TEACHING LEARNERS WITH READING DIFFICULTIES IN AN INCLUSIVE SETUP IN ZIMBABWE: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The inclusion of all learners within the regular classroom has brought about a plethora of challenges for teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges faced by mainstream primary school teachers when teaching learners with reading difficulties in an inclusive education setup in Zimbabwe. The study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of research. The study entailed a survey though questionnaires for the purpose of gathering information on the challenges faced by mainstream primary school teachers when teaching learners with reading difficulties. The questionnaire was administered on the teachers teaching dyslexic children in an inclusive set up. Fifty primary school teachers participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected from a group of primary school teachers teaching in inclusive set up who were willing to participate in the study. This study concluded that learners need to have their needs met concurrently with their non-dyslexic peers in an inclusive setting. The participants highlighted that parents did show an uncaring attitude like not helping learners with their homework or coming to the schools to inquire how best to help their dyslexic children. This study recommends there is need to provide basic training of teachers on dyslexia to enable them to cope with differentiated education.

Key Words: Dyslexia, reading difficulties. Inclusion, inclusive education, teaching dyslexic children

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

For most people living in today's modern world, reading is an everyday ordinary task to which little thought is given, yet it is one of the most important skills that learners acquire at school as it forms the foundation for all further learning. Unlike the ability to speak, the one to read is not inborn, and a learner does not acquire it simply by watching and listening to others reading. Many of our day-to-day tasks require reading, and a person who can read well can function more effectively in everyday activities

Literacy is the ability to read, write, listen and think creatively. It involves a wide range of cognitive competencies, from basic decoding to knowledge of words, grammar and larger

textual structures and features to knowledge about the world (Mackey, 2004:236). The effective acquisition of these competencies enhances the ability to read. Darrel (2005:4) describes reading as a skill that enhances learners to acquire all foundation for further learning.

Johnson, Pool and Carter (2013:1) observed that despite the need to address the importance of reading, most teachers and other stakeholders' research findings indicate that there are many learners who experience reading difficulties. For some, letters and words create confusion rather than meaning, for others a failure to develop the prerequisite skill and knowledge prevents them to become good readers. This inability to read may be a characteristic of dyslexia. Velluntino (1979:7) defines dyslexia as a generic term used to refer to children who are severely impaired in reading. Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

Reading is the basic life skill and cornerstone for every learner's success at school and throughout life, and many governments globally have a mandate to ensure that every school going child is equipped with reading skills to empower them until adulthood. This can help to put to an end the" chorus" of adult illiteracy. However learning to read, simple it may seem, is a realist problem for both learners and teachers. Inclusive education practices are currently in practice by most governments globally to ensure that all learners' needs are met (Swart & Pettipher 2005:8).

According to Howe, et al., (2007:218) the reading situation in Africa (South Africa and Zimbabwe included) constitutes a serious educational crisis. Every year there is a public outcry over the low grades and poor pass rates of secondary school learners. Although the reading skills of these learners are not stated their high failure rate suggests problems in their reading. Pretorius and Matchet, (2004:47) acknowledge that research in South Africa indicates that, in general, learners' reading skills are poorly developed, and this applies from

primary school through to tertiary level. Hugo (2010:133) also confirms that many young learners in South Africa have reading problems and there has long been a misunderstanding about the role of the teacher in teaching reading.

In Zimbabwe, the Schools Psychological Services use the Wide Range Achievement Tests-Level 1(WRAT-R1) to assess and place children with reading challenges in special classes. The Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised (WRAT-R1) contains three sub-tests: Reading (recognizing and naming letters and words), Spelling (writing symbols, name, and words), and Arithmetic (solving oral problems and written computations). The authors of WRAT-R1 emphasis of the test are to measure the basic school codes rather than comprehension, reasoning and judgment process. This study sought to examine the challenges faced by Zimbabwean rural primary schools in teaching children with reading difficulties in an inclusive education setup. There are dyslexic children in Zimbabwean primary schools as evidenced by the existence of special classes in some primary schools. Dyslexic children cannot be easily identified but the School Psychological Services recommends the placement of such children after testing them using the WRAT-1. Very few schools offer special classes to meet the needs of dyslexic children. Zimbabwe has inclusive education related policies like the Zimbabwe Disabled Persons Act of 1996 which advocates for non discrimination of people with disabilities (Chireshe, 2013:224) but it does not have a specific policy on inclusive education for learners with disabilities (Chireshe, 2013:226). Nziramasanga (1999:218) also highlights that 'Special Education is under the management of the Schools Psychological Services and Special needs Education *but with* no clear policy in place to cater for those with reading problems (the dyslexic).

Teaching students with dyslexia across settings is challenging. Both general education and special education teachers seek accommodations that foster the learning and management of a class of heterogeneous learners. Educators frequently find it difficult to differentiate between students with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, and slow learners. Students with learning disabilities often do significantly well in some areas but very poorly in others; slow learners; on the other hand, consistently perform at below-average levels in most areas. Students with dyslexia also exhibit specific learning deficits in information processing (i.e., organization of thinking skills, memory, learning efficacy), but slow learners usually exhibit general limited ability (Brinckerhoff, Shaw & McGuire, 1993).

Dyslexia may be accompanied by social, emotional and psychological problems (Ryan, 1994). Parents and teachers often mistakenly view children with dyslexia as bright students who just need to try harder. This attitude puts undue pressure on these students, because they are likely already trying their hardest. Also, individuals with dyslexia often perform erratically. They may be able to accomplish a task easily one day but be unable to do it the next. Furthermore, they may be able to do a very complex task yet flounder when attempting something very simple. Or they may make the same mistake in several different ways (e.g., misspelling a word five different ways in an assignment). This fluctuation in dyslexia's intensity makes it difficult for students to compensate. In addition, individuals with dyslexia often misread social cues, have a poor self-image, are socially immature and have trouble communicating orally. When they fail to meet others' expectations or are unable to achieve their own goals, they may feel frustrated, anxious, inadequate, depressed and angry.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many individuals with dyslexia have experienced years of frustration and limited success, despite countless hours spent in special programs or working with specialists. Their progress may have been agonizingly slow and frustrating, rendering them emotionally fragile and vulnerable. Some have been subjected to excessive pressure to succeed (or excel) without the proper support or training. Others have been continuously compared to siblings, classmates, or co-workers, making them embarrassed, cautious, and defensive. The study seeks to answer the following major question: What are the challenges faced by Zimbabwean primary school teachers in supporting dyslexic children in an inclusive education setup?

2.1 Research Questions

- What are probable causes of reading difficulties for children with dyslexia in inclusive primary schools in Zimbabwe?
- What strategies can be used by teachers to overcome challenges they encounter when teaching dyslexic children in Zimbabwean inclusive primary schools?

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

The study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of research. Quantitative research deals with questions of relationship, cause and effect, or current status that researchers answer by collecting and statistically analyzing numerical information (Ary et al. 2010). According to Creswell (2009) qualitative research involves proposing questions and course of action, information characteristically assembled in the participant's surroundings, data analysis inductively building from fine points to general themes and the researcher producing interpretations of the meaning of the information. The study entailed a survey though questionnaires for the purpose of gathering information on the challenges faced by mainstream primary school teachers when teaching learners with reading difficulties in primary schools of Zimbabwe. The questionnaires were administered to school teachers.

3.2 Sample

Fifty primary school teachers participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected from a group of primary school teachers teaching in inclusive set up who were willing to participate in the study. In purposeful sampling, the knowledgeable people are selected (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). The participants were qualified teachers who were knowledgeable about the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools.

3.3 Instrumentation

The questionnaire was used in this study. The researchers decided on this instrument because it is the most appropriate in collecting quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire was administered on the teachers teaching dyslexic children in an inclusive set up. The questionnaire allowed for the objective data due to the use of close-ended items. The close-ended questions provided a number of alternatives from which the respondents were instructed to choose. In order to ensure improved content validity of the instrument, it was given to some experts for proofreading, wording and restructuring of the items.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were presented and analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Descriptive statistical tools such as frequencies, percentages were used to analyse the research questions.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 What are the challenges encountered by teachers when teaching dyslexic children in Zimbabwean inclusive primary schools?

Table1: The challenges encountered by teachers when teaching dyslexic children in Zimbabwean inclusive primary schools.

Challenges Encountered	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teachers' lack of training in special needs education	40 (80%)	10 (20%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Lack of teaching facilities	25(50%)	15(30%)	8 (16%)	2(4%)
Class sizes are too big for teachers to facilitate quality learning.	50(100%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Negative attitudes of teachers	25(50%)	0(0%)	25(50%)	0(0%)
limited resources,	30(60%)	20(40%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Poor learning environment to support the learners with	15(30%)	30(60%)	3(6%)	2(4%)
Lack of parental involvement in the education of dyslexic learners.	32(64%)	17(34%)	1(2%)	0(0%)
Lack of support	0(0%)	25(50%)	25(50%)	0(0%)

The study found out that some challenges were more common and affected many respondents than others. All the participants pointed out that the main challenges were, the teachers' lack of training in special needs (100%), class sizes are too big for teachers to facilitate quality learning (100%) and limited resources (100%). According to Clark and Peterson (1986), external influences such as curriculum policy, the community and internal constraints such as the physical setting and resource availability significantly affect teachers' actions. In addition, teachers' thought processes may be similarly constrained because of reduced flexibility in their planning arising from curriculum design decisions determined by education policy. It would seem that the teachers are not receiving sufficient training and support with diversity and are left to tackle the issues on their own. Teachers are taught essential teaching skills during their training but receive limited, if any training in how to work children with dyslexia in an inclusive set up. This highlights the need to provide training and support to teachers working at schools where diversity issues arise, so that the teachers feel equipped to deal with learners with dyslexia.

An overarching issue that was accepted by almost all the participants was the lack of parental involvement (88%)in the education of dyslexic learners. Teachers felt unsupported by parents yet having dyslexic learners implies that both teachers and parents have to support each other and play a dual role if the learners are to perform well. With dyslexia learners will have challenges in their learning; teachers expected that parents or caregivers would be hands on in the education of their children.

Teachers also expressed challenges on poor reading material that the schools supplied. This material was seen to be shallow and not much help to dyslexic learners. Some participants complained about inadequate reading material such that learners were forced to share in class and alternate taking books home if given homework. One of the participants wrote:

Our school does not provide enough reading material and as a teacher you have to make learners share. Teaching becomes impossible; learning becomes very difficult especially in assisting dyslexic children.

4.2 What are probable causes of reading difficulties for children with dyslexia in inclusive primary schools in Zimbabwe?

Table2: Causes of reading difficulties for children with dyslexia in inclusive primary schools in Zimbabwe.

Causes of reading difficulties	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Inappropriate methodology used in the teaching of reading	15(30%)	25(50%)	5(10%)	5(10%)
Lack of Parental Involvement	2(4%)	30(60%)	13(26%)	5(10%)
Shallow knowledge of language constructs	0(0%)	25(50%)	25(50%)	0(0%)
Inflexible curriculum	15(30%)	25(50%)	10(20%)	0(0%)
Parent's lack of interest and supervision of their children schoolwork, including homework	15(30%)	30(60%)	3(6%)	2(4%)
Inferiority complex	0(0%)	25(50%)	25(50%)	0(0%)
inclusive education is not well cascaded to lower levels	25(50%)	15(30%)	8 (16%)	2(4%)

A survey of 50 teachers teaching in inclusive set up showed that the participants (80%) felt that inappropriate methodology used in the teaching of reading caused the reading challenges for children with dyslexia. 90% of the respondents also indicated that parents' lack of interest and supervision of their children schoolwork, including homework also caused challenges for children with dyslexia. The introduction of the new curriculum in Zimbabwe created problems for the teachers in teaching children with dyslexia. However, the question can be asked whether teachers are not simply resisting change. It is common knowledge that some teachers always try to resist change when a new curriculum is introduced, despite the benefits, because change may result in more work in terms of training, reading and the preparation of learning materials.

Teachers did not seem to have been introduced to the major communicative and interactive approaches to reading in the pre-service teacher programmes. Experience through interacting with practicing teachers shows that when learners read aloud individually, they are not given pause time to use other strategies. Learners often read parrot-like, while the meaning of what they read is not established by them. They are also over-corrected for trivial and insignificant pronunciation errors. In the context of literature, Joubert, Bester, Meyer and Evans (2012) suggest that teachers should know a variety of reading methods, for example, phonics approach or a language-experienced approach, and that they should not resort to one method of teaching.

The participants pointed out parents were not involved in their children's education. The parents remained uninvolved even if they were called by the teachers to come and see them. This was confirmed by three participants who wrote:

Reading becomes one of the activities that are not always prioritized by the community members, because the most prioritized activities are those that would bring food home. This can serve as one possible reason why parents remain uninvolved in their children's education.

Morrison (2009) found that students who spent more time receiving explicit instruction from more knowledgeable teachers had stronger word reading gains than those with less knowledgeable teachers. When participants in this study were asked about their ability to successfully help struggling readers, they showed a lack of confidence in their abilities.

4.3 What strategies can be used by teachers to overcome challenges they encounter when teaching dyslexic children in Zimbabwean inclusive primary schools?

Table 3: Strategies that can be used by teachers to overcome challenges they encounter when teaching dyslexic children in Zimbabwean inclusive primary schools

Strategies that could be used	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Use intervention programmes on reading	10(20%)	35(70%)	5(10%)	0(0%)
Provide individual support plan (ISP) for learners experiencing reading difficulties	20(40%)	30(60%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Involve parents to assist teachers in the child's work	10(20%)	20(40%)	10(20%)	20(40%)
Give appropriate reading skills	30(60%)	10(20%)	5(10%)	5(10%)
Use appropriate methods that suit the learning styles of learners	35(70%)	10(20%)	5(10%)	0(0%)
Instruction need to match the learner's academic needs	10(20%)	30(60%)	5(10%)	5(10%)

The information in Table 3 above indicate that different strategies can be used to overcome the challenges teachers encounter when teaching dyslexic children and these include: use intervention programmes on reading, provision of individual support plan (ISP) for learners experiencing reading difficulties, giving appropriate reading skills and that instructions need to match the learner's academic needs. It is critical to identify learners with reading difficulties early in elementary years so as to provide them with appropriate instruction and interventions so that reading difficulties are resolved during their early years of schooling than when they are older.

Darrel (2005:4) and Norton (2007:5) state that that just as there is no single type of learners in the reading room, instruction need to match the learner's academic needs. Russell and Santoro (2007:190) maintain that carefully designed instruction is required to help learners

at risk of academic failure referred to here as learners experiencing reading difficulties.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

From the findings, this study concluded that learners need to have their needs met concurrently with their non-dyslexic peers in an inclusive setting. The participants highlighted that parents did show an uncaring attitude like not helping learners with their homework or coming to the schools to inquire how best to help their dyslexic children. A research by Lindsay, Proulx, Scott and Thomson (2013), concluded that parental involvement play a crucial role in the support of learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. A barrier that participants in this study raised was the failure for the government to practically help them include dyslexic learners. This failure was seen in the lack of financial support and training. Reiser(2006) says the lack of resources makes inclusion hard to translate from policy to practice. While it cannot be denied that resources play an integral part in the management of schools, Slee and Allan (2001) warn of reducing inclusion to battles of limited resources.

In a report on teaching learners with dyslexia, Rose (2009) seems to suggest that helping a child overcome dyslexia and literacy requires considerable knowledge and expertise on the part of the teacher. Lamport (2012) holds that for inclusion to be successful, it is important for teachers to be provided with training. Similar views seem to be shared by Thwala (2015) that the lack of training makes it impossible for teachers to supervise teaching and learning in inclusive settings. Even though it can be concluded that training is the backbone to the success of all inclusionary practices, findings in the study show that teachers struggle to understand dyslexia and how dyslexic learners can be effectively taught in mainstream classrooms.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends there is need to provide basic training of teachers on dyslexia to enable them to cope with differentiated education. This could be achieved by redesigning the curriculum of teacher training institutions so that when a teacher qualifies, should complete theory and practical part of the training in regular as well as in inclusive setting. The teacher should demonstrate that s/he is able to cope with challenges of meeting the needs of learners with special educational needs within the inclusive setting.

The study recommends that all schools need to be well developed and resourced to enable all learners to be exposed to a variety of reading material to widen their horizon and to be able to compete with their peers locally and globally without feeling inferior. Teachers, as experts in their own field, need to alternate various methods for teaching reading depending on the learner needs. Research indicates that no method can be singled out as the best method for teaching reading. More research on the impact of reading material, time, language and

workshops is critical. Teachers need in-depth, hands-on training and also guided practice for developing lessons and activities using their content material to teach strategies to learners.

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