

The Inclusive Education Policy in Sport: Four Secondary Schools in Masvingo, District in the Republic of Zimbabwe

by

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine how the government of Zimbabwe has placed support services in schools to advance the Inclusive Education Policy in Sport in four secondary schools in the Masvingo, District. The study used a qualitative approach as it gave the researcher a chance to visit the respondents in their natural settings. Thus, a sample of four school heads, four sports masters, two children with disabilities and a District Education Officer were used to generate the required data. The study assumed that most schools were moving towards inclusivity in theory, with no meaningful practical support services being done, and argue that the government should make the policy clear and stakeholders should be made knowledgeable on how to and what to do to put the support services in place. The study recommends that stakeholders be made aware of the policy before its implementation and as well give them some form of training.

Introduction

An education which is inclusive hinges on the premise that all children with and without disabilities should learn, and do sporting activities together. Thus, those with same disability challenges should be provided with some materials to enable them to function fully (Flovian, 2017). This is based on the medical model which views disability as a medical problem, and therefore, it should be looked as medical challenges that must be treated or remedied by medical professionals (Langtree, 2010). Hence, a disability is a challenge of an individual, directly caused by disease, trauma or other health conditions which may require sustained medical care, a medical model that assumes that barriers to learning reside primarily within the learner and that learner support should take the form of specialist care, and typical interventions (Joshua, 2006).

In the same light, inclusive education in sport is an extension of a general inclusive education, where the concept looks at providing a child with a disability with support services such as sporting equipment and medical facilities where possible, as well as adapting the games to enable him/her to take part in sport.

The extent to which government has provided support services for children with disabilities in sport in Africa, and particularly in Zimbabwe has remained low as a result of unclear policies, poverty, lack of human and material resources, and because mainstream teachers' are unprepared to ensure inclusiveness in sport (Hay, Smit, Paulsen, 2001).

In this regard, the Zimbabwe Constitution, amendment number 20, Act of 2013 merely scratches the surface of the issue of the inclusion of children with disabilities in sport. It states that all institutions of government at any level within its limits of resources available must assist persons with physical or mental disabilities to achieve their full potential and minimize the disadvantages. However, the Constitution does not specify how other forms of disabilities such as blindness, deafness, dyslexia, autism and behavior problems may be assisted in regards to sport, and it is neither mandatory nor forceful in compelling schools/institutions to ensure that children with disabilities have enough support services to adequately take care of them during their sporting activities.

Further, the phrase "within limits of the resources available" gives institutions a way to either provide support services or not, hence making it not mandatory to provide support services. Thus, the Act is therefore too general, because it needed to state how each category of disability might need to be resourced and assisted in class and in sport. The Constitution is also silent on whether children with disabilities shall do sport, and the equipment to be availed. These issues seem to have been left to the teachers' discretion, which creates problems with the provision of support services in the implementation of the inclusive education policy in sport, since each school is likely to end up doing its own thing as most teachers are not trained to handle such cases.

Literature Review

Inclusive education in sport is an extension of general inclusiveness in education. However, in sport, the concept looks at providing children with disabilities with support services to enable them to take part in sport with those living without disabilities.

Contrary, the rights of people with disabilities have not been fully met throughout history, as people with disabilities at one time in the European context were portrayed as inhuman, evil and sick (Trent, 1994). Later they were viewed as sinners or possessed by the devil, and at times many would be exterminated or just left to die (Adams, Bell & Graffin 2007).

The mid-18th century saw the beginning of the Eugenics movement, whose aim was to improve the quality of human gene and protect society from those with physical or intellectual ‘defects’. This then resulted in people with disabilities being segregated and hidden in institutions such as hospitals and special schools (Adams et al, 2007). The Eugenics movement continued to impede the rights of people with disabilities by enacting laws which restricted the movement of people with disabilities into the United States. These people were also not allowed to marry or have children, and in most cases were forced to be sterilized (Adams, Bell & Graffin 2007).

Hence in Africa, children with disabilities face barriers in the education system due to a variety of reasons (ACPF, 2011). In South Africa, this resulted in massive exclusion of children with disabilities from the education system (Department of Education, 2001). And despite the adoption of an inclusive education policy to address these imbalances, one of the challenges that hinders progress is lack of support services to differentiate the curriculum from the general type of educational services (Chataika, Mckenzie, Swart & Lyner-Cleophas, 2012).

Zimbabwe as a member of the United Nations (UN), has agreed to recognize the rights of people with disabilities through declarations passed by the United Nations Human Rights, including the ratification of the UN conventions and declarations such as: the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989), the world conference on Education for All (1990), the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) and the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994). All these conventions and declarations came to pass as they stressed the need for regular schools to adopt an inclusive orientation as a way of curbing negative attitudes towards others and in the building of friendly environments through the provision of support services (Deppeler, Loreman, Smith & Florian 2015). The declarations also aim toward policy changes so as to promote inclusive education to enable schools to serve all children, especially those with disability challenges. Hence, the Salamanca document excludes the establishment of special schools which discriminates children with disabilities from their environment and advocates for inclusion based on a human rights model. Thus, it points out that ordinary schools should accommodate all children irrespective of their physical, social, emotional, linguistic or other forms of disabilities (Chireshe, 2011).

Further, as a signatory to those inclusive education related charters and conventions, Zimbabwe was mandated to initiate and support inclusive programs for people with disabilities. Strides have been made by drafting legislation, though it was not comprehensive and specific to the inclusion of people with disabilities, particularly in sport. The Education Act of 1987 amended in 1986 points out that every child in Zimbabwe shall have the right to education. It is important to take note that there is no mention of the rights of children with disabilities specifically. And, the Act does not give guidelines for the provision of support services to learners with disabilities during sport, or stating how these learners should be included in mainstream sport, or how necessary adjustments or modifications could be made to enhance the participation of such children in sport.

The Act should have made suggestions for all forms of disability challenges to take part in sport among themselves or with those without disabilities.

Further, the Zimbabwe Disabled Persons Act of 1992 addresses the rights of people with disabilities in relation to education, employment, recreational facilities, community and social services, but it fails to articulate how children with disabilities may be assisted in sport. The Act does not make the government provide support services in any concrete way as the government's effort end at the integration in resource units and special classes. The Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training in Zimbabwe (1999) says that inclusive education called for by the government then, was merely theoretical, and noted that the real and serious inclusive education need to be adopted at all levels of the education system (Hapanyengwi, 2009).

Objectives of the Study

This study sought to examine how the government is providing support services to enhance the success of its inclusive education policy in sport, premised on the philosophy of equality and non-segregation of children living with disabilities, especially when it comes to taking part in sport. The policy has a view that the government should provide individuals or institutions with equipment or materials to enable children living with disabilities to function as near 'normal' as possible when it comes to sport. However, taking a view from an eagle's eye, there seem to be very little if at all anything in terms of support services from the government as a way of supporting their inclusive education policy in sport. Thus, support services are being provided to support the policy is heavily compromised. Before coming up with such a policy, it seems that Zimbabwe did not take into account the pre-requisite facilities/equipment as well as human resources needed before including children with disabilities in sport. Thus, the study sought to answer the following research question: To what extent has the government provided support services in support of the inclusive education policy in sport?

Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature, and guided by an interpretivist paradigm that sought to understand wholly the context of the situation (Merriam, 1998). The study also sought insights relevant to support services provided by the government in an effort to support the inclusive education policy in sport. Qualitative data was collected on views and situations pertaining to the issue under investigation, and purposive sampling was used to select 4 school heads, 4 sports masters, 2 children with disabilities and a District Education Officer (DEO). This was so, because purposive sampling involves drawing a number of participants from the population in a deliberate or targeted way, hence, selecting participants because of some characteristics they possess (Punch, 2010).

The main source of data collection instruments used in this study were interviews because they enabled the researcher to interview the respondents in their natural settings which enabled the participants to freely express their feelings on the subject and it also allowed the researcher to probe on answers given, and as well observe the body language of the interviewees. Thus, consent was sought from the permanent secretary, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and from the participants, and identities of participants were protected by way of using pseudo individual names as well as schools. Participants were also ensured of data confidentiality as well as being free to withdraw from the study at any point in the event because of being disinterested or otherwise. And subsequently, the qualitative data collected was analyzed using themes derived from the research question that guided the study; and the reporting of data took the form of thorough descriptions and verbatim quotations.

Results

In conducting this study, the researcher intended to establish that support services that can help learners living with disabilities when taking part in sporting activities in regular settings. The researcher thought it important to get views of school heads, sports masters, learners with disabilities, as well as the DEO on the support services they get/give during participation in sport. It was also necessary to find out from the affected learners how they got affected by participating in sporting activities with mainstream children with or without some forms of support services.

There is absolutely nothing offered at this school to allow us to be able to take part in sport with the rest. We end up doing our own activities in order to entertain ourselves.

This was the response from a child with a disability when asked to indicate the support services offered when taking part in various sporting activities.

Results of the study clearly indicate that there are no sporting disciplines where children with disabilities are getting any form of support services in order for them to effectively take part in sporting with peers in the mainstream. This could be because most of the children from the mainstream could perform to their best, even without support equipment such as spikes in athletics. Some of them have come to believe that some forms of support services are not necessary for them (children without disabilities), but for those with disabilities. A participant with low vision said:

I can play soccer much better than some of those with good vision, only that their dark coloured ball is difficult for me to see. If only they could use the white balls like we used to have at primary, then I could compete even at higher levels.

Four school heads responded to an interview item which required them to highlight the support services the government put in place in support of the inclusive education policy in sport at their respective schools. The responses of school heads indicated that the government has virtually made no preparations for the implementation of the policy. Some schools include learners with different forms of disabilities such as the mentally challenged; the visually impaired and those that have hearing challenges. Hence, all these schools would require different forms of equipment if proper support of the policy would take place. For example:

Head 1 said:

We cater mainly for mainstream children. So far we have only one child with a physical disability and he has nothing to use when it comes to sport.

Head 2 said:

This school was constructed without taking into account that both children with and without disabilities would learn together, hence the facilities are not user friendly to those with disabilities. However, we have one or two children with disabilities at this school. We have a boy who had an accident and lost his palm, this happened while he was doing form 2, so we cannot turn him away because of the mishap. Under the circumstances, the school may not afford loosing large sums of money to cater for these two. More so, both are now in their fourth form and will be leaving us soon.

Head 3 said

At this school we cater for mainstream children as well as those with visual challenges. We have a specialist teacher who takes care of their needs, when it comes to taking part in sport, braille and other aspects the mainstream teacher may not be well versed in. The class teacher refers such children to a specialist teacher. Similarly, during sport, a specialist teacher gives them their own sporting activities.

Head 4 said:

We are a school which specializes on visual impairments. When enrolling students, we don't look at availability of equipment/ resources, but rather we enroll those with medical cards from doctors indicating their visual challenges and we also follow what we have been directed to do by the ministry. So, as of now we don't have specialized equipment for sport to talk about.

These examples of responses are a clear evidence that the government has not made any meaningful preparations in terms of support services to enable children living with disabilities to be included in mainstream sport. There was lack of evidence concerning resources, knowledge and skills from the participants interviewed. This was also in line with what sports masters and trainer respondents had revealed. And one of the school Heads indicated that the school had three learners living with disabilities from the surrounding communities in line with the government policy on inclusive education, despite there being no qualified staff, equipment or facilities available.

Yet another school Head indicated that his school catered to all learners in the mainstream, but those with visual, physical or mental challenges had no one in the school to assist them effectively; and every challenged pupil learns in the same class as everyone else, even those in wheel chairs. The school Head also pointed out that besides these disabilities; there are other disabilities which are found in almost every class, like behavioral and learning disabilities. This means that there were quite a good number of learners with disabilities in regular classes because all learners who make each class are a mixture of learners. However, when it comes to sport, there are no provisions to enable them to take part in sport with those with disabilities; the information from school Heads was confirmed during two focus group discussions which also yielded similar responses, with some elaborations and additions. And also, participants in a focus group discussion for sports masters (FGDSM) agreed that there were no support services for learners living with disabilities in ordinary schools, hence making the implementation of the policy rather challenging.

Focus group discussion for team trainers (FGDTT) respondents echoed the following:

Our school mainly caters for mainstream children i.e. those without disabilities. Last year we had three children living with disabilities that we could hardly assist in sport due to lack of knowledge and facilities. During sporting activities they would cheer with the rest of the learners who will not be part of the team. Although the children showed some interest in belonging to some sporting teams, our main worry was failure to provide the required support resources by the school.

The inclusion of learners with disabilities in schools means that there is a need for schools to have support services in the form of resources, skills and knowledge of handling such learners, however, another participant added:

The moment we include someone with some disabilities in the game, he or she should be given provisions to enhance his or her participation in mainstream sport, otherwise in the absence of those materials the games are slowed down and may start boring.

This was also confirmed by other participants whose responses showed that the inclusion of learners with disabilities in sport, particularly in mainstream, has many yawning gaps with respect to resources/support services which need to be in place if disabilities in sport were to be successful. Teachers as well need to be empowered in terms of skills, resources and knowledge, and the District Education Officer (DEO) also confirmed that:

Learners with disabilities are not well catered for in sporting activities in mainstream schools as there are no resources for use by these children. School heads and their staff, lack knowledge on how best such children can be incorporated in sporting activities in the absence of support services.

The availability of resources at national, provincial, district and school level determine whether implementation of the inclusive education policy in sport will be successful.

This indicates that there is need to train and re-train officials on how best to implement the inclusive education policy in sport. If the officials who are supposed to lead and provide guidance to the teachers and school Heads are not sure about how best learners can be included in regular school sport, this again creates challenges. And in this light, the DEO went further to say:

Schools should have been mandated to make school environments and sporting facilities accessible to both children with and without disabilities. A certain percentage of the fees collected at schools should be used for buying the basic materials for including children with disabilities in sport. Lastly, a policy should have been drawn up enforcing all schools to adhere to the policy.

Discussion

Schmitt and Priestly (2011), in presenting country reports on special needs education for the United Nations, indicated that according to data gathered by the European Agency on Development of Special Needs Education, the challenges of learners living with disabilities enrolled in the main stream are various, and that learners are not gaining much from the mainstream as intended, mainly due to a lack of support services. They gave an example of Slovak Republic and Czech Republic where reports indicate that the number of children and young people with disabilities enrolled in mainstream schools increased marginally because of the insignificant help they are getting from inclusivity in sport in regular schools. Contrary to the afore-mentioned, the Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education (2012) report indicated that in European countries like Scotland and Finland, learners with disabilities were now spending their time in mainstream classes because of the good sporting environment, facilities, equipment/resources, as well as specialist training given to teachers where the proportion of children living with disabilities in the mainstream is favorable to the facilities and resources available.

The present study was carried out in Zimbabwe, which is a developing nation. The numbers of learners with disabilities who attend regular classes continue to increase as most parents are opting for the mainstream curriculum where their children would learn with the so-called “normal” children. On the other hand, schools are shifting from special classes and special schools as per the governments’ call for inclusive education. Despite the unavailability of support services, parents would like their children to learn and live a near “normal” a life as possible as they interact with peers without disabilities.

However, teachers (sports trainers) from the selected four secondary schools indicated the difficulties they encountered in meeting the sporting needs of learners with various disabilities due to a lack of support services. They also expressed the view that teachers who are teaching in special schools are better off than those teaching in inclusive settings in terms of knowledge, skills, resources and information.

Alexander (2001) indicated that teachers were concerned that they might not be able to meet the needs of these children because of a lack of training, and also because of a lack of proper facilities for learners with disabilities to use in the regular schools. Haskell (2000) and Unianu (2011) are of the opinion that enrolling children with disabilities in a mainstream school requires teachers with higher and relevant qualifications for the effective teaching of both learners with and without special educational needs. According to Alexander (2001, p.20), “this supports and confirms that, concerns do exist regarding students with special educational needs who are included in regular education classrooms.” This is also the focus of the present study which is a response to concerns of a lack of training and overall preparation of regular school trainers for them to be effective in training learners with special needs education in mainstream sport.

While Alexander (2001) carried out his study with middle and high schools, the present researcher carried out this study in four secondary schools in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe.

In relation to insufficient in-service and pre-service training, Forlin et al., cited in Travers, Butler, DuPont, McDaid, O'Donnell and Prunty (2010, p.255) analyzed concerns identified by 228 teachers from 11 schools within 16 districts across Western Australia regarding including children with disabilities in sport. Thus, the teachers' responses revealed issues such as:

... Insufficient in-service and pre-service training to cater adequately for children living with disabilities in mainstream settings... difficulties in monitoring other learners when attending to students with SNE.... and reduced ability to teach other students as effective as they would like when including learners with disabilities in their class and lack of support services by the government.

Lack of competence in teaching and assessing students' progress is a major concern reported by teachers. Travers et al. (2010) in a study of a special school-mainstream partnership involved in promoting inclusion, reports that teachers' lacked competency in terms of appropriate teaching strategies, a dilemma which teachers stressed that caused them to have problems with giving attention to all learners in a class of forty or more learners, including those with special education needs, and in the sharing of resources. This is reiterated by Avramidis and Kalyva's cited in Travers et al. (2010) who reported that teachers were most challenged when it came to including students with particular disabilities, for example, those with autism and neurological disorders. While such learners needed to adapt to learning situations in the mainstream, teachers also needed to acquire knowledge and skills suitable for them to handle such challenges.

In a research report by Pricewaterhousecoopers (2012) in Ireland, most teachers in regular schools are finding themselves teaching learners living with disabilities, which demonstrates that there is a need for every teacher to have a special needs component in their initial training. Although some of the problems are of a general nature, teachers stated that their students have more than one need. In Zimbabwe, some of the schools are enrolling learners with multiple disabilities, yet there are no support services, consequently, teachers are encountering challenges on how to teach sporting activities in mainstream settings.

Interview data revealed that the majority of teachers/trainers needed some skills. This was a clear indication that there should be an inclusive education policy in the sport component in both in-service and pre-service training for the benefit of teaching children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Teachers were further probed to explain why they thought such skills were really needed in regular settings. The following were some of the responses picked by the researcher:

- Teachers/trainers needed to have the right equipment and know the right methods/ techniques of teaching sporting activities to children with disabilities in regular schools;
- Support services are a vital cog in the implementation of the inclusive education in sport; and
- Teachers in the present century should be able to teach in both inclusive and regular settings.

The above statements place emphasis on the importance of support services and why teachers needed to have knowledge and skills. From those statements, one could deduce that teachers need to be knowledgeable in special needs education issues, particularly including children with disabilities in sporting activities in the mainstream, as well as having the resources to use.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, the recommendations of the study are that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should ensure that all stakeholders should be aware of the policy of inclusivity in sport, and as well be taught of the forms of support services needed by learners living with disabilities when it comes to a particular sport. Teachers should be taught on how to provide support services for children living with disabilities in their initial trainings, so as to avoid later confusion when they get in the schools. It should be mandatory for teachers, school heads, parents and DEO to receive some basic training on inclusivity in sport so as to work as one to achieve the common purpose; and the government should ensure that support services provisions for learners with disabilities be budgeted for.

Conclusion

Children living with disabilities were not included in sporting activities in mainstream schools, with the exception of mild cases that did not disturb rhythm of games. There were no provisions to assist children living with disabilities to take part in sporting activities. On the other hand, there were no circulars, no clear policy guidelines or follow-up to enhance teachers' knowledge as well as make demands to ensure that the policy is implemented. Due to policy inadequacy and the lack of knowledge and resources, all participants in the study were ignorant of the support services needed to enable children with disabilities to take part in sport. It emerged from the study that children living with disabilities were mostly left to do as they pleased during sporting time, as teachers pointed out that they were afraid of taking responsibilities in the absence of any support services.

Teachers were also afraid of taking responsibility in case a child got injured. On the intervention strategies that could be taken to mitigate the issues to do with support services, many teachers, school heads and the DEO pointed to the issue of training and the retraining of teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills. If the inclusive education policy framework in sport is to succeed, respondents further argued for appropriate support services and trained personnel for all schools. Respondents went further to propose a policy that has information on specific forms of support services that could be availed to specific forms of disabilities in particular sporting activities

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