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Inclusive education among learners with visual impairments in Masvingo North District, Zimbabwe

Caleb Rangarira Ngwarati[1], Stella Muchemwa[2]*
[1]Public Relations Office, Ministry of Primary & Secondary Education, Zimbabwe
[2]Applied Education English, Midland State University, Zimbabwe
*muchemwas@staff.msu.ac.zw

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Abstract

Visually impaired (VI) learners face challenges at school especially in the developed world where resources are scarce. Since 1980, Zimbabwe prioritized universal education, aligning with the 'growth with equity' principle and 'nobody left behind' concept. The 1987 Education Act emphasized inclusivity. This study draws from three models—Social Model, Critical Disability Theory, and Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Model—all advocating for educational inclusion. The study investigated inclusive education for visually impaired secondary school students in Masvingo North district, Zimbabwe, aiming to identify improved implementation methods for inclusion. Researchers collected data from 4 schools using questionnaires, interviews and observations. A purposive sample (N=67) of 4 school heads, 20 teachers and 43 students comprising 13 VI and 30 non-visual (non-VI) was used. Results revealed that school heads lacked both the knowledge and enthusiasm to implement inclusive education effectively. Additionally, school infrastructure was often unsuitable for visually impaired students, and teaching resources were limited. Most teachers lacked the necessary skills for both face-to-face and online teaching for visually impaired learners. Moreover, there was a lack of awareness and social support for visually impaired students among non-visually impaired peers, schools, and the community. Based on these findings, researchers concluded that inclusive education for visually impaired students requires further development. Teacher educators should train school heads and trainee teachers to address disabilities in schools, while holding related in-service workshops. The responsible ministry and schools should fund for the necessary resources, and the government should ensure policy execution for inclusive education to flourish in Zimbabwe.

Keywords

Inclusive education, visual impairment, Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, nations have upheld inclusive education as a key to human development and economic sustainable development. Present global trend in education is tilted towards inclusion of students with disabilities in the main steam so as to achieve universal education, although with challenges, since the inception of the 1994 Salamanca Statement de Souza [1]. Zimbabwe has also its part to play in inclusive education.

The term inclusion in the education fraternity is associated with the process of understanding and reacting to the diverse needs of all learners through boosting involvement in learning, cultures and communities, regardless of their abilities [2]. It advocates for equality and fairness

in students' participation in all types of schools and activities regardless of their various diversities. In Zimbabwe, quality inclusive education is regarded as sine qua non for attaining the national vision of becoming a middle-income country by 2030.

The inclusion policy came from the background of discrimination in the education fraternity. Plan International [3] has reported that there are about 150 million disabled children worldwide who are frequently denied an education and are most vulnerable and marginalized members of their communities. Wapling [4] suggests that gender and poverty complicate success for children with disabilities in formal education.

Humanitarians have always sought to protect these people with disabilities, for instance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 advocated a welfare viewpoint that emphasized disability prevention and rehabilitation [5]. The United Nations Standard Rules also added to equal education opportunities and inclusive education [6]. The 1994 Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action, is another disability-specific international legal instrument earmarked at protecting this affected group [1].

In keeping with international trends and standards in education, Zimbabwe has adopted inclusive education as a means of embracing, in education, students with impairments [7]. Recently, the National Disability policy of 2021 has been put in place. All these are meant for expansive move to the "growth with equity" goal associated with "nobody left behind" concept that the country adopted at independence in 1980. This means that, the right to education for all became a priority that the country committed itself to.

In the secondary schools, inclusion calls for the transformation of accepting and providing quality service to students with disabilities. This move posed challenges to regular secondary schools in Zimbabwe who used to care for students who were considered "normal" for many years while those with specific conditions were accommodated at special schools [8]. Hlatywayo and Mapolisa [9] unearthed the problem at teacher training colleges where curriculum rigidity and lack of resources hinders proper teacher training in teachers' colleges. The two also found lack of uniformity and standardization in the Zimbabwean education system as another challenge in the implementation of inclusive education.

Traditionally in Zimbabwe, children with VI would normally be educated in special school such as Margaretha Hugo (Capota) and Jairo Jiri in Kadoma [10]. Capota primary school was established in 1915 while the high school was incepted in 2009 [11], [12]. In some cases, in the country, the VI were educated in special classes, or resource units in some regular or mainstream schools. However, there are several VI children who, for various reasons, are failing to access education. They may be excluded from school because of their disabilities which vitiated and negatively impacted learning progress. To satisfy such learners' needs, schools and classrooms should be child-centered modifying their learning environment and curriculum as well as their teaching and learning approaches to suit even the VI learners [2].

The Government of Zimbabwe has taken a step in trying to implement inclusive education where learners with VI are to learn with mainstream learners either in mainstream schools or in the former special schools. To this effect, M. Hugo High School for the blind in Masvingo, for the past four years (from about 2017), has been trying to put this policy in action by enrolling non-VI learners. They have been enrolling such learners at a maximum of 5% of the students at the school. Elsewhere in the country, schools are encouraged to enroll VI learner in the mainstream schools [13].

From the above discussion, it can be seen that Zimbabwe's educational policy highlighted the importance of education as a fundamental human right, which should be available to all students regardless of race, gender, class, religion, disability and culture. However, some mainstream schools still have that negative attitude towards learners with VI and some of them are not yet prepared for such inclusion. Such scenarios have forced the affected parents and guidance to pull their children from the mainstream schools. This is what motivated the researchers to take up this critical conceptualization of the current implementation of inclusive education among learners with visual impairment in Masvingo North.

Literature study

Inclusive education has attracted research worldwide including in Zimbabwe. Findings

generally revealed that children living with disability are disadvantaged in societies [2], [14], [15]. UNICEF [16] found that nearly 24 million children in the world has some form of disability. World Health Organization estimated that 10% of Zimbabwe's population lives with disability while only 33% of children living with disability has access to education, compared to 90%of the able-bodied population [17]. To worsen the situation, only 5% of all the children with disabilities who begin their primary education complete it [7].

Resource availability

While the nations have taken a positive step toward inclusion in education, there are challenges that humper its success. One obvious obstacle against its smooth implementation is lack of resources as Mutizwa [18] realized. Lack of key facilities for the visually impaired students such as favorable buildings, braille books, braille paper and all other requirements a learner with visual impairment would need for learning to take place are a real set-back.

Chikiwa [15] found out that that most schools do not have facilities to cater for the visually impaired students, for instants, for over 100 schools in Bulawayo, only 3 have resource units. Similarly, Chuchu and Chuchu [14] study findings showed that lack of financial and human resources as well as ineffective policies, contributed to the low impact of inclusive Education.

De Souza [1] researched on the journey of inclusive education implementation in Africa where a plethora of challenges were met during the process of slow development; he explained it as a back-and-forth endeavor hampered by traditional beliefs and attitudes of people.

Musa [19] made a related study in Sierra Leon specifically focusing on girls with disability and their inclusion. He highlighted that, in March 2020, Sierra Leon removed a ban of pregnant girls from attending school after the ECOWAS Regional Human Rights court ruled it to be discrimination especially when considering more challenges on the girl child that were accelerated by COVID 19 pandemic. Musa also wrote of a successful story of a visually impaired girl child, Marie, who was given a radio by donors and could continue with her lesson through the radio-lesson program that was introduced in the country as a means of averting COVID 19 challenges.

It can be seen that the VI learners face many challenges in their education endeavors, for instance, they cannot afford the needed resources. Lack of these resources as well as the absence of support from the community for students living with disabilities, is detrimental to their inclusion in the education system.

School heads know-how and teacher-skills to handle inclusion

School heads know-how and teachers' skills in dealing with VI learners in an inclusive educational environment is essential in the success of the inclusion process. Khaleel et al. [20] carried out a study on the role of school heads in promoting inclusion in the schools and found out that school heads' awareness of inclusive education emerged as a significant factor in creating and promoting inclusive schools.

Mutizwa [18] studied students with disabilities and their aspirations for the future focusing on UNICEF works in Zimbabwe. He wrote on students at King George vi Centre (KG6) in Bulawayo who were harvesting the fruits of inclusive education in schools receiving donor-funding. UNICEF also initiated the launching of the National Disability policy in 2021 to address discrimination and marginalization of students with disabilities. Despite donor funding, Mutizwa [18] realized challenges even at such good schools and called for multiskilled, adaptable and flexible teachers who can handle the deaf, the down syndrome and the blind, all in one class.

Another main teacher-skill challenge found on a related study was on computer teaching where the visually impaired were given free lesson when others were learning computer skills main due to lack of know-how on the part of teachers [15]. He realized that the government of Zimbabwe is also playing its part; it has designed a roll-out-plan for inclusive education training, a program that was delayed by COVID 19 related challenges.

Attitude towards visual impairment

The Zimbabwean government cares for its citizens living with disabilities. Article 22 of the Constitution states that all government institutions must recognize the rights to education of persons with disabilities and should assist them to achieve their full potential so as to minimize the disadvantages they suffer [7]. The country

was among the first in Africa to adopt the disability legislation in 1996.

Maria and Mira [21] realized that blindness has been stereotyped and labeled by the sighted people reducing the acceptance and tolerance of the VI persons. Thus, the VI were still prejudiced in their education although the attitude was moving towards accepting them.

Chuchu and Chuchu [14] studied on the impact of inclusive education on learners with disabilities in high schools of Harare. They also wanted to find out the extent to which it has benefited students with disability. They realized that there were low inclusive rates in the country. The low impact was mainly due to negative perceptions and attitudes of the people who were pivotal to the success of the VI in the region.

One can conclude that more is needed from organizations, individuals, the government as and well-wishers to put effort, at times through workshops to sensitize the society at large on the need to accept VI since this area is still lacking. At the same time, the Zimbabwean government should return persons with disabilities at the top of legislative reform agenda as was in the past.

Theories of the study

This study is underpinned by three models namely: Social Model, Critical Disability Theory and the Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Model. The Social Model posits that, on disability, the limiting conditions on an individual are created by unjust connections in a debilitating society rather than by a person's incapacity [5]. This means that the inability usually associated with human impairments are societal constructs which are not genuine. This model suits this study for inclusion is based on the concept that disability does not mean inability.

Another related model, the Critical Disability Theory that was influenced by Michel Foucault [22], was employed in the study. Clark [23] said that studies related to critical disability originated in the 1970s while the theory itself was founded in the late 1990s. Like the Social Model, it views disability as socially constructed rather than a result of deficiencies. It is a non-separatist theory that encourages human emancipation. This theory is suitable for the study for it condemns discrimination based on disability, gender, ethnicity, age and social status hence, inclusion.

The third model, the Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural model claims that social, cultural and historical factors have an impact on human development [24]. The argument is that learning only happens if the learners interact with peers where social and cultural exchanges has a long-term impact on the learners. This means that the inclusive studying of students with disability and those without is beneficial to both groups for they can assist each other in the process. Alternative ways of involvement and specific treatments, such as supplemental modes of communication using Braille, may be required if social barriers to participation exist [24].

Statement of the problem

Worldwide, inclusive education has been meant to alleviate challenges faced by learners with impairments. However, learners with visual impairment in Zimbabwe still face challenges in accessing quality education [1], [18]. Although Zimbabwe subscribes to the policy of education-for-all as a fundamental right and despite having relatively high school attendance, there remains a notable disparity in terms of access, participation, retention, completion of cycles and achievement of learners with visual impairment in high schools in Zimbabwe.

Research questions

The four research questions were: (RQ1) What is the state of resource-availability to teach the visually impaired students in Masvingo North district secondary schools?; (RQ2) Do school heads and teachers have relevant knowledge and skills to teach the visually impaired learners?; (RQ3) Is the school-infrastructure user friendly to learners with VI in the selected schools?; (RQ4) Which mitigation measures can be used to improve inclusive education status in Masvingo North district?

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the researchers used a mixed methods design, it is using questionnaires, interviews and document analysis as data collection tools. The sample comprised 4 schools in Masvingo North district in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe. Purposively selected 67 respondents were used for the study and these were: 4 school heads, 20 teachers and 43 students (13 VI learners and 30 non-VI learners). Table 1 show specific sample allocations.

Table 1. Overall demographic statistics

Participants	Males	Females	Total
VI learners	7	6	13
Non-VI learners	12	18	30
Teachers	8	12	20
School heads	4	0	4
Total	31	36	67

Table 2 is a summary of learners with VI (all from one school, school B, that is, the formers VI special school) from Form One to Form Six who were purposively selected to participate in this study. Both males (53.84%) and females (46.15%) took part in the research.

Table 2. Demographic information for VI learners

Form	1	2	3	4	5	6	Subtotal
Males	-	-	-	2	2	3	7
Female	-	-	-	2	1	3	6
Total	-	-	-	4	3	6	13

Teachers were equally-selected, that is 5 from each school. On the part of non-VI, an equal number of 7 non-VI were taken from school A, C and D while 9 were selected from school B.

Data collection instruments

The researchers used neat and presentable questionnaires with clear instructions for participants for data collection. Respondents' anonymity was considered as well. The researchers also used face-to-face interviews as well as observations. This triangulated data collection strategy provided a cost-effective and quick method of acquiring valid and reliable data.

The researchers chose interviews because they allow respondents to ask for clarity on the questions that they failed to understand and this opened up a depth interrogation of facts. The researchers also used the observation checklist which guided them. One of the two researchers visited and observed the schools in terms of infrastructure, facilities and other necessities of the study; also checked on the available records of resources for the visually impaired students in the schools chosen.

Data collection procedures

In compliance with research ethics, the researchers got all the necessary data collection documents. The researchers then scheduled appointments with selected schools at times that were convenient to both the researchers and the respondents. As such, one of the researchers administered the questionnaires to the school heads, the teachers and the students and later on interviewed the selected participants under study. Face-to-face interviews were done in line with World Health Organization (WHO) protocol on COVID 19 conditions, that is sanitizing, masking and maintaining social distance since data was collected during the pandemic era. Document analysis was also done.

Data analysis and presentation techniques

Data acquired for this study was mainly qualitative, that is, from the open-ended questionnaires and interviews. It was therefore processed according to themes of the research questions in stages by the researchers. In the first stage, the researchers familiarized themselves with the obtained data and then put it under the rightful research questions. Important excepts were also extracted and fitted in accordingly. Arrangement of the data was then done in order to make a meaningful presentation of findings. Data from the literature review as well as the theories of the study was used to make substantiated analysis of the findings. Data obtained from the documents was also used to supplement and confirm information gathered from the other sources. The analyzed data was then presented as tables and narrations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research addressed each research question in its respective section sequentially, namely: (1) resource availability to teach, (2) relevant knowledge and skills to teach, (3) school

infrastructure user-friendly, and (4) mitigation measures.

Resource-availability to teach

Table 3 shows responses from school heads on the availability of special resources to carter for the learning of VI learners. School heads and teachers of school A, C and D revealed that resources were not available to aid the teaching and learning of VI learners, hence they could not accommodate such learners in their schools. Only school B (former VI special school) had the basic required resources for teaching and learning of the VI learners**.** However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, school B VI learners were almost booted out of meaningful learning due to lack of relevant technologies. This finding is similar to that by Chikiwa [15] who found out that most schools in Zimbabwe do not have facilities to cater for the visually impaired students.

The unavailability of teaching and learning resources has hindered the progress of the implementation of inclusive education among VI learners as they cannot learn without the resources mentioned on Table 3. They also require other resources such as recorders, talking calculators and computers as well as soft-wares such as Non Visual Desktop Access (NVDA) and Job Access With Speech (JAWS) for research.

Table 3. Availability of resources checklist

Learning materials for VI learners	School A	School B	School C	School D
Sleets	No	Yes	No	No
Stylus	No	Yes	No	No
Braille papers	No	Yes	No	No
Braille books	No	Yes	No	No
Braille machines (Perkins, Bailers, Embossers etc.)	No	Yes	No	No

Interviews with the school Heads revealed that there were challenges even in school B (former VI special school); though the school had some braille books in stock, some teachers said that there was need for updating the library to accommodate new curriculum books such as Family and Religious Studies and Heritage textbooks for Zimbabwe Junior Certificate to Advanced level. Learners who use braille at school B indicated that they all had stylus and sleets that they use to write; this helps them to jot down notes. However, time usually limit them since the lessons are 35minutes and the teacher would want to cover as much as possible in a lesson. They said that it is a bit slower when using stylus as compared to Braille Perkins and recorders but the schools did not have such resources and learners could not afford to buy them on their own. The school head and teachers confirmed this.

Most participants from school B indicated the challenge of Braille papers; they could not be bought at ordinary shops. They were also expensive while they were used in large quantities, for instance, one learner may use more than 50 sheets per lesson especially in subjects like History, Heritage Studies and Geography, some teacher informants said. School head B also confirmed this inadequacy of resources especially the braille papers which learners cannot do without. Again, participants exposed that the Braille machine is also a problem at the school because there is no specialist who can fix the machine whenever it breaks down. A teacher respondent from schools B mentioned that the machine, after a breakdown, can take a very long time without being fixed. These findings are similar to one by Mutizwa [18] who realized that lack of resources hampered the inclusion of learners in schools.

Learners from school B indicated that sometimes schools do respond to their needs but the problem is that the equipment and other needed resources are expensive for them to purchase. The affected learners appreciated the school efforts, for instance, they said that the school had applied for funds to help them.

Schools A, C and D, as can be seen on Table 3, have no resources for the VI learners. This is typical of all the other school in the district and province of study. School heads A, C and D argued that they did not blot away the idea of inclusive education but were of the view that at that moment, they could only enroll learners who had low vision and could use large print for they could not meet the teaching and learning needs of the VI learners. They recommended that learners who used braille could better be educated in the special schools. Some non-VI learners echoed the same sentiments due to empathy for their fellow

leaners. This finding negates inclusion and thus, forfeits the Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural model's advantages of the social interaction of the VI and non-VI in the classroom and the school at large for human development.

It can be seen that, due to all these challenges, inclusive education had made very little impact in the district and a lot need to be done in terms of amassing resources before enrolling learners with visual impairment. Thus, the researchers concur with the school heads in that, since the schools do not have available resources to carter for the VI learners, it can be better for VI learners to be educated in special school, then those special schools should implement reverse inclusion whereby they enroll a certain percentage of ordinary learners to learn in the VI learner' classes.

Relevant knowledge and skills to teach

Table 4 shows professional qualifications of the 4 heads who participated in this research as well as their work experience. Three of the 4 heads had no qualification to teacher learners with disabilities, that is, Head A, C and D. Only one out of 4, Head B, had qualifications to teaching both the visually impaired and the non-visually impaired learners. This is the one who headed the visually impaired special school that had adopted inclusive education. This demographic information shows how challenging it is in implement inclusive education in Masvingo; those who are supposed to lead the people towards inclusion lack the expected and mandatory know-how and capabilities.

Table 4. Demographic information for school heads

Participants	Professional status and service history
Head A	- Holder of Bed in Mathematics; Bed in Educational Management - Holder of Masters in Educational Management - Has no experience in teaching learners with VI - Served as a head for 10 years
Head B	- Holder of Bachelor of Arts in Religious studies and History - Bed in Special Needs Education - Holder of Masters in Educational Management. - Has 13 years of experience on teaching VI learners - Served as a head at the same school for 13 years
Head C	- Holder of Bachelor of Arts and Postgraduate Diploma in Languages - Holder of Masters in ChiShona - Has no experience of teaching VI learners - Served as a teacher for 11 years and as a head for 6 years
Head D	- Bed Honors in History - Served as a senior teacher for 17 years and as an acting head of the same school for 2 years

Demographic information for teachers

Only 15% of the total teachers who participated in the study had a Diploma in Special Needs Education. This is why teachers of the schools under study argued that there were no teachers trained to teach learners VI learners.

Head D said that he had never taught VI learners and had no knowledge as to how he could involve them in an inclusive classroom. Teacher participants of the same school also indicated that they had not been oriented to teach learners with VI and worse still, there were no workshops that could orient them on inclusive education. These findings show that the challenges to the inclusion of learners with VI in Masvingo North district are linked to the scarcity of trained teachers, in line with Hlatywayo and Mapolisa [9] findings on lack of teacher training due to teacher training college curriculum rigidity. Similarly, these findings tally what Mutizwa [18] also realized that multiskilled, adaptable and flexible teachers who can handle the deaf, the down syndrome and the blind, all in one class, were hard to come by.

It can be seen that inclusive education is making no impact in the region since there are no teachers who are trained to teach VI learners at most of the schools. For inclusive education to be successfully implemented, knowledgeable teachers on visual impairment are essential. On consulting the school heads on this issue, the researchers got the following information.

School A Head stated that:

"*As for me, I don't have much information about how we should entertain learners with VI in inclusive education based on the international agreements, national policies and theoretical principles. As far as inclusive education is concerned, the national policies are not applicable to this school since we do not have teachers who are trained for special needs education. Neither do we have materials for teaching learners with VI; they are expensive in which the school without the help of the government and interested organizations cannot afford to provide them. Our infrastructure is also not friendly for learners with visual impairment for it was built with only able-bodied learners in mind. VI infrastructure is very expensive to set up and maintain. Therefore, l can say, national policies and all other document policies are not applicable to this school*".

School C Head echoed similar sentiments saying:

"*Inclusive education for learners with VI has never been practiced at this school although at one time we had only two learners who were short sighted. As you have asked, I know that I should give my suggestions on the UN conventions and the inclusive education policy. What I can say is, in the context of these rural schools, as far as inclusive education policy is concerned, it is not applicable. No orientation was given to teachers to teach and associate with VI learners. Inclusive education was not put into practice, due to the inapplicability of this policy to our school. The school and its income cannot afford the demands of inclusive education. What l can say is that, the national policy is not applicable to this school*".

Again, on a similar note, School D Head echoed:

"*In general, I can say, the inclusive education policy on the section of persons with disability is difficulty to implement at our school since the school cannot provide academic resources that carter for visually impaired learners; therefore, the policy is not applicable to our school. It much better for the VI learners to continue learning in their special schools for we are not yet ready to embrace them in our schools. Looking at our infrastructure, it is not friend at all; our toilets cannot be used easily with VI learner. Also, there is the issue of our teachers; we do not have teachers trained for TAT at this school and we have limited knowledge as to how we can best teach learners with disabilities*".

The responses by three school heads participants indicated that the paper policy on inclusive education and other legislations lacks entourage from the government and other responsible authorities making it impossible to embrace inclusive education. Lack of trained personnel, resources and friendly environment for the visually impaired learners cripples inclusive education implementation. This shows that schools are not yet ready to embrace inclusive education as a national policy.

On the other hand, School B Head confirmed ability to handle VI students, though with challenges saying:

"*Inclusive education policy and all other legislations that advocates for inclusion of persons with disability in education are somehow applicable to this school since we can provide the basic resources to meet the requirements of learning for both VI and non-VI learners. However, there are a number of challenges that come with it, for instance, it gives teachers a lot of pressure to effectively teach both learners to their understanding. This is because most learners with visual impairment need more attention than non-VI learners. At a result, the teacher neglects the other group (VI) since they need more time to grasp the concepts, thus, disadvantaging them. It seems, inclusion cannot be implemented without disadvantaging the other group. Maybe, for us to implement inclusive education without disadvantaging the VI learners, the teachers should be given VI learners they can manage, a state which is hampered by limited stuff and classrooms at this school.*

As for us, we have been implementing reverse inclusion, whereby we enroll about 5% non-VI learners in our VI learner classes. l cannot say much on the impact of this inclusive

education among learners with visual impairment since it is at its early stages".

The researchers realized that, out of the four schools under study, only school B had teachers who had at least knowledge, skill and experience in face-to-face teaching VI learners (though with difficulties with online teaching. The other three schools have a lot to be desired. The above findings are similar to those by de Souza [1] who researched on the journey of inclusive education implementation in Africa and found a plethora of challenges encountered during the process. This means that skilled personnel and resources availability are key to successful inclusive education. This can be achieved when all the related parties take up their responsibilities, otherwise they aggravate the limitations of the VI learners, as the Social Model and the Critical Disability Theory posit, rather than alleviate the situation.

School-infrastructure user friendly

One area of interest that the researchers wanted to establish was the infrastructure aspect. It was clearly spelt out through evidence garnered from questionnaires and interviews that respondents were aware of the concept of the infrastructure in general, and the special infrastructures that can support VI learners.

The researchers interrogated the school heads, teachers, VI and non-VI learners on the availability and usability status of the present infrastructures in the four schools in question because children with disabilities are likely to be out of school in the event of unfavorable infrastructure. School A lacked user-friendly infrastructure to VI learners as said by the school head, the teachers and the learners. Similarly, at school C, the roads to the dining hall were in a very bad shape posing a great challenge to VI learner. When considering school D, it is in the remote areas and had poor building facilities which are not user friendly to learners with visual impairment. The school head indicated that all the buildings at the school had been built without VI learners in mind and were obviously not friendly to them. He also said that classroom arrangements and the pit toilets were done without considering the issue of inclusive education. Learner respondents were worried with the school ground state; they said that it was rocky and became muddy during the rainy season making it difficult to access by the VI learners. The school head and some teachers therefore recommended the government to help such schools by contributing in the developing of the infrastructure structure so as to meet the needs of VI learners.

The researchers also surveyed school D and observed that it is located near a river and a main road, which could cause challenges to VI learners. In such locales, VI leaners can then become a burden to other learners because they need regular assistance to and from home crossing the river and the main road. It was obvious that inclusive education was making very little or no impact in such schools with poor infrastructure.

Contrary to the findings at school A, C and D, infrastructure at School B was user friendly. There were even rumps and indoor toilets. What school B head echoed in an interview that the school ground, toilets and dormitories were user friendly to learners with VI, was seen by the researchers. The school was built with VI learners in mind. One of the researchers observed for one year while on attachment that the school's infrastructure was not a burden to VI learners; they could move freely without assistance and the environment was healthy for them. However, the researchers observed that there was still need to improve the infrastructures since the school grounds had no pavement where learners with VI could move from point A to point B without any assistance. Again, though they had indoor toilets, they were located far from the classrooms and learners with VI might find it difficult to use.

From the interviews with the school heads, teachers, VI and non-VI, the researchers found out that the school infrastructure, especially for School A, C and D, had a negative impact towards the functioning of visually impaired learners. This finding is similar to that of SABC Digital News [25] who realized that poor school infrastructure remains a main factor negatively impacting academic performance among learners.

When asked on the user-friendliness of the infrastructures, the majority of the VI respondents at School B were quick to answer saying that the infrastructures still needed to be renovated so as to cater for their needs. In the case of school A, C and D, roadways were a challenging situation. Ramps were found in some few places leaving VI learners with limited access to the school vicinity. The presence of stairways also limited freedom of movement to

some places. Furthermore, the available roads have been in a bad shape making them not friendly to VI learners. The researchers also noticed the absence of hand rails on the walls which are meant to assist VI learners.

Researchers' observations on toilet setups and facilities at all the schools commonly confirms what the learners had said. It revealed dirt condition with limited water, thus exposing VI learners to Urinary Tract Infections (UTI). Toilet facilities failed to meet Mwakyambiki [26] criteria when he said that good sanitary facilities help children with disabilities to learn comfortably without being discriminated against by their fellow pupils after failing to access these services.

These finding made the researchers concluded that, since most schools have bad infrastructure which can hardly accommodate VI learners, it is best to educate learners with VI in special school where they can access better facilities. Otherwise, what Morelle and Tabane [27] found in South African schools that though VI learners are physically integrated in the mainstream classes, they are not truly included, becomes true for Masvingo district, Zimbabwe.

Mitigation measures

The researchers sourced for mitigation measures even from the participants asking them what can be done to achieve inclusive education without leaving anyone behind. School heads and teachers advocated for seminars and refresher-courses for serving teachers and school heads on how to handle, encourage and successfully teach VI learners especially during challenging times of epidemics. On the same note, teachers in training should be equipped to deal with the impaired students in and outside the classroom, a finding similar to that by Morelle and Tabane [27] who realized that teacher training should be enhanced so that teacher can be able to handle VI learners. School heads as well need thorough workshops for them to be well versed with inclusion in education, an aspect that was also realized by Khaleel et al. [20] in a related study.

Visual impaired respondents recommended that there was need for schools to provide them with surviving skills in the schools, such as, direction, mobility and travel skills. However, the non-VI could not give much thought to the VI challenges. This therefore calls for special needs teachers at every school in Zimbabwe or, at least visiting teacher services. Some school heads and teachers called for orientation to be given to school heads, teachers, learners, parents/ guardians, and other people who are currently involved (or will be, in the near future) with the VI students to do away with the societal misconception towards learners with VI which is a cause of attitudinal behaviors, as Khaleel et al. [20] recommended in their study.

In order to change people's negative attitudes and lack of information on VI learners, as this study as well as Chuchu and Chuchu [14] realized, other students, that is, the non-VI, can be mobilized to act as buddies, peer tutors as well as caretakers and helpers to ensure the safety and comfort of VI learners in and outside the classroom. This insight goes along the Critical Disability Theory which condemns discrimination based on human challenges.

On the other hand, the government, the responsible ministry and NGOs can help in the provision of resources (including glasses, big-print materials and magnifiers) and the development of the infrastructure to meet the needs of VI learners.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that, despite the vigorous global, continental and national advent of inclusive education, the inclusion of VI learners in the education mainstream has so far just made very little impact in Masvingo North district in Zimbabwe. This is so because the majority of teachers have no experience on how to teach VI learners, lack of necessary resources, unfavorable learning environment and reluctancy to implement inclusive policy in the schools. It can also be concluded that there is societal misconception and negative attitudinal behavious of learners who are visually impaired from parents, other students, some teacher and other people associated with the VI learners. This on its own acceralates the challenges that the VI learners face in the schools. This means that there is still a lot of skepticism and ambivalence towards the implementation of inclusive education for learners with VI in Masvingo district. Although Zimbabwe subscribes to the policy of education for all as a fundamental right, and despite relatively high school attendance, there remains a notable disparity in terms of access, participation, retention, completion of cycles and achievement of VI learners in education.

This study recommends that, since the challenges faced by students with VI learners are multi-faceted, concerted efforts from all stakeholders is required so as to provide solutions and interventions. The government and schools should invest in school infrastructure development and make it user friendly to VI learners. They can also provide the needed resources. School heads should be conscientized on the urgent need for inclusion in the schools so that they start to plan and be serious on inclusion implementation. On the same note, teacher educators should make it mandatory that all teachers in training should do special needs education in order to produce skilled teachers who can deal with learners with impairment. For the already serving teachers, training courses and workshops on inclusive education are essential. Above all, people need to get education related to human impairments so that they can positively and helpfully view the affected persons.

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