

Challenges Faced by Students with Special Educational Needs in Early Childhood Development Centers in Zimbabwe as Perceived by ECD Trainers and Parents

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ABSTRACT The study sought to determine perceived challenges faced by: (a) students with special needs in Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in Zimbabwe; (b) teachers of students with special needs in ECD centers in Zimbabwe; and (c) to assess how these perceived challenges could be addressed. A survey design was used to assess these perceived challenges. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews and observations check list. A random sample of 50 ECD teachers (40 female, 10 male) and 20 parents (10 male, 10 female) of children with special needs were used in this study. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and themes derived from research questions used in this study. The study found that children with special needs in ECD centers were being taught by untrained teachers; these children were used as surrogate mothers at the centers; and the school curriculum was inappropriate; and the physical environment was poor. Students with special needs are learning under very challenging conditions in these centers.

INTRODUCTION

The present barrier to providing quality programmes for all young children remains at times overwhelming, especially in economic realm (Meyers 2000; Mpofu et al. 2007). Zimbabwe recognizes the importance of early childhood education as part of its national education policy (Meyers 2000). In order to improve the quality of primary and secondary education of children with special needs, policy makers are challenged to look closely at the preparation of those who work with young children before the eligibility age of primary education. The importance of the early years of life, and the related commitment to the education of all the children were identified by the government as a priority (Zvobgo 1990).

Research related to quality education and care programmes for young children in Zimbabwe is scarce in Zimbabwe (Mpofu et al. 2007). The training of Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers by teachers' colleges and universities in Zimbabwe is an important aspect of how quality programmes could be improved in the country.

The country's education and manpower development policies expose the egalitarian values of equal opportunities for all citizens (Mpofu et al. 2007). By law, primary school education is free and compulsory in Zimbabwe (Mushoriwa and Muzembe 2011). However, students are required to pay school fees using the cadetships from the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (Zimbabwe 2000). The egalitarian values of equal opportunities is also extended to early childhood development programmes as they are required by law to enroll pupils without discriminatory practices. This creates equal opportunities for pupils from different ethnic, cultural and those with special needs admitted in ECD centers of their own choice.

During the colonial era, ECD programmes were only accessible to privileged few who were mostly in urban areas (Mpofu et al. 2007). Private

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organisations and individuals were largely responsible for running ECD centres (Zobgo 1990). They tended to charge exorbitant fees which effectively prohibited the majority who could not afford them. This meant that children in rural areas and poor communities had no access to ECD centres. Even with the attainment of independence in 1980, there was no immediate government intervention to enhance access to ECD (Zimbabwe 2000).

In 1981-1982 the Ministry of Community Development and Women's affairs initiated a programme for pre-school teacher training and encouraged communities to organize programmes in rural areas (Zvobgo 1990). The government had realised that ECD programmes were necessary in order to promote the holistic development of children to enable them to reach their full potential for formal school and life-long education. Children had to be offered stimulating environments to realize this goal. However, the initiative did not secure a parliamentary vote for funding (Mpofu et al. 2007). In spite of the lack of available government funding, the importance of the inclusion of children from birth through age six within the national education infrastructure became solidified in 1988 when the government of Zimbabwe directed that the Early Childhood Education and Care unit (ECEC) be transferred from Ministry of Community and Women's Affairs to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Meyers 2000). This was a major turning point in Early Childhood Education. In 1990, the government accepted that early childhood education to be an integral part of the formal education system and it was declared a basic human right. In view of this development, the following policy objectives were adopted in order to achieve the broad ECEC goals:

- ♦ to make ECEC a community-based programme in order to enhance the social and cultural development of the child.
- ♦ to mobilize communities to build and furnish ECEC centres with government assistance.
- ♦ to institute a registration system for and intensify the registration of ECEC centres (Meyers 2000).

Although Zimbabwe has some well prepared early childhood professionals, many more ECD personnel have very little formal education and it is normal/usual for an ECD teacher to be unable to read or write in English (the official language in Zimbabwe) (Meyers 2000). The Minis-

try of Education, Sport, Art and Culture provides in-service courses for ECD teachers (Zimbabwe 2000). However, these in-service training programmes and pre-service early childhood teacher preparation are limited because there is no desire on the part of administrators to train ECD teachers. This scenario poses a lot of challenges for children with disabilities in ECD learning centers. Recently, universities and colleges have started training ECD teachers but they are only recruiting manageable numbers because of lack of resources (Zimbabwe 2000). For example, the enrolment of ECD teacher trainees in 2005 was fixed in the following colleges: Seke Teachers' College 150; Gwanda ZINTEC 100; Marymount 60; and Mkoba 60 (Zimbabwe 2000).

Zimbabwe has a major role to play in any international dialogue about quality of educational programmes for young children with and without disabilities and those who care for and educate them (Meyers 2000). There are great discrepancies in Zimbabwe's existing early childhood programmes and these include a shortage of well prepared early childhood professionals (Davis et al. 1998). While the movement towards access to education for all children has been fraught with economic and logistical pitfalls, considerable progress has been made in a brief period of time. The historical background on ECD programmes in Zimbabwe contributed in ECD programmes as the education espouses egalitarian values of equal opportunity for all citizens.

The Education Act 1987 made students with disabilities more visible in every type of school setting including the early education classroom (Mpofu et al. 2007). The ECD classes increased the numbers of children with special needs. This diverse composition of early childhood classrooms brings many challenges and many opportunities to educators. Without knowledge of effective practices and support of administrators, colleagues, families and the local and global communities, classrooms that are responsive to the diverse needs of children with special needs will be difficult to achieve.

If ECD centers are to meet challenges of educating children with diverse needs, teachers should embrace instruction and curricula that engage and encourage all students. Research about including children with disabilities indicates the importance of several interrelated educational strategies as listed by Mclean and Odon (1993):

- ♦ heterogeneous student grouping, developmentally appropriate practice,
- ♦ an inclusive curriculum that emphasizes children's strengths yet accommodates their needs,
- ♦ high expectations for all students,
- ♦ appropriate physical environment and material,
- ♦ collaboration and instructional teaming with other teachers and professionals,
- ♦ support from administrators, families and the community and ongoing professional development.

Heterogeneous Grouping

Research on heterogeneous grouping has shown that the detrimental impact of identifying children with developmental delays classifies them as low achievers and placing them in "lower" track in ECD centers. Davis et al. (1998) note that "high" and "low" academic tracks or instructional groups constitute different instructional contexts. Rather than narrowing the gap between the groups, the instructional method typically used with the less advantaged children tends to accentuate any inequality in skills and knowledge that may be present when children are initially admitted to ECD centers. Similarly, grouping children with disabilities in special education classrooms may isolate them from the real world and limit their opportunities to interact with other children (DEC 1993). When circumstances permit heterogeneous grouping of students is highly desirable for promoting learning as well as social relation.

Research has shown positive social and academic results for children with disabilities in heterogeneous groups (Bailey and Woley 1992; Davis et al. 1988; Johnson and Johnson 1990). The teacher responsible for such a heterogeneous class must be able to identify the individual needs of each child including any needs for accommodation and support. Inclusion of young children in early childhood education can be a formal method for screening, diagnosis, determining eligibility of special services, planning instruction of placement. Assessment also can be means for monitoring process and informal determination of any help that an individual child may need in the classroom.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Developmentally appropriate practice is "based on knowledge about how children develop and learn" (National Association for Education of Young Children 1996). According to the Southern Regional Education Board (1994) in (Davis et al. 1998: 24), a developmentally appropriate early childhood programme emphasizes the following:

- ♦ active service-based exploration of the environment.
- ♦ self-directed, hands-on learning activities, balances with teacher-directed activities.
- ♦ a balance between individual and group activities.
- ♦ regular and supportive interaction with teachers and peers.
- ♦ ongoing observation and assessment which informs the programme.

When early childhood professionals make decisions about the developmental appropriateness of practice, they rely on what is known about child development and learning the strengths, interests and needs of each individual child in the group and knowledge of the social and cultural context in which children live (Carta 1991). Developmentally appropriate practice is especially important to children with special needs in early education because it encourages greater cultural sensitivity, recognizes a variety of cultural communication patterns and interaction in the natural course of teaching (Carta 1991).

The idea of cultural sensitivity is very important to students who are from deaf cultural community. In developmentally appropriate practice cultural sensitivity is encouraged because it emphasizes the use of interactive or experiential teaching model marked by guidance and facilitation rather than control of children's learning by the teacher (Cummings 1991). This type of instruction is automatically fair in that all students are actively involved in expression, sharing, and amplifying their experience within the classroom. It is especially appropriate for children with disabilities because it provides enriching experiences that each child can act upon individually (Davis et al. 1993). It also facilitates engagement of exploration for students with disabilities (Trivette and Peal 1998). The developmentally appropriate interactive approach allows adapting classroom interaction and accommodates

various individual needs. By using developmentally interactive approach, teachers can help children with disabilities become comfortable and confident in classroom setting (McLaughlin 1995).

An Inclusive Curriculum

An inclusive curriculum is another strategy for teaching children in ECE Centers and accommodates the needs of all children including children with disabilities or at risk developmentally delays and children from various minority groups and cultures such as the deaf culture (Peck et al. 1993). The National Association for the Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (1990:42) describe the following characteristics of an appropriate early childhood curriculum:

- ♦ it is based on sound theoretical principles of how children learn and develop
- ♦ it is designed to achieve social, emotional, cognitive and physical goals
- ♦ it includes realistic and achievable expectations that allow children of varying abilities to work at different levels on different activities
- ♦ supports individual, cultural and linguistic diversity, providing a balance between the dominant culture and the minority culture
- ♦ it emphasizes the value of social interaction; and
- ♦ is flexible and can be adapted to individual children or group.

To come up with an inclusive curriculum, the ECD teacher must plan to connect cultural activities to concrete, daily life through hands on experiences, rather than theoretical aspects only (Davis et al. 1998). Inclusive curriculum encourages children without disabilities to understand and appreciate and value children with disabilities. The ECD teacher can develop activities that introduce ways for children with disabilities and those without disabilities to interact with and learn from each other. The teacher also can model specific ways for children to interact for example by moving a child's wheelchair through the steps of a classroom or in a dance. Such strategies help counter misconceptions and stereotyping about what children with disabilities can and cannot do (Derman-Spans and Anti Curriculum Task Force 1989).

High Expectation

In order to ensure the success of children with disabilities in a diverse ECD classroom, teachers must have high expectations over them. Research consistently shows that schools that establish high expectations for all students and provide the support necessary to achieve these expectations have high rates of academic success (Bredenkamp 1987). The reasons behind increased success are the same reasons that prompt use of heterogeneous groupings, developmentally appropriate practice, and an inclusive curriculum, (Knapp et al. 1995 in Davis et al. 1998). By concentrating on assets rather than deficits, ECD teachers are predisposed to see more potential in the children they are teaching and are able to treat the children's experiences and background as resources for learning rather than constraints on it.

In contrast, identifying students as low ability seems to lower teacher expectations and subject them to an inferior education. Mopfu (2008) notes that once students are considered deficit in some way or other, teachers begin to treat them differently, much to the student's detriment. When compared to their high-ability peers, low ability students are called on less often in class, given less time to respond, praised less frequently, given less feedback, criticized more frequently and prompted less often in case of incorrect response. Most studies on inclusive type of learning of children with disabilities in Zimbabwe (see Hungwe 2005; Mpofo 2004, 2008) show that negative attitudes of teachers towards learners with special needs. According to Mpofo (1998), such students are perceived by teachers as less capable of fulfilling basic learners' roles in general education classroom. Negative attitudes towards learners with disabilities like above may act as major stumbling block to inclusive education in Zimbabwe early childhood education.

Appropriate Physical Environment and Materials

Appropriate arrangement of the physical environment and materials in early childhood classrooms is important for all children, especially those with disabilities (Davis et al. 1998). The classroom arrangement "affects the level of involvement of children and the quality of interac-

tion between adults and children” (National Association for the Education of Young Children 1991:43). The ECD teacher should structure the physical space and invite all children in many different types of group activities. Classroom arrangement also must address the needs of children with disabilities, such as maintaining predictable order for a child with severe visual impairment, or allowing adequate space for a child in a wheelchair to access materials. Since young children learn best through sensory encounters with the world - manipulating, exploring, and experimenting – the physical environment should provide manipulative, puzzles and other learning materials that are easily accessible by all students including those with disabilities (Noonan and McCormick 1993).

In order to promote the goals of diversity, some additional adaptations may be necessary. Choice of material is key (Swick et al. 1995 in Davis et al. 1998). The goal of the early childhood education in a diverse classroom is to increase the use of materials that reflect non-stereotypical ways children and adults of color as well as people who are differently abled. Special needs children may require spatial accommodation to allow for equipment that makes it possible for them to participate in the classroom. ECD and classroom settings must have adequate space and be barrier free (Salisbury and Smith 1993 in Davis et al. 1998). Adaptive equipment help children with disabilities to participate in classroom activities may include ramps to the side of the sandbox, so children who are unable to sit or stand can lie on them and participate in sand play, pillow and bolsters to position children who cannot sit on the floor unassisted, or trays that can be placed across wheelchair arms to enable children to use manipulatives.

Collaborative and Instructional Teaming

Early childhood teachers may feel overwhelmed by the many responsibilities required of them in a diverse classroom. For the teacher to meet individual needs of many different children while developing and presenting integrated curriculum and ensure opportunities for all, the ECD center must provide support through collaboration with other professionals, instructional teaming within the classroom, and assistance from aids within the school or center (McKenzie and Loebeinstein 2007). By collaborating with

other professionals and specialists, ECD centers or schools must provide a collaboration and instructional team that identifies appropriate educational strategies and intervention services for children with disabilities. In this approach, the combined expertise of a variety of professionals such as classroom and special education teachers, speech and language pathologists and assessment specialists inside the ECD center or school building and social workers and health care professionals outside the ECD center or school building provides insight into each child’s needs and strength (Voltz et al. 2001). Through collaboration the educational team can design programmes and implement strategies to help individual children achieve their educational goals.

Support from Administrators, Families and the Community

Competent instruction for diversity requires the unconditional support of school administrators. Cummins (1991) stresses administrative commitments to supporting early childhood teachers who implement developmentally appropriate practice. Administrative support is essential for effectively teaching diversified classroom (Cummins 1991). Heads of ECD centers are supposed to be highly supportive of their instructional staff and supported their autonomy while maintaining an awareness of the needs to conform to national policies on curriculum and academic accountability.

One important sources of teacher support are the children’s parents and families (Chimedza and Chinze 2003). Parents are the first educators of all young children including those with disabilities. Parental involvement in early education programmes is a common denominator in school success (Chakuchichi et al. 2003; Mpofu 2008). Cummins (1991: 234) explains that, “when educators involve parents of children with disabilities in the learning of their children, they appear to develop a sense of efficacy that communicates itself to their children and has positive academic consequences”.

Professional Development

In addition to support from colleagues, school administrators, parents and the local and global community, and teachers in diverse class-

room, require ongoing appropriate professional development to remain in touch with current research in special needs services (Smith and Hilton 1998). ECD teachers should have formal training in child development, appropriate instructional and assessment techniques, curricular development, parent involvement and individual diversity (Smith and Hilton 1998). The field of early childhood education has experienced economic growth in terms of both size and recognition world over (Davis et al. 1998). Early childhood education is seen as a relatively new entity in the arena of serious teaching and learning in most African countries. For many years, early childhood education was seen as play time, and early childhood education teachers were seen as surrogate parents who were there to provide socialization experiences but not necessarily educational ones. In fact, many thought that real school did not begin until first grade, hence the term pre-school was adapted in many countries including Zimbabwe (Davis et al. 1995). For a variety of reasons, the role of early childhood education began to change. Early Childhood education is no longer for only a selected few, but was a necessity for all children including with disabilities. It is against this background that this study sought to determine perceived challenges faced by: (a) students with special needs in Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in Zimbabwe; (b) teachers of students with special needs in Early Childhood Development Centers in Zimbabwe; and (c) to assess how these challenges could be addressed in these centers.

METHOD

Design

A survey design was used in this study.

Sample

A random sample comprising 50 ECD teachers (40 females, 10 males) and 20 parents of students with disabilities (10 females, 10 males) was used in this study. Of this sample, 37 teachers were from private ECD Centres and had no formal training in ECD and 13 teachers were from formal schools with formal training in ECD from teachers colleges and universities.

Instruments

The study used questionnaires for ECD teachers, interviews guides for parents of children with disabilities (hearing and visual impairments) and infrastructure observational check list for ECD centres. What form of disability are you researching on/ is it physical, mental, etc.? The pilot study used 10 ECD teachers (all females) from a neighbouring town of Chinhoyi ECD centres. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the content validity and reliability of the research instruments to be used in the study. The pilot participants were selected using the convenient sampling method. An equivalent sample from a neighbouring town was used in the pilot study. Results from the pilot study indicated that the questionnaire had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.72. This is a high positive correlation and implies that the questionnaire is reliable.

Data Collection

Disability survey return forms (forms meant for heads of schools and ECD Centres to list names of parents with students with disabilities in their centres) were sent to schools and ECD centres to solicit statistics on the location or parents with children with disabilities in ECD centres. This survey was done in collaboration with the ECD department in Chegutu District. With the information on the location of ECD centres in the town and parents of students with disabilities in Chegutu Urban ECD centres, one of the researchers made appointments with heads of schools and ECD centres to visit their schools/ECD centres for data collection. Appointments were also made with participating parents. Data was collected over a period of two weeks. Interviews were conducted in Shona, Ndebele and Chewa languages so as to obtain the best answer by removing language barriers.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and themes derived from research questions used in this study. Themes were used to analyse qualitative data in this study. Information from these themes was then converted into percentages to give explanations.

Ethical Issues

Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants were free to withdraw from taking part at any point during the study. They were also assured that their information would be kept as confidential as much as possible. To obtain anonymity, participants were requested not to write their names or put any mark on questionnaires that would make them or ECD centres identifiable.

RESULTS

Challenges faced by children with disabilities or at risk of developmental delays in Chegutu urban ECD centres were presented as extracted from teachers related activities in their provisions for education to students with special needs in ECD centres, parents perspectives and observations from the researchers observations.

Research Question 1: *To what extent are Chegutu Urban ECD teachers trained to provide formal teaching to children with disabilities or at risk of developmental delays?* The respondents who were ECD teachers were asked to respond to research question number 1. Results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Chegutu urban ECD teachers academic and professional qualifications (n = 50)

Qualifications	Frequency	f(%)	Total %
<i>Highest Academic Qualifications</i>			
RJC/ZJC and less	22	44	100
Grade 11	2	4	
“O” Level	23	46	
“A” Level	3	6	
Degree(Academic)	0	0	
<i>Highest Professional Qualifications</i>			100
PTL/PTH	3	6	100
CE/DE	12	24	
Degree(Professional)	1	2	
Others	0	0	
Nil	34	68	
<i>Special Needs Training</i>			
Yes	0	0	100
No	50	100	

Table 1 shows that most of the ECD teachers in Chegutu Urban have RJC/ZJC and grade 11. The findings show that most of teachers teaching in ECD centres in Chegutu Urban do not hold

at least five O’levels required by Ministry of Education Sports Arts and Culture to teach at least as a temporary teacher.

Table 1 also shows that 68 % of ECD teachers in Chegutu Urban do not hold any professional qualifications from recognised institutions to teach in both public and private schools even ECD centres. These teachers are teaching mostly in private ECD centres owned by council, mine and individuals. However, their activities or services are recognised by Ministry of Education Sports Arts and Culture as they are supervised by the Ministry’s district ECD supervisor.

Table 1 also shows that 24 % of the teachers with Diplomas in Education (ECD) were in primary schools owned by government or churches; 6 % had PTL/PTH; and 2 % had a degree to teach in ECD centres. Table 1 also shows that none of the teachers even those with professional qualifications to teach in ECD centres hold qualifications in Special Needs Education as supplement to basic ECD teaching qualifications to teach children with disabilities.

In order to provide adequate answers to the study respondents were asked to respond to the questionnaire by rating their responses on a five-point Likert scale: 1= relatively true; 2 =somewhat true; 3= moderately true; 4 =very true; and 5= extremely true for each and every statement. The findings are shown in Table 2.

Research Question 2: *To what extent does ECD curriculum in Chegutu Urban ECD centres address the needs of children with disabilities or at risk of developmental delay?* Table 2 shows that 70 % of the centres enrol them giving responses ranging from moderately true to extremely true.

The respondents were also asked if they consider developmental aptitude in grouping their children for learning activities and 60 % of them said that it was relatively true and somewhat true. This means that if grouping was done it was not done as a positive teaching strategy but or design but by coincidence. The respondents also said that they hardly adapt to classroom interaction to accommodate the class diversity in their teaching. The respondents also could not acknowledge in strongest terms that children with different abilities work at different levels in their learning activities. This was seen when they said it was somewhat true to relatively true by 60 % again that children with disabilities work at different paces in learning activities. However, when asked if they really acknowledge existence of

Table 2: Teachers' responses on children with disabilities in their ECD centres

Question	Responses frequencies and percentages									
	1	%	2	%	3	%	4	%	5	%
1. Our ECD centre enrolls learners with disabilities or risk of developmental delays.	5	10	10	20	15	30	15	30	5	10
2. I group learners according to their developmental aptitude but learning same concept	20	40	10	20	12	24	4	8	4	8
3. I adapt to classroom interaction to accommodate the class diversity.	17	34	12	24	7	14	6	12	8	16
4. Children with varying abilities work at different levels of different activities.	23	46	7	14	3	6	4	8	13	26
5. In my teaching I acknowledge existence of disabilities to pupils and at the same time point out shared abilities and similarities.	21	42	3	6	3	6	8	16	15	30
6. Pupils with disabilities or at risk of developmental delay are born educationally competent.	19	38	6	12	5	10	3	6	17	34
7. Background of students with disabilities or at risk of developmental delay is resource for learning rather than constraints.	30	60	1	2	1	2	3	6	15	30
8. Furniture in our classroom is designed and arranged to accommodate even those with disabilities or at risk of developmental delay.	38	76	4	8	2	4	2	4	4	8
9. Our classrooms/ learning environment provide for manipulating and are accessible for pupils with disabilities or at risk of developmental delays.	33	66	6	12	2	4	2	4	7	14
10. Our ECD centre has a combined Unit of expertise of a variety of professionals in and outside school building to provide insight into each child's needs and strengths.	28	56	4	8	6	12	2	4	10	20
11. At our ECD learning centre we believe that children's parents and families are the first educators of young children and their involvement in early childhood education is a common denominator.	17	34	8	16	7	14	5	10	13	26

Table 3: Responses from parents on challenges faced by their children with disabilities or risk of developmental delays in ECD centres in Chegutu urban

Question	Response									
	1	%	2	%	3	%	4	%	5	%
1. Our ECD teachers always advise us of problems that are encountered at school by our children because of their condition	10	50	6	30	-	0	2	10	2	10
2. My child's teacher always tells me to transfer my child to a learning centre that enrolls children with disabilities or risk of developmental delay	-	0	-	0	2	10	3	15	15	75
3. my child is being taught in a manner that acknowledges his/her disability	-	0	5	25	-	0	5	25	10	50
4. children at ECD centre that my child attend are exposed to the same curriculum regardless of their disabilities	-	0	5	25	-	0	5	25	10	50
5. Teachers who teach my child at his/her ECD centre have no hope on the success of children with disabilities	2	10	-	0	-	0	8	40	10	50
6. Learning environment at an ECD centre is quite suitable for learners with various disabilities	10	50	10	50	-	0	-	0	-	0
7. My child's ECD centre has a combined unit of expertise of a variety of professionals in and outside school and province insight into each child need and strength	-	0	-	0	5	25	5	25	10	50
8. The head of our ECD centre always remind us that parental involvement in learning of our children is of prime importance in the learning of children with disabilities	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	20	100

disabilities and at the same time share abilities and similarities in their teaching, 52 % of them agreed to the statement.

Research Question 3: *What is the attitude of ECD teachers towards children with disabilities in their classrooms?* Table 2 shows the respondents' views to the research question 3. The respondents being ECD teachers did not also agree quite outrightly with the assertion that although their students may have disabilities they are a source of learning rather than learning constraints.

Research Question 4: *How appropriate or user friendly is physical environment of ECD centres in Chegutu to students with disabilities?* The respondents were asked to rate user friendliness of their physical environment including furniture and classroom appearance to children with disabilities. In this study, the majority of the respondents shown in Table 2 said that their learning environment was not user friendly to children with disabilities and 72 % of them also said that the learning environment at their centres do not adequately provide manipulative environment for students with disabilities and most places were not accessible to a quite number of students with disabilities.

Research Question 5: *How effective are collaboration teams in teaching and learning of students with disabilities in Chegutu Urban ECD centres?* The respondents were asked if they have a unit of expert outside school meant to provide insight to teaching and learning of children with disabilities in their ECD centres and 65 % of them did not quite agree on this assertion meaning that such units do not exist in their centres. On the contrary, 84 % of the teachers do not believe that parents have a major role to play in the education of their children with disabilities and that they should be involved in direct teaching of their children who have disabilities. The respondents were also asked to list some of the challenges they think that children with disabilities face in their learning institutions or may face in other learning centres. They could not come up with other challenges not discussed above except attitude and being mocked by fellow children without disabilities.

Challenges Faced by Children with Disabilities in ECD Centres in Chegutu Urban from Parents' Perspectives

Parents were asked to respond to questionnaires driven by rating their responses on a five

Likert scale which was 1= relatively true, 2 =somewhat true, 3= moderately true, 4 =very true and 5= extremely true for each and every statement. The results are shown in Table 3 and analysis of each and every research questions are also provided after the table.

Table 3 shows that 50 % of the parent subjects alluded that it is relatively true that their ECD teachers always advise them of problems encountered at school by their children because of their condition; 30 % said it was somewhat true; none said it was moderately true; 10 % said it was very true; and 10 % said it extremely true. When asked if their children's teachers always tell them to transfer or send their children to learning centres that enrol children with disabilities or at risk of developmental delay, none of them said that it was relatively true and somewhat true; 10 % indicated that it was moderately true; 15 % indicated that it was very true; while 75 % said it was extremely true. The respondents showed that none (0 %) felt it was relatively true and another 0 % said it was moderately true that their children are being taught in a manner that acknowledges their disability; 25 % showed that it was somewhat true and also very true; and 50 % indicated that it was extremely true. When enquiring if children at ECD centres they attend are exposed to the same curriculum regardless of their disabilities, respondents indicated that none (0%) felt it was relatively true and none felt it was moderately true, 25 % showed that it was somewhat true and also very true and 50% indicated that it was extremely true. The responses on whether teachers have no hope on the success of children with disabilities, 10 % said it was relatively true; 40 % said it was very true; and 50 % said it was extremely true.

When respondents were asked if the learning environment at the ECD centres was suitable for learners with various disabilities, none indicated that it was moderately true, very true and extremely true, while 50 % showed that it was relatively true and somewhat true. When asked if their children's ECD centres have a combined unit of expertise of a variety of professionals in and outside school and provide insight into each child's needs and strengths, none of the subjects said it was relatively true and somewhat true, 25 % indicated that moderately true and very true, while 50% showed that it was extremely true. On whether the head of the ECD centre always reminds them about parental involvement

in teaching and learning their children being of prime importance, none said it was relatively true, somewhat true, moderately true, and very true; and all (100 %) indicated that it was extremely true.

The subjects were asked if their children's ECD teachers displayed evidence that they have knowledge in teaching and learning of students with special needs, none indicated it was relatively true, 5 % showed that it was somewhat true, 75 % said it was moderately true, while 5 % showed that it was very true; and 15 % indicated that it was extremely true.

From the researchers' observations, none of ECD centres in Chegutu Urban's physical environment were user friendly to learners with special needs at their stations or prospective learners. The external infrastructure and the classroom movable infrastructure did not meet minimum standard for a disability user friendly environment.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to determine perceived challenges faced by: (a) students with special needs in Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in Zimbabwe; (b) teachers of students with special needs in Early Childhood Development Centers in Zimbabwe; and (c) to assess how these challenges could be addressed in these centres. The study found that most teachers in Chegutu urban ECD centres are not qualified to teach at any public or private institutions of learning as their qualifications (ECD teachers are expected to hold a Diploma in Early Childhood Education offered by the University of Zimbabwe) fall short of Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture requirements and yet they are teaching in institutions that are supervised by the ministry's ECD department at district level. A good number of them do not even hold qualifications beyond ZJC. These results are consistent with the findings by Meyers (2000) who found out that while Zimbabwe has well prepared ECD professionals, many more ECD personnel have very little formal education and it's not unusual for an ECD teacher in Zimbabwe to be able to read and write in English.

The above implies that early childhood education is still seen as a play time activity and the major role of the ECD teachers is to play the role of the surrogate parents who are there to provide socialisation experiences but not necessarily

education ones. Davis et al. (1998) believe that where the role of ECD teachers is to provide socialisation experience without educational benefits real school has not yet begun and would begin in first grade hence linking ECD to pre-school. Given such situations, children with special needs or risk of developmental delays, are likely to face serious challenges in their endeavour to get education enshrined in their national constitution as basic right (Mpofu et al. 2007). This becomes a challenge in the view that they are being taught by teachers who do not hold even minimum qualifications (a Diploma in ECD) to be employed in Public Service in Zimbabwe. Their challenges are also compounded by the trend that people with disabilities or risk of developmental delay are not readily acceptable in the main stream society and even at family level (Mpofu 2004).

The study also found that the curriculum was not only unfavorable to children with disabilities (hearing and visual) but was also unfavourable to those without disabilities as it does not acknowledge diversity of its clients as expected in ordinary learning institutions. These findings are consistent with those by Mpofu (1999) and Zingoni (2004) who found that most teachers in Zimbabwe mainstream education system are inadequately prepared (cannot read braille, materials, cannot use sign language, etc.) to teach students with special needs. Modification of this curriculum to suite diversified population that it serves would be an uphill task to teachers whose academic and professional preparation is not beyond ZJC. Such teachers may obviously do not hold professional aptitude (not trained) to modify the ECD curriculum.

The study also sought to determine the attitudes of ECD teachers towards children with disabilities or at risk of developmental delay (in reading and writing using braille language) in their classrooms. Given that most ECD teachers in Chegutu urban ECD centers do not have any professional training on issues that pertain to individual differences, they are bound to inherit negative communal perceptions that are stereotyping to individuals with disabilities (that is, children with disabilities are viewed as a form of punishment). Most communities in Zimbabwe have negative attitudes towards people with disabilities (Chidyausiku 2000; Mpofu 2001, 2004, 2008). People with such possibility of inheriting negative, stigmatizing and stereotyping position on individuals with disabilities believe in in-

competence of children with disabilities in their ECD centers and the belief that disability creates learning constraints in the children rather than source of learning. These findings are consistent with those by Mpofu (2008) who found that teachers in Zimbabwe believe that individuals with disabilities are less capable of fulfilling basic learners' roles in general education classroom. This negative finding was also evidenced by teachers' continuous pasting of parents of children with disabilities to transfer their children with special needs to special schools (Mpofu 2008).

The study sought to find out if the physical environment in Chegutu ECD centres was user friendly for children with disabilities. The research expectations were that the physical environment was supposed to be disability user-friendly since most of the ECD centres in Chegutu town were privately owned and hence making resources available for infrastructure that is adaptable to a diversified population. However, the results indicate that the physical environment which includes classrooms, toilets, furniture, to some extent including staff members at the institutions were not accommodative to individuals with disabilities or at risk of developmental delay. These results are consistent with those by Mpofu et al. (2007) who also found out that students with disabilities in Zimbabwe attend schools or general classroom without accessibility support (for example, adapted desks, classrooms entrances, toilets and lower teacher peer social acceptance).

Lastly, the study sought to find information on whether there are collaborative teams in teaching and learning of children with disabilities as expected in an institution including ECD learning centers. Research results showed that such efforts are still a dream in Chegutu urban ECD centers. Given the ownership of most ECD centers in Chegutu urban privately owned-owned by retired civil servants, active members of the community, political, religious leaders and prominent business people most of whose education is not beyond ZJC, such collaboration teams would be quite demanding to exist in such centers. The collaboration teams are also an uphill task in formal primary schools that offer ECD education since administrators and teachers in these schools are at sea on issues that pertain disabilities. The issue of none functional collaborative teams were also found to be common in most African countries (Engelbrecht 2007).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study imply that the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in ECD education should be encouraged to create more inclusive ECD centers and they should be involved in the implementation of such activities at any centre, public or privately owned. Formal support systems (for example, teachers, educational psychologists, district remedial tutors, district ECD coordinators, counselors, health officials, social welfare officers and others) are encouraged to explore more collaborative ways of providing special needs education within the context of regular early childhood education learning to gain new understandings about children with and without disabilities as well as how to accept a broader, more communal responsibility for the learning outcome of those learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Children with disabilities or at risk of developmental delays form an extraordinary heterogeneous population, there are risks in adopting "one size fits all" philosophy across different sub-groups of this population as indicated by this research results. This implies that ECD teachers should be exposed to staff development programmes and support.

The results of this study show incompatibility of the curriculum (for example, content, teaching strategies teacher preparation) between the urban ECD centres and their learners with disabilities or at risk of developmental delay. Therefore, the curriculum should be made flexible enough so that each learner is challenged to do his/her best regardless of being at an ECD centre. This can only be attainable if these ECD teachers having low academic qualifications are trained to equip them with a more diverse learner approach in their services.

The negative attitudes of ECD teachers in Chegutu urban as indicated in this study's results are consistent with findings elsewhere in Zimbabwe and the world at large. To this effect, it is equally important that ECD teachers in private centers or primary schools and their administrators should be encouraged to accept that greater inclusion will result in improved teaching and learning of all.

The expectation of this study was that the physical learning environment for children with disabilities in most ECD centers in urban areas

would be user friendly. However, the findings of this study were a sharp contrast to the research expectations. This implies the need for development of genuine support and leadership for more inclusive ECD centers from the government since it inherited supervision of ECD activities nationwide.

Support systems involvement (formal and informal) in teaching and learning of children/learners is of paramount importance at any level of education in any state, developed or under developed and this can not be considered a dream come true at any point as indicated in this study results.

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