# Promoting Learning Access for Learners with Physical Impairments: The Case of Three Special Schools in Harare, Zimbabwe

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**Abstract:** *The study looked at ways of promoting access to education by learners with physical disabilities. The study focused on three special schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. The major research question was: what strategies could be employed by special schools to promote and uplift the lives of learners with physical disabilities? The study employed the descriptive study design. The population of the study included all the teachers and parents of learners with physical and motor impairments at three special schools. Non probability sampling methods (purposive and convenient) were used to come up with a representative sample of 30 teachers and 18 parents. The questionnaire was the primary tool used to collect data. Parents were just asked one question on strategies they think will improve access to education by their children. The results show that there are a lot of strategies given by teachers and parents on ways to improve access to learning by learners with physical and motor disabilities. Teachers have got a lot of hope that when they involve the parents access to learning can improve. On the other hand parents want the government to be solely involved in the process. This is a great cause for concern. Results have also shown teachers confirming that besides bringing their children to school parents barely do other services for their children. These are some of the factors that may lead to high drop put rate. The study recommended the strong need for continuous in-servicing of teachers especially of information communication technologies that are disability friendly. In addition disability must be a core subject in teacher training colleges. Lastly the government is taking into account disability issues seriously under the current curriculum review process.*

**Keywords:** Physical and motor impairments, Rehabilitation, Habilitation, Support services, Life skills, Transitional programmes, Multi-disciplinary team

## 1. Introduction

The success of appropriate disability support systems depends largely on a country's commitment to adopt appropriate legislation, develop policies and provide adequate funding for implementations. Zimbabwe is now one of the countries with sound disability legislation and policies. She is a signatory to a lot of conventions such as Salamanca (1994) that spell services to be provided to people with disabilities. In 2013 Zimbabwe ratified the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. Locally we have The Zimbabwe Disabled Persons ACT (1992, 1996) and many other policies. Currently Zimbabwe has embraced the philosophy of inclusion and inclusive education and is in transition from integration. On paper Zimbabwe now sound to be fertile ground for the leaning of people with disabilities. However the researchers' experiences have shown that there seem to be gray areas in terms of access to learners by learners with physical and motor disabilities.
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The streets of Harare are now full of persons with various physical and disabilities begging for alms. Most do so in dirty clothes, in make shift wheel chairs or on crutches while the less fortunate drag themselves on their hands and knees at bus terminuses such as copacabana, market square, fourth street and road port. One therefore wonders whether the people have been to school or not. To worsen the situation is the case of learners with disabilities who loom the streets during school time. The researchers were tempted to assume that there seem to be a mismatch between Zimbabwean policy on disability and practice basing on the situation in the streets. What need to be done to promote access to

learning by those with physical and motor disabilities? It is against this background that this research was carried. The principal question to be answered by the research was

What strategies could be employed by special schools to uplift the lives of learners with physical disabilities?

## 2. Literature Survey

Grol and Kenosi (2000) lamented the lack of facilities as affecting the enrolment, retention and graduation of skilled individuals with disabilities in African institutions. Furthermore they said that the African educational system lack adequate funding, training facilities, resources and effective special needs curriculum, thus most teachers and instructors find it difficult to assist students with disabilities in attaining academic and social successes in schools. Margonwe and Mate (2007) noted that for people with physical and motor impairments to function and develop life skills to proficiency levels they need services such as counseling and instruction. Counselling provides a supportive and evaluative service. Through counseling they are able to solve problems and deal with challenges imposed upon them by their disabilities. Other services which may be very important to individuals with physical and motor impairments include physiotherapy.

According to a report done by the Department of International Development (DFID) (2008), parents are facing challenges such a cost of uniforms, school fees, transport costs, suitable transport and so on. Social stigma is yet another challenge parents are facing resulting in them having negative parental attitudes. Having seen most people

with physical and motor impairments leading a life style which is not admirable but rather deplorable and dependant, the researchers found it necessary to explore ways of improving accessibility to education.

To uplift the lives of people with physical and motor impairments in schools, quite a number of strategies can be employed. The Swedish Organisations of Disabled Persons, International Aid Association (SHIA) and World Health Organisation (WHO) (2003) report spelt out that programmes should be consistently reviewed and developed. Materials for training and handbooks need also to be developed to meet the new needs and challenges. Combined effort by the government, Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOS) and Parents organizations need to be strengthened and duty bearers such as government officials and professional need to build their capacity. Peters (2004) sees training of itinerant teachers or resource persons in situations where teachers lack knowledge or whereby there is shortage of teachers, this was highlighted in her report on inclusive education on how schools can link with the community.

Werner (2007) in his report for the Department of International reiterates that teacher development programmes should be supported by revising pre-service training or developing in-services modules. Teachers also need to be provided with practical information on what they can do in classrooms and how they can treat and handle learners with physical and motor impairments and who they should refer the learners to. Consultants can also work with teachers to develop needs based tool kits providing strategies for treating who are physically disabled in the classroom and this was seen as a stop gap measure until teacher training can be reviewed and revised to provide teachers with specific information and training. The above was seen to work well after it was tried in Sri-Lanka (2009). In a Zimbabwean study carried out by Mafa (2012) teachers need a lot of support and guidance from instructional leaders. In his findings he felt that teachers in these special schools need a lot of help. In the same study teachers gave other strategies that they thought would help uplift the lives of pupils with disabilities. These the need for government through relevant ministries to come up with a clear policy on disability issues, sensitizing parents on the nature of their learners' disabilities, and the provision of facilities and assistive device to learners with physical and motor impairments

## 3. Methodology

The study employed the descriptive study design. This study design allowed the researchers to simply explore with intense accuracy the challenges faced by special schools in the provision of education to learners with physical and motor impairments. This is supported by Creswell (2002) who pointed out that a descriptive survey gathers data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions. It gave room for testing options of a large group of people (educators and parents) through sampling. The survey enabled the researchers to measure many variables as stated in research questions. The population of the study included all the teachers and parents of learners with physical and motor impairments at three

special schools in Harare, Zimbabwe. Non probability sampling methods (purposive and convenient) were used to come up with a representative sample of 30 teachers and 18 parents. The questionnaire was the primary tool used to collect data. Parents were just asked one question on strategies they think will improve access to education by their children.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Demographic Data of Respondents

**Table 1:** Distribution by Sex

| Sex | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 2 | 6.7 |
| Female | 28 | 93.3 |

**Table 2:** Qualifications

| Qualifications | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| C.E. | 1 | 3 |
| Diploma in Education | 16 | 53 |
| Bachelor of Education | 3 | 10 |
| Bachelor's Degree in Special Education | 6 | 20 |
| Masters in Special Education | 4 | 13 |

The results above show that the respondents were highly qualified teachers with others having attained higher degrees I education and special education.

### 4.2 Intensive Parental Involvement as a Strategy

**Table 3**: whether Parents were giving support to their learners with physical disabilities

| Response | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Agree | 16 | 53.33 |
| Disagree | 10 | 33.33 |
| Undecided | 4 | 13.33 |
| **Total** | **30** | **100** |

The results above show that some teachers say that parents do not give any support to their learners. Most teachers felt that the teachers were of assistance in giving support while the other teachers showed that they were undecided as they left the question not filled in.

**Table 4:** Type of support given to learners with physical and motor impairments by parents

| Support | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Bringing child to school | 30 | 100 |
| Buying stationery | 8 | 27 |
| Financial support | 6 | 20 |
| Buying groceries | 20 | 67 |
| Loving and caring | 16 | 53 |
| Payment of fees | 30 | 100 |
| Assisting in fundraising | 4 | 13 |
| Buying assistive devices | 12 | 40 |
| Giving updates on learners' lives | 2 | 67 |
| Helping during functions | 4 | 13 |
| Attending school functions | 10 | 33 |
| Giving moral support | 6 | 20 |
| Upkeep of the child | 15 | 50 |
| Buying uniforms and clothing | 15 | 50 |

**N=30**

The above results indicate some of the support parents were giving to their learners. Bringing learners to school only seem to be the only generalized support.

**How can parents be involved in schools to uplift the lives of their learners with?**
**Physical and Motor Impairments?**

Teachers gave quite a lot of support services they think parents should do to help uplift the lives of their learners. Some of the supports include provision of basic needs, giving moral support, love and care, forming family support groups, clothing and uniforms, financial support, help learners accept their disabilities , payments of fees, joining organizations for the disabled, helping with homework, forming advocate groups, participate in school programmes, help in acquiring skills and lastly buying of assistive devices.

**4.3 Intensive Government Participation as a Strategy**

**Table 5:**

| Responses | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Payment of fees | 18 | 100 |
| Curriculum which suit pupils | 10 | 56 |
| Providing trained personnel | 6 | 33 |
| Increase teachers' salaries | 18 | 100 |
| Making a budget for special needs | 9 | 50 |
| Providing assistance devices and materials | 18 | 100 |
| Refresh courses for teachers | 9 | 50 |
| Provide skills training programmes | 12 | 67 |
| Extend time to complete primary level | 4 | 22 |
| Consider time needed for other therapies | 6 | 33 |
| Involving pupils with disabilities in all educational opportunities | 5 | 28 |

**N=30**

The above were some of the results teachers expect the ministry to do in order to be part and parcel of the physically disabled learners in our special schools.

**4.4 Parental Suggestions on what they thought the government should do**

The following are the most frequent raw responses that were drawn from the eighteen parents when asked about best strategies to improve access to learning by learners with physical and motor disabilities

a) Pay fees for these learners
b) Built special schools in high suburbs
c) Provide transport to ferry learners to and from school
d) Provide finance in terms of grants to meet demands on time as they arise (operations)
e) Assessments to be done by personnel who have the knowledge in the field
f) Learners require an added curriculum consisting of practical subjects e.g. needle work, cookery.
g) Incentives for teachers in special schools so that they are motivated in working.
h) Pupils to be given the same opportunities as their non-disabled counterparts in main stream schools.

i) Deploy teachers with the right qualifications or those with passion (like one of the founders Jairos Jiri).
j) Provide multi-disciplinary teams consisting of physiotherapists, physicians, counsellors etc.
k) Let someone with disability be a representative in parliament
l) Free medication
m) Provision of secondary schools
n) Reduce fees in special schools

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results show that there are a lot of strategies given by teachers and parents on ways to improve access to learning by learners with physical and motor disabilities. Teachers have got a lot of hope that when they involve the parents access to learning can improve. On the other hand parents want the government to be solely involved in the process. This is a great cause for concern. Results have also shown teachers confirming that besides bringing their children to school parents barely do other services for their children. These are some of the factors that may lead to high drop put rate. The issue of donor syndrome must be strongly condemned among parents because not all can not afford. Experience and research have shown that many parents send their non disabled children to expensive schools at the expenses of their children with disabilities. There is need for education in this regard. The findings however confirmed the assertion by the Department of International Development (DFID) (2008), that parents are facing challenges such a cost of uniforms, school fees, transport costs, suitable transport and so on. However, we strongly believe that only those who can not afford must be given 100% assistance while those who can afford take care of their children needs. Capacitating the teachers has also been seen to be a strong strategy. There is strong need for continuous in-servicing of teachers especially of information communication technologies that are disability friendly. In addition disability as a subject must be a core subject in teacher training colleges. Lastly it is our belief that the government is taking into account disability issues seriously under the current curriculum review process. Our initial investigations concluded that most team members leading the process are far from understanding disability issues and this is a great cause for concern.

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