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Dynamics of Inclusivity or Exclusivity and issues of Marginalisation of Children Learning with Disability in Rural Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This enquiry is based on a phenomenological survey in which views of rural teachers, learners and parents were unleashed in an effort to establish whether or not inclusivity has reduced stigmatization and marginalization of children learning with disability in rural Zimbabwe. It was based on class observations and focus group interviews with rural school teachers, learners and parents in Chipinge district. Sixty participants (n=60), comprising 10 school heads, 20 teachers, 10 learners and 20 parents from five schools, were purposively selected. Gender balance was adhered to at 50% for all selected participants. The learner participants expressed mixed feelings over the effectiveness of inclusivity where 30% of the learners viewed it as a time consuming endeavor, whilst 70% admitted having been uplifted academically. The majority of the teachers (85%) reported that many of the teachers required in-service training on how to handle inclusive classes. School heads (75%) seemed to indicate that many of the teachers held attitudinal attributes that seemed to derail progress. Having obtained empirical data, this researcher proposed further means by which inclusivity within Zimbabwe's new school curriculum could be enhanced, all in an effort to improve learning and empowering future livelihoods of a populace living with disability.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, Inclusivity, Disability, Stigmatisation, Marginalisation, Children, Chipinge district, learning

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Introduction

Any country's citizens would want the best education if they are to contribute to improving their lives and that of others. Worldwide, the Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities seek to remove all types of discrimination.

Education represents a fundamental right of children, irrespective of status and background, covered in several declarations (inter alia, Education for All, 1990; the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, 1994; the Dakar Framework for Action, 2000; the Millennium Development Goals, 2000 and Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 emphasizes that inclusive and quality education for all people promotes lifelong learning (Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030, United Nations online). Any learner needs to enjoy equitable access to quality education regardless of one's Socio Economic Status and extent of disability (Messiou, 2011). Learners with disabilities (LWD) are some of the most vulnerable groups, exposed to massive and extended violations of their fundamental rights.

Discrimination is not only driven by one's particular condition, but rather, is an outcome of the lack of understanding of its causes and consequences, fear of difference or contagion, or religious/cultural perspectives of disability (UNICEF, 2013). The condition is further deepened by extreme poverty, especially in isolated communities, where disabled children's rights are routinely violated (UNICEF, 2012). The situation is further aggravated in the context of humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters, when disabled children get disproportionate degree of damage because of their inability to compete with healthier peers (UNICEF, 2015).

Children living with disability are commonly exposed to the lack of proper assistance, and an unfriendly, glacial environment. Sadly, too often such groups are defined and treated by what is missing rather than what they have. Exclusion and marginalization make them uniquely vulnerable, affecting their dignity, individuality, and chances to have a normal life (Alemu, 2014). Inequality and discrimination are the most disturbing issues that need to be solved, as social inclusion of living with disability can only be achieved when they are provided with efficient inclusive education.

Many affected children are exposed to exclusion and segregation from the mainstream and are usually the last to receive schooling services. This scenario alone is a direct violation of their right to education. Educational inclusivity for children living with disability means that training should be an instrument to ensure equality, justice and well-being (Terzi, 2014; Nasir and Efendi, 2016). A multi-faceted practice of the educational act for impaired children can divide focus in mainstream inclusivity and thus, programmes in Special and Inclusive Education must be reshaped to ensure inclusivity and integration of the two types of education funding (Al-Obaidi and Budosan, 2011). Accommodating the special needs of impaired learners could be a major challenge, given the open debate between the supporters of inclusivity and those in favour of educational services delivered in stigmatized facilities.

Discrimination encompasses various forms of behaviour towards individuals as a result of their impairment, whether intentional or unintentional. It is usually caused by stigma.

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The concept of inclusivity involves the identification of barriers to learner's participation in school and maximization of learning resources (Mutepe et al, 2007). Inclusivity addresses and responds to diverse needs of all children including those living with disability (Chireshe, 2013).

According to World Health Organisation (2011), 15% of the world's population live with disability. Moreso, in and outside Africa, the issue of inclusivity continues to raise debates as to what should be the way forward. It seems progress on inclusivity is now noticeable in a number of countries including Zimbabwe. For instance, some countries have drafted their policy to make education inclusive eg. removing fees. Donohwe (2014), in SA reported that 70% of school going age living with disability was out of school. Inclusion in SA has coincided with changes in politics about national unity (Makoelle, 2014).

Inclusivity results in social acceptance of all children with special needs and can promote a positive attitude to those without. It can reduce stigma and marginalisation in schools and society at large. Lock et al (2008) found that positive interactions increase any learner's sense of belonging. Learners of less privileged and marginalised backgrounds face many challenges especially where they are less welcome (Carter et al, 2006). Marginalisation and stigmatisation induce fear and anxiety resulting in detrimental stereotype threats to victims (Lock et al).

Zimbabwe has shifted from exclusion to inclusion from early childhood education to higher levels (Majoko, 2018) though inclusion is lower at higher levels. The New Curriculum Framework in Zimbabwe (2015-2022) reinforces inclusivity. Researches on inclusivity seem to have dealt more on certain groups of learners in collaborative and transformative approaches (Chakuchichi, 2013; Ncube and Hlatywayo, 2014; Chikwature, 2016; Majoko, 2018). This enquiry attempted to envisage whether inclusivity has managed to reduce marginalisation and stigmatisation through the lenses of teachers, parents and learners in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framework

The study is tethered on Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2010). Any child, including one living with disability, is imbedded in a complex network which needs to be well understood. Donald, et al (2010) explain that the Ecological Systems model states that child development occurs within an interactive system of nested influences between the child and the environment. Aspects of the nested structure diagrammatically illustrated in figure 1 below are: Micro system, Meso system, Exo system, Macro system, Chrono system (Donald et al 2010; Ganga, 2013).

Donald et al (2010) posit that micro systems are systems in which children are closely involved in proximal interactions with other familiar people (such as the family). They involve roles, relationships and patterns of daily activities that shape many aspects of cognitive, social, emotional, moral and spiritual development. Structures in the micro system include the family, school, and neighbourhood or childcare environments. Children living with disability experience an irregular pattern in which they might have challenges in accomplishing some goals that other children might achieve in a limited space of time.

Gooskens, Khan, Moses and Seekings in Donald et al (2010) describe the macro system as the one that involves dominant social and economic structures as well as values, beliefs and practices that influence all other social system. For example, a cultural value will then influence the proximal interactions in the child's micro systems and probably, her whole meso system too.

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Chrono system refers to the change in the environment that occurs over time and has an effect on the child especially where disability is an issue. An ecological systems model provides an appropriate framework to guide research and selection of appropriate interventions for families and children experiencing psychosocial challenges linked to disability. Understanding the interactions of these systems is the key in understanding how a child develops and what factors may lead to achievement or failure.

Donald et al (2010) purport those things that happen in one part of the system can affect other parts and ultimately the ecological system as a whole. Such an interaction is explained fully in the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979).

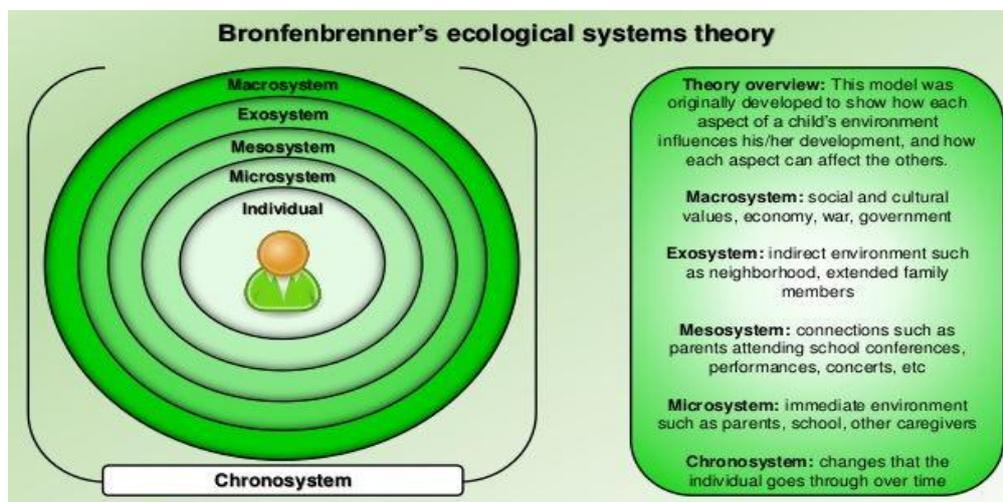


Fig. 1 The ecological systems theory according to Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979)

According to Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems, relationships between people are seen holistically where every person is vital in sustaining the life cycles of those within their circles. The theory views different individuals as interacting systems (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2010). In the situation of people living with disability, the system is made up of different people including those living without disability, each holding a particular role that has noticeable or unnoticeable effect on one living with disability. In some instances, the learners living with disability of the same nature can opt to run their own activities but the ecological systems impact from the surrounding people remains inevitable, regardless of any form of disability. Some people may treat them with love and empathy, whilst some may stigmatize and discriminate them. Any form of interaction with those living with disability can hold either positive or a negative impact.

The Study Problem

Developmental deficits leading to disability are numerous. Emotional security, social competence and ability to learn are dependent on optimal human development. Children growing up in comfortable learning environments derive long term benefits, yet those with disability and from socially disrupted backgrounds develop significant delay indicators. Though some researchers have reported a decline in number of children who are out of school due to disability, there still exist limited researches on whether inclusivity has reduced marginalisation and stigmatisation of learners with disability in Zimbabwe.

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Purpose of the Study

The study endeavoured to establish whether inclusivity has reduced marginalization and stigmatisation of children living with disability in Zimbabwe. On this matter, the researcher sought views of secondary school children, parents and educators.

Research Questions

1. How do children, parents and teachers perceive the status of marginalisation and stigmatisation of children living with disability in Chipinge district, Zimbabwe?
2. How far have educators gone in consideration of factors of inclusion such as the syllabus, subject content, class preparation, interaction with learners and individual differences?

Research Methodology

This study was carried out within the interpretive research paradigm, using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The task in this context was to find out whether inclusivity has dampened stigmatization and marginalisation of children learning with disability in rural Zimbabwe. The researcher was therefore concerned with the views of rural school teachers, learners and parents in Chipinge district. The main aim of the study was descriptive and exploratory. Justified in the illustration below, is the summarised research methodology.

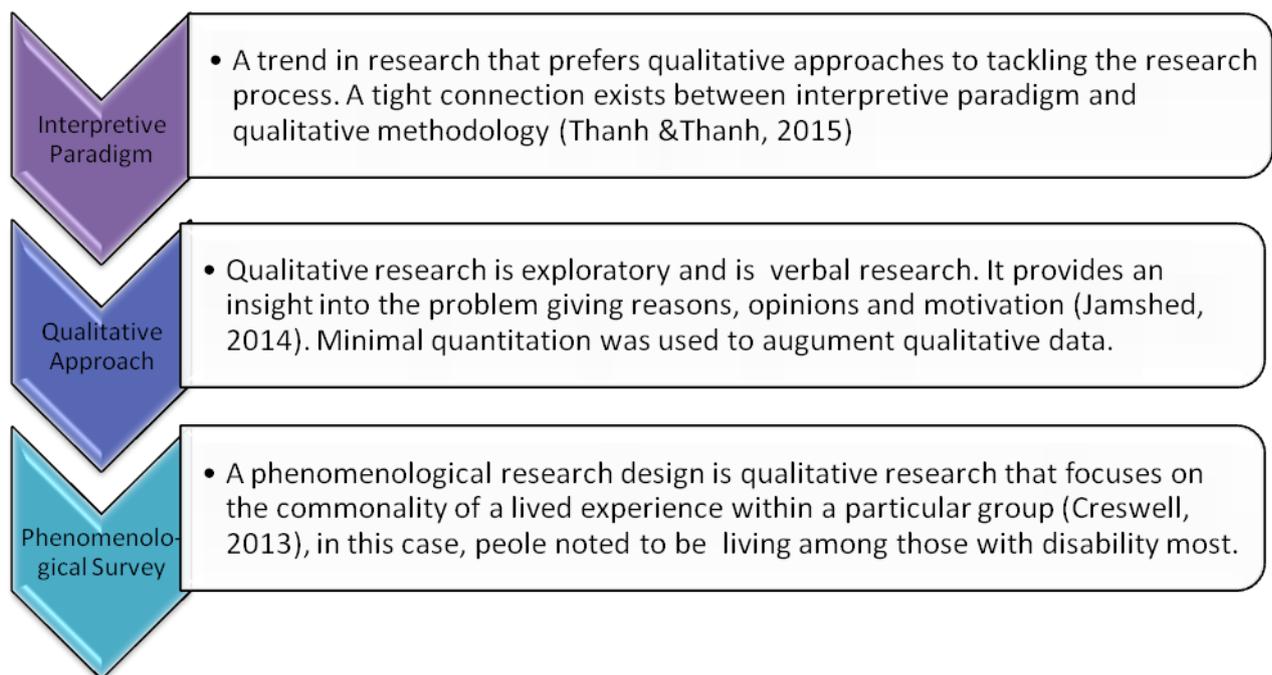


Fig. 2. Research Methodology

Instrumentation

In an effort to extract valid and more reliable data, the researcher engaged the following data collection measures that are normally utilized in qualitative enquiries. Parents were met during scheduled focus group discussion sessions on school consultation days. Teachers were visited in their schools at scheduled times. Observations were carried out on learners with disabilities during school visits. For purposes of data triangulations, some in-depth Interviews were conducted with School Heads and learners.

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Triangulation is the use of various sources of data; research instruments usually enhancing the reliability and validity of the research design. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2010) say that triangulation is the basis upon which the validity and reliability of data can be anchored. Triangulation may be defined as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour such as interviews, open-ended questionnaires, observations and focus group discussions.

Population and sample

The study was carried out in Chipinge District of Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. Sixty participants (n=60), comprising 10 school heads, 20 teachers, 10 learners and 20 parents from five schools, were purposively selected. Gender balance was adhered to at 50% for all selected participants.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was secured from Chipinge District Education Office, Zimbabwe, as well as from the selected school headmasters/principals. Further permission was sought from the parents of the selected learners. The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the research if they were not comfortable. Participants were also assured of anonymity in the research report.

According to Chiromo (2006:10) 'Research ethics are the principles of right and wrong that guide the researchers'. The researcher considered ethical principle such as confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity and privacy as listed in the figure below. Confidentiality required that the researcher must not disclose information supplied by the respondents unless prior permission is sought and granted.

Privacy complement confidentiality and it stipulates that the participants' privacy should be respected. Anonymity requires that the name of the research participants must not be divulged especially during the data analyses and discussion stages. Alphabetical order of letters beginning the surnames was used to identify the school teachers and administrators. The researcher informed the respondents of the research procedure, the purpose of the study, the risk to be involved and the rights during and after research study.

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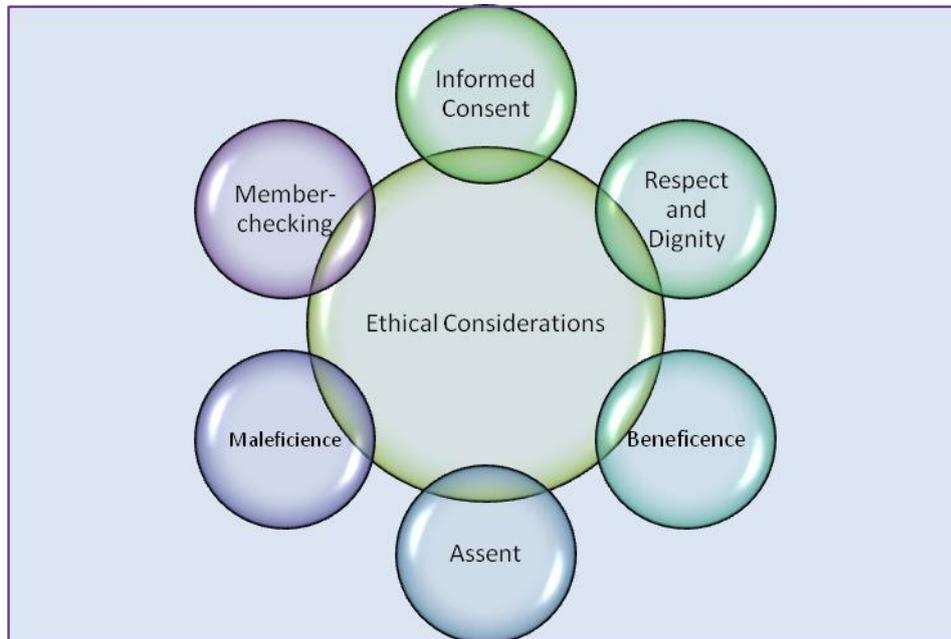


Fig. 3 Ethical Considerations

Data Analysis Plan

The study employed the Tesch's qualitative model of data analysis in Ganga (2013) that led the findings into themes, each differentiating into sub-categories. Qualitative data analysis procedures were utilized to categorize and reduce data into major themes as they emerged from the research findings. Within these themes the researcher was able to place vignettes taken from the participants, thus making the study results more qualitative.

Research Findings and Discussion

The findings from this enquiry were extracted from the learners, teachers, school heads and parents.

Thirty percent (30%) of the learners viewed inclusion as time consuming, whilst 70% admitted that they had been uplifted academically. Children needed their teacher's support and continued peer encouragement in difficult school sessions e.g. in practical work where sometimes one had to set aside own class task in order to assist a peer with disability. Earlier researchers had also noted that inclusivity had brought by social acceptance (Chireshe, 2013) within a learner's micro system. Observations too confirmed Majoko (2017) claim that Zimbabwe is moving from exclusion to inclusion.

Many learners wanted learner involvement on certain decisions about what goes on in their schools, a clue that children want to know what goes on in their macro and chrono systems. Messiou (2011) had observed that collaborating with children on issues of marginalisation can help eradicate stigmatisation in schools. Learner observations indicated that many children were quite empathetic with their mates living with disability. They were showing signs of acceptance as they took turns to assist where there was need eg. the researcher observed learners taking turns to push one on the wheelchair and to share ideas and jokes without restrictions.

This is in concurrence with ideas raised by Ncube & Hlatywayo (2014) that learners need to be taught to survive in a pluralistic environment if inclusion should work in our schools. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) had also explained how the learner is ever affected by environmental

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systems even up to how changes are made in government. Enlisted here are some responses from learners interviewed within this study.

- I find peace and encouragement when other children invite me whole heartedly into their group work.
- No one looks down upon me! I'm blessed! My teacher likes me. My mother loves me. Everybody does!

In concurrence, another learner supporting care for learners living with disability exclaimed to say;

- *God is for us all! Why would I look down upon another child.*

The majority of the teachers (85%) reported that many of the teachers required in-service training on how to handle inclusive classes. School heads (75%) seemed to indicate that many of the teachers held attitudinal attributes that seemed to derail progress (fig.4).

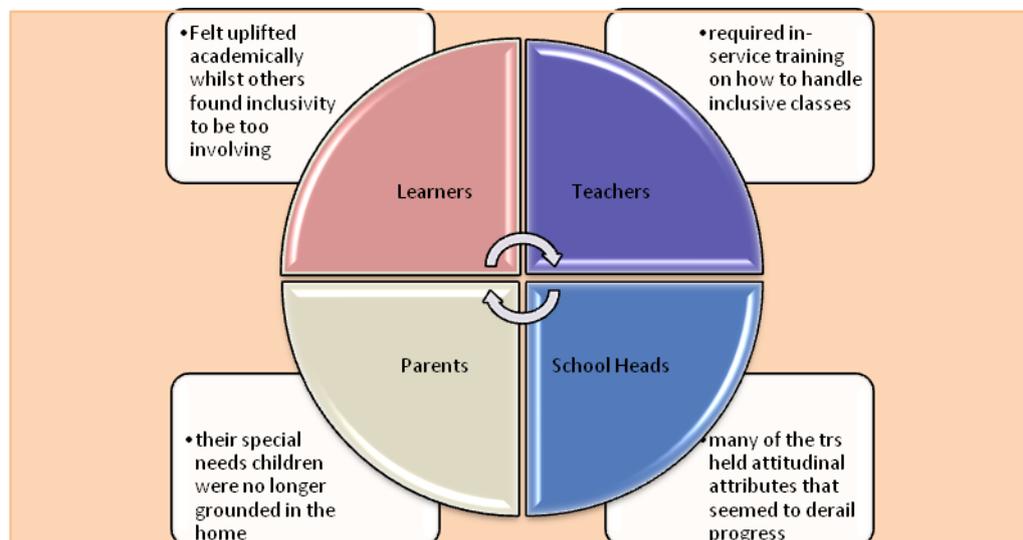


Fig.4. Some Highlights of the Findings from the four stakeholder participants

According to the data from teachers and parents, the society still holds traditional beliefs about the causes of disability and misunderstanding of dimensions of impairment. This was evidenced by one response from a teacher who said, “*Vamwe vanenge vakaisirwa mabvuri vachiri vanana.*” meaning (Some learners might have been bewitched at a young age). The lack of knowledge of children with disability leads to their invisibility and exclusion within the education arena. Excluded children are invisible to development initiatives, which mean they have no opportunities for a cultural or family life, cannot participate in decision-making and experience violent conducts, poverty and isolation.

A school head also said that the number of learners with disability (LWD) not attending school seems to be declining. Large number of LWD remains invisible to local communities and schools because of stigma and marginalization that leads to exclusion and lack of access to fundamental life services. Literature has also confirmed some irregularities noted by the World Bank (2011) that 6% of all children in developing nations are impaired and 15% of those over 15 years represent LWD. There is also a substantial underreporting that has had an impact on government planning in Zimbabwe (Mtefpa, Mpofo, & Chataika

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(2007). Global statistics are alarming and vary with the source, but evidence shows that the numbers of not-enrolled or excluded children is rising (UNICEF, 2014).

The magnitude of disabilities is often inaccurate and underreported; for instance, a 2004 census in Sierra Leone identified only 3,300 children mentally impaired, while a detailed national survey in 2003 evidenced the real number ten times higher (EFA, 2010). Figures for Malawi, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe revealed that between 24%-39% of LWD have never attended school, compared to 9%-18% of children without an impairment that have never been enrolled (Eide and Loeb, 2006; Stubbs et al., 2013).

Filmer (2008) study of 14 low-income nations showed that LWD are among the most vulnerable groups, often being marginalized within their own family, school and local community. All over Africa, families with LWD and disabled students are marginalized and stigmatized (Hasan, 2006). Too often, the dominant belief is that children's impairments are caused by witchcraft and other superstitions, which, combined with poverty, leads to low enrolment.

Robson and Evans (2005) study found that millions of LWD are not included in educational planning because of the lack of data and knowledge on how to integrate this group into national implementation plans. This is a phenomenon particularly severe in rural regions and poor urban areas (UNICEF, 1999). The researcher observed that in Zimbabwe, many schools have embarked on building infrastructure to cater for inclusive education.

Globally, most schooling units have no physical facilities to meet the needs of special education for LWD and lack the hygiene and sanitation conditions, communication systems, logistics and transportation to assist class participation of this group. Families with several children often favour those without disabilities in terms of providing books or school uniforms, and assume that special education is less relevant. Even where a large number of LWD complete primary education, the percentage accessing the next level is significantly lower than that of their non-impaired colleagues, mainly because of the lack of resources, teacher/parental assistance, awareness of the role of special education to the child's future development.

Most parents (85%) were happy that their special needs children were no longer grounded in the home. These were the vignettes that came from some parent participants:

- Will the teacher continue to love my little boy?
- At least our children are no longer grounded in the home.
- My child can wash dishes, so I am sure she can be taught to read and write, but she will need a wheelchair to get to school.
- What about other children? Will they accept him all the time?

The parents' sentiments seemed to express the fact that what the society might see as disability is in fact normality in the lenses of an accepting family. In line with the current Sustainable Development Goal 4, all learners need to enjoy equitable access to quality education regardless of one's socio economic status and extent of disability (Messiou, 2011). Learners with disabilities (LWD) remain amongst most vulnerable groups, exposed to massive and extended violations of their fundamental rights.

Conclusion

Participants expressed mixed feelings on the issue of inclusivity, eg some found it worthwhile whilst others found it to be a tiring endeavor. Both marginalisation and stigmatisation seem to

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be on the decline in schools visited. Learners seemed to have accepted one another. Parents and teachers raised many questions about whether their children were going to remain in school. Teachers seemed to have many reservations about the issue of inclusion e.g. incentives for the extra duty, teacher preparedness for the task and acceptance of all children by all e.g. in profound disability cases. School heads confirmed their readiness to handle every case with empathy. They confirmed many preparations for effective inclusion eg content to be taught, school infrastructure and accessibility, catering for learner diversity.

Inclusive education (IE) has the most efficient means to remove stigma and narrow the gap of inequalities in the delivery of education worldwide. In other words, IE helps create a unified society, which disapproves on the practice of preferential treatment of some cohorts based on their condition. Reviewed literature has also underlined the importance of the teachers' role in the implementation of any education policy such as that of inclusivity. Their abilities to adjust, alter, and reshape the learning environment to accommodate the needs of impaired children is critical. Challenged children should be assisted by people close to them such as parents, educators, and school mates to gradually overcome difficulties in performing a given task in the daily education routine.

Recommendations

Many teachers will require in-service training on handling issues of inclusivity among other specifications. Teachers' attitudes towards disability and inclusivity in education, disability awareness training and education are essential requirements for all professionals. Instructors need to possess a complete understanding of the dimensions of particular impairments for the learning experience when working with special learners. Learners, teachers and parents will need continued group and individual counselling to eradicate marginalisation and stigmatisation in and outside of the classroom. Parents need to be much more involved in the learning and welfare of their children. Continued research will open up avenues for effective inclusivity.

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