

Mercy Kurebwa et al.; Sch. J. Arts. Humanit. Soc. Sci. 2014; 2(6A):895-899.

Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

ISSN 2347-5374 (Online)

Sch. J. Arts Humanit. Soc. Sci. 2014; 2(6A):895-899

ISSN 2347-9493 (Print)

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(An International Publisher for Academic and Scientific Resources)

Primary school teacher perceptions on the challenges of implementing the inclusive education programme: A case of Gweru Urban.

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Abstract: This study sought to explore the perceptions of primary school teachers on challenges that hinder the implementation of inclusive education programme in Gweru Urban schools. A qualitative research approach was employed in this study. Data were collected through document analysis, face to face in-depth interviews with head teachers, focus group discussions and observations. The documents that were interrogated include school registers and educational policies. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Qualitative data analysis revealed that the inclusive education pilot programme faced an array of challenges. These included lack of sponsorship, lack of both material and financial resources, poor perceptions by teachers, lack of competences by teachers and donor dependency syndrome. It also emanated from the study that teachers had high teacher /pupil ratios which made it difficult for them to attend to pupils with different disabilities. The paper recommends that the issues raised be addressed using research based solutions in order to successfully implement the programme.

Keywords: Inclusive education; programme; implementation; teacher; head teachers; disabilities

INTRODUCTION

The success of the implementation of inclusive education programme largely depends on the willingness of the teachers to implement the programme. Widely held attitudes are fundamental to understanding social perceptions of people because they greatly influence people's actions. Ojo[1] contends that it is only human nature to view things in certain ways and act accordingly. The teachers' attitudes towards learners with special needs and their knowledge of inclusive education have an impact in the way they implement inclusive education. Gweru urban is in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. The Director's circular No. 1 of 2004[19] stipulates that children with disabilities are supposed to be included in sporting activities in their own category and director's No.2 of 2001 [20] directed that sign language should be taught in all schools and that schools are obliged to implement inclusive education. This is in line with the Salamanca Convention[2] which states that governments should implement inclusive education. Zimbabwe as a signatory to the convention is obliged to abide to the dictates of the framework of action which specify that inclusive schools should recognise and respond to the needs of their students and accommodate different styles and rates of learning and ensure quality education [2]. United Nations [3] Declaration of Human rights

also enforces the imperative to value equity and equality to educational access.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Inclusive education is a philosophy which is based on the principle that all children regardless of ability or disability have a right to be educated alongside their peers in their nearest local schools UNESCO [4]. This calls for restructuring of schools in order to respond to learning needs of all pupils Ainscow,[5]. Many classes comprise of children of varying disabilities (emotional, physical, mental and learning). Many of them fail to meet requirements met by their peers in the mainstream because there is inadequate intervention to meet their needs[6]. Schools thus, should have an inclusive set up which tries to meet their needs. Inclusive education calls for a fundamental change in the set up of the mainstream. The needs of all pupils in the community should be met regardless of their abilities[7]. In this regard, the teachers' attitudes play a very important role.

In a study carried out by Mukhopadhyay[8] it was discovered that teachers in Botswana support the practice of inclusive education but they lacked support. They complained of not having adequate training to manage children with special needs, adequate resources

to use when teaching pupils with special needs and the teacher pupil ratio which they claimed was too high. Most of them showed dislike of pupils with severe disabilities. These factors adversely affected the way they could implement inclusive education. Most of them developed negative attitudes towards inclusive education.

In a study to ascertain teachers' attitude towards inclusion, Horne and Timmons [9] established that teachers lack self-efficacy for inclusive practices. They argue that efficacy is gained through training and gaining knowledge. This was because they lacked insufficient training for providing inclusive services [10]. The teachers felt their training did not prepare them for implementing inclusion. It was recommended that teachers should take part in decisions and practices which concerned their pupils undergo in-service training on inclusive practices.

Chopra[11] is of the opinion that in order to realise the vision of inclusion, the school personnel should realise that the regular and the special educator need to share responsibilities of teaching all students. The two should cooperate and assess the educational needs of students and map out strategies to meet the needs. This practice of co-teaching was necessary because regular teachers did not have knowledge of special education and this gap was filled by the special educator. For collaboration between the two to be effective, both have to have a positive perception on inclusion [6]. However there was resistance from regular education teachers to include children with special needs in the class. Chopra[11] cited that the most ideal situation was to have a teacher with crystallised understanding of what is needed to make inclusion work. This includes providing the regular teacher with support and services that make him provide effective educational programme for special class students.

Class size is cited as another factor which influences teachers' attitudes towards inclusive practices. Johnson[12] concluded that class size should be reduced in order to manage a group of pupils with different needs. In a large class the regular teacher cannot have time to assist students with learning problems. Accommodating students with special needs implied additional role for the regular teacher. Teachers expressed concern that they would need extra tools and skills in order to cope with social and emotional problems that go hand in hand with inclusive practices[13]. This raised objection to inclusion by regular teachers.

Regular teachers are also frustrated by the inability to communicate effectively with some students with disabilities that join the mainstream. Chavuta et al [14] cite that there is poor communication between the mainstream teachers and learners with disabilities. This

is because the teacher does not have communication skills. Learners who are visually impaired pose a challenge to regular teachers for they do not have brail skills. Similarly, those who are hard of hearing require the teachers to use sign language which the teachers are not able to use. As a result, regular teachers' developed negative attitudes to inclusion. They might ignore the learners.

Teachers are the key elements in successful implementation of inclusive education philosophy. They are the persons who shoulder the responsibility of implementing inclusive education. Their attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and willingness to work with children with special needs matter most. It is therefore crucial to assess their perceptions of inclusive education since their perception affect their acceptance and commitment to implementing inclusive policy, Johnson and Newton [6]. The results of the study help administrators and policy makers will make policies and laws which cultivate positive perceptions to children with special needs in teachers.

The problem

So much has been said on implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. In Gweru Urban, a pilot project involving three schools was carried out by Leonard Cheshire Zimbabwe Trust. The project involved full inclusion of pupils with disabilities, provision of assistive devices in the schools, development of infrastructure and training of teachers in management of inclusive education. These schools were to be model schools in their clusters. Observations are that despite examples set by the project and encouragement to implement inclusive education, there is no progress being made. There is no increase in the enrolment of pupils with special needs in the schools. There are no structural developments being made to accommodate children with special needs. Teachers' attitude and perceptions are closely linked to the implementation of inclusive education [15]. It is therefore important to explore the teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education as one of the solutions to the problems militating against implementation of inclusive education.

Objective of the study

To explore primary school teachers' perceptions towards the implementation of inclusive education.

Research questions

1. How do teachers perceive implementation of inclusive education?
2. What is the challenge faced by teachers in the implementation of inclusive education?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative interpretive research approach was preferred in this study. A case study was the design for this study. Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context specific settings, such as “real world setting where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest”[16]. Data were collected through document analysis, face to face in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations. The documents interrogated were inclusive education policies and registers. Three focus groups of six teachers each were conducted at each of the two schools where the research was conducted. All the head teachers of the visited schools were interviewed individually and the responses were transcribed into scripts. All the participants of this study were purposefully selected. The interpretive researcher encourages varieties of data and different sources of analysis methods in order to strive for validity[17]. Triangulation of data sources helped the researchers to be confident that data generated was not artefacts of one specific method of collection[18]. The researchers’ analysed data from the individual interviews and focus groups using qualitative methods

for summarising narrative data. The researchers analysed data using thematic analysis. The narrative was read and re-read to identify the themes and segments of the narrative that reflected the themes.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Implementation of the Inclusive Education Pilot programme.

The programme was sponsored by Leonard Cheshire Trust Zimbabwe in 2010. Three schools were included in the pilot programme. At each school a committee including the deputy head teacher, teacher in charge, two teachers, two parents, and a nurse aid was selected to monitor the progress of the programme. The nurse aid was paid by the Leonard Cheshire Trust which also provided schools with ramps, wheel chairs, spectacles, toys and crutches. Teachers were invited for a workshop at the launch of the programme. Awareness campaigns were also made. In the two schools which were studied 33 pupils with different disabilities were enrolled. The disabilities included the blind, the deaf, the physically challenged and the mentally challenged. Some pupils had multiple disabilities. The statistics were as follows;

Table-1: Enrolment Statistics of the two schools Grades1-5

Initial registration in 2010	Enrolment status in 2014	Type of disability
9	3	Deaf.
2	2	Mentally challenged.
2	2	Blind.
9	4	Crippled and using wheel chair and crutches.
3	1	Crippled hands.
6	3	Multiple disabilities.
2	2	Lump on the back.
33	17	Total

The study has revealed that several challenges cropped up during the implementation of the programme. This might have led to a cursory approach in its implementation. As revealed by this study statistics of pupils with different disabilities have since declined due to attrition and dropout.

CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PILOT PROGRAMME.

Lack of teacher competencies

In an interview with both teachers and head teachers, it was revealed that teachers lacked competencies to handle pupils with different disabilities. The following sentiments came out of the teachers’ focus group;

- “I was never trained to handle pupils with different disabilities”

- “How can I handle the deaf, the blind and other pupils with different disabilities? It needs specialist teachers in this area”. The sentiments tend to suggest that teachers had no proficiency to handle pupils with special needs. To this end it would appear that pupils with disabilities continued to be disadvantaged and inclusiveness seems a dream yet to be realised.

Teachers’ negative attitudes

The study revealed that teachers had negative attitudes towards inclusive education. The teachers felt that it was unnecessary extra-work since there was no extra pay attached to this programme. Teachers considered this as extra-work because they already had large classes. While some teachers had children with disabilities, some did not have such children in their

classes, as such, the teachers with children with different disabilities felt that they were overworked because the pupils needed special attention yet no incentives were given for this programme. One teacher lamented that, "The current teacher pupil ratio is at 1:40-55 and this makes it very difficult for me to attend to pupils with disabilities". The pressure that is exerted on teachers due to work overload tends to give the teachers negative attitudes. Furthermore teachers expected an extra-payment if they had pupils with disabilities in their classes.

Lack of resources

Lack of time and material resources were another challenge which came out of the study. It was observed that the toilets that were built in all the schools did not cater for different disabilities. Furthermore, some classrooms and toilets had no facilities for wheel chairs to be pushed into the classrooms. Only one school had appropriate toilets. Teachers in a focus group also indicated that there was limited lesson time since most lessons in the primary school last for 30 minutes which might be inadequate for some pupils with challenges.

The situation was exacerbated by the withdrawal of donors in 2013. These donors were financing the programme and when they withdrew the nurse aides who were hired to assist pupils with disabilities have since been allocated other duties. In one school, the nurse aid was performing general hand duties. In the other school the nurse aid had since left employment.

It was also observed that the programme was slowly and naturally phasing out. Most of the pupils who had enrolled in the programme had since left but some were still in the schools. Thirty three (33) pupils with different disabilities were enrolled in the studied two schools at the inception of the programme. However at the time of study 17 pupils with disabilities were in the school, these included the crippled, deaf, mentally challenged, partially blind and multiple disabilities.

Parents' Donor dependency syndrome.

It emerged from the teachers' focus groups that some parents were not eager to pay fees for children with disabilities. Such parents were used to the idea that the donors would fund for the education of their children. As such some of the children with disabilities were compelled to stay at home. This was because the pupils did not only need school fees but other related costs such as transport, spectacles, wheel chairs and wheel chair repairs which some parents could not afford.

The programme state of affairs.

The programme was a pilot study which was supposed to filter to other schools. However, interviews with participants revealed that no other schools managed to adopt the programme; rather it was slowly and naturally phasing out from the pilot schools.

CONCLUSION

The inclusive education programme has great potential to provide education to children with disabilities. The programme allows all children regardless of ability or disability have a right to be educated alongside their peers in their nearest local schools [4]. The pilot test of the programme has faced challenges which led it to naturally phase out instead of it getting to a full-fledged implementation stage. The proper implementation of the programme can be realised if steps are taken to address the challenges faced.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made in light of the responses to findings highlighted in the study as follows;

- Inclusive education to be included in the teachers' college curriculum in order to equip teachers with requisite skills.
- Need to continually educate teachers, pupils, parents and other stake holders on inclusive education.
- Need for the Ministry of Primary and Secondary education to reduce teacher /pupil ratio to allow teachers ample time to assist those in need.
- Need for continuous monitoring and evaluation of the programme to facilitate its effective implementation.
- There is also need to put research based solutions in the implementation of this programme.

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