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## Research Topic: Is Physical Education a Form of Exclusionary Closure to Children with Disabilities?

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**Research Topic: Is Physical education a form of exclusionary closure to children with disabilities?**

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**Abstract**

Worldwide, there are benefits that accrue to children or adults who engage in physical activities (Johnson, 2009). Within this context, this study sought to find out the conditions under which students with disabilities participate in Physical Education in Zimbabwean schools. A purposive sample of 72 teachers and 15 heads of schools who are students of Great Zimbabwe University participated. The research was largely qualitative, gathering data through a survey that used an open ended questionnaire for teachers and focused interviews for school heads. The typical experiences in schools are a complete denigration of the children with disabilities. Evidence indicates that children with disabilities are pitied and reduced to spectators. Teachers lack competencies to handle children with disabilities. Values, orientations, norms and practices in schools are skewed against children with disabilities and school facilities are just but exclusionary closures to them. The study argues that a well defined and coherent programme that inculcates habits of inclusion in teachers, heads, fellow children and the community at large around a set of shared values, beliefs and knowledge about inclusion be promoted in Zimbabwean schools. Further studies that include the disabled pupils themselves as subjects could be carried out to get the effect of exclusionary factors on children with disabilities in Physical Education.

**Key words:** Children with disabilities, inclusion, physical education, exclusionary closure, regular primary schools.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

After independence in 1980, the government of Zimbabwe adopted an education for all policy. Enrolments skyrocketed. One core subject that was integrated in the curriculum is Physical Education. Physical education is an integral part of the education process, which enhances and harmonizes the physical, intellectual as well as the emotional aspects of an individual's personality chiefly through directed activities (Zvobgo, 1986). Unfortunately, at one time, it was the global practice to exclude from education anyone perceived to be different such as those with disabilities (Tsai and Lena 2009) as they were judged to be either incapable of benefitting from such an education as existed or to be potentially disturbing (Green and Engelbrecht, 2007). Subsequently, with the emergency of a 'charity discourse', missionaries and other philanthropists established separate special schools to offer care and certain forms of education. When the Zimbabwean 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 (Mpofu et al, 2007) but because the institutions seemed to be part of the oppressive social system through which people with disabilities were excluded from participating in society (Barton, 1998).

Government responsibility then became the development of policy of integrated provision for most children with special needs (Matshalaga 2004). 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 (EFA 2001) that education should be accorded to all people. To achieve this end, UNESCO'S Salamanca stated that children with special educational

needs have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy (UNESCO, 1994). The document to which Zimbabwe is a signatory, maintains that learners with disabilities should be educated together with their age peers, sharing educational experiences but following individual learning plans with the necessary support available. Zimbabwe is also a signatory to various 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).

In the Zimbabwean context, although there is no specific legislation for inclusive education (Mpfu, 2003), inclusive education involves the identification and minimization or elimination of barriers to students' participation in traditional settings (that is, schools, homes, communities and workplaces) and the maximization of resources to support learning and participation (Mutepfa, Mpfu and Chataika, 2007). To this effect, inclusive education of children with special educational needs in regular schools which is being pursued in Zimbabwe is formed by the philosophy of 'normalisation'. The basic tenets of this philosophy are that schools and communities are not complete unless inclusive education gives all children a chance to realise their potential. 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 revised Education Act (2006) also enshrined 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 Mpfu, Kasayira, Mhaka, Chireshe and Maunganidzel

(2007) note that government has adopted 'growth with equity' as the articulating principle of inclusive education.

Growth with equity was put in place to ensure quality in education. According to Machingura, Magudu, Maravanyika, Moyo and Musengi (in press) quality in education is relative, elusive and difficult to define but they condense indicators of quality provided by Doherty (2008); Cartwright, (2007); Alstete, (2004), into internal efficiency of education. In this study, the proxies of internal efficiency in Physical Education and Sport include access, performance and a conducive 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 people with disabilities are supposed to be taught with others and participate in all activities, including those without disabilities in ordinary schools. Thus, this study was undertaken to find out whether Physical Education is a form of exclusionary closure to children with disabilities.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

Following up the debate on inclusion / exclusion of children with disabilities, a number of studies have been carried out, mainly in the United States and Europe, to try and find out the relationship between society, particularly in educational settings, and children with disabilities.

Most of these studies investigated the issue of attitudes and perceptions of people towards children with disabilities. Among these studies were those of Center (1985), which investigated on Principals' attitudes; Longoria and Marini (2006) on perceptions of children's attitudes; Tripp, French and Sherrill (2007) on contact theory and attitudes of children in physical education programmes; and Duchane, Leung and Coulter-Ken (2008) on pre-service physical educator attitude toward teaching students with disabilities. Findings in all these studies showed negative attitudes as the single most contributing factor to exclusion of children with disabilities from full participation in physical education and sport activities.

Some of the studies compiled in International reports and documentaries settled on finding out about resources and facilities that children with disabilities can possibly use, for example, Directgov-Disabled people (2010); Active Parent Education Kit Fact (2010). Other studies and international reports have dwelt on trying to clarify issues and terminologies on inclusion and exclusion of children with disabilities that seem to be shrouded with complexities and confusion, for example, the Save the Children UK (2002); WHO Report (2004); Cure Our Children Foundation (2010). And yet others have attempted to provide solutions to problems in education epitomised by inclusion of children with disabilities in physical education, for example, Grosshans and Kiger (2004), suggesting teaching tips; Martins (2002) and WHO Report (2004), both spelling out Adaptive Teaching Education techniques.

Locally, and indeed in Zimbabwe, topical issues on disabilities and inclusion/ exclusion, have been confronted within the contexts and platforms of activism as depicted by topics such as 'Disability is much more than a physical constraint' in AIDS Portal News (2007); 'Africa's disabled will not be forgotten' in Africa Renewal (Kwenda, 2010) and the 'The forgotten tribe:

People with disabilities in Zimbabwe (Choruma, 2007). Others have focussed on academic debates based on research, for example, those of Mpofu (2003); Mutepfa, Mpofu and Chataika (2007); Mpofu et al (2007).

Gleaning through all these researches and debates, it is apparent that the majority of them seeking insights and solutions to problems engendered by inclusion of people with disabilities in purposeful interactions and activity have been carried out in Europe and the United States as alluded to earlier on. In Zimbabwe, a minimal of them has been done. The major difference between these studies basically lie in differences in context as well as in research designs, individuals sampled, and assessment instruments employed ( Duchane, Leung and Coulter-Ken, 2008). In many developing countries, indeed here in Zimbabwe, the issue of inclusion and exclusionary factors in physical education, has not been extensively explored (WHO Report, 2004) and the current study therefore attempted to explore this gap by testing five variables against exclusion of children with disabilities in physical education.

To support the above literature, the study sought conceptual framework built on the philosophies underpinning the issues of disability and inclusive education as directed by the principles of human rights and equity (UNICEF Convention on the rights of the child, 1989); UNESCO, 1994), the principles of social justice (Jerlinder, Dannermark and Gill, 2009) and promoting the human rights and health of individuals with a disability (Blauwet 2006). To understand these issues more clearly, conceptual definitions of some terminologies are necessary.

Disability is viewed as any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being (save the Children UK, 2002; Bourk and Worthington, 2000; Manilla Bulletin Report, 2009; WHO,

2004). A disability may be physical, cognitive, sensory, emotional, developmental, or some combination of these (Schechter and Feldman, 2010). This means that disability refers to problems or activity limitations that result from interactions between personal and contextual factors, and no longer determined by how a person looks or acts, but can be determined only by assessment of individual performance and context (WHO,2004) Thus, in countries such as Zimbabwe, characterised by shortage of assessment experts, the interpretation of the concept might distort the practice in human interactions, say in physical education, ending up with children denied opportunity or access to any programme simply because of the way they look or act.

Alongside the concept of disability is the concept of inclusive education. Inclusive education is a process of increasing the participation of all students in schools, including those with disabilities (WHO, 2004). It is about restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality (Save the Children UK, 2002). This means, it is about disabled children learning effectively once they are in mainstream schools, that is, the focus is on quality of learning, not attendance (WHO, 2004). Whilst in some contexts, the terms mainstream schools and inclusive schools may be used interchangeably, the current study took note of the subtle differences between the two , and hence deliberately left out using the term ‘mainstream schools’ preferring to use the term ‘regular schools’ instead. This is because mainstreaming, in the context of education, as the Save the Children UK (2002) argues, refers to a practice where special needs children who cannot function in a regular classroom to a certain extent, require access to special education classroom, often called a ‘self contained classroom’, or ‘resource room’ under the charge of specialist teachers who try to address any need for

remediation during the school day. In Zimbabwe, there is an insignificant number of schools with such facilities and hence the study did not focus on such schools.

In addition, the study also considered two main approaches to social theories of disability (Bourk and Worthington, 2000). The first approach positions people with disability as welfare recipients in need of care. The second approach views people with disability as individuals with civil rights of access and equity which should be recognised. The current study subscribed to the second approach and drew on the social model to disability to demonstrate that children with disabilities are excluded from participating in physical education due to unequal distribution of resources, negative attitudes of heads, teachers and peers, some common malpractices at school, among other factors.

The social model, as opposed to the medical model, (Save the Children UK, 2002); WHO, 2004; Dowling and Dolan, 2001; Manilla Bulletin, 2009) and indeed this study, argues that it is not the child who has the problem and therefore to be changed, but the social environment in which the child exists. In this case, it is the school environment and school curriculum, in particular the physical education and sport subject that should be adjusted and modified to meet the needs of both children with disabilities and those without disabilities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Zimbabwe, it is government policy to ensure that all children have the right to access equal opportunities in education. In the regular primary schools where Physical Education is timetabled and is supposed to be taught to both disabled and non-disabled children, it is not clear whether the needs of children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport activities, are

being met. The study therefore was undertaken to find out whether Physical Education and Sport in the regular primary schools, is not a form of exclusionary closure to children with disabilities.

### **Purpose and significance of Study**

The purpose of the study was to determine factors in Physical Education and Sport that exclude children with disabilities from meaningful participation and development. It would also lay down the foundation from which the suggestions to promote the full participation of children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport, could be developed. Beside, the study would add value to international debate on cross-cultural and contextual studies as the world is made aware of the dilemmas unfolding between inclusive education philosophies and real practice in schools. There is limited research that explores the specific barriers to participation in sport for people with a disability in developing countries. Much more evidence is needed along with financial support to ensure that people with a disability have both the opportunity and the choice to participate in sport regardless of which country they live in.

### **Research Questions**

The main question addressed by the study was:

Is Physical Education a form of exclusionary closure to children with disabilities?

### **Sub-problems**

To what extent are the disabled children involved in Physical Education and Sport in the regular primary schools?

Are teachers and heads competent enough to handle children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport?

Do schools have adequate and suitable Physical Education and Sport facilities for children with disabilities?

What are the attitudes of peers and teachers towards the participation of children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport?

What are the common practices in Physical Education and Sport that discriminate against meaningful participation of children with disabilities?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study was a descriptive survey of which both qualitative and quantitative types of research designs were used because the two can effectively be combined to provide insight that neither type can provide alone (Hopkins, 2008; Hoepf, 2009). In this survey, both questionnaires and interviews were used to draw, from the respondents, information pertaining to exclusionary factors to children with disabilities in Physical Education. It is argued that the descriptive survey research design is the method of research that looks with intense accuracy at the phenomenon of the moment and then describes precisely what the researcher sees (White 2005).

### **Population and Sample**

The target population was all 7000 teachers and heads in Masvingo Province, covering all the seven districts comprising Chivi, Masvingo, Gutu, Zaka, Bikita, Mwenezi and Chiredzi. From this population, 72 primary trained teachers, 32 males and 40 females, were randomly selected to participate in the study, but first, having been drawn from a purposive sample of 15 primary schools, In addition, a cohort of 15 school heads, one from each school, also participated. Although the researchers were aware of the limitations posed by purposive sampling, that is, biased because of personal selection (Hopkins, 2008), purposive sampling was preferred because at the time of study, one of the co-researchers was a Physical Education lecturer at one of the universities in Masvingo Province, and during the time of teaching practice supervision, had easy access to schools from where all participants in the study were selected because of who they were and what they knew (Siegle, 2002) about teaching Physical Education and children with disabilities. This means, all the participants were 'qualified' teachers with some teaching experiences ranging from 1 to 20 years and were drawn from regular schools, which purported to practice a form of inclusive education where pupils with disabilities such as physical, cognitive, emotional or sensory learn together with pupils without disabilities.

### **Instruments**

A questionnaire containing open-ended items, amenable for use in both quantitative and qualitative methods (Hannan, 2007), through soliciting information pertaining to the teachers' perceptions on the exclusion of children with disabilities from Physical Education and Sport, was used. Such qualitative reports 'typically rich with detail and insight into the participants' experiences of the phenomenon observed, (Hoepf, 2009) were found to be more meaningful. However, such questionnaires had some limitations to the current study in that a large amount of

data was generated and this took a long time to process and analyse (StatPac, 2010). Apart from questionnaires, the study also employed qualitative, informal, conversational interviews with heads of schools (Patton, 1990) because these interviews allowed the researchers to freely probe and explore, though keeping interactions focused, the issues pertaining to ‘exclusionary factors’ as well as excluding questions that were found to be unproductive for the goals of the research (Hoepfl,2009).

### Research Procedures

The questionnaires were distributed to 15 schools and administered to participants on the spot, that is, at their schools to ensure a 100% return rate. Interviews were conducted with individual heads in their offices. Data collection stretched over a period of four months that coincided with one of the researcher’s time of teaching practice supervision in the primary schools. To illustrate the distribution of questionnaires and interviews depending on the size of the school, the table below was used.

School	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	total
questionnaires	4	8	6	4	4	4	5	12	3	4	4	5	3	3	3	72
Interviews	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	15

### Data Analysis

Data from open-ended items were coded and that from interviews were recorded in form of written notes and both analysed by identifying themes that emerged (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This means as soon as data was gathered, the responses were streamlined and categorised into themes according to each of the variables tested. For example, to respond to the question “to what extent are children with disabilities involved in Physical Education?”, the responses were categorised into the following themes: ---are not involved at all; involved to a limited extent; discriminated and segregated; are fully involved; no limitations. This enabled the researchers to quantify the data that was presented in frequency tables and analysed according to percentages. Besides, participants’ quotes ‘the voice in the text’ (Hoepfl, 2009) were also used to illustrate the themes being described because it was important to understand behaviour from the subject’s own frame of reference (Siegle, 2002).

## **Results and Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to determine factors that excluded children with disabilities from participating in Physical Education and Sport activities at their schools. Participants were asked to indicate what they perceived were the effect of such factors based on five variables namely: disabled children’s involvement in Physical Education and Sport activities; competencies of teachers to handle children with disabilities; availability of Physical Education and Sport facilities in schools; attitudes of peers and teachers towards children with disabilities; and common practices that discriminate against children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport. Responses from 72 teachers and 15 heads were categorised into themes that were both quantitatively and qualitatively analysed.

## **Involvement of children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport**

When asked to indicate the extent to which children with disabilities are involved in Physical Education and Sport activities in their schools, results indicated that the majority of the respondents (52, 78%) revealed that children with disabilities are not involved at all or they are completely excluded. In some cases, such children are involved to a limited extent (19.44%) and in other cases, they are discriminated and segregated (16, 67%). Only a few respondents (8, 34%) indicated that children with disabilities are fully involved and 2, 77% said there are no limitations given.

These results have shown that if children with disabilities in the regular or inclusive primary schools are not involved in the Physical Education and Sport activities, then their rights as children are seriously violated (Martins, 2010). Although Zimbabwe is a signatory to various conventions that advocated inclusive education in all its schools, for instance, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Human Rights of People with Disabilities (1989), implementation of such inclusive practices are barely at a minimum. Practices in schools show that such disabled children are seriously disadvantaged. They are not fully participating and benefitting from the Physical Education activities.

The Active Parent Education Kit Fact (2010) clearly states that young people, regardless of whether they have a disability or not, enjoy their sporting experiences in the same way. Through these activities, physical educators can teach important game and life skills such as the value of good competition, fair play, loyalty, cooperation, and the value of working as a team (Grosshans and Kiger, 2004). In addition, children who participate in such activities, improve in strength,

coordination and flexibility (Martins, 2010). This evidence suggests that if disabled children in our primary schools are not fully involved, and are not accorded the opportunities to participate, then there is something wrong in our regular schools and in the education system as a whole. In other words, the Zimbabwean school curriculum, as typified by Physical Education as the subject used in this study, is acting as a form of exclusionary closure to the full participation of children with disabilities in school activities. This means the Zimbabwean educational policies on inclusive education need to be re-examined to address the plight of disabled children. This rising incidence of disability, particularly in developing countries has the potential to place further burdens on governments and health care systems (Seymour, Reid and Bloom 2009). Sport can be a low-cost and effective means to foster positive health and well-being, social inclusion and community building for people with a disability.

### **Competencies of teachers to handle children with disabilities**

The study also investigated whether teachers in regular schools are competent enough to handle children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport. Results that emerged showed that respondents were not quite sure about what to say. However, indications were that teachers are not competent and qualified enough to handle such children (44, 56 %) and they are not skilled (27, 78%), as well as lacking knowledge about what disabled children are capable of doing (11, 11%). Such sentiments are confirmed by comments made by some of the research participants in the open ended questions:

*I am not sure of my competency. I was never trained to do that because I did not train in Special Education*

*I do not have adequate skills to handle such children.*

*I am not sure about what these children are capable of doing.*

Such sentiments, although they may appear too extreme, could be evidence enough of the reality on the ground in schools in this study. In Zimbabwe, teachers who are considered qualified to teach children with disabilities are normally deployed in the special schools. Special schools are schools which serve the needs of the children with disabilities outside the regular system of education (Save the Children UK, 2002). Schechter and Feldman (2010) clarifies that such schools are based on the assumption that children with disabilities have needs, which cannot be addressed, within the mainstream schools. As such, in Zimbabwe, a few teachers who teach in special schools often train in special colleges or join university education programmes where they receive professional skills and knowledge to handle children with disabilities. However, inclusive education is a complete paradigm shift from such practices. This study was examining the situation in those schools with a mandate to implement inclusiveness only to unearth that few trained specialised teachers who spill over into regular schools were capable of handling children with disabilities the majority were not. This goes contrary to Darling-Hamond, (1996)'s assertions that what matters most is a competent teacher for every child. It appears, this was not the case in this study. Competent teachers appear an insignificant number because the bulk of the teachers who are not specially trained teach in regular schools and these teachers are, as study evidence suggests, putting disabled children at risk (Tsai and Lena 2009).

The evidence in this study confirms views which suggest that in many cases, regular physical education teachers are not equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively include children with disabilities into their classes (Grosshans and Kiger, 2004). Such teachers take disabled

children as an extra burden (Gallagher, 1995) because they overload their teaching time if extra attention has to be paid to them. These teachers who are not properly trained, Bauman (2005) observes, may have an emphasis on performance and winning, resulting in children with disabilities finding few opportunities to be included in school sport.

### **Availability and suitability of Physical Education and Sport facilities in schools**

Children with disabilities can be excluded from participating in physical education activities because of the nature and type of facilities available in schools. When asked to indicate whether or not Physical Education and Sport facilities are available and suitable in schools, views raised point to the fact that there are no suitable facilities for the disabled children in the regular primary schools 43 (54%) and where these facilities are available, they are not suitable for the disabled children (12,67%). In some cases such facilities are expensive to buy as expressed by 16, 67% of the respondents, and hence are inadequate (13, 89%). Only 2, 77% indicated that facilities are available in schools.

Results above indicate that there is a big discrepancy in the provision of physical education facilities in the regular schools. These schools are not offering special educational facilities that meet the unique needs of these 'differently abled' (Johnson 2009) pupils because of limited resources and facilities and the lack of strong political will on the part of government to take responsibility for the education of these children (Manila Bulletin, 2009). Yet, overlooking the developmental needs of people with disabilities or disinvesting from programmes that directly benefit them, can be one of the most dramatic form of exclusion people with disability can face (Choruma, 2007)). This is further confirmed by Kwenda (2010) who cites Kuchera, a born blind child lamenting that there are no projects or programmes whatsoever for disabled people

(Kwenda, 2010). However, the solution to the above problem may lie in the provision of Adaptive Physical Education (APE) programmes (Save the Children UK, 2002). Martins (2010) describes Adaptive Physical Education as teaching that adapts or modifies the curriculum task or environment so that all children can fully participate in Physical Education and Sport. Thus, Adaptive Physical Education, Martins emphasizes, is adapting, or modifying, and/or changing a physical activity so it is appropriate for the person with a disability as it is for a person without a disability. Bauman (2005) adds that Adaptive Physical Education is an individualised programme of physical motor skills and fitness meant to provide disabled children with the opportunity to participate in the regular Physical Education programme.

In view of the above definitions, it might seem that teachers in regular primary schools, where ball games is the main activity, may have the facilities such as playing fields, golf balls, soccer balls and volley balls but what they do not have is the knowledge and skill to adapt or modify such equipment to meet the needs of the disabled children. For instance, the Cure Our Children Foundation (2010) suggests the following modifications for soccer for children of diverse disabilities.

Use walking instead of running

Have well defined boundaries

Reduce playing area

Play six-a-side soccer

If the child uses a wheelchair, allow him/her to hold ball on his/her lap while pushing the wheel chair.

Use a deflated ball, beeper ball or brightly coloured ball

Use a target that makes noise when hit

For volley ball, the following suggestions were given:

Use larger, lighter, softer, bright, coloured balls

Allow players to catch ball instead of volleying

Allow to self toss and set ball

Lower the net

Reduce the playing court

When such adaptive approaches are used, coupled by barrier-free entry to the playing field and obstacle-free surfacing (Bauman, 2005), it moves children with disabilities off the sidelines in Physical Education and Sport. It also makes children realise justice and equity in resource distribution and cultural recognition as directed by the justice theories espoused by Jerlinder, Danermark and Gill (2009).

Where other sophisticated facilities such as swimming pools and tennis courts are required, schools, particularly near urban areas, should be able to work in partnership with some local

sports organisations or in collaboration with more affluent schools for the provision of resources and opportunities for children with disabilities to develop their potential to the full.

### **Attitudes of peers towards children with disabilities in Physical Education in schools**

Attitudinal barriers are recognised as an impediment to success of persons with disabilities (Duchane, Leung and Coulter-Ken, 2008). This concern stems from the belief that such an attitude can have a direct influence on the successful inclusion of disabled children into regular physical education classes. To this end, the present study also wanted to determine what attitudes of peers can be considered as exclusionary factors against the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools.

Issues that emerged show that peers isolate and shun their schoolmates with disabilities during physical education and sport activities (54, 75%) and underrate their disabled counterparts because they do not take them seriously. Disturbing statements were gleaned from the open ended questions. These statements bear testimony:

*The peers isolate and shun their disabled friends.*

*Some peers laugh at their disabled friends for failure to do as expected*

*Peers underrate their disabled counterparts and do not take them seriously*

However, there were a few who:

*Are helpful and make an effort to assist the disabled counterparts.*

The above comments support observations made by Save the Children UK (2002) which indicates that negative attitudes can be found at all levels-children, parents, community members, teachers, government officials and disabled children themselves. This means when children are shunned by their schoolmates, they in turn can develop low self esteem, hiding away and shunning social interaction, which can lead directly to self-exclusion from physical education in the primary schools (Martin, 2010). In interview, some heads in this study pointed out that if one happens to observe some of the physical education lessons one will be confronted by children, particularly in the lower grades, who first report about the failure of the disabled child to perform a task, no matter how much the disabled child tries. A negative comment given by a class mate may be more painful than that given by the teacher because it thwarts the 'I Know I Can Do It' spirit (Martin, 2010). It also drives away the self confidence and self esteem which help the promotion of fitness and positive attitude towards sport.

To help children with disabilities regain their enthusiasm and interest in sport, parents and teachers are urged to explore with their children what might work for them by asking questions such as (Active Parent Education Kit Fact Sheet 5, 2010)

Do you want to play a team sport or individual sport?

Would you prefer indoor or outdoor sport?

Do you want to play socially or competitively?

In this way teachers and children begin to understand each other leading to the disabled child motivated to participate otherwise schools in the study appear a long way from total inclusion. In sum, in special education classrooms, both teachers and assistants need to work and learn

together in order to develop, execute and assess the curriculum for each student with disabilities (Schechter and Feldman 2010). However, different perceptions with regard to their partner's capacity and motivation to learn could hinder the effectiveness of the class learning processes.

### **Attitudes of Teachers and Heads towards children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport**

The study also wanted to find out the attitudes of teachers and heads towards children with disabilities in Physical Education classes. Results of the survey revealed that generally, teachers have a negative attitude towards children with disabilities (41, 7%). They look at these children with pity (22. %), but all the same they are friendly (13, 9%). Another 13, 9% indicated that they are overprotective. A shocking revelation, although expressed by only 8, 23% of the respondents, was that teachers do not even notice the existence of the disabled children when it comes to their involvement in sports and physical education.

Indeed Chappell (2007) believes that negative attitudes to disability are arguably the single biggest barrier to disabled children accessing and benefiting from the inclusive education. Though he was referring to sport in developing countries, Chappell, (2007) further pointed out that the impact of such attitudes is evident in the home, school, and community and at the level of national policy-making in terms of planning, budgeting and programming. This was also evident in this study.

In the same vein Longoria and Marini (2006) cite various literature, for instance, that of Antonak and Livnek (2000), Byrd and Elliot (1988) and Gallagher (1995) that suggest that persons with disabilities are perceived negatively; and also that they are economic burdens (Gallagher, 1995)

and helpless and dependent (Antonak and Livnek, 1991). The idea that teachers do not even notice the existence of the disabled children or take it as a 'not ought to matter issue' (Jerlinder, Danermark and Gill, 2009) is disheartening if one imagines the same is happening in our schools.

Other literature brings forth principals' attitudes towards the integration of disabled children into regular schools. Thus, Center et al's findings (Center, 1985) indicate that principals are positive only about integrating children who demand neither extra help competencies nor extracurricular duties from the regular class teacher. The same results also suggest that principals are dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of support services routinely provided and now seek resource personnel with the expertise to directly assist the regular teacher in the classroom. The same can be said about heads in the schools in this study where one indicated in the interview that:

*Some of the demands require substantial investment in time and resources that our schools are not capable of meeting.*

Thus, running throughout the survey is the fact that teachers or schools in general, have negative attitudes towards children with disabilities. In as much as governments might want to implement policies that accord equal rights and opportunities to all disabled children (Nelson Mandela in Martin, 2010), teachers and schools are making very minimal efforts to maximise inclusive education. Instead of doing something that benefits these children, they just look at them with pity and over protectiveness, or with admiration as found out by Harris cited by Longoria and Marini (2006). However, studies involving attitude factors, carried out by Duchaine, Leung and Coulter-Kern (2008) suggest that favourable attitudes can be cultivated by providing physical

education teachers with appropriate coursework and positive experiences of working with children with disabilities.

### **Common practices that discriminate against children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport**

Another variable that the study investigated was the issue of common practices that discriminate against children with disability in Physical Education and these practices seem to be prevailing in the regular classes. Results indicated that the main fabric that ties all other practices is the ‘children with abilities don’t matter syndrome’ (59%). This practice, the ‘ought not to matter’ notion as Jerlinder, Danermark and Gill (2009) put it, permeates through all behaviours that are evident at Physical Education practices in schools.

The evil perpetrated by this practice was demonstrated when interviews with heads revealed that:

*Whilst able bodied children are actively engaged in physical education games and sport, be it athletics or ball games, the children with disabilities are asked to sit comfortably in the sheds.*

*They are asked to be recorders or judges of winning teams, or simply asked to be spectators to cheer up the teams.*

The saddest thing that is emerging from the interviews is that the disabled children are ‘naturally’ being sidelined from the benefits that accrue to children who engage in active participation (Johnson 2009). One head of school put it this way in an interview:

*The teachers themselves seem not to be aware of the 'invisible 'damage that they are causing on these children.*

Another one said:

*Sadly, the disabled child thinks it is a favour by being asked to be the judge or recorder and the teachers on the other hand think they are doing a wonderful job of protecting the 'vulnerable 'child from shame and criticisms, oblivious of the fact that disability is not an illness but a condition and therefore should be treated as such.*

The scenario coming out of the schools in this study appear to be disturbing because the teacher, as the significant other person in the life of the child with disability, must be positive, supportive and dynamic and should focus on what the child with a disability CAN do (Save the Children UK, 2002)) and work from there. The continual underperformance of less privileged students particularly those with disabilities, is an area of serious concern to educators (Niesche and Jorgensen 2010).

Other practices that emerged include discrimination in purchasing of sporting equipment (6, 94%), labelling these disabled children as vulnerable and weak and therefore to be protected (5.56%), and stigmatisation (4.17%). These practices serve no purpose to children with disabilities except acting as exclusionary factors prohibiting disabled children from participating in Physical Education.

## **Conclusion**

With the inclusive philosophy that currently should be permeating our schools (Duchane, Leung, and Coulter-ken, 2008) and considering that today, the idea of children with disabilities being able to participate in Physical Education and Sport is not so uncommon; it is not the case in all parts of the world, particularly in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Children in regular primary schools are not being actively involved in Physical Education and Sport activities. The study has identified various reasons why physical education and sport is an exclusionary closure for children with disabilities. Among those identified are negative attitudes by peers and teachers perpetrated against children with disability, lack of suitable and adequate facilities in schools, teachers not properly qualified and prepared to handle inclusive education, and adopting practices that seem not to bother about what children with disabilities are capable of doing. This situation is disturbing because no matter how much the government may try to enforce the policies that allow all children free access to equal educational opportunities, the reality on the ground is not. This study has shown that much more needs to be done to raise the involvement of the disabled children in Physical Education and Sport to the same level as non-disabled children in our schools. Lack of understanding and awareness of how to include people with a disability in sport, limited opportunities and programmes for participation, training and competition and lack of accessible facilities, such as gymnasiums and buildings all collude to make Physical Education an exclusionary closure to children with disabilities.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the findings and issues that emerged in the present study, it is recommended that first and foremost, the government should ensure that the philosophy and principles behind inclusive education are clearly understood by everyone who has something to do with disabled children in

our schools. This can be done by scaffolding teachers and heads with in-service teacher education programmes at colleges and at universities across the country that equips them with skills and knowledge of how to deal with children with disabilities. Each school should ensure that it has at least one member qualified in special needs education to teach children with disabilities.

There should be a deliberate programme in schools through mounting workshops that increase interaction between teachers and children with disabilities. This interaction can be facilitated by ensuring that regular schools procure suitable equipment and facilities that allow meaningful participation of children with disabilities in Physical Education and Sport activities. The common saying that hinges on “Disability is not Inability’ should not just be lip service but a philosophy that guides all practices that relate to Physical Education and Sport.

For attitude change to occur interaction with children with disabilities should be extended to include parents, community members and other stakeholders such as local organisations linked to Sports and Disability. This networking among different sectors of the schools communities enhances deeper understanding and realisation of the needs of disabled children. To reinforce this idea, a school may, for instance, have a committee comprising the head, special needs education teacher, one parent representing parents of disabled children, a community leader such as a councillor or chief and a member from organisations linked to Sports and Disability. Such a composition and networking of stakeholders will ensure a full representation of views and eventually a close monitoring of the principles of inclusive education.

Finally, government should redefine its policies that relate to learning of children with disabilities in the regular primary schools. A lot could be happening in special schools but it

appears nothing worth mentioning is happening in regular schools despite the motivation of the highly popularised inclusive education. This means policies that relate to curriculum planning, provision of resources, implementation, supervision and evaluation of the participation of disabled children in physical education and Sport, should be revised to achieve the educational goals of these children.

The curriculum must cater to specific needs arising from a particular disability (e.g. motor skills for cerebral palsy or communication skills for pervasive developmental disorder), must build upon the learner's strengths, and must flexibly allow different learning styles in the classroom (Kirk and Gallagher cited in Schechter and Feldman 2010).

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