



## **Provision of Special Needs Education in Zimbabwean Primary Schools: A Case Study of Nkayi North West Circuit Primary Schools**

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study sought to investigate the provision of special needs education in Zimbabwean primary schools using the qualitative methodology. The study adopted the descriptive survey design. The population comprised of all the eighteen primary schools in Nkayi North West Circuit and the sample consisted of 30 teachers and heads from five schools. Purposive sample was made up of 17 females and 13 males. All the information was collected through the use of a questionnaire which largely had close-ended questions and one-open ended one. The study revealed that most special units or special classrooms were manned by teachers without the requisite qualifications and that schools had inadequate resources to properly cater for the needs of children with disabilities. The study recommends that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should deploy more teachers with Diploma in Special Education to all schools across the country and that there should be supervision of teachers by the District Psychological Services Unit to support their efforts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the attainment of independence and the pre-independence war cry and ideology of equality of all people regardless of disabilities, all Zimbabweans had the right to access educational opportunities [1]. The inclusive education was born out this philosophical thinking. The inclusive education unlike separate placement which works on the philosophy that the child with challenges must adjust to school environment operates on the thinking that "it is the school that makes adjustments to accommodate or include the child [2]. In the late 1990s the government of Zimbabwe adopted the policy of Inclusive Education (IE). The Jomtien Conference (1990) had affirmed the need to uphold the rights of all people while the Salamanca Convention (1994) ostensibly suggested IE by affirming that inclusive schools are the most potent in combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all [1]. By being a signatory to the Salamanca Convention of 1994, the government was fully obliged to implement inclusion. The Secretary's minute number P36, of June 1985 gave school heads the mandate to enrol pupils with mild disabilities and place them in a separate class at the same school. These teachers would be assisted by specialist teachers deployed to each school by the Schools Psychological Services; a department that the government had created to cater for students with education needs and disabilities (SEND). In 1990, the Ministry of Education officially made integration operational through its directive that schools should provide specialised rooms for use by those with mild or severe special needs. Pressure from human rights campaigners and coupled with resolutions of Jomtien and Salamanca conventions drove the government to introduce inclusive education [3].

Soon [3] state that in recent times, places available in special schools are declining as more students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are educated in mainstream schools. However, as [4] argue, there will always be some children whose learning needs cannot be appropriately met in a regular classroom setting and will require specialized education and resources to provide the level of support they require. An example of a

disability that may require a student to attend a special school is intellectual disability [5]. In the Zimbabwean context according to [1] every school can apply to open a special unit through the assistance of the District Psychological Services officer based at each of the District Offices across the country. The special unit is a separate room dedicated solely to the education of students with special needs within a larger school that provides general education [1]. Ideally, these classrooms should be staffed by specially trained teachers, who are expected to provide specific, individualised instruction to individuals and small groups of (SEND) [2]. It is on account of this information that this study set out to investigate how primary schools in Zimbabwe are providing special needs education.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to [6] common special needs include learning disabilities, communication disabilities, emotional and behavioural disorders, physical disabilities and developmental disabilities. As [7] argues, SEND are likely to benefit from additional educational services such as different approaches to teaching, the use of technology, a specifically adapted area or a resource room. [8] asserts that whereas special education is designed specifically for learners with special needs, remedial education can be designed for any students, with or without special needs; the defining trait is simply that they have reached a point of unpreparedness, regardless of why. For example, even people of high intelligence can be unprepared if their education was disrupted, for example by internal displacement during civil disorder or war [8].

Fisher and Pleasants [9] state that some children are easily identified as candidates for special needs due to their medical history since they may have been diagnosed with a genetic condition that is associated with intellectual disability, may have various forms of brain damage, may have a developmental disorder, may have visual or hearing disabilities, or other disabilities. [10] posit that early remediation can greatly reduce the number of children meeting diagnostic criteria for learning disabilities. [11] has also suggested that the focus on learning disabilities and the provision of accommodation in school fails to acknowledge that people have a range of strengths and weaknesses and places

undue emphasis on academics by insisting that students should be supported in this arena and not in music or sports.

Thompson and Russell [12] argue that a special education programme should be customized to address each individual student's unique needs, and that special educators provide a continuum of services, in which SEND receive varying degrees of support based on their individual needs. Special education programmes need to be individualized so that they address the unique combination of needs in a given student [11]. SEND include those suffering from dyslexia that is failure to read and write those with attention deficit and hyper activity and children with physical disabilities or impairments [13].

Zindi [2] states that in theory, many African countries show interest in educating SEND, but what lacks is putting theory into practice. Successful teaching of SEND depends on the availability of formal and natural support which is indispensable [14]. Formal support includes curriculum materials and technological assistive devices and natural support which include family, classmates and teachers. Schools therefore should provide facilities for disabled pupils such as proper furniture, toilet facilities, Braille, abbreviation expanders, alternative keyboards, personal FM listening systems, optical character recognition, speech synthesizers / screen readers, talking calculators, and other assistive devices [12].

Mpofu [1] argues that, for any successful system to move forward, there is need for a highly trained human resource to implement it. It is vital that those teachers who have a defined responsibility for SEND to have considerable expertise in special needs education. According to [15] teachers should be properly trained to handle children with special needs. For example, a child with visual impairment cannot be taught by a teacher who has not been trained Braille. Likewise, a teacher who has not received training in dealing with children who have mental disorders may fail to execute his or her duties [15].

According to [16] there are many factors which hinder progress in educating SEND and some of them are lack of proper records and supervision. Lack of records defeats the very purpose of special education. As [15] advise, any and all information gathered by special education teachers through formal and informal

assessment, testing, anecdotal evidence, direct observation and academic performance analysis, must be carefully correlated and kept secure. That information must be clear and accessible to parents, administrators and Ministry of Education, so accuracy and completeness are key [10].

In the context of this study, researchers are guided by previous research to determine the extent to which findings by local and foreign scholars are consistent with how the studied schools were providing special education in order to expose both successes and challenges for enhancement and improvement of the system.

## **2.1 Statement of the Problem**

Most schools in Zimbabwe have created special units of special classrooms which are separate rooms dedicated solely to the education of SEND within a larger school that also provides general education. There is need therefore to expose the way how these special units function for the benefit of the special needs children. The study sought to answer the following research problem:

How the studied schools were providing special education in order to expose both successes and challenges for enhancement and improvement of the system?

## **2.2 Purpose of the Study**

The study sought to establish how primary schools were providing special education in order to expose both successes and challenges for enhancement and improvement of the system.

## **2.3 Research Questions**

1. Do schools have special units to cater for SEND?
2. Do teachers who teach special needs have the necessary qualifications?
3. Are resource materials for use in special needs education adequate for effecting implementation of the system?
4. Do heads carry out effective supervision of teachers teaching special needs classes?
5. Do teachers keep accurate records for children under special education classes?

## **2.4 Significance of the Study**

The importance of the study stemmed from the fact that it attempted to reveal how schools were

providing special needs education to the children with special needs in order to come up with recommendations to improve where there are weaknesses and to build on the existing strengths of the system in the schools. The researchers hoped to consolidate awareness to the importance of special education to education authorities in particular and to other stakeholders in general.

**2.5 Limitations of the Study**

The study employed the case study method which according to [17] lacks generalisability because of its reliance on small samples". In view of the small size of the sample used, the findings of the study will have limited generalisability. It has to be pointed out also that attitudes about an issue are essentially subjective and cannot be measured accurately. In other words, attitudes have no universally acceptable scales of measurement; and measures that were used in this study cannot be considered to be absolutely accurate.

**2.6 Delimitation of the Study**

The researchers delimited the study to the provision of SEND by five (5) primary schools in Nkayi North West Circuit through the creation of special units. The study was not concerned with special education provided in ordinary classrooms. Views from 25 teachers and five (5) heads of schools were used. Views from other key stakeholders were outside the purview of this study.

**3. METHODOLOGY**

The study employed the qualitative methodology and made use of a case study research design. According to [18], "the case study is an approach to studying a social phenomenon through a thorough analysis of individual case." [18] goes on to argue that, "This approach rests on that the case being studied is typical of cases of a certain type so that through intensive analysis, generalisations may be made that will be applicable to other cases of the same type."The study's population comprised of 300 teachers and 20 heads of schools from primary schools in Nkayi North West Circuit in Nkayi District in Zimbabwe. The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select a sample of 25 teachers and 5 heads of schools. Purposive sampling was chosen because as [19] observes,

the researcher can use her / his research skill and prior knowledge to choose respondents. Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire which was largely made up of close-ended questions and one open-ended question. The questionnaire was chosen because of its ability to reach many respondents who live in widely dispersed addresses and preserves anonymity which encourages greater honesty [20]. However, as Blumberg argues, the questionnaire generally has a low response rate and is inflexible in that it does not allow ideas or comments to be explored indepth and many questions may remain unanswered.

**3.1 Findings and Discussion**

The study set out to investigate how schools were providing special education in Zimbabwean primary schools. This section is presented in two parts, namely, presentation of data and discussion, thereof.

**Table 1. Category of respondents (N=30)**

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Teachers	25	83
Heads	5	17
<b>Totals</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

Teachers constituted 83% of the respondents and heads were 17% of the sample.

Table 2 shows that overallly there were more females than males (57% female; 43% male).

**Table 2. Distribution of respondents by gender (N=30)**

Sex	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Male	3	60	10	40	13	43
Female	2	40	15	60	17	57
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

However, there were more male heads than female heads (60% male; 40% female). The datum is considered of statistical significance in that it implies that although the majority of teachers in the schools are female [21] it is still not easy for them to rise to post of headship.

Table 3 below shows that only 17% of the respondents were in possession of the Diploma in Special Education. The rest (83%) had the general professional qualifications to teach all

children in the primary schools. This would mean that the 17% were the teachers teaching the special needs classes in the schools understudy.

Table 4 shows that all the schools had a special education unit where children with special needs were accommodated to receive special attention.

**Table 3. Professional qualifications of respondents (N=30)**

Qualifications	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Certificate in education	0	0	2	8	2	6
Diploma in education	0	0	15	60	15	50
Diploma in Special education	0	0	5	20	5	17
Degreed	5	100	3	12	8	27
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 4. Responses to the question: “My school has a special education unit” (N=30)**

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	30	100
No	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 5 shows that all the respondents (100%) indicated that their schools’ special needs units did not have adequate resources.

**Table 5. Responses to the question: “Does your school have adequate resources like special rooms and assistive devices for the special needs children? (N=30)**

Adequacy of resources	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0
No	5	100	25	100	30	100
Not sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

Information on Table 6 shows that both heads and teachers were congruent that the heads did not supervise teachers teaching special needs classes (Heads, 60%; Teachers, 80%). 40% of the heads and 20% of the teachers indicated that the heads supervised these classes.

Table 7 also shows that both teachers and heads were in concord that Psychological Services

officers did not assess the special needs classes in their schools (heads: 100%; teachers: 100%).

**Table 6. Responses to the question: “Does your head supervise teachers taking special needs classes?” (N=30)**

Category of resources	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Regularly	1	20	0	0	1	3
Seldomly	1	20	5	20	7	23
Not at all	3	60	20	80	22	74
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 7. Responses to the question: “Do officers from the psychological services assess the special needs classes in your school?” (N=30)**

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Regularly	0	0	0	0	0	0
Seldomly	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not at all	5	100	25	100	30	100
Not sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 8 below shows that 80% of the heads indicated that there were no comprehensive records kept in the schools for special needs classes. All the teachers (100%) concurred with the heads about the non-existence of records in their schools for the special needs classes.

**Table 8. Responses to the question: “Are there comprehensive records for special needs classes kept by the teacher and the head of school?” (N=30)**

Category of responses	Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Yes	1	20	0	0	1	3
No	4	80	25	100	29	97
Not sure	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

The questionnaire had one-open ended question which complemented data from the close-ended questions. The question asked respondents to add any information they deemed relevant about the subject at hand. The most popular issue was that to do with the low teacher-pupil ratio for special needs classes.

Most respondents argued that because the special needs classes had low teacher-pupil

ratios (between 5 and 7 pupils per teacher) some heads officially allocated these classes to themselves at the beginning of the year but went on to abandon the children during the course of the year due to demands from their offices. As a result, these pupils became a burden to other teachers in the school not to mention that they were not given attention at all. Teachers teaching special needs classes stated that because of the low teacher-pupil ratio for special needs classes, some heads gave them extra loads since they thought they were not doing much. This also compromised the attention that special needs children had to receive from their teachers.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Data reveal that most of the teachers in the schools did not possess the relevant qualifications for teaching SEND classes. However, some of the teachers had obtained the Diploma in Special Education offered to qualified teachers who wish to teach SEND. Whether these are the only teachers handling special needs classes in the schools could not be established. However, it is likely that some schools may have more than one special unit due to the low teacher-pupil ratio for the special classes. This then implies that there is a shortage of specialist teachers in the schools. As [2] postulates, ideally, special unit classes should be staffed by specially trained teachers, who are expected to provide specific, individualized instruction to individuals and small groups of SEND.

Findings from the study also reveal that the entire schools understudy had opened a special unit class to cater solely for SEND. These are applied for through the District Psychological Officer who verifies the availability of the required number of special needs children and authorizes the creation of the special unit in concurrence with the District Education Officer. This is in tandem with [9]'s observations, that there will always be some children whose learning needs cannot be appropriately met in a regular classroom setting and will require specialized education and resources to provide the level of support they require.

Data from the study reveal that all the schools did not have adequate resources for the special unit classrooms. This dovetails with observations made by [2] who argues that, in theory, many African countries show interest in educating pupils with special needs but what lacks is

putting theory into practice. Successful teaching of children with special needs depends on the availability of formal and natural support which is indispensable. For example, as [18] posit, formal support includes curriculum materials and technological assistive devices. Schools therefore should provide proper facilities for SEND such as proper furniture, alternative keyboards, talking calculators, Braille material and other assistive devices [12].

Information also shows that heads did not supervise teachers teaching special needs education. This could be because the heads themselves are not equipped with skills to supervise the teachers. As [1] state, supervision provides teachers including those teaching special needs classes, direct assistance as it continuously focuses on improvement of classroom instruction, curriculum implementation as well as individual attention teachers give to pupils. This is particularly so for SEND who require more attention from teachers and if teachers are left to do as they please in their classrooms, they may neglect the children.

Data also show that officers from the Psychological department both from the District Offices and Provincial Education offices were not visiting the special units in the schools to assess the processes of teaching and learning. [22], the Zimbabwe School Psychological Services and Special Education (SPS and SE) department has the primary responsibility for supporting schools in the special needs practices. It provides in-service training and support in the application of applied behaviour analysis and teaching SEND and also provides a wide range of counselling services [22].

Findings from the study also revealed that special unit class teachers did not maintain comprehensive records for SEND. Lack of records defeats the very purpose of special education. As [15] postulate, any and all information gathered by special education teachers through formal and informal assessment, testing anecdotal evidence, direct observation and academic performance analysis must be carefully correlated and kept secure. That information must be very clear and accessible to parents, administrators and Ministry of Education; so accuracy and completeness are key [10].

Information also shows that some heads were offering to take the special unit classes because

of the low teacher-pupil ratio that applies to these classes and yet did not give the children the adequate attention they deserve. In most cases, (if not all) these heads were not in possession of the requisite qualifications. As [1] argues, it is vital that those teachers who have a defined responsibility for children with special needs to have considerable expertise in special needs education. According to [15] teachers should be properly trained to handle SEND. For example, a child with a visual impairment cannot be taught by a teacher who has not received training in dealing with Braille.

The information also reveals that teachers who teach special unit classes are always interrupted in their work by being given more work loads in addition to dealing with their classes, since it is assumed by some heads and teachers that they have little work to do due to the low numbers of children they handle. Special needs teachers need more time than any teacher because they are dealing with unique learners. As [12] state, a special education programme should be customized to address each individual students' unique needs and that special educators need more time to implement these individualized education programmes.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Given the background of the above findings, the researchers make the following conclusions:

- Most teachers and heads in the schools do not possess the relevant qualifications for teaching special needs.
- All the schools had opened a special unit class to cater solely for children with special needs.
- All the schools did not have adequate resources for the special needs classes.
- Heads did not supervise teachers teaching special needs education.
- Officers from the Psychological Services Department did not visit the special units in the schools.
- Special unit class teachers did not maintain comprehensive records for special needs children.
- Heads were volunteering to take special unit classes because of the low teacher-pupil ratio that applies to these classes.
- Teachers who teach special unit classes are always interrupted in their work by being given more assignments thereby affecting their attention to the special needs children.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of this study, the researchers would like to make some recommendations:

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should make it mandatory for all those teaching special unit classes to have a Diploma in Special Education or a relevant degree.
- Schools should prove first of all that they have the requisite facilities and resources to open special unit classes instead of allowing every school to open the units.
- Heads should prepare a sound supervision programme for special needs education in the schools and put it into effect if schools are to help the special needs children properly.
- The Psychological Services Department should constantly visit schools offering special needs education in order to provide expert guidance and counselling to teachers and heads.
- Teachers teaching special unit classes should be staff developed on best ways of assessing the learning of special needs children as well as accurately recording all the activities and marks.
- Heads should not allocate themselves special needs classes because their jobs make it impossible for them to provide genuine guidance to pupils with special needs.
- Teachers teaching special needs classes should be allowed to work on their children without interference as this affects the individualized programmes they offer to SEND. The low teacher-pupil ratios in the special unit classes should not be used as an excuse to overload these teachers with extra work as it disturbs the learning process.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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