

The Friendliness of Special Needs Education Learning Environments in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *The research study explored the friendliness of special education learning environments in Zimbabwe. 65 teachers, 40 school heads and 26 parents drawn from special schools and resource units took part in the study. Questionnaires were the main data collection tool. The results show that respondents were generally satisfied and happy with the learning environments of children with disabilities. It was however also observed that there is need to adapt physical infrastructure, the curriculum, language of instruction to include sign language and assessment methods. It was recommended that adequate resources be provided to adapt the physical structures in schools to make it disability friendly and that That teachers be trained and in sign language and the language be taught in all the schools.*

Keywords: Disability, impairment, special school, special class, resource unit, inclusive classroom, child friendly schools, least restrictive environments, curricula

1. Introduction

Education is a universal right and extends to all children including those with disabilities. This right to education is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008). It is also addressed at high level forums and international declarations, including the World Declaration for Education for All (1990), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000). The constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) is also very categorical about this right. Zimbabwe embraces the principle of Education For All (EFA) and this explains why it has the highest literacy rate in Africa. However access to education by children with disabilities in Zimbabwe is still riddled with challenges and barriers. Removing barriers to accessing education and to learning for persons with disabilities are prerequisites for the realization of Education for All. To ensure that children with disabilities have access to quality education there is need to encourage their full participation of all and promote diversity as a resource, rather than as an obstacle.

The development of special needs education in Zimbabwe prior to independence is attributed to the work of missionaries, and non-governmental organisations. After independence in 1980 the government of Zimbabwe did a lot to improve the provision of special education. The most significant efforts has been the training of specialist teachers and the enactment of disability friendly policies. To date special education in Zimbabwe is provided in special schools, special classes, and resource units and in inclusive schools. According to The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education (1994:7) *Special needs education incorporates the proven principles of sound pedagogy from which all children may benefit. It assumes that human differences are normal and that learning must accordingly be adapted to the needs of the child rather than the child fitted to the preordained*

assumptions regarding the pace and nature of the learning process,

Thus the foregoing Salamanca statement advocates, among other things, that schools should seek out, welcome, nurture, respect and educate all children regardless of their gender, physical, intellectual, social, economic, emotional, linguistic or other characteristics.

In 2004 the Zimbabwe National Strategic Plan for the Education of Girls, Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children 2005-2010 was launched. The plan was to be implemented between 2005-2010 using a multi-partner mechanism and resources that were mobilized on an annual basis locally and internationally. Through this Plan, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture and its UN partners renewed their commitment and collective efforts to mobilize broad-based partnerships to ensure that every child, girls, boys alike, especially orphans and other vulnerable children, are able to enroll, complete and realize their full potential in education

Through the plan, schools were to be transformed into quality, child-friendly schools using existing frameworks. Improved learning outcomes were also pursued through the provision of quality learning materials and the development and implementation of an in-service teacher development plan. Lastly existing support services in schools and communities for children with special needs were to be revitalized and made more responsive to the needs of these children

After the implementation of this plan very little research has been carried to establish whether all the learning environments providing special needs education were made to be more responsive to the needs of these children. It is against this background that this research was carried.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The government of Zimbabwe to a larger extent democratized the provision of special education by including so many players as compared to general education. As such many authorities profess a commitment to special needs education but demonstrate little awareness of the implications of such commitment in practice. That being so the response to special educational needs of the children tends to be a mixture of indifference and cosmetic commitment. In light of this confusion this research study sought to answer the question "to what extent are special needs education learning environments friendly to learners with impairments?"

1.3 Demarcation of the study

The study was undertaken within a couple of months in the context of an area that has seen very little meaningful research over the years. Additionally, this paper looks at only one aspect of the eight selected dimensions of special needs education the study was confined to. This on its own creates a limitation. Given this background, the constraints of time, resources and secondary data availability should be considered while reading the study. This study had no geographical boundaries and was open to all schools that offer special needs education in Zimbabwe. However respondents were only drawn from specialist teachers, school heads and some parents. Learners with disabilities were not part of the study sample. Also, universities and colleges that offer special education were not included in the study.

1.4 Limitations of the study

While the study was not limited by some geographical boundaries not all provinces were covered. Matabeleland North and South Provinces were not included in the study mainly due to the distance involved in accessing the provinces which called for more resources. While this may have some effects on results generalisability the fact that all the other provinces were included countered the effects. In addition, it was very difficult for the researchers to reach out to many parents because these could not be found in one place like teachers and heads. As such, the parent sample was not representative enough to reflect the real views of parents with disabilities across the country. It has to be noted however that the parents were included in the study in order to triangulate views from teachers and heads who were the main respondents.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Child friendly Schools

Irrespective of the social and economic challenges, Zimbabwe's education continues to have a lot of potential to compete within the global market. The Child Friendly Schools (CFS) Initiatives plays an even more critical role of enlarging opportunities for every child, particularly the girl child, to attend school and educated (UNESCO, 2009). The goal of this bold initiative is to intensify the systematic use of schools as centres of learning and for the delivery of other

social services for children (including care and support), in circumstances where the normal provision of these services by family and community has come under increased threat from major challenges (Mannathoko, 2010, online). He went further to say that partnerships and multi sectoral collaboration in CFS emphasise achieving synergies and improving coherence in schools' contribution to educational change within the context of Education for All. Thus getting on a path towards a child friendly school begins with promoting and institutionalising learning, health, nutrition, water and sanitation and the safety and security of children through a series of packaged, inter-sectoral interventions. This is done with the participation of children themselves, teachers, school management, parents, the community, local authorities and the national government. (Mannathoko, 2010, online)

2.2 Barriers to Learning

Children with disabilities face more barriers to learning compared to their peers without disabilities. The barriers to learning, development and participation these children face vary from one child to another depending on the type and severity of the disability, UNESCO (2009). If these barriers are not addressed properly, children will not be able to reach their full academic, social, emotional, and physical potential. Barriers may therefore be experienced temporarily or permanently depending on how effectively these are addressed and removed (Brunswick, 1999) Children with disabilities face both environmental and individual barriers. Combined they create a set of barriers that need to be reduced, and if possible removed by schools, homes and communities in order for the children concerned to be able to develop to their fullest potential. These barriers make learning environments unfriendly for the disabled child if not addressed (Ahuja and Watterdal, 2006). They include limited or no access to early intervention programmes, lack of support systems and services, inaccessible curricula, poor assessment and evaluation systems, physical accessibility

3. Methodology

This study is a sub-study of our wider study that sought to establish the current state of special education in Zimbabwe. The primary aim of the current study was to understand and describe the friendliness of learning environments for learners with disabilities in Zimbabwe. The research was designed to be exploratory and descriptive and thus no attempts were made to establish causal relationships. As such the research method that guided the study was largely qualitative. However, elements of quantitative methods were employed in instrumentation and in data analysis where descriptive statistics were used. In the main, therefore, a descriptive survey design was used to collect data. The population included purposively selected special schools and schools with special classes, resource units, integrated classes and inclusive classes in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was preferred to ensure that the different special needs education arrangements and provisions were considered given the uneven distribution of special needs education facilities in the country. In this regard, efforts were made to cover all the types of disabilities in 8 of the 10 Zimbabwean education provinces. The representative

sample was composed of forty school heads and sixty five specialist teachers.

Open-ended questionnaires and structured interviews were used to obtain information on the availability of learning resources for learners with disabilities in the schools. The survey was answered by teachers and heads of schools. In general, the qualitative questionnaires asked for the perceptions of the participants on the status of learning resources for learners with disabilities in their schools. The design used in this study was considered amenable to instruments and method triangulation. This was considered important for purposes of validity and reliability enhancement.

4. Findings

4.1 Friendliness of Learning Environments (Teachers and School Heads Responses)

It can be argued that learning for learners with disabilities and other special needs can only be meaningful if environments in which they operate are friendly. Disability-and-special needs friendly schools and classrooms are a critical component of the philosophy of inclusivity, for example. Respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which they feel the learning environments for learners with disabilities were friendly or not friendly. Table 1 below summarises the results.

Table 1: The extent to which special needs education environments are learner friendly. (n=105) (40 heads and 65 teachers)

Variable	Extent of friendliness							
	Extremely friendly		Very friendly		Sufficiently friendly		Not friendly at all	
	n	%f	n	%f	n	%f	n	%f
Physical infrastructure	12	11	27	26	51	49	17	16
Psycho-social support	15	14	46	44	31	30	5	48
Appropriateness of curricula	9	8	22	21	48	46	25	24
Assessment procedures	5	48	34	32	33	31	21	48
Total	41	81	129	123	163	146	58	136

From table 1, it is evident that the school heads and teachers were generally satisfied with the learner-friendliness of the special needs education environments. It is equally evident from the table that a fairly large number of respondents felt that curricular issues and assessment procedures were generally unfriendly to learners with disabilities. Some of the raw comments given by the respondents are summarized below:

- There is need for more visits by the Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education personnel to supervise curricula issues
- There is need to adapt environments with ramps and lowered toilets
- If more assistive devices were provided the environments could be more friendly
- There is need for skills –based assessment

- More toilets should be made appropriate for wheelchair users
- Deaf children are very disadvantaged as very few teachers can teach in sign language. These learners must only attend schools for the deaf

4.1.2 Friendliness of Learning Environments (Parents Responses)

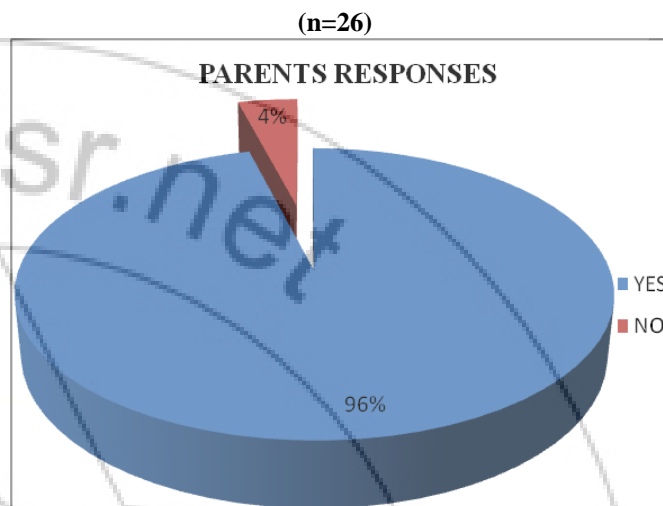


Figure 1: An evaluation of friendliness of learning environments by parents

Parents were asked to respond, giving reasons; to the question whether or not they thought the learning environments of their children were friendly. As the results in fig 1 shows, parents were generally happy with the learning environments of their children. Some of the raw reasons they gave are given below:

Parent 1: “My child refused to be transferred from his special school because he loves it so much meaning he is happy”.

Parent 2: “At my child’s school there is discipline, no bullying and the staff is very responsible”.

Parent 3: “My child has many friends at her school and does not want to miss school even a single day”.

5. Conclusion

From the research results it was noted that the majority of the respondents, including parents were happy with the environments in which their children attend school. However concerns raised were related mainly to the physical environment, the issue of sign language, curricula issues and psychosocial support and assessment procedures. The areas raised here are very critical in the provision of special needs education. As such there is need to carry out further research on each of these issues and come up with the best practices. The findings also have to be treated with caution as the research field did not include inclusive schools but special schools and resource units that have been traditionally providers of special education.

6. Future Scope

The study respondents were drawn mainly from established

special education environments. Future research must focus on inclusive environments as the trend is shifting from special education to inclusive education

7. Recommendations

Recent trends in the field of special education are pointing to the need to provide services to children with disabilities in least restrictive environments. As such the following recommendations are made

- That adequate resources be provided to adapt the physical structures in schools to make it disability friendly
- That community education be done continuously to increase the level of disability awareness and achieve positive attitudes towards disability.
- That schools be supervised to provide adequate psycho-social support to learners with disabilities and other special needs.
- Those instruments with some ecological validity be used to assess learners with disabilities.
- That teachers be trained and in sign language and the language be taught in all the schools.

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