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Including Children with Disabilities in Primary School:

The Case of Mashonaland, Zimbabwe

Working Paper 26

Marcella Deluca, Carlo Tramontano, Maria Kett



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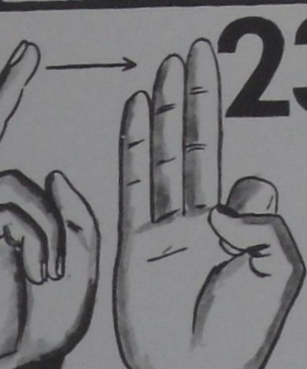
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Including Children with Disabilities in Primary School: the case
of Mashonaland, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarises the school-based information gathered on girls and boys with disabilities in schools in four districts in Mashonaland West Province (MWP), a large province in the north of Zimbabwe, as well as the main results derived from a survey on knowledge, attitudes and practices of their parents or caregivers, teachers and head teachers. This research forms part of a three-year project led by Leonard Cheshire Disability Zimbabwe Trust to promote the provision of inclusive primary education for children with disabilities in that province. The first part of the paper outlines the current state of education for children with disabilities in 268 schools in the four selected districts in MWP; including disaggregation of numbers of children in school by age, gender and impairment. It also provides an overview of the numbers of teachers as well as pupil/teacher ratios. The second part examines findings from a survey on disability and Inclusive Education (IE), administered to 67 head teachers, 183 teachers and 186 parents/caregivers of children with disabilities.

Findings highlighted a lack of training in special education needs/IE, and the need for further training emerges as a pressing issue. Overall, the attitudes and beliefs of respondents were positive, but amongst the major perceived barriers preventing children with disabilities from going to school by respondents was the lack of assistive devices. Other major barriers include distance to school and lack of transportation. Parents reported that the direct and indirect costs for schooling their children with disabilities are too high. Head teachers and teachers identified human resource allocation and financial administration as potential critical issues.

This survey contributes to the limited literature that examines knowledge, attitudes and practices of teachers and families, as well as well as barriers and challenges.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

It is now estimated that over one billion people - 15% of the world's population - live with some form of disability, and of these, between 110 and 190 million have significant difficulties in functioning¹. Though there is a lack of accurate data in this field, the estimated number of children with disabilities between 0 and 18 years old ranges between 93 million and 150 million, with roughly 5.1% of all children aged 0-14 years (93 million) living with a moderate or severe disability and 0.7%, or 13 million children, living with a severe disability¹. According to UNICEF, more than 80% of children with disabilities live in developing countries and have little or no access to appropriate services.

Gathering accurate data on disability, especially among children, has been challenging due to the lack of disability-focused questions in national surveys (such as census), but also cultural conceptions of what constitutes impairment and disabilities. Most of these children have little or no access to education, and if they do manage to go school, are often amongst the most marginalised and excluded of all groups, and this exclusion can be compounded by gender, age and ethnicity, as well as where the child lives¹.

Zimbabwe had been seen as exemplary in the education sector, with one of the highest literacy rates in Africa (around 90%). However, there are an estimated 600,000 children with disabilities of school going age in Zimbabwe, of which it is thought that more than half have no access to education². One study suggests that children with significant disabilities have been turned away from schools in Zimbabwe because teachers perceived themselves as untrained and ill-equipped to assist them³. In order to try to address this issue, the Leonard Cheshire Zimbabwe Trust and partners have been implementing an Inclusive Education (IE) programme in Zimbabwe since 2009. An evaluation of the previous work recommended that the project concentrate on one province, rather than scatter across single schools in a number of provinces. This research has been designed to complement that work.

Inclusive Education in Zimbabwe

IE promotes the inclusion of children with disabilities within formal mainstream school systems by putting all elements in place to ensure that they benefit from learning

and realise their potential. It is defined by UNESCO as "...a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education."⁴

All children have the fundamental right and ability to learn, irrespective of their individual differences and needs: this is the core principle and assumption underpinning IE. IE is a dynamic, continuing process which facilitates the presence, participation and achievement of all students in the education system. It therefore looks beyond the issue of basic access to schooling, prioritising a quality education which enables all children to enrich their learning and achieve their full potential⁵. Successful, inclusion requires a fundamental rethink of school (and learning) cultures to ensure they are flexible and responsive to all students, taking into account the diversity of students' needs and rights⁶⁻⁸.

Although Zimbabwe does currently not have any specific policy or legislation in place relating to IE, it does have a range of policies that support and promote the inclusion of children with disabilities, including the Zimbabwean Education Act (1996), which introduced free and compulsory education for all students; the Zimbabwean Disabled Person Act (1996) addresses rights of people with disabilities in a range of sectors, including the education sector; the Secretary's Circular number P36 of 1990, which provides guidelines to placement procedures for special classes, resource units and institutions; Secretary's Circular number 2 of 2000, on inclusion of learners with albinism with reference to meaningful inclusion in schooling and co-curricular activities; and Director's Circular number 7 of 2005, which offers guidelines for the inclusion of learners with disabilities in all school competitions⁹. Zimbabwe is also signatory to several IE-related international charters and conventions such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education¹⁰. However, Zimbabwe only ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2013.

In order to address some of the poverty-related gaps, in 2001 the government introduced the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) fund as part of the Enhanced Social Protection Programme. One of the major objectives of the BEAM programme is to prevent households from resorting to coping mechanisms - such as

withdrawing children from school - in response to worsening household poverty. As such, it specifically targets children who have never been to school, have dropped out of school for economic reasons or are at risk of doing so – for example, orphans and vulnerable children¹¹. The BEAM covers the costs of core education such as levies, school and examination fees. It is a nationwide scheme covering primary and secondary schools including special schools for children with disabilities – in fact, 10% of the beneficiaries are expected to be children with disabilities¹¹. The programme is managed through the Ministry of Labour and Social Services (MoLSS) as part of their National Action Plan for Children II and is provided in the form of a lump sum payment directly to schools, conditional upon them allowing beneficiary children free access to school.

Despite these interventions, to date there has been little work done to establish the present status of IE in Zimbabwe. The few existing studies have made numerous recommendations aimed at improving delivery, including increasing awareness; improving coordinating of stakeholders; improving teacher training; and increasing resources¹²⁻¹⁶.

This paper therefore contributes to plugging this knowledge gap and provides a summary of information gathered about girls and boys with disabilities enrolled in primary schools in four districts in Mashonaland West Province (MWP), a large province in the north of Zimbabwe, and the knowledge, attitudes and practices of their parents or caregivers, teachers and head teachers.

METHODOLOGY

These results are based on data collected at the school level and from a survey administered to 186 parents/caregivers, 183 teachers and 67 head teachers in 268 schools (30 model schools, 240 cluster schools and nine control schools) in the four districts. Data were also collected at the school level by project staff using a spreadsheet designed specifically for this purpose, in order to obtain information on numbers of children with disabilities already enrolled in schools in different types of provision. In the Zimbabwean educational system children with disabilities may be placed in mainstream classrooms, in resource units or special classes. Resource

units mostly cater for children with hearing and visual impairments; while special classes are intended for children with varying degrees of general learning difficulties.

A pre-intervention survey was undertaken in order to gauge knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) of head teachers, teachers and parents/caregivers in the project areas prior to any programme intervention taking place in order for pre- and post-intervention levels of KAP to be measured. Control schools were identified on the basis of distance from the project schools and any community level project activities and therefore adequate data was obtained to test the impact of interventions in the project schools. The results of the survey will help establish a baseline from which to measure the effectiveness of the IE intervention, as the same information will be collected on the same samples (head teachers, teachers, and parents/care givers) at the end of the project.

The questionnaires were developed by the Leonard Cheshire Disability and Inclusive Development Centre, UCL and were based on standardised sets of questions used internationally in research of this kind. In particular, in the sections related to attitudes, scales were based on Mahat¹⁷; questions around concerns were based on Sharma and Desai¹⁸; teacher self-assessment of efficacy on Caprara et al¹⁹; questions around job satisfaction were based on a modified versions of Skaalvik and Skaalvik²⁰; and motivational questions on Lam et al²¹.

The survey teams planned to interview parents/care givers in the privacy of their own homes where possible, at a pre-arranged time. However, due to logistical challenges, most parents/care givers were in fact interviewed at the schools.

It was decided to initially train a group of trainers/supervisors on how to conduct research on IE. The trained supervisors were then able to train 30 enumerators (selected from the local university) on how to administer the research tools.

Enumerators completed the field work and data entry in approximately two weeks.

Subsequently, data were transmitted to the research centre at UCL. The paper questionnaires were sent to UCL as per the requirements of the UCL Ethics approval.

RESULTS

School level information

According to data gathered at school level, the total number of **children with disabilities** across the 268 schools was **2,559**, with 1,494 males (58.4%) and 1,065 females (41.6%). This gender imbalance reflects similar findings²²; and further research is needed to account for the apparent over-representation of males attending schools, for example, does this reflect sex differentials regarding impairments, or a greater difficulty in accessing education for disabled girls?

The average percentage of children with disabilities over the total student population was **1.96%** (s.d. 2.36%) with a range from 0 to 12.96%. This is higher than the previous estimate for MWP, which was given at 0.4%, though MWP is known to have the lowest school enrolment rates of children with disabilities (23) – one of the reasons it was selected for the IE project in the first place.

Findings show that the majority of children with disabilities are reported as having learning difficulties (more than 70%) and this is in line with previous findings³. This however calls for an analysis of how children are assessed, labelled and consequently resourced in schools. It also has clear implications for future programme interventions.

With regard to teachers, the total number in the 268 schools sampled was 3,592 (1,693 males and 1,819 females). It was also reported that 67 of them teach in special classes and 13 in resource units.

The average pupil-teacher ratio (total pupil enrolment per number of teachers) was 37.6 (s.d. 6.6) ranging from 7 to 61.2. In special classes, the pupil-teacher ratio was on average 17.8 (s.d. 2.2) with a range from 11 to 22; in resource units was typically 7.6 (s.d. 3.5) with a range from 3 to 15 children per teacher; and in mainstream classes it was on average 37.8 (s.d. 6.6) with a range from 7 to 61.2 (7 is derived from a single school in a small village in Kariba with 3 classes with a total of 21 students).

KAP SURVEY

The study also examined knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) of head teachers, teachers, and caregivers of children with disabilities from the same schools, villages and districts. The survey therefore allowed for parallel analysis of these groups, suggesting congruencies, as well as gaps.

The majority of the head teachers interviewed were male (76.1%), and on average 47.6 years old (s.d.=7.1); while the majority of the teachers and of the care giver were female (respectively 59.0% and 68.7%), and on average 40.6 (s.d.=7.2) and 41.7 (s.d.=13.4) years old.

Training

In terms of training, both head teachers (67.2%) and teachers (81.4%) reported not having undergone a great deal of pre-service training (undertaken prior to employment/teaching work – e.g. workshops – as opposed to in-service training, meaning training undertaken during employment). This finding is particularly significant, when considering that Simui²³ has argued that teacher education should be at the 'centre' of IE reform – with pre-service teacher training as a vital start. With regard to in-service, head teachers (77.6%) tend to report undergoing general training more frequently than teachers (48.6%), whereas more specific training on special education needs (SEN) was lacking for both head teachers and teachers – 65.7% and 64.5% respectively were not trained in SEN. Overall, respondents (head teachers and teachers) reported a lack of specific training in SEN/IE. The need for more training in SEN emerges as a significant issue among both groups. When asked about specific training needs, head teachers listed communication and behavioural skills, in addition to specific pedagogical skills. Both head teachers and teachers were highly motivated for further training on IE.

Inclusive Education

It is interesting to note the range of understanding about what IE means. A relatively high percentage (around 80%) of both head teachers and teachers reported having heard about IE; however this implies that a significant percentage had not heard of IE at all. Furthermore, partial and incomplete understanding of IE was reported. While some head teachers and teachers show a good understanding of the requirements,

there is an overall lack of clarity and consistency about what constitutes IE such as those outlined by the OECD²⁴. In particular, some of the comments indicated the head teachers still have some way to go before they have fully engaged with a rights-based approach to disability inclusion, using terms such as '*normal* schools', and '*despite* their disabilities.' On the other hand, while overall it seems from the comments that teachers do have an understanding of some of the core components of IE, it is less clear they have an understanding of all the components required – or in fact their role in IE. Not all agreed that mainstreaming was successful, in particular in terms of adaptations of resources. Some did highlight the challenges – including lack of resources. Others highlighted the role of the parents, but none talked about additional support in the classroom, including classroom assistants. It will be interesting to see if this is more harmonised after the intervention, as demonstrated through the post-intervention survey.

Attitudes and beliefs

Typically attitudes and beliefs are positive. However, these should still be read critically, and taking into account that a relevant percentage of teachers (21.9%) think that children with disabilities should be taught in special schools, and are disconcerted by the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classes (28.2%). These views are shared to a lesser extent among head teachers (18.5% and 15.4% respectively). A percentage of teachers reported feeling frustrated and upset with how they communicate with children with disabilities (15.0%) On the other hand, a significant percentage of parents think that children should be taught in special schools (57.0%) and equally that they should be taught in the same classes as non-disabled children (65.4%), so this warrants further research.

Barriers

Findings concerning the perceived barriers preventing children with disabilities from going to school revealed that overall head teachers (98.5%), teachers (93.3%) and caregivers (89.4%) think that the lack of assistive devices is a major barrier. Furthermore, the majority of head teachers stated that assistive devices and teaching aids are rarely or never available (92.3%). They also stated that there are no resources available for the provision of or access to assistive devices. In addition a very small number of caregivers (8%) stated that their children used assistive devices

(if needed). Notwithstanding the general agreement between informants in recognising the significance of the different barriers, these findings suggest some different paths that call for further in-depth analysis. On one hand, head teachers and teachers largely agree in thinking that parents are worried that their children with disabilities will be abused (bullied, teased, ill-treated, etc. - 86.4% and 87.2% respectively) and that the schools are a long distance from home (87.9% and 86.2%). On the other hand, parents largely reported that the direct (83.3%) and indirect costs (76.0%) for schooling their children with disabilities are too high. Head teachers and teachers tend to recognise less frequently the direct (uniform, books, fees) costs as a barrier for parents (60.6% and 61.1% respectively). This is most likely due to the availability of social protection mechanisms such as the basic education assistance module (BEAM). Furthermore, findings reveal that teachers and head teachers perceive parents' attitudes towards the education of their children with disabilities as a major barrier; on the other hand, parents think that their children generally should attend schools but are worried about abuse. Head teachers are frequently convinced that the lack of expertise of teachers may represent a barrier to children with disabilities going to school (83.3%). Teachers themselves recognise their lack of expertise and see it as a barrier (65.6%). Further training, as highlighted above, will then be crucial for effectively including children with disabilities in schools.

Concerns

Overall there is a less positive picture, with head teachers and teachers expressing concerns linked with the inclusion of children with disabilities. In particular, both head teachers and teachers identify potential critical issues surrounding administration and resources (funds, infrastructure, specially trained teachers, teaching material and teaching aids). Half of teachers are concerned that they will not have adequate skills and knowledge (51.9%). Again, training would improve this picture.

Head teachers, and to a lesser extent teachers, are also concerned about the effects that having a child with disabilities in the classroom will have on academic achievement of non-disabled children (70.6% and 76.2% respectively) and about the reaction of non-disabled children (52.5% and 59.6%) and their families (54.6% and 57.6%). These concerns are also reflected in the relevant percentage of caregivers

reporting that other parents do not want their children to be in the same school as children with disabilities (54.8%) and/or think disability is contagious (55.9%).

Daily practices

According to head teachers and teachers, daily practices are generally challenging due to poor infrastructure (74.2% and 59.6% respectively), high number of students (75.8% and 67.6%) and poor sanitation arrangements (66.7% and 50.0%).

Notwithstanding these challenges, both head teachers and teachers are highly satisfied with their job (93.9% and 90.8%). However a significant proportion of them do not think that their work is extremely rewarding (28.8% and 24.1%).

Difficulty to teach by type of disability

A small sample of respondents, with head teachers giving more positive responses than teachers, usually finds it difficult to teach children with disabilities. Teachers tend to be more positive in teaching children with physical disabilities and health-related disorders and are definitely more at positive about teaching gifted, talented and creative learners (who are categorised as having SEN in Zimbabwe).

Interestingly, more than 20% of teachers who teach in mainstream classes reported not having had any previous experience teaching children with disabilities.

Access to BEAM

In our survey, 170 caregivers (95%) reported knowing about the BEAM assistance module; and while 70 out of the 170 (41.2%) had applied for it, only 38 of these (54.3%) were successful in their application (Figure 17). 38 (out of 70) specified what it was used for, and all 38 confirmed that the money was used to pay for school fees. It is unclear from this why caregivers did not apply for the BEAM – whether it is because of eligibility criteria, or other such factors. This is something to be followed up in future research.

DISCUSSION

While there is a broad range of understanding about what IE means, there is also a similarity between the responses of head teachers, teachers, and parents/caregivers. These similarities may reflect local conceptualisations of disability, but highlight the extent to which these groups share similar ideals. However, overall understanding

about what IE really means should be more harmonised after the intervention, and will be measurable through the post-intervention survey. This two-fold approach will highlight on-going gaps in both the IE programme, and also education for children with disabilities in Zimbabwe more generally.

The survey also indicates high levels of expectations on behalf of parents – perhaps contrary to what head teachers and teachers themselves assumed. However, it should also be noted that the parents/caregivers interviewed all have children with disabilities already in school. More work has to be done to understand the attitudes and expectations of parents/caregivers of children with disabilities who not in school. It also raises questions of when – and if – these expectations are lowered, and why, as well as questions about why, and when, children with disabilities drop out of school.

While head teachers and teachers were overwhelmingly positive about their capacity to teach children with disabilities, and the effectiveness of their teaching overall, they clearly recognise the need for additional training and capacity building – as well as resources – in order for this willingness to be made a reality. They highlighted a number of challenges, including accessibility and resources, which they perceived as being outside of their control.

Project staff reported that schools must provide staff development sessions at school, cluster, district, provincial or national levels on IE as well as promote increased awareness about disability issues. There are also questions around the ways in which teaching is delivered – for example, the use of classroom assistants. But much of these results are linked to partial understanding of IE and its features of implementation. Disability needs to become a cross-cutting issue throughout any training programme for educational staff.

It should be noted that as is characteristic of the teaching profession in Zimbabwe, it is the males who are in the senior leadership positions. It also raises questions about the composition and nature of local school governance structures, which were rarely mentioned in the survey (and were actually beyond the main aim of the research), but are an important element of any IE programme. Another area that warrants further exploration is the issue of role models (male and female), including members

of local disabled people's organisations. Other areas that warrant a more gendered exploration include the continuation of education – the survey indicates that in the project schools there is a degree of gender parity in terms of numbers, but it is unclear if this will continue across the school years.

An issue that is clear throughout the survey is how children with disabilities are identified, assessed and labelled. Our findings show that the majority of children with disabilities are reported as having learning difficulties (more than 70%). Clearly, such labels have implications and impacts beyond the classroom – though they matter here enormously too – but also in terms of other entitlements including the BEAM, as well as assistive devices and other resources. Labels also impact on teachers' perceptions about how 'difficult' or 'easy' it is to teach children with certain types of impairments, in particular those with learning difficulties.

The major barriers highlighted include a lack of assistive devices. Of course, provision of assistive devices would have benefits beyond the child going to school, including freeing up caregivers to support socioeconomic activities and supporting the inclusion of the child in wider social activities. However, this does raise the question that if assistive devices were provided, would the exclusion of children with disabilities be overcome, and would all these children be in school? Other barriers, such as distances to and from school, lack of transportation and sanitation are obviously barriers for all children, but are exacerbated for children with disabilities. Further research and innovative solutions are needed in all these areas.

With regard to resources, while parents largely reported that the direct and indirect costs for schooling their children with disabilities are too high, they are not being fully addressed by protection mechanisms such as the BEAM. This fact is supported by a recent UNICEF-funded review of the BEAM, which highlighted that while the BEAM is having a positive impact, children with disabilities are significantly less likely to be beneficiaries of the BEAM¹¹. This fact is borne out by the results of our survey. In fact, the reviewers suggest children with disabilities may be better served by a different funding mechanism, especially if they do not fit the current poverty-based criteria¹¹. Another point is that only around half of all applicants to the BEAM were successful, which also warrants further examination.

Overall, the attitudes and beliefs of respondents to our survey were positive, in line with recent findings in Zimbabwe¹². However, some challenges remain, in particular beliefs that the educational experience of non-disabled children can be affected by the presence of children with disabilities in the classroom. In line with this, it has been argued that more needs to be accomplished to translate positive attitudes into action (even if supported by policy), and that a shift is needed in the entire education system in Zimbabwe to support inclusion¹². Chireshe has also argued that high teacher-pupil ratio (he cites 1:40) in many Zimbabwean primary schools means that teachers are left with no room to cater for children with disabilities¹². Our findings revealed that pupil/teacher ratio is on average 1:37 – currently in line with policy recommendations in the country, and current international debates. Nevertheless, the daily practices and experiences of head teachers, teachers and children are impacted by the poor infrastructure; lack of resources; poor sanitation, transport, and high numbers of students which prevent quality education for all pupils.

These findings will inform the next stages of the research, and are aimed at fostering a better understanding of the educational context in MWP, and where there is the possibility – indeed necessity – for, innovation and improved practices. Zimbabwe has some strong policies and good practices, but they need to be constantly reinforced to ensure adults and children with disabilities are included, as well as finding innovative and alternative solutions to overcome barriers.

LIMITATIONS

This was an ambitious survey given the time frame and budget and several challenges were encountered in the field and at data entry stage. There were also some challenges with undertaking the fieldwork, and to overcome some of these, it was decided to use a ‘training of trainers’ approach. Undertaking research in Zimbabwe can be challenging. Parents/caregivers of children with disabilities can be a difficult sample to reach, and there has been very little engagement with them in previous research in Zimbabwe. While there were some challenges in data collection, the results still provide some insights into the activities, issues and opportunities for

children with disabilities in MWP, their families and their teachers, not previously available elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the attitudes and beliefs of respondents were positive, and this should be capitalised upon going forward in ways elaborated above. However, the results also demonstrate a need for more 'joined up' co-ordinated thinking across ministries and departments, such as provision of assistive devices (with healthcare provision), and distance and transport (with roads and transport). Other innovative solutions may come from communities themselves – but all require resourcing and support.

This research component of the Leonard Cheshire Disability Zimbabwe Trust's (LCDZT) three-year IE project provides a snapshot of the current situation, prior to any programmatic activity. It allows the possibility for the programme team to adapt the interventions according to the specific results and for measuring the changes over the duration of the project. Further research will be undertaken to complement this survey, focusing on community attitudes, innovative transport solutions, as well as the use of classroom assistants, and to assess the most effective options to scale up IE programmes in Zimbabwe. This will enable a better understanding of the factors which contribute to the improved and increased participation (enrolment, retention and accessibility) of children with disabilities in primary education in Zimbabwe. Finally, in addition to the above, political will is also required, and this may yet be one of the biggest challenges to overcome.

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