

Mainstreaming Inclusion In Teacher Education In Zimbabwe.

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-----ABSTRACT-----

The basic education philosophy has invariably altered the academic profile of pupils populating Zimbabwe's public primary schools. Teachers are having difficulties handling inclusive classes. Similarly, most pupils' individual needs are hardly addressed in mainstream classes. Teachers do not seem to possess the necessary skills to effectively teach inclusive classes. Most if not all, aim their teaching at the presumed average pupil, meaning that the gifted pupils are not cultivated to their academic potential while pupils having learning disabilities and other educational needs are lost in the academic maze. In the face of all these didactic problems, questions have been raised regarding the suitability of the country's teacher education programme. This study explores the challenges experienced by lecturers as they attempt to equip teacher trainees with inclusive teaching skills and suggest strategies that teachers' training colleges can adopt in order to mainstream Inclusion in teacher development. The study adopted a qualitative approach, where focus group discussions were used to generate data from lecturers from one of Zimbabwe's primary teachers' training colleges. Data were transcribed, verified, segmented, coded and analysed using thematic content analysis. Major findings were that: lecturers were aware of the meaning of inclusive education; they knew the skills that needed to be inculcated in teacher trainees when preparing them for inclusive teaching; lecturers were not mainstreaming inclusion in teacher development because of a number of challenges, inter alia the lecturers' limited knowledge and skills in inclusion and lack of pro-inclusion policies on teacher development. Recommendations to facilitate the mainstreaming of inclusion in teacher education include: enactment of clear pro-inclusion policies to guide teacher development in the country; staff development of lecturers and reconceptualisation of the type of a teaching graduate that Zimbabwe needs in the context of inclusion.

KEY TERMS: Mainstreaming, Inclusion, Teacher Education, Zimbabwe.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In a study by Mafa (2012) teachers pointed out that it was hard to successfully manage inclusive classes. They also mentioned lack of specific skills when dealing with specific forms of special needs, e.g. reading and writing Braille and not being able to use sign language when interacting with children having hearing impairments. Most teachers said lesson preparation, planning how to organise pupils for teaching, actual lesson delivery, variety of work to be assessed placed heavy demands on them. Problems encountered by teachers when handling inclusive classes bring to the fore the appropriateness of the teacher's training programmes that teacher trainees are exposed to during pre-service teacher training (Mafa, 2003). The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2010:6) reiterates that: 'Underlying the process of inclusion is the assumption that the general classroom teachers have certain knowledge and understanding about the needs of different learners, teaching techniques and curriculum strategies'. Florian and Rouse (2009) opine that the task of pre-service teachers' training is to prepare teacher trainees to enter a profession which accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of all children. Pre-service teacher education is very vital since it provides the best platform to develop a new breed of teachers with the prerequisite skills and attitudes to implement inclusive policies and practices successfully (Cardona, 2009). Savolainen (2009) is of the view that teachers play a pivotal role in education quality. McKinsey et al. in Savolainen (2009:16) argue that: '... the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers'. Wenglinsky (2000) states that professional development is closely linked to classroom practice; various types of professional development encourage effective classroom practices; and teachers who are more knowledgeable about the subject area they teach are also more likely to engage in effective classroom practices. However, if findings by Mafa (2012) are anything to go by, it would appear that teachers' training colleges in Zimbabwe have not responded accordingly to the pedagogic and didactic challenges being heralded into schools by the inclusion revolution. This observation prompted us to explore the extent to which inclusion was being mainstreamed in teacher development programmes. Additional objectives were – to unmask the challenges that

lecturers were experiencing in their attempt to mainstream inclusion and to suggest strategies that lecturers could employ to circumvent the challenges.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Inclusion and its rationale

There is a global movement towards inclusive education as evidenced by the many conventions, declarations and recommendations at global level. One such convention is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which reiterates the need of inclusive education systems. UNESCO (2009) provides the following justification for educating all children in inclusive settings:

- Educational justification – Inclusive schools have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and benefit all children.
- Social justification – Inclusive schools are able to change attitudes towards diversity and form the basis for a just, non-discriminatory society.
- It costs less to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different schools ‘specialising’ in different groups of children.

UNESCO (2008:3) states that inclusion is ‘... an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination.’ Quane (2008) in the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2010) observes that the thinking on inclusion has moved beyond the narrow idea of inclusion as a means of understanding and overcoming a deficit and it is now widely accepted that it concerns issues of gender, ethnicity, class, social conditions, health and human rights encompassing universal involvement, access, participation and achievement. Anati (2013:56) defines inclusion as ‘Integrating students with disabilities in regular classrooms . . . that aims at protecting the right to education for all society members, and it ensures that no child with disability is left behind.’ Ainscow et al., (2006:25) point out that there are many different views of inclusion in the field of education, and that any given country has more than one perspective on inclusion. Notwithstanding the diversities in definitions, Ainscow et al., argue that most definitions converge towards the realisation that inclusion refers to:

- The processes of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the curricula, cultures and communities of local schools;
- Restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality; and
- The presence, participation and achievement of all students vulnerable to exclusionary pressures, not only those with impairments or those who are categorized as ‘having special educational needs.

2.2 Inclusion implications for teacher education

From a teacher education perspective, Ballard (2003:59) states that new entrants to the teaching profession should: ...understand how they might create classrooms and schools that address issues of respect, fairness and equity. As part of this endeavour, they will need to understand the historical, socio-cultural and ideological contexts that create discriminatory and oppressive practices in education. The isolation and rejection of disabled students is but one area of injustice. Others include gender discrimination, poverty and racism. Hernandez (2013) identifies seven steps that are essential in a teacher education programme meant to prepare teachers to teach in inclusive classes. These seven steps are: (a) the inclusion of subjects with high social and community content, (b) recognition of individual differences and implementing learning strategies for all; (c) the collaborative work among educators; (d) all programmes for pre-service and in-service teachers must be based on the interpretative and critical paradigms; (e) link teacher training with educational services in contextual professional practices; (f) training should be cross categorical; and (g) new teachers must participate with experienced teachers during their early years of training.

UNESCO (2009) suggests that a basic training curriculum for teachers might include advice about how to:

- [1] Translate relevant research findings (including brain research) into effective teaching practices;
- [2] Assess the progress of all students through the curriculum, including how to assess learners whose attainments are low and whose progress is slow;
- [3] Use assessments as a planning tool for the class as a whole, as well as in drawing up individual plans for students;
- [4] Observe students in learning situations, including the use of simple checklists and observation schedules;
- [5] Relate the behaviour of particular learners to normal patterns of development;
- [6] Involve parents and pupils in the assessment process; and

- [7] Work with other professionals – and know when to call on their specialized advice and how to use their assessments for educational purposes.

Brownell et al. (2005) identify the following characteristics in general teacher education programmes judged as highly effective: (a) connections between carefully planned coursework and fieldwork so that students connect what they learn with classroom practice; (b) the use of varied practices by lecturers to hold themselves accountable for pre-service teachers' training; (c) coursework and fieldwork that emphasise the needs of a diverse student population; (d) teacher education that occurs within a collaborative professional community, that includes pre-service teachers, in-service teachers and lecturers; (e) a heavy emphasis on subject matter pedagogy that facilitates the development of content specific pedagogy; (f) a clear vision of high quality teaching that is pervasive throughout the programme; (g) use of active pedagogy by lecturers to promote student reflection that is likely to lead to conceptual change by pre-service teachers.

2.3 Teaching competences for inclusive classes

The inclusive philosophy changes the academic profiles of pupils occupying classrooms. This change has both pedagogic and didactic implications as was discussed in the preceding section. From a teaching perspective, it means that the business as usual approach does not work. If teachers are to effectively teach inclusive classes, they should be equipped with certain unique competences. Competences such as understanding pupils, mentoring ability, flexibility, developing skills that are beyond the subject matter are viewed as crucial if teachers are to comfortably handle inclusive classes (Tomlinson, 1995; Wasley, 1999; Arguelles, Hughs and Schuman, 2000 and Marcus and Johnson, 1998).

Inherent in the literature on teacher education for inclusion are the following characteristics, that teacher trainees should: (a) be equipped with theory of education and practical teaching skills; (b) trained on how to collaborate with other specialists; (c) attached to experienced teachers during their early years of teaching; (d) be aware of learners' individual needs and diversities; (e) be conversant with appropriate assessment methods; and (f) well grounded in their special subject areas.

III. RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

The study was informed by the following three questions:

- What do lecturers understand by the term Inclusion in education?
- Which are the skills that initial teacher education should equip teacher trainees with in order for them to teach inclusive classes effectively?
- What challenges are lecturers encountering in the teaching of inclusive skills to teacher trainees?
- How can these challenges be addressed?

The study adopted a qualitative case study design. Fifteen lecturers were purposively sampled from one of the primary teachers' training colleges in Zimbabwe. The lecturers were divided into three focus groups of five members each. Focus group discussions were then conducted to generate data. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The process involved transcribing of focus group discussions outcomes, verification of transcribed data through member checking, data segmenting, coding, enumeration and categorizing of data into themes and sub-themes.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data were generated from three departments in a primary teachers college. The departments were: Special Needs Education, Early Childhood Education and General Studies (Professional Foundations). Lecturers in Special Needs Education department train teachers in specific disabilities – there is some form of specialisation. However, the department enrolls very few students meant to go and teach in special schools. The Early Childhood Department lecturers concentrate on those teacher trainees who upon graduation will be deployed to teach pupils in Grade Zero to Grade Two. General Studies (Professional Studies) lecturers aim to produce teachers who will teach Grade Three to Seven pupils. Teacher trainees in this department are taught Curriculum subjects of their choices. Teaching methods, Sociology, Psychology and Philosophy of Education are taught in all the three departments.

4.1 The meaning of Inclusion in Education from the lecturers' perspective

Generally, most lecturers were able to explain the meaning of Inclusion in Education. This understanding of the concept could be attributed to the fact that some topics on inclusive education have been recently included in the teacher education curriculum. We (the researchers) were also made aware that just prior to data collection for this study lecturers had participated in an inclusive workshop in the college. Some of the lecturers' definitions are captured below:

Including children with special needs in the mainstream so that they are exposed to similar educational conditions just like the 'normal' children. This definition was from an Early Childhood Development (ECD) lecturer. A general education lecturer from the Professional Foundations Department defined it as: *An education that caters for all types of pupils, e.g. slow-learners, fast learners, average learners, able and disabled learners, different abilities catered for.* Similarly, a lecturer from Special Education Department defined Inclusive Education as: *Including every child in the mainstream regardless of disabilities, and also facilitating or providing for education that caters for children with varied needs and diverse capabilities.* In our view, the lecturers' correct understanding of the concepts Inclusion in Education bodes well for any future attempts that teachers' colleges may make to mainstream inclusion.

4.2 Skills that lecturers thought should be inculcated in teacher trainees

Lecturers from the three departments were aware of skills that should be taught to teacher trainees when preparing them for inclusion. Frequently mentioned skills were:

4.2.1 Identification of children with special needs early

Lecturers felt that it is important for teacher trainees to be able to identify children with special needs early so that corrective measures will be put in place before the challenge goes out of hand. The need for early identification is also corroborated by Kirk, Gallagher and Anastasiow (2000), who point out that early intervention is very important when dealing with exceptional children.

4.2.2 Scheming and Planning for Children with special needs.

Most lecturers pointed out that once all children are in the mainstream, teachers should be able to handle them. Therefore it was important that, teacher trainees leave teachers' training colleges with skills that will help them to scheme, plan and teach mainstream classes effectively. Most reiterated that when teaching a mainstream class, the 'one size fits all' approach rarely works. There will always be those students who excel, while others struggle and will need the teacher to repeat several times or to use teaching methods which appeal to more than one sense. Tomlinson (1996) posits that when a teacher is teaching a class whose population is diverse, he/she must differentiate his/her instruction so that it benefits all the students. These differentiating skills must be taught in college during teachers' training. A number of authors among them Hernandez (2013), Brownell et al. (2005) and Arguelles et al. (2000) also emphasise the teaching of such skills to teacher trainees.

4.2.3 Skills needed to deal with specific disabilities

From all the three focus group discussions, the consensus was teacher trainees should be equipped with teaching skills to deal with specific disabilities that they are likely to come across during their teaching careers. Such skills include use of sign language, reading and writing Braille, remedial teaching, among others. The reason proffered was that such an approach will ensure that the teachers will not be found wanting in mainstream classes. Lecturers bemoaned the present practice in the Department of Special Needs, where teacher trainees are only equipped to deal with one type of special needs area. One of the lecturers pointed out that: *'This is a limitation in that they would not be able to cater for all the children with their diverse needs.'*

4.2.4 Teaching methods

The generally feeling among lecturers was that teacher trainees should be exposed to a variety of teaching methods. The curriculum on teaching methods should include – pupils' styles of learning since they influence the teacher's choice of what teaching methods to use; multi-sensory approach so that teachers can make use of available pupils' senses in their teaching; task analysis to ensure mastery of complex concepts; remediation, compaction and scaffolding in order to deal with pupils' different rates of learning and assessment of diverse pupils' work.

4.2.4 Guidance and Counselling skills

Participants acknowledged that teachers should be equipped with guidance and counselling skills so that they can counsel pupils with special needs as well as their parents. It emerged that pupils with special needs and those with a variety of disabilities may feel out of place, or unwanted in mainstream schools. Such feelings may negatively impact on their performance in school, hence the need for counselling.

Despite the lecturers' knowledge of the type of knowledge and skills that teacher trainees should be equipped with upon graduation, most lecturers concurred that their teacher training graduates were not effectively prepared to competently teach mainstream classes. The interpretation one gets is that teachers' training colleges were not mainstreaming inclusion in their teacher development programmes. This could be deciphered from some of the lecturers' comments: *'They are ill equipped for teaching inclusive classes the programmes at college partially equip them with the above skills.'* This was one of the comments from a lecturer in the Department of Special Needs. A lecturer from the Department of Professional Foundations commented thus: *'Generally this is inadequate since fragments of Inclusive Education are dealt with as topics*

in certain subject areas, e.g. Psychology of Education.’ In the same vein, an ECD lecturer reiterated that: *‘Most of them are not prepared at all because Inclusive Education concept of education has not been fully taught in their programmes.’*

Basing on the above sentiments we are of the opinion that the present inclusion of some aspects of Inclusive Education in teacher education curriculum is meant to sensitise teacher trainees of the presence of children with diverse needs. Apart from the training of specialist teachers, not much is being done in mainstreaming inclusion in the teacher training curriculum of teacher trainees meant to go and teach in the mainstream schools after graduating. This means that the special needs of some children in the mainstream schools will remain unmet for some time to come until such a time that teacher training colleges move away from sensitising teacher trainees to equipping teacher trainees with appropriate skills and attitudes for effective teaching in mainstreaming schools.

4.3 Challenges being experienced by lecturers in the teaching of inclusive skills to teacher trainees

Lecturers concurred that it is pertinent that teacher trainees be equipped with prerequisite skills to make them effective teachers in mainstream schools. However, the generally feeling among lecturers was that as a college of teacher development, they were not doing much in that direction, because of a number of challenges. Below are the three challenges that were frequently mentioned by the lecturers in the three FGDs.

4.3.1 Lecturers lack knowledge and skills on Inclusive Education

Deliberations from the three focus groups illuminated that lecturers did not have adequate knowledge and skills to effectively prepare teacher trainees for inclusive teaching. Some of the sentiments were: A small dose of Inclusive Education is given to the teachers in training. However, both teachers in training and lecturers are ill equipped in terms of knowledge and skills with regards to Inclusive Education and Special Needs Education. Not all lecturing staff have all these specialist skills so as to impart them to their students. Lecturers are not professionally trained to teach in almost all the special needs areas. I need to be fully workshopped and developed in the concept of inclusive teaching. I think I know what it is but I am not sure if I really know what it entails. Other few members in my institution have been workshopped on it unfortunately my turn has not yet come.

The lecturers’ sentiments captured above corroborate our view that what is presently happening in teachers’ training colleges amounts to sensitising teacher trainees on issues pertaining to inclusive education. The teacher trainee graduates’ inability to teach inclusive classes effectively emanates from the quality of training they will have been exposed to. Obviously, one cannot expect a lecturer with limited skills and knowledge to produce a teacher with all the requisite inclusive teaching skills. The lecturers’ testaments that they have limited skills in inclusive teaching further lend credence to our postulation that teacher training colleges are not mainstreaming inclusion in their teacher training efforts.

4.3.2 Inadequate resources and specialist equipment

Lecturers from the Department of Special Needs Education pointed out that there is need for a hands-on approach when training specialist teachers. For example, a lecturer should not theorise when teaching teacher trainees reading and writing Braille. However, as argued by lecturers, specialist equipment is not always available, for the few teacher trainees who are enrolled in the department. If the whole college student population is to be taught hands-on, the available equipment will just be a drop in the ocean.

4.3.3 Loaded timetable

Lecturers were in agreement that the teacher education timetable that was being used in the college was too loaded, such that with the limited time available, it was difficult to effectively equip teacher trainees with inclusive skills. In order to cover the syllabi in time for examinations, most of the lecturers ended up resorting to the use of notes in form of handouts. Absent from the list of challenges raised by lecturers is lack of policy on mainstreaming inclusion in teacher development. It would appear as if lecturers were viewing challenges from a micro perspective, without looking at the bigger picture. In our view, there is a nexus relationship between the challenges that were raised by lecturers and lack of policy. Where a programme is policy driven, chances are that resources (human, material and finance) may be committed towards the proper implementation of the programme. Therefore, without a clear policy on mainstreaming inclusion in teacher development, chances of teacher training colleges to produce competent teachers to effectively teach inclusive classes will be limited, rendering any talk on mainstreaming inclusion in teacher development rhetoric.

4.4 Suggestions of how to mitigate the challenges

Lecturers suggested a number of strategies which they thought could enhance mainstreaming inclusion in teacher development. The general feeling was that apart from special needs lecturers, most were deficient in

special needs skills. It was therefore suggested that colleges of teacher education should recruit more specialist lecturers to complement the meagre numbers already present. Staff development resonated in all the three focus group discussions. The suggestion was that colleges could engage specialists in inclusion education from sister colleges or universities to run in-service courses. The colleges could also send their lecturers for further training on how to mainstream inclusion in teacher development. Two out of the three FGDs, also pointed out that staff development could also be accomplished through staff exchange programmes. It was also suggested that they should be a reconceptualisation of teacher education in view of inclusion. The general consensus was that, certain subjects which lecturers deemed unnecessary in a teacher education curriculum should be done away with to decongest the syllabi. Proponents of this view argued that such a move could create time for lecturers to dwell more on mainstreaming inclusion, all other things being equal. Finally, the other suggestion was that teachers' training colleges should get greater support from the state and other stakeholders. The above suggestions are quite pertinent. However, we are of the view that these suggestions can only bear fruit when they are implemented in a conducive policy environment.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings indicate that teacher training colleges are not mainstreaming inclusion in their teacher training programmes. While data were generated from a single teachers' training college, conclusions can be generalised to all the country's primary teachers' training colleges since they follow a common curriculum. Challenges such as lack of a clear policy on mainstreaming inclusion; lecturers' limited knowledge and skills on inclusion; limited special needs equipment and the nature of the teacher training curriculum seem to be responsible for the colleges' failure to mainstream inclusion. Therefore, Inclusion topics in the teacher training syllabi are meant to sensitise teacher trainees on Inclusion, and not to produce teaching graduates who can teach inclusive classes effectively and competently. Recommendations to facilitate the mainstreaming of inclusion in teacher education include: enactment of clear pro-inclusion policies to guide teacher development in the country; staff development of lecturers and reconceptualisation of the type of a teaching graduate that the country needs in the context of inclusion.

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