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## **The Nziramasanga Commission Report (1999): Implications for Special Needs Education in Zimbabwe**

**Francis Emson Dakwa**

Senior Lecturer, Special Needs Education, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe

### **Abstract:**

*The Nziramasanga report (1999) ushered in a milestone in the education of children with disabilities in Zimbabwe. The report recommended the need to educate learners with special educational needs alongside their peers in regular school contexts. The report highlighted problems encountered by educators at institutional level in attempting to include learners with exceptionalities. Some of the problems noted in this report include resource challenges in including learners who are deaf as well as those who are blind. Issues of institutional readiness for inclusion as well as training of specialist teachers to manage special needs educational issues were also discussed in this report. The study examined the implications of the Nziramasanga Commission Report for service provision for children with special educational needs. The study also examined effectiveness of including learners with special needs within mainstream contexts. In addition, 20 teachers teaching children with disabilities in the regular classes were purposively sampled and interviewed regarding their observations on the Nziramasanga Commission's findings with regards to disability and special needs educational issues. A summary of the Nziramasanga Commission findings, on children with disabilities was provided to all the participants in the study.*

**Keywords:** Institution, inclusion, disability, resources

### **1. Introduction**

The Nziramasanga Commission was commissioned by the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe in January 1998. This Commission was led by Dr. Caiphaz Nziramasanga, whose mandate was to inquire into Zimbabwe's entire education system (Nziramasanga Commission Report, 1999; Mawere, 2013). Among the specific areas examined by the Commission was the education and training for persons with disabilities as enunciated in chapter 11 of the report. This study was designed to examine the implications of the Nziramasanga Commission Report for special needs education in Zimbabwe. The study further explored the extent to which the recommendations on inclusion of learners with disabilities have been implemented.

### **2. Literature Search**

Inclusion shall be defined as the commitment to educate each child to the maximum extent appropriate in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend if he did not possess a disability. It involves bringing the support service to the child and requires that the child will benefit from being in the class, rather than having to keep up with the other students (Rogers, 1993). On the other hand, Skjorten (2001) refers to inclusion as the practice of educating all or most of the children in the same learning classroom, which is a learning friendly environment where diversity is experienced and recognized as enhancement for all involved. Education systems should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or any other condition (Salamanca Statement, 1994).

Children with special educational needs have a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision. These children would find learning more difficult than the majority of children of the same age (Halliwel, 2003). Regular classrooms should be provided with adequate human and financial resources. In other words, there is need for support to enhance inclusion (Dakwa, 2009, Stainback and Stainback, 2004). Inclusion should support the creation of the least restrictive environment where the child with exceptionalities learns best (Mastopieri & Scruggs, 2007) Adjustments should be made to the learning environment and teaching practices involving the child with disabilities. Learning material should be accessible to the child (Smith, 2001).

Children with disabilities need to be provided with equal opportunities to participate in activities of daily life and to interact with their peers (Chakuchichi, 2003). The need for access to education is vital and competition with peers should be fostered (Enfield, 2003). Support services are needed to boost inclusion of children with special needs within regular school settings. In concurrence, Erwin (1993) advocates the need for social participation of young children with visual impairment in specialized and integrated environments. It is the intention of this study to evaluate the extent to which the Nziramasanga Commission Report caters for the

accommodation of children with disabilities within the mainstream and whether the equity concerns of persons with disabilities have been realized.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Participants and Setting*

20 teachers of children with disabilities were purposively sampled. These included 10 mainstream teachers teaching children in both the primary and high schools. 10 specialist teachers were also purposively selected on the basis of their knowledge about children with special needs and about disability issues.

The 20 teachers were interviewed to solicit their views and observations regarding the efficacy of the Nziramasanga Commission's findings to the inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream. The participants had been provided with Chapter 11 of the Commission's findings which specifically dealt with children with special needs, prior to the interviews.

#### *3.2. Procedure*

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Ministry of Education, Sports Arts and Culture. The permission letter authorized the researcher to conduct research in institutions.

#### *3.3. Data analysis*

Themes were drawn from the data provided and these were analyzed. The themes covered the whole spectrum of problems experienced by respondents and how these would be overcome. Content analysis was employed in the analysis of views and responses as well as observations expressed. Hence, a qualitative approach was adopted in the analysis of data. The themes created are tabulated as follows;

- Degree programmes
- Braille and sign language
- Assistive devices
- Staffing and resource rooms
- Braille press and audiological lab
- In servicing of staff and monitoring
- Early identification

### **4. Nziramasanga Commission Findings**

The Nziramasanga Commission revealed that there was no specific policy on special needs education. There was also no clear policy on children with learning difficulties and remedial education in the schools. The 1987 Education Act, amended several times, as well as Circular P37 on inclusion of children with disabilities were frequently quoted as policy documents.

#### *4.1. Equipment*

It was established that there was lack of equipment, especially Braille machines and hearing aids in the resource rooms and units. Broken down equipment featured in the classes where children were included in the mainstream. Repair kits were not available to service the machines.

#### *4.2. Information Access*

The report indicated that there was paucity of information on the number of children with disabilities in Zimbabwe. It was, therefore, difficult for the Ministry of Education to come up with clear cut programmes for children with disabilities who needed appropriate educational services in the institutions.

#### *4.3. Financial Assistance*

The report confirmed that children with disabilities were being referred to the Department of Social Welfare for financial assistance to buy mobility appliances and for school fees. The Social Dimension Fund assisted children in government schools. The report cited either delays in payment or no payments at all. The government education grant of \$150,00 per child was paid out for children with disabilities in institutions. This was paid out in addition to the normal per capita grant. The management of the grant was the responsibility of the Department of Social Welfare.

#### *4.4. Braille Press and Audiological Lab*

The report further revealed that the National Braille press and audiological lab were not operating to capacity. The inputs to equip these two facilities were not available.

#### *4.5. Training and Deployment of Teachers*

The report indicated that formal training for special education teachers was at the United College of Education in three areas only- Deafness, Blindness and Mental Retardation. It was indicated that specialist teachers were deployed to their original schools on

completion of their training, even if there was no need for a specialist teacher at the school. The report confirmed that the teachers regarded this as a waste of skills. The students with disabilities revealed that newly qualified diploma teachers were not proficient in their areas of specialization, for instance, in Braille and sign language.

#### *4.6. Inclusion*

There was a need to include children with disabilities in the mainstream education system. It was evident from the report that the existence of special schools, including resource units in ordinary schools, was not supported by many respondents. Parents and guardians of children who were deaf were not in favour of having their children included within the mainstream. They preferred special schools.

#### *4.7. Sports*

The report revealed that sports for persons with disabilities were few. It was discovered that sport was being developed by non governmental and private organizations which included the Zimbabwe Special Olympics which catered for intellectual disabilities and sensory impairments. The Zimbabwe Association of Sports for Persons with Disabilities also catered for sporting for other disabilities.

#### *4.8. Early Identification*

With regards to the development of early childhood development centres, the Nziramasanga Commission report indicated that there were no proper facilities for children with disabilities in these centres. The teachers did not possess skills in early identification of disabilities. Moreover, teachers in the ECD centres did not possess formal training to cope with young children with disabilities.

#### *4.9. School Psychological Service*

The report indicated that the school psychological service was not clearly visible on the organizational chart of any of the Ministries of Education, hence, many institutions in the country were not aware of the role and activities of the school psychological services department.

### **5. Results**

#### *5.1. Results from the Teacher Sample*

The following issues were raised

#### *5.2. Degree Programmes*

The teachers observed that on the issue of degree programmes in Special Needs Education, Zimbabwe had progressed beyond the Nziramasanga Commission findings. Specialist teacher training programmes have been established at several universities, for instance, Great Zimbabwe University, Reformed Church University, Zimbabwe Open University and University of Zimbabwe. The Great Zimbabwe University offers the B Ed Honours degree in Special Needs Education as well as Masters and Doctorate degrees.. Similarly, the Zimbabwe Open University offers the B Sc ( Honours) and M Sc as well as Doctorate degrees in Special Education. The B Ed Special Needs Education Honours degrees are also offered at the Reformed Church University. The University of Zimbabwe who have pioneered degree programmes in special education in Zimbabwe since 1994, are now offering Masters degrees as well.

#### *5.3.. Braille and Sign Language*

The teachers observed that the practical elements were glaringly missing in most universities' curricular, for instance, Braille and sign language. However, some universities had recently introduced a compulsory practical component on Braille for education of children who are blind as well as sign language for learners who are deaf.

#### *5.4. Assistive Devices*

The teachers cited the lack of sufficient Braille machines (Perkins Brailers) as well as lack of hearing aids for children who were deaf. These assistive devices were not locally manufactured but procured from the United States, United Kingdom or Republic of South Africa. Teachers also noted the lack of assistive devices throughout the inclusion units and resource rooms. It was also noted that broken down equipment featured in the special schools and resource rooms. These could not be repaired owing to lack of repair kits, technicians and laboratories for the repair and maintenance of the machines.

#### *5.5. Inclusion*

Inclusion had been adopted as a policy in principle and practice in Zimbabwe. Resource centres and inclusion units have been established in every province of the country. However, teachers noted that there were insufficient resources in the country to support inclusion.

#### *5.6. Braille Press and Audiological Lab*

It was noted by respondents that the Braille press and audiological lab were 'white elephants'. They were inadequately staffed with specialists in the relevant specialist fields and insufficiently equipped to service schools where children with visual and hearing

impairment were receiving tuition. Respondents also cited the need for a Braille national code and establishment of regional Braille presses and audiological labs to cater for institutions within regions and districts. It was also indicated that facilities at the Braille printing press and audiological lab were meagre and did not reach out to institutions and resource rooms.

#### *5.7. Inservicing of Staff and Monitoring*

Lack of transport and office equipment hindered effective monitoring of programmes. Respondents indicated that mainstream teachers lacked training in the basics of special needs education. All teachers in the schools need to be taught basics of special needs education. Respondents also revealed the need for early identification in disability programmes which had to be extended to every practising teacher and not only to parents as stipulated in the Nziramasanga findings. Sign language and Braille should be taught to all staff members at the schools where children were being included in the mainstream. Respondents indicated that lack of transport and office equipment hindered effective monitoring of programmes. The SPS and special needs education staff needed to be trained on issues in special needs education. It was also revealed that there was no definite special needs education policy available in Zimbabwe. The Education Act of 1987 (revised 2006) as well as Circular P 37 were being quoted as essential policy guides.

#### *5.8. Early Identification and Assessment*

Respondents indicated that the School Psychological Service and Special Needs Education department did not have adequate assessment kits to test all children with special needs and children at risk. Kits available were mostly outdated and were not culture sensitive. Some kits had missing parts and improvisations would be needed to make them effective as assessment tools.

### **6. Discussion**

The responses from the teachers who were interviewed indicated some measure of progress made in the implementation of the Nziramasanga Commission's report findings. However, a lot still needs to be navigated in the area of children with special educational needs if the goals of the Nziramasanga Commission report have to be realized. Mafa (2012) confirms the need to assist every child to reach his or her maximum ability.

On the issue of assistive devices used in the area of visual disabilities and hearing impairment, respondents cited the paucity of devices to cater for the needs of inclusion units and resource rooms as well as the institutions needing the devices. Regular classrooms should be provided with adequate human, financial and material resources and any other support systems to enhance inclusion of learners with special needs (Smith 2001; Dakwa, 2009; Mastopieri and Scruggs, 2007; Stainback and Stainback 2004). Hallahan and Kauffman (2006) confirm that people with disabilities are increasingly gaining access to technology and assistive devices developed to minimize the negative effects of their disabilities. Shortage of resources remains an impediment to the implementation of inclusive education programmes (Mpofu, 2000, Peresuh, 2000).

With regards to degree programmes and training of staff, respondents indicated that colleges and universities had taken up the challenge and several specialist teachers have been trained. However, most of these teachers are deployed in the schools where they previously taught, consequently, they failed to maximize their specialist training expertise.

Education has to meet the child's learning needs. The goal of inclusion is to enable all pupils with disabilities to belong within an educational community that welcomes them and values their individuality. Specialist teachers need to be appropriately placed because they impart disability specific skills (Dakwa 2011) As these teachers become more skilled in their experiences and interaction with children with special needs, they are able to provide quality opportunities for the learners (UNESCO, 2002).

The application of assistive technology in the training programmes was largely missing. Most of the training tended to be theoretical in content. A significant amount of time should be spent guiding students in training in their specialist teaching and learning programmes. They should be taught directly, employing a variety of techniques and technologies (Kirk et al, 2006) Personnel should be specially trained and appropriately utilized in the resource rooms throughout the country (Chakuchichi et al, 2003). In addition, teacher training programmes should cover a wider spectrum of disabilities (Dakwa, 2014).

On the question of effectiveness of inclusion, respondents revealed the unquestionable need for inclusion across all areas of special educational need.. They, however, cited lack of resources and negative public perceptions as hindrances. Children with special needs should be educated in a regular educational setting along with their peers (Rizzo et al, 1994; Salamanca agreement, 1994; Dakar World Conference, 2000). Simply placing children with disabilities in the mainstream without support does not guarantee inclusion (Dakwa 2009, 2011, 2014).

With regards to the viability of the Braille press and audiological lab, respondents revealed that these were heavily underutilized. Because of lack of adequate staff and equipment, it was a mammoth task to service institutions and units throughout the country. Musengi et al (2012) observed that children with disabilities are found in schools but access to facilities remains complex and out of reach for most of these children. The Braille printing press and audiological lab need beefing up with regards to manpower and equipment, as these remain a pillar in the education, rehabilitation and inclusion of learners with sensory disabilities (Dakwa 2011; 2014, Mudekunya and Ndamba, 2011; Daniel and King, 1997; Sherrill, 1998). The Braille press and audiological lab assist in the improvement of communication and language development of children with visual impairment and those who are deaf (Smith, 2001, Musengi and Dakwa 2010). With regards to inservicing of staff and monitoring of programmes, respondents revealed the need for the school psychological services and special needs education department to be more proactive. Inservicing of specialist teachers and monitoring of programmes were imperative components of quality control in special needs education. Teachers with less knowledge will be less positive and less effective. They will also not be able to implement effective instructional strategies (Van Reusen, Shoho

and Barker, 2000). Children with special needs require unique instruction by specially trained professionals to enable them to achieve their highest potential as they strive to progress beyond their limitations.

On the question of early intervention of disability, the respondents indicated the problem of lack of appropriate assessment kits to detect disability. The tests and kits available were foreign, hence, not suitable for indigenous populations of children with exceptionalities. The first few years of a child's life set the pattern for many issues associated with quality of life (Mitchell and Brown, 1991). The earlier the child receives services to address the effects of disability, the more time there is to influence positive learning outcomes.

## 7. Conclusion

The study concluded that the findings of the Nziramasanga Commission were a huge eye opener for practitioners in the field of disability and special needs education. Lack of material resources to equip units, resource rooms, the Braille printing press and audiological lab hindered efforts to include children with disabilities in the mainstream. Teachers teaching children with disabilities need to be inserviced on the basics in special needs education. The Braille printing press and audiological lab should be sufficiently equipped and staffed. A policy specific to special needs education and disability should be established. Resource rooms and units in regular schools should be adequately provided with equipment to promote effective inclusion. The school psychological service and special needs education department should be more proactive in monitoring programmes. Specially trained graduates should be deployed in special needs educational facilities.

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