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Exploring Challenges to Inclusion of Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Early Childhood Development in Mutoko District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract. This study sought to explore challenges in the current practices of including children with intellectual disabilities (IDs) in early childhood development (ECD) with a view to using the findings to improve their access to early learning programmes. The study employed semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, nonparticipant observation and document reviews. Individual interviews were employed to gather data from eleven ECD teachers and five school heads. From each of the five schools, five teachers were purposively selected to participate in focus group interviews. The study found that the execution of this seemingly rather complex practice of inclusion in early learning programmes has to be changed since teachers revealed that they lacked the expertise and necessary resources to meet the needs of these learners. Additionally, schools would prefer these children to attend special schools; they do not accept them and teacher education programmes do not prepare them effectively to work in inclusive environments. The study recommends that capacity building for ECD teachers be improved in order to equip them with adequate skills to deal with children with IDs. In addition, it is recommended that ECD classes be adequately resourced in terms of material and infrastructure. The inclusion of children with IDs at ECD level should be supported by policies that clearly spell out how issues related to resources, class sizes, assessment and teacher education are addressed. Support services should also be available to assist ECD teachers to meet the needs of children with IDs.

Keywords: inclusion; intellectual disabilities; early childhood development

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1. Introduction and contextual background

Historically the education of children with IDs has been left to chance as it was considered to be a waste of resources. Rotatori et al. (2011) noted that because disability made one a nonperson, persons with disabilities were excluded, mistreated and were considered as uneducable. In Zimbabwe, missionaries were the first to establish schools for children with IDs. According to Mariga et al. (2014), previously children who were different were excluded from schools or attended special schools. They were educated under the auspices of special needs education in church-established institutions (Chimonyo et al., 2014).

After attaining independence in 1980, the country developed a heightened interest in ECD provision to its eligible population. However, Nziramasanga (1999) found that although there were 1 000 ECD centres in both rural and urban areas in 1980, children with disabilities did not have access to ECD. Similarly, Kirk et al. (2012) observed that owing to the belief that their status could not be improved, children with disabilities were excluded from preschool programmes until the 1960s. Instead, they were placed in institutions where they received custodial care. Moreover, Kirk made it clear that early experiences with development accelerated the mental and social capabilities of children with intellectual disability. Furthermore, the United States (US) Department of Health and Human Services (2015) claim that states and communities have expanded early learning opportunities for young children. In 40 states pre-kindergarten programmes are state funded; however, there is no expansion of early learning for children with disabilities.

Since 1988 many ECD centres have been established in the country and privately- owned centres are required to register with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Research by Tafirei et al. (2013) found that children with IDs in their study were aged between eight and 19 years because in Zimbabwe these children start school later than non-disabled peers and spend a longer time in school. They spend more years repeating grades to master skills that their peers would have mastered easily during ECD programmes. The teachers' goal would be to aid these children in the development of their moral, social, cognitive, and physical abilities. Even though the term "ECD" was not used, schools offered services that support development which are part of the ECD curriculum.

The advent of inclusive education (IE) meant that Zimbabwe had to introduce ECD in its schools to support this paradigm shift in education. The practice of IE and ECD is backed by international declarations and conventions. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) reaffirmed the right of every child to education and that inclusion of individuals with disabilities should be a crucial component of that education. The UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (2008) indicated unequivocally that states must provide an inclusive

education system at all levels. The United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities (1993) rule 6, which focuses on education, indicates that states should ensure that the education of people with disabilities is an integral part of the education system. Special attention should be given to very young and preschool children with disabilities. States have the responsibility for ensuring that children with disabilities access education at all levels, including early learning programmes. Also, countries that attended the Dakar Conference (2000) committed to implementing inclusive educational systems that seek out children who are not enrolled and react to their needs. One of the objectives established was to increase access to early childhood care and education (Mariga et al., 2014). Previous research studies show that inclusion has been actively considered in Zimbabwe since 1994. Children with disabilities have access to inclusive early learning programmes as recommended by Nziramasanga (1999). Allen and Cowdery (2012) observe that early childhood education gained widespread acceptance in the past quarter of the century and integration of young children with disabilities in this programme is a relatively new practice. These children's development will be severely hampered if they do not have access to ECD, which in turn delays early intervention. In line with current global trends, the government has deemed it important to provide inclusive ECD in its primary schools. This has seen primary school education shifting from a seven-year course to one of nine years. This programme caters for children from three to six years old with ECD A comprising those aged three and four whilst ECD B comprises four- and five-year-olds. Teachers have training in inclusive education (Mutepfa et al., 2007).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Benefits of ECD to learners with intellectual disabilities

ECD is the cornerstone of formal education and is seen as an essential component of the global education system. On the importance of ECD, the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) (2013) observes that children who receive preschool education outperform those who do not have access to early education in terms of academic success, employment and earnings, health, welfare dependence and crime rates. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services (2015), both children with and without disabilities benefit from early childhood inclusion. If they do not access ECD, children with IDs may not have their potential nurtured. Chomba et al. (2014) point out everyone's capacity can be increased to the extent where those with mild to moderate disabilities will eventually no longer be classified as having IDs. A building's foundation is more important than the rest of it: it must be strong because it supports the rest of the structure. Through social interaction ECD children develop physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally. According to Omrod (2014), active interaction with the physical world is essential for cognitive growth. These children are characterised by developmental delays and thus may have limited interaction with their environment. Inclusive ECD programmes enable them to develop through social interaction.

Acceptance of these children may be facilitated by knowledge of disability. According to Omrod (2012), the non-disabled gain knowledge from IE about diversity of the human race and discover how similar to themselves those with IDs are in many respects. Owing to lack of early opportunities most people are sceptical about people with disabilities. Allen and Cowdery (2012) maintain that inclusion at the ECD level is crucial because it enables children with disabilities to imitate skills modelled by peers. Language acquisition and other behaviours are learnt through imitation. ECD provides a stimulating environment which influences learning and development which may eventually reduce the impact of the child's disability.

2.2 Challenges to inclusion at ECD level

Literature research has shown that there are obstacles to inclusion at various levels of education. Research by Kuyayama (2012) on ECD policy which supports inclusion found that although policies are inclusive, their implementation presents problems due to lack of human and financial resources as well as knowledge on inclusion. The researcher observed that the government has mandated primary teacher education colleges to train ECD teachers and their curriculum encompasses inclusive education. In terms of research on inclusive education in ECD in New Zealand (2012), it was found that children with disabilities are excluded because service providers are not adequately resourced to include these children. Furthermore, a study by Mukhopadyay et al. (2012) found that primary school teachers in Botswana favoured including students with mild disabilities over those with severe to profound instances. In Zimbabwe, the Education Act of 1987, revised in 2006 and the Disabled Persons Act of 1992 prevent discrimination against people with disabilities in public settings, such as schools. However, Mpofu and Shumba (2012) found that children with special needs were being taught by unqualified teachers, the curriculum was inappropriate, and the environment did not accommodate the difficulties faced by children with special educational needs in ECD centres in Zimbabwe. Numerous challenges affect the inclusion of children with disabilities at ECD level.

3. Research questions

Based on the preceding section, the research questions can thus be formulated as follows:

- What are the current practices and issues surrounding the inclusion of children with IDs in ECD?
- How might inclusion at ECD level be improved?

4. Theoretical framework: Social construction of disability and human rights

The philosophy underpinning the concept of inclusive education (IE) in this study is that of constructivism and human rights. IE is premised on the social model of disability which locates the source of difficulties faced by children with disabilities in the educational environment (Hassanein, 2015). Physical, social, cultural, political and economic factors are barriers which have disabling effects that create disability socially by imposing limitations on certain individuals,

including children with IDs, from participating in the school life. For instance, disability is created when a child using a wheel chair is expected to get into a room which has steps at its entrance. Their needs are not considered.

Schools are no exception, as noted by Goepel et al. (2014) who say barriers to learning and participation emanate from the interaction of the child with their environment. Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory views disability from a social constructionist perspective and stresses the importance of the sociocultural nature of disability for the methodology in IE as well as the importance of social learning in the upbringing and education of children with disabilities (Rodina, 2006). Isolating children with disabilities from typically developing peers creates disability. Inclusion in early learning is important because human learning and development take place in a social context. It is against this background that children with disabilities have a right to ECD. The social model of disability, according to Donohue and Bornman (2014), has its roots in the human rights paradigm. Adults and the physical environment socially construct disability by denying children with IDs the opportunity to interact with peers. Human rights include the right to education, health, family life, the vote, employment and recreation facilities. Human rights apply to all people, not a selected few. The UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (2000) affirm the right to education for all children, youths and adults with disabilities in inclusive settings. The right to education is paramount because it enables them to access all other rights.

5. Research methodology

The research employed the qualitative interpretive research paradigm with a bias towards the phenomenological approach. This provided the opportunity to explore the phenomenon in its natural setting through the participants' perspective (Cohen et al., 2018). The nature of the topic studied suits the qualitative interpretive paradigm which believes that knowledge is constructed basing on human interactions. The qualitative phenomenology approach permitted the researcher to build a robust understanding of the topic and unpack meanings people ascribe to their activities and situations (Leavy, 2017). This approach was chosen because it is flexible and not confined to a single case study. Phenomenological study advocates for the study of lived experiences of the people involved with the issues being researched (Cresswell, 2014). The research explored the phenomenon using interviews, focus group interviews, observations and document reviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to co-construct knowledge whilst focusing the conversation on issues relevant to the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Focus group interviews enabled participants to speak freely about significant issues using their own language and describe their own experiences in detail with illustrations (Leavy, 2017). Observations were used to assess indoor and outdoor infrastructure. These techniques enabled the triangulation of results and ensured the trustworthiness of the study.

6. Research locale and participants

Mutoko District in Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe served as the site of the study. ECD class teachers, school heads and some teachers at the schools teaching grades one to three classes comprised the population of the study (Cohen et al, 2018). The teachers were purposively selected because they were better positioned to provide in-depth information on the topic. Five schools were randomly drawn from a population of 90 primary schools. It is a sample drawn from a population in such a way that each element had a chance to be involved in the study. Ethical issues were considered throughout the study; prior to conducting the research, at the commencement of the research, as well as during data collection, analysis, reporting the data and publishing the study (Creswell, 2013).

7. Data collection and analysis

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the District Education Officer at Mutoko. Interviews and focus group interviews were carried out at the schools to avoid disturbing participants during their time off work. Data were first transcribed. Multiple readings of the data allowed for the description, classification, and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013). Identified themes were then coded. The researcher had to review the themes, focusing on pattern codes which helped to put material into meaningful units and to identify data that addressed the research questions.

8. Findings and discussion

The study found that the inclusion of children with IDs in ECD is faced with several obstacles, among which are lack of adequate skills by teachers to teach these children, lack of resources, large class sizes, long distances to school and lack of parental involvement in some cases.

8.1 Importance of ECD to children with ID

During interviews participants revealed that the inclusion of children with IDs at ECD level gave the children the opportunity to develop social skills, acceptable behaviours, friendships, gains in emotional development as well as learning language through imitation, and learning to write. They also showcase their talents in sports. Attending school helps them learn to interact with others and discrimination is reduced whilst exclusion compounds their problems. One ECD teacher indicated the following:

> *Significant improvement is seen in the child's work, especially on colouring, fine motor skills and social development. She sometimes plays well with others though at times she is bully.*

Another ECD teacher said: *It is good to include these children, especially in rural areas because some parents cannot afford sending them to special schools. It is better for them to come to school and be included rather than just sitting at home. At school they learn different social skills like sharing and listening to others.*

Interviewed participants reported that these children develop socially, physically, intellectually and emotionally as they interact with others in ECD classes. Allen and Cowdery (2012) noted that inclusion at ECD level provides

children with disabilities with models to imitate. Interaction with others also facilitates learning.

8.2 Experiences of participants with children with intellectual disabilities

Participants had varying experiences with children with IDs in ECD classes. They revealed that these children exhibited challenging behaviours which included disruptiveness, aggression and bullying. Attention problems, failure to follow instructions, and a lack of social skills were also mentioned. One teacher reported the following:

> *The child sometimes bullies others, fights others or just screams and does anything that she feels like doing and others will be disturbed.*

Some children with ID who exhibited challenging behaviours should be dealt with in a manner that gives them the opportunity to learn acceptable behaviours. According to Heward (2014), limited self-control, aggression, and bizarre as well as self-injurious behaviour are more common in children with IDs than among their non-disabled peers. Mariga et al. (2014) suggest that being firm and consistent in managing challenging behaviours is crucial. Challenging behaviours could emanate from lack of attention or from lack of involvement in learning, leading to their exclusion. When children are not fully engaged in learning, they are likely to misbehave.

> *The child may not be able to reason like other children. The child does not do what he/she is expected to do and does not think that he is supposed to do it that way. The child does not understand very simple things.*

These children faced challenges to learn because the teachers reported that they were insufficiently trained to teach these children. The challenges could also be due to teachers' failing to adapt the curriculum to suit the learning abilities of these children with IDs. Kirk et al. (2012) question the ability of teachers to assess needs of children with IDs and modify the curriculum appropriately.

8.3 Observations

Six children involved in this study had mild to moderate ID. Some of the children had attention problems and were restless. During lesson observation, one child with ID stood up and started walking towards the window. The teacher had to get the child seated. During another lesson one of the children with ID failed to identify a triangle and showed no interest in group activities assigned by the teacher by keeping quiet and being uncooperative.

It was observed that some children benefitted from interacting with peers. However, some children with IDs were seen beating and scolding their peers and on one occasion the teacher had to intervene. Whilst some children with IDs interacted with typically developing peers, the opposite was observed from others who exclusively interacted with peers they knew and to whom they related. Some occasionally accomplished tasks assigned by the teacher successfully and without any prompts. However, methodology was not adapted to accommodate these children. Also, it was noted that certain classes were overcrowded, the available seating furniture was not age appropriate, and in

other cases, the students were crammed onto the few available benches, which led to a great deal of pushing and shoving and eventually, some fights. During one lesson that was conducted at the outdoor play area, one child with ID sat down by himself, despite the teacher's efforts to get him to join the others. He briefly joined them but kept quiet, and he eventually retreated and sat down in the play area. According to Balakrishnan and Cornelius (2012), it is possible for children with IDs who are placed in a mainstream class to remain segregated within the class and among peers.

8.4 Document Review

The children's samples of work in their portfolios supported the teachers' claims that these children struggle with written work. One of the children had drawn a picture with human attributes (legs and hands). On another sample it was difficult to tell what the child had wanted to write; even simple patterns seemed difficult for the child to draw. Others merely scribbled all over the paper. The developmental checklists provided evidence that these children had acquired some self-help skills. They were able to button and unbutton their clothing, tie their own shoelaces, and signalled when they wanted to use the toilet and did so hygienically and independently. They were able to scribble with a beginner's pencil and match pictures with familiar objects. Some could not turn the pages of a book without assistance and encountered challenges in writing numerals and copying their first names.

8.5 Challenges to inclusion of children with ID in early learning

8.5.1 Lack of support

During interviews participants said that parents did not show an interest in the education of these children. Teachers' efforts to communicate with the parents of these children using various ways yielded no positive results. One of the teachers reported the following:

> *They have not visited the school and l do not know them. If you ask the child to bring information about his date of birth he does not bring it. You write them a letter; they do not come. I do not know any of the people he claims to stay with. You invite them to the school; they do not turn up.*

Participants expressed mixed feelings on the availability of support. Some reported that they received support from the district remedial tutor, specialist teachers and non-governmental organisations whilst others lamented a lack of support from the district offices. However, they indicated that they were aware that they could seek assistance from the district. Nevertheless, the officer responsible for Special Needs Education rarely visited schools. This could be attributed to a lack of transport. It was also revealed that the remedial tutor sometimes arranges some workshops to assist teachers in their work. One of the school heads indicated the following:

> *Sometimes on problems that we encounter we work with the parent, try to understand the challenge that their child is having and we also try by all means to provide some resources to support that child. We also try to link with the Psychological Services who recommends how we can help the child grow well regardless of his challenges.*

Lack of support personnel to assist class teachers makes it a challenge to include children with disabilities. However, it is sad to note that teachers in this study managed ECD classes on their own because schools did not employ support personnel. Placing children with ID in inclusive settings without support is detrimental as observed by Allen and Cowdery (2012) who contend that adequate support must be provided to a child in an inclusive set-up to succeed, otherwise the child may fail to learn. Lack of support may result in exclusion. Lack of support has greater implications for assessment which helps to identify strengths, weaknesses and the needs of the child. This, in turn, leads to appropriate placement and informed instructional objectives and activities (Mariga et al., 2014). Without assessment, teachers may face difficulties in providing appropriate education to children with IDs.

8.5.2 Attitudes

Participants revealed that some parents do not send their children to school, pay school fees or provide them with basic needs while some teachers prefer that they enrol at special schools. Parents of children without disabilities do not want their children to associate with those with ID. One school head explained the following:

> *It is a challenge for parents to understand and accept their children's situation. Some parents have got a tendency of not paying fees for them. They think everything is done by the government yet that's not the scenario. If you invite them to come and you discuss with them, they seem not to be very supportive to these students. We are trying by all means to teach them on how they should handle and treat them and some of them are happy if you associate with them.*

When asked why parents do not send these children for ECD learning, one teacher said:

> *I think the main reason is that parents are not aware of what ECD entails, therefore if they have a child with IDs, they think it is useless to send such a child to ECD since they just play.*

When they were asked about the challenges that are encountered in the inclusion of children with IDs in early learning programmes, one of the ECD teachers said the following:

> *There was a big boy who had tantrums and was aggressive and one parent came and said, "'Can you move my child from that group"'. He did not want his child to be associated with the child with IDs. l discussed the issue with him till he understood and l did not move the child from the group. I moved the mentally retarded child to another position such that he would not be segregated from the rest of the group. He sat among others instead of seating in a corner on his own. That was the only case, may be others complained at home.*

Despite participants being aware of the benefits of including children with IDs in ECD, one of the ECD teachers said the following:

> *It would be better if they are sent to special schools because there are special teachers who have learnt to handle these children and for them to learn and have a better future.*

Generally, participants had negative attitudes towards the inclusion of children with IDs. These negative attitudes could emanate from lack of knowledge and negative societal beliefs about children with IDs. Chimonyo et al. (2014, 27) contend that society harbours myths about children with IDs. Some people equate ID with mental illness. Pertaining to this result, Balakrish and Cornelius (2012, 85) maintain that low levels of awareness and the prejudices of other parents regarding the acceptance of children with disabilities in the same classroom as their children are impediments to successful inclusion. Also, parents do not pay fees or provide for their children with ID because they consider that as wasting resources. In this regard Mariga et al. (2014) observe that negative attitudes by parents who consider that it is not worth investing in the education of children with disabilities threaten inclusive education. Inclusion may be a challenge to implement and these children may eventually become school drop-outs if the schools pressurise them to support the children, to pay fees and to provide other school necessities.

Teachers are unwillingly to accept these children: should the opportunity arise, they would prefer them to enrol in special schools. Under such circumstances these children may not benefit from inclusive classes.

8.5.3 Class size

Participants also mentioned how inclusion was affected by large classes. It would be very challenging to meet the needs of fifty children, especially if these included children with disabilities. At one school, there were more than 100 students in two of the ECD classrooms. According to Belk (2005), teachers of inclusive courses should give children with disabilities individualized instruction, which influences how much time they spend with other children. If students do not receive individualized attention, their demands can go unmet. The study's classes ranged in size from 25 to 52. One ECD teacher stated the following:

> *I believe 34 children in a class are too many. The teacher-to-student ratio should be 20. I believe that is how we can best assist them all.*

One of the teachers explained that:

> T*he teacher-pupil ratio at this level will not allow me to cater for individual differences because I will be moving around monitoring other children, those learners need extra attention. It would be beneficial if the government would approve of assisting teachers.*

The participants indicated that class sizes of 20-25 would be reasonable since they do not have assistant staff. This result coincides with what Hassanein (2015, 129) found in Egypt, namely that teachers faced a dilemma in meeting the individual needs of children in large mainstream classes. He also found that the teachers were worried that class size affected the success of inclusion.

8.5.4 Teacher preparedness

The majority of the ECD teachers in this study had ECD teaching experience ranging from two to seven years. Three teachers had recently joined the profession as they indicated that they had teaching experience of one term (three months), while two teachers did not hold any qualification to teach ECD classes; instead, they were qualified to teach from grade one upwards. One of the ECD-qualified teachers had a Bachelor of Education degree in ECD and was studying for a Master's degree in ECD. The remaining teachers held diplomas in ECD while there was also an ECD certificate holder (para-professional).

School heads revealed that the ECD teachers were adequately trained to teach children with IDs in ECD classes. At one school the head said that they had a qualified teacher who was able to teach children with IDs and a para-professional who had attended short courses. She added that the latter had a better understanding of these children. At another school, when asked whether the teachers were able to manage children with ID, the head reported the following:

> *Sometimes they manage; occasionally I ask them what they are doing about those children. They say that it is very difficult to handle them. So they need more training to assist those children. They need special schools but since all of them cannot go to special schools, we include them in our schools. We enrolled them and teachers are doing their best to assist them, but more training is needed because these are special needs children who require special teachers.*

However, the ECD teachers said that they were not adequately prepared to handle these children. Nziramasanga (1999) recommended that teacher training should include the basics of special education; however, the majority of practising teachers do not feel confident working with children with disabilities. Based on this suggestion, teachers from colleges are expected to be competent in managing these children in inclusive classes. Surprisingly, the teachers revealed that they were not competent to assist learners with ID. A recently qualified ECD teacher said:

> *We were not adequately trained because we were introduced to such education when we were back from Teaching Practice and which means it was for some few months since we were preparing for examinations and they were in a rush all the time. We did not receive enough education. We have rough ideas on what it is but skills to help such children are not enough. A teacher must possess more than a qualification to teach ECD classes in order to manage an inclusive class.*

According to UNESCO (2013), while it may appear easy to implement inclusive education, striving to do so in schools and without teacher education is difficult. Another ECD teacher said the following:

> *lt is better if they are sent to special schools because, there are special teachers who have learnt how to handle these children for them to learn and have a better future. At our schools we are not able to assist them to engage in any task because we were not educated to help children with such challenges.*

Participants expressed a significant need for further education to enable them to work with children with IDs. They recommended workshops help teachers acquire the necessary information to deal with these children. An ECD teacher reported as follows:

> *We have the fundamentals but colleges should have that program alone. It should be a standalone subject because there are many children with disabilities in schools. It should not be covered under Psychology, so that we can have the skills we need to help these children.*

One of the participants suggested the following:

> *l think the government should employ at least one specialist teacher at each school, to cater for these children.*

Another participant from that group elaborated that teachers who are able to cater for these children should be deployed in schools similar to what is done for subjects such as Agriculture. Participants emphasised the need to fuse theory with practice. Pedagogy for children with disabilities should be included in coursework and practicum (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). This could guarantee that teachers receive the necessary training to work in inclusive classes.

8.5.5 Resources

It was also found that some schools lacked adequate resources for inclusion. Observations revealed that there were not sufficient materials or equipment. Although some participants indicated that their schools have adequate resources to accommodate learners with IDs in early learning programmes, the majority of participants believed that their schools were not adequately resourced. Both infrastructural and material resources were insufficient. Balakrishnan and Cornelius (2012, 83) state that there are various constraints in developing countries such as lack of infrastructure and inadequate resources to meet the needs of children with IDs. One of the school heads remarked as follows:

> *The play centre is poorly resourced. Lack of adequate play material affects their play time. The School Development Committee is trying to find a solution but if we could get a donor of money we could buy slides and other items.*

In some schools, resources were not commensurate with the number of ECD children enrolled. The school heads reported that they did not have enough furniture or classrooms. Even though schools tried to address the challenges of resources for the ECD classes, they did not have adequate materials for these learners. This could be due to large ECD classes at the schools. One school head who responded to the question of how they obtain resources for ECD classes said:

> *We buy some through the School Development Committees whilst some are donated by UNICEF and non-governmental organisations like Capnak. They donated material specifically for ECD children once.*

Reiterating that their schools had adequate resources both in indoor and outdoor play areas. An ECD teacher reported the following:

> *Swings and see-saws are part of our outdoor area. Indoor play centres are equipped with different toys and blocks. As you can see, that child is attempting to make different shapes with the blocks like others. That child enjoys playing with dolls on the dramatic area. Every time she puts the baby on her back and sweeps the classroom. We have everything necessary child development.*

These findings are consistent with the National Report on the Status of Education by Zimbabwe (2008) which indicated that the government and private sector are not adequately funding ECD. Generally, resources that are used by other children also benefit those children with IDs; however, the schools in the study lacked adequate resources owing to large classes. There were dolls, balls, and blocks and occasionally, non-functional television sets and computers in the indoor play area. There were no record players, tape recorders, music tapes or DVD players. Additionally, it was noted that one school's furniture was insufficient and unsuitable for the young learners. The children with IDs sat with peers in overcrowded classrooms. At two schools, the furniture was sufficient and child-sized. The infrastructure in schools was impacted by the implementation of the ECD programme. In some cases, the ECD A and B classes had to share one classroom allocated to them since classrooms were insufficient. One of the school heads said:

> *Our classrooms were adequate but enrolment has increased. Twenty will be in the room while the remaining 20 will be outside at play. Those that were inside go outside on a set time. Children are confused by this and it affects the ECD programmes.*

8.5.6 Distance

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the circumstances which they claimed affected the young learners. Inclusion of learners with IDs at ECD level was affected by long distances. Participants said that five-kilometre distances were too far for young children to travel and that parents might be concerned for their children. As a result, some children began early learning in ECD B class and others even attended the programme during the last terms of ECD B. According to one school head:

> *ECD has a problem that children aged 0-4 years are not able to walk long distances, which is why they are few. Children aged five- six year are not affected because they can walk long distances. Currently there is no child with IDs in EDC but last year we had one who is now in grade one. He drools and is not able to talk but he is included and managing. The main problem is that teachers are ill-equipped to assist the child.*

Walking distances are acknowledged as a barrier to inclusion at ECD (National Action Plan of Zimbabwe, 2005). It was found that some parents may be reluctant to enrol children with disabilities for the early learning programme out of concern that they might face harassment along the way to school or become lost owing to long distances. One of the teachers reported the following:

> *Parents hide them because they are terrified of what society will say about their children. Some of them experience abuse by peers who may beat them as they travel. So, the parent will think it is better the child stays at home than sending the child to school. Some are afraid that the child gets lost along the way because he/she may not be able to return home alone. Some parents that the child not be able to do anything in life.'*

This could be the reason why in some ECD classes in two schools there were no children with IDs when the study was conducted. In their study, Deluca et al. (2014) found that school heads and teachers agreed that parents were worried that children with disabilities would be abused and that schools were too far from home. Under such conditions children with IDs are unlikely to be enrolled for ECD.

8.5.7 Financial challenges

Participants revealed that some parents do not permit their children to complete the entire two-year programme owing to financial difficulties. Financial constraints were mentioned as a problem that limited the amount of time students with IDs could attend ECD. Additionally, it was revealed that some community members who have children with IDs do not send them to school since some parents view them as useless. This has led some parents to send their children to school without books or fees. One participant commented as follows:

> *Some children enrol for only a portion of the ECD course: it is difficult to determine if they attended and made any progress because the fees are too exorbitant. They do not complete the entire course.*

Yet another participant added that:

> *Parents do not have resources and they view paying school fees for such children as wasting money so they prefer to send other children to school.*

The government of Zimbabwe introduced the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) in 2001 with the intention of assisting vulnerable children to access education (Smith et al., 2012). It is interesting to note that parents still struggle to pay fees. They add that underprivileged children, those with disabilities, and those with a history of failing to pay fees and levies are eligible for BEAM financing. Zimbabwe has an obligation to provide quality education to children and to support vulnerable children (Smith et al., 2012). Therefore, it may be concluded that selection committees do not take children with IDs into account when choosing recipients of this programme. Similarly, Deluca et al. (2014) contend that though BEAM has a positive impact, children with disabilities are less likely to be considered as beneficiaries. The reason could be that society has negative attitudes towards these children and may consider registering them for BEAM as wasting resources.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine the challenges of including children with IDs in early learning programmes. Despite the widespread acceptance of inclusion in early learning as a means to enhance the development of all

children, including those with disabilities, nations such as Zimbabwe still face difficulties in implementing this novel idea. The incorporation of inclusive education in teacher education curricula does not guarantee the provision of quality services to children with IDs. Key issues surrounding the inclusion in ECD were lack of resources, inadequate teacher training, negative attitudes, inaccessible schools, high teacher–pupil ratios and lack of support. Because of the way society views these children, they are at risk of being excluded and subsequently dropping out of school. Evidence suggests that even recently qualified teachers were not capacitated to deal with children with IDs in inclusive classes. In addition, the Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education (SPS & SNE) Department is not providing the much-needed support for successful inclusion. In order to provide quality inclusive ECD to all children, SPS and SNE should be capacitated to assist schools. In addition, teacher education must revamp its approaches to IE by covering concepts in greater depth.

10. Recommendations to improve the inclusion practice at ECD level

To improve the inclusion of children with IDs in early learning programmes the study made the following recommendations:

1. Teacher education programmes should ensure that their curricula give topics related to the inclusion of learners with disabilities more serious consideration and that aspiring teachers are effectively trained to meet the needs of such learners. Inclusive education should not be treated as a component of Psychology of Education; rather, it should be allocated the same adequate time as any other subject in the curriculum.
2. Establishing ECD centres in the communities close to where young children live could address the problem of travelling long distances to access education by those aged between three and six years who may find it difficult to attend distant schools.
3. Parental education on the importance of ECD to learners with disabilities could be initiated in communities.
4. Schools should ensure that learners with IDs constitute part of the beneficiaries of BEAM (Basic Education Assistance Module). This could be stipulated in policies that guide the selection of beneficiaries.
5. The Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education Department should be actively involved in the service provision of learners with IDs by initiating workshops for ECD teachers and parents, as well as conducting assessments that will guide instruction.
6. Teachers in the schools should have access to policies on inclusive education that guide their operations in schools where the inclusion of children with IDs takes place.
7. The teacher pupil-ratio for ECD classes stipulated in the policies should be adhered to for the benefit of learners with IDs.
8. It could be of great benefit if each school could have a specialist teacher who could assist teachers to teach and manage children with IDs and other disabilities during curriculum implementation. Funds permitting, allowing ECD teachers to have assistant teachers would be a noble idea which would reduce teacher stress and help ensure that all children benefit from the early learning programme.

9. All stakeholders should assist in the procurement of adequate resources for ECD A and B classes so that meaningful inclusion of children with IDs takes place. They should also assist in the building of classrooms for ECD learners. Alumni Associations could be established to assist in paying fees and procuring other resources.
10. Exchange visits could be arranged at district or national level to enable ECD teachers, parents of children with IDs, and school heads to visit schools that are already practising inclusion at ECD level in the country or even in neighbouring countries.
11. The findings from the study also suggest that practitioners in the schools should be equipped with skills to operate in inclusive classes at ECD level through in-service training or through workshops organised at district or cluster level.

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