

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Views of parents on the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education in Masvingo, Zimbabwe**

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**The aim of this study was to investigate the views of parents on the inclusion of children with special needs (CSN) in physical education at primary school level in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. A survey involving parents was conducted with the questionnaire used as a data collection instrument. The questionnaire was administered to 40 parents of both the children without disabilities and those whose children had exceptionalities. The study was conducted at four primary schools in Masvingo urban. The findings reveal that more parents prefer and advocate for inclusion in physical education while others favour separate placement. Noted differences could be interpreted in terms of situational, attitudinal and cultural reasons. The study recommends that the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture should work towards full involvement of parents in the provision of adapted facilities and equipment for physical education in an inclusive set up.**

**Key words:** Physical education, inclusion, separate placement, children with special needs, parental support.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Zimbabwean 1987 Education Act, revised in 2006, specifies that there should be inclusion of Children with Special Needs (CSN) into regular schools. Further, the Nziramasanga Report (1999), which looked into the education affairs of Zimbabwe, stipulates that the quality of education for the child with disabilities should reflect the same standards and ambitions of general education. As such, the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture adopted the concept of inclusion and ceaselessly called for the integration and participation of (CSN) in all subjects including physical education. The idea of inclusion is also advocated by many policy documents like the African Charter on the rights and welfare of the child adopted in 1990, the Jomtien World Declaration on Education For All Report (1990), the Dakar Framework For Action on Education For All (UNESCO, 2002) and

the Salamanca Report and Framework For Action on Children with Special Needs (1994). In line with the above documents on inclusive education, UNESCO (2002) calls for the recognition of the importance of parent/community participation in the management of schools. The present study sought to investigate the level of parental support towards the education of CSN in Physical Education in an inclusive setting.

The philosophy of inclusive education which was a result of continued appraisal of inclusion means educating children with disabilities in a regular educational setting along with 'non-disabled' peers (Rizzo et al., 1994; Salamanca Statement and Framework For Action on SNC, 1994; Hardman et al., 1993; Ashman, 2002). The inclusion movement has been reinforced by many parents who believe that separate education is not an equal education and that the setting, in which a programme is implemented, significantly influences the programme provided for a child (Winnick, 2000; Salamanca Report, 1994; Nziramasanga Report, 1999).

Inclusion is concerned with providing all students with

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enhanced opportunities to learn from each other's contributions, providing necessary services within the regular schools (Rizzo et al., 1994; Ashman, 2002). It also means having students with disabilities follow the same schedules as 'non-disabled' students, involving students with disabilities in extracurricular activities like physical education and music (Kanhukamwe and Madondo, 2003), teaching children to accept individual differences, taking parents' concerns seriously and providing an appropriate individualised educational programme [IEP] (Chakuchichi et al., 2003). Inclusion involves whole communities and ensures full participation of CSN at all levels of community's cultural and economic life (Hardman et al., 1999; Putnam, 1993; Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994, In McNally et al., 2001). Therefore, inclusive education in physical education may be perceived as both a holistic approach to the development of CSN and a means of taking care of the individual child and societal needs (Sherrill, 1998; Grove and Fisher, 1999; UNESCO, 2002).

However, for the purposes of this study, the term inclusion is defined as full inclusion of students with hearing impairments, those who have multiple disabilities and those with orthopaedic impairments (Winnick, 2000) in regular classrooms with the additional support services available for the student (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994 cited in McNally et al., 2001; Kanhukamwe and Madondo, 2003).

Researches on inclusive education in Zimbabwe have been conducted on pupils' attitudes towards peers with mild mental retardation (Peresuh, 1996) and on views of pupils with visual impairment on the challenges of inclusion (Dakwa, 2009). However, not much research has been done on views of parents on the inclusion of CSN in physical education at primary school level.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

It is widely recognised that parental support and involvement is essential for the effective implementation of any educational reform movement (Sherrill, 1998; Salamanca Report, 1994; Turnbull et al., 1995; Grove and Fisher, 1999; UNESCO, 2002; Zindi, 2004). Hence, the success of inclusive education requires parental and community support and beliefs in the competence of the education system to meet the needs of all students (Winnick, 2000).

Professionals have for too long ignored the need for the involvement of parents and families of CSN, treating them more as patients or adversaries than clients, consumers of services or co-workers (Peresuh, 2000; Winnick, 2000; UNESCO, 2002). The notion of parental involvement is based on a set of premises that parents are experts of their own children for they know the capabilities of their children and parental skills can complement academic and professional skills, hence parents have the potential to contribute to decision

making and can be effective teachers of their own children (Hardman et al., 1999; UNESCO, 2002; Chakuchichi et al., 2003).

Ballard (1999) echoes that most parents believe that the only way they would succeed in the goal of socialisation as a way of enhancing inclusion would be through supporting one another, assessing information and asserting the right to be heard in the development of policy and practice. The Zimbabwe Education Act of 1987, revised in 2006, recognises and acknowledges the importance of parental participation in the provision of equipment and facilities for Physical Education in an inclusive setting. The 2006 Education Act further empowers Committees/Associations run by parents to manage schools (UNESCO, 2002). The School Development Committees/Associations call for the parents of CSN to join hands and work in collaboration with the physical education teachers towards the provision and availability of adapted Physical Education equipment like wheel chairs, brackets, balls, racquets, goal posts, basketball and tennis nets (Kanhukamwe and Madondo, 2003). According to Shanker (1995), other support services that parents should be involved in include the availability of aides who are trained to handle CSN, school personnel, peer grouping and infrastructure that would allow the effective implementation of an effective programme in Physical Education.

Parental involvement in the school is both empowering to their children and themselves and it is through partnership with teachers that attitudes towards students with disabilities are changed productively in the school and community (Chakuchichi et al., 2003) Lesotho Society of Mentally Handicapped Persons, 1997). Parental involvement in inclusive education also helps ensure professional understanding of the student as well as protection of the student against representation of cultural behavioural differences between groups (Ashman, 2002).

However, there are parents who prefer and advocate for inclusive education while others favour separate placement (Grove and Fisher, 1999; Chakuchichi et al., 2003; Zindi, 2004). The majority of parents of CSN with negative attitudes towards inclusion argue that they want their children with disabilities to learn in special schools where there is safety, resource availability and specialist services (Daniel and King, 1997; Sherrill, 1998).

Parents are more concerned about the degree to which their child's individual education plan (IEP) addresses the needs of their child in an inclusive setting but it may be difficult for schools to find personnel who are sufficiently knowledgeable about inclusive educational goals in order to provide appropriate services to their child (Grove and Fisher, 1999; Chakuchichi et al., 2003). Parents are aware that many teachers have negative attitudes towards CSN in physical education because they do not know how to teach them (Winnick, 2000), that is, they do not have adequate specialist knowledge regarding

handling learners with disabilities, hence they need knowledge in sport medicine, bioenergetics, sport psychology, sport sociology, kinesiology, biomechanics and exercise physiology (Siedentop, 1990; Theodorakis et al., 1995; Kanhukamwe and Madondo, 2003). However, even when knowledgeable personnel were available, conflict may arise from divergent perspectives about the child's needs (Lake and Billingsley, 2000).

A gradually increasing number of parents want their CSN to attend a regular school, that is, the same neighbourhood school that siblings and children without disabilities attend. Such parents believe that their children receive education that is as near to normal as possible as they are prepared for adult life (Hardman et al., 1993; Winnick, 2000; Chakuchichi et al., 2003). There are parents who also reiterate that inclusive education in physical education promotes assimilation, accommodation, adjustment and adaptation among learners in a free atmosphere (Ballard, 1999; Hallahan and Kauffman, 1994; Musangeya et al., 2000; Kanhukamwe and Madondo, 2003).

Numerous inclusive physical education models have been designed to help students with disabilities gain social competence and other skills to function fully and independently in regular physical education classes (Sherrill et al., 1994; Sherrill, 1998). However, Sherrill heralds that exception to the practice of inclusion in physical education is usually from some parents of children with multiple disabilities who may view inclusion in the regular classroom as very difficult, impossible and disabling. This is when parents insist on adapted physical education in separate settings that afford opportunities for IEP to meet special needs (Sherrill et al., 1994). Some parents of children with disabilities feel that regular classes are not accommodating enough for their CSN for it is a common characteristic that teachers complain that they are overburdened by the large class sizes, teaching conditions and demands of teaching a diverse range of students (Palmer et al., 2001; Papadopoulou et al., 2004).

Some parents of children with severe disabilities believe that inclusion in physical education has social and emotional benefits of both children with and without disabilities who are educated in regular classrooms, in terms of getting along with peers during physical activities as they interact, seek and lend assistance to one another (Chesley and Calaluce, 1997; Lipsky and Gartner, 1997; Kanhukamwe and Madondo, 2003). Sherrill et al. (1994) in their model designed to change attitudes and create equal relationships between children with and without disabilities in an inclusive setting in physical education, identified the need for community-wide and parent participation, especially in home-school community, collaborative planning and negotiation with the Physical Education teacher on how to manage Physical Education activities, time and resources at elementary level.

In spite of all this, there are parents who are anti-inclusionists who argue that regular classrooms focus on an

academic curriculum rather than on basic, living or functional skills which can be developed through the performance of physical activities in physical education (Daniel et al, 1997; Sherrill et al, 1994; Sherrill, 1998). At times parents have an educational agenda for their child and unless the school knows that, it may provide the child with irrelevant skills (Chimedza and Sithole, 2000; Rizzo et al., 1994; Shanker, 1995).

In their study on the attitudes of parents towards inclusion, Freeman and Alkin (2000) concluded that when students with severe disabilities are placed in regular classes, they would be rejected socially by both their peers and teachers. Further, as noted by Giangreco et al. (1991) cited by Palmer et al. (2001) a parent's satisfaction with a school programme is often based on such subjective criteria as perceptions regarding their child's sense of well-being or the presence of a caring teacher in a given placement.

In Zimbabwe, the Department of Social Services (1982) underscores that there are parents of the children without disabilities who are not keen to have their children in an inclusive setting. Such parents with negative attitudes towards disability believe that disability is a result of witchcraft and they fear that their children without disabilities may be affected as they interact with their peers with disabilities during physical activities (Chimedza and Peters, 2001; Chimedza and Sithole, 2000). Some parents from the Shona and Ndebele cultural groups in Zimbabwe view disability as a contagious disease which came as a result of evil influences like devils and demons residing within the child with disability (Chimedza and Peters, 2001). Some parents from the Shona and Ndebele cultural groups believe that children with disabilities require cleansing through traditional rituals before inclusion Chimedza and Peters, 2001).

The question that guided this study was, "To what extent do parents support the inclusion of children with special needs in Physical Education in Masvingo urban, Zimbabwe?"

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The study employed the descriptive survey method. This method focused on systematic description or exposure of the salient aspects of a situation with a focus on the patterns that emerge. The study was analytic (qualitative) in that the researchers focused on the relationships between variables and further interpreted the relationships.

### **Sample**

Forty parents for both the children without disability and children with special needs were purposively selected through their children from primary schools in Masvingo urban. Only those parents who were easily accessible to the researchers were involved in the

study.

### Instruments

A questionnaire was used as it was found to be the most ideal data collecting instrument for the relatively large sample (Tuckman, 1994). Questions were meant to solicit information from parents on their views on the inclusion of CSN in physical education in an inclusive setting.

### Procedure

The research was conducted at four primary schools which were purposively selected from thirteen primary schools in Masvingo town. The study focused on children with hearing impairments, those with multiple disabilities and those with orthopaedic impairments. The researchers used the school heads to give pupils questionnaires to take to their parents. Data were collected over a one month period in 2009.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents were asked to state their views on inclusive education and 96% indicated that they were in favour of it as inclusion facilitated the social development of CSN. However, it may be necessary to mention that when parents indicated that inclusion facilitated the social development of a child, this could have emanated from the idea that inclusive education promotes assimilation, acceptance, adjustment and adaptation in a free environment (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1994; Ballard, 1999; Chakuchichi et al., 2003). Again, the views shared by the majority of parents in this study could have been due to their understanding that as children work on personal adjustment during physical activities, they also develop social interaction skills like conduct (respect for authority, honesty and sportsmanship), interpersonal relations (cooperation, teamwork, competition) and self fulfilment (confidence, self actualisation and self image) and emotional stability (Ballard, 1999; Kanhukamwe and Madondo, 2003). This could have also emanated from the fact that some parents of CSN believe that when their children participate in physical education activities in an inclusive setting, psychological satisfaction is enhanced while self-esteem, self respect and pride is built onto the child due to the treatment one may get from peers (Stewart, 1991; Chimedza and Sithole, 2000).

On whether they regarded a child with exceptionalities as an object of pity, 88% of the respondents indicated that they did not believe so. A possible explanation for such positive attitudes towards disability among parents of CSN may be from their understanding that disability is not inability (Hardman et al, 1993; Hallahan and Kauffman, 1994). Such parents may want their children with disabilities to attend a regular school, that is, the same neighbourhood school as their siblings and children without disabilities for them to receive a 'schooling' which is as near to normal as possible (Chakuchichi et al.,

2003) with some achieving high in physical education and sport in an inclusive setting (Chimedza and Sithole, 2000; Kanhukamwe and Modondo, 2003).

The other reason for parents not to regard children with exceptionalities as objects of pity could also be that some parents with realistic expectations about CSN believe that inclusion prepares individuals for life and enhances learning from peers while exclusion infringes on the human rights of children with disabilities (Hegarty and Pocklington, 1990; Salamanca Report, 1994; UNESCO, 2002). Not viewing CSN as objects of pity may be further enhanced by the fact that when parents are involved in school management and human rights issues, they become aware of the merits of inclusion. Inclusion is thus viewed as giving CSN a recognised position in society, leading to society's shift in attitudes from charity to rights, from disempowerment to empowerment, from fixing a weakness to developing strength (Chimedza and Sithole, 2000; Hardman et al., 1993; Zindi, 2004).

The idea that children with exceptionalities were not regarded as objects of pity in physical education could also have emanated from parents whose children had relatively higher cognitive skills, fewer behavioural problems and fewer characteristics requiring special attention, who felt that regular classroom teachers could accommodate their children's learning (Palmer et al., 1998; Grove and Fisher, 1999; Daniel and King, 1997).

When they were asked to state if they were capable of imparting vital information and knowledge to their children, 90% of the participants said that they were able to assist their children with exceptionalities. The possible reason for this response could be that there are parents who claim to be experts of their own children and believe that parental skills can contribute to enhancement of the child's social, physical, academic and professional skills (Palmer et al., 2001; Chakuchichi et al., 2003). Hence, parents can be effective as first teachers of their own children (Winnick, 2000; UNESCO, 2002). Another possible explanation for the view shared by many parents that they could impart vital information and knowledge to their own children could be that parents know the challenges faced by their children and may possibly have an educational agenda for their children with disabilities, hence the acquisition of important information, functional skills and the development of attitudes and feelings of personal worth begin from parents at home, expands to the playground during physical education at school and subsequently encompasses total life experiences (Hardman et al., 1993; Zindi, 2004).

The study also found that generally, parents felt that their children were not given equal opportunities to participate in physical education activities in an inclusive set up. Such views could be found among parents of children with severe disabilities who would be concerned about the lack of support services like specialist personnel who are trained to handle the special needs of students, school personnel, special equipment and various adaptations that would enhance the teaching of

CSN in an inclusive setting (Shanker, 1995; Block, 1994; Block and Zeman, 1997). The views of parents of the children with severe disabilities may be further explained in terms of their concern that their children may be harmed, mistreated or ridiculed in an inclusive setting (Freeman and Alkin, 2000; Palmer et al, 2001; Daniel et al., 1997; Grove et al., 1999).

The other reason for such parent perceptions on the lack of equal participation in physical education lessons would be probably due to the fact that most parents believe that inclusive classes concentrate more on the academic curriculum that would be advantageous to the children without disabilities and pay little or no attention to the development of physical and social skills which would benefit the children with exceptionalities (Rizzo et al., 1994; Shanker, 1995; Nziramasanga, 1999, Chimedza and Sithole, 2000).

These anti-inclusion attitudes in this study could have been among the Shona and Ndebele (cultural groups in Zimbabwe) parents who are against the inclusion of CSN. These parents believe that disability may have emanated from witchcraft which came as a result of evil influences like devils and demons which are contagious and reside within the child with disabilities. Hence such parents would not be keen to have their children educated side by side with the children with disabilities for fear that the other children may be infected unless those children with exceptionalities are cleansed through traditional rituals (Chimedza and Peters, 2001; Chimedza and Sithole, 2000).

Such anti-inclusion perceptions among parents may also have come about probably because while the philosophy of inclusion has opened previously unavailable placement opportunities in physical education for many CSN, a meaningful implementation toward general education service delivery for all in physical education as viewed by many, has not existed (Sherrill et al., 1997; Chakuchichi et al., 2003; Winnick, 2000; Nziramasanga, 1999).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study sought to determine the views of parents on the inclusion of CSN in physical education and to make appropriate recommendations. Findings indicated that more parents supported inclusive education in physical education while others favour separate placement. It emerged that the mixed views were mainly based on cultural beliefs and attitudes towards CSN. The study recommends that parents should be recognised as active partners in decision making pertaining to CSN. The Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture should act as a watchdog to ensure that parents join hands with the school in the provision of appropriate physical education equipment and facilities in an inclusive setting. Seminars and workshops should also be conducted for parents and

teachers, with the hope to address factors that hinder the effective teaching of physical education to CSN in an inclusive setting.

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