

ENSURING QUALITY PROVISION OF EDUCATION FOR ALL: DISCOVERING CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN REGULAR PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MASVINGO DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates challenges faced by teachers of students with learning disabilities in regular classes in primary schools in Masvingo district. From global perspectives, it is argued that for quality teaching and learning of learners, all teachers need to possess the necessary pedagogical knowledge and skills to meet the individual needs of each learner. This was a mixed methods study. Purposeful sampling was employed to get participants across the district, who participated by responding to closed and open-ended questionnaires, through focus groups or in interviews. The major findings of the research were that teachers lack knowledge and professional competency of teaching the students with learning disabilities in regular classes. Schools do not have enough resources like textbooks for quality teaching of students with learning disabilities and this is a major challenge to teachers. Parents have negative attitudes towards their children with learning disabilities and do not assist them to do homework, do not provide them with learning resources at home and schools and do not consult the teachers on the learning progress of their children. The Ministry of Education has to inject some funds in order to run workshops to equip all teachers with the requisite skills for handling students with learning disabilities in regular classes. Teachers' colleges should have special needs education as a major component of their curriculum in order to equip teachers with pedagogical knowledge and skills in handling such learners. Through parents' meetings, school heads should instil positive attitudes in parents so that they provide their children with all forms of help that promote effective learning. School heads and school development committees need to source for teaching and learning resources in order to make it easier for teachers to perform their work. School leadership should run staff development and in-service training workshops to assist teachers to gain necessary skills in teaching learners with learning disabilities.

Keywords: Learning disability, Regular classes, Pedagogical knowledge, Classroom teachers, School leaders, Teaching, Learning.

Contribution/ Originality

The paper provides insight into the effective teaching and learning of students with learning disabilities in regular primary schools.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is not always the case that when one trains to be a teacher, he/she can teach students with learning disabilities in regular classes. That there are large numbers of learners in the schools resulting from the introduction of the Education for All policy in many countries is not a guarantee that all children are benefiting from the education system. The schools are manned by teachers who in some cases, lack the mechanics of handling students with learning disabilities and this renders it difficult to give effective instruction to such kind of learners. Not all teachers teaching regular classes are experts in teaching students with learning disabilities. There are several challenges that teachers confront in handling students with learning disabilities in the regular classes. It is argued in educational theory and practice that the challenge confronting the inclusive school is that of developing a child-centered pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities ([The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994](#)). This study seeks to explore such challenges.

1.1. Background

It is the responsibility of schools to ensure that the policy of Education for All is implemented to the maximum levels. The observation made particularly for learners with learning disabilities in regular schools is cause for concern. The learners receive minimum assistance notably because most teachers are not trained in the tricks of the field. The overall number of learners who have learning disabilities in schools is ever increasing but the question that comes to mind is whether they are getting any form of help from their teachers. School teachers today are faced with multiple calls for change in their practices. These calls take many forms based on the value preferences of the educational policies crafted by Ministries and the governments. Prominent among the rhetoric for change is the demand for schools to revise teaching and learning methods and curricular foci to meet the needs of inclusive education in regular classes. It is argued that in many schools, few educators are well versed in how to effectively work with students who have disabilities ([Wolf et al., 2009](#)). [Capper et al. \(2010\)](#) pointed to the fact that there is dismal achievement, school completion and employment outcomes for students with disabilities. Educational leaders need to think creatively in terms of how to best deal with these challenges. This is pointing to the fact that there are quite a number of challenges that are being faced by teachers of learners with learning disabilities in schools. This paper would address the challenges.

([The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994](#)) World Conference on Special Needs Education, Access and Quality, highlighted an internationally

...emerging consensus that children and youth with special educational needs should be included in the educational arrangements made for the majority of children. This has led to the concept of the inclusive school. The challenge confronting the inclusive school is that of developing a child-centred pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities (Serpell and Jere-Folotiya, 2011).

While governments are busy crafting policies for learners with special needs, the point being noted is that the implementation of policies leaves a lot to be desired. Lip service is paid in terms of effective implementation of the policy of inclusion of learners with learning disabilities in the absence of teachers with the requisite pedagogical skills to handle such learners. Lack of critical pedagogy seems to be a challenge embedded among many teachers who handle such learners and this might be a major challenge of handling learners with learning disabilities.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

A look into the Zimbabwean classes shows that there are varied pupils with learning disabilities. Performance of pupils in most school tests and even public examinations show that they lag behind in Mathematics and English. Grade seven results for 2011 were a dismal failure as zero percent pass rate was announced in the media. If one gets into a class to test the reading ability of most primary pupils, he/she realises that there are reading problems. One wonders whether they are not being taught or whether it points to some challenges in the teaching and learning processes. Policy stipulates that pupils with learning disabilities should be taught in regular classes. The question that remains is whether teachers have the ability and capability of handling such pupils. It is the purpose of this research therefore to find out the challenges teachers face in teaching pupils with learning disabilities in regular classes. Little is yet known about challenges that are faced by teachers of learners with learning disabilities in regular settings. This research therefore fills in this gap. Specifically the statement of the problem can be stated thus:

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS OF LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN REGULAR CLASSES IN MASVINGO DISTRICT?

1.3. Research Questions

- 1.3.1.** To what extent does the shortage of resources pose challenges in teaching students with learning disabilities in regular classes?
- 1.3.2.** How does lack of teacher expertise pose challenges in teaching students with learning disabilities?
- 1.3.3.** How does class size pose challenges in teaching students with learning disabilities?
- 1.3.4.** To what extent do home conditions pose challenges in teaching students with learning disabilities?

1.4. Conceptual Framework: Learning Disability

The concept Learning Disabilities (LD) refers to a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language (spoken or written), that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. People with learning disabilities generally have average to above-average intelligence with large discrepancies between their abilities and specific areas of difficulty (Maxam and Henderson, 2013).

A learning disability refers to a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, writing, arithmetic, or other school subject resulting from a psychological handicap caused by a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioural disturbances. It is not the result of mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural and instructional factors.

1.5. Theoretical Frameworks

There is always a debate on the model of disability that can be followed to bring positive changes to people with disabilities. It is the normal trend that people are socialised to view disability as something that is intrinsic to the individual, a “defect” of sorts. In schools, students with disabilities are often viewed as people who must be assessed, identified, and accommodated as opposed to just unique individuals who contribute to the rich diversity of the classroom. Students with disabilities are often merely tolerated, seen as a burden, or expected to assimilate rather than be supported, nurtured, and empowered to be active members of the classroom community (Capper *et al.*, 2010). This mind-set is referred to as the “medical model” of disability whereby the person with a disability must be “normalised,” and/or “rehabilitated” (Michigan Disability Rights Coalition [MDRC] as cited in (Maxam and Henderson, 2013). Such a model, along with behaviours and attitudes it foment, restricts people’s opportunities to make choices, control their lives, and develop potential. The “social model” of disability, however, is described in the rapidly growing, multidisciplinary field of Disability Studies as a framework that “seeks to understand disability as socially and culturally constructed, as opposed to something wrong with people’s bodies that must be remediated, fixed or cured” (Capper *et al.*, 2010). In other words, the social model of disability posits that disability is caused by society and is not the fault of the person with a disability. In this sense, it is the product of physical, organizational, and attitudinal barriers present in society which lead to discrimination. The removal of such discrimination requires a change of approach and thinking in the way in which society is organised (Maxam and Henderson, 2013).

1.6. Literature

It is argued that the more contact educators have with students with disabilities, the more favourable they are to having these students in their classroom (Milligan, 2005). Likewise, educators who had more information about students with disabilities are more positive towards

them and more willing to integrate them (Salzberg *et al.*, 2002). The issue of the mindset of teachers is emerging as a challenge of teaching learners with disabilities. The success of students with disabilities depends to a large extent on willingness and ability of their instructors to accept them and provide accessible instruction, engagement, and assessment so that they can participate more equitably. There seems to emerge the issue that it is the teacher who is disabled and not the learner. Change should hinge on assisting the disabled teacher so that he or she can handle learners with learning disabilities without challenges.

Research indicates that teachers vary in their effectiveness in meeting the challenge of teaching a heterogeneous class (Podell and Tournaki, 2007) and they respond differentially to various student characteristics (Tournaki, 2003; Tournaki and Podell, 2005). The point of teacher effectiveness is being raised in relation to the ability to handle learners with learning disabilities in a regular class in schools. Some teachers seem to face challenges of handling such students in a regular class. To that end, learners with learning disabilities will not benefit from the process at all. Gerber as cited in Podell and Tournaki (2007) postulates that teachers can optimally address only a limited range of student characteristics given finite resources, of which personal and internal teacher characteristics, such as knowledge and expertise, are the primary elements. Accordingly, the interaction between teacher and student characteristics, along with the availability of material resources, determines teacher tolerance. In addition, unavailability of resources in the classroom is being raised as a challenge that teachers face in teaching learners with learning disabilities. Paucity of teaching and learning resources compounds the problem of teacher ineffectiveness. Louis *et al.* (2010) observed that a mismatch between what the learner brings and what the teacher expects within the context of the classroom causes the student to face constraints to educational opportunity.

Several factors were identified as posing challenges to teachers in the teaching and learning of students with learning disabilities. These include among others;

- lack of sufficient learning time,
- lack of active teaching methods,
- failure to use integrated systems for assessment and feedback,
- inappropriate class size,
- failure to use adapted curriculum to meet individual needs,
- lack of active student participation,
- inappropriate supports, and
- lack of clear roles & responsibilities for students (Peters, 2003).

1.7. Research Methodology

The study employed mixed methodology. It had both qualitative and quantitative elements in its design. Mixed methods research has become the most popular term for mixing qualitative and quantitative data in a single study (Johnson *et al.*, 2007) and is the label used in this study. The definition of mixed methods research used in this study is one based on an analysis of definitions used by leaders in the field of mixed methods research:

Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g. use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Johnson *et al.*, 2007).

1.8. Sampling Procedure

Purposeful sampling was employed to get participants across the district. The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for studying in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). This study focused on respondents who had knowledge and lived experiences of challenges encountered in teaching students with learning disabilities in inclusive settings and who were willing to take part in the investigation (Flick *et al.*, 2004).

1.9. Data Collection Instruments

Participants responded to closed and open-ended questionnaires. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were also used as data collection instruments.

1.10. Results

Table-1. Responses from all teachers

QUESTION	RESPONSES AS %				
	SA	A	NS	D	SD
1. Lack of resources pose challenges in teaching students with learning disabilities	88	6	2	4	0
2. I have always experienced the problem of textbook shortage	30	50	2	14	4
3. My teaching is affected by lack of teaching/learning resources	26	46	4	16	8
4. The performance of students with Learning Disabilities (LD) is being aggravated by lack of adequate teaching/learning resources	42	42	8	2	6
5. In my class each student has a reading text	16	30	2	36	16
6. I have expertise of handling students with LD in a regular class	8	38	16	22	16
7. During my teaching I always attend to students with LDs	14	42	10	24	10
8. I possess the skills of handling students with LDs in my class	10	42	14	26	8
9. Some teachers are challenged by teaching students with LDs	48	40	6	4	2
10. Teaching students with LDs in regular classes requires special training to make learning effective	68	18	8	2	4
11. I have enough time to assist students with LDs in my class	6	20	10	32	32
12. The number of students (class size) I teach is quite manageable	6	26	4	36	28
13. I have high interaction levels with all students in my class	24	36	4	24	12
14. I always use varied teaching methods for my students	28	50	4	8	10
15. I find it easy to individualise instruction all the time	8	34	16	32	10
16. When I give students homework they get help at home	2	32	22	28	16
17. Parents for students with LDs show great concern	6	30	24	22	18
18. Parents of students with LDs also come for consultations	8	36	14	30	12
19. Lack of home resources is affecting my students with LDs	34	42	10	2	12
20. Parents of students with LDs have a positive attitude towards their children's learning	18	24	20	22	16

Explanation of the table

Key:

SA= Strongly Agree: A= Agree: NS= Not Sure; Disagree: SD=Strongly Disagree

Raw data was converted into percentages. Finally, all responses which strongly agreed and agreed were added and regarded as agree. Not sure was left like that. Disagree and strongly disagree were added and regarded as disagree. This was done for ease of analysis and interpretation of data.

1.11. Emergent Themes from Open-Ended Questions/Interviews and Focus Groups

The following qualitative responses were generated with regards to the extent to which shortage of resources pose challenges in teaching students with learning disabilities in regular classes. Participants raised their voices to shed light on the challenges teachers face as shown below.

1.11.1. The Extent to Which Shortage of Teaching and Learning Resources Pose Challenges to Teachers in Teaching Learners with Learning Disabilities

Lack of resources is a major challenge teachers are pointing to in the teaching students with learning disabilities. The current practice of teaching centres on learner centred methodologies which require learners to interact with matter. Lack of such basic requirements poses a major challenge to teachers.

- *Lack of tangible objects affects the teaching and learning of learners with learning disabilities*
- *Most of such learners require individual media to solve problems*
- *Shortage of resources is the strongest challenge especially in rural areas and makes such pupils passive*
- *Most of such students fail to read and comprehend matter without instructional media*
- *Pupils with learning disabilities need more resources since most of the time the teacher uses the hands-on approach*
- *Teachers find it difficult to develop lessons without media*
- *Teachers rush to complete the syllabus neglecting pupils with learning disabilities if there are no resources*
- *Some teachers end up developing negative attitudes towards such pupils who force them to prepare individualised media all the time*
- *Lack of resources make such pupils difficult to teach*
- *Lack of resources results in pupils failing to understand concepts*
- *Some concepts need practical work so shortage of resources affects their chances of learning effectively*
- *Without resources like textbooks students tend to grasp concepts at a slow rate*
- *The teacher fails to achieve his/her objectives*

1.11.2. The Extent to Which Lack of Teacher Expertise Poses Challenges in Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities

Pressing among the issues raised by teachers is the issue of lack of pedagogy and didactics to handle learners with learning disabilities in their classes. Lack of such requisite skills is a major challenge that affects the quality of instruction in class. The mindset of the teacher who lacks such knowledge becomes negative to the learners and the learners are likely to be left unattended to in class.

- *Without expertise, the teacher is incapacitated to handle the needs of students with learning disabilities*
- *If the teacher lacks knowledge he/she cannot teach such children effectively*
- *Teacher fails to tackle such students and might end up giving maximum attention to other learners neglecting students with learning disabilities*
- *The teacher will not be sure of how to teach and what to teach such students*
- *Students might be exposed to verbal abuse because they will not be occupied and start making noise*
- *Lack of teacher expertise affects the quality of teaching since such teachers lack methodology*
- *Such teachers are likely to fail to identify individual and instructional needs of such students*
- *Trial and error becomes costly to students' learning*
- *Such teachers lack basic approaches of dealing with students with learning disabilities*
- *Unsuitable matter might end up being taught*
- *Selection of teaching content and teaching materials would be a problem to such a teacher*
- *Such teachers lack the ability to explain concepts to students with learning disabilities*
- *Teachers without special training have high expectations of students in general and even students with LDs and hence end up developing negative attitudes towards those who lag behind in certain specific areas*
- *Children's reception and acquisition will be marginalised when the operational wavelength is zeroed in a situation where the teacher lacks knowledge*
- *Such teachers feel threatened and challenged*
- *Students would not be given suitable work*
- *Lack of didactical knowledge also affects the mindset of the teacher*

1.11.3. The Extent to Which Class Size Poses Challenges in Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities

Teachers seem to raise quite a number of important issues that pose challenges in the teaching and learning of students with learning disabilities in class. Chief among them is the lack of interaction that is caused by large classes in the school system. Large class size emerges as a major challenge in teaching and learning of learners with learning disabilities in schools.

- *If a class is too big students with learning disabilities are not attended to*
- *Teachers fail to manage such classes with varied children*
- *Special attention might not be adequately given to students with LDs if the class size is too large*

- *Teachers will not individualise instruction in such a scenario*
- *Huge classes become a disaster to students with LDs*
- *Large classes reduce teacher-pupil interaction or contact time and the time the teacher can take with each individual learner is compromised*
- *Not very much help is offered in a rally like situation*
- *Pupils will lack supervision and close monitoring*
- *On the spot remediation is not done in large classes*
- *Teachers end up using the lecture method when faced with large numbers of students*
- *Preparing for all such pupils will not be practical*
- *Such pupils just get decorative attention*

1.11.4. The Extent to Which Home Conditions Pose Challenges In Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities

Respondents raised quite a number of issues that emanate from the home that pose challenges to teachers in handling learners with learning disabilities in class. These are pointing to the home factors as they affect quality teaching and learning. This shows the process of quality handling of learners with learning difficulties is a jigsaw between the teacher and the home.

- *Background affects the child's level of concentration*
- *Home conditions affect behaviour because children's behaviour is moulded at home*
- *Pupils with parents without the knowhow of helping them disadvantage their children*
- *Some parents are not supportive to school demands and this has a negative bearing on children's learning*
- *Some parents look at their children with LDs negatively and do not give them any form of help*
- *Some parents do everything for their children instead of just assisting them to do their work and this adversely affects their parents*
- *Some parents fail to provide adequate resources hence some pupils fail to fully participate in class work due to lack of facilities*
- *Some parents do not cooperate with school demands and lack knowledge of the importance of child support in school work*
- *Parents who do not help children to do their homework pose learning problems for the child*
- *Some homes do not teach pupils to listen and this affects the listening span of the child at school*
- *If the child is getting a negative attitude from care givers at home, they are likely to be distracted from concentrating in school work*
- *Students who are labelled as passive at home take very few chances of hard work at school*
- *Most parents do not buy even a single textbook for their children to use at home and even at school*

2. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study point to shortage of teaching materials as a big challenge teachers encounter when teaching students with learning disabilities. Teachers are failing to cover the

whole syllabus as required due to lack of resources. They are doing their lessons hurriedly. Hurriedly done lessons are not effective at all. The study also points to teachers' lack of expertise as a challenge. For effective teaching of students with learning disabilities, teachers need some kind of professional competence and this is lacking among teachers. Lack of expertise among teachers explains why students with learning disabilities learn very little or none in schools. The study also illuminates that class size poses challenges in teaching students with learning disabilities. Large class sizes are a hindrance to effective teaching. With large classes, teachers fail to individualise instruction and they get demoralised. The decreased interaction between the teacher and the student with learning disability emanating from large class size in the school system is a recipe for poor performance by students with learning disabilities. A demoralised teacher is not an effective teacher at all. It is evident from the study that home conditions pose challenges in teaching students with learning disabilities.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions were made:

- lack of resources poses challenges to teachers and this adversely affects the teaching of students with learning disabilities
- Parents have negative attitudes towards the education of students with learning disabilities and do not give them the necessary support at home and even school support. With such parents, teachers find it difficult to effectively teach students with learning disabilities in regular classes
- some parents do not insist on homework and do not help their children to do the homework and this poses challenges to teachers who find it difficult and develop negative attitudes to such children
- Parents for students with learning disabilities have no concern for their children's learning and hardly consult teachers at school on the learning progress of their children. Teachers thus find problems of how best to assist such students yet performance at school is a result of the effort of the teacher and the parent
- teachers are not finding it easy to individualise instruction all the time yet students with learning difficulties need individual attention
- teachers face the problem of textbook shortage to effectively teach students with learning disabilities in regular classes
- teachers find shortage of resources as a hindrance to quality teaching performance
- teachers lack expertise in handling students with learning disabilities in regular classes. Most of them have never received any such training at college and even in workshops
- due to classes that are not manageable, teachers fail to attend to students with learning disabilities because they lack the time
- teachers have negative attitudes towards students with learning disabilities and this affects their interaction patterns in class

- teachers lack teaching methods that suit proper teaching of students with disabilities in regular classes

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above conclusions, the following are the recommendations from the research:

- Schools should increase and effectively use study time during which the teacher can attend to a large pool of pupils with individual problems.
- The Ministry of Education should run workshops with all teachers in order to equip them with the necessary skills of handling students with learning disabilities in regular classes
- Schools need to introduce textbook levy in order to purchase textbooks so that pupil-textbook ratio is improved to advantage the disadvantaged students with learning difficulties in the regular classes
- Teachers and parents need to develop positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties in the regular classes
- Colleges of education need to have a course on handling students with learning difficulties in regular classes as a major component rather than having it as a topic in theory of education
- School staff development workshops and in-service training programmes can go a long way towards equipping teachers with the pre-requisite skills of handling students with learning disabilities in regular classes
- School heads and the school development committees should provide with proportionate teaching and learning resources for both teachers and pupil.
- The Ministry of Education should reduce the pupil- teacher ratio in order to reduce teacher- pupil and pupil- pupil interaction.
- Teachers and schools should provide work-cards, books, among others, in order to keep pupils busy and hence increase their academic progress.
- Through parents' meetings, the school heads should emphasize to parents the importance of monitoring homework and helping their children do it
- Homework should be given to pupils and monitored by both teachers and parents to help pupils improve in their academic work.

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