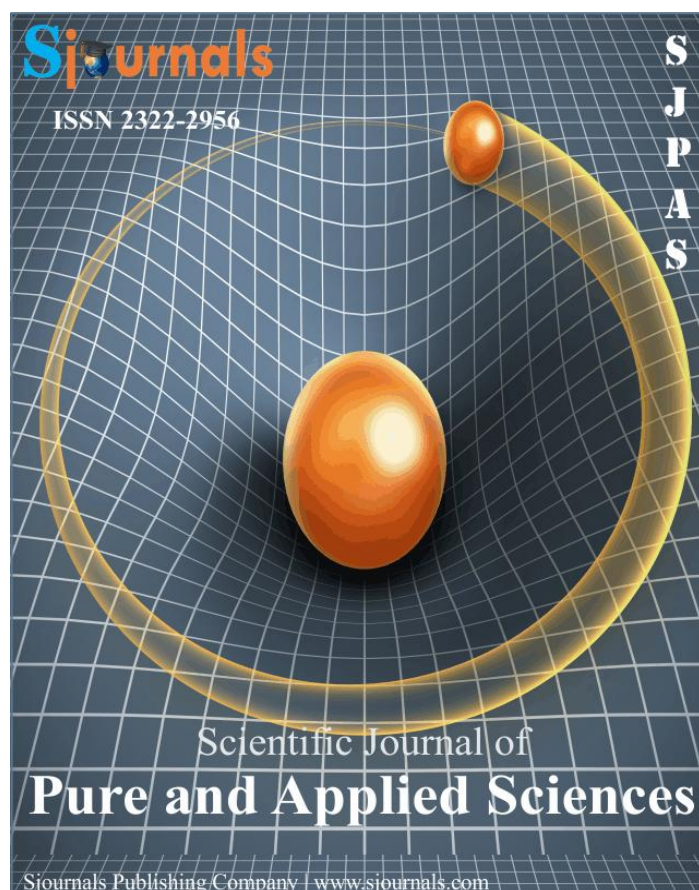


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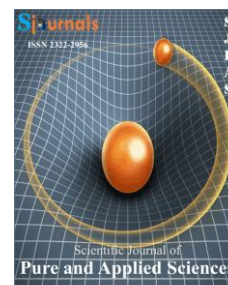
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Review article

A review of the implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe: challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this review was to, using literature, examine the various challenges faced in the implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Existing opportunities for the implementation of inclusive education were also explored. Literature indicates that challenges of implementing inclusive education are more visible in sub-Saharan Africa than in the other parts of the world. The main challenges that were identified during review and synthesis of literature as affecting Zimbabwe in particular included lack of resources, inaccessibility of schools, ambiguity or complete lack of policies and laws, structural barriers, cultural stereotypes and negative attitudes, lack of political will, low teacher-pupil ratio, curriculum inaccessibility and research concerns. It also emerged from the review that opportunities such as the vast interest the government of Zimbabwe has invested in general education since 1980 which has culminated in the construction of several mainstream schools and training of specialist and special education teachers can be exploited for full inclusion of learners with disabilities. From the information gathered, the review concluded that the major causes of the many challenges affecting Zimbabwe are lack of political will, unclear policies and lack of funding. Meanwhile, the existing opportunities were seen to have potential for the successful implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. On these bases, the review recommended mainly raising awareness among educational stakeholders, standardization of

training, policy review, improved funding and restructuring of the implementation strategy.

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1. Introduction

The current global trend in the education of children with special needs is skewed toward the embracement of the philosophy of inclusion. This trend is premised on the assumption that inclusion is the only realistic means of achieving education for all. Inclusive education is ideally concerned with presence, equity, fairness, participation, diversity and access with regards to educational provisions. Inclusion is thus a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities and reducing exclusion within and from education (United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI, 2010). For Hyde (2013) inclusion, which is founded on human rights principles, refers to the right to active participation and to educational equity through engagement in all aspects of daily life. It is a set of processes concerned with removing barriers to presence, participation and progress in the teaching and learning of all children (Samkange, 2013). For that matter, inclusion involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, within a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular school system to educate all children within an accessible, safe, secure and child-friendly learning environment, where diversity is acknowledged and responded to and every effort is made to reduce barriers to participation and learning (UNESCO, 2005; 2008; 2009; Kusters et al., 2015). For Abu Shaira (2013), inclusion represents the participation of all students in a supportive education environment in which appropriate educational services and forms of social support are available.

According to the Nevada Partnership for Inclusive Education (2016), inclusion is an educational approach and philosophy that provides all students with community membership and greater opportunities for academic and social participation and achievement. It is about ensuring that every student feels welcome because their individual needs are valued and met and entails that children with special needs attend the nearest school they would have attended had they not been disabled for instance (Sagahutu and Struthers, 2014; Republic of Namibia, 2013). Specific to this paper, an educationally specific definition of inclusion as inclusive education is adopted. Thus, inclusive education entails the use of dynamic needs-based strategies to facilitate and promote equitable learning conditions, language access and cultural diversity within the mainstream school system where all children, disabled or not, are valued the same and benefit from equitable participation in the overall education process (Walton, 2017; Kusters et al., 2015). In essence, inclusion provides opportunities for equity and participation in education but because of its relative newness and its dynamic nature, it is bound to be characterised by challenges especially in developing countries like Zimbabwe. It is in this light that this paper reviews literature pointing to challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Consequently, the paper also proffers some mitigation measures against the challenges. The challenges include lack of adequate resources, inaccessibility of schools, ambiguity of laws and policies, lack of political will, cultural stereotypes and negative societal attitudes, low teacher-pupil ratios, curriculum inaccessibility as well as research concerns.

2. Lack of resources

Successful implementation of inclusive education requires resources that are nevertheless not as expensive and expansive as those required for parallel education systems, such as special education. Due to socioeconomic challenges, many developing countries are however experiencing a serious challenge of lack of resources in implementing inclusive education. In effect, general lack of support and resources contributes significantly to the poor implementation of inclusive education in many of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bornman and Rose, 2010). This is often due to competition for limited educational resources between and among educational reforms such as basic adult education and early childhood development (ECD). In a study, Chimhenga (2016) identified limited resources in form of human, financial, infrastructural and material resources as the major challenge in implementing inclusive practices in Zimbabwe. In Kenya, lack of resources such as instructional materials impacted negatively on the implementation of inclusive education (Mwangi and Orodho, 2014) yet in Swaziland Thwala

(2015) bemoaned lack of proper teaching and learning material that would help accommodate learners with disabilities.

It is clear that lack of human resources in form of specialist teachers, school psychologists and relevant therapists for example, is one of the major challenges bedeviling implementation of inclusive education in many African countries, Zimbabwe included. At the time of writing this paper, a lot of schools in rural areas of Zimbabwe were understaffed due to a freeze on recruitment of teachers. For those deployed in mainstream schools, many lacked appropriate specialist skills to effectively implement inclusive education. Many of them had not been either trained or adequately staff developed in inclusive practices. Teachers themselves complained about lack of knowledge and were asking for training. Pre-service teacher education programmes were not aligned to adequately sensitise and equip prospective teachers with inclusive education practices. This situation seemed evident in Zimbabwe and many other countries as well. As a result, many mainstream teachers in Zimbabwe lacked in-depth awareness of inclusive practices. The results of a study by Sibanda (2017) revealed that, although many of the mainstream teachers in Zimbabwe had merely heard or read about inclusion, they had not studied or trained in it and hence lacked in-depth knowledge and insight of the philosophy. Donohue and Bornman (2014) believes that added to lack of funding, lack of teachers with the capacity and knowledge to teach a diverse body of learners in a single classroom is another major challenge. In Zimbabwe and many other developing countries, there were few specialist teachers and mainstream teachers lacked knowledge of inclusion and skills to implement it. A number of universities in the country offered special needs education programmes but it was doubtful whether the teachers graduate fully prepared for implementing inclusive education. An evaluation study in these regards is imperative.

Similarly, there were also limited resources in form of assistive devices such as Braille machines and other visual technologies for the blind, hearing technologies such as hearing aids and cochlear implants for the deaf, computers for those with intellectual challenges or learning disabilities and mobility devices such as wheel chairs for those with physical disabilities. Further, considering the current educational trends, lack of information communication technology (ICT) hardware and software was also posing a great challenge for the implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. All children with disabilities can benefit from the utilization of ICT. Singh (2015) opines that ICT-enabled pedagogical and assistive devices are particularly useful for children with disabilities. Software such as jaws for instance is crucial for the inclusion of learners who are blind. Sadly, such technologies were still a far cry in Zimbabwe. Of course the major reason for lack of all these and other resources was poor or lack of funding. Generally, lack of funding was largely responsible for inaccessibility of the schools especially those in rural areas.

3. Inaccessibility of mainstream schools

Following the prioritization of education by the Zimbabwe government since 1980 when the country attained its independence from the British colonial rule, several mainstream schools were built to cater for inclusive education but as for children with disabilities, not all these schools were accessible due to distance or structural barriers. In rural areas many children walked long distances to school. For children with disabilities, this situation was worsened by lack of transport, rough terrain for instance for those using wheel chairs, dilapidated road network and associated costs families incurred in their endeavor to get these children to school (Leonard Cheshire, 2014). Director's Circular Minute Number 12 of 2005 stipulates that no primary school child should walk more than 5km to and from school. According to a study conducted by Mwangi and Orodho (2014) in Kenya, geographical distance between schools and homes forced parents to take their children with disabilities to and from school. This is a cumbersome duty and with time, many parents would give up and keep their children at home. For children with physical disabilities, for example, even the 5 km distance can be impossible to cover. Girls with disability in this case could be at higher risk of exclusion if parents prefer boys to go to school. A similar and at times worse situation obtains in Zimbabwe. At times parents would keep school girls with disabilities at home in fear of their safety and security when they travel to and from school. That is why in some cases parents resorted to carrying their children with physical disabilities, often on their backs, to and from school every day. This is detrimental to a family's socioeconomic survival since much productive time is spent trying to get the child with a disability to and from school. Once at the school, the child is likely to be met with a further challenge associated with structural barriers imposed by the school's physical environment.

4. Structural barriers

Even where mainstream schools were within a walking distance, for children with disabilities the infrastructure in the schools was often inaccessible. Many mainstream schools that were built way before the Disabled Persons Act (1992 revised 2001) lacked ramps and wide doors for children using wheelchairs, rails for students who are blind and sound proof class rooms for children who have hearing impairment for example. Some schools had 2 or 3-storey buildings which were difficult to access by children using wheelchairs. Lack of access to sanitary and ablution facilities was another major barrier to inclusive education particularly in rural areas. Even facilities such as libraries were not easily accessible to many children with disabilities. In a study, Mafa (2012) established that in Zimbabwe, buildings in most schools were not accessible to children with disabilities particularly those in wheelchairs. These structural barriers complicated the process of implementing inclusive education and the situation was made worse where cultural barriers and negative attitudes toward disability still dominated the education environment.

5. Cultural stereotypes and negative societal attitudes

Lack of political will to make the school environment fully accessible to all children with disabilities is in effect rooted in cultural stereotypes and negative attitudes towards disability. Any negative cultural stereotypes and attitudes towards disability reflect on poor or lack of implementation of inclusive education. This is because the Zimbabwean society associated inclusive education with the educability of learners with disabilities. Frankel, Gold and Ajodhia-Andrews (2010) argue that to successfully implement inclusion, educators and other stakeholders must have among other factors, positive attitudes. Successful implementation of inclusive education thus depends on the actions and attitudes of especially school administrators and that of teachers and other school personnel. Research has shown that although teachers agree with the philosophy of inclusion, they still believe that children with disabilities can best be taught in special classes and special schools. Mainstream teachers have their own socially and culturally constructed notions about disability but lack scientific and educational knowledge about children with disabilities and their inclusivity (Singh, 2015).

Additionally, cultural attitudes and stereotypes about the education of learners with disabilities affect parents' attitudes toward sending their children with disabilities to mainstream schools. Some parents believed that it is not economically feasible to send their children with disabilities to mainstream schools at the expense of the non-disabled children. A study by Mwangi and Orodho (2014) in Kenya established that socio-cultural factors contributed to the negative attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with disabilities. These socio-cultural factors were rooted in cultural beliefs and values that blamed disability on ancestral sins and other misdeeds. In Zimbabwe, such beliefs were perpetuated by the traditional perspective that attributes disability to family sin, witchcraft and angered ancestors (Jackson and Mupedziswa, 1988). This leads to parents, families and the children with disabilities being shunned, blamed and discriminated against. The usual reaction was that the children with disabilities were either kept at home or sent to special schools. Such reactions are detrimental to the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools.

The socially constructed notions about disability suggest that negative attitudes are a great barrier to the implementation of inclusive education since they can persist even where resources are abundant. For Mafa (2012), negative attitudes of some administrators, teachers, parents and learners were the greatest barrier to inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Such attitudes from education stakeholders obviously impacted negatively on the amount of commitment in form of resources and sacrifices that go with the implementation of inclusive practices. According to Polat (2011), changing attitudinal barriers among school professionals, parents and the community is one of the essential aspects of making inclusive education happen in low-income or developing countries. Negative attitudes among mainstream teachers translate into negative teaching methods and ultimately to frustration. The net result is complete exclusion of children with disabilities. Without eradicating these negative attitudes and putting in place effective legal measures, genuine inclusive education cannot be achieved.

6. Ambiguity of laws and policies

Ambiguity or even complete lack of laws and policies is a big issue in the implementation of inclusive education in many countries. International conventions and declarations such as the Salamanca Report and

Framework of Action on Children with Special Needs (1994); Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), the Jomtein World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the Dakar Framework for Action on Education For All, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) and the Incheon Declaration on Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All (EFA) (2015) are all in favour of inclusion which in educational discourses is referred to as inclusive education. For example, Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) to which Zimbabwe is a signatory, mandates member states to recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination but on the basis of equal opportunity. Member states are specifically directed to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed at full development of human potential, sense of dignity and self-worth. In the absence of local laws and policies, these international laws take precedence.

Zimbabwe had laws and policies directed at inclusivity but these policies lacked clarity on the exact procedures. Section 83 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Number 20 of 2013 for instance provides, 'The State must take appropriate measures, within the limits of the resources available to it, to ensure that persons with disabilities realise their full... potential including measures... to provide special facilities for their education...' The problem of this policy provision is that it is ambiguous and advocates for special facilities instead of inclusivity. The Zimbabwe Disabled Persons Act (1992 revised 2001) in Section 7 emphasises the need for adaptation of the physical environments of service centers to ensure accessibility but does not directly refer to inclusive education. Just like the Disabled Persons Act, even the Amended Education Act (2006) generalizes the rights of children to education without specifying how inclusive education should be implemented and practiced as a way of extending these rights to learners with disabilities. Meanwhile, Secretary's Circular Number 2 of 2000 provides minimum guidelines for the inclusion of learners with albinism and Director's Circular Number 7 of 2005 provides guidelines for the inclusion of learners with disabilities in school competitions. These and other policies are either not specific on how inclusive practices will be provided for and have weak or no enforcement procedures at all. Mafa (2012) implores that, while a lot has been said about inclusion even in supplementary policies, there were no comprehensive strategies for enforcement. What the Zimbabwe education system needs for inclusive education to succeed are clear enforceable laws and policies that specify not only the guidelines but exact procedures and how associated resources will be provided. In Uganda for instance, according to the inclusive policy, schools are grouped into clusters of 15 to 20 schools (Mwangi and Orodho, 2014). Each of the clusters has a special needs education coordinator who oversees implementation of inclusive practices.

7. Lack of political will

Poorly crafted, ambiguous or unclear policies are often a reflection of lack of political will among the political leaders of a country. Donohue and Bornman (2014) testify that in SA, lack of political will towards inclusive education is reflected through inadequate funding, vague guidelines and ambiguous incentives and directives resulting in great challenges for educators. This is because education laws and policies are crafted at political level and at times are imposed on the education systems without consultation. Allan (2012) argues that unfortunately, while the concept of inclusion has been a diffuse part of policy, it remains a political concept tied more closely to special education than to democratic education. At times, political leaders maybe unaware of changes in education and as a result make decisions based on outdated practices. Many politicians, for example, do not understand what inclusive education entails. Many of them still cling to the old belief that children with disabilities are best educated in well-resourced special schools with their own specialized curriculum. In Zimbabwe, ministers responsible for disability have been appointed to several previous and current cabinets but they have not impacted significantly on the implementation of inclusive education. Not much if any advocacy for inclusive education has been initiated by any of these ministers to date. Lack of political will in Zimbabwe was glaring as a function of the expression in the Constitution as highlighted earlier, that the state will only provide for the education of persons with disabilities 'within the limits of the resources available to it'. This shows that the political leaders of the country did not want to be held responsible or do not want to commit themselves to the provision of appropriate education for persons with disabilities. Therefore, this lack of commitment and of a political will made the implementation of inclusive education difficult or even untenable. Issues of provision of resources such as failure to train and recruit adequate teachers who had an appreciation of inclusion can also be traced back to lack of political will. Unfortunately, it is this inadequacy of teachers in schools that led to low teacher pupil ratios hence to challenges in the implementation of inclusive education.

8. Low teacher-pupil ratios

A low teacher-pupil ratio mathematically entails more learners allocated to one teacher. It is best understood in terms of fractions whereby the larger the denominator the less the value of a fraction. Leonard Cheshire (2014) is worried that large class sizes and teacher-pupil ratios of up to 1:100 in some developing countries are a great source of frustration in the inclusion of learners with disabilities into mainstream schools. Howarth (1987) believes that large classes negatively impact on the implementation of inclusive education due to difficulties related to attending to individual needs, class management dynamics and marking load. Since the curriculum is often examination-oriented, teachers tend to teach in order to cover the syllabus and have no time for individual attention. At the time of writing this paper, in Zimbabwe, primary schools had an average class size of 50 pupils but in extreme cases, this number would almost double owing to the government's failure to recruit more teachers. Such class sizes presented a challenge for teachers to exercise inclusive practices. In Swaziland, Thwala (2015) found out that large class size hindered the practice of inclusion because teachers could not cope with diverse needs in the midst of a large number of learners in need of individual attention. For effective inclusive education to occur in mainstream schools of Zimbabwe, a larger teacher-pupil ratio of up to 1 to 25 is desirable.

9. Curriculum inaccessibility

Large class size has implications for effective teaching and learning and for curriculum accessibility in general. The mainstream curriculum in its original state was never designed to serve the purpose of inclusive education. Such a curriculum was designed for average learners who use typical means to access knowledge, skills and competences that are inherent in it. Unless the curriculum is modified, adapted or differentiated, it would pose as a barrier to inclusive practices since some children with special needs would fail to access it. Curriculum modification, adaptation or differentiation is meant to make the curriculum responsive to a diversity of learner needs and abilities. But modifying, adapting or differentiating a curriculum without watering it down needs special skills on the part of the teachers. Training and staff development will therefore be required in order to meet the new but demanding skills of modifying, adapting and differentiating the curriculum. In fact, it is a frustrating challenge on its own to teach a class with a wide diversity of needs and abilities. This happens even within the ordinary classes that have no deliberate inclusive orientation. Donohue and Bornman (2014) believe that the success of learning in inclusive settings depends not only on educational provisions but on systematic curriculum accommodations as well. Similarly, Singh (2015) concurs that, for inclusive education to succeed, curriculum adaptations suited for special and unique needs of every learner including those with disabilities should be adopted.

10. Research concerns

In addition to the practical challenges that have been proffered, paucity of research particularly in developing countries is also a major concern. In effect, existing research has established some cross-cutting issues that reflect on the several challenges to the implementation of inclusive practices which I have alluded to. Rosenqvist (2007) alludes to the uncertainties about the meaning of inclusion as being the main source of many of the challenges raised in this paper. Research points to the fact that the major challenges are rooted in the changes that will be required in the school structures, ethos and practices. According to Allan (2012), this is exacerbated by existing environmental, structural and cultural, social or attitudinal barriers. Researchers themselves are asking about who exactly should be included, where and how. Research has therefore not adequately responded to teachers' questions on why they should include children with disabilities and at what cost. The same goes for parents' concerns about why their children with disabilities are let down by the educational paradoxes of inclusion versus exclusion. For the children with disabilities, they are generally perplexed why it is so difficult to be included (Allan, 2012) yet researchers have not yet provided a convincing solution. Researchers report that, as a result, teachers the world over are increasingly talking about inclusive education as an impossibility in the current climate (Croll and Moses, 2000; Thomas and Vaughan, 2004). They also express lack of confidence in their own competences to deliver inclusive practices within the constraints of existing resources (Mittler, 2000; Hanho, 2005). Even in the UK, teachers argue that there is no clear shared national definition of what inclusion means leading to variation of

provisions. Therefore, so much strain has been imposed on schools that are under-funded. These findings have led to speculations as to whether ideal inclusive practices can ever be achieved.

Depending on availability of funding which is of course informed by a political will and the socioeconomic environment of a country, Zimbabwe needs to explore the following recommendations in order to minimize the aforesaid challenges:

- ✓ Allocate a specific budget for the implementation of inclusive education.
- ✓ Intensify the teaching of inclusive education modules to pre-service teacher trainees and in-service all practicing teachers. In addition, regular staff-development in inclusive practices should be a mandate for each Education District in the country.
- ✓ Standardize the training of inclusive education and/or specialist teachers in colleges and universities.
- ✓ Establish planned inclusive education awareness programmes for all stakeholders including legislators, school administrators, teachers and other education officials, School Development Committee members, parents and children.
- ✓ Repeal policies that discourage inclusive practices in favour of pro-inclusion policies. These policies should be accompanied by enforcement measures.
- ✓ Group schools into clusters and deploy specialist teachers to coordinate the implementation of inclusive education at cluster level.
- ✓ Re-designate special schools to become resource centers for inclusive education.
- ✓ Motivate research that focuses on the removal of barriers to inclusive practices.

11. Conclusion

From the aforesaid, the main conclusion is that lack of funding coupled with lack of political will hence policy inconsistencies and at times absence of policy together with confusion over the meaning and purpose of inclusive education give rise to all the other challenges that are reviewed in this paper. There is also the problem of paucity of research that is focused on addressing these challenges yet some findings of existing research continue to add more complexity and controversy especially with regards to the way teachers are asking about its cost and feasibility. Therefore, the paper further concludes that the best way of mitigating the several challenges while fostering the abundant opportunities for inclusive education is raising awareness among the political leadership and all the other significant stakeholders in the education of children with disabilities and other special needs. This will translate into positive attitude, functional policies and hence improved funding of inclusive education. In the ultimate, full inclusion of children with special needs will be attainable in Zimbabwe only with adequate funding, positive attitude and political will. In terms of opportunities for successful implementation of inclusive education, the paper also concludes that Zimbabwe has great potential for the implementation of full inclusion since there are several mainstream schools as well as adequate special schools which can be turned into resource centers for inclusive education. A significant number of specialist teachers who can be made into inclusive education coordinators have already been trained and some colleges and universities are training more and more specialist and special education teachers who have the capacity of working as special education coordinators.

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