Sign Language Marginalisation in Early Childhood Development Education in Zimbabwe: Towards Linguistic Inclusivity

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Abstract

This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the marginalisation of sign language in early childhood development education (ECDE) in Zimbabwe and proposing an inclusive approach for Deaf education. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology, researchers focused on two mainstream schools that accommodate Deaf learners and two special schools for the Deaf. Data collection included a literature review, observations, and semi-structured interviews, framed by the Critical Language Policy framework. Findings highlight a shortage of qualified ECDE teachers and the predominance of the direct method and audio-linguicism as key factors marginalising sign language. Additionally, limited parental involvement and a lack of language acquisition support hinder Deaf

learners' development. The study advocates for increasing learning facilities and qualified sign linguists and establishing inclusive teaching and learning policies to improve Deaf education in ECDE settings.

Keywords: *Zimbabwe Sign Language, Childhood development, Harare, Deaf Schools, Deaf, Sign-linguists, Audio-linguicism.*

Introduction

The Nziramasanga Commission of Enquiry into Education and Training (1999, pp. 261), Terms of Reference 2.1.2, identifies ECDE as one of the decisive areas where the foundation of the basic principles and philosophy of Zimbabwe's education system is laid to prepare a learner for future life challenges. Therefore, it is critical to conduct research pertaining to ECDE to aid educationalists, linguists, language planners, and activists in ascertaining the quality of education and identifying issues that require attention. Drawing from this and the need for linguistic inclusivity, this paper investigates the marginalisation of Zimbabwean Sign Language (ZSL) in ECDE by drawing on the teaching and learning process. This paper examines the state of education for Deaf learners in Zimbabwe within the framework of early childhood development (ECD) and accessibility to ZSL. It undertakes this exploration through a literature review, an overview of existing provisions, a synthesis of stakeholder interviews in the field of Deaf education, and observations made within classrooms. Finally, it concludes with a delineation of key priorities for instigating change.

Early childhood spans from birth to 8 years of age, according to UNESCO (1996). This phase is crucial for the establishment of fundamental skills such as walking, talking, self-esteem, worldview, and moral principles. With significant brain development occurring during this period, the years from 0 to 8 set the stage for future learning (UNESCO Early Childhood Care and Education Unit, 1996). Despite existing disparities and areas for improvement, the advantages of ECDE within the Zimbabwean school curriculum remain significant. Thus, conducting this study is deemed beneficial.

The Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe serves as the conceptual foundational point of departure for this study. Act 20 of 2013, Section 6(4) of the Constitution, mandates the state to actively promote and facilitate the use of sign language, ensuring conducive conditions for its development. Moreover, the Constitution advocates for the integration

of sign language within the ECDE system in Zimbabwe. On the contrary, as sign linguists, the current researchers noted that Deaf learners are denied their right to learn through their native language (sign language), and they often face delayed enrollment in school due to exclusion from the ECDE system in Zimbabwe. Building upon this observation and situating the study within the context of critical applied linguistics, there is a pressing need for an in-depth examination of marginalisation and the need to work towards inclusive approaches for future implementation. This paper aims to serve as a foundation for such discussions and to propagate similar studies to be undertaken by fellow researchers.

Penn (2001, p. 6) highlights that "critical applied linguistics delves into language within social contexts, transcending mere correlations between languages and society, and instead raises critical inquiries regarding access, power, inequality, desire, diversity, and resistance". Consequently, this study delves into the status of sign language within the ECDE system to address the critical questions posed by Penn (1992). According to Mkuzana and Gatsi (2014), the effectiveness and calibre of any educational system's outcomes are influenced by the nature and quality of its ECDE programme. While this study examines sign language marginalisation from a linguistic standpoint, its findings hold significant potential to enhance ECDE. This research may shed light on how language marginalisation detrimentally affects the attainment of inclusive and equitable quality education in ECDE, particularly focusing on Deaf learners in lower grades. It is anticipated that the discussion and outcomes of this paper will offer valuable insights to language planners, policymakers, linguists, activists, various stakeholders, and the government regarding the utilisation and advancement of sign language within ECDE.

To fulfil the purpose of this study, the following interrelated objectives are explored:

- To ascertain the present level of inclusivity of sign language in ECDE in Zimbabwe.
- To determine challenges encountered in teaching and learning sign language within ECDE in Zimbabwe.
- To suggest potential measures that could be implemented to enhance the inclusivity of sign language in ECDE.

Having established the context in which the study's problem is identified and outlined, the subsequent section critically reviews existing literature to

assess the current level of inclusivity of sign language in ECDE in Zimbabwe, thereby addressing the first objective of this study.

Literature Review

The sociolinguistic status of sign language in the Zimbabwean educational system

The Zimbabwean government, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture, has formulated language policies in various years (2002, 2006, 2007, 2013). However, there has been a lack of adequate detail regarding the implementation of such policies in the education of Deaf learners (Matende, 2015). Statistics compiled by the Deaf Zimbabwe Trust (2015) indicate that Zimbabwe has an estimated total of 85,964 Deaf children, with over 90% of them not enrolled in schools. In September 2013, Lazarus Dokora, the former Minister of Primary and Secondary Education, reported that 2,261 Deaf learners were receiving education in the country's 115 resource units and 9 special schools spread across ten provinces.

Harare Children Centrer, St. Giles Rehabilitation Centre, and Danhiko School, among others, are the few mainstream schools that accommodate Deaf learners. Emerald Hill School for the Deaf, Henry Murray, and Deaf Zimbabwe Trust, among others, are the few Deaf-specialised schools. It is stated within the Constitution of Zimbabwe, Act 20 of 2013, Section (6) that,

> …the state must promote and advance the use of Sign language and must create conditions necessary for its development.

This means that sign language can be used in whatever sphere where communication is needed; hence, sign language usage in ECDE is no exception in this regard.

The Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC) results show Deaf learners perform worse than their hearing peers, with only 10% passing Grade 7 exams in 2014 (Deaf Zimbabwe Trust, 2013). Data by disability at the secondary level is unavailable (Deaf Zimbabwe Trust, 2013).

Matende (2017) and Musengi (2012) note that the lack of qualified sign language interpreters and the oral approach to teaching sign language hinder Deaf education. This oral approach prioritises speech over signing (Veira & Molina, 2018, PP. 2). Zimbabwean Sign Language, like many

minority languages, has seen limited development (Musengi, Ndofirepi & Shumba, 2012).

High dropout rates among Deaf learners and low reading proficiency beyond the 4th grade are well documented (Brueggermann, 2004; Wauters et al., 2006). Kiyaga and Moore (2009) report that many teachers of the Deaf in sub-Saharan Africa lack signing skills and do not consider sign language legitimate. In Zimbabwe, some specialist teachers learn sign language from their students to teach effectively (Musengi et al., 2012).

Having examined the sociolinguistic status of sign language within the Zimbabwean educational system, the subsequent subsection of the literature review discusses ECDE in Zimbabwe.

Early Childhood Development Education in Zimbabwe

The Nziramasanga Commission (1999) asserts that early childhood development education (ECDE) in Zimbabwe is crucial for establishing the education system's foundation, aiming to equip learners for future challenges. The State of the World Children (2001) emphasises providing opportunities for fine motor skills and language development through conversation, reading, and singing for children aged four to five.

Matende and Mugari (2021) highlight that Deaf learners in Zimbabwe face a neglect of Zimbabwe Sign Language (ZSL) in favour of oral communication, erasing Deaf culture and violating their educational rights. The importance of the first language in ECDE is particularly vital for Deaf learners, who often face pressure to learn the auditory based first language rather than their natural visual language. As such, only about 10% of Deaf children acquire sign language in conducive home environments.

This study's researchers observe that many Deaf learners learn sign language from peers in special schools, though systemic issues like oralism often impede this. Act 20 of the 2013 Constitution states that rejecting a child's language equates to rejecting the child, violating fundamental rights and access to society.

It is vital to note that influences from home, peers, and community are key in shaping culturally adept individuals (Makuvaza and Gatsi, 2014). The Nziramasanga Commission's findings have led to reforms, including ECD-A and ECD-B classes (Samkange, 2016). The Commission (1999) defines ECDE as care and education for children from birth to six years to promote development. An evaluative study by Dyanda et al. (2005) examines ECDE's history and policy implications but does not assess its impact on Deaf learners. Vygotskian theory suggests quality ECDE should focus on developing competencies (Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

This subsection discussed ECDE in Zimbabwe. The ensuing sub-section discusses sign language as a real language for teaching and learning in the ECDE context.

Sign language as a real language for teaching and learning in the ECDE

Musengi, Ndofirepi and Shumba (2012) note that sign languages have been mistakenly likened to pidgins or creoles, but linguistic studies affirm they are visual-spatial languages with unique structures (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003). Mugari, Mabugu and Nyangairi (2015) argue that sign language is a distinct language, comparable to spoken languages. This view is supported by Nendauni (2021) and Yule (2010), who assert that signing is as fundamental as speech.

Nendauni (2021) views sign language as a fully-fledged human language, meeting all linguistic criteria. Zimbabwean Sign Language, unique and unrelated to Zimbabwe's spoken languages, is a rule-governed, systematic, and arbitrary communication system (Matende & Mugari, 2021). Similarly, Nendauni (2021) explains that Sign Language grammar uses space, handshape, and movement, along with facial expressions and body movements, to create visual-spatial utterances. Like spoken languages, sign language has syntactic (Lillo-Martin & Klima, 1990), morphological (Klima & Bellugi, 1979), and phonological (Stokoe, 1960) structures.

Umalusi (2018, pp. 26) stresses the need for extensive exposure and practice in sign language for effective learning. While not an official language in Zimbabwe, sign language is recognised in various policies and used in ECDE instruction. However, Umalusi (2018, p. 11) highlights a global lack of qualified teachers for the Deaf. Kiyaga and Moore (2009) add that sub-Saharan African teachers often lack appropriate skills and do not see sign language as legitimate. Umalusi (2018, pp. 29) cites Morgan, Glaser and Magongwa (2016) on the importance of Deaf teachers as role models, with team teaching by Deaf and hearing teachers enhancing language acquisition and social adaptation (SA Department of Basic Education, 2017). Education in sign language is crucial for Deaf learners, upholding their constitutional rights in Zimbabwe (2013).

Having discussed sign language as a real language for teaching and learning in the ECDE context, the ensuing subsection discusses sign language acquisition and development.

Sign language acquisition and development

Brueggemann (2004) notes that over 90% of Deaf children are born into hearing families, and those exposed to sign language tend to have higher IQs. Research shows that children learning sign language from birth develop language skills at similar rates to those learning spoken languages, with early signs and syntax emerging on comparable timescales (Chamberlain, Morford & Mayberry, 2000; Morgan & Woll, 2002; Schick, Marschark & Spencer, 2005).

Language development, starting in early infancy, relies on perception, cognition, motor development, and socialisation (Iline, 2013). Levine (2002) indicates that children exposed to complex sentences by educators develop advanced language skills. Ritterfeld (2000) suggests optimal language input directs attention, provides necessary data, and motivates verbal communication.

According to Tomaszewski (2001), the language development stages of Deaf learners are similar to those of hearing people. Studies reveal that mothers of linguistically delayed children communicate less and provide less diverse language input (Grimm & Kaltenbacher, 1982; Szagun, 1996). Deaf children exposed to sign language from birth begin producing complex sentences around age three (Tomaszewski, 2001). However, hearing parents often lack proficiency in sign language, delaying their children's language exposure until preschool (Tomaszewski, 2001).

Despite limited sign language input, Deaf children develop home signs, creating systematic gestural communication (Goldin-Meadow & Feldman, 1977; Coppola, 2002). Deaf children learning signed languages from birth show development patterns similar to those learning spoken languages (Petitto et al., 2001; Chamberlain et al., 2000; Morgan & Woll, 2002; Schick et al., 2005). However, many Deaf children are isolated from both spoken and signed languages if their parents do not sign, and interventions may discourage sign language to promote speech (Mann & Marshall, 2010).

Overall, this section has reviewed literature pertinent to the topic under investigation. The review has addressed objective one of this study, which aims to ascertain the present level of inclusivity of sign language in ECDE in Zimbabwe. Additionally, the review has partially addressed objective two, which seeks to identify challenges encountered in teaching and learning sign language within ECDE in Zimbabwe. These objectives will be further explored in the subsequent sections, aligning with the data collected for this study. The subsequent section introduces the theoretical framework that underpins the present paper.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in critical theory in language policy (Tollefson, 2006). The application of critical theory in language policy (CLP) in the context of this study plays a significant role in addressing the challenges faced by Deaf learners in ECDE. CLP draws from critical linguistics, which involves social activism and entails linguists taking responsibility for understanding and challenging the ways dominant social groups use language to establish and perpetuate social hierarchies. In this study, adopting CLP allows for an exploration of viable solutions to the marginalisation of sign language and the challenges experienced by Deaf learners in ECDE.

One of the key aspects of CLP is its emphasis on analysing policy interpretation, linguistic rights, and the experiences of marginalised groups, such as Deaf learners. By employing CLP, the study aims to shed light on how sign language is marginalised within the Zimbabwean context, particularly within the ECDE system. This approach allows researchers to critically examine existing language policies and their impact on linguistic rights and educational opportunities for Deaf learners.

Moreover, CLP serves as a research approach that seeks to develop more democratic policies aimed at reducing inequality and promoting the maintenance of minority languages. In the context of this study, CLP enables researchers to advocate for policies that address the marginalisation of sign language and promote inclusive practices within ECDE. By highlighting the social and political implications of language policy decisions, CLP contributes to the broader goal of promoting social justice and equity in education.

In brief, the application of CLP in this study provides a framework for critically examining language policies, advocating for the rights of Deaf learners, and proposing solutions to address the challenges they face in ECDE. Through this lens, the current researchers will contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable language policies that prioritise the linguistic rights and educational needs of all learners, including those who use sign language.

Research Methods

The paper employed a descriptive research design utilising qualitative methods for data collection. The descriptive design was chosen for its suitability in exploring the implications and challenges of sign language marginalisation in ECDE programmes. According to Moyo, Wadesango

and Kurebwa (2012), descriptive research is a social scientific investigation that examines both large and small populations by selecting and studying samples chosen from the population to uncover the relative incidence distribution and interrelationships of sociological variables. Qualitative researchers play a crucial role as they personally collect data through interviews and behaviour observation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, pp. 10; Wiersma and Jurs, 2009, pp. 232).

Data collection involved a literature review, unstructured interviews, and observations conducted in two selected schools for the Deaf in Harare, Zimbabwe, as well as two selected mainstream schools catering to Deaf students. Interviews were conducted to tap deeper into the context, while observations provided insights into the teaching and learning process. The researchers focused on observing lessons in progress in two classes: ECD A (3-4 years) and B (4-5 years) in the selected schools in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants due to the rich information they possess, essential for fulfilling the objectives of the study (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010:138). The study included four school heads (SH), eight teachers (T), and four hearing parents (HP), one from each of the four selected schools. Nendauni (2023) suggests that in cases where there are no fixed sample size guidelines, a larger sample is advisable. However, even a small sample can be valuable if the topic has not been extensively studied. Given the limited research on the marginalisation of sign language in ECDE in Zimbabwe, it is anticipated that this study will generate sufficient interest to justify the use of a small sample. Teachers instructing Deaf learners in ECDE who are hard-of-hearing are presumed to be more experienced and proficient in ZSL than those who are not.

It is important to note that research involving human participants raises complex ethical, legal, political, and social issues (Mhlanga, 2012). To adhere to ethical standards, the researchers obtained permission from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and the Provincial Education Director of Harare Province before conducting the study. Participants were assured that the data would only be used for research purposes. To maintain anonymity, the names of schools, parents, teachers, and school leaders were hidden, and pseudonyms were assigned to safeguard their privacy and identities. For example, school leaders were denoted as SH, teachers as T, and parents of hearing children as HP, each distinguished by numerical identifiers (e.g., Teacher one is T1, and subsequent teachers are labelled T2, and so forth).

This section detailed the methods employed in the study, the subsequent section concurrently presents and discusses the findings, drawing examples from the collected data.

Findings and Discussion

The research findings are presented and interpreted in alignment with the research objectives, as outlined in the introduction section of this paper. The discussion of the findings follows a thematic approach derived from key themes arising from the data and serving as the foundation for the discussion, including the absence of trained professionals in ECDE for Deaf learners, the lack of a curriculum tailored for Deaf ECDE learners, the absence of a language acquisition support system, and attitudinal barriers. The first theme is discussed below.

Theme 1: Lack of trained professionals in ECDE for Deaf learners

The lack of trained professionals in the ECDE for Deaf learners emerged as a major challenge. One of the interviewed HP indicates that professionals are being hired to teach the ECDE classes without evaluation officers available specifically to supervise. The teacher specifically states:

> *The professionals hired to teach Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) classes in Zimbabwe lack direct supervision from evaluation officers* **(HP1)**.

HP1 underscored a critical concern regarding the recruitment of professionals to instruct classes, highlighting the absence of resolute evaluation officers to oversee their teaching. This omission suggests a potential lack of quality control and oversight in the educational process, which could impact the effectiveness and standards of ECDE within the Deaf community in Harare.

In this regard, a considerable number of teachers tasked with instructing learners with special needs lack specialised education qualifications and training to effectively cater to learners with special educational needs in ECDE. This is echoed by **SH1**.

> *As the School Head, I am forced to use teachers who do not have special education training yet alone sign language due to lack of teachers who have Sign Language in the country, unfortunately this impact the teaching and learning process for Deaf learners.*

Drawing from **SH1** utterances, there is a scarcity of teachers with sign language skills in the country. Consequently, this situation adversely affects the teaching and learning experience for Deaf learners. This finding aligns with the findings of Arrah and Swain (2014), who argue that there is a lack of proficiency in utilising sign language effectively in their teaching practices. The lack of specialised training and sign language proficiency among teachers hampers their ability to effectively communicate with and cater to the needs of Deaf learners, this potentially hinders their academic progress and overall educational experience.

This finding holds significant weight, particularly considering that inadequate teacher training hinders the effective educational outcomes of learners with special needs (Arrah and Swain, 2014). Therefore, teacher education should be positioned at the forefront of ECDE reform, with pre-service teacher training representing a crucial initial step towards providing an effective learning experience for Deaf learners (Simui, 2009). Moreover, **SH3** adds:

> *We don't have a special early childhood development education programme just for Deaf children. Instead, we have to include them in the regular ECDE programme, and that's why we're finding it hard.*

Drawing from the above, it is evident that the absence of ECDE programmes specifically designed for Deaf learners complicates the establishment of structured teaching and learning environments. To state it plainly, the implication of not having a specialised ECDE programme for Deaf children is that it can exacerbate existing educational disparities and hinder the holistic development and inclusion of these learners in the educational system. This finding is further elaborated on in theme two below.

Theme 2: Absence of a curriculum for Deaf ECDE learners

As stated in the paragraph above, one of the themes in this study was the lack of a curriculum for Deaf learners. The findings of this study unveil the detrimental impact of the absence of an ECDE curriculum tailored for Deaf learners on the effectiveness of ECDE programmes in Zimbabwe. For instance, interviewed teachers collectively express uncertainty regarding the management of ECDE programmes and highlight the pressing need for ongoing training. Several teachers echoed the following sentiments:

*I can attest to the challenges we face due to the absence of a specific curriculum tailored for their needs. It affects not only the flow of our programmes but also our ability to effectively address their learning requirements (**T1**).*

*Without clear guidelines and resources, it is challenging to provide an inclusive learning environment that meets the unique needs of Deaf children (**T2**).*

*Continuous training and support are essential for us to enhance our skills and confidence in delivering quality education to Deaf children in Zimbabwe (**T3**).*

The challenges outlined by **T1** highlight how this gap affects the smooth operation of educational programmes and hampers their capacity to adequately cater to the learning needs of Deaf students. Similarly, **T2** underscores the difficulty in establishing an inclusive learning environment without clear guidance and resources, which directly impacts the educational experiences of Deaf children. Moreover, **T3** highlights the need for teachers to receive continual training and assistance to enhance their capacity to provide Deaf students with a high-quality education. Collectively, these statements highlight the urgent need for tailored educational resources, clear guidelines, and comprehensive training programmes to ensure that Deaf children in Zimbabwe receive the education and support they require to thrive academically.

According to the Deaf Zimbabwe Trust (2015), the curriculum for early childhood development education (ECDE) centres in Zimbabwe should be designed to accommodate all learners, regardless of their disability status. Therefore, the ECDE system ought to consider and address the diverse needs and abilities of learners. However, the researchers observed that sign language remains marginalised in ECDE centres, despite Section 6(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe recognising it as a fully-fledged language of the country.

This marginalisation has significant implications for the social mobility of Deaf learners. Deaf Zimbabwe Trust (2015) suggests the necessity of reviewing the teacher education curriculum to incorporate sign language and advocating for sign language to be developed into an examinable subject, considering it is the primary language of the Deaf learners. Additionally, subject-specific sign language resources need to be developed to ensure the availability of signs for various subjects.

Because of the absence of a specific curriculum for Deaf children in ECDE, this has an impact on the teaching and learning methods used by teachers, as discussed in theme three below.

Theme 3: Lack of proper teaching methods

The researchers in this study also note that the demonstration teaching method was not effectively utilised due to a lack of material resources in ECDE centres. Consequently, the absence of individualised plans resulted in limited benefits for the learners from the lessons. Moreover, the use of sign language as a medium of instruction was not fully implemented. Instead, teachers tended to incorporate oralism, leading to the utilisation of total communication, which, according to Devise, Jacquet and Loots (2005, pp. 371), nearly "enhances the creation and exchange of shared symbolic and linguistic meaning". One of the interviewed teachers stated:

> *Some of my colleagues use signs typically employed by Deaf adults, despite there being a noticeable difference between the two* (**T1**).

This highlights that some teachers of Deaf learners utilise signs typically employed by Deaf adults, despite a noticeable distinction between the two. Deaf children often employ non-formal signs, lacking a formal structure, which are simpler to execute, allowing for the development of language skills as they progress through language acquisition stages. Therefore, adhering to the five parameters of signing (hand shape, hand location, hand movement, palm orientation, and facial expression) might pose a challenge for Deaf learners initially, but it is a skill they gradually acquire over the course of language acquisition stages.

Line (2003) emphasises that learners with and without hearing loss can not benefit from the same teaching strategies. While educational concepts may be taught using similar methods, adaptations should be made to suit the specific needs of Deaf learners. Therefore, although the demonstration method is suitable for most categories of learners, its application should be tailored to accommodate the requirements of Deaf learners. Employing appropriate teaching methods and curriculum is pivotal in fostering the holistic development of learners in ECDE. Doing this also fosters good classroom management, which will be discussed next.

Theme 4: Difficulty in classroom management

The findings of the study also reveal that ECDE teachers encounter challenges in managing Deaf learners in the classroom, particularly due to the high number of learners in each class, which hampers the teaching and learning process. For instance, **HP1** stated:

I have seen that our children are taught in overcrowded classrooms, it must be hard for the teacher to manage such large classes.

Ideally, a manageable number of learners in a classroom facilitates a more effective teaching and learning environment. Furthermore, Chireshe (2006) contends that the high teacher-pupil ratio in many Zimbabwean primary schools leaves teachers with limited capacity to address the needs of learners with unique requirements.

Additionally, the findings show that teachers sometimes write on the board and move around the classroom while speaking, failing to maintain visual contact with Deaf learners. This practice makes it difficult for Deaf learners to follow the signing teacher visually, rendering lip-reading virtually impossible. For example, **T4** expresses:

Sometimes I have to walk around the classroom talking to get learners attention, unfortunately, it makes it difficult for Deaf learners to lip read.

This teaching method may unintentionally marginalise Deaf learners and hinder their ability to fully engage with the lesson content. It highlights the need for educators to be mindful of the diverse needs of their students and to employ inclusive teaching strategies that accommodate all learners, including those with hearing impairments. Teacher classroom management should ensure that the environment is conducive to learning. According to UNICEF (2000, pp. 12), "class management refers to creating a learning environment appropriate for the whole class or other teaching arrangements that use incentives and imposed rules in which effective learning is given scope to flourish".

Theme 5: Absence of sign language subjects and syllabus

Sign language is not taught as a subject in Zimbabwe, and there is no syllabus for it. Moreover, the 2017 New Curriculum is entirely silent about sign language as it outlines the three learning levels: infant school (ECDE-A Grade Two), junior school (Grade 3-7), and secondary school (Form 2-6). To date, sign language is still not taught as a subject in primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe. This contradicts the fact that sign language in Zimbabwe is a minority language and warrants promotion. According to Dube and Ncube (2013, pp. 250), 'education and language are like Siamese twins', meaning one needs the other for development.

Echoing the same sentiments, Alidou, Boly, Brocke-Utne, Diallo, Heugh and Wolff (2006) observe that language does not mean everything

in education, but without language, everything is insignificant in education. In fact, Section 6 of the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe determines the language rights of Deaf citizens in Zimbabwe, which must be honored. However, despite this development, the use of sign language has remained passive in legal settings due to the absence of a vigorous implementation matrix. In this regard, there is "a gap between policy intentions and practice" (Kadenge, 2015, pp. 32). Echoing the same sentiments, Kadenge and Mugari (2015, pp. 10) note that 'deliverables have always been a blind spot plaguing language planning in Zimbabwe'. Thus, the language behaviour of Deaf learners in ECDE centres, as revealed by the findings, remains the same due to the absence of implementation measures.

Without dedicated instructions in sign language as a subject with structured content and curriculum, Deaf learners may struggle to develop proficiency in sign language. This means that the absence of sign language subjects and syllabi has significant implications for sign language acquisition, as discussed in the theme below.

Theme 6: Lack of a language acquisition support system

The findings of the study reveal that most Deaf children are born to hearing parents who do not know sign language, while very few are born to Deaf parents. Research indicates that at least 90% of Deaf children are born into hearing families, and those whose families converse in sign language tend to perform much better in school than those whose families do not use sign language (Brueggermann, 2004). This study finds that due to the lack of a language acquisition support system both at home and at school, Deaf learners from hearing families experience significant delays in acquiring language. **T4** stated:

> *When a mother is breastfeeding her child, she will be talking to the baby and the child's language will develop', unfortunately this does not work for a Deaf child.*

The way learners acquire a language, whether it be their first language or a second language, significantly impacts their academic success. Neglecting the needs of Deaf learners and failing to address language and material gaps for them hinders the attainment of universal education for Zimbabwe as a nation (Deaf Bulletin, Issue 2/2013).

Using spoken language as the primary medium of instruction for teaching Deaf learners in ECDE centres is not an appropriate approach. This practice violates the linguistic rights of Deaf learners to use a language of their choice, as outlined in Section 6(a) of the 2013 Zimbabwe

Constitution, which mandates that all officially recognised languages be treated equitably.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) contends that instructing learners in an unfamiliar language is akin to subjecting them to "submission", analogous to submerging them underwater without teaching them how to swim. Language acquisition is pivotal to learners' education and development. Teachers facilitate language acquisition by reinforcing appropriate responses with the correct environmental consequences and by addressing the children's responses and needs (Edwards, 2000).

Ritterfeld (2000) outlines three crucial functions of optimal language input in language acquisition: directing learners' attention to their linguistic environment, providing necessary language data for knowledge development, and motivating independent communication. The UNESCO Committee of 1953 emphasises the effectiveness of teaching children in their first language, promoting comprehension and free expression. This principle, supported by research across Africa (Ndamba, 2008), underscores the importance of language familiarity for educational success.

Theme 7: Attitudinal barriers

Findings from the study reveal that negative attitudes towards sign language and the Deaf community constitute a significant obstacle to the language and education rights of Deaf learners in Zimbabwe. From a linguistic perspective, all languages and language varieties are considered equal. Evaluative judgements are socially influenced; languages, varieties, and features that receive less favourable evaluation do so due to social stigmatisation of their users (Romaine, 1989). The lack of learning materials, the absence of sign language education interpreters, teachers lacking signing skills, and low teacher motivation contribute to the poor educational outcomes of Deaf learners.

Additionally, this study finds that Deaf learners in ECDE centres face discrimination and isolation in school settings as they struggle to communicate with their peers and teachers. **T2** said:

> *Teachers of Deaf learners are marginalised by their peers in the school and thus assume the same marginalised status as the Deaf learners they teach.*

Kadenge and Mugari (2015) argue that in Section 1 of Chapter 6 of the 2013 Constitution, the initial letters of all spoken languages are capitalised, while sign language is written in lower case, implying a lower status, and suggesting that it may not be treated equally with its oral counterparts. This

raises concerns about negative attitudes towards sign language compared to spoken languages. The authors suggest that those responsible for drafting the document may not have recognised sign language in Zimbabwe as a language on par with the others listed in the Constitution (Kadenge and Mugari, 2015). This lack of recognition may explain why sign language is not given the same level of importance in ECDE centres regarding its use and development trajectory.

One of the school head lamented that teachers in ECDE centres are not accommodating but stigmatise and discriminate against Deaf learners and give preferential treatment to hearing learners, as echoed below:

> *I have seen how most teachers sideline and discriminate against Deaf learners, and this makes it difficult for these learners to acquire education* (**SH2**).

This situation exemplifies a complex exclusionary system, unaccommodating policies, and the violation of linguistic rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights charter. According to Johnston (1989), whether through educational technology or social practices, Deaf learners continue to face discrimination and numerous attitudinal barriers that hinder their ability to reach their full potential. Inclusive education, where Deaf and hearing students learn together, should be promoted, but in a manner that benefits both groups. Unfortunately, the reality of inclusive education often means that Deaf learners have limited access to the information being taught, as much of it is delivered orally and at a rapid pace, primarily benefiting hearing learners. This underscores Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahans' (1996, pp. 422) argument that "internationally recognised language rights are universally violated when it comes to signed language minorities".
Overall, this section presented and discussed the findings of the study. The next section discusses the implications of the study for ECDE and the Ministry of Primary Education.

Implications of the Study on Ecde and the Ministry of Primary Education

While the sample size of this study may appear small, its implications for the Ministry of Education, particularly in the context of ECDE, are significant. Effective ECDE programmes hinge on comprehensive policies that regulate the conditions and provisions necessary for successful services. As explained by Sun, Rao and Pearson (2015), governments should establish ECDE policies to formalise and regulate the processes

and operations of ECDE programmes. These policies should be sensitive to the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities, such as the Deaf, as highlighted in this paper.

According to Neuman et al. (2012), national ECDE policies typically include a policy statement outlining the vision, goals, and key strategies, as well as descriptions of institutional structures. In Zimbabwe, Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 lays down regulations and requirements for the registration of ECDE centres and the age of attendance. However, the findings of this study reveal persistent challenges, indicating a need for the government to enhance infrastructure to facilitate the teaching of sign language in today's world, taking into consideration technological advancements and linguistic human rights. Moreover, while Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 emphasises the need for appropriately qualified teachers in ECDE classes, this study's findings suggest discrepancies between policy intentions and implementation, warranting intervention by the Ministry of Primary Education.

Recognising the importance of qualified teachers in ECDE, as highlighted by Samkange (2016), the Zimbabwean ministries of education committed to training 10,000 teachers for ECDE programmes. Universities have also been urged to offer both pre- and in-service training programmes for teachers. Research, such as that conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in 2002, underscores the significance of qualified teachers in providing high-quality learning experiences for young learners.

Indeed, teachers play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of any educational programme, including ECDE, as emphasised by Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016). However, challenges in developing countries like Zimbabwe include the difficulty of attracting and retaining motivated and qualified teachers, particularly in rural and remote areas. ECDE educators have often been perceived as substitute mothers, leading to a lack of professional training. Addressing these challenges requires not only investing in teacher training but also building adequate infrastructure to accommodate learners effectively.

Additionally, further perspectives from a human rights standpoint could serve to catalyse the Zimbabwean government's attention towards addressing disparities in the implementation of sign language within ECDE. By adopting a human rights lens, policymakers can be prompted to prioritise the equitable provision of sign language education for Deaf learners, ensuring that their fundamental rights to accessible and inclusive education are upheld. This approach could foster greater accountability and

commitment towards achieving linguistic inclusivity within the ECDE framework.

In brief, addressing the challenges identified in this study requires a concerted effort from the Ministry of Education to align policies with practical implementation, prioritise teacher training and professional development, and invest in infrastructure to support ECDE programmes effectively.

Conclusion

The research findings highlight the detrimental impact of a shortage of qualified teachers on the provision of ECDE for Deaf learners. Pedagogical approaches such as the direct method and oralism further exacerbate the challenges faced by Deaf learners, as the ECDE system in Zimbabwe favours hearing learners. Additionally, inadequate parental involvement and the absence of language acquisition support systems hinder Deaf learners from acquiring sign language and intellectual development. Consequently, the marginalisation of sign language disrupts the early childhood development of Deaf learners, impeding their smooth progression through educational levels.

It is imperative for the Ministry of Primary Education to enhance teaching and learning facilities to cater to the needs of Deaf learners and ensure the effective implementation of educational policies aimed at improving ECDE quality for this demographic. Addressing attitudinal barriers within the education system is crucial for mainstreaming sign language as both a language subject and a medium of instruction across ECDE centres, thereby fostering inclusive education. Collaborating with Deaf adults as role models and involving them in family engagement programmes can further strengthen language development initiatives.

Moreover, the development of educational materials should involve Deaf individuals to ensure relevance and effectiveness. This is significant given the ongoing delays in implementing the sign language curriculum within the education system. By embracing these recommendations, stakeholders can work towards achieving linguistic inclusivity and enhancing educational outcomes for Deaf learners in Zimbabwe.

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