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## **Challenges Faced by Learners and Teachers in Special Classes in Secondary Schools: The Case of Dzivaresekwa District in Harare**

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### ***Abstract:***

*Education systems, the world over have tended to treat disabled learners differently from the able bodied. This has been done with the express intention of providing learners with disabilities with conditions which take into account their special conditions. Since the Salamanca report education ministries have tended to gravitate towards inclusion and or the establishment of special classes in regular schools. In Zimbabwe the focus was on the establishment of special classes in regular schools. This study explores challenges which teachers and learners have experienced in such a set up with a view to suggesting interventions that can be adopted by the Ministry of education and more specifically by teachers who operate in special education classes.*

***Keywords:*** *Special classes, learners, teachers, disability, inclusion*

### **1. Introduction**

Historically, children with disabilities have been treated as inferior and in Zimbabwe special schools such as Copotaschool for the blind and Henry Murray for the deaf were set up for them. Such an arrangement was in line with the principle of exclusion. Ainscow (2009) posits that integration which began in the west in the late seventies and early eighties was spurred by a progressive educational ideology of inclusion which was introduced after the Salamanca conference held in Spain. The parallel system to traditional schooling that developed came to be known as Special Education. Special needs education is thus a system of education for children with disabilities within ordinary schools. It means that learners with disabilities are taught together with learners without disabilities. A common characteristic of this provision of education is that it has been offered in special classes and not in cooperation with other mainstream children.

The idea of inclusion is advocated for by policy documents such as the Salamanca Report and Framework for Action on Children with Special Needs (1994) and the Dakar framework for Action on Education for All (UNESCO, (2002). `Every child who has a disability should enjoy all the basic human rights enjoyed by those that are not disabled. The Zimbabwean government also adopted a new Framework for Action, the guiding principle of which is that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This means that children with special needs have a natural and rightful place in schools and the community at large. The framework, stipulated that disabled children attend the neighbourhood school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability.

The Zimbabwe Disability Act provides for the creation of a Special Education Unit which provides specialized services and its activities enable children with various disabilities to remain a part of the larger network of the school system and this it does by providing education to children with special needs within the normal school system. This unit's main function is to bring the physically and mentally handicapped into the mainstream of education and through this specialized service prepare them for a life of service to themselves and the nation. To realize the goal of education for all it is important that the learners with disabilities who are particularly vulnerable to marginalization and segregation be integrated in ordinary schools and be accepted as they are. The Dakar Framework for Action says inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to enjoyment and exercise of human rights (UNESCO, 2002). In the field of education this is reflected in bringing about a genuine equalization of opportunity. The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, where possible and that ordinary schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, while also having a continuum of support and services to match these needs. Countries with few or no special schools should establish inclusive not special schools because the latter promotes segregation or exclusion.

Gulllifford and Upton (1992) point out that a special class consists of students with disabilities who would have been grouped together because of similar individual needs so that they can receive specially designed instructions. Special classes serve students with disabilities whose needs can't be met within general education class. The Zimbabwean government could not exactly meet the demands of inclusion as enunciated by the Salamanca Statement but it opened special classes and resource units in several primary schools and a few secondary schools to cater for children with disabilities.

Children with disabilities present an especially vulnerable class of citizens (Pivik et al, 2002). It was not until 1987 that the government of Zimbabwe came up with the Education Act, which stipulates that every child in Zimbabwe shall have the right to school education. The Act also places on every local authority the responsibility of providing education to all children under its jurisdiction. The current Disability Act is not comprehensive and is non-committal. Lack of policy may mean that there are no special provisions and services to meet the specific needs of the children. Additionally, the 1994 Education Act has no reference to special needs education, thus it is silent as far as the right to education of pupils with special needs and the type of education they should receive. Special provisions and services include special teaching techniques, materials, equipment, facilities, and assistive services.

A preliminary study conducted by the researcher indicated that some teachers ignore learners with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and let them play because of various reasons. Indications from an analysis of O level results for the last four years are that learners from special classes have been performing badly. Some school teachers have challenges in terms of handling the children with special needs. Jones (1996) cites Botswana Community Junior Secondary School teachers indicating that they perform weakly. The following are some of the comments made by Botswana Junior school teachers: "I was trained to teach the 'A's and 'Bs', a 'D' grade is a fail and they should not come here". They are hopeless, they are empty vessels. They will get a 'D' in the JC and that will affect the school's result. From the foregoing it is evident that some teachers have negative feelings towards teaching learners with disabilities because they are worried about their results.

Guilford et al (1992) on the other hand point out that the majority of parents of Children with Special Needs argue that they want their children with disabilities to learn in special schools where there is safety, resource availability and specialist services. This reveals that teachers may have challenges emanating from the parents who do not appreciate the services offered by teachers at regular schools, regardless of their input. Forbes (2007) adds to the foregoing by indicating that students with disabilities experience more rejection by peers than do students without disabilities. Bullying directed toward students with disabilities is common.

It is against this background that the study explores challenges faced by the learners and teachers in special classes with a view to suggesting possible solutions to these challenges.

### *1.1. Statement of the Problem*

Learners from special classes are encountering challenges in acquiring basic education hence their performance is poor at "O" level. The various instruments that have been put in place both internationally and locally are meant to create conditions which enable learners from special classes to benefit in their education. Conditions on the ground, however, seem to suggest that learners, particularly those from special classes are not performing well at "O" level. This study explores challenges that teachers and learners in special classes experience with a view to proffering interventions that are likely to enhance the academic performance of "O" level students in special classes.

### *1.2. Research Questions*

- What instruments were put in place to create conditions which are conducive for learners from special classes to benefit in their education internationally and locally?
- What problems are being faced by learners from special classes?
- What problems are being faced by teachers who take special classes?
- How can challenges experienced by special education teachers and learners be addressed?

## **2. Research Methodology**

Osborne (2008) expresses a research design as a plan that describes how, when and where data are to be collected and analyzed. A research design is the overall plan for collecting data in order to answer research questions (Slavin, 2007). The research design adopted in this study is descriptive, non-experimental, qualitative and contextual. The main goal of this type of research is to describe the data and characteristics about what is being studied. Qualitative research focuses on the experiences of people as well as stressing uniqueness of the individual (Osborne, 2008). Qualitative research takes place in natural settings. Purposive sampling of three special education teachers and four special education learners from each of the three purposively selected schools was conducted. Nine teachers, who interact with special education learners in other co-curricular activities were randomly selected for this study. Questionnaires, interviews and observation were the data gathering instruments used in this study (Brown and Watson, 2010).

## **3. Findings**

### *3.1. What Instruments Were Put in Place to Create Conditions Which Are Conducive for Learners from Special Classes to Benefit in Their Education Internationally and Locally?*

The interviews revealed that there is no clear cut policy in Zimbabwe. From the interviews conducted it was revealed that internationally the teachers make use of the Salamanca Statement of 1994 which they learnt of during their training back then in colleges. Almost all the teachers interviewed indicated that they did not know of any clear cut policy in Zimbabwe for inclusive education but they would consider the Disabled Persons Act of 1996 as an instrument for inclusive education and some circulars especially Ministry of Education Secretary's Policy Circular P36 of 1990 which states that every child should have access to basic education irrespective of their colour, disability, religion, creed or gender. Some teachers revealed that they are aware of the Nziramasanga Commission (1999) whose recommendations they were using as a substitute for a clear policy on integration. One teacher indicated that they knew of no policy or circular in line with disabilities in Zimbabwe.

### 3.2. What Problems Are Being Faced by Learners from Special Classes?

From the observations made by the researcher it was noted that teachers have no time for special learners as they were always in a hurry to complete syllabus topics in given time. The learners who are slow especially during practical lessons are not given much attention by the teacher. The learners themselves who were behind were very timid (Baumburger and Harper, 2007). They were not willing to open up and indicate to the teacher that they were behind. During a reading session in one of the classes the researcher observed that when a learner from one of the special classes was now reading the other classmates started to pass derogative comments and immediately the teacher reprimanded them, and the lesson went on well thereafter as the learners gathered more confidence as the lesson proceeded.

It was also noted with concern that some teachers from special classes themselves have given up or resigned already as they do not make their lessons interesting anymore, which makes it difficult for the learner to develop interest. Some teachers lack passion even though they were trained to do the job.

It was also observed by the researcher that a few individuals who were sitting next to learners from the special class would whisper to them or help them with the task given.

One learner indicated that he could not see from the back properly, another learner pointed out they were very forgetful. One respondent revealed that he was sick most of the time hence misses most lessons “*Kungorwararwara*”; the other respondent said “*zvakaqozha*” meaning the content was difficult to understand. Another learner indicated that she lacked confidence and had fear of the unknown hence suffered from inferiority complex. She stated that her communications skills were not that good because she had difficulty in speech. Additionally one said she had low self-esteem so could not stand up on her own feet. Yet another learner said he fails to understand the teacher and if he asks for explanation the others will complain that he is wasting their time and the teacher will simply say go over it later after school. So the mainstream teachers are too fast for him.

### 3.3. What Problems Are Being Faced by Teachers Who Take Special Classes?

It was revealed from the research that most teachers who take special classes just find themselves with learners with special needs in their classrooms and don't know about their conditions and disabilities or what to expect. One respondent said as he got into a practical classroom the sight which welcomed him the first day at work at his new school was something else, one learner was lying on a work bench and the other one doing something else. He couldn't take it or understand the learners so he went back to the head indicating that he wanted to quit because no-one had equipped him or prepared him for such a class.

Many teachers are left on their own to cope with special needs in the classroom.

One respondent said some students lack parental support emotionally and materially at times, which will result in learners withdrawing.

Learners' attitude will be negative fuelled by the way they are treated around them. Learners are forced by circumstances to toughen and create a shell round themselves which will make it difficult for the teacher to reach them.

Social problems and psychological problems make it a challenge for the teacher to reach out to the learner. For example if a learner with disabilities is being abused by a female parent at home the learner will identify any female teacher with the abuser at home which will cause the learner to build a wall around herself especially as far as female teachers are concerned.

Lack of resources was one challenge as the schools had no suitable books, the needed equipment for cooking lessons, as some pupils would move from their base room to the next room for cookery lessons. At teachers are forced to improvise. At one school the teacher had no blankets or pillows in case one pupil may have seizures since some epileptic and they would need blankets to treat the shock and become warm.

## 4. Conclusions

On problems faced by learners from special classes the researcher concluded that students are encountering problems of low concentration span, having mood swings, failure to comprehend questions and failure to handle or manipulate tools especially when dealing with some of the practical subjects. The other problems revealed were poor eyesight, short memory and poor communications skills, failure to attend some lessons because of illness or seizure in case they are epileptic learners and the content which is difficult for them to understand. Some learners faced the problem of being isolated and labelled by their peers and some teachers. Some learners cited boredom, uninteresting teachers and no variety in recreation methods.

The study revealed that teachers have challenges in trying to deal or handle learners with disabilities as they are not equipped or trained to deal with them. Some teachers do not have time to attend to individual needs as they have large numbers in their classes already to cater for and racing against time to complete the syllabus within a given period of time. In agreement with Cramer (2006), some of the teachers were discovered to have no passion for the learners and their job at large.

Teachers also face problems when they receive no support from parents as was stated by one teacher who had invited parents for consultation and out of ten parents only three came on the day. It was also indicated that he had never met parents of some learners from the class ever since they got enrolled at the school, which shows that some parents view the school as a dumping ground for their children who have special needs.

Trying to change the learners' attitude from being negative to positive is one challenge which is facing teachers in some schools which will enable the learner to be receptive. It was noted that lack of resources was a problem faced by teachers in special classes such as textbooks, toys and linen especially to use for learners who might be epileptic.

## 5. Recommendations

Policy makers in Zimbabwe should come up with a clear cut policy on inclusion so that teachers and learners have instruments which will guide them to make the environment and conditions for special classes favourable and as a result benefit them.

The researcher suggests that every teacher undergoes some form of training in special education in order to prepare them for inclusion and integration in schools. Based on the findings of this research it is suggested that those teachers already in service should be offered in house training or on the job training on special education so as to equip them with relevant information and skills.

It is suggested that administrators get training on special education requirements and needs so that they can learn to appreciate the department and its function and provide relevant infrastructure and material as required. School heads are encouraged to stop emphasizing percentage pass rates at the expense of children's development and to stop judging teachers' performance by their results. Furthermore more research be done so as to establish approaches that take into account conditions of special learners in all Zimbabwean schools.

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