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## Quality of Sports Participation by Pupils with Disabilities in Inclusive Education Settings in Masvingo Urban

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**QUALITY OF SPORTS PARTICIPATION BY PUPILS WITH DISABILITIES IN  
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SETTINGS IN MASVINGO URBAN**

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**QUALITY OF SPORTS PARTICIPATION BY PUPILS WITH DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION  
SETTINGS IN MASVINGO URBAN**

**ABSTRACT**

*The study sought to analyse the extent to which pupils with disabilities participated in sports and Physical Education in inclusive education settings. To this end, it examined how sports are adapted to suit these pupils and explored other factors which contributed to the pupils' benefit or lack of benefit from sports. A qualitative descriptive survey design which employed questionnaires and structured interviews collected data from 30 primary school pupils with disabilities, 20 primary schoolteachers and five school heads. The study found that teachers and non-disabled peers have low expectations of pupils with disabilities as potentially competent athletes. The teachers view sports as competitive events in which a few talented pupils would naturally excel and through which they would eventually earn a living. In this light, pupils with more obvious disabilities were more likely to be denied access to sports. The teachers also have low expectations of Physical Education as a subject and have a laissez-faire approach to teaching it. Most of them do not know what to teach or how to teach it. They do not adapt equipment*

*or rules to suit the therapeutic needs of pupils with disabilities. A significant number of pupils with disabilities appear to have been caught up in the cycle of low expectations as they do not view sports as useful, do not participate in or seem to benefit from Physical Education and sports in general.*

## **QUALITY OF SPORTS PARTICIPATION BY PUPILS WITH DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SETTINGS IN MASVINGO URBAN**

### **INTRODUCTION**

For many children with disabilities, the chance to play in the playfield only comes when they enter school as they may be either overprotected or neglected in their homes. Most indigenous-traditionalist Zimbabweans view disability negatively and experience shame and blame if a child with a disability is born into their family (Mpofu, Kasayira, Mhaka, Chireshe and Maunganidze, 2007; Chidyausiku, 2000). Mpofu (2003) notes that the effect of these negative cultural beliefs is that many Zimbabweans will avoid direct personal contact with people with disabilities unless such people are family. Once they are in school, children with sensory, physical and other disabilities may not experience the thrill of sport or Physical Education because of visual, mental or locomotion limitations in addition to the negative cultural beliefs. To compound this, Churches (1980) notes that sports are viewed as nothing more than leisure and many educators may fail to clearly define the importance of Physical Education and sports in terms of development of motor skills, communication and cooperation. This study intends to find out the extent to which ordinary primary schools include pupils with various disabilities in Physical Education and sports in general.

### **BACKGROUND**

It was at one time the global practice to exclude from education anyone perceived to be different such as those with disabilities (Engelbrecht and Green, 2001) as they were judged to be either incapable of benefitting from such education as existed or to be potentially disturbing (Green and Engelbrecht,

2007). Subsequently, with the emergence of a 'charity discourse' missionaries and other philanthropists established separate special schools to offer care and certain forms of education. When the Zimbabwe government assumed responsibility for the education of children with disabilities at independence in 1980, they inherited this colonial legacy of separate special schools. However they were uncomfortable with it, not only because of the very limited numbers that the schools catered for (Muzembe, Musengi and Makahamadze, 2008) but also because the institutions seemed to be part of an oppressive social system through which people with disabilities were excluded from participation in society (Barton, 1998).

Government responsibility then became the development of a policy of integrated provision for most children with special needs (Barcham, 1998). This was at a time when the International Decade for People with Disabilities had just started and later the UN-sponsored World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien (1990) declared that education should be accorded to all people. To achieve this end, UNESCO's Salamanca statement stated that children with special educational needs should have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy (UNESCO, 1994). The document, to which the Zimbabwe government is a signatory, maintains that learners with disabilities should be educated with their age peers, sharing educational experiences but following individual learning plans with the necessary support available. Zimbabwe is also a signatory to several inclusive education-related international charters, conventions and cooperation agreements such as the UNICEF convention on the rights of the child (1989), the Standard rules on the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities (1990), the World declaration on education for all and the Education for All flagship on education and disability (2001).

Inclusive education of children with special educational needs in regular schools which is being pursued in Zimbabwe is informed by the philosophy of 'normalisation'. The basic tenets of this philosophy are

that schools and communities are not complete unless all children are welcome in them and that inclusive education gives all children a chance to reach their peak. In this spirit, the government of Zimbabwe enacted the Disabled Persons Act (1992) which outlaws discrimination of people with disabilities. Although it does not specifically single out disability, the Education Act (1986) also enshrines education as a right for all children irrespective of diversity of race, creed, gender and so on. Physical Education is one of the ten primary school subjects for which Mpofu et al (2007) note that government has adopted 'growth with equity' as the articulating principle of inclusive education.

Growth with equity appears to be meant to ensure quality in education. According to Machingura et al (in press) quality in education is relative, elusive and difficult to define but they condense indicators of quality provided by Doherty (1994) Singh (2000) and Woodhouse (2000) into internal efficiency and external efficiency of education. In this study the proxies of internal efficiency in Physical Education and sports include access, performance and a good school environment. Machingura et al (in press) explain that access is the ability of the school to accommodate individual learning needs, while performance is the ability of the learners and teachers to attain high levels of achievement and good school environment refers to staff attributes, provision of adequate and appropriate teaching resources and inculcating in pupils cherished values. Proxies of external efficiency include matching what is taught in Physical Education and sports with the expectations of the world outside the school.

It is in this legislative, policy and theoretical context that pupils with disabilities are supposed to be taught all subjects, including Physical Education, and participate in all activities, including sports, together with those without disabilities in ordinary schools. This study was undertaken to find out the extent to which proxies of quality in education were being manifested in the participation of children with disabilities in Physical Education and sports within ordinary primary schools.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study analysed the extent to which pupils with disabilities participate in sports in inclusive education settings in Masvingo town. The study sought to address these specific research questions:

- . To what extent do non-disabled peers and educators accept pupils with disabilities in sports?
- . To what extent do educators and pupils with disabilities perceive sports as important and manageable by pupils with disabilities?
- . How effectively are sports adapted to suit specific needs and attain therapeutic goals of pupils with disabilities?
- . What factors contribute to the participation or non-participation in sports by children with disabilities in inclusive education settings?

## **METHODOLOGY**

Cluster sampling was used to select five primary schools from the ten public primary schools in Masvingo town. Purposive sampling was then used to select three pupils with disabilities from each of the five schools, to give a total of 15 pupils with various disabilities. Pupils who had been identified by their teachers and school-heads as having sensory, physical, cognitive (mild mental retardation or learning difficulties) and health-related impairments (such as albinism and asthma) were selected, one each from a class. The pupils, who were aged from six to 14 years of age and were from grades one to seven, were engaged in structured face to face individual interviews in the mother language for easy communication. The 10 to 15 minute interviews initially established each pupil's attitude towards sports, changes made specifically for him or her and acceptance by non-disabled peers and teachers in sports activities. Focus then turned to identifying and explaining activities: in which they thought they

excelled or could not perform; from which pupils were excluded by teachers and peers and in which they took part separately or differently but with non-disabled peers.

Pupils with disabilities were then asked to nominate two of their best, non-disabled friends in order to come up with a snowball sample of 30 non-disabled peers. It was thought that these 'best friends' would have firsthand experience of the pupil with a disability and therefore illustrate just how acceptable they were. These pupils were asked to provide biographical data such as age, gender and presence of a family member with a disability before responding to a six item Likert-scale type questionnaire on games and activities in which they would rather have or not have peers with a disability and factors that influenced acceptance of pupils with disability in sports.

Teachers from whose classes a pupil with a disability had been selected were automatically part of the sample as they were thought to be knowledgeable about their own pupils. The 15 teachers were subjected to 15-minute structured interviews which sought to find out adaptations made for specific therapeutic goals and factors that determined success in participation of pupils with disabilities in sports.

## **DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

### **Acceptance of Pupils with Disabilities in Sports**

The majority of children with disabilities do not appear to be accepted in sports activities by most non-disabled peers and most teachers. Many teachers pointed to the delicate nature of some disabilities and said that such pupils should not exert themselves like non-disabled peers. One teacher said, *"Straining this asthmatic child by doing athletics and other exercises would be risky as one would not know whether they had taken appropriate medication before the exercises. They might go into an attack for which I am not prepared."* Another teacher said: *"The pupil you mention fits (has epileptic seizures) and so cannot*

*be expected to take part in contact sports as she might go into an attack at any time*". Another said of a child with cerebral palsy: *"There is always the risk of getting injured during sports. So why risk injuring pupils who already have limitations? It is much safer and better in the long term for them to concentrate on academic activities."* Another teacher said of a child with epilepsy: *"There is danger that saliva (froth) from him during attacks may expose other children to risk."* From the foregoing excerpts, it is evident that lack of acceptance by the teachers took three forms: firstly through overprotection, secondly through fear of contracting the other's condition and thirdly, neglectful low expectations.

The low expectations were evident in that teachers and peers alike thought that pupils with disabilities might not be competent enough to participate in certain strenuous activities. In response to a follow-up question on why he thought a physically disabled boy was unacceptable as a team-mate, one non-disabled pupil had this to say: *"Isu tinogara tichihwinha trophy kubhora, manje dandara rikapinzwa muteam tinodyiwa"* (Ours is a winning team, including a non-performer in it would result in losses). A school head asked: *"You don't expect someone without a leg to be on the school team, do you? Even children without disabilities who get injured are not selected for the school team."* A teacher who is responsible for organizing school sports activities echoed the same sentiments: *"In situations where we compete against other schools, we use merit to select only the best teams, so there is no room for those without the necessary skills"*. One non-disabled peer said: *"Chinonetsa ndechekuti X anofamba zvakasiyana nesu, saka akanzi amhanye anosekwa nevanwe nekuti zvaanenge achiita zvinosetsa"* (The problem is X has a strange gait and so when he runs people find it funny and will laugh at him). It would appear from these vignettes that pupils with visible, physical disabilities were viewed as unacceptable by both teachers and non-disabled peers in situations where competitive sports were involved. It was felt that such pupils should not be involved in competitive sports activities as they would be subjected to ridicule by non-disabled peers. Concerns about the safety of such pupils in many contact sports activities were expressed. In preparing for competitive ball games and other athletic events, sports organizers and

potential team-mates were emphatic that merit was the only criterion for participation. Two non-disabled peers who had disabled siblings and teachers who had just been trained were more amenable to the idea of pupils with disabilities taking part in sports.

### **Perceptions of Sports by Educators and Pupils with Disabilities**

Pupils with disabilities who were in higher grades, generally thought that sports were important, but not as important as other academic subjects that could later help them secure a livelihood. They were more concerned with trying to do well in subjects such as Mathematics. Most pupils with physical disabilities said that they were not competent enough to participate in sports activities where a lot of skill was required. One of them said: *“Ndichizvipatisirei zvangu nezvinhu zvandinongowona kuti handizvigoni? Better kutoita zvevasvomhu kwandinokurira vanhu”* (Why would I make a fool of myself by engaging in activities in which I know I will fail? I would rather concentrate on Mathematics where I know I will do better than a lot of my classmates). Another said: *“Zvaana high jump ne-long jump handizviiti nekuti ndingatokuvara. Ini ndinongogona zvekukuza vanenge vachiwuruka.”* (I do not take part in jumps because I could get hurt. I just cheer for the jumpers).

In the lower grades pupils with disabilities viewed Physical Education as being just as important as any other subject and more interesting than many other subjects. They however pointed out that they were not able to do well in many of the activities which they considered too difficult for them. One pupil said: *“Pada, nhodo nechuti zvinondinakidza. Kumhanya hakundinakidzi nekuti ndinosiyiwa nevanhu vese nguva dzese.”* (I enjoy pada, nhodo and chuti (games). Athletics are not interesting because I am always last in these races). Another pupil said: *“Zvese zvatinoitiswa pano pachikoro zvinebasa. Zvimwe kungozvitadzawo”* (All activities we do at school are important. It is just that I am not able to do some of them well).

Class-teachers and sports organizers said that they knew that sports are important for pupils with disabilities as they provided much needed leisure and were a welcome relief from the monotony of classwork. One teacher said: *“Sports enable these children to take a break from the usual classroom routines so that they can enjoy and come back refreshed.”* Another said: *“All children need breaks in-between the three Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic.”* The teachers observed that some of the disabilities that the children had did not allow them to take part in some sports and Physical Education activities.

### **Adaptation of Sports and Physical Education**

All the teachers said that they did not know how to adapt sports equipment, facilities and games to suit specific disability-related limitations. Some of the teachers knew that they could adapt rules for such sports activities as track events to accommodate hearing impaired participants by signing to indicate ‘on your marks, get set and go’ while speaking simultaneously rather than blowing the whistle. None of the teachers knew anything about using sports activities to attain therapeutic goals for specific pupils with disabilities. One teacher queried: *“Doesn’t the use of sports for such purposes require the expertise of physiotherapists and others who are only found in hospitals? I am not trained to do that kind of thing.”* Another said: *“When I engage the whole class in Physical Education, the activities are designed for motor development: some to exercise gross motor and others fine motor skills. This means that all pupils’ needs will be equally catered for.”* From the foregoing, it is evident that teachers generally did not know what to teach and how to teach it. Some acknowledge not having specialist knowledge in Physical Education while others hope that the general activities that all children take part in will somehow meet the specific needs of their pupils with disabilities.

### **Factors Contributing to Participation or Non-participation in Sports**

Among important factors listed by teachers as contributing to the non-participation of pupils with disabilities was the unavailability of ordinary equipment as well as specialized equipment adapted to match the needs of these pupils such as balls with bells for visually impaired learners and wheelchairs for physically disabled pupils who may want to take part in various wheelchair sports. Unavailability of indoor facilities and sunscreen lotion that would enable albinos to participate in games without risking sunburn was also cited as a contributing factor to the non-participation of these pupils. Inhalers were also said to be unavailable and therefore inhibiting asthmatic pupils from fully participating in many sporting activities especially during cold days. Poorly prepared grounds were also listed as a hindrance in the participation of pupils with disabilities in sports.

### **DISCUSSION**

The results show that the majority of children with disabilities are not accepted in sports activities by most non-disabled peers and most teachers. Lack of acceptance by the teachers took three forms: overprotection, culturally-based fears and low expectations. Overprotection seemed to emanate from what Barton (1996) called a charity model of disability in which people with disabilities are pitied and patronized as they are perceived as inferior and therefore in need of non-disabled society's assistance. Many teachers pointed to the delicate nature of some disabilities as a reason why such pupils should not exert themselves like non-disabled peers and generally expressed concerns about the safety of such pupils in many contact sports activities. Kanhukamwe and Madondo (2000) do identify pupil safety as one of the most important needs that have to be met in Physical Education and sports however Fait and Dunn (1984) observe that concerns for pupil safety should not be an excuse for reducing pupils with disabilities to spectators of non-disabled pupils participating in Physical Education. Culturally-based fears of contracting health-related conditions such as epilepsy would also reduce pupils with disabilities to

mere spectators of sports activities. Mpofu's (2003) observation that because of negative cultural beliefs many Zimbabweans avoid direct personal contact with people with disabilities is supported by this finding.

Low expectations were the third way in which lack of acceptance was expressed. The low expectations were evident in that teachers and peers alike thought that pupils with disabilities might not be competent enough to participate in certain strenuous activities. It would appear that teachers and non-disabled peers had low expectations of pupils with visible, physical disabilities which were viewed as particularly unacceptable in situations where competitive sports were involved. It was felt that such pupils should not be involved in competitive sports activities as they would be subjected to ridicule by non-disabled peers. In preparing for competitive ball games and other athletic events, sports organizers and potential team-mates were emphatic that merit was the only criterion for participation. Two non-disabled peers who had disabled siblings and teachers who had just been trained were more amenable to the idea of pupils with disabilities taking part in sports.

The quality of education would appear to be compromised if Machingura et al's (in press) internal efficiency aspects of access and performance are taken into account. Access to education is denied where there are overprotective concerns for safety. Similarly pupil performance in these activities is unlikely to reach its peak because of lack of opportunity to practice as a result of stigmatization, ridicule and low expectations. It is therefore possible to project that, as a direct result of this, participation in sports beyond the school setting is likely to be jeopardized. This means that the quality of sports participation is also compromised in terms of Machingura et al's external efficiency. The normalization goal of inclusive education would thus appear to be negated as pupils with disabilities are denied a chance to participate and reach the peak in Physical Education activities and sports.

Pupils with disabilities who were in higher grades, generally thought that sports were important, but not as important as academic subjects that could later help them secure a livelihood. They were more concerned with trying to do well in subjects such as Mathematics. Most pupils with physical disabilities said that they were not competent enough to participate in sports activities where a lot of skill was required. In the lower grades pupils with disabilities viewed Physical Education as being just as important as any other subject and more interesting than many other subjects. They however pointed out that they were not able to do well in many of the activities which they considered too difficult. Kane (1992) reveals that children with disabilities can be involved in many sporting disciplines if they are adapted to suit their unique needs.

Class-teachers and sports organizers said that they knew that sports are important for pupils with disabilities as they provided much needed leisure and were a welcome relief from the monotony of desk-work in classrooms. The teachers observed that some of the disabilities that the children had did not allow them to take part in some sports and Physical Education activities. Fait and Dunn (1984) say that sports for children with disabilities go beyond skill training and development as there is need for therapeutic activities which enhance the child's physiological functioning.

Non-participation in sports by pupils with disabilities either because they are not accepted by non-disabled peers and teachers or because they perceive sports as unimportant or unmanageable may send the unintended messages. Firstly this may confirm to non-disabled pupils that pupils with disabilities are not good enough to participate in any sporting activities. Secondly the message that they are not good enough may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy that in turn lowers their self-esteem. These pupils are denied what Price (1990) calls an opportunity to express in a visible way that being disabled is not synonymous with being invalid and may internalize their disabilities negatively and possibly begin to play a sick role. Dykens and Cohen (1996) assert that sports develop self esteem, social competence and

adaptative behavior of children. Guttman (1999) asserts that sports for children with disabilities restore psychological equilibrium by countering feelings of inferiority. In addition to this Stewart (2001) asserts that sports serve as a catalyst for socialization with non-disabled peers. Through sports, children with disabilities are able to communicate with others and so develop friendships as others accept and acknowledge their efforts. Mussen (1984) says children with disabilities have generally been found to be socially inassertive, defiant, resentful, suspicious, destructive, impulsive and lacking self-control. Involving the children with disabilities in various sporting disciplines may therefore be expected to alleviate a lot of these ills while lack of access to sport for any reason is likely to aggravate these adjustment problems.

All the teachers said that they did not know how to adapt sports equipment, facilities and games to suit specific disability-related limitations. Some of the teachers knew that they could adapt rules for some sports activities. The teachers generally did not know what to teach and how to teach it. Some acknowledge not having specialist knowledge in Physical Education while others hope that the general activities that all children take part in will somehow meet the specific needs of their pupils with disabilities. Although all primary schoolteachers in Zimbabwe are required to teach Physical Education, very few major in this area during teacher training (Nziramanga, 1999). The implication of the foregoing is that most teachers may not have sufficient depth to properly teach Physical Education to non-disabled pupils let alone facilitate adaptation of Physical Education lessons and sports activities for pupils with disabilities. To compound this, training to teach pupils with disabilities is largely a post-qualification option and very few teachers proceed to specialize in this area so most teachers may also not have any basic principles of how to teach pupils with disabilities (Nziramanga, 1999).

Among important factors listed by teachers as contributing to the non-participation of pupils with disabilities was the unavailability of ordinary equipment as well as specialized, disability-related

equipment adapted to match the needs of these pupils. Poorly prepared grounds were also listed as a hindrance in the participation of pupils with disabilities in sports.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It emerged that teachers and both non-disabled and disabled pupils had low expectations of the latter as potentially competent athletes. The teachers and non-disabled pupils viewed sports as competitive events in which pupils with disabilities were unlikely to do well, or worse still, get physically or emotionally hurt while participating. A significant number of pupils with disabilities appear to have internalized these notions about Physical Education and sports. In addition to viewing sports as unimportant for pupils with disabilities, teachers also thought Physical Education as a subject was not to be depended on as a future means of earning a livelihood even by non-disabled pupils. The teachers and pupils with disabilities viewed sports as leisure activities in which only a few talented pupils could excel and eventually earn a living. In this light sports could not be expected to have a bearing on pupils with disabilities' ability to earn a living. Pupils with more pronounced disabilities and who had been in the school system for longer were more likely to think sports were unimportant and therefore avoid participating. Most of the teachers did not know what activities would be suitable for children with specific disabilities and how to adapt equipment, activities and rules to suit them. Teachers listed a variety of sports equipment and facilities that they said hindered the participation of pupils with disabilities in sports. Some of the things listed were general and basic while others were disability-related.

In light of these conclusions, it is recommended that:

1. Government, through the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture should improve the likelihood of successful inclusion of children with disabilities in primary school sports and Physical Education by;

- i. Engaging mainstream primary schoolteachers and non-disabled pupils awareness campaigns focusing on the strengths and potentials of pupils with disabilities in various disciplines including Physical Education and sports;
  - ii. Involve mainstream primary schoolteachers in in-service Physical Education and sports training workshops dealing with disability-related therapeutic interventions;
  - iii. Beginning counseling sessions for pupils with disabilities who are included in mainstream primary schools. Such sessions could focus on assertiveness training for the pupils to enable them to be more forthcoming in sports activities;
2. Schools should work closely with the government, parents and the donor community in trying to procure essential sports equipment for all pupils, including those with disabilities.

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