The teacher support in addressing barriers to learning in Inclusive Early Childhood Development classroom: a case study of Bulawayo Primary schools

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Abstract: **Zimbabwe has adopted an inclusive education system in order to address barriers to learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning in early childhood development classrooms. In this study, the researcher sought to identify the teacher support in the inclusive Early Childhood Development classroom for learners experiencing barriers to their learning. This study used the qualitative research methodology and also involved a descriptive survey design to collect data from a sample of 8 teachers and 2 teachers-in-charge for ECD classrooms. The findings showed that inclusive education promotes education for all children irrespective of their disability so that they can be educated in the same classroom with other learners of their age. The research concluded that school teachers in primary schools of Zimbabwe lacked training in the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs. The study also concluded that ECD classrooms lacked material resources specifically classrooms, textbooks, trained teachers, tables, desks, finances, time, and computers to implement inclusive education for children with special needs. The research recommended that there is need to establish a clear and concise mandatory policy and legislation, supported by an Act of Parliament that spells out the expectations and roles of the stakeholders in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities.**

Key Terms: **Early Childhood Development, inclusive education, barriers to learning, teacher support**

I. INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the Zimbabwean context, inclusive education involves the identification and minimization or elimination of barriers to students' participation in traditional settings (i.e., schools, homes, communities, and workplaces) and the maximization of resources to support learning and participation. This study focuses on the support given by teachers in addressing barriers to learning in inclusive classes for children in Early Childhood Development in Reigate District Bulawayo Province in Zimbabwe

Inclusive education in Zimbabwe seeks to enhance the civil liberties of students with disabilities in the Early Childhood Development classroom and addressing barriers to learning in the classroom. Its practice is supported by some government policy documents, and, by implication, by several pieces of legislation in Zimbabwe. However, successful inclusive education in Zimbabwe is yet to be a common reality, due to a lack of commitment by policymakers towards learners with disabilities. In addition, parents and guardians have credible concerns regarding the safety and quality of learning experience for their children with disabilities in non-inclusive school settings. Therefore, a commitment by all stakeholders to binding legislation for inclusive education is crucial to the promotion of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Educators, as the keys to the success of the implementation of the system need to be equipped with knowledge, skills and strategies to manage their inclusive classrooms. They need to be able to identify the learners who experience barriers to learning and who need to be given guidance in removing these barriers. It is therefore the aim of the researchers in the investigation to provide educators with the relevant information to enable them to focus on the child and to give the best possible teaching that he/she (educator) is capable of providing.

Inappropriate support and intervention may be centered on problems in the learner instead of the system where the barrier may possibly exist, and the intervention may actually aggravate the learning breakdown. Inadequate skills and knowledge in educators and support personnel, leads to an inability and fear to deal with a diverse range of learner needs (Department of Education, 1997).

Specific enabling mechanisms and processes are needed to support diversity and enable the education system, including educators and learners, to minimize, remove and prevent barriers which may exist or arise. Where no provision exists for such services, barriers cannot be overcome and needs cannot be met. In some contexts, however, inappropriate or inadequate support services may contribute to learning breakdown or exclusion. For example, where the nature of the service is focused on problems in the learner rather than in the system where the barrier may exist - such as poor teaching methods - the intervention may exacerbate the learning breakdown.

Similarly, the nature of the intervention may lead to a learner being removed from a learning environment rather than addressing the problems which may exist in that environment. Learners who may require individualized intervention to address barriers to learning may also not have access to these. As was discussed earlier, basic services which may support

learners and the system to minimize and remove barriers or prevent them from arising are often lacking or limited in poorer communities.

The inadequacy or unequal distribution of services which do exist may further disadvantage learners rather than being services which contribute to effective learning. Inappropriate and inadequate provision of support services in the system does not facilitate the development of learners. Another major compounding factor relates to the nature of human resource development of both educators and personnel who provide services to learners. Ahuja (2007) explains that lack of awareness, service provision that is fragmented and inappropriate to the context in which it takes place, and fear of dealing with diverse range of needs, all result from inadequate and fragmented development of human resources.

The responsibility of the education system to develop and sustain learning is premised on the recognition that education is a fundamental right which extends equally to all learners. A complex and dynamic relationship exists between the learner, the Centre of learning, the broader education system and the social, political and economic context of which they are all part. These components play a key role in whether effective learning and development takes place. There are factors which lead to the inability of the system to accommodate diversity, which leads to learning breakdown or which prevents learners from accessing educational provision and these factors have been conceptualized as barriers to learning and development (DOE, 2002). The range of factors resulting in barriers to learning can be viewed on a dynamic interactive continuum from internal to external system factors. There have been numerous campaigns and advocacy on the adoption of inclusive education for the ECD children worldwide by governments, NGOs and other stakeholders. Despite concerted efforts by all these groups, the disadvantaged ECD children, by various factors remain out of school. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 26.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges for teachers and teacher support in the inclusive Early Childhood Development classroom. The findings of this study hopefully may be of great use to policy makers and implementers of the inclusive education alike in that where the policy may have been inadequate or probably not achievable to some extent, then the study may inform the direction of review and improvement in relation to ECD children. The teachers too, may contribute in identifying these challenges and suggest ways of solving them towards the full implementation without compromising on quality of learning.

In keeping with international trends in education, Zimbabwe has embraced inclusive education as the means by which diverse learners, including those with learning disabilities, should be educated. Premised on the need for primary schools

to change and become responsive to diverse learners by offering the support necessary for access and participation, inclusion is being realised in Zimbabwean primary schools. Human rights issues have been discussed internationally and in Zimbabwe and political, socio-economic and educational transformation has been effected in different societies. This has created challenges for teachers in the implementation of inclusive education for children with learning disabilities in primary schools of Zimbabwe

II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The research aims to identify the challenges to the implementation of inclusion as experienced by ECD teachers in primary school classrooms in Zimbabwe and to investigate how teachers understand their role as primary implementers of inclusion and how they experience the implementation process in primary schools.

Inclusion indicates a thorough commitment to create regular schools, which are inherently capable of educating learners including those with learning disabilities (Mpya2007). According to Engelbrecht (1999) this entails a radical restructuring of schools as organisations, re-evaluation of the curriculum, and changes in pedagogical methodology. Teachers in Zimbabwean primary schools have experienced challenges in the implementation of the conditions necessary for inclusive education in their schools and hence this study sought to investigate the teacher support being rendered to children with special needs in ECD Classrooms

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

i. What challenges do teachers experience in the implementation of inclusive education in the ECD classrooms in primary schools?
ii. What are the causes of the challenges that teachers experience in the implementation of inclusive Education in the ECD classrooms in primary schools?
iii. What strategies can be used to improve teacher support in the implementation of inclusive education in the ECD classrooms in primary schools?

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study used the qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research methodology refers to research that elicits particular accounts of meaning, experience or perception and also produces descriptive data in the participant's own written or spoken words (Fouché & Delport, 2006:74). A descriptive survey was used in the study. According to Burns and Grove (2003:201), descriptive research "is designed to provide a picture of a situation as it naturally happens". It may be used to justify current practice and make judgment and also to develop theories. For the purpose of the study, descriptive research will be used to assess the factors that affect the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs in primary schools of Zimbabwe.The population

for the study was Mzilikazi Primary School, Reigate District, and ECD teachers selected because they have been regarded as information rich for the study and as participants that would generalize the results of the study. The sample size of the interview wereeight teachers where purposive sampling methods was used to select them based on the purpose that the selected teachers are teaching the ECD classes which are the target population of the study.The study used a one-on-one interview method and questionnaires for information collection.

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS

*What challenges do you have as a teacher in the implementation of inclusive education at primary level***?**

Participants A, C, G and H felt that there is *lack of material resources, such as teaching aids and physical structures hampered the success of implementing inclusive education for children with disabilities.* Observations in computer resource centers for children with disabilities, in and around the schools, show that the centers had outdated software and non-functional hardware. Because much of the hardware, software and expertise needed for the upkeep of the computers are only available outside, it is extremely difficult to maintain the little provision that exists. Resources allocation at most inclusive schools are too low to support learning and teaching. The education of children with special needs might be impossible in many regions of the world because of a lack of resources needed to meet the individualized needs of such children.

The challenges included lack of parental participation, heavy workload, inadequate training for teachers, multi-grade challenges, and lack of resources. Participants also indicated that teachers have negative or neutral attitudes towards implementing inclusion of learners with special education needs in the mainstream schools as they feel they are not competent to accommodate learners with special education needs.

What are the causes of the challenges that teachers experience in the implementation of inclusive Education in the ECD classrooms in primary schools?

All participants indicated that overcrowding in the inclusive classrooms is a problem. The reason is that it prevents them from developing close relationships with their learners and it hinders progress as they are unable to assist learners who need more of their attention. In a way it inhibits individual attention. It was reflected by statements such as

"*… there is lot of pressure… we must have few learners in a class so that we will be able to address all the needs of these learners*" (Participant F). "*… Learner to facilitators ratio must also be considered. Each and every individual's needs should be understood very carefully''* (Participant B).

Gross (2002:81) argues that the research evidence on the link between smaller class sizes and pupil achievement does not show any correlation. In other words class size does not necessarily have any effect on the poor achievement of learners. The problem lies with the facilitators and the managers.

All the participants admitted that they initially had negative attitudes towards inclusive education. They all agreed that at some stage they realized that they have to do something about their attitudes. One participant mentioned an important issue of attitudinal change for herself as a person, she said:

"*… my attitude has changed positively towards learners in general. I am now diverse in terms of activities that I plan for my learners ... I have automatically developed my own tactics to cope with different learning problems ... I have managed to change learners with learning difficulties*"(Participant A from the interview).

Despite the best intentions of government, however, the lack of protective legislation and policy hampers the development of an Inclusive Education and training system. The basic centralization of the education system has left a legacy of restrictive centralized control which inhibits change and initiative. Brandon (2006:39) claims that legal responsibility for decisions tends to be located at the highest level and the focus of management remains oriented towards employees complying with rules rather than on ensuring quality service delivery. Nor is there an accurate picture of the number of learners excluded from the school system, including those who have never attended school or who have dropped out. There is no support available for those learners who are outside the system, and existing provision after primary school is inadequate to meet the needs. The provision and the distribution of resources reflect the past inequalities of the apartheid. Brandon (2006:42) argues that learners who have historically faced barriers to learning have had few opportunities for further education at tertiary level.

What strategies can be used to improve teacher support in the implementation of inclusive education in the primary school?

Teachers in the implementation of inclusive education are the key role players. Bothma, Gravett and Swart (2000:203) in their research found that teachers have a negative attitude towards inclusion due to the fact that they were not trained to cope with learners who experience barriers to learning and that their schools did not have the facilities or equipment needed by these learners.

In order for teachers to become change agents in the education system, they should be given a sense of ownership and need to own the change through direct 43 involvement and their views and concerns to be taken into consideration (Nghipondoka, 2001:27). To fulfill the role of educators being change agents, their roles need to be redefined meaning that they are not only imparting knowledge to learners but may also serve as learning support teachers in order to accommodate the diverse needs of learners in their classrooms.

School based support teams should, therefore, enforce the concept of efficient delivery by collaboratively working hand in hand with teachers to develop intervention strategies for learners who need additional support in classrooms. It has been pointed out by the Department of Education that educators need to be trained so that their knowledge can be of great value in implementing inclusive education, and collaboration and communication skills will be essential for inclusion to work (Department of Education, 2002:119).

The use of ICTs in institutions of Primary school in Zimbabwe has allowed learners with disabilities to learn easily and enabled them to do things that were difficult to do in the past. The application of Information and Communication Technologies(ICTs) have become so attached to contemporary educational delivery worldwide that it has virtually become impossible to deliver or receive formal education without the application of such advanced technologies in the processes. The all-encompassing term - ICT- which covers a wide range of technologies for gathering, storing, retrieving, processing, analyzing and transmitting or presenting information is, in reality, practically indispensable in the delivery of contemporary education.

E-learning holds many possibilities for inclusion for people with disabilities; however the online platforms utilized must provide access for all students. Jaeger (2012) notes that, persons with disabilities, unless technological design and implementation meaningfully focus on inclusion, the internet may become a new means of increased marginalization in society. E-Learning has great potential to help both existing students with disabilities in their studies and also facilitate a more equitable representation of the group of people in higher education. Seale (2013) has observed that the relationship that disabled university students have with both their technologies and institutions is poorly understood. In order for the potential to be realized the e-learning platforms need to be as accessible as possible for students with a range of different impairments.

E-Learning assembles a new educational context, develops new roles for teachers, provides more options for students and constructs learning environments that promote and enhance the learning experience. According to Jethro et al. (2012) E-Learning provides new and creative ways of motivating and engaging learners to develop their interests based on their educational potential, allows learners to arrange the content and knowledge for their own needs.. For example, online courses provide enhanced opportunities for people who, because of climate, health, transportation or physical accessibility, experience barriers to attending classroom-based courses.

Collaboration refers to the challenge of working together as a team to achieve one's goal. In communities, all stakeholders should collaborate so as to meet the diverse needs of learners in that particular community. Also at district level, all stakeholders should collaborate to form the District Based Support Team and the combination will be determined by the

particular needs concerned and the specific resources available in that particular context (Department of Education, 2002).

Intersectoral collaboration works when teams know what is needed, know who to involve in the team, have common understanding on the problem and the challenges faced and also develop team skills so as to work effectively with others (Department of Education, 2002). Collaboration is also important so as to avoid a situation where the different service providers act in fragmented ways, which often results in institutions overwhelmed with uncoordinated services or not receiving services at all as the left hand might not know what is being done by the right hand.

Collaboration also includes all aspects of the school based support team process where teachers share and in the end agree on certain ideas. Teachers should be encouraged to function collaboratively and have good communication skills in order to meet the barriers faced by learners in their classrooms; hence collaboration is a new experience for many teachers as they are used to work in an isolated manner (Engelbrecht & Green, 2001:35). Collaboration between teachers and school based support teams can be useful in addressing barriers faced by learners as it enables educators to share their expertise, diverse specialized knowledge and skills for the benefit of all learners.

Also, collaboration in schools can help educators to manage diversity. Consultation is the integral part of helping professions with each one offering a unique perspective to the process (Dettmer, Thurston &Dyck, 2002). The consultant will use his/her expertise to address the problem experienced by the learners and also to address the teacher's question for instance in the case of a learner who is not fluent in speech, the speech pathologist will intervene (Dettmeretal, 2002). Co-operative learning should also be practiced in classrooms so as to allow learners with a variety of skills and traits to work together. The kind of learning encourages the higher achieving group members to assist learners who are having academic difficulties to understand and perform better (Mpya, 2007).

The other important way of addressing barriers arising from the curriculum is to make sure that the process of learning and teaching is flexible enough to accommodate different learning needs and styles. The curriculum should, therefore, be made more flexible across all bands of education so that it is accessible to all learners, irrespective of their learning needs. The District Support Team should assist educators in institutions in creating greater flexibility in their teaching methods and in the assessment of learning by providing illustrative learning programmes, learning support materials and assessment instruments (Department of Education, 2001).

Differentiated or multi-level instruction should be used in classrooms to allow for different kinds of learning within the same curriculum. The Department of Education (2002) also suggests that in order to overcome barriers to learning and

development, there should be initiatives aimed at providing for learners who have been excluded from the system by both the state and nongovernmental organizations, innovative practices for recognizing and accommodating diversity, activities that advocate against discrimination and challenge attitudes, processes towards the involvement of learners, parents, educators and community members, training programs to equip educators to deal with diverse needs, curriculum restructuring, conducive teaching and learning environments as well as economic and political transformation supported by enabling and protective legislation and policy.

To address gaps in current reform and restructuring initiatives, a basic policy shift must occur where teachers should teach effectively, where there should be effective instruction and well managed schools, and barriers to be handled in a comprehensive way which means that there should be an instructional component, an enabling component and a management component. Support services should be both institution based and district/provincial based. Education support personnel within the district should be orientated and trained in their new roles of providing support to all teachers.

Training should focus on supporting all learners, educators and other staff in the system as a whole so that the full range of learning needs can be met. The focus should be on teaching and learning factors, with emphasis on the development of good teaching strategies that will be of benefit to all learners, on overcoming barriers in the system that prevent it from meeting the full range of learning needs, and on adaptation of and support services available in the classroom (Department of Education, 2002). Effective partnerships should be established with parents and parent organizations, so that they would be able to participate more actively and meaningfully in the planning and implementation of inclusion activities while simultaneously playing a more active role in the learning and teaching of their own children (Department of Education, 2002).

Other researchers have also made a contribution on how barriers to learning can be addressed. Mpya (2007) also recommended that to overcome barriers to learning, relevant resources should be provided to schools and be made accessible to all learners. The problem of overcrowded classrooms should also be taken into consideration as it hinders effective learning. To overcome barriers, the Department of Education (2002:248) stresses that there should be advocacy within inclusive education whereby information on inclusive education can be shared and where public option should be influenced through various forms of persuasive communication.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The essence of the current study was to investigate the teacher support in the inclusive Early Childhood Development classroom: Addressing barriers to learning in the classroom. From the findings of the study, it can be concluded that school teachers in primary schools of Zimbabwe lacked training in the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs. The findings indicated that most of the teachers in schools do not have the expertise or skill to assist children with special needs in a teaching learning-situation mainstream class. It can also be concluded that teachers in primary schools are not adequately trained to identify children with special needs in their classes and how they should assist them.

Another conclusion to be drawn from the findings of the study is that Zimbabwe primary schools lacked material resources specifically classrooms, textbooks, trained teachers, tables, desks, finances, time, and computers to implement inclusive education for children with special needs. The study also concluded that the unavailability of adequate financial assistance for the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs deprived these children with special needs of textbooks, tables and desks and other resources to address their academic and personal/social challenges they experienced at school.

It can also be concluded that stakeholders, specifically, the government, school heads, regular teachers and specialist teachers, parents, children with disabilities and female teachers had negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs in primary schools in Zimbabwe. It can further be concluded that Zimbabwean primary schools lacked mandatory policy and legislation for the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs. The non-existence of mandatory policy and legislation on inclusive education provisions for children with special needs negatively affects the teaching and learning for such children in the mainstream classes. Based on the findings of the present study, it can also be concluded that legislation and policy making process affects the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs in primary schools of Zimbabwe.

The challenge for Zimbabwe as a nation, in trying to meet the demands for future generations in a democratic world, is to prepare learners to accommodate one another regardless of their physical, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. They should also include gifted learners or those who experience barriers to learning, children from urban or rural areas and those who are at risk of having barriers. The study suggests that to meet the above challenges a lot of work needs to be done by way of taking all the stakeholders on board in facilitating the practice and implementation of inclusive education in its entirety.

People should be made aware that inclusion is not something that will happen overnight as it is a process that demands time, continuity, dedication, commitment, love, motivation intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and also self-sacrifice. Learners who experience barriers to learning are part of the nation, they need to be loved and cared for they need support from all the people around them and they have the right to learn and be treated with dignity. All educators should serve our country with pride.

The above is by no means an exhaustive account of the theme. One of the issues that deserve further attention is the assessment of learners who experience barriers to learning in an inclusive classroom. It is also imperative that other identified problematic factors should be addressed to improve the management of inclusive education in Reigate District and in all of Zimbabwe. Unless these issues are dealt with, educators will remain under pressure, be frustrated and eventually the will inhibit the success of inclusion in schools.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the present study and the literature study, the researcher provided a number of recommendations for overcoming problems of implementing inclusive education for children with special needs in primary schools of Zimbabwe. The recommendations correspond, to some extent, to the best practices in the field of inclusive education as defined and applied by international standards of education.

The researcher made the following recommendations with regard to policy and, the practice of implementing inclusive education for children with special needs:

There is need to establish a clear and concise mandatory policy and legislation, supported by an Act of Parliament that spells out the expectations and roles of the stakeholders in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities. Presently, Zimbabwe only has circulars from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The policy should specify how the children with special needs should be financially and materially assisted. There is need for wider consultation among school teachers, headmasters, parents, students and the community at large before the policy is put in place.

This is in line with primary school teachers, education officers and college/university lecturers' responses that suggested that inclusive education policy making process for Zimbabwe could be improved by involving all key stakeholders. The policy should force the government to have a separate and specific budget for inclusive education for children with disabilities in order to reduce the shortage of resources in the area.

From the findings of the current and the literature study, the implementation of inclusive education would be improved if there would be adequate professional preparation and training of Zimbabwean primary school teachers in the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs. The teachers in primary schools need to be trained in teaching methods that are child-centred, and using active and participative learning techniques that improve their confidence and capacity to teach children both with and without special needs. The current study further recommended that the government should put in place clear educator skills development plan for the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs that would address the problem of skills shortage on the part of teachers who are already serving in the mainstream schools. Short in-service training courses on implementation of inclusive education must be offered to all teachers.

The implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs in primary schools would be enhanced by having clear and concise mandatory inclusive education policies and legislation that influences effective implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs in primary schools of Zimbabwe. The policies need to be clear in providing practical guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs in primary schools. The policies also need to specify and clarify the roles, responsibilities and expectations to all key stakeholders of inclusive education in schools. The implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities should be supported by an Act of Parliament. The effective implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs would enhance the holistic development of children with special needs in accordance with the ecological systems theory which focuses on interdependence between different organisms and their physical environment to provide a holistic solution to the development of the system.

It is recommended that school teachers should be trained in special needs education during their initial training in teachers' colleges to acquire the theory and practice of primary school education that facilitates the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs embodied in the ecological systems theory which informed the study. The teachers in primary schools would be trained in teaching methods that are child-centred, and using active and participative learning techniques that improve their confidence and capacity to teach children with special needs.

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