

Alignments and Mismatches of Policies on Children with Learning Difficulties/Disabilities to Professional Practice Expectations in Zimbabwe: A Reality Check

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Abstract The problem of gross discrepancies between educational inclusive policy rhetoric for learners with disability and applicability of such intentions in implementation has raised concerns of stakeholders in Zimbabwe. This paper examines whether or not policy prescriptions by the Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary & Secondary Education (MoPSE) for the primary level learners with difficulties are aligned or mis-aligned to actual implementation actions that are a reality on the ground. The paper interrogates these issues with regards to provision of specialised support services, checking if these are fulfilled for learners with disabilities, and argues that if they do not occur, then learning is impeded. The study was located in the interpretive paradigm which used a qualitative approach and a case study design. Participants were drawn from the Metropolitan Provincial Psychological Services team, Parents of children from one selected school and a head of school in the same Province. Results showed that while to a limited extent the specialists identified a few children in the province as falling in the learning difficulties category, the greater number was not identified. Of those identified, specialists hardly serviced them because of lack of resources and this constituted a mismatch of the pronounced claims with what is happening. The paper advances calls for advocacy for policies to be suitably aligned to the expectations purported in ministry claims.

Keywords: *learning difficulties, disabilities, inclusive education, restrictive barriers, policy*

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1. Introduction

Globally the drive to include and support children with special needs has been energised by such declarations as the Salamanca statement and framework for action [1] International Year of Disabled Persons [2] (the Convention on the Rights of the Child [3], the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities [4] and the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities [5] which highlighted inclusion as a human right that implies equality of opportunity.

Inclusive education in Zimbabwe is not specifically spelt out as a stipulated service but is implied in the constitution of the country [6] where education is considered a basic, inherent and universal right for all children and this covers those with learning difficulties and disabilities too. However this act is only general with no specification of inclusion for such vulnerable groups like learners with disabilities or difficulties. It cannot be used as a basis for claims of non-provision of specialised environments, programmes or care from government or any other stakeholder because there are no legally binding

stipulations [7,8]. Documents on Zimbabwe's policies and legislation show that the inclusion of learners with learning difficulties in regular ECD classrooms is embedded in mainstream education policies. These include the Government of Zimbabwe Education Act of 1987 as revised in (2006) [5] and the Zimbabwe Constitution Amendment Act Number 20 of 2013 section 75 [6] and the Government of Zimbabwe Disability Act of Zimbabwe (1996) revised 2017 [9]. However, still there are no specified actionable requirements in these Policy pronouncements.

Scholars and stakeholders inclined towards the philosophy of inclusion view disability and difficulties in learning as professional challenges rather than insufficiencies in children. This way of looking at things stimulates the development of innovative ways of finding strategies to solve challenges in this field [10]. It also entails pursuing and trying ground-breaking ways of striving to support the learning of all children [11,12,13]. Inclusion is also viewed as a principle that should guide educators to be supportive to all learners in terms of their social, career, knowledge and skilling needs. Such a view takes on the wider perspective of elimination of all sorts of curtailing barriers such as lack of materials for learning

like computers, books, and aids to particular disabilities [14].

The Government of Zimbabwe Psychological Practices Act [15] requires that individualised programmes be developed for persons with disabilities and that such learners with special needs be placed in the least restrictive educational environment. The Act advocates for inclusion of such learners in ordinary classrooms where the teaching is expected to make deliberate exceptional and sensitive care for their needs. It also calls for such learners to have the least restrictive but creative learning environments.

Thus in Zimbabwe the mandate for inclusion of children with disabilities is carried out in regular schools [16,17]. This is because by preference most stake holders including therapists, psychologists and parents find this placement to be the least restrictive [17,18]. While inclusion is perceived as access to specialised care and education, participation of all children including those with exceptional conditions in daily activities of the regular school while meeting their diverse needs and contributing to the advancement in the community and society does not always occur in regular schools [19,20]. The system does not always work smoothly to achieve this noble vision [13,21]. In addition [22] insist that effective inclusion does not just mean placing the child in a regular classroom but that the school has to become responsive to the needs of each child in their diversity. Ideally this would involve creating learning opportunities that are sufficient and financially manageable to all children [23]. But the ideal is not always achievable in Zimbabwe because in an economy that has high inflation the struggle for meeting some set goals in the schools is strenuous and at times futile. This causes the quality of teaching in schools where teachers hardly have materials and equipment such as computers to be poor.

Another major curtailing constraint in schools is that are also large numbers of learners in regular classes with the average being 50 learners per class, meaning those needing individual attention, especially those with special needs and disabilities go unattended and unsupported [13,24]. The duty to support special needs learners remains with the special services sector like the psychological services unit.

However, concerns have been raised in Zimbabwe by multi-disciplinary specialists in the Psychological services unit such as researchers, psychologists, speech & language therapists, and educators who are required to offer specialised support to learners with learning difficulties, that this sector is beset with serious multiple problems which include inadequate human and material resources [13,21]. First of all the area that one unit is expected to cover is too large in terms of kilometers as well as the number of schools as well as the numbers of learners with difficulties [24,25]. In addition there is only one vehicle dedicated to take members to various points. Sometimes trips fail when the vehicle is dysfunctional and even when operational only one visit is possible per day which is inadequate for all the learners to be helped per week. This means little or no individual attention provided for children with learning difficulties including too few sessions scheduled to attend to such learners who need therapy [26]. Such a situation shows a questionable

commitment by some key figures expected to drive the sector [13].

A close scrutiny at what is happening on the ground reveals that the support given to learners with learning difficulties and challenges in performing activities considered essential for basic learning sometimes ranges from inconsequential to none-existent in practical terms [13]. The special services unit also lacks a lot of equipment they are supposed to use. They do not even have simple educational toys, computer-aided systems, books or other tools to do their work.

What is troubling can be said to be a lot fashionable and politically correct rhetoric of inclusive education with its appeal of doing right by this group of learners on grounds of human rights principles [13,24,26,27] that the sector receives. This is largely by way of highly placed policy awareness campaign launches and statement announcements staged in various fora. It is thus a cause of concern that implementation appears to be the opposite of what is claimed. A lot has also been written on these challenges, however not much has yet been done on the alignment of policies with reality in the sector which may well be the cause for little progress in the drive for inclusive education.

In closely interrogating the situation that currently obtains in schools in Zimbabwe in terms of support for the learners with difficulties, the paper examines how aligned the claim for inclusive education is even to Global Sustainable Development Goals on education (SGDGs) particularly SGG4 which targets quality education for all children. It is also undertakes to reveal how policy prescriptions play out as professional psychological nurturing support or how there is in fact lack of it for children with learning difficulties in public schools. The paper takes the position that such inquiry is imperative as the nation strives for quality, inclusive and sustainable education which in public proclamations has been embraced by Zimbabwe. The authors argue that there is an apparent discordant situation of mismatches between policy and what is practiced which is not only misleading but is demonstrated by operatives of the sector on the ground as lacking rendering inclusivity to be futile.

It has to be noted that in the Zimbabwean situation inclusive education is expected to be practiced with a thrust of early identification of high risk learners [8,28] provision of specially crafted programmes to meet their needs [21,29] and that there should be deliberate observable actions to remove barriers that aggravate their disability or learning difficulty [9]. The question of whether what is in place as policy actually happens on the ground arises because it is only when good policies are operational that difficulties in learning are minimised, removed and prevented from increasing the overridding disability [13,24,26,30].

To examine the issues of implementation of the policies on learning disability and difficulties in servicing of learners in schools, the article was guided by the following questions:

How aligned to the reality on the ground are policies for implementing inclusive education for learners with learning disabilities and difficulties? How can such policies be re-aligned to enhance appropriate learning for learners with disabilities and difficulties?

Currently, the Government of Zimbabwe Disability Act of Zimbabwe [9] defines a disabled person as “a person with a physical, mental or sensory disability, including visual, hearing or speech functional disability, which gives rise to physical, cultural or social barriers inhibiting him or her from participating at an equal level with other members of society in activities, undertakings or fields of employment that are open to other members of society” [[9], p51] This Act details the officially sanctioned legal position and augments a starting point of conceivable provisions for persons with curtailed abilities arising from extraordinary circumstances they find themselves in.

2. Theoretical Model

This study was guided by the Social Relational Model by [31] which speaks to both the biological reduced function arising from a disability impairment as well as social imposed reduced function which comes from social restrictive barriers. Reduced function which is often embedded disability causes learning difficulty. The disability as a mental engineered incapacity gets worse when compromised by social restrictive barriers [31]. Both the biological and social factors are viewed as antecedent to the learning difficulty. What becomes a challenge in Zimbabwe in terms of inclusivity is that there is a lot of campaigning to showcase intention to ameliorate the struggles of learners in difficult circumstances yet in reality only structures are set up which are themselves incapacitated and nothing happens to improve the situation. It is almost tantamount to putting up appearances when learners with disabilities and their parents as stakeholders are made to expect care which never materialises. The learners thus remain incapacitated and hopeless, unable to negotiate to better their own circumstances. It however remains the moral responsibility of Government to take care of such citizens but that only happens in launches and declarations but not in actual implementation. This view is criticised by [31] as demeaning and disempowering. Policy is expected to come in as an enabling instrument to better this human condition by fulfilling expectations.

3. Research Design and Study Context

The study adopted a qualitative approach and a case study design of the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. Structures set up in the Province consist of a team of Psychological Services Unit which is assigned to deal with special needs learners. The team is given the mandate to identify and support all learners in the 44 Primary schools that make up the Province in whatever needs they have. The team was selected for the advantage that it enabled the researchers to hear directly from the participants who were operational in the field and were tasked with carrying out all practical programmes that deal with inclusive issues on the ground. The study context therefore was made up of the Psychological specialists, the school head of a selected school that had special needs learners and some parents of the learners with disabilities.

4. Sampling

The purposively selected specialists from the participants involved in executing policies on disability and learning difficulties were, 3 psychological services personnel who included 1 psychologist coded as PS, and language therapist coded as LS and 1 educator who carried out weekly teaching visits to 3 learners at a selected school in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province coded as ES. In addition 1 Provincial Education Director coded as PD, 3 parents coded as P1, P2 & P3 with learners supported by the participant Psychological Unit in support of teachers were also roped in order to lead the interventions to empower the learners in dealing with their learning tasks. In addition the head in the selected school coded as H1 was sampled to enrich the study as the person driving the implementation of programmes and policies in the school. This was in line with [32] who insist that a researcher should be able to handpick participants who are highly suitable to the study as involved and relevant subjects.

5. Discussion and Findings on Policy Related Challenges

5.1. Lack of a Clear Cut Policy on Inclusion

The fact that there is lack of direct policy on inclusion has proved to be a curtailing issue to implementation. While such instruments as the Constitution and disability frameworks and acts may imply or even mention inclusivity, they do not direct action to be taken and prioritised. They are on a general level covering a wide spectrum of issues for disabled persons and other vulnerable groups. Stakeholders have pointed out that while a lot has been said about inclusion, and that in some education secretary's circulars inclusion has been the subject of directives, yet there is no clear cut national policy [12,33]. In their views, policy will make inclusion mandatory, and force authorities to deploy resources and other support services at a greater level to ensure implementation. In addition, policy may result in clear directions and implementation strategies. In line with this observation H1 Argued:

Directives are there to be followed by schools as implementation bodies but allocation of resources which are a national issue involving the fiscus and sister ministries such as finance happen at a high level cannot be acted upon at circular or secretarial directive level.

5.2. Inadequacy of Multi-disciplinary Specialists for Learning Disabilities

To implement the specialised programmes that the policy of inclusion to service learners with learning difficulties, there is need for highly trained specialists who have expertise to offer education of the nature and quality specifically suited to the children of various disabilities. This has been observed by several scholars including [11,34]. It is without question therefore that this calls for

such specialised personnel to be produced in training institutions in Zimbabwe in the numbers that can man for example the 44 schools across the whole Bulawayo Metropolitan Province in the various disability fields such as speech language, psychological and special needs educators. However what is happening on the ground is contrary to this requirement despite the country embracing inclusive education [13,30]. In the first place, the specialists in the Psychological Unit in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province are very few, 3 to be specific. These cannot cater to 44 schools with many learners who are in the special needs category. In addition teachers coming out of the training institutions do not seem to fulfil the specialisations needed to implement this policy hence the mis-alignment of policy and reality on meeting the needs of learners with difficulties. When asked to assess situation on the ground PS observed:

This is a difficult situation that is set on an unworkable path. The psychological services is not effective because of insurmountable challenges. There are too few specialists compared to the number of schools and the children who need their services. There is also no equipment for the specialists to use. This is a unit in name but they are not equipped to do an effective job and make a difference.

5.3. Budgetary Constraints

Budgetary restrictions in the MoPSE and in the schools may create limitations in the implementation of various projects in schools [35]. The main reason for this is that most of the budgetary apportionment is spent on salaries which have become a crippling issue as educators seek to be remunerated in a way that compares well with regional salaries and equals the service they give. A disproportionately little segment is spent on key educational matters such as providing adequate school learning materials, infrastructure, equipment and reskilling of teachers to sharpen their expertise [21,26]. Given this, it is without question that when education is underfunded and inadequately supported, there cannot be proper implementation of policy. That has a ripple effect causing policy to be non-functional in a learning environment that is deprived. Commenting on this aspect H1 reasoned:

At times our stakeholders see us as unwilling to implement clearly stated policies with regards to inclusion of our special needs learners. They do not comprehend how frustrated we are as we fail to provide quality education as spelt out in circulars. Curriculum documents such as the syllabi and the mandatory mission statements displaced elegantly and prominently on our walls declare our commitment to deliver quality service such as inclusive education with detailed attention given to each special needs child. It is not that we are insensitive to the plight of learners with disabilities that we fail to deliver, but that we try to manage the best way we can in an economic situation in crisis. Resources are in short supply and we fail to cope because the fees struggling parents pay does not stretch far enough and services to our clients are compromised.

5.4. Lack of Specialised Equipment for Teaching Learners

Poor Implementation of policy is worsened by such challenges as unavailability of specialised equipment that is used in testing for the specific kind of disabilities and the extent of impairment or severity for learners [13,33,36]. When educators are curtailed from effectively doing business the way they see fit because of lack of equipment, then the cause is lost. Such incapacitation cannot be circumvented because no matter how specialised a person may be, without tools they are likely to be rendered useless, which also implies the policy becomes ineffective if not implemented.

Commenting on the need for specialised equipment SP lamented:

In addition, there is hardly any equipment, and the children with disabilities largely go unassessed hence unidentified and unassisted. It is as if the policy is just for window dressing and not for the serious intervention the learners need.

Closure of the one and only training department that trains speech and language therapists at the University of Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Science and Technology Development in conjunction with the MoPSE with tertiary institutions with the University of Zimbabwe leading to provide preservice and in-service teacher training in pre-school education [35]. The University of Zimbabwe has been the leading institution offering specialised training of speech and language specialists. However the department which offers this has since been closed, leaving the country with not only a shortage for this specialisation for which there is a dire need but a complete loss of hope for the implementation of the policy of inclusion for those with learning difficulties that involve mental challenges that can be enhanced by speech therapy.

Commenting on this ES argued:

The Bulawayo Metropolitan Province has been serviced by one language therapist who has since been transferred to Harare. As we speak this crucial service is not on offer. The University of Zimbabwe that used to be the sole training institution for speech therapists has closed this department. This renders the situation untenable...it's a nightmare! There is no hope because this state of affairs is sealed!

How policies of inclusive education can be realigned.

Resourcing training institutions, psychological services departments as well as the schools.

Since inclusive education strives to respond to the needs of all learners in their diversity, it is imperative that calls for specialised training of all service providers, especially psychologists, speech and language therapists as well as teachers need to be urgently made. For this to happen, training institutions need to be well resourced with the latest devices and equipment for such service provision [21,37]. On the issue of training specialists, The Ministry of Primary & Secondary Education position was clarified by PD who pointed out:

Policy implementation must be backed by long term plans. Universities need resources to be able to adequately train specialists of the quality the country needs. That means they should have advanced competitive technologies of the time. It also calls for personnel that can improvise, and create adaptation remedies to challenges in the field while being exposed to leading therapies and advances in use in their field. It also means there has to be monitoring by the MoPSE to see if training of specialists is ongoing and that if such training has stopped, urgent plans are made to counter the possible gap. In addition it also means the service departments like the psychological services must be checked to rectify challenges they may be encountering. This would make it possible for the shortage of specialised personnel to be overcome leading to the possibility of availing specialists for inclusive programmes.

5.5. School Headed Efforts for Learners with Difficulties

At school level there is a lot that can be done. This where the learner is visible as a person with needs and there is interface with the service providers who understand the challenges the learner faces due to disability. This is the point where those with needs can be highlighted and passion for doing service to change the condition of those less gifted and in vulnerable circumstances can be stirred, whipped and auctioned [13,37]. Advocacy for mobilizing resources should start from this point.

On this issue ES indicated:

Schools, for example, can make a skills audit of parents for skills which can be harnessed and used as a resource to champion the cause of the disabled and those with learning difficulties. It is possible that among the parents some might be in the banking sector, entrepreneurs and business people, others may be event company managers. The spectrum is wide. It is from such an audit that the school can fund raise and be easily enabled to resource the school with equipment, ICT gadgets and software's as well as any other needed resources. Schools have also been known to fundraise for specific causes like buying a bus with a once-off fund payable by all new students to the school. That is a fantastic idea that raises big sums of money fast and can move projects to completion.

Awareness campaigns and training workshops for stakeholders to sensitise them to their roles in the implementation of inclusive education policies.

There are many stakeholders who if roped in can assist with joining the cause to make the learning environment for learners with disabilities as well as those with learning difficulties workable because they want such students not only to be fully engaged as participating learners but that they achieve [5,38,39]. Corporate institutions sometimes want to become responsible citizens who plough back to the community. However such support can only be availed if such institutions are alerted to the challenges schools face. A few success stories of such breakthroughs have been made possible in some contexts where this strategy has been employed [38,39].

Reacting to this idea ES pointed out:

Springing from the platform of specialised centres, overtures can be made to approach corporates such as mining entities, farms, construction houses, retail shops and many others for support. This often entails submitting very detailed finance proposals for consideration by the corporate management. It also has been our experience that such companies require transparency and detailed feedback on how their sponsorship changed the life of the intended recipients. In this way a fruitful partnership can help navigate the difficult path of resourcing education for learners with difficulties and disabilities.

Creation of Specialised Assessment Centres for learners with learning difficulties.

There is need to create specialised Assessment centres that dedicate all their efforts to empowering learners with learning disabilities and difficulties [40]. These would buttress efforts made by the overwhelmed Psychological Services Unit and the schools to enhance inclusion. Commenting on this note:

PS made the observation that it is important and advisable that there be a specialised assessment centres that will have equipment for testing and evaluating and helping those with various challenges be they psychological or language related. Such centres would then be used by specialists to service clusters of schools in a district.

5.6. Partnerships of Multi-stakeholders to Focus on Policy Implementation

The latest strategies in servicing learners with disabilities are inclined towards a multisectorial approach where partnerships are formed for those with a singleness of purpose and strive to make a difference to learners with special needs [41,42]. This will also allow Ministry to develop strategies where several of linked services such as the psychological, language therapists, rehabilitation specialists, protective social institutions, and nutrition givers for learners with disabilities to be coordinated manner and at a single site, in schools.

Interviewed on the aspect of solving the dilemma of servicing learners with learning difficulties, ES insisted:

There is need for a multi-sectorial approach to solve this crisis. Universities of Science & Technology should train the experts so the country has its base for local specialists who are prepared to be deployed in all provinces and who know the language and culture of the learners and can be counted on to be committed.

Periodic Audit of policy implementation to check and raise red flags when programmes derail.

It also remains true that the onus is on the Policy creation body, which is the MoPSE to make a follow up of what is going on in the field with regards to ensuring policy is effected as planned. That means regular audits should be carried out to determine the state of implementation of the inclusion policies that so greatly affect this vulnerable group of learners.

Think tank groups for countering obstacles and challenges to policy implementation.

The idea of organising stakeholders to form a think-tank of scholars has also been raised among interest

groups such as research associations. These have expressed interest in partnering with MoPSE provide a discussion forum for the latest research ideas as well as being a platform for conferencing and bouncing ideas profered to solve social and academic challenges and barriers for learners with special needs [5,37,38,39,43].

On this issue P1 pointed out:

A powerful collaboration can be mobilised where MoPSE, research associations that have academics currently researching on the ground and institutions of higher learning as well as the teaching fraternity can work together to solve challenges related to learning. Vulnerable groups of learners such as those with disabilities and learning difficulties can benefit from the latest research as well as having new directions formulated to advance their cause in new ways.

The creation of quality monitoring bodies.

It is also important that evaluation be done in consultation with collaborative partners in order to keep track of arising challenges which may need to have solutions implemented as well as any other changes aligned with constantly changing learning environments. This is needed so that there is timely intervention before damage which can be prevented happens [44].

Having a wonderful policy does not mean all goes well in the delivery of services to the target groups. It is a framework and enabling embodiment that allows activation of ideas embedded in the specified curriculum to be actioned. MoPSE therefore needs to create a quality monitoring unit to monitor the implementation service units.

5.7. Interest Group Involvement

It is necessary that stakeholders in the form of interest groups be invited to make input into the school environment through any projects they may feel they want to commit to. Some parents have a lot of influence on political, business and social circles. They can use such influence to network and create an enabling environment for schools to implement policies for special needs learners [22].

Arguing for parental involvement P3 insisted:

If we are made aware of policies that are framed to assist our learners who are disabled and have difficulties in class, we can help from the angle of parents by urging the school development committee to whip up calls to get the head to insist on service delivery. We can even lobby our political representatives that Government listens to and get things done. We have power but we need to know the school needs and the policies on things we are entitled to for us to situate our demands in the right fora.

6. Recommendation

The ministry of Primary and Secondary Education together with other stakeholders need to put in place legislation for periodic monitoring & evaluation to ensure the disabled and those with learning difficulties are accorded their rights and that their programmes allow for adequate attendance by specialists.

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