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# THE TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS IN ASSISTING LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES THROUGH PERFORMANCE LAG ADDRESS PROGRAMME (PLAP) INSCHOOLS OF ZIMBABWE

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## ABSTRACT

The study explored the teacher's perceptions in assisting learners with learning disabilities through Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) in schools of Zimbabwe. Hundred primary school teachers were used in this study because they are the implementers of PLAP in primary schools of Zimbabwe. The study used a quantitative research approach and collected data through a questionnaire. The teachers were randomly chosen from primary schools in their respective regions or place of work, using a table of random numbers. It emerged from this study that teachers have not received any specific training on PLAP hence they reported that there tend to be confused on how to implement the programme. The study concluded that schools were having inadequate resources in the form of instructional materials, textbooks and working conditions for teachers and students and this has a negative effect on learning. Based on the findings of the study, the study recommends that there is need for the government to differentiate the implementation of class remediation from that of PLAP. This will assist the teachers in providing assistance to learners with learning disabilities. In addition, schools need to impart positive attitudes to teachers on issues concerning learners with learning disabilities on any new educational programme as they tend to face resistance.

**KEYWORDS:** Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP), challenges, disabilities, learners with learning disabilities, teacher attitudes towards disabilities

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

If the right to education for all is to become a reality, we must ensure that all learners have access to quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. Still, today, learners with learning disabilities continue to experience difficulties in understanding the concepts they are being taught in schools around the world. Yet education is about being proactive in identifying and removing the barriers and obstacles learners encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education (UNESCO, 2013). In Zimbabwe, learners with learning disabilities and other special educational needs have received no meaningful support in the past couple of years (Peresuh and Barcham (1998: 74). Mavundukure and Nyamande (2012: 2) made the observation that most teachers at special schools and special classes in Zimbabwe have no special training to assist learners with disabilities and other special educational needs.



Teachers as managers and facilitators in the classrooms are the one who have to deal with challenges and problems of implementing different methods or programmes such as PLAP in order for children with learning disabilities to achieve their full potential.

Learning Disability is a condition in which children who though appear 'normal' are unable to perform commensurate with their age and ability levels due to a basic psychological problem. This psychological problem causes a discrepancy between the child's achievement and their actual intellectual ability in; oral, listening comprehension, reading and written expression skills. Gould (2005:4) describes learners with learning disabilities as those learners with an average to above average intelligence, with normal vision and hearing who receive the same teaching experiences as other learners of their age but who are underachievers. These children are unable to keep up with their peers and generally cannot cope with the demands of the school. Learner and Kline (2006:2) define a learning disability as a neurobiological disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding spoken or written language. This disorder may influence an individual's ability to speak, listen, read, write, spell, reason, organise information or do mathematical calculations. Children with Learning Disabilities also seem bright, enthusiastic and with the potential to perform well in education just like their peers of the same age. They perform well in most subjects but for some unexplained reasons fail in specific areas of Maths (Maths reasoning and Maths calculation/computation). They also fail in language (oral language, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, basic reading skills and written language) unlike other children of the same age and ability even when given same learning opportunities (Learner, 2006). These low academic pass rates in primary and secondary schools have influenced the researchers and teachers to come up with strategies which specifically address individual challenges of learners with learning disabilities in order to enhance their academic performance.

In line with global trends regarding learners with learning disabilities, Zimbabwe swiftly promulgated programmes to ensure the inclusion of previously marginalised pupils in schools. Though policies and programmes have been easy to craft, a major challenge remains in that the policies have not been translated into tangible transformational approaches in the primary and secondary school education curriculum. Primary and secondary school education is a critical base which should unequivocally show commitment to practically assist learners in explicit and ostensible ways rather than through mere spoken or written pronouncements.

In trying to alleviate problems of learners with learning disabilities in primary and secondary schools the government of Zimbabwe through The Ministry of Education Sport, Arts and Culture launched the Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) in October 2012 in Manicaland Province. This was done after realizing the under-achievement of learners with learning difficulties at both primary and secondary schools (The Herald 10 August, 2013). PLAP is a teaching programme strategy aimed at addressing gaps and challenges of learners with learning difficulties in mastering concepts being taught by initially going back to their last point of success. The Zimbabwean policy on PLAP dictates tracking learner achievement gaps in order to assist each learner whether with or without special needs (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education 2012). The programme involves re-visiting the syllabus and targeting concepts that have proven persistently difficult for pupils to catch up on. The goal is to teach from the last point of success and accelerated learning by students is assumed. It is a remedial programme which submits pupils to a diagnostic examination in an attempt to establish their last point of mastery and then help them to catch up to where they should be.

The major objective of PLAP was to improve the national examination pass rate in schools by first compensating the lost teaching and learning time (Mukoko&Mdlongwa, 2014; Kurebwa&Mabhanda, 2015). According Mukoko and Mdlongwa (2014) PLAP is a form of remediation. It seeks ways of improving students' performance. They further define remediation as anything that serves to cure defects or improve conditions, and works on the student's weakness within the student's level of study. Students' underachievement is believed to have resulted from concepts missed at lower levels thus affecting their present performance (Mukoko&Mdlongwa, 2014). Moyo (2013) argues that PLAP is a programme designed to address learning anomalies and eradicate zero percent pass rate in both primary and secondary schools. It is undisputable that as teachers there is a great need to address learning difficulties to ensure that the students build on them so as to catch up with the present level.

Teachers in these schools tend to turn a blind eye to learners with learning disabilities since they feel it is the duty of the specialist teacher to assist these learners. A study carried out by Kurebwa and Mabhanda (2015) found out that most teachers in Zimbabwe viewed the programme as a burden imposed on their overloaded time tables which are already congested. A significant number of teachers still have negative attitudes towards PLAP as a programme that assists learners with learning disabilities. Effective teachers need to be committed to their work within their schools to ensure that all children are assisted in class. This is only possible if the teachers possess the skills to make the school experiences of those learners with learning disabilities a worthwhile experience. This research endeavours to assess the perceptions of teachers in assisting learners with learning disabilities through PLAP in schools of Zimbabwe.



## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The study was designed to find an answer to the following main research question: How do teachers assist learners with learning disabilities through PLAP in schools of Zimbabwe?

### **2.1 Goals of the study**

This study sought to assess the perceptions of teachers in assisting learners with learning disabilities through PLAP in schools of Zimbabwe.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Design**

The survey design which was mainly quantitative in nature was used. The survey was used to provide a clear picture of how teachers assist learners with learning disabilities through PLAP in schools of Zimbabwe. Surveys are normally appropriate for studies that seek to obtain participants' perceptions, opinions and beliefs on a phenomenon (Slavin 2007). Since the present study sought to establish how the teachers assist learners with learning disabilities through PLAP in schools of Zimbabwe, the survey design was chosen as the most appropriate design for the study.

### **3.2 Sample**

Hundred primary school teachers were used in this study because they are the implementers of PLAP in primary schools of Zimbabwe. They are in a position to give the required information on how teachers assist learners with learning disabilities through PLAP in schools of Zimbabwe. The sample was drawn from five conveniently selected primary schools in Matabeleland North. The sample consisted of 100 primary school teachers where PLAP is implemented. The teachers were randomly chosen from primary schools in their respective regions or place of work, using a table of random numbers. Randomised samples in the survey designs facilitate the generalisability of results to the target population (Neuman&Neuman, 2000:247). In this study, the teachers were selected because of their knowledge and experience in the implementation of PLAP in assisting learners with learning disabilities.

### **3.3 Instrumentation**

Questionnaires were used in this research. The questionnaire items for this study are in the form of a four point Likert-Scale. The Likert scales were used in this study for the structured items to allow for fairly accurate assessments of beliefs and opinions from the respondents. For most of the items a 4-point Likert scale was used. The items focused on how teachers assist learners with learning disabilities through PLAP in schools of Zimbabwe. Three inclusive education experts were asked to check on the relevance and clarity of the questionnaire items.

### **3.4 Procedure**

Permission to conduct the study was sought from and granted by the Heads of the schools where the research was carried out. A research assistant distributed and collected the questionnaire. She explained the purpose of the study to potential participants. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage during the study.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The researcher used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16 to perform the descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. The SPSS package allowed the researcher to summarize and display data in graphics, particularly tables.



## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 How teachers assisted learners with learning disabilities in Zimbabwe primary schools through PLAP

**Table 1:** Response on how teachers assisted learners with learning disabilities in Zimbabwe primary schools through PLAP

Assistance for learners with disabilities	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Used of the student's last point of success	60 (60%)	30 (30%)	10(10%)	0(0%)
The Wide Range Achievement Test need to be used	40(40%)	40(40%)	15(15%)	5(5%)
Assessment of teacher – pupil records	35(35%)	20(20%)	40(40%)	5(5%)
Planning weekly on assisting pupils in Maths and English on areas where they are weak	40(40%)	40(40%)	15(15%)	5(5%)
Identified problems and solved them as a class	56 (56%)	4(4%)	40(40%)	0(0%)
Discover the weaknesses within the pupils	70(70%)	30(30%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Appraise the performance learning gap so as to sustain the learner's ability to perform better	40(40%)	40(40%)	20(20%)	20(20%)
Address learning anomalies and eradicate zero percent pass rate in schools	40(40%)	55(55%)	5(5%)	0(0%)

From Table 1 above, 90% of the respondents agreed that in assisting learners with disabilities through PLAP, the starting point is the student's last point of success. This means that if a pupil is in Grade 6 and his last point of success in understanding a Mathematics concept is in Grade 5, the teacher has to build up the concept from a Grade 5 level. 100% of the respondents indicated that it was necessary for the teachers to discover the weaknesses of the pupils and then solve the problem as a class. PLAP is meant to appraise the performance learning gap so as to sustain the learner's ability to perform better under conditions and circumstances that match one's developmental needs.

The effective implementation of PLAP requires the teacher to first of all administer pre-assessment to identify the strengths, weaknesses and interests of pupils. Those students with academic challenges are the ones who fall for remediation. Thus curriculum differentiation recognises the differing learning rates, styles, interests and abilities and the need to provide appropriate instruction at student's ability levels (Muzawazi and Nkoma, 2011). Team work is important for PLAP as teachers provide daily support and encouragement to each other and thus realize their interdependence as part of the whole school system.

### 4.2 Challenges of implementing PLAP in assisting learners with learning disabilities

Information from Table 2 above indicated that 100% of the respondents revealed that schools were having inadequate resources in the form of instructional materials and textbooks. 80% of the respondents revealed that schools are staffed with less qualified staff which compromised results of PLAP. Some educators were of the opinion that with proper training learning gaps can be sealed. The teachers (90%) revealed that the relationship between them and children with performance lags is not good and they were reported to have negative attitudes towards school authorities and in learning circles. It emerged from this study that teachers have not received any specific training on PLAP hence they reported that there tend to be confused on how to implement the programme. The teachers reported that PLAP testing ignores comprehension skills which are essential in any learning circles. The research found that teachers view this PLAP as a burden imposed on them without adequate knowledge on how to implement it. (Mukoko and Mdlongwa 2014:7, Kurebwa and Mabhandha 2015) argue that two of the teachers in their study revealed that they are involved in delivering PLAP lessons but they have not received any specific training on how to conduct these lessons.

It emerged from the study that teachers were overloaded and in some school authorities could not provide charts or media which are essential tools in lesson demonstration. Carron and Chau (1996:245) also noted that students without basic resources in their



environments and in schools are most likely to perform poorly as a result the learning difficulties they experience within their classrooms.

**Table 2:** Responses on challenges of implementing PLAP in assisting learners with learning disabilities

Challenges for learners with disabilities	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Schools were having inadequate resources in the form of instructional materials ,textbooks	40(40%)	60(60%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Working conditions for teachers and students has a negative effect on learning	20(20%)	30(30%)	40(40%)	10(10%)
Schools are staffed with less qualified staff which may also compromises results of PLAP	40(40%)	40(40%)	10(10%)	10(10%)
Poor performance in the classroom was seen to be emanating from shortage of resources	20(20%)	30(30%)	40(40%)	10(10%)
Lagging behind more than four grades teaching its self is confusing.	16(16%)	44(40%)	20(20%)	20(20%)
Negative attitudes of students with learning disabilities	66(66%)	24(24%)	10(10%)	0(0%)

The findings of this study about resources affecting PLAP implementation confirm a study conducted by Nkoma (2013:78) who brought forth the ideas that respondents stressed that schools were having inadequate resources in the form of instructional materials ,textbooks and working conditions for teachers and students has a negative effect on learning. In the same breath, Kaputa(2013:111) maintains that a classroom stocked with inadequate materials and untrained teachers present another barrier.It emerged that documentation is critical rendering more time spent on updating records other than teaching itself and preparation of different learning aids for different groups in a class is hectic. Such sentiments points that attitudes may arise hence hinder its full implementation.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

It emerged from the educators opinions that if resources are to be available, the children with achievement gaps can surpass their peers in performance. They concluded that schools need to source resources for PLAP methodologies .This effect would yield great results especial if all members work as a team and proper handled from grade one up to grade five. It emerged from the seen as problematic by some educators. The study concluded that negative attitudes towards PLAP methodologies have a detrimental effect on the education and sealing of achievement gaps in learners in primary schools. This is because children give up in trying and resent to non-school work and to a larger measure they can drop out of school.

Teachers' training has a strong impact on PLAP implementation. It was established that unplanned lessons, not well researched lessons can de rail outcomes of closing achievement gaps. The participants in this study believe that quality PLAP initiatives are very possible in a stable and well-resourced learning environment. PLAP has major benefits though it is very involving but caters for mixed ability groups and instruction varies according to the level of their abilities hence more and different media is paramount.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the study recommends that there is need for the government to differentiate the implementation of class remediation from that of PLAP. This will assist the teachers in providing assistance to learners with learning disabilities.Schools need to impart positive attitudes to teachers on issues concerning learners with learning disabilities on any new educational programmer as they tend to face resistance. This could be done through carrying out workshops on continuous assessment and expose teachers to a variety of assessment techniques in order to close achievement gaps for learners with learning disabilities.



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The negative attitudes of teachers, as indicated in this study's results are consistent with findings elsewhere in Zimbabwe and the world at large. To this effect, it is equally important that teachers in primary schools and their administrators should be encouraged to accept that greater inclusion will result in improved teaching and learning of all. Teachers need to communicate often with the pupils' parents as a way of monitoring pupils both at home and at school. This could be done by frequently checking their children's PLAP exercise books and sign as way of confirming that they have seen the work.

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