



Challenges experienced by remedial education program in peri-urban primary schools in Zimbabwe. Case study of Riki Primary School in Mashonaland Province, Seke District.

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ABSTRACT: The major concern of the study was that despite having remedial education programs in Zimbabwe schools, the performance in peri-urban primary schools is not below expectation. The purpose was to examine the challenges experienced by remedial education programs in peri-urban primary schools as perceived by remedial teachers, and school administrators. The study used document analysis as the foundation of data collection. Interview questions were used to collect data from teachers and school administrators. Focus group discussions was used to collect data from teachers through using ZOOM online meeting. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. The collected data was clustered into themes in line with the study objectives. The findings identified challenges such as lack of remedial learning resources, stigma and discrimination, class size, facilitator expertise, and high teacher-learner ratio. Therefore, the study concluded that remedial education in Zimbabwe's peri-urban primary schools was ineffective. The study recommended that there is need for the government through the Ministry of Education to revise and review the Zimbabwe school remediation policy, train teachers on how to administer remedial lessons, and provide adequate support to promote effective remedial education.

KEY WORDS: education, remedial education, stigma, discrimination, Special Class (SPC)

INTRODUCTION

It is evident that people have different learning capabilities and intellectually develop at different paces because of their biological and psychological differences. Using different learning styles does not literally leads to learners understanding at the same rate. Research has shown that special attention needs to be taken on how they respond to new knowledge and provide special, assistance where it is needed. (Anilan and Ozgan, 2020). The education system has employed remediation as a tool to be used in assisting those who have intellectual deficiencies. This is in line with studies brought forward by some famous psychologists like Vygotsky, Piaget, and Rogers. They clarified the causes of the underdevelopment of the learners psychologically and gave detailed explanations of the benefits of remediation. Remediation empowers the learners to grasp and comprehend concepts. Learning is an experience that stimulates change in a person. How facilitators relate to learners screened for remedial education is critical to the educational and behavioral development of these children (Luoch, 2017). The mandate of remedial education especially in primary schools is to provide individual attention to learners lagging in languages and mathematics subjects. It involves the partial removal of struggling learners from the mainstream classes to remedial classes where they are given special attention to master missed concepts. The remedial education program is a necessary psychological learning intervention but its effectiveness tends to be compromised by challenges faced by learners screened for remediation. As such, this study sought to explore the challenges experienced by learners screened for remedial education in peri-urban primary schools. It also looks into how these challenges can be minimized or eliminated so that there is a holistic educational benefit to the learner.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the relevant literature suggests that remediation programs in schools have been facing several challenges that have negatively affected their success. Research by Gutierrez and Rodrigo (2011) in Mexico shows that primary school facilitators were not fully taught the intricacies of reading and were unaware of the various techniques used to teach remedial reading and spelling skills resulting in frustrations. Remediation facilitators teaching remediation did not have dynamic material, capable of helping remedial learners. In a related study about remedial work in Arab universities, Anilan and Ozgan (2020) indicated that remediation was ineffective due to various challenges. The lack of remedial knowledge affected the effective implementation of remediation of

seventh-grade low achievers at UNRWA schools (Armana & Ramadan, 2011). Papadogiannis et al (2021) in their findings highlighted that primary school remedial programs did not receive enough support from remedial tutors, facilitators, and parents who showed negative attitudes towards the programme.

Remedial classes need a lot of funding as they require a lot of materials for them to function well and achieve their goals. Budgeting for the program becomes an issue that needs serious attention from the school and the government. A study by Shuqair (2018) posits that methods and materials used in the remedial teaching process were ineffective and too basic to capture the attention of some of the remedial learners. Without proper budget allocation, the program will not yield the desired results and will never progress well. Teaching and learning materials should be made, purchased, or selected according to the specific needs of each learner.

A study by Stuck (2014) in Canada discovered that remedial education in primary schools was affected by parental attitude. According to Goodall and Montgomery (2014), while this “parent-involvement” activity can provide a useful foundation for further work, some parents found it hard to accept their children's learning difficulties which need remediation. They however show uncooperative behaviour. Parental involvement and support towards their children’s performance greatly impact the program's success.

In their research, Marineli, Berlinski, and Busso (2019) in Malaysia discovered that remedial learners in primary schools had a negative self-concept. This made learners embark on hordes of negative responses toward the program. Learner’s absenteeism, poor participation, mischievous acts during the program, and not doing activities are some of the actions that learners get into. As this is not enough student delinquencies hinder their development and even spread to other learners resulting in disruption and the creation of a non-conducive learning environment (Shivan, Vijayabanu & Ruthour, 2023).

Remedial education was crafted to provide educational compensation and attempt to remediate cognitive deficiencies. This is not so for most learners as they view it as punishment for failing to understand concepts in mainstream classes (Anilan & Ozgan, 2020). In a study by Kangwa (2022), stigma and discrimination associated with remediation in primary schools were identified thus causing a psychological burden that has negative effects and discourages learners’ efforts. Remedial learners are in some cases not accepted by their non-remedial classmates and may be harassed and teased causing anxiety and stress (Smith & Wallace, 2016; Wekesa, 2015). Remedial learners find themselves in unacceptable situations with their peers and unsatisfactory relationships with the facilitators. Learner’s self-esteem is affected leading to the learners’ resentment of school causing educational problems like drop-outs (Gregory, 2018).

The reviewed literature on remedial education shows that it is affected by a lot of challenges. This motivated the researcher to examine the challenges faced in Zimbabwe's peri-urban primary schools' remedial education.

Aim of the study

The study aims to explore challenges experienced by learners screened for remedial education in peri-urban Zimbabwe’s primary schools.

Objectives of the Study

1. Establish challenges experienced by learners screened for remedial education when taking remedial lessons in peri-urban primary schools.
2. Examine these challenges faced by remedial education during teaching and learning and how to solve them
3. Identify support systems essential in remedial education programs in peri-urban Zimbabwe’s primary schools.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The researcher will adopt the qualitative method since the study intends to explore how participants accommodate and assimilate information related to remedial challenges. According to Tracy (2019), qualitative research focuses on collecting and analysing data either written or spoken or textual or visual. It enables the study to focus on offering participants opportunities to share their inner views, opinions, and perceptions. This method is best suited to this research as it will assist the researcher in focusing on an in-depth examination of research issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Jacobs and Tschotschel (2019) argue that qualitative research is based social and cultural phenomena which is mainly on the life experiences. The researcher will assess the participants’ knowledge, behaviours, opinions, and attitudes. Qualitative researchers emphasize how reality is socially produced, how closely the subject study is related, and how the circumstances influence the character of inquiry (Jacobs & Tschotschel 2019; Tracy, 2019). In this study, the researcher will create an atmosphere that enables the participants to air their views verbally or in action about how their knowledge, skill, and attitude development is influenced by the content of the current curriculum

Population and Sampling

The study adopted a case study approach since the study focused on exploring the real issues surrounding people’s lives. Creswell (2018) highlighted that the approach enables the researcher's deep examination of the concept being studied within its real context. The spatial location of the selected school, which is peri-urban is suitable for the research as it enables the researcher to have enough information based on the issues concerning remedial education (Soja, 2010). Riki Primary School was selected because it’s spatial

location which are essential to the study. Purposive sampling was used to select research participants. Document analysis was used as a foundation for data collection. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used as data collection tools (Barbour, 2008).

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed the data collected, typed, and saved as documents in rich text format. Thematic analysis was conducted with the notes captured during interviews and discussions. Data was analyzed based on the six-phase process by Braun and Clarke (2016). The process included familiarization with generated data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes and finally producing a convincing thesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and a discussion of the findings. The section was guided by research questions as follows:

Challenges experienced by learners screened for remedial education when taking remedial lessons?

Unavailability of teaching and learning materials, facilitator expertise, learner attitude, content recycling and parental attitude were identified to be some of the challenges affecting SPC learners as they take their remedial lessons.

Teaching and Learning Resources.

During the interviews and focus group discussions with teachers and the school head, it was noted that there was a critical shortage of teaching and learning materials for all three subjects (Mathematics, Shona, and English). Regarding this issue, a remedial teacher had this to say:

“We don’t have textbooks to support our learning. When it is time to learn Maths, I send one learner to go and ask for a textbook from another class and write on the chalkboard. Sometimes we are not given the textbook because they will be in use or say you are troublesome “munonetsa”.

The above sentiment is a clear testimony that shows that the program is suffering from poor material support. Teachers have developed a negative attitude because of this situation as they feel they are being punished even though there is the concept of improvisation in education on this matter it’s hard to do so. They now believe that the program is just a waste of time if it has no support (Cleland, 2013). Material backup is the cornerstone to the good results of the remediation. A program should only be implemented when the necessary equipment needed in it has been put in place. Also, teaching and learning environments should be made available with the necessary equipment that assist the learners in developing psychologically. Study by Ben-Peretz (2011) revealed that remedial classrooms need to have enough space and furniture as this motivates students to learn and contribute. They need to be full of stimulation which capture their imagination and coerce them to aim higher. One teacher during the discussion highlighted that:

“The state of most of the classrooms in this school is not pleasing and it affects those in remedial classes more. They feel like they are educational outcasts hence they don’t like to attend these remedial classes. Most of the classes do not have furniture and are poorly maintained. They don’t have proper uplift and this has made the remedial education face challenges which are too much to handle”.

The above excerpt concurs well with what the remedial teacher had this to say during interview:

“Teaching without textbooks is not easy. Remedial classes do not have textbooks specifically meant for all the three subjects we teach. The curriculum has no remedial tailored textbooks for remedial students so end up using the available textbooks and try to water down the content to suit the ability level of learners. This process is very cumbersome and draining”

The above responses open up a difficult environment for teachers as they try to implement this curriculum program. One must acknowledge that remediation aims to identify specific gaps in a student's knowledge. We need to understand that once poor planning has occurred there are chances of the student failing to gain foundational knowledge essential for understanding more complex concepts. Cinque (2016) argues that providing learners with adequate materials provides clear pathways to understanding, which can help reduce frustration and anxiety boosting their confidence in their abilities by helping overcome learning challenges. The latest educational policy (competence-based) gives the learner a central role where support is needed in full. It is in this view that the book part should be taken care of in a way that sufficiently gives the learner access to the reading material. Education contributes to economic growth of a country through creation of new knowledge as well as diffusion and transmission of knowledge. Student-to-student participation is minimised through a lack of learning materials. The school administrators had this to say:

“The biggest problem we are facing at this school is the lack of materials to successfully implement the program. It is a special program that needs support from all stakeholders (parents, government, teachers, and learners). It needs extra effort for the learners to benefit from it. The main idea of the program is to reduce the gap that is there between those who are capable and those incapable. Support systems should favor the aim of this program and be a motivator to learners and the facilitators through provision of necessary material and moral support.

For effective remedial teaching and learning, updated curriculum textbooks especially designed for remediation should be made available in all primary schools (Hazaea, 2024). The above findings concurred with the results from a study by Gutierrez and Rodrigo

(2011) in Mexico who highlighted that remedial facilitators who were teaching reading remediation did not have dynamic material or learning resources, capable of helping remedial students. The way it is currently implemented, remedial teaching widens the gap between privileged and disadvantaged students rather than reduces it. Therefore, this study unearthed that learners screened for remedial education were facing a serious shortage of learning materials.

Facilitator Expertise

Many researchers have validated the need for training for those who are handling underprepared students. Recent research, Ben-Peretz (2011), described the relationship that is there between remedial programs and teacher professionalism. Students who are put in remedial programs where the teacher is equipped with the skills to solve the problems affecting the students will likely pass remedial courses, earn higher grades, and be retained less. Research by Fujii et al (2008) indicated that staff training contributed to the increased effectiveness of individual program components such as instruction, counselling, and tutoring as well as overall program effectiveness. Facilitators need to have special skills in attending to the needs of the affected learners. The authors' observations from various studies of remedial education in the states of Mississippi and Texas suggest that fewer than half of the teachers assigned to teach remedial courses are trained to do so or use the literature of the field to guide their practice (Ben-Peretz, 2011). Cleland (2013) echoed this by pointing out that bad remediation costs more as compared good remediation. This was evidenced by what the teachers said:

"I was never trained to teach special classes at college, but when I joined this school, the remedial SPC was the only class without a facilitator. I had no option but to take it because I needed employment. It's a mammoth task for me to write IEPs for every learner and at the same time I need to teach the planned work. We are not specialists in remedial education and we do not have a firm psychological background on how to handle remedial special class learners"

School administrators commented saying:

"Our facilitators in the special education section do not have adequate knowledge on the implementation of the remedial program. Although they are highly qualified, they did not receive specialist training to assist students with learning difficulties. They don't have enough knowledge and skills on the best learning conditions and methods thereof in which remediation takes place"

Hazaea (2024) in the research on teacher preparedness highlighted that the remedial program requires facilitation by experienced teachers who attend to details of both content and process and use timely interventions to evoke curiosity and the will to learn. Attitudinal shifts should be generated through teachers who actively challenge students' language use, logical inconsistencies, and uncertainties, problematize their assumptions, and provide a metacognitive regulatory voice that nurtures the development of independent critical thinkers. This links well with the findings by Luoch (2017) and Shields (2018) that the lack of basic knowledge and skills of remediation by facilitators was one of the main challenges facing primary schools in South Africa.

Class Size

The remedial program is a sensitive activity that focuses on attending to those students who are underprivileged. It is therefore important to look into the population of the special need class. The population in the class doesn't need to overwhelm the teacher to the extent of failing to handle it. Krueger (2000) shows that studies show that manageable class size have a positive effect on the development of the students and it is important to consider it highly when dealing with remedial class. Results from this study revealed that class size is a problem that affects effective remediation. Remedial teachers said this:

"Our classes are large, giving individual attention to twenty learners it's impossible. To teach all three subjects in two hours, I have to teach them like a normal class which is against the policy which states that they should be taught individually based on weaknesses"

School administrators had this to say on class size:

"Remedial classes are too big for our facilitators. This is because this school is over-enrolled. We can only reduce class size by creating other remedial classes but there aren't teachers trained or willing to teach these classes"

The study by Ehrenberg (2001) shows that the number of students in a class affects what is to be learned and how it will be learned. Remedial classes require a one-on-one strategy and this is under the control of class size. The results from this study concur with the idea that promotes the reduction of the carrying capacity of remedial classes to afford remedial learners to get individualized attention. The school administrators admitted and suggested that reducing their remedial facilitator-student ratio could assist remedial facilitators in carrying out the program hence providing individualized learning. Since remedial facilitators complained of large class sizes, the size of the remedial SPC should be reduced to allow remedial facilitators to carry out remediation effectively.

Challenges faced by learners screened for remedial education when taking mainstream lessons

Remediation exercise comes with its negativity for remedial learners. They face various impediments from the time they are selected for remedial exercise throughout the years of their growth. The challenges they face make them lack learning motivation and in most instances create low self-esteem. These challenges include, but are not limited to, stigma and discrimination, teachers' attitudes and time table clashes.

Stigma and Discrimination

There is a belief that amongst learners that those who are screened for remedial lessons are failures and condemned. With this mentality they start to label each other giving derogatory names to those who are in remedial program. This aligns with Ndebele (2014) who argued that this destroys the self-esteem in the learners and most of these are going unnoticed in the schools. In most instances learners are responding to the stigmatisation and discrimination through engaging in child delinquency. Remedial teachers commented by saying this:

“Remedial learners are being labelled all sorts of names by their fellow mainstream peers and some facilitators as well. This kind of behavior dehumanises them and creates negative spirits in them”

Administrators admitted by saying:

“It’s a sad situation. At one time we had a parent who complained about her child not wanting to come to school due to name calling and radicle experiences. Some of them are now having indiscipline issues in school through stigmatisation and discrimination from their peers. The situation needs urgent attention because losing learners is not the education’s agenda”

The study by Beach & Connor (2014) discovered that there was a stigma associated with remediation and the psychological burden negatively affected outcomes and discouraged student’s effort. The above findings concur with Manyumwa et al (2013) and Ndebele (2014) the labelling of the remedial students and stigma attached to being in the remedial class served to demotivate the student. From this study’s findings the researcher discovered that Riki primary school SPC remedial learners did not like being ‘pulled out’ for remedial lessons for of fear of being labelled and being stigmatized.

Time Table Challenges

The study revealed that remedial learners were facing timetable challenges due to the school’s 3 tie hot-seating programme. SPC learners were not adequately learning other subjects of the curriculum in their mainstream classes due to time table clashes. Facilitators had these sentiments:

“These learners miss a lot of concepts due to the three session system practiced at this school. To be able to teach all timetabled subjects for the day, we are supposed to carry out some lesson discussions outside the classroom and SPC remedial learners will still be attending remedial lessons.”

Administrators admitted to time table issues by saying this:

“The issue of time tabling is a challenge to SPC learners. The carrying capacity of the school is way beyond its measure in terms of infrastructure. So we have been forced to introduce three sessions which are not friendly to SPC learners. It has come to our attention that time tables are clashing causing SPC learners to miss learning other subjects of the curriculum”

The study participants revealed that school timetabling was a challenge faced by learners screened for remediation. Due to hot-seating arrangements, timetable clashes left the SPC learners without any choice but to spend the whole day at school waiting to take afternoon mainstream lessons. The study uncovered that mainstream facilitators were compelled to rush through subject content due to overloaded timetables and as such, the SPC remedial learner was negatively affected. The findings by Kinay and Hamidi (2022), revealed that it was difficult for South African primary schools to include remedial lessons on their master timetables.

CONCLUSION

The study generated findings to establish challenges facing learners screened for remedial education in peri-urban primary schools. It was established that SPC remedial learners were facing challenges when taking both remedial and mainstream lessons. When taking remedial lessons, SPC remedial learners faced several challenges which included a lack of learning materials, facilitators’ competence, content recycling, and parental attitude towards the programme. Study findings highlighted that there were no standardised remedial education learning materials such as textbooks for both the facilitators and remedial learners. Remedial facilitators at Riki Primary School were not trained in the intricacies of remediation. In addition, generated study findings highlighted that SPC remedial learners also faced challenges when taking mainstream lessons. Challenges include stigma and discrimination, mainstream facilitator attitudes, and timetabling. The study revealed that SPC remedial learners were stereotypically labeled as unintelligent by teachers and learners at school. These kinds of treatment lead to low self-worth in the learners and destroy the inner person of an individual. If the suggested measures are adopted and implemented, the school’s remediation programs will succeed in helping learners with learning difficulties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above-stated conclusions, the study gives the following recommendations: There is a need for the Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, through its training institutions, to train all primary school facilitators on how to administer remedial lessons. There is a need for adequate support from the Ministry of Primary and Primary Education to produce

standardized remedial education material to be used by all primary schools in Zimbabwe to promote effective remedial education. The remedial learners should have a platform to share their grievances with the Ministry of Education experienced during remedial and mainstream lessons. The gathered information would act as an assessment tool for the ministry and the school on the effectiveness of remedial education.

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