

The role of Classroom Assistants in Inclusive Education in Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe

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Monitored the transition of children with disabilities through primary school to understand barriers and enablers

Assessed parents, head teachers and teachers knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) around disability and inclusive education

Research on experiences on classroom assistants and the teachers they worked with

Ascertained the benefits and disadvantages of community led transport solutions

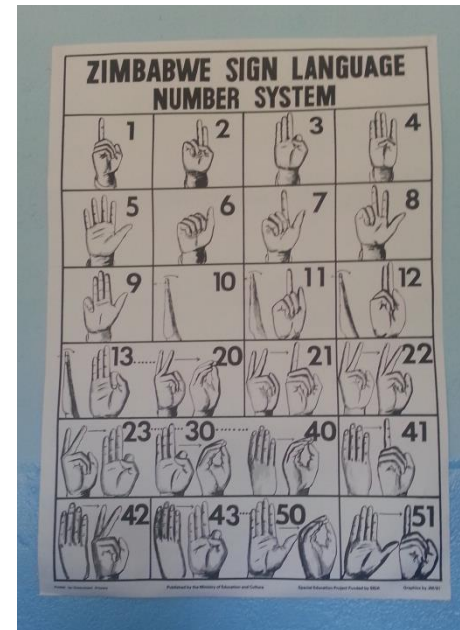


To obtain better data on access and progress of children with disabilities through school

To compare the pre- and post-intervention knowledge, attitudes and practices of parents, head teachers and teachers around disability and inclusive education

Very little data on the impact of classroom assistants as component of IE programmes in low and middle income countries

To explore some practical options for improving transport as a component of providing inclusive education for children with disabilities in low income countries



- Information obtained through the survey on knowledge, attitudes and practice administered to teachers, head teachers and caregivers specifically on the role of classroom assistants on teaching practices.
- Project level information on the profile of classroom assistants, their recruitment and training for the job as well as numbers of children with disabilities in model schools and numbers and distribution of classroom assistants to the four districts.
- Data collected in the field by the research team through focus groups discussions (FGDs) and interviews with education officials, head teachers, teachers, parents/caregivers and the classroom assistants who were recruited as part of the DFID funded GPAF project

20 FGDs on the role of **classroom assistants**:

- 8 FGDs (2 for each district location) with head teachers and classroom assistants (May 2014). The main objective was to explore their perspectives on the effect that classroom assistants can have on the inclusion of children with disabilities.
- Followed up to analyse how interventions implemented as part of the IE project had changed (or not) perspectives:
- 12 FGDs (3 for each district location) in April 2015 with parents, teachers and classroom assistants on the impact of classroom assistants on the inclusion of children with disabilities in model schools.

The main themes emerged from the FGDs were:

- Training
- Relationship with teachers
- Relationship with parents
- Impact
- Retention
- Remuneration - Matching expectations
- Sustainability

- The majority stated that their role was mainly to assist the children with activities of daily living such as going to the toilets (or changing nappies), washing, assisting with eating, mobilising, monitoring them in the playground or playing sports or assisting them during break time, and any other support activities children in either the mainstream classes or resource units/special classes needed.
- Others stated they helped them to accept each other. Some provided assistance with writing – e.g. learning to write names, helping to read or hold a pen. Some worked with the child to child clubs, e.g. at break time. They also take a register (the ‘inclusive register’), receive (welcome) the children when they arrive at school and follow up if children are not attending school. Some also assisted the teacher in maintaining discipline, others in maintaining records and writing short reports, liaising with parents and communities, as well as undertaking community advocacy and sensitisation activities and income-generating activities.
- In some schools they assisted with physiotherapy and taking them to hospital appointments and some have even gone into hospitals to learn how to do physiotherapy.

- In most of the schools represented, the CAs worked in mainstream classes, usually allocated to one specific class (that with the majority of children with disabilities). In some schools, they are more “randomly” allocated, and in others, determine where they will go (amongst) themselves, based on need.
- In other schools, they largely focused on the early grades (as part of a country-wide focus on Early Child Development) as this seemed to be where the majority of the children with disabilities were based;
- In other schools, they either work in regular classes or a resource unit. They may take the child for part of time into mainstream class, and if in mainstream class, they assist with activities concerning life skills.

- Training was undertaken at the beginning of the project (two days) and a refresher course (two days) was undertaken half way through the project.
- Training was perceived as helpful but CAs wanted more training and the FGDs highlighted specific needs of CAs who indicated that they would like more advance skills and training on first aid and sign language as well as on learning difficulties and on how to handle children with multiple disabilities.
- Although some CAs reported they were able to learn from parents how to communicate with their children with disabilities there was an identified need for more formal training to fill these gaps.

- Positive relationship and trust between teachers and CAs. For example, if teachers were away for a capacity building workshop or if they were off sick they left the class to the CA. They were sometimes asked to continue reading or maintaining discipline while the teacher left class for short periods (e.g. to go to the bathroom).
- After completing the training, teachers recognised CAs as having some knowledge on how to handle children with disabilities. For example, they were called by teachers to witness challenges in learning. Teachers realised that the presence of CA saved time and some of the 1-to-1 skills could be taught by CAs.

- CAs reported that overall the parents were very supportive.
- Parents initially met the CAs at the sensitisation workshop. During the workshop CAs discussed with parents the needs of their children and sometimes the teachers provided additional advice as to the child's needs inside the classroom.
- CAs were also sensitised regarding talking to parents about enrolling children with disabilities in school. CAs were often aware of children with disabilities who were not enrolled in school however many of these children faced mobility barriers to accessing the school. For example, some children did not have access to a wheelchair, still required assessment by a psychologist or were still too young.
- The CA's work typically did not end with the school day. They also advocate for children with disabilities, meeting parents at community gatherings and using community leaders

- Most of the children with disabilities who had not been in school were enrolled and remained in school due to the supportive role played by CAs.
- Project staff were told that teachers alone could not have been able to manage some of the children because of the extra needs they require such as feeding, dressing, toilet training, etc.
- The parents of children with disabilities also felt that the help their children were getting was adequate and therefore ensured that their children were in school.
- Some schools paid additional allowances for CAs – a sign that they were valuable in the school and that it was felt that they had to be paid like any other member of staff.
- Some of the additional funds had come through income-generating projects.

- There was reportedly little turnover of CAs as the project managed to retain over 90% of those recruited. This was partly due to the additional allowances given by schools and also because most of them were parents of children with disabilities and felt engaged.
- During field interviews it was evident that there was a difference between rural and more urban settings with CAs being more conversant and self-confident in the latter.
- Retention of CAs beyond the end of IE project was reported with some schools reporting full engagement after end of project but others citing lack of funding as reason for failure to take them on board.
- Although district education officers (DEOs) urged schools to engage CAs, the decision remained with the school development committees on whether they had the capacity to keep CAs beyond the end of the project.

- CAs were a key feature of the LCD IE project
- While the support provided by the 45 CAs in model schools made a significant difference to children with disabilities, the number of CAs provided by the project was low. As the number of children with disabilities in each class grew, so too did the pressure on the CAs for their support services and it was not possible for them to provide the same level of one-to-one assistance as at the start of the intervention. This impacted negatively on the ability of some children to participate fully in lessons.
- Evidence from the FDGs also suggested that some CAs worked longer hours to counter the lack of staff.
- Classroom assistants were frequently parents of children with disabilities and showed great motivation towards supporting IE in mainstream schools, so it was expected that once the project came to an end they will maintain their support, especially as the impact of the project becomes ever-more apparent.

- While some of the CAs were given additional funding by the SDCs, others were not, which created some tensions between the CAs, as well as between the schools.
- Some engagement by cluster schools was generated as a result of having CAs in model schools. It was reported that one cluster school engaged two volunteer parents who are parents of children with disabilities who reside at the school. They looked after their children without any payment nor expecting it.
- The Ministry of Education were reluctant to formally take on any additional ancillary staff such as CAs, and so there was some debate about the sustainability of the CAs, as well as debates around their role vis-a'-vis trained teachers; this led to a change in the terminology used to describe them to avoid them being seen as the responsibility of the MoE – by the end of the project they were commonly called 'caregivers'.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS?

- There is a strong need for additional classroom support, such as classroom assistants though to date these are not a feature of any IE programmes or interventions in Zimbabwe, and there are a number of challenges to be overcome with this role
- Stronger commitment by the Ministry of Education on sponsoring such a profile to deliver a fully inclusive education for children with disabilities.
- In order to improve communication and understanding there needs to be improved linkages, exchange of information and support between teachers and parents/caregivers to improve and ensure continuity and provision for the child.
- Training of teachers (or other related staff) must make it clear that successful inclusion relies on many components (school, community, family, etc.) which must be combined to ensure meaningful inclusion, and quality learning for children with disabilities.
- Need to address the exclusion of children with most severe disabilities

THANK YOU



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