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OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN ASSISTING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT INCLUSIVE CLASSES IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The acceptance of inclusion varies across the regions in Zimbabwe. While countries within the advanced economies have gone beyond categorical provisions to full inclusion, Zimbabwe is still grappling with the problem of making provisions for children with special needs especially those who are physically challenged, even on mainstreaming basis. This paper attempts to highlight and the opportunities for parental involvement in assisting children with disabilities in early childhood development inclusive classes in Zimbabwe. It examines the concept of inclusion for children with disabilities in early childhood development classes and the prospects it holds, for special education practice in Zimbabwean primary schools. This research used a qualitative approach and used 25 parents and 25 ECD teachers as participants. The study concluded that parents' positive involvement in the education of children with disabilities highly influences their children's perception of school, which, in turn, positively contributes to children's academic, social, and emotional learning especially at ECD level. It also concluded that parents can provide different information about the developmental characteristics of their children with disabilities in ECD inclusive classes.

KEY WORDS: parental involvement, disabilities, children with disabilities, inclusive education, early childhood development

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the concept of inclusion has generated various ideas and attention in the area of special needs education. In the Zimbabwean context, inclusive education involves the identification and minimization or elimination of barriers to students' participation in traditional settings (i.e., schools, homes, communities, and workplaces) and the maximization of resources to support learning and participation (Mpofu, 2004). In school settings, successful inclusion results in students' and their families' participation in the regular activities of the school community while meeting their unique needs, as well as contributing to the development of the school community. This article considers the role of parents, family members, teacher preparation, and government policies that influence qualities of inclusive education, as practiced in Zimbabwe.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005) views inclusive education as the dynamic process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners and of seeing individual differences not as problems but as opportunities for enriching learning. The concept of inclusive education is based on the principle that all children regardless of ability or disability have a basic right to be educated alongside their peers in their local schools (UNESCO, 1994). It embraces the conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular education system to educate all children. Inclusion focuses on overcoming barriers in the system.



The success of inclusive education for children with disabilities in ECD classes, to a very large measure, requires a concerted effort, not only by teachers and school staff, but also by peers, family members. Active family involvement has long been considered to be an important factor related to better outcomes in inclusive education of children with and without disabilities in inclusive early childhood programs (Drake, & Barton, 2005).

2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper attempts to highlight the opportunities for parental involvement in assisting children with disabilities in early childhood development inclusive classes in Zimbabwe. The paper uses the ecological systems model to understand parental involvement in children's education. The ecological system model is based on an approach first described by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1988, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). According to Bronfenbrenner, an ecological systems model views the child as existing within a complex ecological context consisting of numerous intrafamilial and extrafamilial systems that affect children's development and learning.

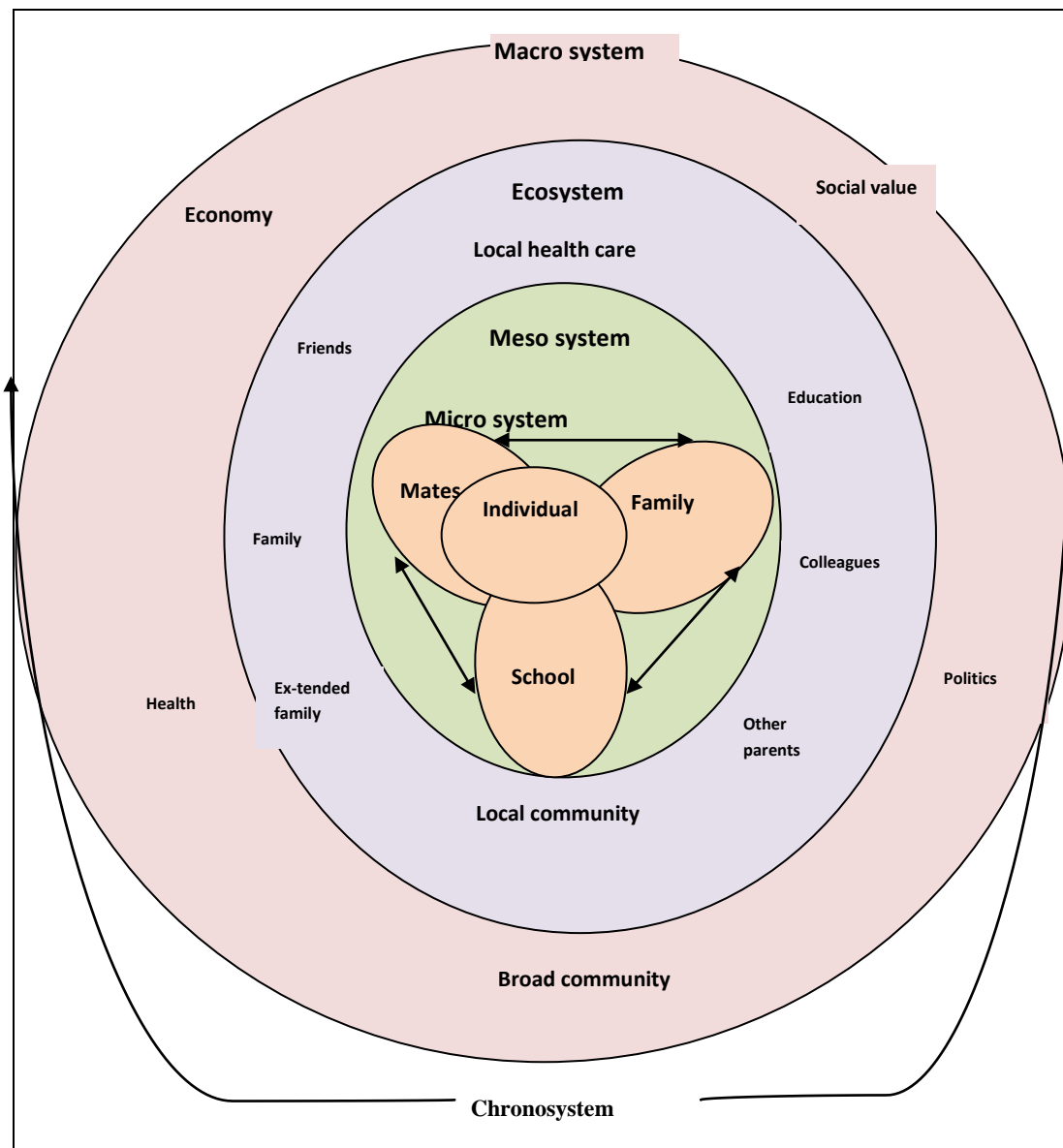
Current educational thinking underpinning inclusive education reflects a move away from a pathological theoretical approach to one which values understanding of learning difficulties. The shift from the medical model of learners with "special needs" to a more social and ecological-theoretical model of learners with barriers to learning at ECD level has become indispensable because it has become clear that obstacles or barriers within the child, the school system and the community must be cleared out of the way (Singal, 2006:39). Globally it is attempted that the diverse needs of learners must be recognised and supported by involving the family, the school environment and the community in the support of these learners. Inclusive education locates barriers to learning for children with disabilities and development in the entire system instead of only focusing on the individual (Mahlo, 2011: 20). This implies that barriers may be located within the learner, within the centre of learning, within the education system and or within the broader social, economic and political context. This thinking has its foundation in ecological systems theory.

Bronfenbrenner's theory, spells out the complexity of the interaction and interdependence of multiple systems that impact on the implementation of inclusive education for children with learning disabilities, their development and learning (Swart & Pettipher, 2005:13; Barnes, 2011:14). It acknowledges the important role that the parents, educators, education officials, peers, the extended family, the community and wider government structures can play in providing support to individual learners in ECD inclusive classes in Zimbabwe schools. Implicit in the systems approach is the understanding that there are layers in the systems that interact with each other to produce certain outcomes (Singal, 2006: 42). It suggests that effective implementation of inclusion requires the collaboration or interaction of multiple factors.

In explaining the eco-systemic approach proposed by Bronfenbrenner, Swart and Pettipher (2005:10) state that in terms of this approach, systems are patterns of organisation whose identity becomes more than simply the sum of their parts. Any individual person or situation can be thought of simultaneously as both a discrete entity and part of different systems. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, the learner does not exist in isolation from surrounding systems, but rather the systems help determine success in his or her academic career, whether the system of education, teachers, the school or the curriculum. If all the systems work well together all learners in schools, even those with disabilities, should benefit. These systems operate as different, but interrelated, levels in constant dynamic interaction. Change at one level has an inevitable, although not always predictable, effect on the other levels. The overlapping micro, meso, exo and macro-systems all contribute to form the whole that the individual will perceive as positive or negative (Haihambo, 2010:65). A fundamental element in Bronfenbrenner's theory is the appreciation that the environment does not merely impact on the child with learning disability, but that the child is also an active partake in his own development and learning. The child's perception of his or her environment influence the way he or she interacts with the teachers, peers and parents in an inclusive setup (Swart & Pettipher, 2005:12).

Ecological systems theory identifies four layers of systems, namely; micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system. These layers are illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1: Ecological systems theory identifies four layers of systems, namely; micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system



(Adopted from Bronfenbrenner 1994:40)

From Figure 1, the first level is the micro-system. It is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face to face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more interaction with the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner,1994:39).This system refers to a pattern of roles, activities and interpersonal relations experienced between individuals and the systems in which they are active participants (such as the family, school or peer group) (Barnes, 2011:14).

A second level or system is what Bronfenbrenner refers to as the meso-system. “The meso-system is a set of micro-systems that continuously interact with one another. So, what happens in the family or peer group can influence how children respond at school and vice versa” (Donald et al., 2006: 42). The meso-system comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person, for example, the relations between home and school, school and workplace. In other words the success of educational support provisioning for children with disabilities in one setting, such as the classroom, is reliant on the quality of resources provided in other settings, such as the home, the peer group, the school and the local and wider community as a whole. Where parents display a caring and loving positive attitude towards learners, the successful outcomes of support strategies for



implementing inclusive education for children with disabilities improves. Within the context of Bronfenbrenner's theory, educational support within an inclusive classroom is understood as the responsibility of everyone, at all levels of the system.

The exo-system is seen as including other systems in which a child is not directly involved, but which possibly influence the people he or she has proximal relationships with in the micro-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994:40). Examples could include the education system (e.g.: curriculum, inclusive policies), a parents' place of work, the media or a sibling's peer group. A fourth system Bronfenbrenner notes is the macro-system. It involves dominant social, cultural and economic structures, as well as attitudes and beliefs, values, material resources, customs, life styles, opportunity structures, hazards and practices that are embedded in each of the broader systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994:41). This system includes ideologies and discourses inherent in the systems of a specific society (Donald et al., 2006: 43).

Encompassing these four systems is what Bronfenbrenner refers to as the chronosystem. Swart and Pettipher (2005: 12) describe this system as developmental time-frames that cross through and affect the interactions between the systems and, in turn, their influences on individual development. Within inclusion one should be aware of the potential barriers, assets and support factors (both internal and external) that exist for children, teachers and all the other systems that exist in and around a school. It is in the interaction between any of the above levels that barriers may occur or supports exist.

2.1 Goals of the study

The study is aimed at adding value to the domain of inclusive education, especially to the involvement of parents in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in ECD classes. It is envisaged that the study will benefit teachers, children with disabilities, researchers, policy makers and administrators in the Ministry of Primary and secondary Education in Zimbabwe.

2.2 Research Questions

The study intended to address the following specific research questions:

- What challenges are faced by ECD teachers in including children with disabilities in their classrooms?
- What opportunities for inclusive education are offered to children with disabilities in ECD classes by their parents?
- How can parents be involved in finding solutions to the challenges of ECD teachers in including children with disabilities in their classrooms?

3. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach. By using a qualitative approach, the researcher was able to explore the challenges and opportunities for the involvement of the parent in the implementation of inclusive education in ECD classes in primary schools. Since the purpose of this research is not to test a hypothesis or verify a theory but rather to identify the challenges and opportunities of the parents' involvement in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in ECD schools, a qualitative approach is appropriate for achieving those goals (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

This research was a case study of one regional cluster of primary schools in Bulawayo in which a purposive sample of 25 parents and 25 ECD teachers who have inclusive classes were interviewed. The goal of this research is to develop an in depth understanding of the involvement of the parents in the implementation of inclusive education in ECD classes in primary schools. This research uses a qualitative approach to collect and analyze data, and in-depth interviews were conducted to help generate new ideas about the involvement of the parents in the implementation of inclusive education in ECD classes in primary schools. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized in conjunction with an open-ended questionnaire technique. This enabled the researcher to cover the main topics and categories while remaining flexible and open enough to pursue topics that the participant brings up while being interviewed (Rossman and Rallis, 2003). Participants were provided with informed consent forms to explain what the study was about, their level of participation and also to guarantee them confidentiality. As an incentive to participate in the study, participants were offered a copy of the completed study. After the data were collected the researcher analyzed the data using a thematic approach as it allowed patterns



and thematic connections to emerge out of the data and do not address the material with a pre-determined theory or hypothesis in mind (Seidman, 1998).

4. FINDINGS

The study sought to identify the challenges and opportunities of the parents' involvement in the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in ECD schools of Zimbabwe. Each research question and its findings are presented below.

4.1 Research question 1: What challenges are faced by ECD teachers in including children with disabilities in their classrooms?

The challenges faced by ECD teachers in including children with disabilities in their classes were investigated in this study. The teachers' beliefs about inclusion as a challenge suggest that they do not regard children with disabilities, particularly those with sensory impairments as belonging in regular classes and would rather prefer them being educated in existing special schools. One of the respondents had this to say:

We haven't yet come to terms with the belief that children who are visually impaired or have hearing impairment can be included in regular schools. They are better if they remain in the special schools.

The ECD teachers and parents also believed that if children with disabilities were included in regular classes it would affect the academic performance of their abled peers without disabilities. One of the parents was not happy to let her child learn with children with disabilities as this would affect the child on its social development. She argued that:

My child would be affected in her social development and may fail to do well in class; hence these disabled children should have their special class.

Teachers also perceived that their professional knowledge and skills were inadequate to effectively teach children with disabilities in regular ECD classes:

If those students with visual impairment, intellectual disabilities and those with speech problems are included, the class will be difficult to manage.

Teachers overwhelmingly believed that inclusive education is impossible without addressing their needs for specialist resources. Overall belief is that without sufficient resources and clear policies, supporting inclusive education was impossible. One of the teachers said:

You cannot teach an overcrowded ECD class where every form of disability is found, any resources or clear policies for such an inclusive set up.

4.2 Research question 2: What opportunities for inclusive education are offered to children with disabilities in ECD classes by their parents?

Findings reveal that teachers and parents perceive parents' attitudes towards the education of their children with disabilities as a major barrier in the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECD classes; on the other hand, parents think that their children generally should attend schools but are worried about abuse. Some of the parents felt that Schools should work with parents of children with disabilities as partners in providing education and should involve them closely in the development and implementation of their children's learning programmes, including individualized education plans where appropriate. One the respondents said:

Parents and families must be involved in the development and monitoring of the individualised education plan for their child, both at support centres and at regular school.



For children with disabilities ECD classes, early detection, identification and access to early intervention services is necessary to provide support and training to parents and families in the early stages of their child's life. Parents and caregivers can play a crucial role in stimulating the early development of their child's potential and preventing the onset of severe secondary disabling conditions which can affect both physical and intellectual ability. Without early intervention many disabled children will have a more limited capacity to benefit from education, if or when they have access to their local community school.

Families of young disabled children can play a critical role in the early development of their children but for this to happen they need to receive support, understanding and useful information on how they can help their children.

4.3 Research question 3: How can parents be involved in finding solutions to the challenges of ECD teachers in including children with disabilities in their classrooms?

Findings from the respondents showed that early childhood teachers may feel overwhelmed by the many responsibilities required of them in a diverse classroom. For the teacher to meet individual needs of many different children while developing and presenting integrated curriculum and ensure opportunities for all, the ECD parents must provide support through collaboration with the teachers.

The teachers felt that:

Using parent-friendly screening and assessment tools, asking parents to observe their child's development and collect data, asking parents to record their child's behaviours during certain routines, supporting parents to be the intervention agents, inviting parents to volunteer in the classroom, organizing regular home visiting, encouraging parent-to-parent support groups, collaborating with researchers at local universities to improve the quality of practices.

The complexity of the lives of parents, their concerns, priorities, and resources must be addressed to effectively involve parents in the mutual goal of improving developmental outcomes of their children. There are clear benefits gained by parents, children, and practitioners by supporting parent participation in ECD classes. The parents and teachers agreed that schools must inform parents about their curricula as well as about ways to assist their children at home. Many parents believe that parent involvement in their children's school would increase if they had more information and understood better what their children were learning.

The parents felt that the teachers should be trained to assist children with disabilities in ECD classes in primary schools. Empowered teachers will empower parents to be involved and expect more from their children. Empowered parents can inspire their children to do better at school and in life. By preparing teachers and administrators to build collaborative partnerships, there is the potential to improve the learning opportunities for all students, so no one is left behind.

5. DISCUSSION

Parent and teacher beliefs and expectations are crucial to shaping home-school relations. Beliefs about individuals and group characteristics drive our choices and behaviors, and are crucial in shaping relationships and partnerships. The findings from this study show that a positive, welcoming school climate, and consistent invitations to parents with ways to become involved in their children's education at home and school, positively predisposes parents about the school's efforts. Parents' positive perception highly influences their children's perception of school, which, in turn, positively contributes to children's academic, social, and emotional learning especially at ECD level. Parent and teacher expectations regarding the academic, social, and emotional development of children have been shown to be among the best predictors of school success.

Two issues are of major concern from this study: ECD teachers believe that regular schools are not places for students with disabilities, particularly those children with sensory impairments, and they perceive that policy makers impose inclusive education on them. The beliefs, negative attitude and concerns expressed by teachers in this study may be explained due to lack of professional preparedness, available resources, lack of sufficient orientation and specialist assistance. Professional knowledge (initial and further training), material and human resources are found to enhance teachers' positive attitudes and their willingness to embrace and make inclusion work (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000). It is when teachers' are sufficiently equipped in knowledge and expertise and supported by other professionals that their confident levels to work with *all* students in inclusive classrooms will improve.



6. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that, parents can provide different information about the developmental characteristics of their children with disabilities in ECD inclusive classes. There are many processes in which parents can be involved, such as, identification, assessment, educational programming, training, teaching, and evaluation. The well informed parents can identify of early signs of a disability for ECD children. Parents can provide different information about the developmental characteristics of their children. Parents can also provide useful information in assessment of functional skills often otherwise inaccessible to the professional (Mohsin, 2009). Depending on a child's age and needs, interventions may include accessing a range of professionals such as special educators, speech therapists, behavioural therapists, occupational therapists, and/or providing education and other support services for parents and carers. Early intervention can take place at a child's home, in a specialist centre, or in mainstream early childhood settings.

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