

**A REFLECTION ON CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS WITH HEARING
IMPAIRMENT IN A MULTICULTURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT. A CASE
OF SELECTED PRIMARY SCHOOLS FROM MUTARE DISTRICT**

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Abstract

This research explored challenges faced by students with hearing loss in the learning process. Students with hearing difficulties are often left to learn in mainstream classroom where they encounter myriad challenges. Furthermore, most teachers in these conventional schools are not equipped with requisite skills and knowledge to assist students with hearing impairment. The study looks at the teaching styles that are commonly used in schools and explore whether students with hard to hear challenges are also catered for. The discussion is qualitative in nature and is based on data collected from 10 primary schools in Mutare district. The results indicated that students with hearing difficulties do not benefit adequately in their educational endeavours which then affect their academic achievement. More-so limited appropriate and effective pedagogical styles are used cater for such students. Thus, these students are denied access to education as a fundamental human right for all, Zimbabwean citizens included. This research discusses support that can be rendered to such students, by different stakeholders, who have an interest of promoting educational parity.

Keywords: Hearing challenges, hard of hearing students, academic achievement learning needs, mainstream schooling, multicultural environment

1.1 Introduction and Background to the Study

Students with hearing disabilities face distinctive challenges in and outside the classroom (Mutasa, 1990; Mutasa, 2000; Higher Education Resources, 2016). Many common pedagogical styles that are used such as discussion groups, lecture method, dictation or even individual classroom discussion can be a hindrance in the learning of students who have hearing challenges and problems. What educationist need also to take into cognisance is that hearing difficulties differs and these students with hearing loss should not be given a universal model of assistance. More-so, deafness is an invisible disability and it becomes difficulty for teachers to recognise it, making it cumbersome to treat these student fairly in

the teaching process. An individual's hearing disabilities thus, dictate how she or he manages life both inside and outside the classroom setting(Higher Education Resources, 2016).

Students with hearing difficulties could be denied equal learning opportunities as compared to other students in the mainstream schooling. There are a multiplicity of factors that place these students who are hard of hearing at a disadvantage. The factors could be socially or economically motivated. Furthermore, most teachers in multicultural schools do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to assist such students with hearing loss (Mandoga & Chakandinakira, 2014). In case of American students, Hranstinski and Wilbur (2016) postulate that there has been a scarcity of studies exploring the influence of students' American Sign Language (ASL) proficiency on their academic achievement in ASL/English bilingual programmes. This research therefore looks at the teaching styles that are commonly used in schools and explore whether students with hard to hear challenges are also catered for. Terms like deaf, deafness and hard of hearing would be used interchangeably as referring to individuals/ students with hearing loss, hearing challenges or hearing impairment and how these students learn in a multicultural classroom setting.

Literature Review

2.1 Students with hearing impairment in ordinary classroom

Students with hearing challenges are often categorised into three groups, the deaf, deafness and those who are hard of hearing. Not all hearing disabilities are equivalent, and a person's hearing level determines how they accomplish their day to day assignments including activities both inside and outside the classroom. The worrisome situation is that teaching styles which can be adopted even increases the chances of students with hearing challenges not to comprehend the learned material.

The deaf refers to an individual who are hard of hearing. Shaver, Marschark, Newman and Marder (2013) define deafness as the level of hearing loss severe enough that the individual is limited in his/her ability to process acoustical language, even though they are using assistive listening devices or not. Shaver, Marschark, Newman and Marder (2013) further explain hard of hearing as referring to an individual who does not hear well. The person may hear and understand verbal communication, but may need the help of an assistive listening device or hearing aid. However, the thrust of this study is not to describe the divergent levels of hearing loss but focuses on challenges students with hearing impairment face in classroom situations regardless of their different levels of hearing loss.

2.2 Teachers' challenges in assisting students with hearing difficulties

Teachers meet different challenges as they interact with students who have hearing impairment (Mutasa, 1990; Mutasa, 2000). Teachers could have limited skills and knowledge to disseminate the content and learned material to such students. Inappropriate and ineffective teaching methods which are not compatible with these students are then used. These teaching styles could include lecture method, dictation, or sometimes other participatory methodologies which might not be relevant. The breakdown of communication in the learning process, thus hinders effective participation of students with hearing loss and as well negatively affects their mastery of the learned material (Mutasa, 1990; Mutasa, 2000). To this effect, these students could not fully benefit from the learning process which could be using teaching styles which could be inappropriate in addressing their learning needs.

2.3 Parents/guardians attitude towards educational support of children with hearing loss

Majority of parents have a yearning to participate in their children's learning but fail because of different hindrances (Sanders, 2008; Mutasa, Goronga and Gatsi, 2013). A multiplicity of factors impediment on parents/guardians desire to support their children. These could be associated socio-economic, cultural, attitudinal, educational or psychological origin of the parents/guardians. Parents could also lack self-assurance in, or acquaintance about, how to support their child's different learning needs (Berger, 2007; Mutasa, Goronga and Gatsi (2013). These varied dynamics could then subsequently affect parents/guardians' attitude towards academic achievement of their children.

Hubpages (2013) asserts that support from parents is crucial to sustain a student's confidence and sense of achievement. Hubpages(2013) further conclude that parents play many distinct roles in their children's education. Understanding of these roles can help one to support his/her child step up towards challenges of learning process. As parents/guardians come to understand the problems, need, interest and abilities of their children in the learning process, they would become better equipped to deal effectively with difficulties facing their children who have hearing challenges. Parents/guardians could be responsible for providing total guidance on physical, mental, spiritual, social, educational and career development in the crucial stage for their own children. National Educational Association (2003) reveals that parents/guardians' attitudes about their child' education and schooling at large can inspire

their child/ren and shows how the child/ren should embark on any educational excursion. Thus, the child would perceive education as valuable and worthy to attend to, if they know that their parents/guardians have a positive attitude towards the learning of such child/ren with hearing loss. Moynihan (2016) asserts positive attitude by parents/guardians would subsequently irradiate a trail for future educational achievement and success for their children regardless of their learning and physical needs.

3. Statement of the problem

Students with hearing loss in Zimbabwe face unprecedented challenges related to their learning experiences, which could include various forms of neglect from the community, their families and more particularly the school environment that could not be conducive to cater for their learning needs. Communities, families and teachers might not have the skill and knowledge to facilitate meaningful dialogue with students who are hard to hear. Thus, hearing challenge exposes that particular student to minimal access to educational services and information. This could result in poor school performance of such students, neglect from teachers or other students. Resultantly, there is lack of educational parity among students with hearing challenges and those without in the teaching and learning endeavours usually when these students with different learning and physical needs attend the mainstream schools. Thus, this study therefore explore challenges faced by students with hearing difficulties in a multicultural learning environment.

3.1 Objectives of study

- To discuss how students with hearing challenges have participated in amulticultural learning environment.
- To discuss why teachers find it difficult to assist students who are hard to hear.
- To assess parents/guardians' perception towards the teaching and learning of students with hearing challenges

3.1.2 Significance of the Study

This research shall contribute immensely to existing body of knowledge on how students with hearing challenges have participated in amulticultural learning environment in Zimbabwe. This is mainly because, whilst there has been a lot of policy designs, proposals and suggestions made to assist students with different learning needs, the issue of students

with hearing challenges has received limited attention (Mutasa, 1990; Mutasa, 2000; Mutasa, Goronga and Gatsi, 2013). As such, this research will build and increase knowledge on challenges faced by students with hearing loss and how parents/guardians or the learning environment have not been able to provide meaningful, appropriate and effective ways of assisting students with hearing challenges.

Research will also help institutions of learning in designing programmes and strategies that cater for students with different learning and physical needs. These varied interventions will then inform on relevant teaching methodologies that can bring educational parity on students regardless of their learning challenges. To parents/guardians with children with hearing challenges, this research will help them have a positive regard for their child/ren despite the nature of that child/ren' physical disabilities such as hearing challenges.

3.1.3 Delimitation of study

This study was carried out in five out 150 selected primary schools in Mutare district of Manical and Province of Zimbabwe. For the purpose of this study these schools were named school A; B; C; D and E. Most primary schools in Mutare are administered by Mutare district council and different churches. However, according to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary education, two politically demarcated districts such as Mutare rural and Mutare urban are merged to form Mutare district.

3.1.4 Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations is that the study participants did not include students with hearing challenges as the primary beneficiaries in the teaching and learning experiences. The reason was that the researcher had limited skills to gather information from students from this nature. The data was only gathered from teachers and guardians. This study was therefore not extensive in terms of soliciting enough evidence from the primary beneficiaries in exploring challenges they face in a multicultural learning environment.

4.0 Research Design

This study is an explorative survey research design which seeks to explore challenges encountered by students with hearing challenges in a multicultural learning environment such as primary schools of Mutare district in Manicaland Province. Creswell (2008) defines a research design as a plan or blueprint of how a researcher intends conducting the research. A research design may be defined as a list of specifications and procedures for conducting and

controlling a research study (Lin, 2013). This research outlines data collection methods, survey procedures and ethical considerations under-taken during this study.

4.1 Population and Sampling

Mutare district was purposively chosen as it has a primary school that enrol students with hearing challenges. Although according to Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's regulations, all schools should have special classes for students with different physical challenges, most schools however focus on other learning needs and negate students with hearing challenges. 35 teachers of five-eight participants were involved in focus group discussions (FGDs) while 10 school heads participated in-depth interviews. The participants assisted on exploring challenges faced by students with hearing difficulties in the teaching and learning situation and how different parents/guardians could be support their child/ren with hearing loss.

4.2 Data collection methodology

The methodology used multiple data collection methods. The data collection methods included a review of related literature on challenges faced by students with hearing difficulties, in-depth interviews and FGDs. Informant interviews and FGDs were carried out with purposefully selected school heads and teachers with rich information about teaching and learning experiences faced by students who are hard.

5. Results

5.1 Students with hearing challenges in multicultural in mainstream schools

The first objective focused on discussing challenges faced by students with hearing loss in their learning situation. The following data were gathered from participants;

School heads gave varied responses on how students with hearing challenges are engaged in the learning process. One of the school heads from school D said;

Students with hearing difficulties often face myriad challenges in their learning endeavours, which recurrently deter them from participating freely in their schooling. The challenge is further aggravated when these students are taught by teachers who have limited skills and knowledge to assist such students. When these students are left in the mainstream classroom, they are normally left behind in the learning situation.

During focus group discussion with teachers from all schools, it emerged that learners who are hard to hear need a lot of time and support from teachers if these students are to excel in the learning experiences. Teachers from school A said;

Students with hearing loss need their space in the learning situation. It is difficult for a teacher to presume that a 30 minutes or 40 minutes lesson period is enough for these students to master all the concepts being taught.

5.1.2 Discussion

Students with hearing damage can range from mild hearing loss to entire deafness. Hearing impairments may also include difficulties in hearing sound frequencies or confusion with certain sounds (Howard, 2007). From a teaching and learning perspective, hearing impairments differs. Depending on the degree of loss, the student may miss fast paced interactions, suffer fatigue while listening and miss 50% or more of class discussion (Howard, 2007). Students may also have speech inconsistencies, limited lexicography, or learning dysfunction, delayed language and grammar skills among other encounters which ultimately affect both their reading and writing. These varied challenges subsequently impact negatively on student's active participation in the learning process within a multicultural school setting.

5.2 Teachers finding difficulties in assisting students with hearing loss

The second objective looks at why teachers find it difficult to assist students with hearing impairment. Most teachers often find it difficult to interact and meaningful assist students who are hard of hearing. Teachers from all schools visited seemed to share same sentiments on their challenges with students who are hard to hear. Teachers from school C assert that;

The main reason behind this pedagogical dilemma is that, initially these students would be communicating using their home language which is different from the language that is used in schools. Mostly, as teachers we lack the skills and knowledge to convey the learned material to such students and more so to understand students' home language which in most instances differs from student to student.

One of the teachers from school B even said;

At this school there is a special class which encompasses different students with learning needs. However, I have been asked by the school administration to 'baby seat' this class. I have not been trained at teachers' college to handle such students. Most of the time we spend playing games or just singing without attending to their curriculum needs.

5.2.2 Discussion

Most teachers in the schools visited pointed out that they face numerous challenges in teaching students with hearing challenges. These teachers opined that they had not received any trainings which could be on job training or while they were still at training institutions. Mandoga and Chakandinakira (2014) assert that most teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe have an obscure curriculum on how they would equip their students in training with adequate and appropriate skills and knowledge to handle classes with students who have different learning needs and abilities. Mandoga and Chakandinakira (2014) further argue that those teacher training colleges which might purport to incorporate sessions on how to handle students with different learning needs, have not been honest in actual practice as minimal time and resources have been allocated for such activities. However, this gap could have been filled by complementary efforts from Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) who have a focus on safeguarding children rights including the right to education but minimal efforts have been done in this regard. Only one NGO in Manicaland has strived to assist either teachers or students who have hearing challenges through one or two weeks training workshop but this could not be enough time for covering all the necessary concepts, skills and knowledge. Thus, no meaningful learning attention has been given to students with hearing challenges.

5.3 Parents/guardians attitude towards children with hearing loss

Most participants reiterated that parents/guardians generally have a negative attitude towards their child/ren with hearing impairment. In a family set up, the child is not usually accorded same educational opportunities as compared to other children who are able bodied.

One school head from school D pointed;

Most parents who have a child/ren with hearing impairment do not consider their education seriously. Most children are just send to school so that they grow with others if ever the parent/guardian decides to send them to school. Usually these children are left to stay at

home, more so assigned to various household chores like herding cattle, farming or gardening.

During a focus group discussion with teachers from school C, they alluded that;

These children with hearing loss are commonly regarded as a source for cheap labour more so, have no space in the schooling process.

Another group of teachers from school E pointed out that some parents regard having children with hearing loss as a curse from God and the only way these parents/guardians could avoid societal humiliation was to exclude such child/ren from other children within their community or the school at large. The teachers revealed that other parents would refer to John 9 versus 2-3 where the disciples asked Jesus who had sinned the parents or the blind man himself that had led to the blind man to lose his sight as if any form of disability including hearing loss was a result of sin.

5.3.1 Discussion

It emerged from the findings that most parents who have a negative attitude towards the teaching and learning of their child/ren with hearing loss due so because of a multiplicity of factors. The factors include among others, socio-regio-cultural, financial or a mere negative attitude towards children with hearing loss. What also arose from the findings was that the parents also felt that their child were not benefitting in the education process since most teachers in the schools were not endowed with skills, knowledge and training to meaningfully assist the students in the teaching and learning process. Banks (2006); Mandoga and Chakandinakira (2014) opine that most teachers lack the pedagogical skills from their training colleges to operate in a multicultural school environment where students have diverse learning needs. Faced with this challenge, parents who have children with hearing loss opted to have these children stay at home or doing other domestic chores and felt less motivated to send them to school.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings revealed that students with hearing loss meet different teaching and learning challenges. These challenges ultimately and negatively contribute to how students with hearing impairment excel in their academic achievement. The parents/guardians, the school environment and the government can join hands in ensuring that there is educational parity and equality among students of different physical abilities. The school should ensure that students with hearing loss have the same access to information as everyone else. There

are numerous resources at hand for students who are hard of hearing, including the technology tools and more so schools' teaching and learning environments should be more conducive to learning for those who have hearing impairment. Changes in the physical classroom can make a difference, as can close attention to the various communication methods offered during class time.

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