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Teachers' Experiences in Teaching Sign Language at Ecd Level in Inclusive Schools in Bulawayo Urban, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study addresses a gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of teachers in teaching Sign Language at Early Childhood Education in Bulawayo Urban. The qualitative approach, embedded in the interpretive paradigm and utilising the case study research design, was adopted. Twelve participants were purposively selected from a population of two schools. Interviews and lesson observations were used to collect data. The collected data were analysed using the thematic approach. The reflective Practice Theory was used to inform the study. Results from the study indicated that teachers frequently encountered challenges in teaching Sign Language. These included a lack of fluency in Sign Language, inadequate teaching and learning resources, unmodified

infrastructure, lack of skills and knowledge in dealing with learners with hearing impairments, a heavily loaded curriculum, and limited parental involvement. The study concluded that, despite policies and legislation supporting the teaching of Sign Language starting from Early Childhood Development (ECD), there are still some hindrances for teachers to teach Sign Language effectively at the ECD level. Emphasis was then placed on the need for professional development and the accessibility of specifically designed Sign Language instruction, educational resources, awareness campaigns on deafness, and collaboration among stakeholders. The study also recommended that the Government should provide financial support and subsidise the education of Deaf learners.

KeyWords: *Sign language, ECD learners, medium of instruction.*

Introduction

Traditionally, Sign Language was one of the languages that were not recognized as a language to be used or taught in Zimbabwean schools. It was through the advocacy of deaf organisations such as the Association of the Deaf (ASSOD) and the Zimbabwe National Association of the Deaf (ZIMNAD), and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), that Sign Language has been recognised as a natural language for deaf people. This was a success, since Sign Language was recognised officially in the Constitution of Zimbabwe drafted in 2013, which also emphasises that “the State must promote and advance the use of all languages used in Zimbabwe, including sign language” (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). Policies supporting the use of Sign Language as a medium of instruction for the deaf in Zimbabwe include the 2006 Amended Education Act, which states that at the infant level, Sign Language should be used when teaching deaf learners (Chegovo et al., 2024). Curriculum policy states that Sign Language is one of the academic subjects to be taught. Similarly, the Zimbabwe Education Amendment Act No. 15 Section 62:1a, also states that every school shall try to teach every officially recognised language. Section 62:1c of the same Act states that the state should ensure that the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction in early childhood education (Chegovo et al., 2024). However, a study by Matende (2021), shows that Zimbabwean Sign Language is not a curriculum subject and is not being formally taught despite all the provisions, yet it has the same status as other languages being taught.

The government of Zimbabwe introduced Inclusive Education to promote education for all (De Bruin, 2019). In Zimbabwe, the concept of inclusion was effectively realised following the Jomtein and Salamanca Conferences in 1994, where the agreement on education for all was made (Muresherwa, & Jita, 2023; Dube, 2024). Inclusive education is viewed by Astuti (2020), as one way through which countries may achieve social justice in education. This was meant to reduce the discrimination of learners with disabilities and promote their integration into society. Equalisation of opportunities among learners with and without disabilities, regardless of origin, race, gender, or level of impairment, is now catered for through inclusion (Tariq, 2024, Dreyer et al., 2020). With the Competency-Based Curriculum getting implemented, learners with diverse disabilities, from three years, including those with hearing impairment, are now being enrolled in regular schools.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What strategies are employed by teachers in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level?
2. What are the challenges faced by ECD teachers in the teaching of Sign Language?
3. How can the challenges faced in the teaching of Sign Language be mitigated?

Theoretical Framework

The study used Donald Schon's Reflective Practice Theory to explore the experiences of teachers in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level. The theory has two types of reflection, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, focusing on exploring the role of reflection within the learning process. In the context of teaching, it aims to enhance teacher self-awareness and promote personal growth (Purwanto, Saepudin & Sofaussamawati, 2023). The theory suggests that, by "reflecting-in-action", professionals reflect on unexpected experiences and conduct "experiments" that serve to generate both a new understanding of the experience and a change in the situation (Regehr et al., 2024, Cattaneo & Motta, 2021). Reflection-on-action involves reflecting on an experience, situation, or phenomenon after it has occurred (Moghaddam et al., 2020;

Mulli, 2021). It is also associated with reflective writing, in which professionals reflect on their experiences and examine alternative ways to improve their practice. Through reflective practices, teachers can gain a deeper understanding of their teaching methods, recognise their strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate the values they incorporate into their instruction (Purwanto et al., 2023). The researcher used theory to understand how teachers reflect on their experiences, skills, and other factors in teaching Sign language at the ECD level. Purwanto et al. (2023) add that self-reflection allows teachers to assess the impact of their teaching on learners and make necessary adjustments to enhance their professional competencies.

Literature Review

Role of Sign Language in the learning of ECD learners

Apart from being a medium of communication for the Deaf and hard of hearing, Sign Language is also important to their cultures and identities (Young, Oram & Napier, 2019; Mauldin & Fannon, 2021). It acts as a bridge of communicative language, and members of these communities express their feelings, share their narratives, and connect deeply with their heritage (Verhaeghe, Van Avermaet & Derluyn, 2022). Learners who are deaf and hard of hearing can have a sense of belonging through using Sign language and cannot feel isolated due to their hearing status (Tanure Alves, 2024). When deaf children are exposed to Sign Language, they exhibit enhanced mental abilities, literacy skills, and academic performance comparable to hearing peers (Howerton-Fox & Falk, 2019; Alshutwi, Ahmad & Lee, 2020). If sign languages are made accessible to learners, they may have the same neurocognitive benefits as naturally spoken language (Murray, Hall & Snoddon, 2019). Therefore, Sign Language is an important tool in fostering understanding and reducing the obstacles between the Deaf and hearing communities (Bai & Bruno, 2020). In this regard, Sign Language is regarded as a tool bridging the gap between the hearing world and the deaf world.

Teaching of Sign Language

Sign Language is considered an important and the only means of communication by Deaf people (Oliveira et al., 2019). However, teaching Sign Language becomes a challenge for teachers, especially if they are not

proficient enough in the language (Bintoro et al., 2023), hindering the effective flow of the learning process. Literature revealed that teachers lack the necessary abilities to teach Sign Language and do not accept Sign Language as authentic (Ngobeni et al., 2020). However, starting from ECD, deaf learners should be taught using Sign Language since it is their first language, as stated by several pieces of legislation (Nendauni & Matende, 2024). Sign Language can be learned effectively if learners are exposed to a Sign Language environment where they can practise it more often. The use of Deaf adults in schools can promote the learning of Sign Language. This aligns with previous research, which suggested that it is important for deaf teachers as role models to work as a team with hearing teachers to improve Sign Language learning for the Deaf (Morgan et al., 2016). This may help the learners to be exposed to Sign Language and learn it easily.

Strategies employed in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level

Different strategies can be employed in the teaching of Sign Language at the ECD level. Learners with hearing impairment can learn effectively and perform well academically if teachers make use of effective strategies (Kisakye, 2021). Alanazi (2021) argues that Sign Language, spoken and written, bilingual-bicultural and total communication are some of the strategies used in teaching learners with hearing impairment. In a study done by Sibanda and Tlale (2019), it has been shown that bilingual education entails complex but equitable use of sign and oral language in which oral language is in the form of writing and reading (Sibanda & Tlale, 2019). Sign Language can also work perfectly well for those who can read and write. Sign Language is perceived as the most common speech type being used because it is the preferred style of communication for Deaf learners (Alanazi, 2021). Literature further revealed that one of the approaches teachers use in teaching literacy education is through localised efforts involving pictures, wooden CAD real objects, the use of demonstrations, and role play (Zulu, 2019). In addition, other strategies that can be used in teaching Sign Language to ECD learners are the use of self-contained classrooms with visual aids and technologies such as hearing aids and cochlear implants

Research Methodology

This section presents the methodology used to carry out the research study.

Research paradigm

Interpretive research is used to gain a better understanding of how people construct, modify, and interpret the social reality in which they live (Pervin, & Mokhtar, 2022, Awasthy, 2019). Therefore, to understand the experiences of teachers in teaching Sign language at the ECD level, the researcher employed the interpretive paradigm. As a result, the researcher managed to interact with the school administrators and teachers who teach inclusive classes.

Research approach

The qualitative research approach was adopted in this study to allow the researcher to explore the experiences of teachers in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level. It allows the study of things in their natural settings, when attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Priya, 2021). This is supported by Tracy (2024), who explains that qualitative research is about immersing oneself in, and trying to make sense of, a phenomenon, group of people, or scene. The approach was suitable for this study because it focused on the lived experiences, emotions, and feelings of those dealing with the teaching and learning of Sign Language at the ECD level.

Research design

The researcher used an exploratory case study, which allowed dwelling on the challenges and opportunities presented by the phenomenon under study. A case study involves a detailed and intensive analysis of a particular event, organisation, or social unit (Schoch, 2020, Priya, 2021). The exploratory case study was used because it gave the researcher the chance to get an in-depth look at the experiences of teachers in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level.

Population and Sampling

The population consisted of three categories from the two cases of participating schools with Deaf learners. The first category comprised all primary school teachers who engaged in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level. These teachers were chosen because they were directly involved in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level. The second category of the population comprised all the head teachers who supervised the implementation of the educational curriculum and implemented policies that supported the teaching of Sign Language. They were chosen to give insight into programme structure, including the availability of resources and implementation of policies that impacted on the teaching of Sign Language at the ECD level. The third category included parents of learners who are deaf and who learnt Sign Language at the ECD level. Their views could shed light on the role of learning Sign Language at school and its effectiveness on communication at home. A sample of twelve participants, which included 2 head teachers, 6 teachers, and 4 parents, was purposively selected from the population. Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024) point out that purposive sampling helps ensure that a quality sample is obtained without biases, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of the findings. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were directly involved in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level and who could give the researcher some credible information

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews and observation were employed as data collection methods, and these enabled the researcher to get information from the person responsible for a fuller version of what is taking place in schools in terms of teaching Sign Language at the ECD level. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to directly interact with the participants to gain a deeper insight into their experiences in the teaching of Sign Language at the ECD level. Open-ended questions were used to elicit an elaborate and extended reflection from participants (Knott et al, 2022). Observation was used to gather data as it appeared in its natural setting. The researcher observed the lessons as teachers were teaching Sign Language to ECD learners.

Data presentation and analysis

The thematic approach was used to analyse data generated qualitatively from the participants. The thematic analysis allowed the researcher to establish participants' thoughts, experiences, and behavior across the data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In trying to understand the experiences of teachers in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level, data gathered from interviews and observation were arranged using themes emanating from the findings. They were then analysed using deductive thematic analysis. The thematic analysis would make it easy for readers to understand and interpret the experiences of teachers in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level.

Ethical considerations

The researcher sought permission from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Permission was granted to carry out research at the selected schools. The researcher conformed to ethical conduct in research by maintaining the confidentiality of participants. Participants were given an informed consent form to sign, that clearly described their right to decide to take part or not and the right to withdraw before their responses in the study were recorded. The researcher used pseudonyms to represent participants throughout the research. Teachers were indicated as T1-T6, head teachers were indicated as H1-H2, and parents as P1-P4. All this was done to protect participants' identities and to maintain confidentiality.

Findings and Discussions

This section looks at and discusses findings that emanated from the data collected. The findings were thematically organised in relation to the sub-research questions of the study.

Experiences of teachers

This section looks at the experiences of teachers in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level.

ZSL as a medium of instruction in teaching Sign Language

Results showed that a few of the teachers often use Zimbabwean Sign Language as a medium of instruction when teaching Sign Language at the ECD level, whereas others use different ways to communicate with learners who are deaf. This was indicated by the excerpts from Teacher 6 and 4 below.

I use different ways of communication when teaching deaf learners, even though. I know that using Sign language as a medium of instruction is an effective way of teaching Sign Language, but I am not good at signing (Participant T6).

I use gestures, oral communication, and a bit of signing when teaching Sign language at the ECD level. I do this mostly because I am not proficient in Sign language, but learners do not benefit fully from that, especially those who use sign language as their first language (Participant T4).

From the above sentiments, it can be deduced that Sign Language is not being used as a medium of instruction, despite having policies on Sign Language use as a language of instruction for Deaf learners. Even though it is stated in the Zimbabwe Education Amendment Act No. 15 (2019), Section 62:1c, that the mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction in Early Childhood Education (Chegovo et al., 2024), teachers are finding it difficult to use Sign Language as a medium of instruction. This is due to a lack of signing skills, forcing them to resort to other means of communication. However, teachers have to make use of simple sign gestures and visual aids for learners to understand.

Challenges faced by teachers in teaching Sign Language

This section presents the challenges hindering the teaching of Sign language at the ECD level.

Infrastructure

Findings from the study indicated that the available infrastructure is hindering the effective teaching of sign language at the ECD level. This is illustrated by the following excerpts:

The infrastructure is not suitable for deaf learners. The classrooms are not acoustically treated. They do not have lights, and they are not noise-proof. However, I usually look for an area where there is less or no noise to practice Sign language with my learners (Participant T4).

We want to support the learning of Sign language by providing the prerequisite resources, but finances are not available, especially for acoustically treated walls (Participant H2).

The above sentiments indicate that a shortage of resources is problematic in the teaching of Sign Language at the ECD level. The infrastructure was found not conducive to the effective teaching of Sign Language, thus hindering its effective teaching. Literature has found that the school environment influences the teaching of Sign Language and can affect the learner's achievement, either positively or negatively (Alzahrani, Alharbi & Alodwani, 2019). A desirable school environment design that is friendly in the teaching of Sign Language should have wide entrances to classrooms and lighting for learners with hearing impairment (Keegan, 2022). The findings also indicated that the support of the teaching of Sign Language at the ECD level, in terms of providing a suitable infrastructure, is hindered by lack of financial resources. In this regard, the teacher has to provide a learning environment that enables learners to learn Sign Language effectively, like using a noise-free environment for Sign Language practice.

Home and school language

From the research findings, most teachers agreed that there should be a relationship between the child's home language and the language taught at school. This is illustrated by the following excerpts:

Deaf learners come to school without exposure to sign languages, especially those born to hearing parents. I suggest that parents should take lessons in basic Sign Language immediately after realizing that their child is deaf to expose their children to Sign Language at an early stage and also help learners with Sign Language homework (Participant T3).

Most parents and family members who do not know Sign Language find ways of communicating with the deaf learner without using proper signs (Participant T6).

From the above sentiments, it can be deduced that the home language has an impact on the learning of a child. Most learners come to school without proper Sign Language basics because their parents cannot sign. The connection between the home language and school language allows a smooth flow of communication for learners, thus improving children's literacy attainments (Nag, 2019). When parents practice Sign Language at home and establish a consistent communication environment, they can help their children acquire Sign Language from a

tender age. Teachers have a role to play to bridge the gap between the home language and the school language by working in collaboration with the parents and advocating for parents' Sign Language training.

Lack of skills and knowledge

Lack of professional competence was seen as the main challenge teachers have in teaching Sign Language at the ECD level. Below are illustrative statements from teachers who teach Sign language at the ECD level.

During my training, I did not acquire the required skills to teach Sign Language. I also lack skills in handling ECD learners. This is giving me a hard time when teaching sign language at this level (Participant T4).

The training was more on theory than practice, and it was my first encounter with Sign Language, which I could not learn to sign fluently. Therefore, I struggle to teach these learners Sign Language. We sometimes try to use Deaf role models or interpreters to help us to teach Sign Language effectively at the ECD level, but they are not always available (Participant T6).

The above sentiments show that teachers lack both skills in Sign Language and in dealing with ECD learners, making it difficult to teach Sign language to these learners. Literature also revealed that the implementation of Sign Language in schools is hindered by teachers' lack of fluency in Sign Language and skills in dealing with learners with hearing impairment (Alamri, 2017). The lack of relevant qualifications related to Sign Language shows a gap in the training of teachers in tertiary schools, resulting in a gap in Sign Language. Special skills to teach Sign Language are a requirement for teachers since it is the primary tool for communicating and conveying information from the teacher to ECD learners (Bintoro et al., 2023). If teachers do not possess the skills to teach Sign Language and to deal with ECD learners, challenges in communication and interaction with these learners may prevail, thus hindering the effective teaching of Sign Language at this level. In trying to come up with a solution to this problem, teachers collaborate with Deaf adults and have continuous professional development through workshops and staff development.

Curriculum adaptation

Findings indicated that the curriculum is loaded, hindering the effective teaching of Sign Language to deaf learners at the ECD level. Interview excerpts from teachers report the following:

The class sizes are too big. To deal with a big class with learners with diverse abilities, with the time allocated and the workload that we have, is very difficult (Participant T3).

The short time allocated for each subject and the content to be taught affect the teaching of Sign Language at the ECD level (Participant T5).

It is evident from the results that teachers are facing challenges with class sizes, learning styles, and the limited time allocated for the subject. Big classes are hindering the effective teaching of Sign Language to ECD learners. The curriculum should be adapted, particularly on the class sizes and time allocated for different activities, so that teachers are motivated to teach Sign Language at the ECD level. A high learner-to-teacher ratio makes it difficult for teachers to control the learners, which can impact how they deliver their lessons (Dube, 2024). Therefore, teachers are left with no room to successfully teach learners with hearing impairment if the class size is too big (Maizere, 2020; Maizere & Robert, 2024). If class sizes are small, it becomes easy for the teacher to understand each learner and work with the learners in an effective manner.

Lack of sign language materials

Teachers indicated that the scarcity of pertinent learning materials is hindering the effective teaching of Sign Language at the ECD level, as shown by the excerpts below:

The textbooks are not in sign language or have pictures of people signing. With little signing that we have, it is very difficult to teach Sign Language without some guidance. I suggest that if we can be provided with books with pictures of people demonstrating, it will help us in teaching Sign Language (Participant T6).

Learners who are deaf rely mostly on visual communication. If we can be provided with visual material like projectors and minicomputers, it can help us teach Sign Language since learners can see videos of other people signing (Participant T6).

It is evident from the above sentiments that learning material to support the teaching of Sign Language is scarce. The available materials

are meant for hearing learners. This scarcity of Sign Language learning materials hinders the teaching of Sign Language. Learners who are deaf use visual communication. Therefore, learning materials should be adapted to suit them. Books for indigenous languages like Shona and Ndebele are in place, but materials that are meant to meet the needs of learners who are Deaf have not yet been adapted (Chegovo et al., 2024). The use of visual materials like projectors should be prioritised in the implementation of Sign Language teaching, as they facilitate its learning.

Parental involvement

Parental involvement is one of the challenges hindering the effective teaching of Sign Language at the ECD level. Findings from the study indicated that parents are not fully involved in the learning of their children, making it difficult for teachers to fully implement the teaching of Sign Language. This is indicated by the following excerpts:

Some parents of deaf learners are not providing the requirements needed at school due to financial constraints. They do not help them with Sign Language homework since they cannot sign, making it difficult to teach Sign Language (Participant T5).

Most parents are not supporting the education of their deaf children, thinking that sending a deaf child to school is a waste of time and resources. They perceive them as children who cannot do anything in life, as they cannot communicate well with others (Participant T2).

I don't have enough money to provide what is needed at school for my deaf child. I cannot even support my child in learning Sign Language because I cannot sign well (Participant P3)

The above responses indicate that parents of deaf children still have a negative perception of the abilities of children who are deaf. Some have negative attitudes toward deaf learners that emanate from a lack of Sign Language proficiency. It has been shown that some parents are not there to provide support for the education of their children who are deaf due to financial constraints and problems in communicating with their deaf children. The involvement and support of parents play a crucial role in ensuring the inclusion of learners with diverse and unique needs by providing support in terms of information about the child and learning resources (Majoko, 2016; Paul et al., 2021). This implies that without proper support from parents, the teaching of Sign Language can be hindered, and learners with hearing impairment cannot be fully included.

Conclusion

The study concludes, from the findings, that despite having policies and legislation supporting the teaching of Sign Language starting from ECD, there are still some hindrances for teachers to effectively teach Sign Language at ECD level. Some of these disturbances, as established from the findings, include a lack of skills and knowledge, and also the infrastructure that is not acoustically treated. The findings also suggest that after reflecting on their skills and other factors affecting the teaching of Sign Language at the ECD level, teachers find alternative ways of helping ECD learners to learn Sign Language effectively. The results from this study could serve as guidelines for future adjustments that will enable teachers to effectively teach Sign Language at ECD level.

Recommendations

The Government should provide financial support and subsidise the education of Deaf learners.

The schools should also adapt the curriculum to accommodate learners who are Deaf.

Schools should also provide technological gadgets like projectors. Textbooks and other learning materials should be in Sign Language. The materials to be used in the teaching of Sign Language should be more friendly to deaf learners to promote the learning of Sign Language and meet their academic needs.

In addition, parents of learners who are deaf should be given the chance to do basic Sign Language lessons to help their children acquire the correct signs.

The study also suggests refresher training for teachers, pre-service and in-service training on Sign Language for teachers, and the use of deaf role models and interpreters to teach Sign Language at the ECD level..

Finally, the government, together with school administrations, should mount awareness campaigns to change negative attitudes towards learners who are deaf and make people embrace the use of Sign Language.

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