

Strategies to Reduce School Dropouts among Learners with Special Needs, A Case of Victoria Falls Primary Schools

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Abstract

abstract: Special needs education has now been renamed inclusive education. The study sought to suggest some strategies that may be used to reduce the drop out rate of learners with special needs in schools. The study is underpinned by three objectives namely to find out the reasons for the high drop out rate, to identify the effects of the dropping out of school and finally possible strategies that can be used to curtail the problem. The study used the social constructivism research method as it sought to find out what society perceived special needs learners. A mixed research design was used on the case study of four primary schools in Victoria Falls area. A total of forty participants were purposefully sampled from a population of 400. The data collection instruments used were questionnaires and focus group discussions. It was highlighted that the society and uncaring parents and teachers are main culprits in the dropping out of special needs learners. Early marriages, teen pregnancies, criminology and abuse of substances were the key effects discovered. Possible solutions were to change society's perceptions as well as improve the school environment both the physical and human. Major recommendations include society to change its perception through awareness campaigns. Teacher capacitation as well as provision of facilitative and less restrictive environments to the special needs learners.

Background of the study

A school is a social system that has members. As a system, it tries to control member's behavior through rules and regulations. UNESCO, (2000) records that internationally, the individual's right to education has been repeatedly affirmed in treaties and conventions. These include the 1968 Convention on the Rights of the Children, the 1990 World Conference on Education for All. Education is an effort to guide, train and help the children to develop in holistic manners. It aims at helping the child to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes so that they can develop to full potential. For this to succeed, the child must have love, affection and appreciation in the environment they are living in, that is at home and at school. Nevertheless, Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) put forward that about seventy-seven million children in the world are out of school and fifty-seven per cent of these are girls. They further highlighted that nearly one billion people, one-sixth of the world's population, have had less than five years of schooling or dropped before acquiring key areas of knowledge and many useful skills.

Millennium Development Goal 2 emphasizes universal education, with the target of ensuring that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015. Ross (2002) posits that both boys and girls are expected to gain the basic learning skills which include literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and survival skills. Ross (2002) additionally recommended that learning should also help these pupils to develop

attitudes and attain values that enable them to become acceptable members of the society. The captured imperative skills lay a foundation for improvement in their lives and eventually lead to eradication of poverty. The implication therefore is that if they leave school before attaining these skills, they would face a lot of challenges in their future lives both economically and socially. Each and every one of the given thoughts and insights lie beneath the significance of the participation of both boys and girls in education. Kinal et al (2002) reminds that; Between 15 and 30 percent of school age children can be classified as rejected or neglected by others which invariably result in a lot of drop outs. This is because neglected children are passive, withdrawn, timid and shy (Anderson, 2005). School age children are influenced by the way others treat them such as parents, teachers and peers. Consequently, learners with special needs may opt to drop out of school due to rejection and join the society and get engaged in activities such as house help, herdsman, prostitution, small business such as selling second hand clothes just to mention but a few. In the early school years, students are developing what Erickson calls a sense of industry. They begin to see the relationship between perseverance and the pleasure of a job completed. This crisis at this stage is industry versus inferiority. For children in modern societies, the school and the neighborhood offer a new set of challenges that must be balanced with those at home. Interaction with peers becomes increasingly important as well. The child's ability to move between these worlds and to cope with learning group activities and friends will lead to a growing sense of competence. Failure to deal with these challenges can result in feelings of inferiority and thereby resulting in more school drop outs even among learners with special needs.

Patrick (2008) rightly observed that in as much as Zimbabwe is a signatory to the United Nation treaties and conventions that promote and affirms the right to education for all, its school dropout trajectory is confronted with a lot of challenges to an extent it has significantly increased to alarming proportions. Azamm (2007) submitted that dropping out of school leads to increased demand for social services, increased crime rates, poor levels of health and reduced political participation. The implication therefore is that learners with special needs require both intellectual and material empowerment in order for them to overcome the negative effects of dropping out of school.

Soon after independence the government of Zimbabwe introduced free-tuition education in rural primary schools to encourage more pupils to enroll. Primary school dropouts in rural areas in Zimbabwe account for about seventy-eight percent of the total number of all dropouts. The laws of Zimbabwe state that there should be equality of education in rights to enter and also in participation. According to Zimbabwe Program for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST 1996-2000), sustainable alleviation of poverty should be based on the empowerment of individuals and communities particularly women. Zimbabwe signified its position of supporting the right to education for all by being signatory to the international treaties and conventions like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All (EFA) goals.

These are targeted towards reducing or even putting an end to global poverty by 2015. One of the major issues is that the nations in question upon signing these treaties would be agreeing that by 2015, to the effect that every child should be able to complete primary school education. This has also can be seen as a resounding inclusive strategy to include learners with special needs at the primary school level of education. In other words, learners with special needs' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality should be examined from the human rights perspective. Accordingly, education should be acknowledged as being very essential for the empowerment and emancipation of less privileged and the realization of all other human rights. It is to this effect that Anderson (2005), posits that learning

fosters critical thinking in the learners in question to an extent that they will be able to question their current positions in society and find new ways of dealing with problems that affect them from their own perspectives. It is against this background that this study is determined to explore the factors causing school dropouts among learners with special needs in Victoria Falls with particular delimitations on the causes, effects and possible strategies to resolve the problem

Statement of the problem

The major concern of this study is that learners with special needs are not adequately accommodated making them feel rejected which invariable causes them to leave schooling as they feel neglected, stigmatized, labeled and less fortunate. Such marginalization makes the learners in question feel unwanted and withdrawn. More so, the economic constraints due to poverty in most families resulting in absence of survival needs as stated by Maslow hierarchy of needs have limited the opportunities for students with special needs. This has resulted in significant dropout of learners from schools in Victoria Falls prompting the researcher to investigate the strategies that can be used to reduce such dropouts.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to find out some strategies that can be used to reduce the dropout rates of learners with special needs in primary schools in Victoria Falls as well as the country at large. The study also aims to alert parents on the effects of the drop out from schools by learners with special needs.

Research objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives. Firstly, it is to determine the causes of a significant dropout rate among special needs primary school students. Secondly, the study is to identify the effects of the dropouts among the children with special needs. Lastly, the research is to explore strategies to curb school dropouts' rates among students with special needs.

Significance of study

The research makes both academic and practical contributions. To the academia, the current study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by analysing the causes of school dropouts among learners with special needs in Zimbabwe. It is hoped that this study will add literature to the existing literature on the strategies to reduce school-dropouts with particular focus on Victoria Falls. It will also enable the Zimbabwean education sector to understand the essence of using copious modus operandi or approaches in ensuring that the methodological pluralism in teaching and valuing the essence of inclusivity program on reducing dropout rates and improving outcomes for learners with special needs are implemented.

methodology

Research approach

The social constructivism approach was used in the study. The approach focuses on how society perceives itself. Culture plays a great role in how society perceives special needs learners. The social interactions of the learners with special needs helps either in their retention in school or dropping out. The school environment and the interactions that occurs there are aiding in the hie dropout rates of learners with disabilities from school.

Research design

The study adopts a mixed research design so as to triangulate the data gathered. Both the qualitative and quantitative designs were used in the study. In order to understand the strategies to be used to reduce the drop rate of learners with special needs, a case study had to be done and in this case four primary schools in Victoria Falls The design is embraced because it relies on data collected from only some members of the population being studied. The design was chosen because it involves the administration of questionnaires and interviews to a sample of the population. The design encourages triangulation of the results.

Population and sample of the study

The population of the study is made up of guardians, caregivers and teachers of learners with special needs in Victoria Falls primary schools drawn from four primary schools. It comprised of the four school heads, fifty-six teachers from the four primary schools, parents chosen from each School Development Committee and pupils who dropout from each school. The researcher used the convenience sampling method as only those with disabilities were to be considered including the dropouts. All the four school heads are included in the research sample. Using the convenience sampling technique, eight teachers comprising one male and one female from each school, were conveniently selected from the four schools. A total of eight parents/guardians comprising four males and four females from the schools were sampled. Two learners with special needs who dropped out from school were selected from each school to make eight. Two in-school learners with special needs were also selected from each school The sample therefore constituted 40 people which is about 10% of the population.

Data collection instruments

The researcher used questionnaires and focus group discussions to gather data. The structured questionnaire was used because it could be administered to a large number of people within a short period of time. The researcher administered the questionnaires to the educators to avoid disturbing their busy schedule with the learners The focus group discussions were used on parents as well as to the learners

Results and discussions

The rational for the study was to suggest some possible strategies to reduce the high rates of school dropping out by special needs learners in schools. However, to propose some strategies, the study had to firstly find out the causes of the high drop out rates as well as the effects to the learners with special needs

Causes of high rate of school drops by learners with special needs

Lack of parental involvement in the education of the learners was cited by twenty three out of twenty-eight parents as the main cause of dropouts. All the educators supported this idea as they highlighted that most parents do not even accompany their children to school. Some parents are said never to support their children with adequate necessities for education. Learners who feel neglected by the home end up frustrated and drop out of school. This is also supported by Ogonda, (2002) who posits that studies carried out in Toronto revealed that school dropouts are caused by parents or guardians of these very same dropouts. Karan Stepen (2024) highlights that children with special needs who are not provided with the essential basic needs will eventually run away and seek ways and means to get these needs. Most parents are said to delegate their children's education to their maids and yet such child need a lot of care. This is

also supported by Ndurumo, (2002) who lamented over the fact that other parents don't bother to know whether the child has the needs or not. In the long run the child seeks ways and means of getting those needs.

The society was blamed by 75% of the participants as it tends to have a negative attitude towards learners with special needs. The negative language used by the society is the starting point of stigmatization and discrimination. The learners highlighted that the language is demeaning and does not recognize them as equal human beings. There is a lot of discrimination, stigmatization and exclusion from societal activities on people with special needs by members of the society, thus resulting in drop outs from schools. The negative labels as well as the denigrating language used in the community has also lowered their self-esteem. This is also supported by Swaffer (2015). The words we use can be respectful, compassionate, and empowering. However, they can also be de-humanizing, othering, disrespectful and even offensive; language use can perpetuate stigma as well as it can do the opposite. Results from focus group discussions also echoed the issue of false impressions from other members of the community who claim that there is better life in other countries even for those who are not educated and this has encouraged some learners with disabilities to drop out from school without considering their family backgrounds as well.

The school environment also plays a role in the high dropout rates. The study found out that most schools are not friendly to learners with disability as pointed out by thirty six of the forty study participants. They highlighted that most schools' physical plans were made without taking into account of learners with special needs. Most facilities are not friendly at all as echoed by most learners and parents. Most schools were built long back when learners with special needs were either denied the right to education or sent to special schools. However, the introduction of inclusive education concept has not yet addressed the infrastructural needs for the learners with special needs. The environmental challenges in the schools, has resulted in most learners with special needs dropping out from school. This idea was also highlighted by Kirk and Anastacia, (1999) who rightly observed that learners with special needs in education, need a least restrictive learning environment which accommodates all learners who are impaired. If the learners are not taken care of the child gets discouraged and drops out of school. So, most schools in Victoria Falls are restrictive to learners with special needs resulting in most of them dropping out of school.

The other issue is about the negative attitudes of the teachers in the schools. Thirty participants (75%) strongly agree that the negative attitudes by most teachers on learners with special needs result in the high dropout rate. About ten of the participants disagree on this idea that teachers' negative attitudes towards learners with special needs results in high drop outs of this group of learners. This is also supported by de Boer, Pijl Sip, and Minnaert (2011) in Sam Susan (2019) who revealed that in a meta-analysis of the research addressing attitudes towards inclusive education practices, they found that most teachers hold neutral or negative attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special needs in the regular classroom setting. If such learners who actually need love and attention receive cold shoulders from the teacher, the end result is that they drop from school.

The curriculum has been blamed as it does not cater for learners with special needs. All the 40 participants that is 100% pointed out that the curriculum is not designed to cater for learners with disabilities but those in the main stream. The curriculum creates boredom to most learners with disabilities especially those who keep repeating the same level or grade resulting in them dropping out of school. Whilst safe education is provided within the environment studies, planning needs to occur across the whole school curriculum. The curriculum refers to both the formal teaching and learning program in the school and the informal curriculum component. This provides students with an opportunity to gain knowledge and skills, and to

develop attitudes and values that enable them to make informed decisions relating to safety. Whilst safe education is provided within the environment studies, planning needs to occur across the whole school curriculum. The curriculum refers to both the formal teaching and learning program in the school and the informal curriculum component. This provides students with an opportunity to gain knowledge and skills, and to develop attitudes and values that enable them to make informed decisions relating to safety (Swaleha 2013). The curriculum must be tailor made to meet the unique needs and strengths of learners with special needs. Smith et al (2020) also support this notion when they say the curriculum must be inclusive so that the learners with special needs are also catered for so as to reduce the high rate of drop outs. They emphasize the importance of a flexible and individualized curriculum, tailored to meet the diverse needs of students, that can enhance their engagement and retention in primary schools thus reducing the dropout rates

The study shows that 75% of the participants concur with this view of age. Most of these learners become adolescent when they are still in the lower grades of which they begin to emulate their peers of their ages who might be at secondary level. The age of the learners with special need encourages them to drop out of school. Most of these learners continue to repeat the same grade regardless of their age resulting in most of them becoming older than some of the learners. Continuous repeating the same grade creates boredom resulting in them dropping out of school. Kinai et al (2002) chronicled that adolescents are faced with the task of reconciling their physical characteristics with cultural standards of attractiveness. Most of these learners with special needs may require special material as they would have reached puberty stage. This desire for such basic items results in them dropping from school as they can no longer learn with children.

The effects of school drop outs among learners with special needs

Dropping out from school by learners with disabilities has a lot of negative effects to their lives thus worsening their plight. Discussed below are some of the effects highlighted but the participants

The study shows that 75% of the participants supported the notion that some of the drop outs end up getting married if they were lucky at all. Most end up in this situation as a way of running away from the poverty at home but exposing themselves to abuse. This is also supported by UNESCO (2019) study which posits that School dropouts among learners with special needs can increase the risk of teen pregnancies. These students may lack proper education and support systems, which can lead to engaging in risky behaviors and having limited knowledge about reproductive health. Some of the learners with special needs in Victoria Falls have also fallen prey to same problems. This was also supported by the parents were present who pointed out that most of them had gotten involved in very early marriages but some of them are experiencing relationship problems.

Most of the teen learners with special needs who drop out of school end up either getting married or being impregnated. The study shows that thirty-six of the participants agree that dropping out from school at an earlier stage result in such drop outs getting into some early sexual activities that leads them to become pregnant. This is also supported by the UNFPA study which pointed out that, girls with disabilities in South America are at a higher risk of experiencing early and unintended pregnancies. These pregnancies often result from limited access to comprehensive sexuality education, lack of appropriate support systems, and social exclusion due to disability-related stigma. The report also highlights that teen pregnancies and school dropouts are interconnected issues that can have detrimental effects on the educational and social development of individuals, particularly those with special needs. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), as quoted by Robert Still-well (2010), argues that dropping out

of school has long-lasting negative effects on the livelihood and life chances of those who cease to attend. Dropping out of school is associated with social ills such as poverty, unemployment, criminal activity, single-parent households and prostitution, as well as psychological problems such as emotional instability, low confidence and self-esteem, and lack of values on a personal, social and occupational level. short informational piece explores the relationship between teen pregnancies and school dropouts among learners with special needs in primary schools in Egypt. It showed that there is lack of Comprehensive Sex Education, insufficient or inadequate provision of comprehensive sex education programs that address the specific needs of learners with special needs can lead to a lack of knowledge and awareness about reproductive health, contraception, and sexual relationships.

The study also found out that most of the special needs learners who dropped out of school ended up committing crimes as they left school without the necessary prerequisite skills and knowledge. Thirty out of the 40 participants supported the idea and also pointed out that most of those with special needs especially boys are involved in criminal activities in the community. Rud et al. (2016) emphasized that students with learning disabilities who drop out were more likely to be arrested, change jobs often, and start families earlier than their non-disabled peers. McNeece & Markward (2018) posit that they often face a lack of social support, limited opportunities, and marginalization, making them more susceptible to negative influences and involvement in criminal activities. The dropouts' learners not only experience negative consequences leading up to dropping out of school but the effects of dropping out also follow them throughout the rest of their lives.

Learners with special needs who drop out of school only discover the hardships encountered in trying to get a decent job. However, due to poverty at home some of them end up being exploited as child laborer. The study shows that about thirty participants agree that those learners with special needs who drop out of school end up as child labour. This is also supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which points out that Asia has the highest number of child laborers globally. Poverty, lack of access to education, social inequality, and weak legal frameworks are some of the factors contributing to the prevalence of child labor in the region.

Most learners with special needs who drop out of school end up abusing drugs due to a myriad of factors. The study reveals that 35 of the participants agree that most of these drop outs end up abusing substances. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), learners with special needs who drop out of school are at a higher risk of engaging in substance abuse compared to their peers who complete their education. This is also supported by The American Journal of Public Health (2017) which published a study highlighting the link between school dropouts among learners with special needs and substance abuse. The research found that individuals who dropped out of school were more likely to engage in substance use, including illicit drugs and alcohol, as a coping mechanism for their emotional and social difficulties. According to the EMCDDA (2020), early school leaving is considered a risk factor for drug and substance abuse among young people in Europe. UNICEF report of 2021 emphasizes that dropping out of school can make these children vulnerable to negative influences, including drug and substance abuse. The advocates for the provision of inclusive education and support services to ensure that learners with special needs receive the necessary assistance to stay in school and avoid such detrimental outcomes.

Strategies to reduce high rate of drop outs

The study came out with some strategies that can be implemented to reduce the high rate of drop out by learners with special needs. an all-stake holder participation needs to be involved that is, the education

department, the parents, the school, the community, the educators as well as counsellors so that these children with disability.

The study shows that 75% of the participants are in agreement that parents need to be actively involved in the education of their children's educational needs. This is also supported by Miller (2021) who posits that parents have to take an active role in the education of learners with special needs so that the learners feel loved and cared for. UNESCO (2020) report also point out that parents also need to be confident that mainstream schools will understand and respond to their children's needs. The same sentiment is echoed by United Nations Development Programme. (2017) who also pointed out that parents of children with special needs have to take a central role in the education of their children. another important strategy that the study managed to come out with is that of teacher capacitation on special education issues.

All the 40 participants pointed out that the school environment is not supportive of learners with special needs. The schools need to create an atmosphere that is friendly to learners with special needs so that they feel that they are part and parcel of the school. Swaleha (2013) posits that the physical school environment encompasses the school buildings including physical structures, infrastructure, furniture, the site on which a school is located; and the surrounding environment including the air, water, and materials with which children may come into contact, as well as the hazards. Sporting facilities should also cater for them as they also want to be involved in sports. The bad behaviors exhibited by other learners toward learners with special needs must not be tolerated at all in the school environment. The labelling which is most learners use must abolished as this is dehumanizing. This becomes the sole role of the school professional counsellors if at all they were available in the schools.

The teachers who are capacitated on special needs education know how to effectively deal with the learners with special needs. All the 40 participants were in agreement that teacher capacitation is crucial to the retention of the learners with special needs in primary schools. Teacher capacitation is central to reducing dropping out from school by learners with special needs. According to Don Pinnock (2016), teachers' attitudes and practices are the most important factor in keeping students in school, since having knowledgeable and skilled teachers helps learners gain confidence as well as pass their matric. According to a policy report published by the Ministry of Education (2022), teacher capacity development is recognized as a crucial strategy for addressing the issue of school dropouts among learners with special needs. So, teacher capacitation plays a great role in reducing the rate of school drop outs. By investing in teacher capacity development, schools can create a supportive and inclusive learning environment, ultimately reducing the rate of school

Another important strategy that can be implemented is the effective use of counsellors in the guidance and counseling department. Schools need some full-time counsellors to offer psycho-social services to the parents, learners with special needs as well as those in the main stream. All the 40 participants translating to 100% supported the issue of effective guidance and counselling programmes in the schools as this help to boost the self-esteem of learners with special needs. The study carried out by WHO (2012) suggests that guidance and counseling programs tailored to the specific needs of learners with special needs can significantly reduce dropout rates. The same sentiments were also highlighted by the Council for Exceptional Children. (2015) in its study entitled *Effective Strategies to Reduce School Dropout for Students with Disabilities*, where it emphasized the importance of proactive guidance and counseling services, including career exploration, social-emotional support, and transition planning. The document highlights the positive impact of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs on reducing dropout

rates and improving outcomes for learners with special needs. This implies that guidance and counselling play a major role in the reduction of dropout rates for learners with special needs.

The school curriculum is another important area that needs a lot of attention. All the participants were in agreement that the curriculum must be sensitive to learners with special needs. 100% of them highlighted that the curriculum must be individualized and offer skills to the learners with special needs. This is also supported by the U.S Department of education's report (UNESCO 2019) which proposes the importance of curriculum adaptations for learners with special needs to reduce dropout rates. It suggests that a flexible and individualized curriculum, tailored to meet the diverse needs of students, can enhance their engagement and retention in primary schools. Smith et al (2020) also support this notion when they say the curriculum must be inclusive so that the learners with special needs are also catered for so as to reduce the high rate of drop outs. Johnson (2021) also weighed in when he stressed that the curriculum must be tailor made to meet the unique needs and strengths of learners with special needs.

Lastly, the community is one of the areas that is seen as the creator of stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities. This awareness of disability issues plays a great role in changing the community's attitudes towards disability issues. This is also supported by Andrew Hartnack (2017), who proposed that schools and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) should work hand in hand to create a school climate where learners find satisfaction in their work and therefore feel less inclined to drop out. It emphasized the importance of community engagement, collaboration between schools and community organizations, and targeted awareness campaigns to reduce school dropouts. According to the UNESCO's policy report, community involvement is a critical factor in achieving successful inclusion of learners with special needs. It highlights the need for community awareness programs that promote understanding, acceptance, and support for children with disabilities. The Save the Children (2022) study report also highlighted the positive impact of community awareness programs on reducing school dropouts among learners with special needs. Through awareness campaigns, capacity-building workshops, and inclusive education committees, the community actively contributed to improving educational opportunities for children with disabilities. So, it is prudent that the Victoria Falls community be made aware on the need to change the negative attitude and cultural myths that are associated with disability issues

Conclusion

The study concludes that the problem of high dropout rates shall continue to be experienced for as long as the society still perceives special needs learners as a curse through the derogatory language used. The physical learning environment still remains very restrictive to special needs learners as facilities available to not cater for their challengers. Human resources in the schools in not fully capacitated to deal with special needs learners. The school curriculum still does not cater for inclusion of special needs learners in the mainstream classes. The country needs to take inclusive education a priority if the millennium development goals for education for all are to be achieved

Recommendations

In light of the above conclusions, the study recommended that Firstly, the parents of children with special needs must be actively participate in the education process of the children rather than delegate the responsibility to maids. The society needs to use positive constructive language that does not denigrate children with special needs as this may help to increase their self-esteem. This can be achieved through holding some awareness programmes in the communities so that people may appreciate living with special

needs learners. Thirdly, all teachers need to be capacitated on special needs education so that they may interact properly with learners with special needs. The employment of professionally trained counsellors whose roles are to counsel the learners with special needs, the parents of learners with special needs, the other students who are in the main stream as well as the teachers in the schools is crucial in creating a conducive learning environment to special needs learners. The school environment must be less restrictive to learners with special needs so that they may effectively participate in the education process. The school curriculum must be accommodative to special needs learners so that they may actively participate in all learning activities thereby reducing the dropout rates.

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