

The Role of Classroom Assistants on teaching practices and on retention of children with disabilities

Introduction

This study was part of a larger programme funded through the UK Department for International Development (DFID) Global Poverty Action Fund (GPAF) ‘*Promoting the provision of Inclusive Education for children with disabilities in Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe*’. The overarching aim the programme was to contribute towards the achievement of Universal Primary Education in Zimbabwe by ensuring that around 3,000 children with disabilities were enrolled and retained into mainstream schools in Mashonaland West Province (MWP) during the period 2013-2015. In addition to the programme activities, research was also carried out to better understand the barriers to education for children with disabilities in MWP, what measures could be implemented to overcome them, and measure the impact of these interventions.



Research undertaken included [a survey to compare changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices of teachers and parents or caregivers of children with disabilities](#) (pdf); options for [improving transport as a means of accessing education for children with disabilities in low income countries](#); and finally, options around the role of classroom assistants on teaching practices and on the retention of children with disabilities. To date, there is little data on the impact of classroom assistants as component of IE programmes in low and middle income countries. This paper presents a summary of the research on classroom assistants. This

briefing paper is drawn from the Research Report ‘The Role of Classroom Assistants on teaching practices and on retention of children with disabilities’, unpublished.

The research was undertaken by the Leonard Cheshire Disability and Inclusive Development Centre UCL from May 2013 to November 2015, in collaboration with the Leonard Cheshire Disability Zimbabwe Trust (LCDZT), and aimed to investigate the role of

classroom assistants (CAs) on both 1) teaching practices and on 2) the retention of children with disabilities in school.

Sample

In total 45 CAs were recruited to work in the 30 model primary schools in four districts.

The majority of them were parents of children with disabilities enrolled in the same school.

Their mandate was to “support teachers in classes where there are disabled children. They will attend to disabled children’s needs so that the classrooms are not disrupted... They will work during the school year (9 months) and will receive a small stipend (£30/\$45) a month... There will be 2 CAs per model school. They will be trained and start work at the beginning of the school year in Sept 2012”.

Model schools represent a cluster, influencing an average of 8 cluster schools, each less than 20km from the model school. Control schools were selected on the basis of their distance from both cluster and model schools. No intervention took place in control schools.

Methods

20 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted. Firstly, eight FGDs (2 for each district location) with head teachers and classroom assistants were undertaken in May 2014. The main objective was to explore the perspectives of head teachers and classroom assistants on the effect that classroom assistants can have on the inclusion of children with disabilities. Follow-up interviews were undertaken in April 2015 in order to analyse the extent to which interventions implemented as part of the IE project had changed (or not) the perspectives of head teachers and classroom assistants. 12 FGDs (3 for each district location) were undertaken with parents, teachers and classroom assistants on the impact of classroom assistants on the inclusion of children with disabilities in model schools. In addition, four interviews with the district remedial tutors (one for each location) were undertaken then.

Furthermore, information from head teachers, teachers and caregivers/parents were collected using a structured comparative survey in four districts in Mashonaland West province - Hurungwe, Kariba, Mhondoro Ngezi, and Sanyati. The survey measured their levels of knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) before (2013) and after (2015) interventions linked with the IE programme. The comprehensive accounts of the [2013 baseline research](#), the [2015 post invention results](#) and the comparative analysis are available in the [centre’s publications repository](#).

Finally, project documentations were reviewed (project and budget proposals, annual reports, etc.) to complement the information collected in the field.

Findings

[Evidence from the KAP studies](#) (Deluca et al. 2016) has shown that one of the key factors that contributed positively to progress with the IE project was the engagement and retention of classroom assistants in model schools. CAs were identified as being an additional resource

for model schools - for children with disabilities, in helping them with activities of daily living; for teachers, in helping them with the extra needs of the class; and for parents, who as a consequence of not having to care for their children with disabilities were then able to go to work and/or do chores. Prior to the implementation of the IE project, parents and teachers reported that they were not

aware that children with disabilities could be enrolled in the local schools. Teachers also often stated that they had not thought that including children with disabilities in mainstream classes was possible ([Deluca et al. 2016](#))

Overall results tend to show a positive trend in the intervention schools, with teachers and head teachers gaining confidence about their knowledge, attitudes and practices with regard to the inclusion of children with disabilities in their classes. The comparative analysis of the data collected in 2013 and 2015 revealed that in most cases teachers who agreed that *classroom assistants would help them in teaching children with disabilities* in 2013, agreed in 2015. Equally, the majority of teachers in mainstream classes stated that *classrooms assistants were helpful*. Moreover, this similar trend was found in control schools. The results revealed that classroom assistants were recognised as being of positive support for the inclusion of children with disabilities in the classroom - regardless of the type of school, district or area where the teacher was working.

Further research to follow-up on these findings is planned.

The role of CAs

The majority of CAs interviewed stated that they 'look after children with disabilities'; although the scope of their role differed between each school, at minimum the CAs assisted with daily living activities and most undertook learning support activities.

The majority stated that their role was mainly to assist the children with activities of daily living such as going to the toilets (or changing nappies), washing, assisting with eating, mobilising, monitoring them in the playground or playing sports or assisting

them during break time, and any other support activities children in either the mainstream classes or resource units/special classes needed. Others stated they helped them to accept each other. Some provided assistance with writing - e.g. learning to write names, helping to read or hold a pen. Some worked with the child to child clubs, e.g. at break time. They also take a register (the 'inclusive register'), receive (welcome) the children when they arrive at school and follow up if children are not attending school. Some also assisted the teacher in maintaining discipline, others in maintaining records and writing short reports, liaising with parents and communities, as well as undertaking community advocacy and sensitisation activities and income-generating activities. In some schools they assist with physiotherapy and taking them to hospital appointments and some have even gone into hospitals to learn how to do physiotherapy.

Location

In most of the schools represented, the CAs worked in mainstream classes, usually allocated to one specific class (that with the majority of children with disabilities). In some schools, they are more "randomly" allocated, and in some schools, determine where they will go (amongst) themselves, based on need. In one school, the CA was based in the resource unit to support a child with visual impairment. In other schools, they were in the 'special class'; and in another they were in a unit for children with hearing impairment but the interviewed head teachers stated the CAs moved around to assist in the mainstream classes as needed. In one school which had two CAs, one was based in a resource unit (HI) and the other in mainstream classes, but they swap around if needed.

In other schools, they largely focused on the early grades (as part of a country-wide focus on Early Child Development) as this seemed to be where the majority of the children with disabilities were based; but in one school, one of the children with disabilities in the ECD class was 15 years old. In other schools, they either work in regular classes or a resource unit. They may take the child for part of time into mainstream class, and if in mainstream class, they assist with activities concerning life skills.

Training usefulness

Training was undertaken at the beginning of the project (two days) and a refresher course (two days) was undertaken half way through the project. It was based on the adaptation of the LCDZT IE training manual. CAs were introduced to IE, discussed issues children with disabilities might experience such as neglect from families and communities, barriers and negative attitudes, etc. Training was perceived as helpful but CAs wanted more training and the FGDs highlighted specific needs of CAs who indicated that they would like more advance skills and training on first aid and sign language as well as on learning difficulties and on how to handle children with multiple disabilities.

Although some CAs reported they were able to learn from parents how to communicate with their children with disabilities there was an identified need for more formal training to fill these gaps.

Relationship with teachers

Several examples were given during the FGDs signalling the positive relationship and trust between the teachers and CA. For example, if teachers were away for a capacity building workshop or if they were off sick they left the class to the CA. They

were sometimes asked to continue reading or maintaining discipline while the teacher left for short periods (e.g. to go to the bathroom).

After completing the training, teachers recognised CAs as having some knowledge on how to handle children with disabilities. For example, they were called by teachers to witness challenges in learning. Teachers are realising that the presence of CA saves time and some of the 1-to-1 skills can be taught by CAs. One teacher provided the example of a child with intellectual impairment who typically would leave class suddenly, but remained in classes longer with the assistance of the CA.

Relationships with parents

CAs were asked about relationships with the parents and reported that overall the parents were very supportive.

Parents initially met the CAs at the sensitisation workshop. During the workshop CAs discussed with parents the needs of their children and sometimes the teachers provided additional advice as to the child's needs inside the classroom.

CAs were also sensitised regarding talking to parents about enrolling children with disabilities in school. CAs were often aware of children with disabilities who were not enrolled in school however many of these children faced mobility barriers to accessing the school. For example, some children did not have access to a wheelchair, still required assessment by a psychologist or were still too young.

The CA's work typically did not end with the school day. They also advocate for children with disabilities, meeting parents at community gatherings and using community leaders.

Parents initially thought that CAs were regular class teachers but after the sensitisation workshop most parents were aware of their support role. Other parents however are still not clear of their role 'and call them madam/sir'. Overall, CAs were well accepted and parents reported they were happy with their role and believed them to have enough skills to support their child.

Impact of CAs

Most of the children with disabilities who had not been in school were enrolled and remained in school due to the supportive role played by CAs. Project staff were told that teachers alone could not have been able to manage some of the children because of the extra needs they require such as feeding, dressing, toilet training, etc. The parents of children with disabilities also felt that the help their children were getting was adequate and therefore ensured that their children were in school. If the parents felt that their children with disabilities were not well supported they could have withdrawn them from school. The fact that some schools were paying additional allowances for CAs is a sign that they are valuable in the school and that it was felt that they had to be paid like any other member of staff. The School Development Committee (SDCs) played an important role relating to salary/allowances and this was discussed during FGDs with head teachers in Spring 2014.

The project staff reported that a few schools in a district added "something" to top up the stipends from LCZT. Other schools reported having challenges raising additional allowances although they were willing.

Remuneration

In some schools, the SDCs had decided to increase the amount of money paid to the CAs - for example, in one school, the SDC had increased the \$45 allowance by \$55 to a total of \$100/month to show their appreciation. Most of the additional funds had come through income-generating projects. They were aiming to increase this to \$200 as they thought that was fairer.

During the FGDs, there was a discussion around whose responsibility it was to pay the CAs, was it the parents of children with disabilities, or all parents, or the SDC, school or government? This issue had also been discussed during the community sensitisation. Other ways to raise money include income generation projects. This meant that some of the head teachers agreed the CAs would be sustained after the end of the project. Another issue raised was the possibility of lobbying the MoE (DEOs) to pay them. However, it was noted that the differences between schools in terms of salaries and additional allowances (subsidised by SDCs) had become a problem during training sessions when some of the CAs found out they were being paid different amounts. This issue had not been resolved.

Retention of CAs

There was reportedly little turnover of CAs as the project managed to retain over 90% of those recruited. This was partly due to the additional allowances given by schools and also because most of them were parents of children with disabilities and felt engaged.

During field interviews it was evident that there was a difference between rural and more urban settings with CAs being more conversant and self-confident in the latter.

Retention of CAs beyond the end of IE project was reported with some schools

reporting full engagement after end of project but others citing lack of funding as reason for failure to take them on board. Although district education officers (DEOs) urged schools to engage CAs, the decision remained with the school development committees on whether they had the capacity to keep CAs beyond the end of the project.

Sustainability after the project

The first point worth making is that overall CAs were a key feature of the LCD IE project, however, there was much debate about their sustainability, and this may have tainted perception of their importance. According to the project staff, while the support provided by the 45 CAs in model schools made a significant difference to children with disabilities, helping them participate in lessons/school life, the number of CAs provided by the project was rather low. As the number of children with disabilities in each class grew, so too did the pressure on the CAs for their support services and it was therefore not possible for them to provide the same level of one-to-one assistance as at the start of the intervention. This impacted negatively on the ability of some children to participate fully in lessons. Evidence from the focus group discussions also suggested that some CAs worked longer hours to counter the lack of staff.

Another point worth reiterating is that classroom assistants were frequently

parents of children with disabilities and showed great motivation towards supporting IE in mainstream schools, so it is likely that once the project comes to an end they will maintain their support, especially as the impact of the project becomes ever-more apparent. This was realised in some of the model schools where the SDCs provided additional allowances in addition to the stipends provided by LCZT.

Conversely though, while some of the CAs were given additional funding by the SDCs, others were not, which created some tensions between the CAs, as well as between the schools.

Another point worth mentioning is that some engagement by cluster schools was generated as a result of having CAs in models schools. It was reported that one cluster school engaged two volunteer parents who are parents of children with disabilities who reside at the school. They looked after their children without any payment nor expecting it.

Finally an important point to make is that the Ministry of Education were reluctant to formally take on any additional ancillary staff (such as CAs), and so there was some debate about the sustainability of the CAs, as well as debates around their role vis-a'-vis trained teachers; this led to a change in the terminology used to describe them to avoid them being seen as the responsibility of the MoE - by the end of the project they were commonly called 'caregivers'.

Recommendations

- There is a strong need for additional classroom support, such as classroom assistants though to date these are not a feature of any IE programmes or interventions in Zimbabwe, and there are a number of challenges to be overcome with this role

- Stronger commitment by the Ministry of Education on sponsoring such a profile to deliver a fully inclusive education for children with disabilities.
- In order to improve communication and understanding there needs to be improved linkages, exchange of information and support between teachers and parents/caregivers to improve and ensure continuity and provision for the child.
- Training of teachers (or other related staff) must make it clear that successful inclusion relies on many components (school, community, family, etc.) which must be combined to ensure meaningful inclusion, and quality learning for children with disabilities.

**Leonard Cheshire Disability & Inclusive
Development Centre**

Department of Epidemiology & Public Health
University College London
Room 308, 1-19 Torrington Place, WC1E 7HB
London, United Kingdom

(Phone) +44 (0)203 108 3146

(Email) lcc@ucl.ac.uk

(Web) www.ucl.ac.uk/leonard-cheshire-research

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