

The State of Inclusive Education in Zimbabwe: Bachelor of Education (Special Needs Education) Students' Perceptions

Regis Chireshe

*College of Education, Department of Psychology of Education,
P.O. Box 392 UNISA, 0003 South Africa
E-mail: chirer@unisa.ac.za*

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish the current state of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Focus was on the perceived gains of inclusive education, challenges in its implementation and how the challenges could be addressed. A survey design which was fundamentally qualitative in nature was used. Forty-two Bachelor of Education (Special Needs Education)(BEd SNE) purposefully selected students from Great Zimbabwe University participated in the study. The data were collected using an open ended questionnaire and were content analysed. The results revealed that the participants perceived inclusive education as having resulted in social acceptance of children with special educational needs. They perceived inclusion as having promoted positive attitudes among children without disabilities and in communities. Stigmatisation and discrimination were perceived as having been reduced. The challenges that were still perceived to be experienced included: lack of specific policy on inclusive education; scarcity of resources such as special needs education trained teachers and assistive devices; existence of negative attitudes among some stakeholders and lack of understanding of the meaning of inclusive education. The participants suggested several ways to address some of the above challenges. These included enacting a specific policy on inclusive education, training more teachers in special needs education, implementing more community awareness programmes, having itinerant specialist teachers, sufficient funding of the education system as a whole and availing more resources for inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of UNESCO's Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education (UNESCO 1994) has resulted in inclusion of children with special educational needs in educational settings becoming a primary service option. According to UNESCO, inclusive education is a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all children by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education (Nguyet and Ha 2010). It is a process of increasing the presence, participation and achievement of all learners (Booth and Ainscow 2002). The process involves mainstreaming children with special educational needs into regular classroom settings, allowing them to learn side by side with their peers without disabilities. Inclusive education implies that children with special educational needs have to attend mainstream schools they would have attended if they did not have a disability. Mainstreaming children with special needs education has a positive impact on both social and academic learning for children with and without special needs (Farrell 2000). Similarly, Bunch (2008) views the inclusive education

philosophy as socially just and more effective in both academic and social spheres. Educational authorities worldwide have adopted the principle of inclusion to address their social and moral obligation to educate all learners (Forbes 2007). Bunch (2008) argues that inclusive education is a new human rights and social justice approach to education and disability. It is a symbol of respect for all of humanity.

From the above, one may argue that inclusive education is about social justice and equity and takes into account learners' abilities, potential and diverse needs. The learner does not have to adapt to the school system. The school or the education system has to change in order to meet the learning needs of all children in a given community (Kisanji 1999; Armstrong 2005). In other words, inclusion involves restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality (Booth and Ainscow 2002). The guiding principle in inclusive education is that all learners have a right to learn in mainstream schools. It guarantees children with disabilities their right to education and helps achieve equality (UNICEF nd).

Zimbabwe is a signatory to the Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education and several other inclusive education related international charters and conventions (Mpofu et al. 2007; Musengi et al. 2010; Chireshe 2011). Although Zimbabwe does not have an inclusive education specific policy, it has inclusive education related policies like the Education Act of 1996 and the Zimbabwe Disabled Persons Act of 1996 which advocates for non discrimination in the provision of education and non discrimination of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe respectively.

Inclusive education has been implemented successfully in many countries (Nguyet and Ha 2010). Such countries have successfully promoted inclusive education practices and policies that eliminate barriers and create enabling conditions for all learners to learn. For example, New Zealand has a range of policy and legislative initiatives that support the rights of children with special needs to an inclusive education. According to Carroll-Lind and Lees (2009), the New Zealand's Special Education Policy Guidelines (M.E. 2003) states that children with special needs education have the same rights to high quality education as their colleagues without special needs education. Other countries with inclusive education policies include Australia (Department of Education and Training 2004) and Finland (Jarvinen 2007; Takala et al. 2009). Takala et al. (2009) reveal that almost every school in Finland has one or more permanent special education teachers. Where such teachers are not available, for example in rural schools, peripatetic teachers are available. Peripatetic teachers also known as itinerant teachers are teachers who travel around local mainstream schools and communities to offer advice, resources and support to children with disabilities, their teachers and their parents (Lynch and McCall 2007).

Inclusive education has also been successful where all stakeholders: parents, teachers, people with disabilities and significant others impress the vision and value of inclusive change on government and school leadership (Bunch 2008). In addition, inclusive education is successful where all learners are accepted as true learners at their own level of ability and where there is collaboration among all players in education: teachers, specialist teachers, parents, supporting disciplines and students (Bunch 2008). The present study sought to establish

the present status of inclusive education in Zimbabwe as perceived by Bachelor of Education (Special Needs Education) (BEd SNE) students.

A number of barriers to inclusive education have been identified in a number of countries. For example, in Malawi, lack of coordination between stakeholders (Griender 2010), in South Africa, lack of knowledge among teachers (Pottas 2005; Stofile and Green 2007), and in Zimbabwe, lack of resources, lack of training among teachers, lack of commitment by policy makers (Peresuh 2000; Mushoriwa 2002; Musengi et al. 2010).

Since signing the 1994 Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education, a number of strides have been made on the principle of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. There is need to establish the present status of inclusive education since its initial implementation. Previous inclusive education studies in Zimbabwe for example, Peresuh (2000), Makowe (2005), Musengi et al. (2010) and Chireshe (2011) have all made numerous recommendations aimed at improving inclusive education. The recommendations include: running awareness campaigns, coordinating stakeholders, training of teachers and availing resources. The present study would want to establish if the BEd SNE students perceive the Zimbabwean state of inclusive education as having improved over the years.

Goals of the Study

The study sought to establish the present status of inclusive education in Zimbabwe as perceived by BEd SNE trainee teachers. The study also sought to establish the trainee teachers' perceived suggestions on improving inclusive education implementation in Zimbabwe.

METHOD

Design

The survey design which was mainly qualitative in nature was used. Surveys are normally appropriate for studies that seek to obtain participants' perceptions, opinions and beliefs on a phenomenon (Slavin 2007). Since the present study sought to obtain BEd SNE trainee teachers' perceptions on the status of inclusive education in Zimbabwe, the survey design was chosen as the most appropriate design for the study.

Sample

Forty-two (27 females, 15 males) first and second year BEd SNE students at Great Zimbabwe University took part in the study. The students were purposefully sampled. In purposeful sampling, the researcher selects the participants because they possess particular characteristics or knowledge being sought (Cohen et al. 2007). In this study, BEd SNE students were selected because of their knowledge and experience in inclusive education. Their age ranged from 27 to 46 years while their experience in Special Needs Education ranged from 1 to 18 years.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire with mainly open ended items was used in this study. The items focused on the gains of inclusive education, current challenges faced in implementing inclusive education and how the challenges can be overcome. Two inclusive education experts were asked to check on the relevance and clarity of the questionnaire items.

Procedure

A research assistant distributed and collected the questionnaire. She explained the purpose of the study to potential participants (BEd SNE students). Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage during the study.

Data Analysis

The data was content analysed. Content analysis produces a relatively systematic and comprehensive summary of data (Silverman 2004). Recurrent instances were systematically identified and grouped together.

RESULTS

The results are presented in Table 1 in accordance to the categories that emerged. Table 1 shows that the participants viewed inclusive education as having resulted in social acceptance, positive attitudes and reduction of discrimination and stigmatisation. The Table also shows the perceived current challenges faced

Table 1: Bachelor of Special Needs Education students' perceptions of the present status of inclusive education in Zimbabwe

<i>Category</i>	<i>Responses</i>
<i>Current Gains of Inclusive Education</i>	- Social acceptance- Promotion of positive attitudes- Reduced discrimination and stigmatisation-Children with disabilities involved community activities
<i>Current Challenges</i>	- Absence of a specific policy on inclusive education- Inadequate resources (few teachers trained in inclusive education, lack of gargets such as hearing aids and Braille machines)- Negative attitudes towards disabilities- Poor conceptualisation of inclusive education
<i>Overcoming the Challenges</i>	- Massive training of teachers in inclusive education and special needs education- Running inclusive education community awareness programmes - Engaging peripatetic/itinerant specialist teachers- Provision of more resources for inclusive education- Sufficient funding for the education system

in implementing inclusive education as including: lack of specific policy on inclusive education, lack of resources, negative attitudes and misunderstanding of inclusive education. The Table further shows that the participants felt the current challenges to inclusive education could be reduced by training more teachers in inclusive education, running community awareness campaigns, having peripatetic or itinerant teachers, enacting a specific policy on inclusive education and providing more resources to inclusive education. The participants felt that the Government should sufficiently fund inclusive education.

DISCUSSION

It emerged from this study that social acceptance of children with disabilities was perceived to have improved as a result of inclusive education. Thus, the participants perceived society as having developed positive attitudes towards children with disabilities in general and those who were included in particular. The perceived social acceptance could have resulted from chil-

dren with disabilities having developed social skills from the practice (Peresuh 2000) leading them to socialize with those without disabilities. The included children could probably have demonstrated their abilities hence the acceptance. Literature reveals that learners with disabilities achieve high levels of academic and social achievement in inclusive settings than in segregated settings (Bunch 2008). Thus, social achievement may have resulted in the learners in inclusive settings being socially accepted. Related to social acceptance and positive attitudes was the perception that the discrimination and stigmatisation of children with disabilities had been reduced. This was a positive development from previous Zimbabwean studies (Mpofu 2000; Peresuh 2000; Mpofu et al. 2007; Chireshe 2011) where discrimination and stigmatisation against people with disabilities was reported to be very high. Related findings were obtained by (Mutepfa et al. 2007) who believed that Zimbabwean regular class teachers were developing positive attitudes towards included children. Continuous exposure to children with disabilities may have lead to the perceived improved social acceptance.

The study also revealed that lack of specific policy on inclusive education was perceived as a key challenge to successful implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Legal support for inclusive education is implied from the Zimbabwe Education Act of 1996 and the Zimbabwean Disabled Persons Act of 1996. The Education Act of 1996 introduced free and compulsory education for all students regardless of any demographic differences while the Disabled Persons Act of 1996 addresses the rights of people with disabilities in relation to education, employment, recreational facilities and community and social services. However, Carroll-Lind and Rees (2009) cite literature (Forest and Pearpoint 1992; Mentis et al. 2005; Spedding 2008) arguing that inclusive education is still more about attitude than legislation and that inclusive values and beliefs should underpin the whole school culture because they determine the policies and practices that will be put into place. Thus, legislation may be there but if society hold negative attitudes towards people experiencing disabilities and other marginalised groups, the success of inclusive education process may be far from over. Nguyet and Ha (2010) support the above idea by arguing that inclusive education can only

succeed if teachers, principals and other education stakeholders maintain a positive attitude towards it.

The study revealed that the implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe was perceived to be presently affected by lack of resources. Previous Zimbabwean studies (Mpofu 2000; Peresuh 2000; Mpofu et al. 2007; Chireshe 2011) lamented on the shortage of resources as an impediment to the implementation of inclusive education. Similar findings were also obtained in Namibia (Zimba et al. 2007) and South Africa (Eloff and Kqwete 2007). The lack of resources is worsened by the high teacher pupil ratio (1 to 40) in many Zimbabwean primary schools. Because of this high teacher pupil ratio, teachers are left with no room to cater for children with disabilities. Negative attitudes towards children with disabilities still prevailing in the country may also negatively affect the provision of resources to them. The funding availed for education in the country in general and inclusive education in particular is insufficient.

The participants also felt that some society members did not understand the meaning of inclusive education. This could be because of lack of awareness campaigns focusing on the phenomenon and lack of exposure to inclusive education best practices. Some people were believed to understand inclusive education just as the mere presence of children with disabilities in mainstream school even if the schools had not been adjusted to meet the unique needs of these children. This finding confirms Forbes' (2007) argument that there is usually a misconception that inclusion refers to a place where children with disabilities are learning and not the process of learning. Real inclusive education entails schools restructuring in order to meet the learning needs of all learners in a given community (Ainscow 1995; Kisanji 1999; Armstrong 2005).

The study also revealed that most teachers were perceived to be lacking training in inclusive education. This finding confirms some Zimbabwean studies (Peresuh 2000; Chireshe 2011). Despite more universities and teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe training teachers in special needs education, many teachers remain untrained in the area. Forbes (2007) argues that the obligations of inclusive education will be met when all schools have teachers with adequate training in special needs education. The partici-

pants in the present study believed that the challenge of lack of teacher training in inclusive education could be overcome by having peripatetic or itinerant specialist teachers. The implication is that better services could be availed if the available specialist teachers could move from one mainstream school to another assisting mainstream teachers and supporting the included learners. Itinerant teachers have been used in countries such as Ghana (Kuyini and Desai 2008), Netherlands (Pijl and Hamstra 2005) and Uganda and Kenya (Lynch and McCall 2007). However, lack of resources may negatively affect the availability of itinerant teachers. For example, Kuyini and Desai (2008) revealed that the few itinerant teachers in Ghana could not meet the demands of many children with disabilities.

It also emerged from the study that B Ed SNE students perceived that the implementation of inclusive education could be improved by running inclusive education awareness campaigns among communities. Awareness campaigns that involve people experiencing disabilities and significant others are most likely to improve attitudes towards people experiencing disability and acceptability of inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that positive gains of inclusive education have been observed in Zimbabwe. The implementation of inclusive education in the country is viewed as having improved although lack of resources is painted as a significant barrier. The lack of resources may be compounded by the perceived lack of a specific legislation on inclusive education and the perceived existence of negative attitudes towards people experiencing disability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: There is need for continuous training of new teachers and inservicing of teachers in inclusive education practices. More inclusive education awareness campaigns should be lodged with all stakeholders. People with disabilities or experiencing disability need to play a central role in the awareness campaigns. Such awareness campaigns may result in more positive attitudes towards people

with disabilities. Positive attitudes across all sectors may result in the enactment and implementation of an explicitly inclusive education policy. Improved attitudes may also result in fair allocation of resources towards inclusive education. The study was carried out with BEd SNE students from one university. There is need to replicate the study with students from other institutions of higher learning in the country.

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