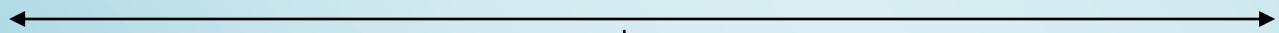# North Asian International Research Journal Consortium

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AN ANALYSIS INTO THE CHALLENGES FACED BY LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS IN UMZINGWANE DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to analyse the challenges faced by learners with special needs in mainstream schools in Umzingwane District. A descriptive study design was used to analyse the challenges faced by learners. Learners with special needs often face neglect and discrimination in mainstream schools, and this is of less benefit to them. They often lag behind their age peers because the curriculum does not cater for their individual unique needs. This poses some challenges to effective mainstreaming because learners with special needs do not benefit from the regular education system. The study results confirmed that, in Umzingwane District, the success of inclusive education is still to be realized. Mainstreaming education for learners with disabilities is to ensure that the society moves away from social and educational segregation and discrimination to complete inclusion. The study's recommendations included; teaching of Braille and sign language; awareness programmes, a multi-disciplinary approach to mainstream education, active involvement of all stakeholders; government, parents, society and people with disabilities spearheading themselves.

Key words: mainstreaming, inclusion, learners, disability, special needs, education.

INTRODUCTION

Every society has people with disabilities in its midst, and there have been enormous changes in the treatment and education of exceptional children, even though the changes have been very slow. There has been a gradual change from rejection of learners with special needs to isolation, charitable treatment, to acceptance, to institutionalization, to integration and finally to inclusion as full members of society. Mainstream education (Inclusive education) has therefore emanated as a human rights issue to enable people with disabilities and more appropriately, learners with special needs to fully participate in the education system at par with their non-disabled peers. It is in this backdrop that the research sought to make an analysis of the challenges faced by

learners with special needs in mainstream schools in Umzingwane District of Matabeleland South Province, in Zimbabwe.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The philosophy of inclusion has been at the forefront currently with regards to the education of learners with disabilities. However, this area of inclusion or mainstreaming education has not been without challenges in so far as learners with disabilities are concerned, in accessing education in so-called inclusive settings. Tracing back the trend of treatment and learning of people with disabilities, they have been discriminated against, segregated and generally not accorded equal opportunities with their non-disabled counterparts.

Learners with disabilities were recognized as people who were in need of help and compassion, and then given alms for survival. They were viewed as not teachable. They were institutionalized in various institutions for persons with disabilities. Later, they were then integrated as the philosophy of integration came into being. This philosophy of integration then changed to inclusion, whereby people with disabilities through the inclusive movement, were recognized as part and parcel of people without disabilities and, in fact, the society as a whole. Somehow, this slightly changed the attitudes of people toward persons with disabilities. To this end, inclusive education marked a shift of thinking from unnatural, inhumane and segregatory settings towards supportive and humane inclusive education, also referred to as mainstreaming of education. In most economically developed countries, the mainstreaming of education to learners with disabilities has been mandatory or a legal obligation.

In the Zimbabwean context, inclusive education involves the identification and minimization or elimination of barriers to students' participation in traditional settings such as schools, homes, communities and workplaces to support learning and participation. But this is being greatly hindered by the challenges faced in the provision of equal and equitable inclusive education (Chimedza and Peters, 1999). Most of the schools fail to provide resources to cater for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools on the pretext that they are costly and hence most of the material resources are obtained outside the country and other African countries. This further compounds the inability to provide for special education services in inclusive or mainstream set-ups. However, there is still no specific legislation for inclusive education in Zimbabwe (Mpofu, 2004), even in the backdrop of having adopted the Jomtien Conference in 1992, Salamanca 1990, African Charter of 1990,and the United Nations Human Rights Declaration Charter on Inclusive Education (or Inclusion) and Education for All and Disabled Persons Act of 1992 – to include a number of government policy issues that have been put forward

with the intention of providing a wholly inclusive education system. One wonders whether inclusive education is real and feasible or still exists legally/mandatorily on paper, as it often, still seems there are a number of factors militating against the full involvement of learners with special needs in most schools in their localities. Given the above situations, it is the aim and objective of this study to seek to unravel and pinpoint the challenges facing the mainstreaming of education for learners with special needs in primary schools in Umzingwane District, as most of the learners are seemingly not performing well and to the best of their abilities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Children with special needs are not wholly included in school settings in Umzingwane District. They are often ignored, rejected, segregated against and not given special attention that they equally deserve so that they are able to cope in mainstream schools, hence enable them to perform to their fullest potentials. Therefore, learners with special needs often do not perform well in both academic and co-curricular activities; and this poses a question as to what challenges are they facing in mainstream schools.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To establish challenges that learners with special needs face in regular schools.

To analyse the challenges faced by teachers in teaching learners with special needs.

To establish the attitudes that teachers have towards learners with special needs in regular schools.

To determine if students with disabilities benefit from the included/mainstream settings.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Learners with special needs are students who have learning disabilities, communication disabilities, emotional and behavioural disorders, sensory disabilities, physical disabilities and developmental disabilities. The National Council on Disability Report (1994) defines learners with special needs as identified as such candidates – for special needs education due to their medical history and current characteristics. They may have been diagnosed with a genetic condition that is associated with intellectual disability, may have various forms of brain damage, a developmental disorder, may have various forms of brain damage, a developmental disorder, may have visual or hearing disabilities, or other disabilities. Furthermore, learners with special needs are regarded as learners who require special attention and are capable in a different way.

Types of Learners with Special Needs and their Characteristics

There are various types of learners with special needs and these include learning disabilities, communication disabilities, emotional and behavioural disorders, physical disabilities, sensory disorders and developmental disabilities. Renick and Harter (2005) reveal that learners with such kinds of special needs are likely to benefit from additional educational services such as different approaches to teaching, the use of technology, a specifically adapted or designed teaching area or a resource room. This approach, however, suggests that learners with special needs may have to be isolated in a resource room, in a separate remedial classroom in a school where students with educational disabilities are given direct specialized instructions and academic remediation and assistance with homework and related assignments as individuals or in groups.

Learning Disabilities and their Characteristics

Lackaye and Margalit (2013) assert that learners with learning disabilities showed lower levels of achievement, effort investment, lower academic self-efficiency, sense of coherence, sometimes positive mood and at times negative mood and hope and higher levels of loneliness. These special needs may exist from birth or be acquired later in life, referred to as congenital or adventitious, respectively. Reynolds and Fletcher-Janzen (2004) acknowledge that most researchers have always overlooked that disabilities or special needs cases may be congenital or adventitious, such that these occur at birth or right from birth and others well after birth, respectively.

These learners perform differently in school situations. Those with congenital disabilities perform a lot better than those with adventitious conditions as they take time to grapple with and accept their disabilities, hence adapt their life situations in line with their disability contexts. Hence they tend to perform poorly and have debilitated interactions that hinder effective teaching and learning.

Physical Disabilities

A person with a physical disability may need to use some sort of equipment for assistance with mobility. They are also various types of physical disabilities. Kemp, Smith, and Segal (2013) envisage that paraplegia and quadriplegia are what many people first identify with a physical disability. Paraplegia, results from injury to the spinal cord, occurring below the neck, while quadriplegia refers to damage to the spinal cord in the neck. Other forms of physical disability, such as polio, which is an acquired disease, cerebral palsy, which involves damages to the brain tissue during fetal stages and some genetic conditions, can result in loss of mobility. There is also

multiple sclerosis, hemiplegia, cerebral palsy, absent limb and/or reduced limb function and muscular dystrophy and spina bifida.

Doyle and Dye (2002) defines hearing impairments as used to describe people with any degree of hearing loss, from mild to profound including those who are deaf and those who are hard of hearing. There are also two types of hearing impairments – deaf and hard of hearing. Deaf is defined as those individuals who do not hear well enough to rely on their hearing to process speech and language and cannot completely pick any sounds. The hard of hearing are individuals with mild to moderate hearing loss, but definitely not the inability to hold a conversation with someone talking in a normal voice or an inability to hear and understand another person speaking clearly over the voice telephone counts as a substantial adverse effect.

The Concept of Inclusive Education

Beyer's and Hay (2011) say inclusive education is a concept which refers to the placement of (most) learners experiencing barriers in a regular classroom is viewed by most stakeholders with optimism as this is viewed by most stakeholders with optimism, as it represents the surge towards the recognition of human rights as well as the move towards education for all. Therefore mainstreaming or inclusion involves the transformation of the school per-se and its whole system. Engelbretcht and Green (2005) continue to profess that inclusive education states that all learners, irrespective of barriers experienced, must be accommodated to ensure that all injustices of the past are addressed. Allen and Schwartz (2000) exhibit that inclusion in education is an approach once thought only necessary for educating students with special educational needs. But now it is crucial that all teachers and education settings ensure inclusive practice for all students in their classroom and the wider school.

Inclusion is an educational approach and philosophy that provides all students with community membership and greater opportunities for academic and social achievement, hence a sense of belonging. Proponents of inclusion say studies have shown no slow down or negative effect in the learning of children without special needs in inclusive classrooms hence surveys conducted with and teachers involved in inclusive settings show that they see no harm to the children without special needs and that they have positive opinions about inclusion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design used in this study was the descriptive survey. 'The descriptive survey design is an effective method because it focuses on small groups. This research design was also found to have an edge over others in so far as it helps in acquiring information of a particular place with the aim of describing what was observed and gathered.

In this research study, the target population included people who lived within Umzingwane district. The target population included; teachers and heads of Umzingwane district schools; children with special needs who attend to primary and secondary schools of Umzingwane district; parents of children with special needs who attend to Umzingwane district schools and Schools Psychological Services Officers from Umzingwane district education Offices.

The sample of this study comprised of 140 people; 30 parents, 40 teachers, 6 heads of schools, 4 school psychological services officers and 60 children with special needs (30 from primary schools and 30 from secondary schools), in Umzingwane District.

For the purposes of having valid and reliable data, the research study followed strict sampling procedures, which permitted the researcher to select people from a large group to answer questions on the study. In this study, purposive sampling was used to select from the population of heads, SPS officers, teachers, parents and children with disabilities from Mvuthu Secondary School, Mzingwane High School, Sikhoveni Secondary School, Mawabeni Secondary School, Mzinyathini Secondary School, Sacred Heart Primary School, Matshetshe Primary School, Mvuthu Primary School, Esigodini Primary School and Mawabeni Primary School. This study used the questionnaire as the main data collecting instrument including observation and interviews.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Disabilities of Children in Schools were recorded as following categories. Those with physical disability in primary schools were 8(16%) while secondary schools had 7(23%). In the hearing impairment category there were 4(8%) children in primary schools while 2(7%) were recorded in secondary schools. 9 (18%) in primary schools and 4(13%) in secondary schools were visual impaired. 29 (58%) in primary schools and 17 (57%) in secondary schools were recorded as having learning disability.

Most respondents indicated that the challenges facing learners with special needs were that learners do not have special classes to accommodate their special needs learners. Some of these learners drop out because of lack of school fees. Those who attend school are isolated and shunned by other learners without disabilities as they are regarded as outcasts. There is also discrimination, labeling and stigmatization by teachers and other learners. The shortage or lack of specialist teachers to handle these learners is also a challenge. The schools lack resources and learning materials that are critical for these learners. The large teacher/pupil ratio is also a problem which greatly affects the learners with special needs. Furthermore, the unadapted teaching/ learning situations and the general environment.

It was also indicated that learners with disabilities lack of self-esteem which cause them not to perform at par with learners without disabilities in tests, examinations and co-curricular activities. They also have poor interactive and socialization skills due to stigma attached to disabilities. Lack of use of sign language and Braille skills, transcription (general lack of communication skills), for learners with hearing impairments and visual impairment, respectively was another challenge that was noted.

The study sought to find out whether students with disabilities benefit from included settings. Responses were obtained as follows:

- ❖ They gain confidence in themselves as they interact with the non-disabled peers. They do not benefit because teachers are concerned with completing the syllabi.
- ❖ Respondents observed that learners with disabilities gain acceptance from others.
- ❖ They learn different skills, especially interactive, academic skills as well as adaptive skills.
- ❖ They boost their self-esteem.
- ❖ They benefit from accessing the same academic curriculum as the non-disabled, as they become competitive too in the job market.
- ❖ They get to know the real demands of the world.
- ❖ They get a lot of experiences of normal life; hence life skills that enable them to have a smooth transition to adulthood, hence learn survival skills.
- ❖ They are empowered through equalization of opportunities, hence feel normal.
- ❖ Socialization skills are enhanced.
- ❖ Some said there are no benefits if there are there, they are less as other students shun them.

- ❖ They are trained to function in society despite their disabilities, as they also become successful people such as athletes, musicians and sportspersons.
- ❖ It reduces stigmatization
- ❖ They discover that they are not any different from others.
- ❖ They share knowledge with others and get assistance from their peers, hence acceptance.
- ❖ They get to understand how the world works and part of the society.
- ❖ They get the freedom to participate.
- ❖ They get a sense of belonging.
- ❖ They learn to relate well with others later in life.
- ❖ They gain skills and concept commensurate with their peers and not a watered-down curriculum.
- ❖ It encourages positive attitudes towards learners with special needs, discourages isolation.
- ❖ They get to be treated fairly
- ❖ It encourages them to have improved performance as teachers put emphasis on good performance.
- ❖ Still individual needs are catered for.
- ❖ Discard discriminative tendencies.
- ❖ Specialist teachers are able to respond to their special needs to improve their interaction and school performance.

The respondents were asked if the benefits differ with the type and degree of disability. Forty participants 48(60%) of the teacher/professionals group said "Yes" the benefits differ with the type and degree of disability. For those with a greater degree of disability are not always catered for in mainstream school settings whilst 32 (40%) of the group said they are no differences benefits obtained by those with disabilities be it difference in the degree and type of disability. This reveals that learners with disabilities differ in gaining benefits in inclusive settings. Those who said "Yes" revealed that their differences are always catered for even though there is shortage of resources and funds to adapt the learning structure, and they may fail to cope in the system, and learners also tend to feel hopeless. Their potential cannot be fully developed.

The study also sought to determine challenges teachers have in handling Learners with special needs in regular schools. There are communication barriers as teachers would not have been taught to communicate with them especially in sign language and Braille. Respondents also indicated lack of experience to deal with special needs learners. Some pupils are orphans and therefore might have more problems, besides school work for their teachers to handle. Lack of resources and adapted environments infrastructure for example, ramps for wheel chair

users to enable their full interaction in the teaching-learning situation causing poor performance. Negative behaviours of special needs learners who tend to have non-adaptive behaviours such as autism and aggression due to frustrations that they experience. Learners, especially with severe to profound disabilities fail to cope in inclusive settings which over burden teachers. Furthermore children with special needs do not have proper and adequate social skills which they bring into the classroom.

DISCUSSION

The research sought to find out the challenges faced by learners with special needs in mainstream schools. Testimony provided by respondents highlight that learners with special needs still face problems in inclusive settings such as negative societal attitudes, lack of resources, special needs educationists and lack of funds, especially in less developed countries and Zimbabwe in particular. The research study found out that, learners with special needs benefit differently in inclusive settings; hence their inclusion is different, depending on the level or degree of disability. They noted that those with severe disabilities still tend to be left out as they are not given much attention, isolated and treated as outcasts. It was also noted that learners with special needs tend to, therefore, benefit from inclusive settings. They get a sense of belonging, gain self-confidence and learn to work at the best of their potentials with same age peers.

They again noted that stigma of the student may be perpetuated and enlarged in the general classroom, to the detriment of the child with disabilities. Furthermore, it came from literature that even general students in the class may feel resented by the teacher and the learning environment as they note that their counterpart with disabilities is being given more attention. Antoinette (2011) further reveals that not only teachers, view these learners a burden, but learners without disability too. This was different from research findings which acknowledged that students with disability feel a sense of belonging in inclusive environments hence did not reveal the adverse effects of inclusion on the part of the learners without disabilities Proponents of inclusion reveal that having learners with disability despite their degree and type of disability would be a way of instilling discriminatory isolation and inhumane, hence to do that would be a gross violation of human rights, as alluded by Trentin and Berigno (2013). However, the issue of inclusion as their basic rights did not feature clearly, hence was not mentioned in the research study by the participants, which is a rather important issue, as these rights are enshrined in the African and United Nations Human Rights Charter.

CONCLUSIONS

It can be noted that Zimbabwe is still lacking in the enforcement of the laws on the inclusion of learners with disabilities as most are still segregated and discriminated against, compounded with the lack of resources and funds to enhance inclusive education. The challenges faced by these learners with disabilities are still the greatest impediment in ensuring their full inclusion. There is still lack of effective advocacy groups, and tertiary inclusions that spearhead the implementation of inclusion especially in rural environments, where children are inhibited from participating actively in education, especially girl children because of patriarchal traditional beliefs, hence by virtue of their being disabled, even though this is enshrined in the Education Policy of 1987, which states that "Education for All" and the Disability Act of 1992, to include the currently drafted Constitution of 2012. However, to a lesser extent, inclusion of learners with disabilities has been successful, because of the participation of those few learners with disabilities in schools, hence the challenges observed. Most learners with disabilities still do not effectively participate in mainstream environments. Thus the concept of inclusion has been without flaws. Evidence, from the research study, has revealed that it can be concluded that the challenges are still being faced in mainstream education for learners with disabilities and these were highlighted as being lack of resources, funding, lack of expertise, inaccessibility of most inclusive settings, negative social attitudes, lack of awareness and knowledge on disability issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above conclusions:-

- ❖ It is recommended that all stakeholders should spearhead inclusion. It is observed that all stakeholders should continually work together in solving problems that impede the successful implementation of full inclusion or mainstreaming.
- ❖ It is strongly recommended that the training of more professionals in special needs education should be done by special needs training to teachers compulsory.
- ❖ It is recommended that clear cut policies and laws be enacted and promulgated on mainstream or inclusion to ensure its effective implementation, and these need to be revised regularly.
- ❖ It is also, recommended that all schools should be adapted so that they are accessible to persons with disabilities – be it learners or school staff. These include adapted physical environments such as rails and ramps for physically disabled learners and those using wheel chairs. Elevators should also be installed and made sure that they are always functioning by using cheap alternative, efficient and clean sources such as solar energy, wind and generators.

❖ Parents, the education system and stakeholders should network with other foreign organizations, advocacy groups and parents to solicit changes and latest technological advancements in disability issues, since the world even in disability issues is now globalised.

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Dreams are not what you see in sleep,

it is the thing that doesn't let you sleep.

- APJ Abdul Kalam