

Teacher preparation in handling gifted children in primary schools in Zimbabwe

Florence Dube

Mkoba Teachers College, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Abstract

Practising primary school teachers are facing a number of challenges that need to be overcome if they are to be able to effectively handle learners with diverse needs. Against such a background, a qualitative investigation was undertaken to find out how trainee teachers were prepared to handle gifted learners. The researcher used observations, interviews and focus group discussions to collect data. The analysis of the gathered information was based on the participants' experiences and explanations. The findings revealed that gifted education was missing in preparing trainee teachers. Teacher preparation programmes did not include gifted education and as such did not adequately equip trainee teachers with the requisite skills to handle gifted learners. Basing on these findings, the recommendations that were made are that there is need for a national policy in Zimbabwe to provide guidelines on gifted education and that teacher education programmes should include a component on gifted education.

Keywords: multiple intelligences theory, gifted learners, trainee teacher, teacher education, mentor, gifted education

Introduction

The purpose of education is to enable individual learners to obtain maximum benefit depending on their abilities and national values from the curriculum offered by the school. (Education Secretary's Circular, 2002^[7], Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013)^[4]. Offering educational opportunities to learners with diverse needs at classroom level appears to be a challenge because teachers seem to be ill equipped with pedagogical skills needed in handling gifted learners. In order to overcome the challenges the Zimbabwean primary schools are facing in handling diverse learners, teacher preparation needs to be addressed. The most affected group is gifted learners since teachers have difficulties in handling them due to factors that include their lack of preparation due to their pre-service courses (Mafa & Makuba, 2013; Manyowa & Ncube, 2013)^[13, 16].

In Zimbabwe gifted learners especially at primary school level have tended to be ignored more than those with academic barriers. Teacher education programmes to cater for learners with special needs and remedial exercises have been put in place in both pre-service and in-service teacher training. Department of Teacher Education (2014) observes that in Zimbabwe trainee teachers on teaching practice displayed seriousness in remedial lesson planning but completely ignored gifted learners. It would appear that trainee teachers do not purposely ignore gifted learners but view them as not requiring an extra attention from teachers. Generally, there is an argument that teachers do not need to make any special provisions for gifted learners in their classes since the learners would do well without much assistance from teachers and as such teachers put more effort in assisting learners with academic barriers (Winebrenner, 2013; Ngara, 2013)^[23, 17]. Teachers in Zimbabwe have raised concerns over the lack of policy on gifted education and yet a lot has been said about inclusion which in their view should encompass gifted learners (Mafa 2012)^[12]. While there is this concern by teachers, Secretary's Circular Minute No. P. 36 (1990) that mandates educational provision for learners with

diverse learning needs is silent on the education of gifted learners Mafa (2012)^[12]. The fact that qualified primary school teachers have difficulties in handling inclusive classes reflects the absence of mainstreaming inclusion in teacher education programmes (Mafa & Makuba, 2013)^[13]. Borland, (2004), in Callahan & Hertberg-Davis (2013) and Winebrenner, (2013)^[23] have observed that it is common to deny provision of more challenging education for learners who require much more intellectual stimulation than those of average ability.

With reference to the Zimbabwean situation, Kudlick, (2008) and Dyanda & Gatsi, (2010)^[6] report that it has been established that most of the problems faced in inclusive education are a result of inadequate teacher preparation grounding. In most cases trainee teachers receive a substantial amount of theory and less emphasis directed to developing skills to effectively teach the wide diversity of learners (Da Costa Baeza 2002)^[3].

If the goal of education as expounded by the Education Secretary's Circular (2002)^[7] has to be realised in Zimbabwe, then a deliberate move should be made in the pre-service preparation of trainee teachers to handle diverse learners. In this view it was necessary to investigate whether there were initiatives by teacher education to put in place programmes that prepare trainee teachers to handle gifted learners in primary school classes in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, Howard Gardiner's theory of Multi Intelligence (MI) provided the research with the conceptual information for reflecting on the adequacy of preparing trainee teachers to handle gifted learners in Zimbabwe. The theory posits that an individual possesses about eight relatively autonomous intelligences (Gardiner 2006). Such an understanding helped the researcher in designing appropriate research instruments to find out how Zimbabwean Teachers Colleges were preparing primary school trainee teachers to meet the needs of learners with diverse abilities.

Research Design and Methods

The study employed the qualitative approach and the phenomenological research design was opted for. As explained by De Vos, (2002) ^[5], qualitative research methods elicit accounts of experience, meaning and perceptions of research participants by producing thick descriptive data in their own words. Typically, qualitative research is used to answer questions about the complex nature of given a phenomenon, usually with the purpose of describing and understanding it from the participants' point of view (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001) ^[11]. In the context of this study, qualitative research was chosen to assist the researchers in gaining an in-depth understanding of the various factors that are at play in preparing Zimbabwean trainee teachers for handling gifted learners.

In qualitative studies, there are several designs that one can use. The most commonly used ones are the phenomenological, ethnological, ethnographical and ethno scientific designs (Mahlo, 2011) ^[15]. However, in real practice, these different perspectives and sets of designs can complement each other. In addition, each research design flows directly from the type of the research questions stated and the purpose of the study. Again, it is the chosen design option that determines the data collection and analysis procedures to be employed (Roberts and Burke, 1989) ^[19].

Given that the main purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of different stake holders in the preparation of trainee teachers to handle gifted learners in Zimbabwe, the phenomenological design was deemed to be the most appropriate one. Holloway, (2005), observes that phenomenological studies examine human experiences through the descriptions that are provided by the people involved. These experiences are usually referred to as "lived experiences". The advantage of using this design is that it provides rich descriptive data as observed by the researcher during interactions with participants. It also enables the researcher to capture different experiences of the participants accurately (Mogashoa and Maila, 2013) ^[14].

The target group and population of the study was made up of six (6) Professional Studies lecturers from two teachers colleges, nine (9) mentors and forty (40) trainee teachers from two primary schools in the city of Gweru, Zimbabwe, making a total of fifty five (55) potential participants. The given description of the target group that was considered is an indication that a purposive sample was used in this research. According to Zint and Montgomery, (2007) ^[24], purposive sampling is a non- random method of selecting research participants where the researcher chooses cases that provide the best information to address the purpose of the research. The technique is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information- rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2015) ^[18] The three (3) participant lecturers were selected on the basis of their assumed knowledge and experience. As for the qualified teachers, there were identified by virtue of them being mentors of the participating trainee teachers who had been deployed in the schools for their teaching practice. In relation to the selection of trainee teachers, eighteen (18) of them were settled on. Out of these, sixteen (16) of them were considered because they had completed their teaching practice session as prescribed by the awarding university's

regulations. These were deemed to have been exposed to a wide range of didactic experiences in handling gifted learners than the others. The remaining two participating trainee teachers were selected as a result of convenience and proximity considerations.

Data were gathered by means of the observation method, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Voce, (2005) ^[22] notes these are the primary and most widely used data collection strategies in qualitative research. The researchers carried out five (5) thirty minute lesson observations for each of the two selected trainee teachers who were still on teaching practice over a period of one week. The details of the proceedings were recorded manually by way of making notes on what was going on during the lessons in relation to the handling of gifted learners. Interviews were used to gather information pertaining to the participating lecturers' views on the initiatives being implemented by their respective colleges in preparing trainee teachers to handle gifted learners. All the responses were audio-taped and later on transcribed in order to guard against loss of vital information.

Two separate focus group discussion sessions with trainee teachers from two primary schools were held for the purpose of capturing the participants' teaching practice experiences and perspectives on the issue of handling of gifted learners. At each and every stage the function of the researchers was to trigger discussions through asking prepared discussion questions. Data were manually recorded in the form of discussion notes that were relevant in addressing the questions that were put forward.

Data Analysis

According to Henning, & Henning, & Smit, (2004) ^[9] and Michelle (2005), the qualitative data analysis process entails the identification, coding and categorisation of thematic patterns found in the solicited research information. As observed by Bradley (2007) ^[2], coding will provide the analyst with a formal system for organising the gathered information, documenting emerging links within and between concepts and experiences in the data. In the context of this study, information from interviews, observations and focus group discussions was analysed by selecting, comparing, synthesising and interpreting it according to themes. Units of meaning were identified in relation to teacher education initiatives undertaken by Zimbabwean Teachers Colleges in preparing trainee teachers to handle gifted learners. The researchers made use of the inductive approach to ensure that the findings emerge from the dominant and significant themes inherent in the raw data. After major themes and sub-themes were identified, data collected were categorised according to particular topics and sub-topics. In real terms, this means making sense of large chunks of information. The researchers interpreted and consolidated what the respondents had said. The following categories were identified:

- Inadequate preparation of trainee teachers
- Empowerment of trainee teachers
- Accommodating learning styles of gifted learners
- Support for lecturers in preparing trainee teachers.

These categories were arrived at after comparing identified units of meaning, grouping them in accordance with the level of similar understanding of each item.

Findings and Discussion

The respondents and education institutions could not be identified by their names. They will be referred to as Lecturer 1 or 2, Mentors 1 or 2, Trainee Teacher 1 or 2, College A or B and Focus Group Discussion A or B.

Inadequate preparation of trainee teachers

The data gathered from interview and focus group discussion responses revealed that the type of training currently offered in Zimbabwean teachers colleges is not adequate in preparing trainee teachers to handle gifted learners. The respondent lecturers and trainee teachers displayed limited knowledge of what gifted knowledge is all about. All of them seemed to confuse gifted with disability issues and this appeared to be a result of the lecturers' seemingly lack of knowledge in the area. It was expected that lecturers should at least have a better understanding of inclusive education if they were to effectively prepare trainee teachers to deal with gifted learners.

When asked about their understanding of what inclusive education is, only one (1) of the participant lecturers had a broader appreciation of what inclusive education entails. This is what he said: "Inclusive education refers to the education system which caters for all children regardless of different factors which may include physical appearance, mental status in the same learning situation".

The other two (2) interviewed lecturers appeared to be restricting inclusive education to disabilities. For instance lecturer one from College A had this to say: "In an inclusive class, pupils of different abilities as well as able bodied and those with disabilities learn together". The other one said: "In inclusive education, in fact, special education learners should be given preferential treatment. For example, partially visual impaired could be asked to sit in front nearest to the chalk board".

The idea of taking disability as part of inclusivity was also common in all the trainee teachers' responses. They could not clearly articulate the elements of inclusivity in relation to gifted learners and this could be an indication that it was a missing link in their training programmes. Two of their verbatim responses affirm this observation as indicated in what follows below:

Trainee Teacher B: "Inclusive education means also accommodating physically disabled and able-bodied. Special education is also inclusive education that incorporates the mentally and physically disabled".

The generality of the trainee teachers who participated in the focus group discussions that were carried out also linked inclusive education with disabilities rather than giftedness. The participants from both Focus Group A and Focus Group B took inclusive education as referring to the learners with disabilities being included in the normal classroom setting.

Empowerment of Trainee Teachers

All the respondents saw how important it was to include gifted education in the teacher education programmes. For sure, that way, a number gaps and shortcomings in the current teacher education programmes in relation to the issues of gifted learners can be closed.

When asked to spell out those aspects of teacher education which they would want to be considered in preparing newly trained teachers to meet the needs of gifted learners, both the

participating trainee teachers and mentors concurred that gifted education should be incorporated into the current and future teacher education programmes. For instance, Mentor A said that: "There is a need to deliberately include gifted education in Professional Studies. If that happens, then the student teachers would be able to handle gifted learners".

The interviewed trainee teachers as well as those who participated in the focus group discussions were also in agreement with the sentiments of the respondent mentors. Part of their verbatim responses is:

Trainee Teacher A: "By the time we went for teaching practice attachment we had not covered any concepts on gifted education. Professional Studies section should have come in to emphasise on the area of gifted learners".

Trainee Teacher B: "Issues on gifted learners could be covered in theory but the problem is in the implementation".

Focus Group A: "The College should deliberately teach gifted education on skills and knowledge of dealing with the gifted child".

Focus Group B: "There is need to add the topic on gifted pupils and it should be dealt with before student teachers go for teaching practice".

Accommodating Learning Styles of Gifted Learners

The possession of the knowledge about different learning styles of gifted learners by college lecturers is quite crucial. It would enable them to pass on useful information to the trainee teachers during college based training sessions. In turn, trainee teachers would use the information when they have gone on teaching practice. While this is the case, the interviewed lecturers appeared to be lacking on this issue. When asked to explain how gifted learning styles differed from those of non-gifted learners, in his response, the lecturer from College A, was vague, dwelling on the types of learners than their learning styles. He said: "It is important to know the type of learner and that knowledge then guides one on the choice of the learning style".

When all the three respondent lecturers were asked to describe their learning styles inventories, they could not do so. The lecturer from College A did not even respond to the question at all, clearly showing that he had no knowledge of the learning styles inventory. Lecturer 1 from College B exhibited knowledge of some learning styles but did not give a detailed amount of these styles. The response from lecturer 2 from College B also showed lack of knowledge about the different learning style. All this was vividly depicted in the following statements from the said respondents:

Lecturer 1 from College B: " Learning styles are viewed as follows: learners learn through play and hearing among other aspects and they are individuals and cannot be blanketed. Variation is important especially methodology and varying activities in order to cater for various learners".

Lecturer 2 from College B: "My learning styles inventory refers to gifted pupils as pupils who are reflective while non-reflective pupils are non-gifted".

Support for Lecturers in Preparing Trainee Teachers

The picture painted by the analysis of the responses from the participant trainee teachers and mentors on issues to do with the improvement of school conditions to meet the needs of gifted learners is that there is not much that is being done in that respect. Trainee Teachers who participated in the focus

group discussions that were carried out indicated that in the school in which they had their teaching practice, the issue of gifted education was not talked about at all. The following are their verbatim responses:

Focus Group A: "Gifted learners were only mentioned in passing in staff meetings without any concrete discussions on how to engage and help the gifted learners".

Focus Group B: "The issue of gifted children was never mentioned"

The responses indicated that gifted learners in the schools are not accorded the academic treatment they deserve. For example.

Mentor A said that: "The school should address the needs of gifted learners by giving them extra challenging work. Unfortunately, teachers use these fast learners to teach others in their groups and this is a disadvantage because the learner is not benefiting. Furthermore.

Mentor B said: "My school has left each individual teacher to deal with his/her class. Since there are no laid down regulations in relation to gifted learners....."

The major implication here is that college lecturers are not getting enough support from schools in preparing trainee teachers to handle gifted learners. There is therefore a need to conscientise school heads so that they can look into the issue and take the necessary steps to rectify the situation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Teacher preparation programmes in Zimbabwe are lacking in providing trainee teachers with knowledge and skills to handle gifted learners. There are also no clear initiatives being undertaken by the colleges to rectify the situation. There is therefore a need for teacher education programmes to include gifted education to enable trainee teachers to be able to respond to the needs of gifted learners. Trainee teachers are supposed to be equipped with teaching skills that enable them to apply theory of education in real teaching and learning situations inside and outside the classroom. Thus, philosophies of gifted education should be infused in teacher education programmes. This can be done through the inclusion of gifted education in Professional Studies and Theory of Education which are the core areas for preparing newly trained teachers for classroom practice. Schools should also try to improve school conditions so as to complement the efforts to be made by teachers colleges towards the enhancement of gifted education in Zimbabwe.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made to address the different challenges currently experienced in the area of preparing trainee teachers to handle gifted learners. There is a need for a national policy on gifted education in the country. This would provide guidelines for all teacher education initiatives targeted at preparing gifted education trainee teachers. Training programmes at teachers colleges should all be reviewed in order to include a component of gifted education. Trainee teachers need to be taught how to handle gifted learners without feeling inadequate and not being sure of how to address the needs of such children. It also recommended that inclusive education awareness programmes be launched in teachers colleges and schools, so that teachers can be exposed to different learning styles and abilities. The teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe needs also to be improved by infusing inclusive education and to that end, the

programmes in Theory of Education and Professional Studies should include components on learning styles to enable trainee teachers to handle a diverse of learners in their classes.

References

1. Borland JH. Issues and practices in the identification and education of gifted students from under - represented groups. National Research Center on Gifted and Talented, 2004.
2. Bradleys H. *et al.* Qualitative Data Analysis for Health Services Research. Health Services. 2007; (156):616-626.
3. Da Costa Baeza M., Editor, Inclusive Education In Southern Africa. Responding to Diversity in Education. Unesco, Harare, 2002.
4. Department of Teacher Education, Handbook for Quality Assurance in Associate Teachers Colleges (Second Edition). Department of Information, Protocol and Public Relations. University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 2013.
5. De Vos AS. Research at Grass Roots for the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions. Van Schaik Publishers, Pretoria, 2002.
6. Dyanda C, Gatsi R, Vygosky's Co-Construction Principles: bright learners as teachers in zimbabwean infant school, from Zimbabwe Journal of educational Research. University of Zimbabwe, Harare. 2010, 22(1).
7. Education Secretary, Circular No. 3. Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture. Zimbabwe, Harare, 2002.
8. Gardner H. Multiple intelligences. Basic Books, New York, 2006.
9. Henning Van Resburg, Smit BP. Nursing Research Principles and Methods (6th ed.) JB. Lippincott, Philadelphia. 2004.
10. Kudlick E. Strategies for Teaching Gifted and Talented Students, 2008. Retrieved from <http://helium.com.>Education> Special Education>, on 11 May 2012.
11. Leedy PD, Ormrod JE. Practical Research Planning and Design. Prentice/Hall, Upper Saddle NJ. Merrill, 2001.
12. Mafa O. Challenges of Implementing Inclusion in Zimbabwe's Education System. From Journal of Education Research. 2012; 1(2):14-22. <http://www.onlineresearchjournal.org/IJER> November 2014
13. Mafa O, Makuba E. Mainstreaming inclusion in teacher education in Zimbabwe. From the international journal of engineering and science (IJES). 2013; 2(5):27-32. ISSN (e): 2319-1813 ISSN (p): 2319-1805
14. Mogashoa TI, Mailan W. Teaching and Learning Policies in South African Schools in the new Democratic Dispensation: A Critical Discourse Analysis. Proceedings of the 40th Annual International Conference of the Southern African Society for Education (SASE). 2013; (1):481-497.
15. Mahlo FD. Experiences of learning support teachers in the Foundation phase, with Reference to the Implementation of Inclusive education in Gauteng. University of South Africa, Doctoral thesis, UNISA, 2011.
16. Manyowa AF, Ncube MV. A Consideration of Education Programs for Gifted Primary Schools Pupils in

- Masvingo. Zimbabwe, from International Journal of Development and Sustainability. 2013; 2(2):617-628.
17. Ngara C. Giftedness and Talent Development in Zimbabwe in the Third Millennium. In Shizha E. (Ed.). Restoring the educational dream. Rethinking educational transformation in Zimbabwe, Africa Institute of South Africa, Pretoria, 2013.
 18. Patton MQ. Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. Sage, London. 4, 2015.
 19. Roberts CA, Burke SO. From Nursing Research: A Quantitative and Qualitative Approach. Jones and Bartlett, Boston, 1989, 381.
 20. Secretary's Circular, Minute No. Special Education: placement procedures for special classes, resource rooms and special education schools. Zimbabwe ministry of education and culture, Harare, 6, 1990.
 21. The constitution of Zimbabwe. Government printers, Harare, Zimbabwe, 2013.
 22. Voce A. Handouts for the Qualitative Research Module. Sage Publications, London, 2005.
 23. Winebrenner S. Optimal grouping of all ability levels for optimum achievement for all. 2013. <http://www.susanwinebrenner.com>. 11 November 2014.
 24. Zint M, Montgomery N. Purposeful Sample. Sage Publications, London, 2007.