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Reforms needed for the operationalisation of inclusive education in ordinary schools in Zimbabwe

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Special Needs Education has evolved from segregation to main streaming and then to inclusion of students with disabilities. This evolutionary process was fuelled by the social need for equality of humanity. This process has been met with fierce idealogical resistance from certain social quotas. The most radical and dynamic changes in Special Needs Education to date, which have withstood such resistance, are those that relate to inclusive education. In response to changes characterising inclusive education, drastic reforms have been experienced in those countries such as the USA and the United Kingdom. These countries have been used as models for the implementation of genuine inclusion of students with disabilities into ordinary schools. This treatise examines reforms of the ordinary school that would save as necessary conditions for successful inclusive education in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Such reforms relate to the organization and philosophy of the school, the physical and social environment, resourcing, curriculum and policy change processes. Examples from Zimbabwe are used to guide the discussion and the terms 'inclusive education', 'major reforms' and 'mainstream/ordinary school' are immediately defined in order to operationalize the topic. Some of the main reasons for failure of inclusive education in developing countries such as Zimbabwe have been lack of political will and negative social attitudes towards people with disabilities. In the ultimate analysis, the paper concludes that, for inclusive education to operate or

function, there is need for a revolutionary change of attitude toward people with disabilities at political, social and professional levels. This should be punctuated with restructuring of the school infrastructure and mainstream curriculum, mainstreaming of social and educational policies to become disability friendly and improved resourcing. Teachers should be re-capacitated to face the challenges that go with inclusive education and community ownership of inclusive initiatives, guided my national policy and support is proposed.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a philosophical vision which envisages that children with special educational needs should learn with their peers in the local school while undertaking the same curriculum. Uditsky (1993) in Lewis (1995) defined inclusion as a set of principles which ensures that the child with a disability is viewed as a valued and needed member of the school community in every respect. More precisely, Wolfendale (1994) conceives inclusive education as an equal opportunities and rights issue implying that the child should attend the local ordinary school on a fulltime basis, in an age appropriate group, with full support and acceptance. In other words, inclusive education entails that all children, regardless of their abilities and status, share the same schooling experiences. Fullan (1991), designates inclusive education as one of the most complex reforms in Special Needs Education to date and conceptualizes major reforms as sustained, pragmatic and wholesome actions that influence drastic changes to ethos and arrangement of the school. For Boehner (2003) reforms amount to the creation of conditions that enable children with disabilities to successfully learn with their peers. In this paper, a mainstream/ordinary school refers to an educational institution which, traditionally, does not enrol learners with significant special educational needs.

2. Reforms in the organization and philosophy of the school

Inclusive education is premised on the belief that there is no need for a separate special education system. Proponents of inclusion, a product of humanistic theories, prefer a single system approach to education to a dualistic system where special education is separated from general education. According to Elliot and McKenny (2003:6), "... inclusion is more successful than the dual system.", In this context, for inclusion to work, the overall organization and philosophy of the school should change in favour of inclusive practices. Hallahan and Kauffman (1997), believe that the educational organisation of the ordinary school needs to be fixed, improved or made ready to address the diverse needs of all students. The aim of the reforms is to enhance ordinary school and classroom practices to accommodate students with significant special needs without compromising the quality of education for all students. Rogers (1993), earlier on, noted that, these reforms do not come without challenges. However, Croll and Moses (2000), still insist that, although in the United Kingdom, great initiatives for fundamental reforms with inclusion as the overwhelmingly dominant 'big idea' have been met with significant challenges, great changes have taken place in favour of improved educational services for students with disabilities in inclusive setups.

These reforms to the school organization should start off with the mindsets of the school leadership. For inclusion to be successful, strong leadership participation is required and a way of thinking consistent with inclusion should be developed (Fullan, 1991). In other words, the practice of the inclusive school ethos should start with the school administrators and School Development Committee leaders. Through training and in service workshops, School Development Committee leaders and school administrators would need to be conscientized on the goals, tenets, benefits and practices of inclusion. Thus, the school leadership would need to develop a clarity of focus toward the immediate and future direction and goals regarding inclusionary practices (Sobel and Vaughn, 2003). The school leadership should be seen to lead the reforms if genuine inclusion is to accrue and the status quo is to be transformed. However, the school ethos towards inclusive education should draw from the bigger

picture of a national policy or mission statement that cherishes inclusion of people with disabilities in all social activities and recognises benefit of their participation.

The current status quo in most ordinary schools in developing countries like Zimbabwe is that, education is run on a market basis where the schools use results to compete for the student clientele and recognition. Unfortunately, the philosophy and practise of inclusion is to some extent, diametrically opposed to such exclusionary practices. In a market forces approach to education, including children with special educational needs into the ordinary school is viewed as detrimental to the competitive nature of the school system. Elliot and McKenny (2003), report that a study in the UK, for that matter, revealed that many teachers and administrators were worried that accommodating students with disabilities into the ordinary school slowed down the curriculum in ways detrimental to the other students. Such organizational beliefs are against the spirit of inclusion and should be transformed. Brown and Ridell (1994) agree that, indeed the market forces approach and encouragement of competition among schools have a profound effect on how children with special needs are viewed. They advise that such practices should be controlled for inclusion to prosper. It is of course not easy to change a philosophy of life of a people. However, the recognition that if all ordinary schools in the local community were to include children with special needs, the children would account for an insignificant proportion of the ordinary school enrolment could allay the fear of having many children with disabilities in the schools.

In essence, a fundamental rethinking of the meaning and purpose of education should be inculcated into the ordinary school system. Education should not be seen as a screening process bent on the creation of the elite and condemnation of the less able. Instead, education should be viewed as a social service designed to improve the lives of all learners regardless of their abilities and status. In other words, the ordinary school should create equal opportunities for all students whether disabled or not. This can be done by increasing support to disable students as a way of creating a level playing field. Unesco (1998), implores that schools must be able to master the rhetoric, content, meaning and spirit of inclusion before any other reforms are undertaken. Some schools in the local community, have to some extent, mastered the rhetoric of inclusion but not its content, meaning and spirit. As such, reforms should be directed toward a better conceptualization of inclusive education in these ordinary schools. For instance, schools should understand that inclusive education may not fully operate without the schools having to bear extra costs. For Carroll and Moses (2000), the impact of the ideology of inclusion must be set in the context of pragmatism that also informs decision making. To this effect, Fullan (1991), also agrees that the philosophy of inclusion should be characterized by valuing of new beliefs, cognitively understanding the philosophical principles and concrete applications, changing of roles and relationships between specialist and mainstream teachers and the community. Thus, roles must be redefined and the dynamics of the reform process of inclusion understood by all educational stakeholders compromising education officers, school heads, teachers, parents, the political leadership, children, industry, business and the community at large. All these stakeholders should take ownership of inclusion as a reform process if it has to be implemented effectively.

Premised on the foregoing understanding and feelings of ownership, the organizational system of the ordinary school should also change or adapt its assessment mechanisms. Unesco (1998:3) emphasizes, "It is ... important to create assessment standards that allow for diversity of pupils' needs and abilities." Elliot and McKenny (2003), concur that, in the new inclusionary order, active assessment practices based on individual needs should be adopted to avoid mis-identifications popularly associated with traditional practices. This implies that, mainstream school teachers should be as much accountable for the performance of students with special needs as they would be for the performance of 'normal' students. In effect, new organizational arrangements should be adopted to the extent that local special schools share assessment and instructional skills as a transitionary measure toward the possible dissolution of special schools. Whether this is tenable considering the poor and inaccessible school infrastructure obtaining in most mainstream school is a cause for concern. Some children, especially those with severe to profound or multiple disabilities, may hardly benefit from the mainstream schools in their current state, unless infrastructural reforms that are alluded to elsewhere in this paper are fully implemented. Fullan (1991:66), actually argues, "... we should understand that institutional realties may not accommodate all the hopes enshrined in inclusion." However, ordinary schools should not deny inclusion of children with disabilities on the basis of the inaccessibility of infrastructure, because inclusion can still prosper in the absence of the said adaptations (Winzer, 1990).

3. Collaborative effort

Sharing of information and professional skills and techniques, is the basis of collaborative work in an inclusive system. Ordinary schools in many local communities in Zimbabwe, instead, tend to isolate duties and responsibilities and see special education as the preserve for specialist teachers and parents as secondary partners in the educational equation. The Warnock Report (1978), recommend that schools should adopt whole school approaches to the implementation of reforms such as inclusion (Stakes and Hornby, 1997). In response to this recommendation, Clark, Dyson, Millward and Skidmore (1997), posit that, all prospective partners in education, including parents, should co-operate in order to chart the way forward, guided by the spirit of collaboration, for inclusive education to work. This suggests a new work system that prefers a multi-disciplinary approach. In this regard collective responsibility for the education of all children should become a permanent feature of the ordinary school system.

To achieve multi-disciplinary operations, schools in the local community would need to create deliberate professional links with medical and social service workers among others and also to strengthen their relationships with parents. Parental involvement is crucial in inclusive education because parents provide the much needed case history of the child as well as pertinent other information for ongoing assessment needs. Although Brown and Ridell (1994), are concerned that conflicts may arise if parental expectations are not in line with those of the school authorities, training parents in the tenets and goals of inclusion together with school authorities, may save the situation. New choices for parents to decide on placement options for their children and an enabling atmosphere that empowers parents to make the choices freely and informatively must be created as a matter of reformation and transformation. Above all, ordinary schools should treat parents as equal partners in the educational equation.

4. Change of attitudes

For the aforesaid collaborative efforts to succeed there must be change of attitudes for everyone involved, from negative to positive. Fullan (1991), believes that reforms should involve changes in conceptions and role behaviours and that teachers, students and the community should change their negative attitudes toward children with disabilities, if inclusion is to be practicable. According to the Salamanca Statement (1994), inclusive education is the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes. Ironically, Unesco (1998:3) decries, "The most important barriers to inclusive education are the negative attitudes and habits that prevail in the ordinary school..." The implication of this assessment is that, negative attitudes that exist among educational stakeholders should be radically transformed to positive ones. This is not an easy task since some of the attitudes are deep rooted in cultural beliefs about disability. However, as has already been alluded to, training, conscientisation and awareness workshops and campaigns could play a crucial role in this regard.

In many ordinary schools in Zimbabwe, some administrators, parents and students still hold negative attitudes toward the practice of inclusion per-se. In this regard it is important to address the issue of negative attitude holistically. In any event, this can be achieved through awareness campaigns, in-service training and variation of delivery models. Attitudes of children with special needs themselves can be transformed through the provision of a differentiated curriculum which provides them with success laden experiences. Use of interactive instructional procedures such as peer-tutoring and the buddy systems can also work. Peer-tutoring is where pupils teach and learn from each other in groups while the buddy system is where able learners are paired with those of low abilities so that they help them. Elliot and McKenny (2003), further implore that, for children with special needs to be fully included into the ordinary school, they should develop assertiveness, a sense of belongingness to the group and should be contributing members of the group. For this to be successful, it has to be reciprocated by positive attitudes from the other children, teachers, parents and the community. At the same time initiatives such as assertiveness training should be availed to students with disabilities during intermittent periods.

5. Reforms in the environment and resourcing strategies

Reforms in the overall organization and philosophy of the school can only become real if complimented by pragmatic environmental adaptations and increased resource provision and funding to the ordinary school. Croll and Moses (2000), postitulated that change is a routine feature of organizations which can be measured through environmental reforms and level of funding and resourcing. The physical environment of the ordinary school which

was erected without due consideration of children with disabilities should be adapted and modified to meet the unique needs of children who are disabled. The environment can be more disabling than disability (Unesco, 2003), if it limits the operations of people with disabilities. Schools particularly in the rural communities of Zimbabwe are hardly accessible especially to wheelchair users and to children who are blind. Doors to the classrooms are narrow and toilets are not adapted for wheelchair users and there are no ramps. Rails for the blind and sound proof rooms for the deaf are also not in existence to mention but a few. Poor road networks and an impoverished transport system exacerbate the situation. For inclusion to work, the infrastructural outlook of the ordinary school must be transformed in order to meet the unique mobility and sensory needs of children with various disabilities. Elliot and McKenny (2003), advise that the ordinary school environment should be modified to meet attention, vision, auditory and behaviour needs of the children if inclusion is to be successfully implemented. In the same vein, Heward and Orlansky (1998), earlier advocated for the least restrictive environment, normalization and equalization of opportunities. The principles of least restrictive environment and of normalization entail educating children with special needs in optimal and normative conditions which are as near normal as possible. Therefore, an environment that is conducive to education for all has to be created if the ordinary school has to promote inclusive education in its totality.

6. Resource provision

Just like environmental adaptations, provision of resources is key to inclusion. In fact, even environmental adaptations would need initial financial funding. Guralnick (2001), highlighted that resources range from funding, human resources, teaching and learning materials to infrastructure and technology. Responding to technological provisions, Hallahan and Kauffman (1997:48), acknowledge its importance to learners with disabilities but warn that, "...over-reliance on artificial means of interacting with the environment when more natural means are possible, could jeopardize a person's quest for normalization." Prioritization of these resources is therefore necessary and ordinary schools should set aside budgets for inclusive education activities. Poor as they are, schools in the local communities in Zimbabwe may not be able to meet the initial budgetary demands of inclusion. When government distributes fiscal allocations to education, it does not specify funding for inclusion. Every year there is an outcry that education as a whole is uder-funded. Unfortunately, without adequate funding, inclusion is likely to fall short as a means of servicing learners with disabilities (Elliot and McKenny, 2003). Stakes and Hornby (1997), posit that increased resource allocation must be met with increased funding whereas Brown and Ridell (1994), earlier on noted that, it is necessary that a continuum of special needs is matched by a continuum of provisions. The net result of inclusive education is actually according to Wilson (1998), considerable savings in educational costs. Once the initial costs of inclusive education have been met, subsequent costs are decreased because of the culture of sharing of resources between mainstream and special education inherent in the system.

For ordinary schools to benefit from the ultimate cost-effectiveness of inclusion, they should learn to share their existing resources more equitably than before. Clark et al (1997) concurred with Wolfendale (1997), that there is need for the ordinary schools to rationalize and utilize already existing meagre resources on a cost-effective basis. Thus the ordinary school should develop a flexible resource allocation system in which priority is given to critical educational and support services such as infrastructural reforms, human resource training and material and assistive device procurement. These resources directly affect the teaching and learning scenario. Such an arrangement can only be achievable if schools plan and work in collaboration with parents and other stakeholders. When it comes to financial resources, Sobel and Vaughan (2003) believe that, ordinary schools should seek an alternative source of funding instead of solely depending on state funding. In the local ordinary schools, one way is spearheading and forming old student associations which can source funds on behalf of the schools. Critiquing the need for de-centralisation of educational provision to school or community level, Wolfendale (1997) observed that, especially in Africa, there appears to be contradiction between a shift of resources to schools, the non-statutory nature of inclusion and responsibilities of the states. This suggests that schools must be capacitated to become more accountable in handling financial resources and must be fully empowered and supported in their quests for inclusive education.

In addition to financing, inclusive education demands in service training especially of mainstream teachers, administrative staff and parents. Teachers would need to be trained in the management of children with various needs and disabilities and in collaborative and remedial teaching strategies. New forms of planning that would encourage use of Individualized Educational Planning and reduction of paperwork on the part of the teacher so

that he/she gets more teaching time would need to be inculcated during the in-service training programmes. Parents should also be trained, as has already been highlighted, and a culture of more parental participation in the education of their children would need to be evolved. By the way, parental participation is not limited to payment of fees and provision of other resources alone but should extend to participation in policy formulation and educational programming. This can better be achieved if at least one specialist teacher who can assist in in-servicing mainstream teachers and in the training of parents is deployed to each school in the community as a matter of policy.

7. Curriculum reforms

From the foregoing, the ordinary school curriculum also needs to be modified and adapted in order to respond to diverse and changing needs of learners that constitute the inclusive school. According to Unesco (1998), teachers in ordinary schools need to receive adequate training to be able to adapt the mainstream curriculum to meet the needs of a diversified student population. A differentiated not a 'watered down' curriculum is required if the inclusive ethos are to be realized. Thus, teachers of the inclusive school should be able to develop an appropriate but flexible curriculum which allows them to gain additional time for instructional support to children with special learning needs. Planning should be individualized, teaching and learning materials more varied than before and use of technology such as computers intensified, while the instructional and testing procedures are made more flexible. The rigid traditional implementation of the curriculum should be abandoned and each child should be allowed to dictate his / her pace in the comprehension of curriculum material. Even examination content should be varied in such a way that each child experiences a certain degree of success in his / her own way. As a matter of urgency, examination concessions such as those enshrined in the Director's Circular Number 1 of 2004 in Zimbabwe, which call for reforms in examination conditions for especially children who are blind or deaf but are currently being ignored by schools in the community, must be implemented fully.

8. Discussion

All the foregoing views on reforms to the ordinary school are dependent on broader policy perspectives. School level educational reforms will depend on a wide range of socio-economic policies at national level (Unesco , 2003). In other words, while schools are encouraged to develop school policies that are consistent with inclusive education, the degree of reforms will be influenced by the level of national commitment, political will and constitutional and legislative provisions over which individual schools have little influence. For instance, government schools in Zimbabwe are not necessarily allowed, as a matter of policy, to receive independent funding unless otherwise approved by the government. In earnest, school level reforms, may only be of impact if they are part of the national educational strategy. Inclusive education is actually more dynamic and complex than it appears to be, at theoretical level. Croll and Moses (2000), perceive the introduction of an inclusive system of education involving far reaching reforms that should affect all the schools, at least on national scale. Fullan (1991) argues that it is difficult, after all, to define once and for all exactly what the objective dimensions of reforms for inclusion are because they get transformed, further developed or altered during implementation. In a sense, the reforms that have been proffered in this write-up may only be situational. It also follows from above that, different communities would institute the said reforms in unique ways that are specific to their situations. Ideally though, these practices should derive from the broader national policy frameworks. Croll and Moses (2000), are convinced that a policy involving major (national) initiatives is more likely to achieve reforms necessary for inclusion than a policy constituting entirely a small community backing. This entails that government should, in essence, take ownership of the policy of inclusion, of course in consultation with local communities and other stakeholders and at the same time provide adequate financial, technical and professional support to all mainstream schools. Government should also ensure implementation of the policy and ensure that compliance measures are in place and are adhered to. At whatever level, the policy on inclusion must make provision for quality control through evaluation of the reforms, "...otherwise we run the risk of appraising non-events" (Fillan, 1991:64). All the reforms alluded to in this treatise, will need to be implemented wholesomely and in an integrated manner if they are to make reasonable impact on the best practices in inclusive education. However, Winzer (1990), radically argues that even without these reforms, inclusive education can still prosper noting that the African philosophy of communism observes equality of humanity. Such African philosophies have had influence on the indigenous education systems

which tend to emphasise functionality within a community set up even where adaptations have not been undertaken. These should therefore be enshrined in the reforms for inclusive education to prosper in Zimbabwe and Africa as a whole.

9. Conclusion

Organisational, philosophical and policy reforms of the ordinary school form the basis for structural and environmental reforms as well as for the level of resource provision in inclusive education. For the reforms of the ordinary school to be significant enough to meet the necessary conditions of inclusion, they must be implemented wholesomely and supported by broader national initiatives, legislatives powers and strong positive belief systems that are pro-inclusive education. Staff and parents who are all committed to and are knowledgeable about the goals, tenets, benefits and practices of inclusive education are most likely to achieve reasonable reforms toward full inclusion. One can, thus conclude that, inclusive education is a complex system that indeed calls for major reforms which are unfortunately not always overly possible and easily achievable unless the whole nation is totally committed to their implementation. Inclusive education actually calls for the transformation of ideas, mindsets, ways of doing things, infrastructure, the social and physical environment, attitudes, belief systems and political and legislative conditions and frameworks. Pragmatism is core in the evolution of reforms that inform inclusive education which may otherwise remain an idealistic phenomenon. It is possible, although not desirable, to still practice inclusive education without necessarily undertaking the major reforms that have been raised, particularly those that are resource intensive. Community resources and assets can be mobilised to start the process of inclusion. African philosophies of communalism can also be harnessed in popularising the concept of inclusive education and in trying to harness negative attitudes toward disability. We should therefore not overly blame failure of inclusive education on lack of resources and on some cultural stereotypes but should always seek alternative avenues to move the band wagon of inclusive education forward.

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