

Perceptions of Teacher Trainees Towards their Teacher Education Curriculum in the Context of Inclusion

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The inclusion movement currently dominating educational reforms in many countries means that classrooms at all levels are populated by students of diverse abilities, motivation levels, attitudes, socio-economic backgrounds and school preparedness levels. However, chances are that the change in the academic profiles of students has not been matched by a paradigm shift in teacher education so as to prepare teachers to meet the challenges of inclusive education. Yet, if students populating our schools today are to benefit from time spent in schools, the need for appropriate teaching strategies cannot be overemphasised. This precipitated the need to establish teacher trainee's perceptions towards inclusion. By identifying the perceptions of teacher trainees towards inclusion, the areas of inclusion that need further attention may be identified. This study focused on identifying views that teacher trainees held towards their teacher education curriculum in the context of inclusion. The study adopted a qualitative case study design. Teacher trainees who were on teaching practice formed the study population. The sample consisted of 20 primary teacher trainees who were purposively sampled. Data were collected through interviews. Teacher trainees were of the view that colleges of education were not adequately preparing teachers for inclusive teaching as teachers were experiencing problems during teaching. It was recommended that inclusion should form the core of the teacher education curricula. Serving teachers should be equipped with inclusive teaching strategies through workshops and in-service training.

Keywords: Context of inclusion, teacher trainees, teacher education curriculum, teaching practice, and teacher competences.

INTRODUCTION

Persistent calls for restructuring the world's education systems resonate throughout the world [1]. Among the most prevalent theories is the need to examine current practices relevant to teaching, learning and organising students for instructional purposes. Exclusion (which is characterised by the education of children with special needs apart), has been affirmed as discriminatory and detrimental to the learning and development of all children [2,3] Educational leaders have increasingly sought to be more responsive to these outcomes by shifting their programmes to a more inclusive approach.

The movement of schools towards inclusion calls for a similar shift in teacher training programmes. There is therefore a compelling need to establish the teacher trainees' perceptions towards their teacher education curriculum, in view of inclusive classes they will teach

upon graduation. By identifying the perceptions of teacher trainees (those who have been on teaching practice) towards inclusion, the areas of inclusion that need further training (pre- and in-service) may be identified. The purpose of this study was to explore the views of teacher trainees towards their teacher education curriculum in the context of inclusion. The study attempted to shed more light on the following four issues pertaining to teachers' training and inclusion: First, the teacher trainees' understanding of the term inclusion. Second, the extent to which the teacher education curriculum prepared teacher trainees for the effective teaching of inclusive classes. Third, the inclusion-related challenges experienced by teacher trainees during their teaching practice and fourth, the improvements that should be made on the teacher education curriculum in

view of inclusion.

Teacher competences needed for effective teaching of inclusive classes

Understanding students

Tomlinson [4] suggests that the effective teaching of inclusive classes requires a paradigm shift in teachers. She argues that when teachers engage in inclusive teaching, they move away from viewing themselves as custodians and dispensers of knowledge and move towards perceiving themselves as organisers of learning opportunities. While the importance of content knowledge cannot be over emphasised, inclusive teachers focus less on knowing all answers, but focus more on understanding their students. After understanding their students fully, they then create ways to learn that both capture students' attention and lead to understanding. Organising students for effective activity and exploration becomes the highest priority. Commenting on this competence, Brown et al [5] point out that:

"In order to guide learning effectively the teacher should know how much the students are capable of grasping at their various levels of maturity, and their interests and previous experiences, so that he will be in a position to motivate them".

Teachers need to learn how to learn about their students. They need to learn to use the available data from test scores and analytic records kept on each student, and use this information to inform their teaching. Basing on the researchers' teaching experiences, more often than not, teachers build lessons and activities without regard for the students themselves. It is during such instances that teachers need help from their instructional supervisors regarding how to use students' differences as organisers in selecting teaching strategies. Lack of support diminishes the teachers' ability to learn deeply [6].

Mentoring ability

Teachers who teach inclusive classes effectively focus on their roles as mentors, and give students as much responsibility for their learning as they can handle. Tomlinson [4] opines that such teachers grow in their ability to:

- Assess students' readiness through a variety of means.
- Read and interpret students' cues about learning needs and preferences.
- Create a variety of ways through which students can gather information and ideas.
- Develop varied ways in which students can explore and own ideas.
- Present varied channels through which students can express and expand understanding.

In inclusive teaching, covering information takes a back seat to making meaning out of important ideas. In other words, teachers possessing mentoring abilities do not worry much about syllabi coverage, they teach for understanding.

Flexibility

Arguelles et al. [7] suggest two other important competences namely flexibility and being prepared to take risks. They point out that teachers in inclusive classes must have the philosophy of making the classroom big enough for everyone. Both teachers and school administrators must be flexible if inclusive teaching is to be effective. School administrators have to be open to new ways of doing routine tasks, such as timetabling and allocation of personnel. Teachers in turn need to be flexible with their instructional styles and classroom management, that is, knowing when to employ whole-class approach, within-class grouping, individualising instruction and peer work. All these approaches have their places in inclusive teaching if properly used.

Making significant changes in the way services are delivered to students requires school administrators and teachers who are willing to take chances. Inclusive teaching often leads to teachers challenging themselves to improve their teaching and actively work to include all students. In addition, teachers need administrative support and ideas. Inclusive teaching requires direction from school administrators who must be willing to listen and learn, and to help overcome obstacles such as timetabling and personnel allocation. This premise is consistent with Arguelles et al.'s [7] argument that:

"Many teachers will be entering uncharted territory and may be apprehensive about their changing responsibilities. Administrators can help them by creating an atmosphere where mistakes and changes are accepted as normal part of the process".

Developing skills that are beyond subject area content

Teachers need to develop skills and knowledge beyond those that are subject related [6,8]. Teachers will require computer skills to be able to develop individualised instructional materials. They will also require sharp diagnostic skills and a social background in learning support and human development potential. Teachers will also need skills to adapt instruction to suit learners with different disabilities, e.g., skills in sign language and reading and writing Braille. Teachers will need to learn how to break through the stereotypes and patterned thinking that haunts many, if not most, even subconsciously. This is a two-fold challenge, inasmuch as most teachers will first need to overcome their own stereotypical presumptions before helping students to move beyond theirs [8].

Ability to select appropriate teaching strategies

Teaching is a complex matter that requires a high degree of decision-making skills and judgment on the part of the teacher [9]. For teaching to be effective, the teacher must be well informed regarding the various strategies and the conditions under which they can be used most effectively. Arends [10] states that the term *teaching strategy* is known by several other terms in literature such as teaching model, teaching method, or teaching principle. The term refers to a particular approach to instruction that includes its goals, syntax, environment and management system. Similarly, Brown et al. [5] simply define a *teaching strategy* as the manner in which the content is presented to the students. Related to this view, is the definition by Mutasa and Wills [11], who conceive a *teaching strategy* as a way that is designed to assist a learner to learn.

Inherent in the above definitions of a teaching strategy is the existence of a body of knowledge on one side, and the students on the other side, with the teacher being the catalyst. This relationship is aptly captured by Uljens [12], who notes that in teaching there is always somebody (*who?*) that teaches somebody else (*who?*) some subject matter (*what?*) in some way (*how?*) some time (*when?*) somewhere (*where?*) for some reason (*why?*) towards some goal (*which?*). From the facts presented, it could be concluded that the mechanism through which the body of knowledge is availed to the students constitutes *teaching strategies*. Basing on Uljens's conceptualisation of teaching, this section concerns itself with the '*in some way (how?)*' aspect. Commenting on teaching and choice of teaching strategies, ADPRIMA [13] notes that:

"Any instructional method a teacher uses has advantages, disadvantages, and requires some preliminary preparation. Often times, a particular method will naturally flow into another, all within the same lesson, and excellent teachers have the skills to make the process seamless. . . . There is no one right method for teaching a particular lesson, but there are some criteria to each that can help a teacher make the best decision possible".

Reece and Walker [14] point out that the teacher's choice of teaching strategies is often related to his or her individual style. In addition, the choice hinges on a number of factors *inter alia*: students' individual abilities and motivation differences [15]; students' learning styles [16,17] and lesson objectives to be achieved [14].

Ability to differentiate content

Tomlinson [4] and Hess [18] suggest that the solution to learner diversity is differentiation. They both define differentiation as a means of providing students with different avenues to acquire content, process or make

sense of ideas and to develop products. In the same vein, Stradling and Saunders [19] view differentiation as a pedagogical rather than an organisational strategy; as a process of matching learning targets, tasks, activities, resources and learning support to individual learners' needs, styles and rates of learning. From the above definitions of differentiation it is evident that the matching of learning content, pacing, methodology and assessment of learning outcomes to students' individual needs are central to differentiation. Tomlinson [4] justifies the need for differentiation by stating that:

We know huge amounts about how individuals learn. Most of us have memories of being in places where we thought we were going to scream if someone repeated one more time something we'd understood seemingly forever - and places where we were about to explode with frustration because we simply could not grasp the ideas at the pace they were presented. We also all know what a difference it makes if we can work alone when we need space to think through by ourselves, or work in a group when we need sounding boards.

Differentiation is a blend of whole-class, group and individual instruction [4]. There are times when it is more effective or efficient to share information or use the same activity with the whole class. Such whole-class instruction establishes common understandings and a sense of community for students by sharing and reviewing. Similarly, there are times when individualised instruction is appropriate. An effective teacher is one who is able to balance the mix.

Apart from raising the subject content of teacher trainees, a suitable teacher education curriculum must address the above issues. Weinstein [20] believes that the focus must be on changing limiting beliefs about differential ability to learn and self-defeating teaching strategies that are a result of such beliefs. These beliefs have culminated into inappropriate adjustments of teaching methods for certain groups of learners, thereby creating enormous inequalities. According to Weinstein [20] confronting entrenched beliefs, implementing effective teaching methods and engaging in a change process are important to ensuring the fulfilment of the declared prophecy of high attainment for all students. These observations stem from the realisation that teacher expectations have a profound effect on student achievement. Glanz [21] corroborates the effect of teacher expectation on student achievement by arguing that:

"Expecting students to pass is one such important disposition. Teachers who communicate high and affirming expectations to their students help them become self-confident, successful learners. Conversely; communicating negative expectations often produces disinterested students. The literature is unequivocal; teachers'

expectations of students' performance is a major determinant for academic success and social adjustment to school/classroom life. . . . What we expect, all too often, is exactly what we get. Nowhere is this more true than in education, where teachers' expectations are crucial".

Glanz's argument shows that teaching and learning are reciprocal processes. If a student knows that the teacher expects him/her to do well, he/she will strive to do well so as not to disappoint the teacher. Similarly, where the teacher shows no concern and has low expectations of the students, students tend not to do well [22]. Weinstein [20] opines that beliefs without actions, is half the expectancy equation. Higher expectations should be accompanied by attention to effective teaching methods. In other words, positive expectations of teachers must be communicated and acted upon if they are to have a positive impact on students' academic achievement. Basing on the above, it can be argued that teacher competences discussed above will play a pivotal role in assisting teachers to make decisions regarding the teaching strategies to employ in their classes as well as making effective use of the teaching strategies. All other things being, upon graduation teachers should have acquired the skills and competences discussed above.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study made use of qualitative methodology, adopting a case study research design. This method was considered apropos since it made it possible for researchers to conduct in-depth interviews and obtain the participants' emic perspectives, instead of reducing participants' views to figures. The study sample consisted of 20 primary school teacher trainees who were on teaching practice in the Harare Metropolitan Government primary schools during term three of 2011. The gender composition of the sample was five male and five female teacher trainees. The teacher trainees were purposively sampled with the help of the Lecturer who was in charge of Teaching Practice, in the teacher trainees' teacher education college. In order to enhance the validity of the findings, sources of data were triangulated. This was achieved by conducting in-depth interviews with teacher trainees and document analysis of teacher trainees' lesson critiques. The researchers also examined the teacher education curriculum to establish the extent to which inclusion was covered.

After being furnished with the names of teacher trainees and the schools in which they were teaching, the researchers appointed to interview them at the teacher trainees' work places. The researchers recorded the interview outcomes verbatim using a dictaphone, The researchers transcribed and partially analysed (field analysis) each interview data before moving on to the next interview. This was to ensure that issues arising

from the data and issues overlooked in the preceding interview could be incorporated in the succeeding interviews. The average duration of the interviews was forty five minutes each. Field-notes were kept during fieldwork. Such notes included observations and relationships observed between theory and contributions from teacher trainees. After all the ten teacher trainees were interviewed, the transcribed data were taken back to each teacher trainee who was interviewed for verification before the major analysis. Once verification was done, data were analysed using the thematic content analysis technique. This entailed segmenting, coding, enumeration, and putting the coded data into sub-themes.

Segmenting

Segmenting involved dividing the data into meaningful analytic units. This was done by carefully reading the transcribed data one line at a time, taking cognisance of the following questions:

- Is there a segment of the text which is important for this study?
- Does it differ in any way from the text which precedes or succeeds it?
- Where does the segment begin and end? Such segments (words, sentences or several sentences were bracketed as a way of indicating their starting and ending points.

Coding

According to Johnson and Christensen [23] codes are labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Key words are attached to chunks of varying sizes – words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs these are referred to as "units of meaning". Coding is the process of marking these units of meaning with symbols, descriptive words or category names. All the category names developed, together with their symbolic codes were placed on a master list. The codes on the master list were reapplied to new sections of text each time appropriate sections were discovered. New categories and new codes were added to the master list as the need arose.

Enumeration

The frequency with which observations were made was noted in order to help researchers identify and take note of important ideas and prominent themes, occurring in the research group as a whole, or between different individuals.

Identification of sub-themes

- Teacher trainees' understanding of the term inclusion;

- Teacher trainees' views on the suitability of the teacher education curriculum;
- Challenges related to inclusion that were experienced by teacher trainees during teaching practice; and
- Teacher trainees' suggestions on what improvements to made on the teacher education curriculum.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The teacher trainees' understanding of the term inclusion

About a quarter of the respondents could not initially clearly define the term inclusion. These respondents were in a position to respond to more questions on inclusion when the researchers had explained to them the meaning of inclusion. Possible explanations could be that their college lecturers used different terms, for example mainstreaming, mixed-ability grouping or integration or that the teacher trainees did not just know the meaning of the term. Whatever the explanation, the researchers felt that not knowing the meaning of the term did not bode well for effective inclusive teaching, because understanding the term subsumes the adaptations teachers must put in place for effective teaching and learning. The knowledge gap on inclusion displayed by teacher trainees reflected that the concept was not central in the teacher trainees' curriculum.

In the teacher trainees' views, is the current teacher education curriculum adequately preparing them for teaching inclusive classes effectively?

Most teacher trainees reiterated that the current teacher education curriculum was not adequately preparing them for teaching inclusive classes effectively. In their views and basing on their teaching practice experiences, most shortcomings of the curriculum revolve around methodological issues. Some of the teacher trainees' sentiments are captured below:

One teacher trainee pointed out that: "I wouldn't say the training we are receiving at college is considered as adequate, it is just to serve as a basis". Others remarked that: "the training is more of theory than practical..."; "...it is more like a learner driver being taught how to drive at the driving school, the actual driving takes place on the road..."; "...inclusion is only discussed in professional foundation courses..."; "...there is a problem when it goes to teaching practice, when you are faced with pupils, it is difficult to apply the professional studies knowledge to the preparation of work in the special subject areas "; "I was not taught how to teach inclusive classes".

The teacher trainees' comments reflect that there was a serious problem related to teaching methodology. It

would appear that the teacher trainees graduated from teachers' colleges without grasping the teaching competences suggested by Tomlinson; Wasley and Arguelles et al., Marcus and Johnson [4,6,7,8]. It would also seem as if the inclusion of Inclusion as a topic in teacher education curriculum is for the purposes of sensitising teacher trainees of the presence of pupils with special education needs in schools, without necessarily equipping prospective teachers with skills, competences and attitudes to effectively teach such class. One will be justified to conclude that the special education needs of students occupying both ends of the academic continuum are not catered for. It is not hard to discern the effect of such a scenario on the academic performance of the affected students.

What challenges related to inclusion did teacher trainees experience during teaching practice?

The frequently mentioned challenges were categorised under the following sub-themes:

Preparation of lessons and resource availability

Teacher trainees conceded that preparing lessons for diverse students was not ease. Some of their comments were: "Preparation for inclusive classes is difficult," commented one of the teacher trainees. A good number of teacher trainees expressed the following sentiments: "... catering for these different abilities, it takes a lot of time"; "...it is very difficult to meet each individual's demands because of time, e-e, and sometimes it is because of too much content...". They reiterated that this situation was exacerbated by the non-availability of resources to make teaching aids in the schools.

Lesson delivery

Several teacher trainees affirmed that they came across classes that had students of different abilities, which made it difficult for them to decide where to direct the lesson. Their dilemma was that if they focused on academically gifted students the slow learners and some of the average could be left behind. On the other hand, focussing on the slow learners meant that the gifted would not be challenged or stretched to limits of their academic potential. If they chose to focus on the average student, it also meant that the students occupying both extreme ends of the ability continuum would be left out. Some of the comments raised were: "...if somebody was a highflier, was about to go even higher, just because you are going to reduce the content...they can also reduce"; "...it's like the slow learners at the end they fail to cope with some teachers' ways of teaching, and at the end, they become a problem and affect the whole class behaviour wise"; "...higher achievers will become bored..."; "...sometimes the gap is too wide and you don't

know how to tackle some issues...". Failure to cater for the different students during the lesson was linked to disciplinary problems, by most of the teacher trainees.

Language of instruction

Almost all the teacher trainees unanimously echoed the sentiment that students had problems with the language of instruction (English). Some of the remarks were that: "...you may find that students are not able to satisfy what the question requires them to do simply because of the language they use in the text is English..."; "...and just communicating is a real problem and this is a national problem...".

Assessment of students' progress

The general sentiment from the teacher trainees was that it was not easy to set assignments, tests and examinations suitable for the whole ability range, including those students having varied special educational needs. Teacher trainees passed comments such as: "... if the test is too simple, it may deceive the gifted, into thinking that they know a lot"; "... other students may fail to complete assignments and tests on time due to their disabilities, yet there is no time allowed for such. . ."; "... too challenging a test may frustrate the academically challenged, so we do not know what to do".

Class size

Most teacher trainees concurred that the average class size in public primary schools in urban areas was 45 pupils. They argued that such a number was too high and militated against effective teaching. Some of the frequently raised comments were: "It becomes difficult to cater for each student"; "... marking of tests and other written work becomes cumbersome"; "... won't be able to offer feedback on time"; "... you may end up not knowing the names of students in your class and their individual needs".

Apart from resource availability, most of the challenges cited by teacher trainees revolved around teachers' lack of competences and skills. While teaching inclusive classes is not a stroll in the park, a competent teacher will know and have skills to plan for such classes. He or she will be in a position to employ different teaching methods [13,15,17], differentiate instruction [4,18,19] – which includes giving extension work to the gifted, scaffolding and remediating the academically challenged. Student diversity (the hallmark of inclusive classes), provides a skilled teacher with an opportunity to make teaching effective [24]. The teacher can employ cooperative teaching strategies such as small-group instruction, group work and peer teaching [25]. These are competences which teachers' training colleges should focus on so that their graduates will not be found wanting

when faced with inclusive classes. The challenges that were mentioned by teacher trainees were a testament of the unsuitability of the teacher education curriculum that the teacher trainees were exposed to.

What improvements should be made in the teacher education curriculum to prepare teacher trainees for the effective teaching of inclusive classes?

Most teacher trainees pointed out that inclusive teaching was very difficult, and that they were deficient in certain teaching and organisational skills that are needed for effective inclusive teaching. The following are some of the teacher trainees' comments regarding organisational and instructional competences that they felt should be included in a teacher education curriculum: "When teaching an inclusive class, you need skills such as how to actually break the content in one topic. . . in such a way that you cater for all the students"; "...need skills to assess the low achievers, the middle achievers and the highfliers..."; "...if I could have motivational skills, I would be a far much better teacher than I am today..."; "...to be honest with you, this thing remedial work, I know what it means in my mind, but planning for it I can't"; "I am also not very good at organising and managing group work"; "In the event that we teach classes having pupils with physical disabilities, we will need skills to adapt instruction, skills in sign language and reading and writing in Braille, depending with the nature of disabilities we will come across". "... skills in introducing the first lesson where an explanation is given to pupils on why they have to be taught again after school or separate from others, without labelling them or showing segregation. . ."; "... the need for appropriate language to be used with such pupils. . ."; "... skills to counsel parents in terms of the required understanding so that they provide proper support system for their children". In addition teachers also pointed out that they need questioning skills and skills in setting test items.

The suggested needs by teacher trainees clearly show that teachers had limited teaching and organisational skills. The researchers also observed that the teacher education curriculum had limited coverage of inclusion, yet this should form the core of the curriculum. The Professional Foundations Curriculum focused much on Sociology, Philosophy and Psychology of Education. The subject area curriculum focused on content, instead of focussing on methodology, i.e. how teacher trainees can differentiate the work for inclusive classes. This may be partly responsible for the teacher trainees' failure to teach inclusive classes effectively. Furthermore, while inclusion has got genuine problems, some of the problems that were mentioned by teacher trainees could be attributed to the teacher trainees' lack of organisational and teaching skills. For example, failure to cater for the students' individual needs and to organise and manage group work could be simply a manifestation of the teacher trainees'

limited ken of teaching and organisational skills. The assumption therefore is that if teacher trainees are equipped with the prerequisite skills, they will be in a position to teach inclusive classes effectively, all other things being equal.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to explore the perceptions of teacher trainees towards their teacher education curriculum in the context of inclusion. This was accomplished by conducting in-depth interviews with teacher trainees who were on teaching practice. From the findings the researchers concluded that most teacher trainees had a limited understanding of the term inclusion. The teacher trainees reiterated that they faced a lot inclusion-related challenges. However, apart from resource limitations, most of the challenges were related to the teacher trainees' lack of competence in handling inclusive classes. It can also be concluded that the special education needs of some students were not catered for, because of challenges linked to teaching methodologies.

Finally, teacher trainees perceived the teacher education curriculum they were exposed to negatively. While the curriculum had some topics on inclusion, this can be viewed as a way of sensitising the teacher trainees on the presence of children with special needs in schools, than equipping teacher trainees with requisite teaching and organisational skills that are needed for effective inclusive teaching. Without a revamp of the teacher education curriculum, it can be concluded that most newly trained teachers enter the teaching field with some vague theoretical knowledge on inclusive teaching strategies, but devoid of the necessary organisational and teaching competences that are a prerequisite for the effective teaching of inclusive classes. As rightly argued by Miles: 'Teacher education and ongoing support are . . . crucial for any changes introduced in education. . . .'[26]. In the researchers' views, inclusion is not an exception. Apart from contributing to knowledge on teacher trainees and inclusion, this study has the potential to bring a paradigm shift in Zimbabwe's teacher education if availed to policy-makers and individuals who have a say in the development of teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need to revisit the teacher education curriculum to ensure that inclusive teaching strategies form the core of the teacher education curriculum. Teacher trainees need to be equipped with skills such as Sign Language and Braille, so that they can effectively deal with certain students' special education needs. It may also be worthwhile to establish the preparedness of teachers' training colleges to train teachers for inclusive teaching – by assessing the skills of lecturers and the availability,

suitability and adequacy of resources. If lecturers do not have the requisite skills for inclusive teaching, they will not be able to impart such skills to the teacher trainees. Similarly, if teacher training colleges do not have equipment associated with inclusive teaching of certain pupils, for example Braille, it becomes difficult for lecturers to equip teacher trainees with relevant skills when faced with pupils who use Braille. Those teachers who are already in the field should be equipped with inclusive teaching strategies through workshops and in-service training. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should deploy at least one special education teacher in schools to assist teacher trainees and regular teachers with the preparation of work and teaching of inclusive classes. Instructional supervisors (school heads, their deputies, senior teachers, and heads of departments and mentors of teacher trainees) should be equipped with inclusive teaching strategies. This will make it possible for them to offer appropriate guidance, help and support to both teacher trainees on teaching practice and other qualified teachers under their supervision.

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