

SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY
EDUCATIONISTS IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
RESOURCE UNITS AND SPECIAL CLASSES IN
ZIMBABWE

Phillipa Mutswanga¹ & Barbara Mapuranga²



*¹Snr Lecturer, Department of Disability Studies and Special Needs Education,
Zimbabwe Open University, +263, P.O. Box MP 1119, Mt Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe,*

*²Snr Lecturer, Department of Disability Studies and Special Needs Education
Zimbabwe Open University, P.O. Box 758 Marondera, Zimbabwe*

ABSTRACT

The study is based on the experiences of the three educators in the establishment of Resource Units and Special Classes in Zimbabwean Primary Schools. The purpose is to extract from the lived experiences and use the information to address the diversity of the learning needs of students in the field of education. It used the impetus of the authors' experiences, observations and shared conversations with learners with disabilities and their parents. The study was predominantly qualitative. UNESCO's 9 Golden Rules whose principles supported diversity of learners' needs and provisions underpinned the study. Schools were reported under-skilled and under-resourced to manage the establishment of Resource Units and Special Classes. The findings revealed that there was need to develop policies that mandated educationists to establish Resource Units and Special Classes with a view to address the learning needs of diversified learners they enrolled. In view to all that, the study recommended that more studies on experiences in the establishment of Resource Units and Special Classes needed to be carried out to help educationists learn lessons from them and improve the learning of diversified students in Zimbabwe.

KEY WORDS: Successes and Challenges; educationists; Establishment of Resource Units and Special Classes; Zimbabwe

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The experiences in this study sought to highlight possible successes and challenges that educationists may encounter when establishing resource units (RUs) and special classes (Sp Cls).

The study is driven by the authors' experiences, observations and shared conversations with learners with disabilities and their parents.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) To what extent do people understand the concept of Resource Units and Special classes?
- 2) What are the experiences and challenges faced by educationists in the establishment of Resource Units and Special classes?
- 3) What are the benefits of the Resource Units and Special classes in the education of people with disabilities?
- 4) What could be done to enhance the establishment of Resource Units and Special classes?

2.0 RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Establishment of Resource Units and Special Classes:-

UNESCO (2001) describes RUs and/or Sp Cls as a situation where an ordinary school sets aside a classroom or a number of classrooms for children with special needs. These children may receive **some** or **all** their teaching in the unit or special classes which are manned by teachers with basic special education skills. That is teachers who work in a special school or special units/classes in an ordinary school with particular responsibilities for children with special needs and will usually have obtained some extra training where they are encouraged to improvise or establish RUs and/or Sp Cls. As experienced by the authors, some specialist teachers may be willing to establish or support such units or classes but circumstances surrounding them have in many instances been reported to block the willingness in various ways as reflected in some of the narratives (See the Appendix). The study acknowledges the SPS and SNE as accountable for the establishment and maintenance of such units. Despite all that, the authors felt that this department's purpose was not clearly defined and was less known too by educationists and society at large. Thus, it is the wish of study that everyone who reads this study should learn lessons and be transformed by the narratives.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Conversations may yield new insights. They engage people in talks, idea sharing and debates in

a free atmosphere. In other words they provide freedom for people to express themselves. McLean and McLean (2006) and Boden and Zimmerman (1991) describe conversations as, rich, revealing and rewarding mode of qualitative research. In other words, they can yield new insights, knowledge and ideas. In support, Sacks (1992) believes that, conversation analysis focuses on the ways in which social realities and relationships are constituted through persons' talk-in-interaction. A case study approach was applied to collect data for the study through informal conversations where the three narrators agreed to develop a write-up about their experiences in the establishment and teaching of learners at RUs and in Sp Cls.

Conversations are usually interactions between two or more who engage in talks, share ideas and/or debates. They may be shared agendas or debates. Daily people engage in conversations about all sorts of topics and issues. Authors of this study equally engaged in a conversation which triggered the development of this study. In some instances conversations connect the internal and external networks as proposed by Silverman (1998). In other words it involves talking; listening; watching; reproducing facts, ideas and extra. Conversations can yield new insights or open a window for new information, learning and/or provoke conversations on new topics or new ideas. Thus, conversations may not assume prior knowledge but lead to greater knowledge discoveries and wisdom. The morality of conversations according to Boden and Zimmerman (1991) is that, talking and sharing ideas and having humility yields results. Conversations provides the beginning for identifying and elaborating on areas of complementarities between perspectives (Silverman, 1998). Unexpected developments may be observed despite the focusedness of the conversation it may be triggered by unforeseen circumstances.

The study analysed the case experiences using the thematic approach. The experiences were repeatedly read to make sense out of them and emerging themes were highlighted and rearranged.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 The concept of Resources Units and Special Classes:-

Special education or special needs education is the practice of educating students with special needs in a way that addresses their individual differences and needs (UNESCO, 1994 and Mtetsha, undated). Special education helps the regular schools maintain their spoiled identity by creating special programmes ... for the *disruptive child* and the slow learners (Zindi, Peresuh and Mpofo (2001). The RUs are ideally planned to individually and systematically monitor teaching procedures; adapt the teaching/learning; equipment and materials according to the individual child's educational needs. Accessibility of the settings is also part of the process. These interventions are designed to help learners with special needs achieve a higher level of personal self-sufficiency and success in school and their community, than may be available if the students are only given access to a typical classroom education (Kanyongo, 2005; UNESCO, 2001).

Common special needs include learning disabilities, communication disabilities; emotional and behavioral disorders; physical disabilities; sensory challenges and developmental disabilities. Students with these kinds of special needs are likely to benefit from additional educational services such as different approaches to pedagogies, the use of technology, a specifically adapted teaching area, or a resource room.

Intellectual giftedness needs different learning. It also benefits from specialised teaching techniques or different educational programmes, but the term "special education" is generally used to specifically indicate instruction of students with disabilities yet giftedness is also part of it. Gifted education is one of the aspects of SNE. A child with special needs is different from his peers in the way he looks, moves, and responds to the world around him and the way he learns or fails to learn (Zindi, Peresuh and Mpofo;2001). The educationists and society at large are usually differently influenced by such physical outlooks.

Students have Special Educational Needs (SEN) if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for them, namely a provision that is different or additional to that which is normally available for students of the same age. Students have a learning difficulty if they have a:

- ▲ significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of students of the same age
- ▲ Disability, which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities provided for children of the same age.

Students may have a Special Educational Need (SEN) for a short time or the whole of their school life. This will depend upon the impact of the condition and the related learning needs.

4.2 The advantages of the RU &Sc in the education of PWDs:-

For learners with RUs and Sp Cls to benefit from the establishment of such units, Zindi et al (2001) propose that, teachers should be optimistic about the future of learners with disabilities. These authors further point out that, teachers should have enough confidence in the potential and capabilities of such learners in order to succeed in building them as fuller and more independent people in the community. This is supported by Case, I's narrative which was despised in its infancy but was later on seen as a noble motion for learners with disabilities in various districts the narrator established RUs and Sp Cls.

4.3 Challenges faced by educationists in the establishment of Resource Units & Special Classes:-

Historically, according to Zindi and Makotore (2000), in the 1960's children with severe intellectual disabilities were not considered for formal educational placement. They further propose that, most societies offered them protection and not education since they mainly kept them in asylums. That did not only end there but it influenced the mentality of society at large resulting in them being viewed as dull, passive and incompetent. It had the potential to likely de-humanise them by taking them

as ill people rather than as intellectually challenged learners who needed extra provisions to cope with their learning equally as non-disabled counterparts.

Other demeaning words were often used to refer to persons with disabilities or physical deformities (Zindi et al, 2001). However the labels rarely tell the teacher who can be taught in what way. One could put five or more labels on the same child and still not know what to teach him or how (Zindi et al, 2001).

It was also established that most schools lack specialist teachers and disability skilled school administrators and this has exacerbated the plight of these pupils. Thus, Tafirei, Makaye and Mapetere (2013) recommend that schools should implement the policy on Inclusive Education [Policy No.36/2005] stringently and the inclusive practices in the United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (CRPD).

4.4 How to enhance the establishment of Resource Units and Special Classes:-

The narratives reveal that, it is the willingness of all involved parties that is likely to increase and enhance the establishment of RUs and Sp Cls in the education system. The findings also proposed the need for advocacy and campaigns on the importance and usefulness of establishing such special education centres in conventional schools. The study acknowledges that within diversified learners, diversified learning needs should be expected which in turn would require diversified provisions. According to the study findings, to meet such provisions the options are to establish RUs and Sp Cls. In this sense, also supported by UNESCO (2001) diversity is the common heritage of humanity thus it should be recognised and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.

The study also revealed that, nobody knows it all but through holding conversations with others; listening to others or news and reading books one gets to know views of other people on an issue or incident. For example, some people may be what they are today because of information learnt from others. This makes conversations one of the reliable tools of eliciting qualitative research. The findings revealed that a number of themes emerged from

the studied cases. The emerging themes included: reasons behind the establishment of resources units/special classes; factors affecting the establishment of resources units/special classes; benefits of establishing resource units and/or special classes and possible solutions to establishment of resource units/special classes

4.5 Varied ways of interpreting resources units/special classes:-

The study revealed that there are many views on what resource units/special classes are. All study participants proposed that the concept of resource units/special classes differed from one individual to the other and one school or institution to the other. Case, 1 took it to be centres where learners who lag behind are enabled through teaching them from known to unknown or simplicity to abstract. Cases 2 and 3 seem to support this view too. However, the study noticed that, the majority of educationists and the society at large did not have clear concepts about Resources units and Special Classes. It was noted with concern that the majority of these people saw the concepts as exposing families and the concerned learners. It is the wish then of this study to change such mindsets and make people see the benefits of establishing RUs and Sp Cls.

4.6 Reasons behind the Establishment of Resources Units/Special classes:-

According to Case 1, establishment of resource units and/or special classes was influenced by the passion she had developed through exposures. That is evident by the following excerpts:

After completing the certificate in teacher education in 1981, I taught ordinary primary school pupils and tuberculosis (TB) patients at a TB hospital in Domboshava District. It was the teaching of TB patients that stirred a passion in me for children with disabilities. That passion took me to a ZIMCARE Trust school in Gweru, where I taught the reception class of children with intellectual challenges in 1983. In 1984, I relocated to Chegutu where I taught people with varied disabilities until 1992. My experiences at Chegutu deepened my interest and desire to do something for people with disabilities [Case, 1].

It was this background that influenced Case, 1 to establish resource units and/or special classes. This influence is further exemplified by the excerpt:

Besides my official teaching duty, the above stated passion drove me into Chegutu townships and surrounding farms to look for school going age children with varied disabilities with a view to encourage parents or guardians to send the children with disabilities to school. That exposed me to varied attitudes of people with HI. Here I found parents and people with disabilities who had both good and adverse stories to tell about their educational experiences [Case, 1].

Case 3 was inspired to establish both RUs and Sp Cls by peer teachers who had successfully initiated their establishment. This is evidenced by his story:

I volunteered to attend a Special Needs Education (SNE) workshop where through information sharing and discussions I developed a passion in the area. At my school there were two RUs which were almost closing down because the person who had established them had left on promotion bases. I did not want to see these centres close down thus when I returned to my school after the workshop during a report back meeting I volunteered to take the classes and requested for another volunteer whom I would assist but I did not get one so I managed the two RUs; for the intellectually and the preferred group of learners who were deaf [Case, 3].

Case, 2, from a different school had a different situation because she was interested in establishing either a RUs or Sp Cls at her school but she could not because the school disputed that as follows:

I did not get the chance to initiate the opening of RUs and Sp Cls even though I wished to do so. The experiences I went through denied that to happen. Although the ZOU training SNE training I had completed urged its scholars to educate the

community on disability issues and initiate the establishment of RUs and Sp Cls with the help of the relevant community members, I could not do so because of the encountered challenges [Case, 2].

Case, 2 explained her circumstances as follows:

After completing the Bachelor of Science in Special Education at UCE I went back to my district where I was posted at the same school where I previously taught before I went for the extra training as a specialist teacher. I discussed what I had learnt and even work shopped my colleagues on the expectations and my intentions to initiate the establishment of RUs and Sp Cls but the school Head put me to task by telling me that I should not waste my expertise on learners who were weak as one of their best teachers I should teach examinable classes, such as Grades 6 and 7 so that the school produces the best results and keep its reputation rather than teach special learners with special learning challenges whose will give a bad reputation to the school. The School Head further suggested that, after they wont make it to Grade seven level. Thus, I was asked to teach examinable classes only and never got the chance later on to even work shop colleagues on Special Needs Education (SNE) [Case, 2].

All these revealed lived experiences signify that systems should have clear policies and structures with easy to follow monitoring and evaluation packages. The authors further felt that, guided by 9 already described principles the establishment and managing of RUs or Sp Cls should be enhanced. That should attract people to rally behind the ideas.

4.7 Factors Affecting the Establishment of Resources Units/Special classes:-

The study revealed a number of factors affected the lack of establishment of resource units and/or special classes

I struggled to make things work in these RUs. I received from little support from the school, community and the parents and that made me almost give up. However, in a bid to respect the person who had started the units I persevered on improvising where I could (Case, 3).

BC Teacher Federation (2006) explores the issues of special support teachers who are working in multiple roles in resource team models. BC Teacher Federation (2006) found that, the challenge was that, many special support teachers now have responsibilities outside their area of specialisation and expertise and that has reduced support from many special support teachers.

4.8 Benefits of establishing resource units and/or special classes:-

The narrative of Case, 1 in the appendix shows that the establishment of the RUs and Sp Cls in various districts acted as wake up calls on the majority of parents who had hidden their children from their neighbours and society at large. The successful functioning of the units plus improvements in performance and behaviour of children lured more parents to develop interest in the education of learners with disabilities. The gesture further drove many parents to send their children with disabilities to school.

Even Case, 2, and 3's experiences revealed that:

After discussing at length with one teacher who did not have basic skills in disability studies, the class got a volunteer whom I continued to assist with disability skills. Other teachers were surprised by end of year to see some of the learners the school had labeled, "dull; useless; madofu and naughty" improving in their academic learning and behaviour too. I was internally excited when some of my colleagues noticed this and commented positively about it. I counted that as the beginning of positively changing the mindset of most teachers towards learners with disabilities [Case, 2].

It was this lack of resources and support that made my learners take long to improve in their learning. Through my hard work they later on improved. It was a wake up call on parents and the community because it influenced them to support and even send hidden children to school [Case, 3].

The Secretary's Circular Minute No. P36 of 1985 was made through the School Psychological Services Department to encourage schools to establish resource units in a bid to lessen the challenges experienced by both teachers and pupils with disability and any other learning challenges. Despite all that, the authors observed that still has not increased or improved the establishment of RUs and Sp Cls in the country.

4.9 Possible Solutions to Establishment of Resources Units/ Special classes:-

Share ideas on setting up RUs and Sp Cls. Case, 1 (one) had set up a number of RUs and Sp Cls over the past years when she was a specialist teacher. Thus, has a number of ideas to share on the successes and challenges in establishing RUs and Sp Cls. Reading her lived experiences under the appendix section may help readers and educationists improve their approach to the establishment of RUs and Sp Cls. More lessons can also be learnt from Cases 2, and 3.

4.9.1 Learnt Lessons from Case, 1:-

Lessons learnt included, that there is still need for disability advocacy since there are still reports of parents who are hiding people with disabilities without sending them to school. The study revealed that the majority of families do not want to be publicly associated with their child with disability. They wanted the issue to be kept a secret by keeping the child in doors and not sending him/her to school or play with peers. This might sound an old fashioned mentality but researches continue to reveal gaps in disability campaigns and advocacy. When an institution gets sponsorship transparency between institutions and sponsors usually results in maintained relationships and continued support. For sustainability, involve the concerned parents with children with disabilities in raising funds and

maintaining their children's projects. The educationists need to adopt a humble attitude and to be patient when dealing with parents of children with disabilities and even issues of learners with disabilities.

4.9.2 Lessons Learnt from Cases, 2 and 3:-

The study findings revealed a high need in community education awareness on PWDs; the causes of disabilities and the untapped potentials; capabilities; talents and creativity they had. It also suggested the need for a Teacher Education Curriculum in colleges and workshops that could help dispel the myths and prejudices and stereotypes and allow the understanding and acceptance of people with disabilities. PWDs have equal rights to education and freedom of expression. People thought education is about academic achievements and yet for people with disabilities it also involves learning daily living and vocational skills for independent living. We have role models of successful PWDs who have gone through RU & Sc CIs and even on leadership positions and even working as teachers as portrayed by Case, 1's lived experiences. These could be used to counter the existing mentality on educability and potentialities of PWDs. There was also need for loud Policies and Acts which could mandate the education of PWDs in suitable placements be it RUs and/or Sp CIs and even the inclusive strategy.

The RUs and/or Sp CIs are established according to the category of disability the school is interested and capacitated in. That has a likelihood of under-representation of some disabilities, thus, many such people may fail to access education or only attend it for the sake of it without receiving appropriate education. Thus, guided by the 9 Golden Rules earlier on described, the study hopes to give the establishment of RUs; Sp CIs and treatment of learners with disabilities a springboard which could help cultivate a positive mindset towards creating equal educational opportunities for PWDs in Zimbabwe and even internationally. The study may further learn from the philosopher, Socrates' words of wisdom.

The philosopher, Socrates once said that true wisdom comes to each of us when we realise how little we understand about life, ourselves and the world. This teaches us that we are what we repeatedly do. He further proposed that excellence is a habit but wisdom begins in wonder. This is exemplified in this study by the way the authors brainstormed and revisited their experiences on the concerned topic and how lessons could be learnt from the shared lived experiences.

4.10 Emerging Themes and Patterns:-

The study revealed that there is a mixed bag of teachers in the country. The researchers found that there are teachers who do not understand at all the concept of RUs and Sp CIs and others who partially do so plus those who understand it. It also noted that some of these teachers who had limited experiences of such children wanted to know more about it while others did not want to be associated with such systems because they presumed them to be contagious and likely to create teachers who would equally become slow learners as the learners they taught. The findings also emphasised that no two learners are the same but they differ in many various ways even though they may be grouped as short; tall; intellectually challenged; autistic and extra. In other words every child is an individual. The study therefore aimed to encourage all educationists to positively respond to diversity in their schools so as to reduce the impacts of learning needs of learners with impairments and/or disabilities. Furthermore the study revealed that, through establishing RUs and Sp CIs a lot of children who had been ignored or pushed along had their needs met and that uplifted them to a level they would not have attained without the interventions of RUs and Sp CIs strategies.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The findings teach us that, we are connected social beings whether we like it or not. Thus, one may safely suggest that, we learn in many ways through conversations. The study also reflected that, a feeling of, "I know it all" was pronounced by the study to likely make one feel knowledgeable

enough and not want to converse or listen to what other people say. Such a habit as reflected by study finding is likely to hamper assimilation and accommodation of new knowledge, a process commonly referred to in the psychology of the classroom. Knowledge and change can therefore be gained through conversations too. To support the current call for EFA and inclusive practices, the authors felt that, the Zimbabwean education system needed to play an active role in the establishment of RUs and Sp Cls. And it should also equip them with both human and service resources and also create environments that give the related learners appropriate opportunities. Such model RUs and Sp Cls were found affording learners with disabled equal opportunities and provisions despite encountered challenges.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the study recommended the following:

- ⇒ That institutions of Teacher Education should impart Disability Studies in their curricula with a view to help educationists understand the concepts Resource Units and Special Classes
- ⇒ There is need for the educationists to advocate and campaign for the establishment of Resource Units and Special Classes in their various areas with a view to address diversity among learners
- ⇒ That SPS and SNE should play an active role and work closely with schools and their authorities in establishing Resource Units and Special Classes
- ⇒ That the system of education gives psycho-social to parents/ families with learners with disabilities
- ⇒ There is need for SPS and SNE to find ways of making known successful role model learners who benefit from the Resource Units and Special Classes education systems
- ⇒ The government needs to develop policies which mandate the education systems to use Resource Units and Special Classes to address all diversity in the learning field

- ⇒ There was need for more research on experiences in the establishment of Resource Units and Special Classes to help educationists learn lessons from them and further improve the learning arena of diversified learners.

REFERENCES

1. Boden, D., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1991). *Transcription appendix. In D. Boden & D. H. Zimmerman (Eds.), Talk and social structure. Cambridge: Polity. 278-282.*
2. Hegarty, S. (1987). *Special Needs in Ordinary Schools. London: Cassel.*
3. Johnson, J. L. (2006). *Special Education and the Inner City: A challenge for the Future or Another means of Cooling the Mark out? Journal of Special Education, 3, 241-51.*
4. Kanyongo, G. Y. (2005). *Zimbabwe's public education system reforms: Successes and challenges. International Education Journal 6(1), 65-74.*
5. McLean and McLean (2006) *Conversation: A new model for qualitative research, UK. www.wardmclean.co.uk/pdf/conversation_new_model_for_qualitative_research.pdf accessed 20/12/2014.*
6. Mtetsha, N. (undated) *Special Education: Labelling and Categorisation and its Curriculum and Educational Implications.*
7. Peresuh, M. (1991). *Attitudes to integration of children with mild mental handicaps. Unpublished, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Manchester.*
8. Sacks, H. (1992) *Lectures on Conversation. Vols 1 and 11, (ed) G. Jefferson, Oxford: Blackwell.*
9. Silverman, D. (1998). *Qualitative Research: Theory, Methods and Practice. London, SAGE Publications.*
10. Tafirei et al (2013). *The effects of inclusion on children with severe intellectual disability who are in the mainstream system or in six ordinary regular rural primary schools in Zaka Central Cluster, Zimbabwe. Journal of African Studies and Development.*
11. <http://www.academicjournals.org/JASD> *Journal of African Studies and Development accessed 20/11/2014.*
12. UNESCO, (2001). *Including the excluded: Meeting diversity in education. Example from Uganda. In Combating Exclusion in Education. Paris: UNESCO.*
13. UNESCO, (2001). *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. Paris: UNESCO.*
14. Zindi, F., Peresuh, M. and Mpfu, E. (2001). *Psychology for the Classroom. Gweru: College Press.*
15. Zindi, F. and Makotore, S. (2000). *Educational Psychology. Harare: Zimbabwe Open University.*

APPENDIX

Authors' Bio data

1) Phillipa's Bio Data

Ms Phillipa Mutswanga is a senior lecturer teaching at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, in the Disability Studies and Special Needs Education department. She holds a Masters degree in Educational Psychology and Bachelor of Education in Special Needs Education. She specialised in Deaf Education and has high interest in Disability Studies and Sign Language issues. She is currently a final year Doctor of Philosophy candidate. Phillipa has authored and co-authored a number of course modules published by ZOU in Counselling, Disability Studies and Special Needs Education and

Early Childhood Education programmes. She has content reviewed a number of modules too. Phillipa has also developed New Programmes for the university. She has also published and co-authored a number of research articles in referred journals.

2) Co-author's Bio Data

Mrs. Barbra Mapuranga is a senior lecturer teaching at the Zimbabwe Open University in the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. She is the Regional Programme Coordinator responsible for Special Needs and Disability Studies programme. She holds a Master's degree in Special Education. She has co-authored a number of research articles, and course modules published by the Zimbabwe Open University. She has authored and contributed to both primary and secondary literature and set-books.

