

Critical Elements that Enhance Assessment of Children with Learning Disabilities in the Remedial Programme in Zimbabwe: A Case of the Harare Metropolitan Province

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Abstract: This study endeavours to look for the critical elements that should be taken into consideration when implementing an effective assessment of children with learning disabilities (LDs) for placement in the remedial programme. Zimbabwe is one of the few countries offering remedial education in Africa. However, the provision has faced resistance since its inception in 1981 because of differences between teachers and other professionals on the type of child who should be placed in the remedial programme. Assessment is crucial in determining the correct candidates. What are the critical elements that improve the assessment so that the correct pupils are placed in the remedial programmes? A case study design using both quantitative and qualitative strategies was employed to collect the data from the participants in their different sites. Purposive sampling was used to identify the participants and the informants. The sample consisted of 120 teachers who included remedial teachers, classroom teachers; head teachers and remedial tutors from the 7 districts in the province. Questionnaires, interviews and document analysis were used to collect the data. The study identified definitions of assessment, learning disabilities, policy, human and material resources as critical elements which ensure the effective provision of remedial education. The study recommends that these elements be addressed to ensure that rights of the children are met in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Assessment, remedial education, learning disabilities, critical elements.

INTRODUCTION

The provision of remedial education places Zimbabwe among countries that are trying to grant children their basic human rights to education as espoused by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [1]. Remedial education includes the assessment, placement, teaching and evaluation of the children's performance to ensure the child's smooth reentry into the mainstream. The child belongs to the mainstream classroom and a remedial programme is just transitory to enable the child to catch up with their peers. Correct assessment and intervention ensures that the child with Learning disabilities (LDs) spends a short duration in the remedial class before rejoining others. This is possible if the critical elements that enhance assessment are addressed. This guarantees that placement never becomes a long term programme as it might end up affecting the child with LDs emotionally and socially. Studies done in other countries confirm the negative consequences of always doing extra lessons at the expense of other social activities [2]. It brings to mind the adage 'all work and no play makes Jill/John a dull girl/boy.' It is unfortunate to observe children perpetually in remedial or extra lessons throughout their

school career without a break. Social education is as much a necessity as academic education [3].

Zimbabwe is one of the few countries offering remedial education in Africa. However, the provision has faced resistance since its inception in 1981 because of differences between teachers and other professionals on the type of child who should be placed in the remedial programme. The correct placement of children into the remedial programme will also certify that the correct children benefit from the remedial programme. Incorrect placement only creates false expectations on both the identified child, the teacher and the parents. It is therefore primary that critical elements that enhance the assessment of learning disabilities are properly attended to so that the children get proper teaching which will ensure that they transfer the learning to their classrooms.

The purpose of this study was to establish those critical elements with the view of improving the assessment of LDs. Therefore, what is their role in enhancing the assessment of children with LDs?

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the critical elements which promote the assessment of children with learning disabilities for placement in the remedial programme?
2. How do they foster the assessment of the children with LDs?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The critical elements which promote the assessment of children with LDs are shared definition of assessment; the construct and definition of Learning Disabilities, the role of policy, and the provision of resources [4-8]. These are discussed in that order.

A shared definition of assessment

A shared definition of assessment is crucial to the identification and teaching of children with learning disabilities. Assessment practices are the cornerstone of any learning encounter. A shared definition among professionals ensures a shared vision of what it entails. Therefore a shared definition provides a firm ground for the provision. McLoughlin and Lewis [8] define educational assessment of children with disabilities as the 'systematic process of gathering educationally relevant information to make legal and instructional decisions about the provision of special services'. They further point out that this information relates to the everyday concerns of the classroom. They sum up by saying it focuses mainly on the areas of learning in schools as well as any factor affecting the school achievement.

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs [9] mentioned concerning remedial teachers that knowledge of assessment is crucial to the teaching of children with learning disabilities. In those countries where teachers were knowledgeable about assessment they were able to identify, and teach their children effectively.

It is possible that when we mention the assessment of children with learning disabilities others who are responsible for their provision may not have a shared perception of what should be done and this can have a detrimental effect on the recipients. This seems to be the trend in Africa as commented by Asim, Kalu, Idaka and Bassey [10] who recommend in-service training in assessment to be seriously considered.

Definition of Learning Disabilities

The construct of and definition of Learning Disabilities underpins our knowledge of LDs and thus helps to ascertain if this category exists in the African horizons. The construct of LDs can be understood from a broad understanding of what African see as a disability. In the African culture disabilities are seen as ranging from being positive to being negative.

Gwitimah and Sibanda, [11] cite Ethiopia were people with disabilities are revered more than those without disabilities. In other African societies disability and its negative nature are viewed as a calamity, an oddity which has its existence emanating from some evil source. For example Ncube [12] says that in Zimbabwe parents and relatives sometimes see a disability as a curse or a punishment from the gods. Because of its nature it should be removed from society. It contaminates the tribe or family. Identification of the disability is based on physical differences between the child and his or her peers. Their behavioural differences form the basis for identification.

The importing of the western construct and definition of disability as a deficit in a person has been central to the development of learning disabilities. Some authorities view the learning disabilities category as a foreign construction since it emerged after the introduction of reading, writing and mathematics [13]. Others like Zindi [14] see it as mimicry of colonial disability epistemologies. Learning disabilities is an invisible disability which needs sophisticated assessment methods [11].

In Africa learning disabilities have been invisible due to the cooperative nature of the traditional education system. People who are viewed as learning disabled in the western culture when placed in an African environment may not encounter similar problems as their counterparts. Whilst in the Western world it is important to be able to read in the environment which relies on the use of written signage for communication this is not the case in most African rural environments. As Werner [4] points out a child who has learning difficulties but is physically strong may not be restricted in the village when milking cows but may be very restricted in a city or in school.

But the situation has changed now since African children in both urban and rural environments are now required to read and write as they experience similar demands as their western counterparts. The transition from traditional education to 'modern' environments make these children with LDs vulnerable. In this case the environmental conditions demand a different treatment.

An important issue which should take centre stage in this study is the issue of definitions of learning disabilities. It is only possible to identify children if we are able to accurately identify what they are exhibiting [15]. All persons involved in assessment should have a shared definition of LDs. Peresuh [16] writes that traditional education focused on 'helping the learner form habits, dispositions, and develop abilities to search for truth, grasp it, enjoy it and use it.' This education was humanistic because everybody had an equal membership. Definitions of learning disability

were irrelevant because of the nature of the societal membership which did into focus on deficiencies. The introduction of Western education had a negative influence on traditional African education [16]. It looked down on the traditional education. Failure to define LDs in an African context will render the whole exercise of identifying children hollow and a mere copycat of western conceptions and horizons.

Chimedza [5] explained that in Zimbabwe disability is viewed as inherent in the individual. This is contrary to the society's view as it determined the person through its beliefs and values [5]. What was the rationale for adopting western definitions of LDs in Zimbabwe?

The basis of the adoption of a Western definition in Zimbabwe has not been fully interrogated through research. The introduction of reading and writing has placed demands on the students arising from societal expectations. What definition should be used in an Africans setting for those children who are facing learning difficulties? Determining this will guarantee successful assessment of children with LDs

Policy

In Zimbabwe the Nziramasanga Commission [17] observed that there was no specific policy on Special Education provision. Instead special education is provided for through Ministry circulars. Chataika, Mckenzie, Swart and Lyner – Cleophas [18] pointed out that gaps in policy existed between intention and the actual practice. Choruma [6] notes that this lack of policy has resulted in fragmentation and lack of coordination of special education programmes in Zimbabwe. What is the effect of policy or lack of it on the actual implementation of the remedial programme in Zimbabwe specifically on the assessment of LDs? A critical look at circular CEO Minute No12 of 1987 [19] on LDs shows that it is silent on what should be done by schools in order to assess the children. Zindi [14] comments that lack of specific legislation on special education inhibit identification and provision for students with disabilities. Enabling policy must be put in place to promote assessment and delivery of programmes. However, Vandeyer and Killen [20] warn that policy alone cannot bring in change; there is need for knowledge and resources. Another observation is that the current policy is now outdated considering that it was promulgated in 1987. The situation has changed significantly in the school system. The introduction of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has changed the education landscape to the extent that new ways of assessment must be ushered in.

School policies are critical in the implementation of national policy. They are a reflection of the national policy. The lack of a clear policy on disability is reflected in the school system. A study by

Muuya [21] on Heads of primary schools titled 'The aim of special education schools and units in Kenya' found out that there was a gap between policy and actual provision at school level. Schools have policies which they use to guide their various activities. Currently their effect on the assessment of children with LDs is not known. In the USA policies have been effective in promoting the assessment of children with LDs, since they have stipulated the types of tests to be used. What also needs noting is that advocacy has been used to promote LDs policy formation. It is obvious that policy is critical in setting the necessary conditions for the assessment of children with LDs.

Resources

The issue of resources is the cornerstone of any identification procedure for children with LDs. Resources are mainly in two forms; human and material. The National Report on the Status of Education in Zimbabwe presented at the 48th session of UNESCO International Conference on Education [7] highlights the challenges facing Zimbabwe as; funding, shortage of books, problem of an irrelevant curriculum and need for curriculum reform. The report identifies resources in the form of classroom and especially qualified teachers as a major player in implementing educational programmes. This is also applicable to special education where the need for resources is felt more critically. Peresuh [22] pointed out that the training of teachers does not include disability which makes it difficult for teachers to provide for the students with LDs in their classrooms. There is need to introduce special needs education in all teachers colleges.

This situation is not unique to Zimbabwe as Berihun, Tesera, and Desta [23] in a study of Primary schools in Ethiopia found that the problem of quality of teaching is related to class size resources and teacher qualifications. The issue of who does what with what type of expertise definitely must determine the type of tests which are crafted into assessment provision. We need to find out from those who are currently doing the assessment what they have and how effective they view this in the process of identifying children with LDs.

The second issue of material resources comprise of the instruments to be used and other accompanying materials. These may be formal tests which may be expensive as they are usually imported.

The discussed critical elements are responsible for the effective way in which children with LDs are assessed. How do they improve the assessment of children with LDs?

METHODOLOGY

This case study was based on Miles and Huberman's [24] research design on the integration of qualitative and quantitative research strategies. It

followed Johnson and Onwueghuzi [25] and Flick's [26] suggestions as it provided the researcher the opportunity to select the best elements from each in a complementary not competitive manner.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the participants and the informants. The sample consisted of 120 teachers and informants who included remedial teachers, classroom teachers; head teachers and remedial tutors from the 7 districts in the Harare Metropolitan province. Maximum variation sampling was used to represent the members of the sample described above [27]. Questionnaires, interviews and document analysis were used to collect the data. This also helped to triangulate the data.

Most of the analysis was done concurrently with the data collection process. The use of multiple data collection methods was used to enhance validity and reliability of the findings [26]. Global and thematic coding was used to analyse the data.

Standard ethical considerations of seeking authority to carry out the research, confidentiality, consent and respect for participants were strictly followed.

RESULTS

The data presented below answers the research questions posed by the study. The results show that all the participants agree that shared definitions of assessment and of learning disabilities, policy and resources are the critical elements which enhance assessment of children with LDs. In each theme the critical element is confirmed and its role in assessment addressed.

Definition of Assessment

The second aspect in understanding the schools' identification strategies was the meaning the participants attached to the actual process of assessment. How did teachers define assessment? The responses show that 58% (14) English remedial teachers; 77% (17) math remedial teachers; 25% (5) Shona remedial teachers and 50% (13) classroom

teachers defined assessment properly. The lowest were the Shona teachers. Slightly less than half of the heads at 45% (10) were able to define assessment correctly. The global analysis shows that teachers across the board saw assessment as a number of processes. One teacher saw it this way:

I see assessment as a way of studying the student in the classroom

In this instance the teacher viewed herself as someone who is studying the children's below average performance. This hopefully would result in the child being identified as learning disabled or not.

Definition of Learning Disabilities

The analysis brings out two definitions on learning disabilities from the teachers. First teachers define children with learning disabilities as those who perform below the average in any subject. Secondly some children are defined as those who miss out some language concepts such as reading and spelling. Clearly this shows that teachers are in agreement that those children have some specific problem in their learning. But when asked for the alternative names they give to the children they label them as slow learners or late developers. This is contrary to how the students are defined in CEO minute No. 12 of 1987 [19].

The teachers clearly have varying definitions and this will have an impact on how they identify the children. The participants' knowledge of the definition was at these levels: 25% (6) English remedial teachers; 40% (9) math remedial teachers; 35% (7) Shona remedial teachers; 15% (4) classroom teachers knew the definition.

One observation made which also affected the identification was the different meanings attached to learning disabilities by some classroom teachers. To some of them any children who have problems with school work had a learning disability. Here are paraphrases of some of the definitions from the teachers in Figure 1:

- *Children who have normal or above normal learning capacity but have a below average performance in either spoken or written language or mathematics.*
- *Children performing slightly below average in math, English, Shona.*
- *Children with challenges in certain areas where they are different from others.*
- *Child has difficulties in certain areas e.g. hearing, visual, mastering concepts*

Fig-1: Teachers' Definitions of LDs

Three out of the twenty-two heads had a slight knowledge of the definition. The bulk of the heads about 87% (19) did not, with one defining it as:

Children with learning challenges e.g. mentally or

physically challenged.

This shows that there is a disparity in meanings between Heads of schools and their teachers

which may result in poor identification of the children and in differentiating the type of intervention programme the child should be placed in.

Policy as a Beginning Point

The issue of policy is central in the implementation of any assessment strategy. The responses show that only 25% that is 25 out of the 92 remedial teachers knew about the policy. The school heads at 59% (13 out of 22) knew the policy for children with LDs. Teachers' knowledge of policy is shown by this response from a high-density school teacher in district 4:

The school policy stresses classroom remediation by all the teachers by keeping records

Policy must be viewed from a macro and micro level. The macro level dwells on the national level of policy in terms of implementing education to children with disabilities and in this case those with learning disabilities. At the micro level emphasis is on policy developed at the school level which then cascades into the classroom. The policy at the macro level will initiate the development and implementation of programmes in a country and are replicated at the school and classroom level. The study further wanted to find out if policy on the implementation of remedial programme specifically on assessment was articulated to the schools.

Interviews with all the participants and document analysis in the sites revealed that there exists a mixed perception at both the national level and the school level. At the national level there was an awareness of circular CEO Minute No.12 of 1987 [19] on the institutionalisation of the remedial programme by the heads and District Remedial Tutors (DRTs). However at the school level this circular was either

barely known or completely unknown depending on the school location. Trust schools had no idea of it or preferred to ignore it and follow their own school policies. The rest of the schools tended to have a vague idea of the policy. Therefore Head teachers of schools tended to comply with the policy by asking teachers to have the necessary files available for the authorities. In such instances timetables were available.

The assessment of the children would be done in such a way that they would be selected, registers and time tables set up but with no requisite teaching. DRTs and District Education Officers (DEOs) verified that this was the norm rather than the exception. Lack of policy awareness was more pronounced in all teachers rather than in the Head teachers, DRTs, and Educational Psychologists.

The results show that there is awareness at both the national and community level for the need to help children who are struggling in the school system. The results which are presented and analysed here clearly highlight the disparity in the assessment strategies prevailing in the different schools in the province. This lack of clarity on the policy has resulted in some schools sometimes abandoning the whole programme and asking class teachers to follow their own initiatives in helping children with learning disabilities. In such an instance concerned parents have opted for extra lessons for their children either outside the school or in parallel classes being run by the classroom teachers.

Resources

Resources are central to any programme and the remedial programme is no exception. The responses from the teachers are reflected in these statements from some of them:

- *Time factor is limited to cover all the children*
- *Learning aids are crucial and should be available*
- *Teachers are not staff developed in assessment*
- *There are no supervisors or moderators*
- *Classes are big*

Fig-2: Resources

School Heads confirmed this situation especially the need for staff development and localized literature to be used by the teachers when assessing and teaching children with LDs and other difficulties. This shows that schools are not benefiting from the current provision.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that despite teachers teaching in separate schools settings the critical elements which enhance assessment in the schools for

children with LDs are the same. Teacher definitions of assessment and LDs are critical elements to the assessment of children with learning disabilities. Teachers and their school heads do not have shared definitions of both assessment and learning disabilities. The majority saw children with learning disabilities as being slow and requiring help. Some even saw them as having physical disabilities. This obviously create problems when it comes to the actual process of assessment.

This study highlights a major deficiency in teachers' competencies in assessing children. There is a need for a major shift in how assessments are being run both in the private and public schools. This concurs with Asim *et al's* [10] recommendation for in-service training in assessment for teachers.

We must understand that learning disabilities can occur to any child who is of average or above average intelligence who may have physical, sensory disabilities or even behaviour challenges. Teachers need to be staff developed in what learning disabilities or any other disabilities are. Such knowledge will help them to know the different types of children with disabilities in their classes and the type of provision to give them.

This disparity is reflected when most classroom teachers and remedial teachers manifest differences when selecting children because they did not know how to do the assessment. The findings show teachers mechanically coming up with a position. Throughout the study one got the impression that teachers were just going through the assessment without understanding what was actually involved. That is why some remedial teachers could not justify the type of children they were identifying to the other classroom teachers and the head. These teachers reflect what the study by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs [9] mentioned concerning remedial teachers; that knowledge of assessment is crucial to the teaching of children with learning disabilities. In those countries where teachers were knowledgeable about assessment they were able to identify, and teach their children effectively.

Teachers' awareness of policy was scanty in comparison to their heads. These participants are highlighting the fact that there is no clear policy on special education an observation made by the Nziramasanga Commission of 1999. Zindi [14] comments that lack of specific legislation on special education inhibits identification and provision for students with disabilities. Enabling policy must be put in place to promote assessment and delivery of programmes. However, Vandeyer and Killen [20] warn that policy alone cannot bring in change; there is need for knowledge and resources. The current practice on remediation, where it is directed through government circulars as established by Nziramasanga Commission [17], reduces the remedial assessment of children with LDs to the level of extra mural activities and yet parents and many authorities view the remedial programme as the solution to the mismatched grade seven failure rates and the reading comprehension difficulties students' face at the secondary school level. Remediation policy needs to take into consideration current environmental challenges.

The challenge of resources in the form of assessment instruments, books, large classes and inadequate manpower was mentioned by all the participants although the need was acute in government schools. This confirms the UNESCO [7] report that most challenges are due to inadequate resources. This also concurs with Berihun *et al's* [23] finding that class size was observed to be a significant variable in providing in-class identification. Teachers with reasonable class sizes were able to identify and teach children without undue stress. The smaller the class size the more that teacher is able to work individually with those children with LDs. Most children with LDs have normal to above average intelligence and therefore are aware that they have learning challenges but do not know how to overcome the problem. Some might even be gifted, talented or creative as history has proved. Therefore large classes provide them with a sanctuary to hide resulting in them moving from one grade to the next without identification. If special needs provision is to improve, then parents and their communities will have to build inclusive schools and provide the funds for the much needed resources to assess and effectively teach all children.

CONCLUSIONS

- Most teachers and heads do not have shared definitions of assessment and learning disabilities.
- There is no clear policy on the assessment of children with LDs and current policy does not specify how teachers should select children with LDs.
- Inadequate resources affected most of the assessment practices.
- Human and material resources enabled private schools to do their assessment effectively.
- Teachers in government schools did not have time to do the assessments due to many duties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that these critical elements be addressed to ensure that the rights of the children are met by:

- Capacitating teachers in assessment of learning disabilities
- Improving policy
- Giving teachers support in the form of resources and incentives.

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