



Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP): The View of Teachers in Inclusive Primary and Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

The policy on Education For All (EFA) has been the hallmark of access to education with equal opportunities, equal provision of services and allocation of resources towards basic education in Zimbabwe. To this effect, The Director's Circular number 26 of 2008 on guidelines on remedial work at primary and secondary school levels alludes to Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP). This study was prompted by the unevenness of the training of teachers by non specialist professionals and the ineffective use of non-standardised assessment tools for screening learners. This creates professional doldrums of what exactly teachers should do. The aim was to capacitate accountability approaches towards PLAP. The research was qualitative and a case design was applied. A sample of 80 participants comprising education officers, schools administrators and teachers was purposively drawn from Masvingo District namely, offices, primary and secondary schools respectively. Semi-structured interviews, an open ended questionnaire and document analysis were used to generate data. It emerged from the study that most PLAP trainers are not in tandem with the mechanics of Individualised Educational Programmes (IEP) and most of teachers are confused with PLAP demands and voluntarily opted not to engage in the programme. It is recommended that PLAP trainers should be specialist professionals with qualifications in special needs education should not hurriedly and haphazardly train teachers. Training centres should also be established and should equip teachers with requisite mechanics of handling diverse learners.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In Zimbabwe, Performance Lag Address Programme originated from Manicaland Province in October 2012 after a research on Zimbabwe's socio-economic meltdown from 2006 to 2008. According to the Herald 10 August (2013), the crisis had considerable effects on several aspects of education system particularly financing the teaching force, participation, equity and learning outcomes. The major concern was over the nose dive decline in pass rate at Grade 7 level from 2005 to 2010. This necessitated the need for a pilot study into the causes of the poor performance because some schools were observed to record zero percent pass rate. The exodus of qualified personnel during the period 2005 to 2008 culminated in poor service delivery thereby affecting the learning and teaching processes, giving rise to poor performance in National Examinations. According to Nkoma, Zirima and Chimunhu (2012) the Government introduced the Performance Lag Address Programme as a stop gap measure to address learning anomalies and eradicate zero percent pass rate recorded in both primary and secondary schools. The then Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture (2013) adopted it. The Learning Achievement Trailing Study (LATR) which was done in Manicaland revealed significant learning achievement gaps in Maths and English which then widened at Secondary Level.

The Learning Achievement Tracking Study conducted revealed that 76% of the students at Primary level were below Grade level in Mathematics and 24% were either at or above their Grade level in Mathematics. At Secondary level, 85% of the students were below their Form level and 15% were either at or above the Form in Mathematics. The Performance Lag address Programme was then designed to identify the level or grade at which pupils stopped grasping learning concepts and accelerate them to their academic level (Nkoma, 2014). Teachers from Special Education Schools were trained to implement it. The research revealed that half of the students were able to catch up to the anticipated academic grade level and would be ready to take National Grade Seven Examinations. The school which piloted the programme witnessed a 12% increase in Grade Seven Examinations pass rate (The Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture, 2013). The programme was baptised to Performance Lag Address Programme.

The Performance Lag Address Programme aims to improve the achievement of Primary and Secondary students by revisiting the syllabus and targeting concepts that have proven persistently difficult for pupils to catch up with their last point of success. The Programme is deemed to be effective when dealing with the most challenged pupils by enhancing their understanding of challenging concepts. Therefore, Performance Lag Address Programme is a form of remediation since it seeks pedagogies that improve students' performance. Thomas (1991) defines remediation as anything that serves to cure defects. However, the programme differs from normal remediation in many distinct ways. The usual

remediation procedure works on the student's level of study or Grade level. The Performance Lag Address Programme regards students' weaknesses as having cropped up from concepts missed at lower levels and affects present academic performance (The Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture, 2013). In this regard, the teacher is required to establish the student's last point of success to address the academic problems so as to ensure success at present academic level. In the usual remediation, a one-to-one situation is expected between the teacher and student whereas for the Performance Lag Address Programme, the students are handled as a class with commonly identified challenges. Performance Lag Address Programme focuses on foundation skills so as to master the present concepts in the current learner's level (Nkoma, 2014) Under Performance Lag Address Programme, the students are grouped according to their capability levels as revealed by the marks from pre-test. Those with common difficulties are assisted together.

Muzawazi and Nkoma (2011) cited by Nkoma (2014) opine that the Performance Lag Address Programme can be implemented effectively following a series of steps such as assessment, screening, grouping, scheming, planning, lesson development and written work that culminates in determining mastery of concepts by the learner. During assessment, a syllabus based achievement test will be administered at the beginning of every year to determine the learner's last point of success. PLAP utilises the generic Wide Range Achievement Tests (WRAT) to determine the learner's last point of success. The pre-test determines the learner's actual academic performance.

Under the PLAP, the teacher is required to put together a class register with names and grade levels for the screened pupils basing on the test results and the learners are then homogeneously grouped according to their academic achievement. A class register with names and grade levels would be designed. The register indicates the group, child's name, subject, topics or concepts covered and solutions to the challenges. Groups remain the same at the beginning of every week or topic (Nkoma, 2014). A grade plan book is designed using the syllabus and learners would be taught simultaneously regardless of their varying aptitudes while the teacher addresses the various performance levels thereby closing the gaps. Although the teaching of a class begins from the lowest level and progresses until the concept reaches the anticipated grade level, this creates a dungeon of confusion to both the learners and the teachers. The work activities increase in levels of difficulty from day one to another depending on the progress being made by learners but, learners may even though, not progress at the same rate regardless simplicity of concepts because of miasma in acquisition. Nkoma (2014) argues that for any academic activity 30% of the learners perform below grade level items and 70% at and above grade level.

The implication is that teaching should begin from the lowest level and progress until the concept

reaches the grade level of each learner. The argument is that, it is tall order task to reach the operational level of each learner in a lesson or two, given the complexity of homogeneity of learners in an inclusive class in most primary and secondary schools. The teacher determines the mastery or non mastery of concepts without any test administered to determine a standard score the learner must attain. The whole process may become panorama of futile effort, waste of time and resources if the approaches and methodology employed do not address individual academic needs. Besides, there are so many factors such as time, age of the learner, teaching and learning materials, lesson delivery, purpose and activity length that need to be considered in dealing with inclusive classes. Drawing catch-up activities from the preceding grade level is difficult given the current legal teacher pupil ratio. It is also difficult to find a coherent pedagogy that focuses on the needs of multi-grade learners and to plan weekly. The Secretary's Circular Minute Number 2 of 2014 states that continuous assessment of learners from Early Childhood Development (ECD A) to Advanced Level is vital. Concomitantly, continuous assessment is an integral part of the Performance Lag Address Programme, but, the tests used do not have a clearly defined standard to represent a rich source of diagnostic information that is required to determine the learner's operational level, as the learners do not have consanguinity in skill acquisition and fluency building, hence there was need for this research.

Statement of the problem

Zimbabwe, as a country which subscribes to the policies of equity education among its citizens, has engaged in implementing PLAP in its primary and secondary education sector. However, a number of studies have shown that, effective implementation of PLAP is marred by lack of resources ossified by teachers' lack of relevant skills to handle all the learners in inclusive classes. In this view, this study is set to investigate the impact of PLAP on academic development of primary and secondary school learners.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How effective is (WRAT) in determining students' eligibility for PLAP?
- To what extent does lack of effective training in PLAP affects academic achievement of students in mainstream primary and secondary education?
- How far does PLAP contribute towards pass rate at both primary and secondary education?

Theoretical framework

This research study was based on the philosophy of normalization which requires all individuals to regard and accept individual differences. Normalization aims at giving all individuals equal opportunities to

participate actively in educational activities as equals (Badza and Tafangombe, 2010). The implication is that, normalization focuses on change of attitudes, interaction and communication, information, integration and inclusion. Mainstreaming and inclusion are stages that build up to achieve normalization. Full participation of disadvantaged population groups promotes normalization and paves way to inclusion.

The argument is about academic achievements which transcend to Wolfensberger's (1979) concept of normalisation which has been the dominant force in the implementation of inclusive education (Chakuchichi and Kapuya, 2003). The executive and express emphasis of normalisation is on social justice and harmony, which ultimately cascades to creation of PLAP. This implies that a positive socio-cognitive learning environment facilitates academic achievement.

The devotion is on academic achievement of the less privileged especially those students with learning disabilities. Thus, inclusive education of students with learning disabilities is regarded as a synergy of reconstructing and increasing equalisation of educational opportunities. Mittler (2000) asserts that Wolfensberger's (1979) theory of normalisation focused on the fundamental purpose of education which is firmly dovetailed in Plato's philosophy of idealism which declares that education should enable individuals to guide their own life by the law of reason so as to establish knowledge of virtue. The focus of this research was to investigate factors that impact on PLAP. This may result in re-defining, re-thinking, re-modifying and reconstructing PLAP to IEP (Individualised Educational Programme).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative methodologies. The qualitative approach uses familiar techniques for handling verbal materials that make situations "come alive", it keeps the investigator close to the data and markedly facilitate understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Krathwohl, 1993, p. 159). A case study design was used, where a case of ten institutions of primary and secondary education were considered. The population for this study were teachers in both primary and secondary schools. In addition, administrators (including education officers) of these institutions formed part of the research population where they were meant to give information on how they catered for PLAP in their planning and management of the institutions.

Purposive sampling was employed to come up with the actual number of participants. Linchtman (2006), unravels a sample as a limited subset of the entire population. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique which provides a typical group of individuals with a particular life experience and the researcher selects information-rich cases for depth study, (Maree, 2007). Therefore, for this study, the sample comprised 60 teachers, 5 education officers and 15 heads and deputies of the secondary and primary schools, since they were also directly

involved in PLAP implementation. Semi- structured interviews were used to collect data from heads of schools, while a questionnaire with both open and closed questions was used to collect data from the teachers.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The codes that were used for the participants

The participants' responses were coded to facilitate easy categorisation and presentation of data. In the responses, administrators' responses were coded as (A) and teachers' as 'T'. These codes were used in vignettes and narrative texts below.

Assessment tools used to determine students' eligibility for PLAP

The majority of participants were aware of Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT). The participants revealed that, though they had once administered the wide range achievement tests, they had never utilized the assessment results because they did not have the expertise since the teachers and administrators were not especially trained on how (WRAT) results are to be used to come up with the operational level of the learner. The implication portrayed implies that, the learners would be falsely assessed and diagnosed, resulting in failure to address learners' academic, socio-emotional needs and other learning disabilities that negatively impact on the learners' academic achievement.

Besides, WRAT, the participants revealed that they also used end term and yearly summative tests as assessment tools. Apparently, term end tests and end of year tests are norm-referenced tests which cannot exactly pin point the operational level of learners with learning disabilities. The end of term or year tests is not criterion-referenced and the results produced are knowledge gap concerned, thus they may wrongly show the actual academic capabilities of the learner.

The participants also unraveled that, they did formative assessment. This is the direct observation assessment done by teachers during teaching-learning process to identifying the learners' needs in order to guide them towards the desired goals (Portar, 1995). The participants indicated that they capitalised on daily exercises, weekly tests, fortnightly tests and monthly tests which they individually designed. The tests that were analysed did not cater for their individual differences as the basic concepts were not captured effectively. Lack of knowledge on how to design teacher made tests to cater for the various performance groups was a major challenge in classroom work. The analysed tests were characterized by over subscribing of certain consanguinity concepts and lack of variations in questioning style, thereby, giving learners a false status of academic achievement.

The effects of lack of effective training on PLAP by teachers

The analysis was that, though group work was used daily, tasks were not graded according to the ability of learners. Written work, as well as the tests did not cater for the learners individual differences. Work assigned in group activities would not be criterion – referenced, resultantly, basic concepts to address the learners' needs could not be properly addressed and hence, there could be low performance and minimal improvement and achievements. Furthermore, the tasks given should be accompanied by teacher's guidance through chalkboard demonstrations addressing learners on basic needed concepts first. The results showed that demonstration lessons need to identify proper blend of child centered methods for learners to benefit effectively from PLAP. Some participants had this to say;

T: We do not adequately use teaching methods that challenge stigma and discrimination surrounding learning disabilities. We were trained non-specialists personnel.

T: Some of these newly introduced methods in education are out of my touch. To make matters worse, when PLAP was introduced, there were no proper workshops to open up our minds.

The responses point on negative attitudes by teachers. In this regard, there is need for proper PLAP workshops. Perhaps that will probably assist teachers to realize the need to make efforts to effectively implement proper remediation. Thus, on-going training on pedagogies for teachers can have a direct impact on academic achievement of learners with learning disabilities. Case studies from Kenya, Botswana, United Kingdom and Pakistan have provided evidence that on-going professional development throughout a career contributes significantly to learners' academic achievement (UNESCO, 2013)

Effects of large classes on effective implementation of PLAP

All the participants said that they held staff development workshops on teaching methods that cater for individual differences but did not mention the methods they thought are really excellent to address the needs of learners with learning disabilities who are in inclusive classes. The participants shoulder the blame on the current teacher-pupil ratio at primary and secondary education which is currently one as to forty. However, the participants said that the current ratios at all levels of inclusive education of learners with learning disabilities are not compatible with academic needs and interest of pupils who are lagging behind.

T: Teacher-pupil ratio affects the quality of PLAP.

T: It is difficult for me as a teacher to select a teaching method that meets individual demands for all the

learners because of large classes given the syllabus demands.

A: *Teachers find it difficult to use a suitable teaching style for inclusive classes with learners with learning disabilities.*

These acknowledgements show that, teacher pupil ratio affected the implementation PLAP. Although mainstream teachers were staff developed on PLAP, they find it difficult to handle large classes. The implication is that, teachers would find it difficult to give individualised educational instruction to learners with learning disabilities in inclusive education. As teachers are core players in academic development and achievement of learners with learning disabilities in inclusive education, they may not effectively teach many learners with learning disabilities in an inclusive class.

PLAP contributions to the pass rate at both primary and secondary education

The majority of the participants revealed that, Performance Lag Address Programme can never cater for all the learners as an individual group. The participants agreed that in the Performance Lag Address Programme, learners' work is graded to the level of the average learner with learning disabilities and when work is graded to that level, learner progress may be noticed. The majority of the participants revealed that, partially enabled the learner to gain self-confidence and self esteem. Most of the participants cited that learners with learning disabilities experience isolation, stresses, frustration and confusion during PLAP. Some of the participants noted that, the child may not take an active role in the programme. One of the participants revealed that;

T: *Although Performance Lag Address Programme is deemed to utilize child centered methods which create positive regard between the learner and the teacher. Most of the learners with learning disabilities are disappointed with it and drop out of school.*

The implication portrayed is that, good relationship is regarded as a push factor for maximising the learner's academic performance. Participants believe that PLAP helps the learner to have the room to interact and socialize with peers through cooperative learning. The research results confirm the findings by Underwood (1991) cited in Mawer (1995) who avers that, cooperative learning are peer support strategies which offer greater opportunities for social interactions development of communication skills and empathy for each other's learning attempts.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings evidently show teachers have very scanty knowledge and skills on implementing PLAP for learners with learning disabilities in inclusive education. Without knowledge, skills and

understanding of PLAP, teachers may often use subtle ways in which their practices may be directly limited in addressing various learners' needs in teaching and learning.

Having a flexible, thoughtful conceptual understanding of PLAP, inclusive education can be effective and beneficial to learners with learning disabilities. Without PLAP knowledge, learners with learning disabilities in inclusive education may find it difficult to acquire all the academic skills, behaviours, knowledge, values and norms which are considered worthwhile in their learning.

The implication is that, there is need to transform the content for learners with learning disabilities in inclusive education, in ways that make it accessible to them without watering it down but to maintain its academic rigour and integrity. The sentiments echoed by the participants provide strong evidence to demonstrate that learners with learning disabilities in inclusive education have particular special learning and curriculum needs hence, PLAP implementation. Most teachers are not acquainted with relevant PLAP pedagogies to employ when teaching an inclusive class with learners with learning disabilities.

This study shows overwhelming evidence that, learners with learning disabilities in inclusive classes experience isolation, stresses, frustration and confusion during PLAP. They may then fail radically to fully meet their academic needs as such. This research also unravels that teachers lack adequate and relevant skills and knowledge in the choice of pedagogies in PLAP. This research finding indicates that most teachers are not adequately trained on how to apply the necessary interaction pedagogical methods such direct instruction, individualised educational instruction and scaffold instructional procedures during PLAP. This perhaps explains the fear by teachers in managing diversity of learners with learning disabilities in inclusive education, resulting in feelings of hopelessness and learned helplessness by both learners and teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

The researcher concluded that, there are effective assessment tools to be used to assess learners with learning disabilities in Zimbabwe for PLAP implementation, but, their results are not effectively used by primary and secondary school teachers. The widely used Wide Range Achievement Tests (WRAT) is generic and seems to produce false results if implemented in both primary and secondary level of education in Zimbabwe. The use of WRAT is compounded by lack of expertise on how to administer it and utilize the assessment results. It was also concluded that many facilitators who train teachers on PLAP are not specialist, resulting in poor implementation of the programme. The facilitators lack knowledge of (WRAT) configurations and individualized educational instruction, as a result, teachers will haphazardly keep PLAP records as a way of pleasing their supervisors. This means PLAP neither

increases the pass rate nor improve academic achievements of learners with learning disabilities, as a result some of the learners become frustrated and drop out of school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that PLAP facilitators should be specialist teachers who are well versed with special needs education and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) should capitalize on qualified special needs education specialist personnel to design suitable assessment instruments so as to correctly assess and identify learning disabilities. It is also recommended that the MoPSE should finance staff development of teachers in special needs education so that effective inclusive education can be done. It is prudent that MoPSE, ensures that the Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education Department hold seminars to induct PLAP administrators and teachers.

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