PREPAREDNESS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD): A SURVEY OF GWERU DISTRICT ECD CENTRES

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ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively examines through descriptive survey, the state of preparedness for the adoption of Inclusive Education (IE) among Gweru district ECD centres. The paradigm shift towards IE has become a central concern within Zimbabwe's education at all educational levels although adoption of IE at ECD level remains a challenge. Yet, the horizon of accessing and delivering quality and sustainable early childhood education that can transform schools and communities into 'The Future We Want' seems elusive. Ten ECD teachers and five school heads were purposively selected in the study. Observation checklists, interviews and surveys were administered for data gathering. The study revealed that ECD centres do not have infrastructure that adequately responds to the diverse needs of learners. It also emerged that ECD centres have capacity building projects such as nutrition gardens and toy production to assist learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds. The study recommends that the government should increase staff development workshops for ECD teachers and administrators.

Key Words: Children with diverse needs; Early Childhood Development (ECD); education transitional dream; human rights based education, inclusive education; The Future We Want.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive Education (IE) is a philosophy as well as a principle and/or practice based on human rights and social justice. It advocates that children with special needs and those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds be educated along with their 'normal' peers in the regular classrooms. In order to achieve this direction, administrators, teachers and other support staff in an inclusive institution play a major part through their attitudes and actions. IE policies also play a major part to influence the way teachers and educational institutions form their attitudes towards inclusion and inclusivity.

IE of young children has become a central concern within education at all levels and Early Childhood Development (ECD) is not an exception (Reay, 2006). This move is supported by international legislations and conventions on inclusive practices which advanced arguments that inequalities arising from Early Childhood Development practices have not been adequately addressed globally (UN, 1989; UNESCO, 2000). The same can be said about Zimbabwe's Early

Childhood Education system. For this to be achieved, schools should be prepared to adjust and accommodate all learners by providing them with quality education.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The study sought to establish the state of preparedness in schools in embracing IE in ECD. IE is a new trend and paradigm shift within education and is driven by the philosophy that all children, regardless of their mild or severe conditionsor individual differences should attend the same school, in the same class with their peers. According to Winter and O'Raw (2010) traditional thinking viewed children with various forms of impairments as disabled while emerging thinking view those with physical or mental challenges as children with special needs. Based on this perspective, the trend has been to send children with special learning needs to special schools where specialist teachers would attend to them. This was so because it was discovered that these children were unique and needed unique.Specialised treatment was believed to make them benefit from the education system.

Such a practice, though positive and responsive to the needs of the children, increased stigma and promotedsocietal segregation of the affected children. Special schools in themselves are exclusive and selective; as such they promote a dichotomy between the disabled and their able bodied counterparts. Towards the later part of the 20[th]century, disability began to be perceived as a social construct and in response IE sought to demolish socially constructed impediments which society puts before those with physical impairments.

The current trend and perception in relation to philosophy of humanism and social treatment of fellow humanity is that "inclusion is an appropriate philosophy and a relevant framework for restructuring education" (Thomas, et al, 1998 p.4). The philosophy of inclusivism is also in line with the dictates of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Winter and O'Raw (2010 p.6) argue that the declaration of rights is "anchored on the imperative to value and treat everyone equally and according to need." This perspective marked a clear and yet necessary shift in the societalperception towards children with handicaps of different forms so that they may also be accorded social and human rights.

Furthermore, IE was initially viewed as primarily concerned with provision of education to those with disability, such as the blind, the deaf and dumb; the physically challenged as well as those with mental retardation (Peters, 2004). ConvenedInternational conferences in recent decades propelled the world towards adopting IE. After the Jomtien and Salamanca Conventions of 1990 and 1994 respectively, most proponents of IE assumed a paradigm shift (Fasokum, 2006). The Dakar Conference, Senegal, convened in 2000 had marked impetus towards the IE initiative in the whole world, Zimbabwe included.

IE has often been characterised by controversies about its definition and what constitute its practice in schools. Several authors and researchers have defined the concept of inclusion differently but the central theme is social justice and equity (Ashman, 2012). UNESCO (2009 p.8) sees inclusion as

a process of addressing and responding to the diversity in the needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education.

In addition, Loreman, Deppeler and Harvey (2010) define inclusion as all children being valued, accepted and respected regardless of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, socio-economic circumstances, abilities, gender, age, religion, beliefs and behaviours. Furthermore, UNESCO (2008 p.3) views inclusion as an ongoing process aimed at

…offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, thereby eliminating all forms of discrimination.

Thus, inclusion is therefore a human right issue aimed at removing barriers in society. To fully adopt the philosophy of inclusion, it is a dire and prerequisite for institutions to also adopt 'inclusivity' –the practice of infrastructural responsiveness to the diverse needs of different learners in line with access and navigation within the premises.

Policies and trends for IE

Policies and trends for IE are guided by two panels which are;

- Panel 1 – To achieve universal primary education by 2015 (Goals 2 and 3).
- Panel 2 – Education and gender equality (Cooper, 2012).

Focusing on universal education implies absence of segregation and discrimination practices and tendencies in educational practice. The goal specifies gender variables at the expense of other factors such as ethnicity, intelligence and social background. Thus, IE is the rightful definition of the desired practice by the goal. Promotion of Education for All (EFA) as a basic human right is central to the international community's concerted efforts to uplift the well-being of the child. Education is thus universalised for children to get maximum benefits from the system.

The rights of the child to education on the basis of equal opportunity are basic and with the view of achieving this right progressively.The international community agreed to adopt that by making primary education compulsory, available and free for all (Article 28 no 1, also Article 1 no 2). The Convention on the Rights of the Child had impetus for the international community to meet on the Dakar Conference in 2000 which affirmed the need for nations to commit themselves to achieve Education for All by 2015 (Fasokum, 2006). It is against this international convention that educational goals were promulgated among which the first was to 'Expand Early Childhood Care and Education.' Thus, educational attainment and access are critical for the socio-economic development of societies.

Every child, that is to say, boy and girl under the age of 18 years has the right to education(Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013, Section 75 (1a)). The act recognises Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Dworetsky, 1988) but this education section is voidof the equality, opportunity and ideal to the central expectations of the philosophy of inclusivism. This makes the country's policy on equality of educational opportunity for children with diverse needs vague.

In response to the Dakar Conference in 2000, Zimbabwe adopted compulsory Early Childhood Development (ECD) as a national policy but had challenges of exclusion of children with diverse needs (Fasokum, 2006). The recent paradigm shift towards IE has become a central concern within Zimbabwe's education at all levels from pre-primary to tertiary education. Insurmountable efforts in response to the policy to adopt the philosophy of inclusivism was realised at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. However, adoption of IE at ECD level is still a challenge. Yet, the horizon of accessing and delivering quality and sustainable ECE that can transform schools and communities seems elusive.

ECD centres in diverse geographic and socio-cultural contexts are side-lined from the benefits associated with IE. It is the object of this study to ascertain the state of preparedness for IE in Gweru district ECD centres.

The Education For All Monitoring Report (2005) emphasises that learning should be based on clearly understanding that learners are individuals with diverse characteristics and backgrounds; strategies to improve quality should therefore draw on learners' knowledge and strengths. The pursuit of 'Education for All', involves engaging with questions of social justice, equity and participatory democracy which all people must have been empowered to have in society (Barton, 2010). This idea is supported by the Salamanca Statement on Principles and Framework for Inclusion which states that,

> Inclusive orientations are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.(UNESCO, 1994 p. ix).

With the notion of equity and social justice, contemporary philosophy of inclusion has moved beyond the conception of disability and normality to embrace a 'whole school approach to education'.This demands equal attention to be given to children in all educational settings to enable them to deal with constraints that inhibit developmental and learning outcomes (Ashman, 2012).

In this research, inclusion is conceptualised as a process of supporting all children to be able to negotiate and manage their life courses through effective and total participation in education. IE, therefore, upholds the notions that, every child has a fundamental right to education no matter the level of education, even at ECD and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning.Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs; education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented

to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs among learners (UNESCO, 1994 p.viii).

The same position is reiterated by UNESCO at the Dakar Framework for Education for All (2000) that, IE has emerged in response to a growing consensus that all children have the right to a common education in their locality regardless of their background, attainment or disability. The Framework therefore challenges all exclusionary policies and practices in education as they relate to curriculum, culture and local centres of learning. The current research examines the state of preparedness for IE in Gweru district ECD centres.

The inclusive system focuses on all children while according attention to their diverse needs. According to Choate (1997) these children;

- may not speak the language of the classroom;
- are at risk of dropping out because they are sick, hungry, or
- not achieving well; or they belong to a different religion or caste.
- They also may be girls who are pregnant, children affected by HIV/ AIDS, and
- all girls and boys who should be in school but are not, especially those who work at home, in the fields, or elsewhere (migrants) and who have paying jobs to help their families survive.
- may have mild or moderate disabilities, such as mental, physical, visual or hearing impairment.

"Inclusive" means teachers have the responsibility to seek out all available support (from school authorities, the community, families, children, educational institutions, health services, community leaders, and so on) for finding and facilitating all children to learn(Choate, 1997). This is an obligation that most Zimbabwean educational institutions seem to be lacking especially at ECD level.For an all-inclusive ECD initiative to be realised, a positive environment is needed.
The characteristics of a positive environment are shown in the spider diagram(Figure 1) below:
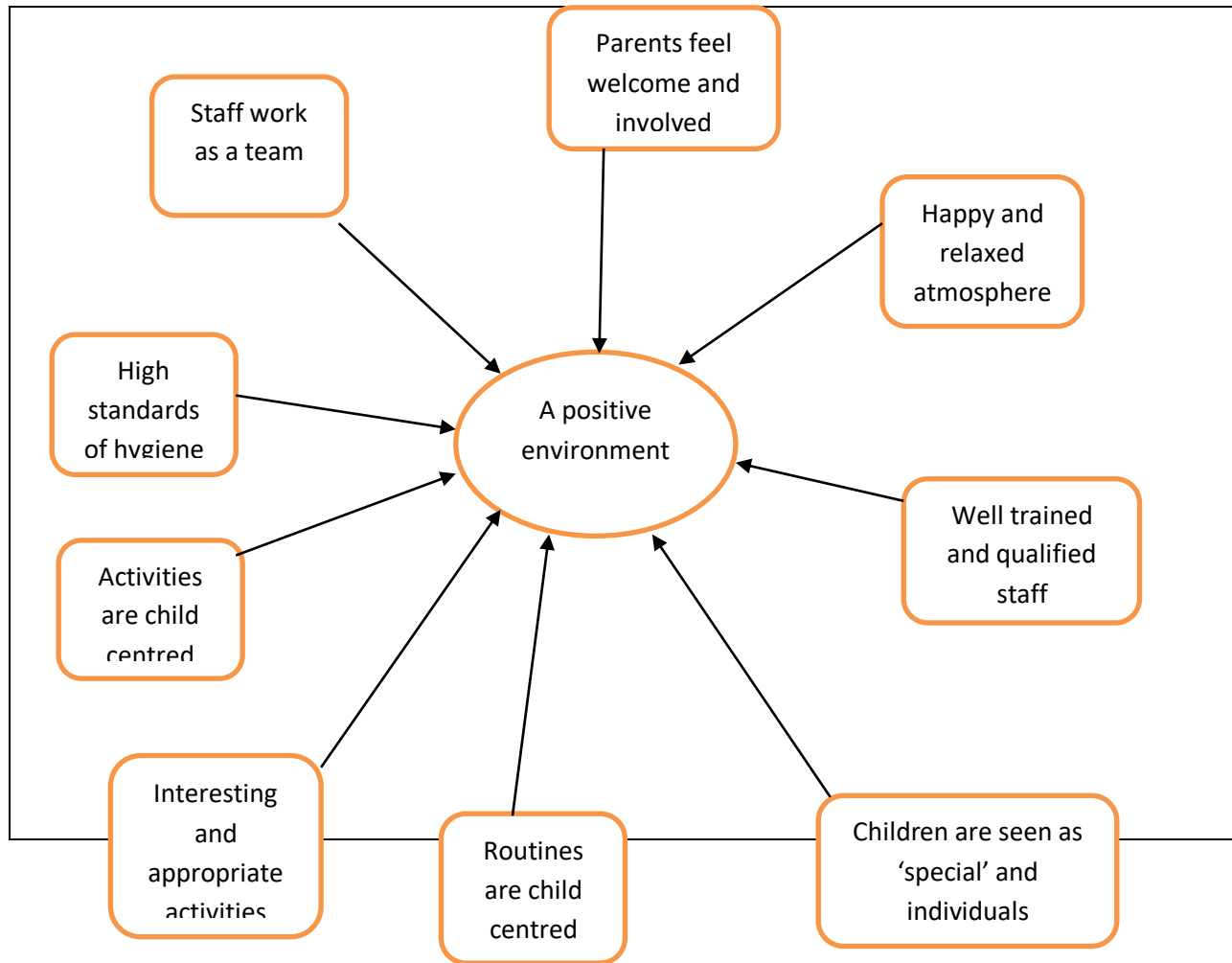
Figure 1: The characteristics of a positive environment (Tassoni&Beith, 2005 p.98)

An ideal ECD environment is inclusive as shown in Figure 1 above. An ECD environment should be as a safe, happy environment setting the base of learning. According to Ministry of Education ECD syllabus (2012) teachers are free to adapt activities to suit the age group, developmental level of the children and the context. Some practices an ECD teacher must embrace are that he/she should be loving, warm and knowledgeable to mention a few.

The nature of IE

According to VVOB Zimbabwe (2012) early identification and planning for diverse learning needs is the starting point for inclusion. This entails the ability of a teacher to identify learning

needs of each and every child in the ECD classroom; from grassroots, and be able to put up individualised strategies to help children learn and reach his/her full potential. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies; with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range. Further, conviction should be that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children without segregatory tendencies.

IE broadly pertains to children who are vulnerable as a result of being orphaned or as a result of poverty and war among others (Winter &O'Raw, 2010). IE according to this dimension, should address the needs of all children who carry certain disadvantages be they physical, psychological or emotional in nature. Advocates of total inclusivism advocate for a zero rejection philosophy where no child is turned away from the local school on the basis that he/she is handicapped regardless of the severity of the handicap. Justifications for this are three pronged namely, educational, social and economic, Choate (1997).

These children may be sitting at the back of the classroom and may soon leave altogether (in other words dropout). Teachers are responsible for creating a learning environment where ALL children can learn; ALL children want to learn, and ALL children feel included in ALL classrooms and schools. The conviction of researchers is to assess the state of preparedness for IE among ECD centres in Gweru district. The major challenge of Gweru district ECD centres is to make inclusion

> …embedded deeply in the very foundation of the institution, in its mission statement, its belief system, and its daily activities, rather than an appendage that is added to a conventional school (Lipsky& Gartner, 1997 p.390).

Institutions should lead in marrying theory and practice to ensure that all learners benefit despite their diverse needs. This research seeks to examine the state of preparedness for IE among the Gweru district ECD centres.

According to Winter and O'Raw (2010) there should, however, be enough support services in the form of specialised gadgets or the presence of an aide to ensure that within that inclusive environment, the handicapped child benefits. IE is driven by the philosophy that special gadgets for use by those with handicaps should find their way to the school where the children are and not the other way round. The idea is not for children with special needs to be isolated and be sent toso called special schools which in essence are segregation centresfor children with different forms of impairments.

IE unlike separate placement which works on the philosophy that the child with challenges must adjust to school environment, operates on the thinking that "it is the school that must make adjustments to accommodate or include the child" (Mushoriwa, 2001 in Chitiyo, 2004 p.14). Instead of focusing on preparing children to fit into existing schools, the IE emphasis focuses on preparing schools so that they can deliberately reach out to all children (UNESCO, 2000). Early Childhood IE is a process of giving children the opportunity to co-construct knowledge with

teachers (Agbenyega, 2011). According to Allen and Cowdery (2012 p.7) Early Childhood inclusion embodies

> …the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities and society.

This means that inclusive ECD is not only about enrolling children to attend preschool programmes, childcare or recreational programmes.It is about accepting and valuing human difference, including provision of the necessary support for all children and families to fully participate in the programmes of their choice, which ensure that all children's needs are met (Allen&Cowdery, 2012).

Therefore, the key aspect of early childhood inclusion is about values, beliefs and institutional practices that work best for each child void of all forms of discrimination whatsoever. In this sense, inclusive ECD is for all children with and without disabilities for they are part of the society.Therefore, they must receive equal attention, participate in meaningful, quality education and care within their communities (Tsao et al., 2008). It is about supporting typically developing children and children with additional needs to participate fully in a programmes or services that cater for all children regardless of colour, creed, race, and religion; socio-economic, mental or physical status. This means, inclusion focuses on the transformation of school cultures and pedagogy to increase access to all children, enhance acceptance of all learners, maximise children's participation in various activities, and increase achievement by and development of all children (Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2005). Against this scenario, there is need for Zimbabwean ECD centres to respond positively by way of adopting a paradigm shift to incorporate IE in all their practices.

According to Foreman (ed.) (2007) previous research has shown that disability severity, disability type, and teacher's previous experience determine the nature of teacher attitude towards IE. However, professional development was found to contribute to altering teachers' negative attitude and concern about inclusive practice (Loreman, Deppeler& Harvey, 2010). Silverman (2007) points out that beliefs, concerns and attitudes of teachers directly shape the manner in which they work with children.Attitudeshave great influence on classroom environment and children's outcomes.

Concerns for quality ECD for all children has focused attention on IE as a way of ensuring that marginalised children in Zimbabwe also receive equal attention in education. Early Childhood IE is based on a value and belief system that invites, celebrates and supports all children no matter their nature, nationality, class, gender, language, socio-economic background; cultural origin or ability, physical or cognitive status (Swart &Pettipher, 2005). Thus, the concept of IE in ECD is gaining support in Zimbabwe's education system. However, as inclusion is a relatively new concept, barriers exist which need to be identified and overcome to make Early Childhood IE practicable. Vorapanya (2008) argues that the key barrier to IE in ECD is the lack of knowledge and training among teachers and staff. This study, therefore, establishes the state of preparedness for IE in Gweru district ECD centres.

The status of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has developed since its incorporation under the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture (MoESAC) in 2005 (MoESAC, 2004). This was a major turning point and by 1990, the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) accepted ECD as an integral part of the formal education system. ECD was then declared a basic human right like all other forms of education. In view of this development, the following policy objectives were adopted in order to achieve the broad ECD goals which are to:

- make ECEC a community-based programme in order to enhance the social and cultural development of the child;
- mobilise communities to build and furnish ECEC centres with Government assistance;
- institute a registration system for and intensify the registration of ECEC centres;
- mobilise the communities to provide clean water and sanitation facilities to the centres;
- ensure that ECD centres are provided with adequate water and sanitation facilities;
- provide adequate and affordable ECD to all children in the 0 to 6 year age group;
- ensure that ECEC centres provide quality services by providing qualified teachers, supporting the provision of classrooms, teaching and learning materials;
- make the mother tongue the language of instruction at ECD level. The mother tongue shall continue to be the language of instruction in the first three years of formal education (Education (Amendment) Act 2006; MoESAC, 2004; MoESAC, 2005; MoESAC, 2007).

The above objectives thrived to ensure that all children have access to ECD centres. Quality also plays a crucial role in the IE initiative so as to achieve optimum development among the ECD learners. Thus, the objective of this study was to assess the state of preparedness for IE in Gweru district ECD centres.

Most children with diverse needs are still not receiving suitable educational services. Many children with disabilities who are included in the schools are "excluded within the classroom" (UNICEF, 2003 p.50). Some schools and ECD centres do not accept children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2003). Besides, whether or not children with disabilities are accepted and fully included in schools depends very much upon the understanding, beliefs and attitudes of the teachers (Carter, 2006). Coupled with this, it is the lack of qualified teachers in the field related to Early Childhood IE that is a major cause of concern. In terms of educational quality for young children, pedagogy remains punitive and teacher directed (Klibthong, 2011). Zimbabwe has since adopted the IE initiative at all the levels of education and ECD is no exception.

Implementation of inclusive pilot programs shifted emphasis from special segregated schools to IE (National Education Act, 1987, revised 2006). These developments have led to Zimbabwean ECD children having more opportunities to access educational services and to engage in ECE despite their diverse needs. However, some institutions have adopted the IE initiative as far as enrolments are concerned but are practically excluding some of the learners with diverse needs

within the classroom. Basing upon this backdrop, the study establishes the state of preparedness among ECD centres to adopt IE in Zimbabwe in general and Gweru district ECD centres in particular.

The national policy on education compels all schools and educational institutions to uphold IE and inclusivity to cater for the various learners' diverse needs. However, it seems some schools do not have infrastructure suitable to cater for learners with various educational needs. The trend of low uptake of IE among certain ECD centres is thus an issue of concern. There is, therefore, need to establish the extent to which ECD centres are prepared to cater for learners with diverse needs. Some deep understanding of factors that influence the ECD centres' low response to national policy on IE can assist in developing suitable intervention strategies. The study was guided by the following research question;

- To what extent has Gweru district ECD centres adopted the IE initiative?

The following sub-problems help address the research question;

- Do ECD centres have infrastructure that caters for diverse needs of learners?
- Are ECD teachers qualified to handle learners from diverse backgrounds?
- Do ECD centres make efforts of capacity building to enable the success of the IE initiative?

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by the Head start model of ECD practices. The Head Start framework was introduced in American schools in 1975. Zimbabwe has adopted the same style through the feeding scheme for ECD classes but has since been upgraded to junior classes as well. Vinovkis (2005) describes Head Start as a federal programme for preschool children three to five years of age in low income families. Its aim is to prepare children for success in schools through an early learning program. The United States Department of Health and Human Services (2010) states that the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework provides Head Start and other early childhood programmes with a description of the developmental building blocks that are most important for a child's school and long term success.

The Head Start is anchored in cooperation of various ECD stakeholders so that no learner can be left behind (Bruce, Meggit&Greineir, 2010). The Head Start approach is based on the idea that children do best in life when they grow up with active, positive involvement parents (Roopnarine& Johnson, 2000). This is because when caregivers and parents work together well, everyone benefits.This means, caregivers, parents, the administration and most importantly the child. Parents and caregivers can provide each other with unique insights and different perspectives about the same child resulting in a complete understanding of that child, her abilities, strengths and challenges (Cadwell, 2002). Parents will know much more about the child's personality, tendencies and family life.

Caregivers will get to know much more about the curriculum and school culture. Exchange of such information allows the teacher to devise best ways to treat each child as a unique individual and help them develop holistically whilst the parent is enlightened on how to prepare an environment conducive for their children to fully thrive and develop to the best they can become. There is need for parents to understand that if ECD is not done properly, educational outcomes in upper grades will also be affected negatively because ECD is the foundation.

The Head Start Approach aims to involve parents in educational activities to enhance their role as principals to influence their children's education and development (Wiles & Bondi, 2008). It also aims at ensuring parent participation in developing education services, classroom and home-based program activities. Parents are involved in the development of the curriculum; health, education and nutritional services of the programme (Zigler&Styfco, 2010).
All participating parents are encouraged to provide access to community services and resources in crisis such as assistance like food preparation (Stacie, 2004, MOESAC, 2007). Parents can also intervene in toy making and construction of play centres since the ECD curriculum is mainly through play. The Head Start aligns with and builds from the five essential domains of school readiness identified by the National Educational Goals Panel and lays out essential areas of learning and development (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2010).

The five essential domains comprise of language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional development, approaches to learning; as well as physical development, and health. Barnett (2005) stresses that the Head Start aims to provide the resources necessary to strengthen access to quality ECD programmes for learners who come from low income families, and a growing pre-kindergarten movement.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative descriptive survey design to establish the state of preparedness and challenges faced in the attainment of 'The Future We Want' as an education transitional dream for the nation. Best (2004) posits that the descriptive research describes and interprets "what is?" It is concerned with circumstances or relationships that exist; practices that prevail; beliefs, points of assessment or attitudes that are held; procedures that are going on, effects that are being felt, or trends that are developing.

Schools were conveniently selected. They include both private and public or school based ECD centres. All rural ECD centres used were within the established primary schools. Ten (10) ECD teachers and five (5) ECD administrators in Gweru district were purposively sampled for this study. Observations, surveys and semi- structured interviews were adopted to collect data from ECD teachers and administrators. Use of different methods assisted researchers to obtain valid, credible and trustworthy data (Bhebhe, 2014, Magwa&Magwa, 2015). Observations were made on the infrastructure and indications of inclusivity at each of the sampled institutions. The interviews were administered to selected school heads in each of the ECD centres. Surveys were administered to ECD teachers. Data were analysed in themes.

Research findings and discussions

Discussion on the findings from interviews, observations and document analysis is covered under the following themes: infrastructure, teachers` qualification, capacity building.

Infrastructure

Observations conducted revealed that all schools under study were constructed with the non-impaired child in mind. Structures therein do not accommodate physically impaired learners who use wheelchairs and other assistive devices to navigate the environment. Administration offices in some of the learning centres in both rural and urban schools had stairs leading to the entrance. The ablution facilities (toilets) in all the rural ECD centres were ordinary squat holes that are not be usable by some of the physically impaired learners. There were pit latrines under construction at one of the institutions but these had numerous stairs as they were raised making navigation suitable for children who can walk properly. However, all the urban ECD centres used child-sized water-system toilets that have seats that can be hygienically used by learners of diverse conditions.

Observations were corroborated by the school heads in the interviews. School Head 1 said,

> *The school was built in in1982 and the issue of inclusive education was not topical then. Our infrastructure may no accommodate learners on with wheelchairs or other movement challenges.*

School Head 3 added,

> *Though we are preparing to put some rumps on entrances, our infrastructure is not yet inclusive education compliant.*

School Head 4 also said,

> *For now, our infrastructure needs some revamping so as to accommodate learners with diverse needs. Of course we have started with some toilets to have child sized seats, then move to classroom entrances.*

From the findings, it may be deduced that the ECD centres do not have requisite infrastructure for IE because schools were built long before the IE initiative. It may also suggest that very little is done to improve the existing structures from time to time. However, the responses from the school heads show that they are now embracing the IE initiative though at a slow pace. The slow pace in upgrading the infrastructure to be IE suggests that there are no strong synergies between schools and other stakeholders such as parents, other government departments and non-governmental organisations as advocated for by the Head start approach. The schools need to engage more stakeholders such as parents and non- governmental organisations for both financial and other support. This paradigm shift resonates with Winter and O'Raw (2010) who suggest that there should be enough support services in the form of specialised infrastructure, gadgets or the presence of an aide to ensure that within that inclusive environment, the handicapped child benefits. Thus, the prevailing circumstance need more support measures.

Teachers' dispositions

All the ten ECD teachers in schools had received special needs education in their training. Qualified teachers had received some training at either Diploma or Degree level. Paraprofessional ECD teachers had also gone through capacity building training sponsored by UNICEF. In the survey, Teacher 1 wrote,

I learnt about inclusive education during my training at Teachers` College.

Teacher 3 also wrote,

I did Special needs education as a module at the University and I have an appreciation of inclusive education.

Teacher 7 added,

I learnt about inclusive education during our paraprofessional training sponsored by UNICEF.

Teacher 8 wrote,
I did not receive any form of training. Even UNICEF was targeting those in public schools leaving those in private preschools behind. Thus, we know little about Inclusive education.

From the responses, most ECD teachers had some basic training in teaching at ECD level and had an appreciation of IE. This resonates with Tassoni and Beith(2005) who suggest that a safe and inclusive ECD environment is one with well qualified staff for they will be able to handle learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, ECD teachers in the private urban centres did not understand what IE entails. No workshops were not been done as far as IE is concerned be they school-based or ministry-based. The survey responses seem to suggest that private ECD centres did not benefit from the government capacity building programme.

Capacity building initiatives on IE

The study revealed that ECD centres had capacity building initiatives on IE that included nutrition gardens and toy production. Data from the interviews revealed that the school heads did not receive IE awareness and the ECD centres did not have opportunities for workshops and courses for their staff. School Head 1 said;

Though I am a qualified teacher, I am not capacitated to handle learners with profound disabilities.

School Head 2 added;

I trained before this inclusive issue becomes topical in education. I think we need awareness workshops for capacity building on handling learners with special needs.

From the above responses, school Heads are not capacitated to handle learners with special learning needs. The administrators in the ECD centres indicated that they understood the IE framework and the national policy expectations although they did not have learners with special learning needs coming to their centres. They indicated that their enrolments were not segregatory and catered for learners from diverse backgrounds although they expected them to be full fee paying.

In an effort to cater for children from poor backgrounds, schools have embarked on initiatives to cushion learners from hunger and malnutrition. Enrolment was biased towards high socio-economic status families for all the ECD centres in the low density suburbs while those in the high density suburbs enrolled children from diverse backgrounds. All the Gweru urban ECD centres had nutrition plans in place to avail meals to all the learners. However, both urban and rural schools had nutrition gardens to complement government efforts to provide at least a hot meal to learners. In the interview school head 4 said,

We have a nutrition garden; we have vegetables to provide at least a meal for our ECD learners.

Teacher 2 corroborated the view in the survey. She wrote,

We have a nutrition garden and prepare meals for our learners and this reduces on drop outs.

Teacher 5 wrote

We supply relish for our learners through the nutrition garden as the government provide the starch. This has minimised on absenteeism.

Another capacity building initiative that emerged is the engagement of communities in toy production. Rural schools had school projects particularly for ECD that included toy production. Teacher 7 wrote,

We engage parents in toy production and play centre equipment construction. This assists all learners to have enough play materials and no one is left behind.

Teacher 10 also wrote

Community participation in toy production has helped to have adequate play materials and every child gets fully engaged in the learning process.

The play centres in all the institutions were child friendly and could accommodate all the learners' diverse needs. The involvement of parents in the school projects resonates with TassoniandBeith (2005) who advance that one of the key principles of an inclusive and safe ECD environment is the one that welcomes and involves parents. This involvement of parents assists

in forming strong synergies between the home and the ECD centre. This cooperation by parents goes along with the Head start principle that underscores their importance in both curriculum implementation and other support services (Bruce et. al., 2010). The Nziramasanga Commission (1999) asserts that, there is recognition of the importance of inclusive education and many people are engaged in an effort to promote it in Early Childhood Development. However, there is no universal access yet to programmes for children below the age of six years.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study established that ECD centres are not well prepared for the IE initiative. ECD teachers, though most of them are qualified, are not comfortable to handle learners with various special needs. Teachers from urban private ECD centres are paraprofessionals who are not well grounded in teaching. In addition, these paraprofessional teachers were left out in the capacity building training sponsored by UNICEF as it targeted those operating in public schools. However, the teachers seemed to appreciate the importance for IE in ECD.

ECD centres are still behind as far as inclusivity in terms of infrastructural development is concerned. Most school buildings were constructed before the IE philosophy became topical in the education system. Though schools are making efforts to renovate structures to accommodate learners of diverse needs, the pace at which this is done seems to be slow. This slow pace in renovations may be attributed to lack of funding for them to be fully responsive to the IE framework.

The study also concluded that there is lack of capacity building among school Heads. School Heads trained long before the education system had a paradigm shift towards IE. However, schools have capacity building projects such as nutritional gardens and toy production that enhance inclusive education. These initiatives assist in reducing drop outs and providing adequate play materials, hence, no learner is left behind.

Recommendations

Researchers made the following recommendations;

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education must steer workshops and training sessions for ECD teachers and administrators on IE expectations and standards.
- The government should avail safety net programmes for funding ECD education for vulnerable learners with diverse learning needs; preferably, BEAM funds that cater for primary and secondary education must be extended to incorporate vulnerable children in ECD also.
- Schools and ECD centres must be empowered to hold consistent and persistent awareness campaigns to all the stakeholders within their catchment areas on children's rights and the IE initiative within their operations and obligations as ECD centres.

- ECD centres should uphold the IE initiative by making refurbishments to existing structures to accommodate learners with diverse needs especially the physically impaired and this has to be part of the assessment standards before an ECD centre's registration may be approved.
- Policy makers should institute monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that supervise and assess IE implementation strategies and recommend possible improvements with particular focus on ECD. Currently, such a mechanism is not existent or may not be visibly functional.

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