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## Teacher perceptions on inclusive education in Makoni District schools, Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

The study examined teacher perceptions in implementing inclusive education to early childhood development learners in Makoni District Primary schools in Zimbabwe. The qualitative research approach was employed in this study and a sample of six teachers were purposively selected from three primary schools that were purposively selected. Interviews, observations, and document analysis were used to gather data from the participants. Findings from the study showed that teachers had mixed feelings about inclusive education. The lack of skills to teach the learners with special needs was found to be the major cause of discomfort among the teachers. It is recommended that the government train teachers in schools to enable them to have basic skills that enable them to help learners with special needs.

**Keywords:** Early childhood development, Special Needs, Stakeholders, Inclusive education

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### Introduction

Inclusive education settings allow challenged and nonchallenged learners to coexist. In this study, the researcher focused on teachers' perceptions towards inclusive education in Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Makoni district primary schools. Adams (2011) <sup>[1]</sup> states that inclusive education entails all learners attend the mainstream schools and are supported to learn and contribute to all aspects of the life of the school. Research done by Noe (2011) <sup>[27]</sup> indicated that long ago, learners born with disabilities were killed in Germany as they were believed to be unfit, were denied the right to education, often received substandard services, were unable to air their views to society and sometimes were kept indoors especially in African countries. This has however changed with schools urged to implement inclusive education where students, irrespective of ability, are educated in their local schools through the provision of appropriate practices, pedagogies, and resources (Boyle & Anderson: c2020) <sup>[3]</sup>. Dunn (2010) <sup>[10]</sup> however states that the problem being faced by this educational discourse is the lack of appropriate infrastructure and funding for the inclusive education programme, resulting in teachers regarding ECD inclusive education as a burden to them than a welcome development. This is because teachers do not have the skills and facilities suitable for the smooth running of inclusive education (Mushoriwa: c2011) <sup>[25]</sup>. The number of trained personnel to teach special needs learners in Zimbabwean schools is small. Some schools even depend on paraprofessionals to care for these young learners. This has led to this programme not receiving much enthusiasm from teachers as it should have.

Myers (2011) <sup>[26]</sup> advocate that several treaties and normative instruments have been signed and agreed upon by governments concerning inclusive education. It can therefore suggest that regular schools with an inclusive orientation can be the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes. This is because, if the learners with challenges are well assisted academically, they will do very well. The Zimbabwean constitution calls for the inclusion of learners with special needs into the normal schools so that they can interact with their fellow learners. This being the case, the policy appears not to have been welcomed in schools. Thus, this study sought to examine teachers' perceptions about inclusive education in Makoni district schools.

Bruder (2010) <sup>[5]</sup> states that studies done in the United States of America concluded that children with special needs achieve positive results in inclusive settings. Inclusive education is believed to provide opportunities for children to learn and accept individual differences hence lessening the impact of stigmatisation, harassment, and bullying.

Mushoriwa (2011) <sup>[25]</sup> advocates that in the past, learners who had special needs in Zimbabwean boarding schools were not allowed to participate fully or at all in different school activities. This led to the labelling of the learners. The incoming of the inclusion policy in the Zimbabwean education system, indicated that learners with special needs can exist alongside the others without any challenges. The Zimbabwe Education Secretary's Policy Circular number 36 of 1990 states that regardless of ability, every child has the right to education and is expected to learn and master the national curriculum at all levels of schooling.

Several factors are believed to affect the smooth inclusion of special needs learners into regular classes. These include lack of resources, inadequate training of staff in special education and teachers' attitude towards learners with severe to profound disabling conditions (Avramidis: c2010). Mushoriwa (2011) <sup>[25]</sup> advocated that most teachers had negative attitudes towards inclusive education because of the belief that learners with special needs would be frustrated because of the social rejection by their peers. Johns (2010) indicates that a study carried out in Uganda concluded that 46% of teachers supported the idea of inclusive education while 55% were against the idea. With such a percentage it might mean that the success of an inclusive education programme is questionable. The Zimbabwean government introduced inclusive education in all primary schools but, there is no infrastructure, resources, and knowledgeable teachers to cater for learners with different challenges. This situation led to this study where I examined teachers' perceptions of inclusive education among ECD learners.

### Statement of the problem

Though the Zimbabwean government aims to have inclusive education implemented in schools, the situation on the ground indicates that ECD learners with special needs in different schools are being taught by caregivers and teachers whose majority are not specialised in such areas. The question thus is how much such learners benefit from the teachers who lack the knowledge to efficiently handle children with special needs at ECD level. This study thus sought to examine teachers' perceptions in the face of them operating in environments where they are not adequately trained and lack adequate resources to carry out their duties

### Research Questions

- What is the importance of inclusive education at ECD level?
- What are teachers' views towards inclusive education?
- How can the inclusive education programme be made effective in schools?

### Literature Review

This study examined teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in Makoni District Primary Schools. Literature was reviewed under the topics, implementing inclusive education at ECD level and strategies to achieve inclusive education at ECD level.

### Implementing inclusive education at ECD level

Children benefit most when teachers engage in stimulating interactions that support learning and are emotionally supportive. Interactions that help children acquire new knowledge and skills provide input to children, elicit verbal responses and reactions from them, and foster engagement in

the enjoyment of learning. Dunn (2010) <sup>[10]</sup> points out that implementing inclusive education at ECD level plays a crucial role in supporting children to learn, to contribute and to participate in all aspects of life at school. It contributes to confidence building and developing in learners a sense of belonging. It is also believed to reduce fear of human difference commonly faced by children with special needs. Through inclusive education learners are believed to copy in their future life, the behaviours and skills of those peers who have higher level social skills with whom they interact with. In line to this, Graham (2020) <sup>[13]</sup> states that positive social interactions at school have a direct influence on the social participation of the learners when they enter adulthood. This points at the importance of inclusive education to learners. Blake-Smith (2011) <sup>[4]</sup> believes that teachers' abilities and attitudes determine the success of inclusive education in schools. A lack of positive attitudes by teachers towards learners with special needs, will unlikely result in satisfactory learning. According to Jaickal's (2019) <sup>[18]</sup> study teachers' negative attitudes towards inclusive education are caused by their feelings that they are not qualified to teach ECD learners with developmental disability since they did not receive any training on that from college. Hoskin *et al.* (2015) believe that a lack of training, and experience among teachers means that many teachers find teaching in inclusive environments challenging. This signals the need for ongoing professional learning opportunities to in-service teachers on inclusive education. Loreman *et al.* (2011) <sup>[21]</sup> advocate that good pedagogical practice that utilises different modes of learning benefits all learners.

Environments where schools lack facilities such as ramps, accessible toilets, enlarged classroom doors, hearing aids, cochlear implants, eye wear and braille adapted readers to successfully implement inclusive education for ECD learners with learning disabilities also negatively affect teacher attitudes towards inclusive education and its effective implementation. Chisaka (2010) <sup>[6]</sup> points out that a lack of funding in Zimbabwean schools particularly ECD classes, led to a lack of stimulating environments that develop all learners with diverse needs and interests. Teachers in schools face several challenges of limited resources in ECD classes as they implement inclusive education. Material resources are very crucial at ECD level as learners learn more by handling objects and discovery than abstract terms. Funding for special materials for learners to use in their learning such as the braille and hearing aids are greatly needed in inclusive education systems. Without adequate funding effective learning may not be realised since lack of funding negatively affects the availability of material resources.

The sudden change of policy to have all learners in the mainstream resulted in glitches in the implementation of inclusive education in schools. Gibson (2015) <sup>[13]</sup> states that the changes of policy in education have resulted in messy attempts in implementing inclusive education alongside growing collective anxiety and confusion, as governments took reactionary policy steps. Inclusive policies aim to relocate disabled students into mainstream systems but as it does that fails to engage with different cultural identities, attitudes, values and lived experiences. A misconstrued and misrepresented form of 'inclusion' is practised in schools (Gibson: c2015) <sup>[13]</sup>. Despite the central role that teachers play in trying to implement inclusive education, the fact that most of the teachers do not understand how a child's disability affect their ability to learn results in flawed

inclusive education. Most of the teachers are not sufficiently qualified and equipped to teach children with disabilities, particularly those in the mainstream schools. Without a basic understanding of a child's disability, it may not be easy to offer appropriate assistance. This results in mixed feelings towards inclusive education by teachers because of a lack of being equipped nor being prepared for inclusive education. Hosking (2000) <sup>[16]</sup> points out that positive attitudes encourage the inclusion of learners with disabilities into regular classrooms, while negative attitudes support low achievement and poor acceptance of learners with disabilities into mainstream settings. Thus, for effective learning, school environments need to be favourable to inclusive education.

### **Strategies to achieve inclusive education at ECD level**

The overall goal of inclusive education is to ensure that all learners participate and are treated equally (Edwards: c2013) <sup>[11]</sup>. Skidmore (2014) <sup>[29]</sup> advocates that an inclusive curriculum addresses learners' cognitive, emotional, and creative development. This has led it to becoming a growing policy priority in many countries and it has such benefits as social and economic benefits, improved child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning, equitable outcomes and a reduction of poverty, and improved intergenerational social mobility. These positive benefits are directly linked to the nature of the foundational level of learning thus Ministries must pay much attention to how inclusive education is handled at ECD levels in schools. Lira's (2019) study recommends that the Ministry of Education must design a thorough training programme in disability and inclusive education in teachers' colleges to equip ECD teachers with knowledge and skills to teach inclusive classes. A well-structured curriculum that allows uniformity in the provision of both resources and time to promote inclusive education are needed in schools. The curriculum should be re-organised and re-evaluated to suit learners' needs. The successful implementation of inclusive education in schools particularly in Zimbabwe needs a professional preparation and training of teachers, the provision of resources and the formulation of mandatory policies and legislation for the implementation of inclusive education. For increased ownership of the programme by teachers they need to be involved in the formulation of policies on inclusivity. This increases the chances of effective implementation of inclusive education. Mafa (2018) <sup>[22]</sup> emphasises the crafting of clear policies on inclusivity by the Ministry. This is believed to increase the chances of the programmes being implemented successfully.

ECD teachers must totally be prepared and equipped to teach in inclusive classrooms if effective learning is to take place. School heads must also initiate professional development programmes at their schools to equip all teachers including the ECD teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge on inclusive education. To be successful in this, school heads must also ensure that the environment suits teacher's positive attitudes as well as the diverse needs of learners. Hetling (2018) <sup>[14]</sup> argued that the provision of varied devices such as cochlear implants, hearing devices, braille adapted reads for learners with special needs are a strategy to achieve inclusive education. For improved availability of school materials Iman (2017) <sup>[17]</sup> recommend the effective use of the three sources of school materials that is the education ministry, tuition, and civil society.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study used the qualitative research approach. Flick (2010) <sup>[12]</sup> states that qualitative research focuses on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Silverman (2014) <sup>[28]</sup> advocates that qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible. Qualitative research studies elements in their natural settings.

### **Research Instruments**

Wiersman and Jurs (2010) <sup>[32]</sup> define research instruments as tools that facilitate information gathering from the respondents in the sample. They are techniques used to gather data from respondents. Interviews, observation, and document analysis were employed in this study to gather data on teachers' perceptions about inclusive education.

### **Interviews**

Christians (2012) <sup>[7]</sup> states that interviews are verbal face to face interactions between interviewers and interviewees. Interviews permit greater depth of response, which is not possible through any other means. Through interviews, researchers can probe for more information when respondents give unclear responses. During interviews, interviewers can take note of participants' responses, their facial expressions, and their voice intonations. These can relay messages to the researchers. Semi structured interviews were used in this study.

### **Observation**

Tedlock (2015) <sup>[30]</sup> advocates that observation has been widely used to gather data about people, processes, and cultures in qualitative research. Observations enable researchers to learn about activities of the people under study while in their natural settings through observing and at times participating in those activities. Creswell (2012) <sup>[8]</sup> points out that observations enable researchers to take note of nonverbal expression of feelings, to determine who interacts with whom, to understand how participants communicate with each other and to check on time spent on various activities. Through observation, researchers observe events that participants may be unable or unwilling to share as doing so would be loutish, or insensitive (Terell: c2012) <sup>[31]</sup>. By observing the situation on the ground, I was able to ratify the data that I had gathered through interviews. In this study, the researcher observed teachers as they carried out their daily activities.

### **Document Analysis**

Creswell (2014) <sup>[9]</sup> advocates that documents are an important source of data that can help researchers to understand better the problem under investigation in qualitative research. Documents used in this research study included registers, record books and learners' work. These documents helped unravel information about inclusive education at the schools. Document analysis was convenient for me because it gave me insights into inclusive education at the selected schools. Documents are a source of original evidence which expresses the language of the participant (Yin: c2011) <sup>[31]</sup>. Document analysis enabled me to check the data I had gathered through observations and interviews.

### Sampling Procedures

The population of this study was made up of the primary schools in Makoni district. A population is any group of individuals that have one or more characteristics in common that are of interest to the researcher. From this population, a sample of three primary schools were purposively selected and from each of the three schools two ECD teachers were purposively selected (Merriam & Tisdell: c2016) [23]. These schools were popular in the district for their practice of inclusive education. In each of the six classes selected there were at least three learners with special needs that included physical, visual, and hearing challenges.

### Data collection procedures

Six teachers from the ECD departments who were purposively selected for this study were interviewed and observed while at their work. Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. During the stay at the school, I also had the opportunity to analyse the teachers' and learners' documents to gather data about the teachers' perceptions about the different learners they taught. During the process of gathering data, I also started interpreting and analysing the data to reveal trends, themes, and then to classify it.

### Findings and Discussion

This study sought to examine teachers' perceptions on inclusive education in Makoni district primary schools. The findings were presented as a detailed narrative and first to be presented were the participants demographic information.

Six participants took part in the study and of the six only one participant was a male and the rest were females. This is characteristic in most Zimbabwean primary schools that females outnumber males in the ECD sections. It is probably because of the motherly attitudes that connects females to ECD departments. Male teachers are usually found from grade three to seven. This trend made the female composition of the participants in my study be more than males. Four of the participants were specialised ECD teachers with Diplomas in Education specialising in ECD. Two of the participants held general Diplomas in Education, which meant that they were qualified to teach in primary school. Of these two one was the male participant. Among the four who specialised in ECD, two of them were studying for a Bachelor of Education in ECD with one of the universities in the country. Three females including the two teachers who were studying for a degree were in the 45 to 50 age group whereas the rest of the participants were in the 51 plus age group. All the teachers had been in the teaching field for more than ten years thus indicating that they were all mature and experienced teachers.

The bringing of learners together and learn in the same class with others help infuse special needs learners into a social fusion with other learners thus enhancing social cohesion. When I interviewed teachers on the importance of inclusive education three of the respondents indicated that inclusive education helped in removing stigmatisation of learners with disability. They pointed out that through this practice, the children learnt to care for each other without discrimination. One of the teachers went further and pointed out that inclusive education at ECD level enabled learners to appreciate those with special needs at an early age. In relation to teachers, inclusive education helped teachers develop an understanding of different needs by learners thus could work with any learner with different abilities. They also pointed out

that because of the inclusive education programme some schools had introduced specialised education in-service training to their teachers. This was meant to equip teachers with the requisite knowledge and skills to cater for learners with different needs.

In this view Noe (2011) [27] highlights that a young child taught in an inclusive safe learning environment became more empathetic of others. When learners in a school learn that they are valued and regarded as equal members just like the others, they learn to respect others too and advocate for diversity in the larger community.

The other three participants were critical of inclusive learning. They regarded it as time wasting especially to fast learners. They pointed out that the government was reluctant to fully support the programme, but rather forced teachers to deal with situations which they were not even trained to deal with, thus burdening teachers in searching for best ways to help the learners with special needs. They pointed out that if the classes are not handled properly learners with special needs will always attract the attention of other learners leading to them being withdrawn. They therefore pointed out that such learners needed own classes where special teachers would teach them. The responses thus indicated that some of the teachers regarded inclusive education as a step in the right direction whereas others saw it as affecting the learning process in classes.

When asked about the challenges that the teachers faced in the implementation of inclusive education at ECD level, all the teachers cited a lack of resources, lack of knowledge and class size as factors that affected the effective implementation of inclusive education. They explained that the large numbers of learners in their classes were deterrent factors for them to effectively cater for individual learners. This resulted in learners with special needs failing to get the special assistance they needed. Thus, lack of funding is a stumbling block that affects the full implementation of inclusive education in primary schools. This therefore indicates that the lack of resources affects teachers' perceptions about inclusive education. Besides resources, the teachers indicated that they lacked the knowledge to handle inclusive classes despite them conforming to policy to implement inclusive education. In such cases results from ill-trained teachers could not be as expected.

Observations made indicated that class sizes were very big so much that to give special attention to individual learners was not possible as that meant disadvantaging the other learners. It resulted in learners with special needs receiving very little or no special attention at all. When I analysed the documents at the school, the class registers indicated big enrolments. Class records analysed indicated low performance by learners with special needs. This suggested that very little if any special help was given to the learners. When I asked the teachers about individualised assistance to learners, they openly stated that the large numbers of learners in their classes deterred them from giving the individualised help. This indicated that for effective implementation of inclusive education, class sizes were to be reduced to manageable sizes to enable teachers to give attention to all learners effectively. When asked whether inclusive education could be effectively implemented in schools, all the teachers agreed that it was possible to effectively implement inclusive education in schools provided more attention was paid to the programme. Varied suggestions for the success of implementing inclusive education were given. The teachers called for increased

participative efforts by the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders towards the provision of resources for use in schools. They encouraged the training of teachers on how to handle inclusive education classes. Through such training teachers could improve their perceptions about inclusive education. Leedy (2012) <sup>[12]</sup> advocates that the majority of ECD teachers, globally, have a negative perception and attitude towards children with special needs in regular classes. Thus, by equipping the teachers with skills to handle inclusive education classes, it could improve their attitudes towards learners with special needs.

### Conclusions

#### The following conclusion were made from the findings of the study

1. Teachers have mixed feelings about inclusive education.
2. When inclusive settings are well managed, they nurture respect and understanding among learners of different abilities as they play and learn together.
3. Lack of financial and material resources in inclusive classes affect teachers' zeal to implement inclusive education.
4. Teachers are willing to implement inclusive education provided they get government support and adequate material resources to use at their work.

### Recommendations

#### From the above conclusions, the following recommendations were made

- In-service training of teachers where they are equipped with skills and knowledge to handle learners with special needs should be carried in schools.
- Schools should upgrade their facilities to cater for all learners.
- Stakeholder support should be harnessed to avail financial and material support for inclusive education.

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