

INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT: POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion, as a concept, supports the right of all children, regardless of abilities or disabilities, to participate actively in natural settings within their communities. The study sought to examine the extent to which learners with visual impairments were included in regular class situations in Masvingo district of Zimbabwe. The samples constituted 15 teachers who included 3 specialist resource room teachers and 12 mainstream teachers involved in the inclusion of these children. Purposive sampling was employed on the teacher sample. In addition, 20 children with visual impairments were randomly selected from 3 regular schools where inclusion was practised in the classes at primary and high school levels. An interview schedule was administered on both the teacher and pupil samples to solicit their views and observations regarding the effectiveness of inclusion. The study revealed that, despite problems related to inadequate material resources, the children benefited from inclusion. Teachers in the regular classes needed more specialist training as well as in-service courses. It was also clear that the schools, in particular resource units, needed Braille kits and brailled books for blind children as well as large print material for children with low vision. The reading community shall benefit as they will acquaint themselves with the needs of children with visual impairment.

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KEYWORDS: Inclusion, Blindness, Low Vision, Visual Impairment, Regular Class

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education entails that all children with disabilities are included in general education settings under the responsibility of a regular classroom teacher. Wherever possible or justifiable, learners with disabilities may also receive some of their instruction in settings such as resource-rooms or units within the regular school. (Mastopieri & Scruggs, 2004). Inclusion reflects a philosophy in which all children, regardless of abilities and disabilities, are educated within the same environment, an environment where each child's individual needs are met. (Downing, 2002; Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Heward and Orlansky, 2009; Smith, 2001). In an inclusive scenario, the child with special needs is valued as an equal member of the community.

Children with visual impairments face problems in accessing learning materials used by their colleagues in the regular class through the sense of sight. They employ compensatory senses like the tactile or auditory senses to access learning materials (Kirk et al 2006; Hallahan & Kauffman 2006). Children with visual impairment can be classified as those who are blind or have low vision (Dakwa, 2009; Tumbull et al, 1995) Their disability status entails that they utilise specialised equipment and strategies to access learning within adapted environments. The learners who are blind would need Braille as a writing and

reading medium. Likewise, learners with low vision would need large print material and magnification devices to enlarge print to enable them to read print wherever possible (Dakwa 2009; Kirk et al. 2006; Erwin, 1993).

Inclusion of children with visual impairment in Zimbabwe was established at Waddilove Mission, by the Methodist Church through the efforts of the Council for the Blind (Mavundukure, 2000; Addison 1986; Chimedza and Peters, 2000) Resource rooms for inclusion are reserved within the regular school system and children with visual impairments included in the regular classes are withdrawn into the resource room, which would be specially equipped to meet the needs of these learners. A resource room specialist teacher assists the children with their learning needs and facilitates their effective inclusion within the school system (Lipsky and Gartner, 1998; Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006; Smith, 2001; Turnbull et al, 1995).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

At the 1990 Jomtien World Conference in Thailand, the goals for Education for All (EFA) were set. At this conference, it was proclaimed that every person, child, youth and adult should be able to benefit from educational opportunities which would meet their basic learning needs. Since the Jomtien Conference,

UNESCO and other UN agencies, in collaboration with several international and national non governmental organizations, have been working towards the achievement of these goals.

The inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular school education is part of a global human rights movement. In 1994, at the UNESCO World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain, the principle of inclusive education was given further impetus as the Conference considered the future international direction of special needs education to ensure the rights of children to basic education.

In Zimbabwe, the rights of children to basic education were echoed in the Education Act of 1987, revised in 2006. The Disabled Persons Act (1992), revised in 1996, further emphasised the removal of discriminatory practices to ensure equality and accessibility to social services for persons with disabilities. It is in this regard that the study seeks to examine the extent to which children with visual impairments can be included within regular school situations.

LITERATURE STUDY

Turnbull et al (1995), refers to the IDEA definition of visual disability which regards blindness as an impairment of vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance (pg 578). According to this definition, the child has a visual disorder that interferes with learning.

Okwaput (2000), emphasises that trends in the education of children with special needs advocate for inclusive education. This is confirmed by Ainscow (1999) who concurs that inclusive education should reach out to all learners. Acceptance refers to the inclusion of a child by his or her peers in the school, enabling that child to be an integral member of the group (Downing, 2002; Karagiannis, 1996; Kirk et al, 2006). According to Zindi (2004), inclusive education is a process that brings about a broad vision of education for all (EFA). Zindi further affirms that the concept of inclusive education means that all schools are expected and challenged to educate every child in their neighbourhood schools (Salamanca Statement 1994). The child with exceptionalities is, therefore, accepted as an equal partner within learning environments. (Winzer, 1996; Smith 2001). In light of this, it is the intention of this study to examine the extent to which children with visual impairments are included in regular school settings.

The blind child is perhaps the easiest exceptional child to be included in the mainstream (Heward and Orlansky 2009). This is facilitated by the expertise offered by the specialist resource room teacher. Heward and Orlansky further argue that, for successful inclusion to take place, a full program of

educational and social services should be provided. Turnbull et al (1995: 624) agree that full inclusion takes the position that all children with disabilities must receive their education in the regular public school. Inclusion implies that the child with disabilities is able to participate meaningfully, on more or less equal terms, in at least some of the activities of other children. For the child who is blind, Braille transcription services should be provided in the resource room so that the teachers in the ordinary class can effectively teach and communicate with the child (Heward and Orlansky, 2009; Turnbull & Turnbull 1995; Stainback & Stainback, 2000). The child with disabilities experiences a sense of achievement and self respect on gaining the support of others.

For the child with low vision, support is needed in the provision of magnification which includes large print books (Hallahan and Kauffman 2006; Dakwa, 2009). The use of the closed circuit television (CCTV) enables print to be enlarged to suit the needs of individual children with low vision. (Mastopieri & Scruggs, 2010).

Kirk et al (2006), indicate that the child with visual impairments needs to be taught within the least restrictive environment. The Salamanca Statement (1994) echoes the same sentiments that children with special needs must have access to regular schools which can accommodate them within a child- centred pedagogy. To this end, all children need access to school resources which include both human and material elements that can influence achievement, social and cognitive development. In this regard, the study seeks to examine the extent to which children with visual impairments are included within the regular school.

SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study should benefit specialist teachers, ordinary class teachers as well as children with visual impairment. The specialist teachers will be equipped with techniques on managing the children who are blind within inclusive contexts. Children will benefit from inclusion and acceptance by their peers. Mainstream teachers will benefit from the input of specialist teachers who will in-service them to gain strategies in accommodating children who are blind as well as those with low vision.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study shall focus on Masvingo District only because the units (resource rooms) where children with visual impairment being included in the mainstream are concentrated in that area. A bigger survey on inclusion challenges which covers the whole province of Masvingo would be problematic because the only special school for children with visual impairment is situated in Masvingo District.

Inclusion is, therefore, not practiced at that institution.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Inclusion of children with visual impairments has been practised in Zimbabwe since 1962. Many units and resource rooms have been established in primary and secondary schools. Successes have been recorded in the ability of students with visual impairment to mix and interact with their counterparts in the ordinary classes. However, a number of problems have impeded effective inclusion. Lack of material resources in the form of writing equipment like the Perkins Braille and brailled books have been cited as barriers to inclusion. In some cases, schools have not been sensitised on the subject, hence, negative attitudes have developed. In the case of inclusion of learners with low vision, there has been lack of enlarged print books, assistive devices and magnifying lenses like closed circuit televisions to enlarge print.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Setting

15 teachers who included 12 teachers from the mainstream primary and high school as well as 3 specialist teachers were purposively sampled. 20 children with visual impairments were randomly sampled from three schools where children with visual impairment were included within the mainstream.

Procedure

Permission to undertake this study was granted by the Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture. This enabled the researcher to interview respondents and record the responses.

Instruments

Both the teachers and pupils were interviewed individually and all the responses were captured. This allowed for a hundred percent response rate as no data was lost through non participation in the interview process.

Data Analysis

Data collected was content analysed where views and responses of subjects were discussed in sub themes created for easy and effective analysis of responses. Thus, a qualitative approach was employed.

Results From The Teacher Sample

Teachers' qualifications and experience

Most teachers in the mainstream did not possess specialist qualifications (60%). The teachers with specialist qualifications were in the units where they were assisting children and teachers with Braille transcription and provision of resources to support inclusion. Most of the teachers also lacked wide experience on inclusion of learners with visual impairment. 60% of the respondents had experience ranges of 0 – 5 years.

Problems faced by teachers and pupils

Teachers responded that they lacked assistive devices to use as teaching aids in the classroom. Books in Braille were insufficient, hence, children had to share the meagre resources available. Teachers reported that children with low vision also lacked books and reading material in enlarged print. Closed circuit television and magnifying lenses were not available to enlarge the ordinary print used in the ordinary classes.

Children's performance in class

Most respondents revealed that children with visual impairments could compete well in class. Some children with visual impairments performed better than their counterparts within the regular class.

Efficacy of inclusion

Teachers concurred that inclusion was worthwhile. They responded favourably that children with visual impairments mixed well with their counterparts. There was no segregation as other children in the mainstream were prepared to assist their peers with visual impairment.

Performance in sport and other activities

Teachers indicated that the children with visual impairment had little participation in sport. During sporting time, the children were withdrawn so that they could do their Braille and homework under the supervision of the specialist resource room teachers. The few who participated did so in volleyball. Teachers also indicated that children with visual impairment participated in such activities as music, choirs and drama.

Results From The Children Sample

Assistance from peers

Children who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they received assistance from their peers and that they enjoyed learning with them through sharing information in class. The children with visual impairment revealed that peers read to them, walked with them and took them round. Children with low vision indicated that they wanted peers to teach them how to use a pen for writing.

Participation in activities

Most students cited music and singing as activities they participated in. Some cited participation in volleyball. A few indicated that they took part in all games like football, athletics and nhodo (Children's game involving small stones and round holes on the ground). Children, however, especially the blind, indicated that they were segregated during sporting activities because their peers regarded them as incompetent to participate and compete in games and various sports.

Assistance needed from the school

Some children indicated that the school authorities did not provide them with writing materials like Perkins Braille, writing frames and styluses. Even Braille paper for writing was not always available when most needed. Consequently, they could not catch up with their peers in academic activities.

Assistance with diagrams

Students in the high school echoed that they needed assistance with diagrams in subjects like Maths, history and geography. Most schools where children were included in the mainstream lacked facilities to print raised maps and diagrams. They also complained that teachers in the regular classes were too fast and ignored their concerns. They indicated that they needed time and assistance to interpret the diagrams.

DISCUSSION

The responses by teachers from the questionnaire indicated that most teachers in the regular classes did not possess relevant specialist qualifications to equip them with skills to effectively handle inclusion of learners with visual impairments. They also lacked experience. In fact, specialist teachers in the units had to in-house train the regular class teachers to provide them with basic skills on inclusion. Dakwa, (2011) echoes the need for mounting in service courses to equip mainstream teachers. In concurrence, Cavanaugh (2013) proposes that all teachers need to be trained and prepared for the inclusion of children with special needs within the general education population.

The need to procure appropriate assistive devices was also highlighted in the study. The absence of sufficient brailled reading material for children who were blind and large print books for learners with low vision was evident. Assistive devices like Perkins Braillers, closed circuit television and magnification appliances were insufficient for the inclusive units catering for both the blind students and those with low vision. Assistive devices are needed by learners with visual impairments as these will enhance access to information vital for learning (Dakwa 2009; Dakwa 2011; Dakwa 2014; Kirk et al 2006; Erwin 1993). Adaptations to equipment and curricula promote effective inclusion for learners with visual impairments (Block & Vogler, 1994; Giongreco & Putman 1991). The basis of inclusion is that children with special needs have a right to the benefits of a full school experience with needed modification and supports, alongside their peers within inclusive contexts. (Ajuwon, 2013; Mani, 1998; Mc Greggor & Vogeliburg, 1998). Adequate resources should be allocated to improve teaching and learning consequently, enabling schools to be more accessible and inclusive (Rose & Meyer, 2000).

Regarding the extent to which children with low vision were included in the mainstream, it was clear from the study that they received adequate, adapted and magnified reading material. However, magnification devices like magnifying glasses and closed circuit television were lacking. Barraga and Erin 2001, recommended the use of both ordinary and large print for learners with low vision. The need for magnification to enhance leaning for children

with low vision is emphasized (Mastopieri and Scruggs, 2007; Dakwa 2011; Dakwa 2014.) The need for visual awareness training and optometric low vision rehabilitation was highlighted by Kalil (2006). She further emphasised the use of electronic magnifiers to allow for greater magnification. Access to computers is also encouraged for learners with low vision. Although students who are blind and those with low vision may perform tasks differently, they are capable of doing academic work with speed and competing on an equal footing with their peers. (Cheadle, 2005).

On the issue of assistance from peers, it was revealed from the study that peers assisted children with visual impairment both in class and during outside activities. The included learners, therefore, did not experience any segregation. They were accepted as participants within the mainstream. According to Winzer, (1996) and Smith (2001), children with visual impairment deserve acceptance by their peers on an equal footing. Participation by learners with visual impairments could either be full or partial (Cope, 1997; Heward and Orlansky, 2009). Full inclusion occurs when a child with visual impairment is accepted by his/her peers as a member of the ordinary class (Smith, 2001; Dakwa, 2009). To achieve this independence, youngsters with visual impairment also need assistance in areas that are not part of the physical curriculum, for instance, in social and functional skills.

With regards to children's participation in sport, the study indicated that children with visual impairment did not participate in all sporting activities. Their peers did not include them in competitive sports because they felt they were slow and retarded their progress. Dakwa (2011) highlights situations where there should be participation in sport for students with visual impairments. In the study, teachers concentrated on sighted children for the sake of progress. According to Sherrill (1998), sporting adaptations are needed to enhance the concept of the inclusive school. Such modifications are necessary to meet unique needs, which would enable children with visual disabilities to be fully functioning and fully participating members of the society. Students should be encouraged to participate in mainstream sports where individuals with and without disabilities train, recreate or compete with each other (Brasile, 1990; Sherrill and Williams, 1996).

On the issue of assistance from mainstream teachers, the study revealed that children, especially, those students in the high school, did not receive adequate assistance. The teachers could not assist children with visual impairment with regards to the making and interpretation of raised maps and diagrams and, quite often, ignored the students. Dakwa (2011) purports that the purpose of education is to assist children and youth to acquire life competences. The role of the

classroom teacher is to provide general curricula areas for all children in their classes to benefit maximally. The type of training or lack of training in specialist areas affecting learning tends to impact on teachers' attitudes (Mataruse, 2002; Dakwa, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that mainstream teachers were not adequately trained to assist children with visual impairments in inclusive settings. They also lacked adequate experience to meet the needs of the children. The study also concluded that lack of appropriate assistive devices hampered progress of including children within the mainstream. The study further concluded that children with visual impairments participated and competed well with their peers in classroom learning activities. They also received maximum cooperation and assistance from their peers. The study revealed that participation of children with visual impairments in sporting activities was minimal because teachers concentrated on the sighted participants for competitive sport. Mainstream teachers should be appropriately trained to meet the challenges of inclusion. Participation of children in inclusive settings should extend to sporting activities. Assistive devices should be provided to boost inclusion of the learners. Children with low vision should receive maximum assistance in the interpretation of raised diagrams.

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