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Unravelling Challenges that Inhibit Transformative, Quality Education for Children with Visual Impairment in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

International, regional and local communities have taken great strides to promote Inclusive Education for children with disabilities. The Salamanca Statement universally advocates that learners with disabilities attend lessons in regular classes, that is, together with their peers without disabilities. This advocacy is against special institutions for learners with disabilities, thereby promoting deinstitutionalisation. Whilst it seemed as the best practice for some disability categories, Inclusive Education brought about various challenges for learners. This paper sought to unravel challenges that inhibited transformative, quality and meaningful education for leaners with visual impairment in selected mainstream schools. From a qualitative research design perspective the researchers used face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions for data collection. The sample comprised 35 purposively selected participants from 5 selected mainstream schools of Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. 7 participants (3 males and 4 females) came from each of the 5 selected mainstream schools of Masvingo Province, ultimately making a total of 15 males and 20 females. Lack of ordinary and modern assistive devices, unavailability of reading materials in relevant formats, long distances to and from school, absence of trained personnel and negative attitudes from parents, staff members, peers and some community members were identified as some of the challenges that hindered transformative, quality and meaningful education of learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools. Through transformative, quality and meaningful education, learners with visual impairments will become employable, independent and self-reliant adults who are empowered in every way.

Key Words: Learners with visual impairments, meaningful education, quality, transformative

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INTRODUCTION

Visual impairment refers to a reduction in the individual's vision (Practical Handbook, 1984). It involves limited vision or the complete absence of vision as a result of impairment in the eye structure. The total inability to see is referred to as blindness, whereas the individual with low vision possesses some residual vision which can be utilised to the person's benefit (Practical Handbook, 1984). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), visual impairment is a severely disabling condition with an expected incidence rate that is less than 1 percent of the total statewide enrolment. It is also considered as one type of impairment which is referred to as low-incidence and high needs disability and, therefore, triggers and brings about unique and peculiar challenges pertaining to inclusion (Miyauchi, 2020). In spite of the universally-acceptable principles on inclusive education, it remains a fact that limited vision and complete absence of vision have an immense impact on the education of learners with visual impairment, especially in mainstream schools.

The prominence of the Jomtien Framework (1990), Salamanca Conference (1994), United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] (1994), United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children [UNRC] (1989) and the United Nations Standard Rules (1993) on equalisation of opportunities made the centre stage for Inclusive Education. This concept was supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). This international covenant came on board to protect and promote Rights of persons with disabilities inclusive of learners with disabilities (UNCRPD, Article 7).

Inclusive Education is every student's right, not a privilege (UNCRPD, 2006). Whilst it is a noble idea for children with disabilities to attend lessons in regular classes, the situation remains prohibitive for children with severe visual impairment to enjoy meaningful, transformative and quality education. An Inclusive Education system can only be achieved if all mainstream institutions embrace learner diversity and enhance conducive environment for all learners inclusive of those with visual impairment (Practical Handbook, 1984). Various challenges, however, have hindered children with visual impairment from attaining meaningful and transformative education.

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Unavailability of reading materials in relevant formats, for example, Braille for learners with severe visual impairment, is one great challenge that deters transformative, quality and meaningful education in both mainstream and special institutions (Baker, Wang & Walber, 1995). Learners cannot interact and meaningfully participate in learning because instructional materials are inaccessible to them (Ajuwon and Oyinlade, 2008). The current researchers believe that when a learner reads materials in relevant format, he or she better comprehends the subject matter than when he or she uses other means.

Learners with severe visual impairment need assistive technologies, which makes it compulsory for them to get adequ555ate support from qualified teachers (Jessup, Bundy, Broom & Hancock, 2017). The researchers believe that without modern technologies, transformative, quality and meaningful education for learners with severe visual impairment is difficult to attain. Even if there may be few assistive devices, where there are no qualified practitioners to help these learners, transformative, quality and meaningful education is not possible.

Absence of trained personnel or their unwillingness to help is one challenge that confronts learners with severe visual impairment in mainstream schools. Teachers' attitudes are associated with their willingness to provide an inclusive environment to learners with impairments (Chang & Schaller, 2002). The researchers, therefore, are of the view that teachers can facilitate or limit successful inclusion. The nature of the varied differences in the needs of learners with visual impairment calls for more specialised practitioners in each regular class (Brydges & Mkandawire, 2017). High-needs disability is a condition when a teacher with specialised skills for that specific impairment is required to regularly support the student in accessing the general education curriculum (Haegele & Porretta, 2015). If the above requirement is not met, learners with severe visual or hearing impairments may not ultimately attain transformative, quality and meaningful education on an equal basis with others (UNCRPD, 2006). Most often, in the context of developing countries, for example Zimbabwe, most mainstream classes are so large that an ordinary practitioner cannot effectively attend to all learners, inclusive of those with severe sensory impairments. As a result, these learners are disadvantaged and are denied the opportunity of accessing transformative, quality and meaningful education.

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Classroom teachers are largely responsible for implementing inclusive principles and breaking down barriers to inclusion (Royal National Institute for the Blind, 2017). The researchers, therefore, are of the view that the absence of trained personnel or their reluctance to adequately attend to learners with severe visual impairment leaves the barriers to inclusion unbroken and inclusive principles unimplemented.

The attitude of other members of society has an immense impact on learners' psychological and social adjustment especially during their daily interaction with others (Lieberman, Lepore, Stevens & Ball, 2013). Both positive and negative attitudes were influenced by parent-, staff-, non-disabled peer-, community- and environment-related factors. As significant others, parents have great influence over their children, whether they have impairments or not (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008). Since they are the likely source of information about their children, they know their interests and their academic abilities, hence they can make a major contribution in their education, thereby enhancing transformative, quality and meaningful education (McMahon, 2014). The researchers argue that, without psychosocial support from parents and other family members, transformative, quality and meaningful education for learners with severe visual impairment is difficult to achieve.

Jessup et al. (2017) assert that despite the fact that, in some instances, learners with disabilities may feel acceptable in regular classes, one-third of them, particularly those with visual impairment, felt isolated or lonely and dissatisfied with their social relations. This has been evidenced by the teasing and bullying of learners with disabilities by their peers without disabilities (Ahsan and Sharma, 2018), which, consequently, compelled them to drop out of school. Drawing from the above discussion, the researchers assert that transformative, quality and meaningful education for learners with visual impairment is still a challenge in mainstream schools, both in developing and developed countries.

The environment is one very essential and relevant factor to be considered for learners with disabilities to attain transformative, quality and meaningful education in mainstream schools (Spungin & Huebner, 2017). These learners need mobility and orientation skills to engender their independence and self-reliance as they daily interact with others in mainstream schools (Opie, Deppeler & Southcott, 2017).

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The researchers assert that if the environment is inaccessible, it hinders transformative, quality and meaningful education for learners with severe visual impairment since they cannot independently walk from one point to the other in search for reading materials.

Despite the challenges discussed above, learners with severe visual impairment are still entitled to their right to transformative, quality and meaningful education on an equal basis with others.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite various international conventions, conferences, regional treaties and pieces of local legislation that promote inclusive education, allowing learners with disabilities to attend lessons in regular classes, these have not been of real advantage or benefit to learners with visual impairment. Various challenges and hurdles have hindered learners with severe visual impairment from attaining transformative, quality and meaningful education. Lack of modern assistive devices, unavailability of materials in relevant formats, absence of qualified and experienced personnel and negative attitudes from members of society are some of the challenges that militate against transformative, quality and meaningful education of learners with severe visual impairment. Whilst there are some learners with severe visual impairment in mainstream schools, the glaring exclusionary issues that inhibit transformative, quality and meaningful education from learners with visual impairment are lamentable. This paper, therefore, sought to unravel challenges that hinder learners with visual impairment from enjoying their right to transformative, quality and meaningful education and provide recommendations that could liberate them from that dilemma. Learners with visual impairment could ultimately access education on an equal basis with others.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What challenges do learners with visual impairment encounter in the mainstream schools in Zimbabwe?
2. How can the education system in Zimbabwe include learners with visual impairments in the mainstream schools?

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3. What recommendations can be proffered to solve these challenges?

METHODOLOGY

This research study used the qualitative research approach, where face-to-face interviews and focus group discussion were used for data collection. The researchers settled for the qualitative research approach because it allowed them to interpret the social situation accordingly. Blackie (2013) states that qualitative research allows researchers to understand the meanings of social situations and interpret people's actions and meanings of human-created worlds. The researchers support the above view because societies are human-created and so, researchers, being part of society, can interpret social situations and draw their own meanings from the settings (Rugara, Ndinde & Kadodo, 2016). Situating themselves physically as researchers in the research environment allowed them to comprehend and interpret the underlying negative perceptions influencing social exclusion of learners with visual impairment in Zimbabwean schools. The face-to-face interviews helped the researchers to probe their participants for them to get reliable data.

The location of the research study was Masvingo Province, from where the researchers purposively drew five participants from each of its five districts, namely Bikita, Chivi, Gutu, Masvingo and Mwenezi. The sample comprised thirty-five participants (20 females and 15 males)

Before the face-to-face interview, the researchers promised participants that they would not disclose their names to the public regarding data drawn from them, thereby promoting anonymity and maximum confidentiality as a way of protecting their dignity and integrity as human beings. The researchers then persuaded participants to freely respond to questions because they would not disclose their names and information to anyone. The researchers collected data on challenges that hinder learners with visual impairment from acquiring transformative, quality and meaningful education in mainstream schools, with the intention of proffering recommendations towards their total inclusion.

FINDINGS

This research study had the following several research findings, which, if considered, can bring about transformative,

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quality and meaningful education for learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools: unavailability of modern and effective assistive devices, scarcity of reading materials in relevant formats, long distances to and from school, absence of trained personnel and negative attitudes of parents, staff members, their peers without disabilities and the community at large, were some of the challenges confronting learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools. Learners with visual impairment also suffer from inferiority complex, low self-esteem, little confidence and loneliness/solitude at the school. All these are contributing factors hindering transformative, quality and meaningful education for learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools.

Most schools that enrol learners with visual impairment do not take deliberate steps towards mobilisation of resources to procure modern and effective assistive devices as a way of engendering quality education for learners with severe visual impairment.

> *"Assistive devices for learners with severe visual impairment are very expensive so much so that the school cannot afford to buy them"* (Participant 1).

Due to the economic hardships which hard-hit the country of Zimbabwe most parents of learners with visual impairment could not afford to buy modern assistive devices which would promote transformative, quality and meaningful education.

> *"My son with visual impairment needs a laptop, a note-taker and a printer that produces both braille and print but I cannot afford to buy all these essential gadgets"* (Participant 2).

Reading materials in relevant formats for example, Braille and large print are a rarity in mainstream schools of Zimbabwe, and, as a result, learners with severe visual impairment could not access reading materials on an equal basis with others.

> *"I did not do well last term because most of the books on our syllabus are not written in Braille"* (Participant 3).

Negative attitudes from parents, staff members, peers without disabilities and other community members also militated against learners with visual impairment in both special and mainstream institutions, for

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example, some learners with severe visual impairment were, and are still, denied the opportunity to continue with their education and they dropped out of school at primary level.

> *"Why should I waste resources sending this blind girl to school?"* (Participant 4).

Negative attitudes of staff members have hindered progress for learners with severe visual impairment in mainstream schools. This has weakened and stifled transformative, quality and meaningful education for learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools.

> *"I have a very large class so I do not have adequate time to attend to these two learners with visual impairment in my class"* (Participant 5).

In some instances, peers without disabilities teased and cursed learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools.

> *"I dropped out of school because some learners without disabilities bullied and mocked me, I had no choice but to leave school"* (Participant 6).

Long distances to and from school were also identified as challenge that hinders transformative, quality and meaningful education for learners with severe visual impairment in mainstream schools.

> *"I accompanied my daughter with visual impairment to and from school up to Grade 4. I later on gave up due to long distance"* (Participant 7).

All the above statements clearly show how learners with visual impairment were denied access to transformative, quality and meaningful education.

DISCUSSION

Findings from the research study reveal that there are various challenges hindering transformative, quality and meaningful education for learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools. Lack of modern and effective assistive devices for learners with severe visual impairment has revealed that no deliberate steps have been taken by school authorities and the Ministry towards provision of transformative, quality and meaningful education for learners with visual impairment. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006, Article 2), puts emphasis on the use of modern technologies by persons with disabilities, particularly learners with visual impairment, to enhance

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their access to information. If this would be implemented, transformative, quality and meaningful education would be attainable.

Scarcity of reading materials in relevant formats has revealed underachievement for most learners with visual impairment due to lack of quality education. The UNCRPD (2006, Article 24) speaks about the transformative, quality and meaningful education for all learners inclusive of those with visual impairment.

Negative attitudes from parents, staff members, peers without disabilities and the rest of community have revealed that very little was expected to come from learners with visual impairment, because in most cases they were denied access to transformative, quality and meaningful education in mainstream schools.

Absence of trained personnel implies that very little will be attained in the learning of children with visual impairment in the absence of trained, skilled, experienced and qualified personnel. Transformative, quality and meaningful education can be achieved if qualified personnel render assistance to learners with severe visual impairment who are in mainstream schools.

The challenge of long distances has hindered the learner from attaining transformative, quality and meaningful education in mainstream schools.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above findings, one can conclude that there are still various challenges hindering transformative, quality and meaningful education. Lack of modern assistive devices, scarcity of reading materials in relevant formats, absence of trained personnel, negative attitudes from parents/guardians, staff members, peers without disabilities and the rest of the community were some of the obstacles barring learners with severe visual impairment from attaining transformative, quality and meaningful education in mainstream schools. This research study focused on access to transformative, quality and meaningful education by learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools. In view of this:

1. Government and other agencies should provide learners with visual impairment with modern assistive devices for them to access quality education.

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2. Negative attitudes from various angles should be done away with as a way of promoting transformative, quality and meaningful education.
3. Each mainstream school should have at least one trained teacher in special education.
4. Low-cost boarding facilities should be constructed to solve the challenge of long distances.

These recommendations will possibly usher in transformative, quality and meaningful education.

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