



SPECIALIST TEACHERS AS USEFUL ASSETS IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The study qualitatively tapped the experiences of purposively selected 6 specialist teachers on the usefulness of specialist teachers as assets in the field of education in Zimbabwe. The naturalistic phenomenological design was used to collect data. In-depth interviews, observations and narratives were employed to elicit data from the participants. The symbiotic transformative theory which borrowed from Mezirow's framework underpinned this study. The study revealed that, although, teachers are the most important assets in the field of education, different perceptions are held on this view, especially on specialist teachers. With regards to that, some participants considered specialist teachers as useful assets if the Education for All (EFA) goals is to be met. On the other hand, other participants viewed specialist teachers as ending up behaving as learners with disabilities that they taught. However, all this is subject to debate and further studies. The study recommended that all stakeholders who dealt with learners needed to be skilled in disability studies in order to address diversity amongst humankind.

KEY WORDS: Specialist teachers; useful assets; field of Education; Zimbabwe

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, although, teachers are the most important assets in the field of education, different perceptions are on specialist teachers. This is so despite of the fact that teachers initiate and facilitate learning in schools. They act as sources of information both within and out of the classroom. Both formal and informal education generally transforms the lives of people. It is equally the major aim of special education in this study. Although

special education has come to be recognised as an essential system in the field of education controversies and debates exist on why the workload of special classes and/or resource units teachers should have limited numbers while conventional classes with diversified learners remain overloaded. With respect to that, UNESCO (2000) suggests that it is equally apparent that, teachers have limits as to how many pupils they can meaningfully interact

with for effective learning to occur. Everyone is different in some way from the other. The deviation may be higher or lower than the norm. Thus, special needs individuals equally differ significantly in what they are able to do in order to succeed in the world. Even within the norm there are people who deviate from the norm in one way or the other. At one time or other every person behaves outside society's acceptable standards or norms. In other words levels or degrees of disability differ from one person to the other. Furthermore to that, everyone has some limitations, thus, because of that we are all not professors, teachers, medical doctors, or nurses. Equally medical doctor have to specialise in the field of medicine so do the teachers in order to effectively address diversity amongst learners.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) Who are specialist teachers?
- 2) To what extent are specialists teachers an asset in the field of education?
- 3) What challenges are faced by specialist teachers in the field of education?
- 4) What could be done to make specialist teachers more useful assets in the field of education?

2.0 RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

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 (Lockett, 2014; Noor Fatima Foundation, 2014). The researchers employed the symbiotic transformation as the best theory that could guide this study.

2.1 THE SYMBIOTIC TRANSFORMATION THEORY

Generally experiences shape and delimit perceptions (Mutswanga in Press). This is supported by the day-to-day idiom which says, "*Experience is the best teacher.*" Thus, some experiences have the potential to transform our lives or wellbeing. According to Mezirow (1997), the transformation theory is a process of effecting change in a frame of references. Frame of references according to Mutswanga (In Press) are structures of assumptions through which experiences can be understood. In 2012 Mezirow further polished this definition and

described it as a deep shift in perspective which led to more open, permeable and better-justified meaning. The meaning may be drawn from the acquired or achieved new identify after acquiring certain achievements or experiences.

Symbiotic is a mutual relationship where both parties benefit. Hicks (2012) and Dirkx (2000) acknowledge that after going through education, new insights have in most instances guided individuals' lives to a better position. This study is guided by the symbiotic transformation which borrows its strength from Mezirow's transformative learning theory. This framework embraces diversity and transformation dominion for all people including those with special needs and their teachers who are the focus of this study. The authors considered this theory relevant to the study because as noted by Mezirow (1997) it supports this study's focus by discouraging the assimilation of the minority into the dominant culture. As a result this theory is instrumental in guiding this study.

Additionally, as noted by ERU (2009) involving empowered stakeholders in collaborative problem-solving in civil society can create "win-win" solutions. For that condition to occur it is the core of the symbiotic strategies of transformation. Symbiotic strategies of transformation, therefore, always involve a counterpoint between two kinds of processes (ERU, 2009). The study encourages the recognition of the importance of specialist teachers as essential assets in the field of education in general.

As guided by the framework below, the figure calls for the positive transformation of all people who have to do with the education of learners with disabilities in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. The mere acceptance of specialist teachers as useful assets is likely to lead to improvements in handling the learning needs of learners with disabilities. Thus, parents; conventional teachers and their pupils; specialist teachers and all other disciplinary team members are expected to be guided by this theory to transform for the betterment of learners with disabilities. Figure 2.1 below self explains how the symbiotic transformative theory guides this study. The symbiotic transformative theory which borrowed from Mezirow's framework underpins

this study as earlier on stated in preceding paragraphs.

2.2 OTHER RELATED LITERATURE REVIEWS

According to Heward and Orlansky (1988), the first public school class for children with severe intellectual disability was formed in 1896 in the Providence, Rhode Island in the United States of America. As observed by the researchers, such international improvements marked the beginning of special class movement, which later on influenced several states and legislation on the education of learners with disabilities. Despite such positive influences, historically, cultural beliefs towards people with disabilities also contributed differently to such shifts in thinking. For example, where some people still believe that having a child with disabilities was some form of punishment to the parent for disobeying ancestral spirits or God or failure to appease ancestors, the essence of specialist teachers may be less considered or otherwise. The level to which such thinking is diminishing in Zimbabwe seems under-researched and not clearly established since controversies continue to dominate the usefulness of specialist teachers.

Thus, the Secretary's Circular Minute No. P36 of 1985) was developed through the Zimbabwean School Psychological Services (SPS) Department to encourage schools to establish resource units in a bid to lessen the challenges experienced by both teachers in managing learners with disabilities and equally help pupils with disabilities manage their learning. Additionally, in 1992 The Disabled Persons Act (DPA), which was amended in 1996 and the ongoing United Nations Convention Rights of People with Disability (2006) (UNCRPD) which Zimbabwe ratified and signed the protocol on 23 September 2013 all continue to support the current treatment given to special education and the specialist teachers.

Despite all these movements and development the authors of this study still felt that specialist teachers were not receiving the deserved position [though not empirically proved]. In other words, that still seemed to be slowly changing the

mindset of conventional educationists and the public towards the importance of specialist teachers in the Zimbabwean education system. It was against this background that, this study was carried out to strengthen the usefulness of specialist teachers in the Zimbabwean education. Within this framework, the authors were motivated to carry out this study. Thus, it may be argued that when special education is conceptualised in this manner, it creates barriers to noticing the essence of specialist teachers in the Zimbabwean education. According to Tafirei et al (2013) it absolves the rest of the education system from taking responsibility for all children's learning. The study therefore, calls for urgent address of the situation. That in turn may allow specialist teachers to give their maximum output and also to drive conventional teachers to refer cases they cannot handle as soon as possible. Such action may allow early interventions to the educational gaps and needs of learners with disabilities and enhance the learners' performance. 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 (Lockett, 2014; Noor Fatima Foundation, 2014). Some of the commonly identified special needs include: learning disabilities; communication disabilities; emotional and behavioral disorders; physical disabilities and developmental disabilities (UNESCO, 2000). Students with these kinds of special needs are likely to benefit from additional educational services such as different approaches to teaching, the use of technology, a specifically adapted teaching area, or a resource room (UNESCO, 2000). As observed by the researchers these limitations are likely to prevent a child to learn as other children thus, the situation may require teachers with an extra skill in the area of individual children's learning needs.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was employed to bring forth the views of teachers on the usefulness of specialist teachers as assets in the field of education in Zimbabwe. Qualitative research presents facts in a narration of words. It deals with data that is principally verbal and is based on a

naturalistic phenomenological philosophy which believes that multiple realities are socially constructed through individual and collective definitions of the situation (Aaltonentt, 2006; Somekh, and Lewin, 2005). The method aims to understand reality by discovering meanings that people in a specific setting attach to it (White, 2002). That is, behaviour is intentional, creative and can be explained but it cannot be predicted. The approach believes that human actions are strongly influenced by the settings in which they occur. In other words the qualitative research is more concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the participant's perspective. In support, White (2002) propounds that may occur through the researcher's participation in the life of the actors in a research role or through historical empathy with participants in past social events as focused by this study.

Qualitative is considered as the most appropriate approach for this study because of its greater flexibility in both the methods and the research process. It is for this reason that the qualitative methodology is described as interpretative and dialectical (Aspers, 2009). Thus, White (2002) asserts that according to this approach a researcher cannot understand human behaviour without understanding the framework within which the subjects interpret their thoughts, feelings and actions. Meaning that during the interaction process between the researcher and the participant, the participant's world view is discovered and interpreted through qualitative methods (Schurink, 2000). It is marked by disciplined subjectivity where data is self examined, criticised, quality analysed and encountered problems are highlighted and explained how they are mitigated (Aspers, 2009).

The main idea of empirical phenomenology is that scientific explanation are grounded in the first-order construction of the actors; that is, in their own meanings. These constructions are then related to the second-order constructions of the scientist. In this study, empirical phenomenology is considered in the light of the phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology is fundamentally a fore-science or "Urwissenschaft" as Heidegger calls

it (Aspers, 2009). It aims to reach a better understanding of the conditions of science. Understanding is a central concept in this philosophy.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants for the study and point of saturation determined the sample. The selected participants freely took part in the study and they were told that they were at free will to withdraw. On the other hand, the authors assured them that the information they gave was confidentially kept and it was also anonymously treated to protect the participants. Informed consent of participants who took part in the study was sought and they signed forms to that.

The study employed in-depth interviews, observations and narratives to elicit data from the participants. The collected data was placed into patterns and themes as it was obtained. The revealed patterns showed that participants held varied perspectives on the concept understudy. The findings then, explained how the patterns, themes and research questions addressed the topic understudy in the sections below. Though the collected data was criticised for being less representative enough, it was strengthened through repeated evidence obtained through triangulation. In addition to that probes verified any misunderstood issues. Thus, the authors felt results from this study were trustworthy and dependable.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study revealed a number of patterns and themes but it highly acknowledged individual differences as a major pattern. Thus, the majority of the participants agreed that every learner was different from any other learner while the minority of them felt it was not necessary to engage specialist teachers to teach so few learners who were even likely not to make it in life. As a result, Cases, 3 and 5 considered it as wastage of human resources. This was a common pattern among the minority while the majority of the participant considered specialist teachers as useful assets. Another observed pattern was that although specialist teachers carried out there duties amicably negative comments from other teachers influenced the way they associated themselves with the philosophy of RUs and Sp Cls. This is evidenced by the echoes below:

After obtaining extra training skills in special education I volunteered to teach at the RUs since the class teacher was going on leave. Other teachers in the school confronted me to discourage me suggesting that it was wastage of the good knowledge and skills I possessed. They further suggested that even the English of the teacher who was going on leave had been affected and was no longer good enough for a teacher because of the class of "dhandu heads" she taught. [that is, slow learners in English a word derived from the word "dull"] (Case, 4).

Another participant heard colleagues remarking:

Teachers of learners in the RUs and Sp Cls end up behaving as the pupils they teach. I do not want to be associated with such classes (Case, 6).

According to the authors the above excerpts therefore reveal that there is a high need to carry out several studies on perspectives held by the public and educationists on special education and specialist teachers. The findings would probably feed into education with a view to make them understand and see specialist teachers as useful asset in education. In support, Zindi et al (2001) confirm that, these interventions are designed to help learners with special needs achieve a higher level of personal self-sufficiency and success in school.

4.1 The Concept of Specialist Teachers:-

The study findings showed that people had several definitions for both special needs education and specialist teachers. Some of these concepts contributed to the current held controversies and debates on their definition (s). As observed by the authors it was this lack of clear definitions which contributed to the ongoing confusion about the concepts. Below are some of the excerpts from the study:

Calling teachers who assist learners with disabilities specialist teachers creates/gives room to them being called special and the use of this word makes people want to find

out more about such children and what their teachers do with them. The word brings with it to the education field stigma which further culminates into discrimination. I therefore propose that the teachers be called support teachers and that the focus is put more on these children's needs than their outlook and physic [Case, 1].

I question what is special about special education. This is just education which starts from one's operational level and takes the individual at a learning pace the learner determines [Case, 2].

With a view to address these excerpts Zindi et al (2001) felt that, special education is a profession with its own tools, techniques and research methods, all focused on improving instructional arrangements and procedures for evaluating and meeting the needs of special needs children and adults. The same authors furthermore felt that, at a more practical level, special education is the individually planned and systematically monitored arrangement of physical settings, special equipment and materials, teaching procedures and other interventions designed to help special needs children to achieve the greatest possible self-sufficiency and academic success.

However, the authors felt that, the terms *special education* and *specialist teachers* needed to be taken to the drawing board to find out whether it was worthy changing it to *supportive education and/or teachers*; be left as it is or think of other best terms. The authors further, felt that, understanding of these terms was important as the starting point of the recognition of special teachers; the people they serve and the special education system.

4.2 Specialist teachers an asset in the field of education (advantages/roles:-

The study participants were divided and could not be resolute on the recognition of special teachers as an asset in the field of education in Zimbabwe. Thus, in some instances the same participants made contributions for and against the usefulness of specialist teachers despite the fact that

the authors probed for further explanations for such behaviour. For example, the majority of participants pointed out that, while they saw specialist teachers as essential assets in education but they felt their specialism was exaggerated and that drove people to question their skilledness. Other participants felt that, although specialist teachers helped to improve the performance of some learners their workload opened the system to lots of suspicions and unanswered questions. A very interesting contribution from one of the participants reported:

Since specialist teachers have a less workload, the performance of their students should not be compared with the workload of 40 plus which already has diversified learners. Thus, specialist teachers should not be seen as better teachers than other teachers, as the system seems to intend to portray.

Another participant had this to say:

I am a teacher with a child with disabilities. I never expected my child to one day perform well in his education but I counted it a miracle and the great effort of the specialist teacher who helped my child improve in his learning. I totally accept that specialist teachers are useful assets in the field of education. I therefore recommend that every teachers' training college should have special needs education as a core course [Case, 2].

The modern trends of special education and special needs as expressed by Zindi et al (2001) and Norwich (1990) assert that, learners with disabilities or learning needs have a right to live and participate in settings that are as normal as possible to promote their independent living. They further suggest that, the improvements should continue to grow and not remain static. In other words these authors are aware that in every generation individual differences and learning needs remain as long as people exist.

However, the general findings from this study were supported by Zindi et al (2001) who propose that, 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 student were only given access to a typical classroom education. The authors took this study as an eye opener. The message we deduced was that, special education and the public should be made aware that, there is nothing special about special education parse but it is the conditions of the learners which requires special treatment/ conditions or materials for effective learning to take place.

4.3 Challenges faced by specialist teachers in the field of education:-

As already discussed one of the major challenge was on the definition of specialist education/teachers. It may require revisiting to improve it or make it more user-friendly to the Zimbabwean education system. Another challenge was naming calling of learners and their specialist teachers. The previously discussed issue where the learners or the specialist teachers were labelled *dull* was another example, affecting the conceptualisation of the usefulness of specialist teachers. Another was disgruntlements of both specialist teachers and conventional teachers over many unclear issues on special needs education.

In view to most of the highlighted challenges in this study, Florian and Rouse (2009) argue that, underlying the process of inclusion is the assumption that the general classroom teacher has certain knowledge and understanding about the needs of different learners, teaching techniques and curriculum strategies. Furthermore to that, Zindi and Makotore (2000), suggest that historically, in the 1960s children with severe intellectual disability were not considered for educational placement but most societies offered them protection and not education as they mainly kept them in asylums. The authors of this study noticed that with the advent of new knowledge and improved legislation many educational systems saw it noble to equip some teachers with special education training skills. As observed by the authors of this study, that did not improve the perspectives of educationists on the usefulness of specialist teachers.

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) further 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. It was also established that most schools lacked specialist teachers and school administrators and this has exacerbated the plight of these pupils (Tafirei et al (2013). Thus, the same authors stringently recommended that schools implement the policy on Inclusive Education [Policy No.P36/2005]. Although there is widespread support for inclusion at a philosophical level, there are some concerns that the policy of inclusion is difficult to implement because teachers are not sufficiently well prepared and supported to work in inclusive ways (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2010). Thus, this study repeatedly, calls for retooling of the teacher education curricula to include basic special needs education skills.

4.4 How specialist teachers can be made more useful assets in the field of education:-

The following excerpts from the study addressed what could be done to make specialist teachers more useful assets than they currently are:

If the education system wants people to feel the goodness of specialist teachers, it should induct all personnel in different sectors as to what it is; its focus; benefits; benefits to who? [Case, 1].

Administrators equally need the education just as the specialist teachers do to enable them to monitor its implementation and to make the schools accountable for diversified education. I say so because most school heads shoot the policy down by taking the specialist teachers to teach better classes that give their school better reputation [Case, 2].

I propose that people in all sectors should receive education on special needs

education to help them manage and also to help clear the misconceptions on people with disabilities [Case,2].

Although controversies and debates were expressed by the participants the majority of them felt that specialist teachers were very useful asset in the field of education in Zimbabwe. Participants suggested that they had models who had been assisted to improve their learning performance through the help of specialist teachers and were now on better employments. In the study, Case, 2 is another good example that explains the usefulness of specialist teachers in the field of education. The study findings may safely conclude that, in general, the development of the more humane and sensitive attitudes have paralleled the advance of science over superstition. Thus, the scientific study of human behaviour provided more and more information about natural bases of special needs, explanations based on unnatural causes lost force (Zindi et al (2001). However, as a starting point, the education system needed to change the curricula in teacher education so as to support all teachers to meet the diversity and diverse student needs in the context of addressing special problems (BC Teacher Federation, 2006).

4.5 Other Findings:-

The study revealed that education is a learning curve/field which takes on board diversified learners with various levels of abilities and disabilities. It acknowledges that while some teachers' training colleges give their teachers basic education on disability studies that was found inadequate in some instances considering the severity of some conditions and the limitedness of the depth of the curricula. Students with these kinds of special needs are likely to benefit from additional educational services such as different approaches to teaching, the use of technology, a specifically adapted teaching area, or a resource room.

The study findings caution us to be aware that specialist teachers are not only needed to address issues of learners with disabilities but the intellectually gifted also embraced this group. Teachers needed to be skilled to manage such individuals. In support, UNESCO (2000) asserts that,

intellectual giftedness is a difference in learning and can also benefit from specialised teaching techniques or different educational programmes, even though the term “special education” is generally used to specifically indicate instruction of students with disabilities. Gifted education is also handled in special education. All that justified the usefulness of specialist teachers as assets in the field of education in Zimbabwe. Thus, specialist teachers could be taken as advocates with the know how to stand in and fight for the gifted and the less gifted. In other words, they are agents of change in treatments, attitudes and could influence policies because of their training and experiences.

Basing on the findings specialist teachers can work as motivators, improve the self-esteem of learners and also the perceptions of the community and even other conventional teachers. The study found specialist teachers better equipped with methods to apply to address the diversity amongst learners. Besides all that, the study acknowledged them as having the ability to work in various settings. Thus, even though generally specialist teachers have areas of specialisation, this revealed that they have a general understanding of all learners with or without disabilities. As a result the study proposed that teachers’ colleges and universities needed to equip all teachers with basic knowledge in special need education. As observed by the authors that was likely to form the foundation which could lead to the recognition of specialist teachers as useful assets in the field of education. Therefore the task of initial teacher education is to prepare people to enter a profession which accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of all children (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2010).

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that teachers with varied qualifications and specialism were required to address the diversity among learners. It revealed that including the excluded helps to meet diversity in education. That then, justified the need to have specialist teachers as valuable assets in the field of education. The study proposed that the identified learning needs of learners should be followed by

appropriate placement or allocation to educationists with the relevant specialism. Generally, the study recognised teachers and parents of learners as the sole most important assets in the field of education in Zimbabwean. Teachers are the focal point of all curricula and classroom organisation while specialist teachers according to findings from this study should also remain the focal persons of the experienced learning challenges in the Zimbabwean education and probably in African schools. The study accepts that, although at a philosophical level inclusion is widely supported, there are some concerns that the policy of inclusion is difficult to implement because teachers are not sufficiently well skilled to address diversity. Thus, the study suggested that all teachers’ colleges and universities should skill every teacher with basic special needs education skills to enable every teacher to accept the responsibility to create schools for all children. Furthermore, the study findings revealed that specialist teachers were a crucial asset in the field of education in Zimbabwe because they reduced the number of under-achievers and in turn promoted the learning of the gifted to the next level of achievement.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The study findings recommended the following:

- ↳ There was need to educate all the educationists on the diversity of needs of learners that attended their classes and thus, equally justify the need of teachers with varied specialism
- ↳ The justification of specialist teachers in the field of education should pave way for these teachers as usefulness assets in successfully educating learners with diversified needs
- ↳ As follow up to the above, there was need to make the basic disability and special needs education a core course at every teachers’ college and university with a view to make sure that all special needs of learners receive the needed attention
- ↳ There was need for community awareness campaigns on disability and special needs education and the need for various

specialist teachers in the field of education with a view to give specialist teachers their place and recognition and aim for symbiotic transformation of both the society at large and all educationists

✎ That every school should have a specialist teacher who attends to the diversified learning needs of learners

✎ There is need for school heads to champion the usefulness of specialist teachers in the field of education with a view to reduce the number of underperformers in schools.

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Appendix 1: Authors' Bio data

Author

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.