

Provision of educational psychological services under a high inflationary environment in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design since the lived experiences of educational psychologists in Masvingo Province were scrutinized with the intention of establishing the extent to which educational psychologists matched the laid down specifications pertaining to their professional operations during a high inflationary environment. Three males and two females were purposely selected and in-depth interviews were utilized. Four themes emerged from the study: (a) vital roles, successful, and unsuccessful experiences, (b) diverse views on major policy documents, (c) barriers in rendering support services, and (d) perceived solutions. Results indicated that policy documents are outdated and need revision. Human and material resources were viewed a barriers to performance and perceived solutions included multidisciplinary team work, decentralization and increasing the number of psychologists, training of psychologists and reduced continuous professional development points. Educational psychologists focused more on diagnostic and behavioral consultations in urban schools. They distributed schools in urban areas depending on psychologists' place of residences. Rural schools were minimally assessed with little provision of intervention, prevention, and health promotion services. The results provide important implications for resource provision and policy formulation.

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Introduction

Countries with extremely high rates of inflation tend to have particularly low standards of living, as the general populace will ultimately be unable to afford even basic necessities of life (Pettinger, 2022). Moreover, such countries almost always end up having severe political problems because the population becomes irritated and restless owing to the incessant cost of living (Pettinger, 2022). Zimbabwe is one such country that is experiencing very high rates of inflation that also contribute to its unstable political climate. Inflation is broadly defined as the rate of increase in the cost of living, generally measured in terms of a Consumer Price Index (Siklos, 2000). The current inflation rate in Zimbabwe is estimated to be 285% (Kuwaza, 2022), and inflation has been rising from 2018 to the present. High inflation affects households, firms across all sectors, parastatals, and public services.

There is paucity of research focusing on public service educational psychologists' operations in high inflationary environments. However, in Greece, Apostolopoulou (2013) explored the impact of the economic crisis on the work of psychologists and psychotherapists in private practice; findings indicated viability problems as well as marked challenges in the therapeutic relationship, process, and outcome. In the UK, during the global economic crisis of 2008, which resulted in education budgets being cut, Lee and Woods (2017) found a positive impact of a "traded" model of service delivery (i.e., one in which the service organization relies on income from schools or other agencies to meet some or all of its costs) on the role and contribution of the educational psychologist. Inflationary environments may result in professionals and nonprofessionals leaving for greener pastures in neighboring countries and abroad (Nkoma & Hay, 2018). This migration of psychologists may in turn exacerbate shortages of educational and school psychologists, resulting in:

- (a) reduced availability, range, and quality of services to students and families; (b)... a marginalized role focused on special education compliance; and (c) hiring of unqualified personnel to perform ... services in the absence of an appropriately credentialed school [or educational] psychologist. (NASP, 2017, p. 1)

Psychologists working in schools promote the well-being of all children (direct services), through collaboration with other school professionals and administrators (indirect services) (Ahtola & Niemi, 2014). The education and training of school psychologists prepares them to provide psychological assessment, intervention, prevention, health promotion, program development, and evaluation services focusing on the development of children and youth in the context of schools, families, and other systems (Wicks, 2013). Engelbrecht (2004) clarifies this by indicating that educational psychologists need to serve as consultants as well as in collaborative roles in teams in an educational system. Such consultative roles include behavioral consultation (which utilizes

behavioral interventions with learners with behavioral problems); diagnostic consultation (which is concerned with accurately identifying and assessing an individual learner's problem and prescribing specific individualized strategies for resolving it); organizational consultation (wherein educational psychologists assess the entire school system and assist educators in resolving a broad range of identified concerns that may affect their job functioning as well as learner outcomes in order to facilitate change); and mental health consultant (key roles focus on the development, implementation, and evaluation of school-based mental health programs; Engelbrecht, 2004).

Given these considerations, the purpose of the present study is to understand how educational psychologists, who are public servants, carried out their operations under a high inflationary environment in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Masvingo Province was purposefully selected because it was closer and convenient to the researchers (Neuman, 2016) and has the highest number of professionals and nonprofessionals who left the country for greener pastures during the census period held from April 21–30, 2022; moreover, the town is closer to the South African border.

Educational Psychology in the Zimbabwean Context

In Zimbabwe, the term educational psychologist is *de jure*—that is, the legally recognized title and will therefore be primarily used in the present study. According to Kasayira et al. (2004), a landmark development in the history of school psychology in Zimbabwe occurred in 1971 when the colonial Rhodesian government endorsed a statutory law and some attendant regulations for psychology to be recognized as a profession in the country. Unfortunately, the preindependent political terrain was heavily tilted in favor of non-Black learners with regard to school psychological services, thereby leaving Black learners with literally no form of educational psychological services (Kasayira, 2005; Mpofo & Nyanungo, 1998). Mpofo et al. (2007) explains that it was in 1980 that schools psychological services ceased to be for non-Black learners only; educational psychologists were mandated to provide psychoeducational services to all learners in post-independent Zimbabwe (Kasayira, 2005) (Mpofo & Nyanungo, 1998; Nkoma, 2018; Nkoma & Hay, 2018). Zimbabwe has 10 provinces, and Mpofo et al. (2007) indicated that in each of these provinces, the School Psychological Services and Learner Welfare (SPS & LW) Department has a provincial office headed by a principal educational psychologist. The professionals who report to the provincial principal educational psychologist include guidance and counseling education officers, remedial tutors, speech correctionists (formerly speech therapists), and assistant and educational psychologists. There are 50 educational psychologists in the department of SPS and LW (Mpofo et al., 2007), and this number has not changed since 1980 despite the increased enrolment of learners (Nkoma, 2018). Each province has between five and six educational psychologists.

Infrastructure of Educational Psychology

The Allied Health Practitioners Council of Zimbabwe (AHP CZ) and the Zimbabwe Psychological Association (ZPA) are organizations that service the interests of

psychologists (Mpofu et al., 2007). The AHPCZ sets the standards for training and education of psychologists in collaboration with the Health Professions Authority and Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (AHPCZ, 2016). The AHPCZ has a psychology education committee whose responsibility it is to evaluate undergraduate and postgraduate university programs for possible accreditation and maintain a register for educational psychologists, license the premises for practice, and regulate their practice (AHPCZ, 2016; Chireshe, 2005; Mpofu & Khan, 1997). The ZPA fosters professional identity, oversees training for psychologists, and has regional chapters in the country's 10 provinces (Nkoma, 2018).

Preparation of Psychologists

The Public Service Commission and the AHPCZ require psychologists to hold a minimum qualification of an Honors degree in psychology, which is achieved after four years at university (Mpofu & Khan, 1997). After joining the SPS and LW department, the educational psychologist trainee is then put on the intern register of the AHPCZ. To be registered as a psychologist with AHPCZ, one must have completed a Master of Science degree in educational psychology (MSc in Educational Psychology) (which takes one and half years full time), after which one undergoes a one-year internship program under the supervision of a registered senior psychologist and then completes an oral and written board examination (AHPCZ, 2016). The internship experiences include child assessment; report writing; teacher, school, and parent consultation; child advocacy; and legal aspects of school psychology practice (Mpofu et al., 2007). The authors indicated that a Masters' degree in Educational Psychology (MED) is not required although a Diploma in Education is desirable (Mpofu et al., 2007). Due to shortages of senior psychologists in the department of SPS and LW, assistant psychologists can be trained by those in private practice and lecturers in local universities at a cost of \$50 per month.

Prior to the institution of new accreditation standards in 2016, one could register as an educational psychologist either after attaining a Bachelor of Science Honors in Psychology coupled with an internship program lasting for three years under the Department of SPS and LW in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education or through having a Master of Science degree in Educational Psychology with no internship (Mpofu et al., 2007; Nkoma & Hay, 2018). According to Zirima & Nkoma, (2018), the stringent AHPCZ (2016) accreditation benchmarks and the near absence of Master of Science in Educational Psychology degree programs at universities in Zimbabwe created a bottleneck system, thereby restricting the number of educational psychologists in the country. Zirima and Nkoma (2018) reiterate that the accreditation system in Zimbabwe somehow is suggestive of the intention to promote gate-keeping, consequently frustrating potential educational psychologists to the extent of steering them toward sister fields such as counseling and community psychology. Such a state of affairs might have both positive and negative effects on the operations of educational psychologists in a high inflationary environment. All these considerations in mind, coupled with concerns regarding high inflation, indicate the need to explore educational psychologists' perspectives on their roles and experiences in Masvingo urban.

Policy Documents

Zimbabwe has a number of policy documents that are meant to articulate how educational psychologists are expected to undertake their roles. These documents reflect the requirements described above.

Educational psychologists must also adhere to a number of policy documents that govern school-based service delivery. According to Mpfu et al. (2007), the Education Secretary's Circular Minute No. P.12 of 1987 provides guidelines on remedial programs for students with learning disabilities. Nkoma and Hay (2018) together with Hutchinson (2007) make reference to the Education Secretary's Circular Minute No. P.36 of 1990 which specifically articulates the procedures for the educational placement of learners with special needs in Zimbabwe but does not specify the roles of educational psychologists (Nkoma & Hay, 2018). Mpfu et al. (2007) made further reference to two more policies, that is, Education Secretary's Circular No. P.5 of 2000 and the Education Secretary's Circular Minute No. P.3 of 2002, which were meant to deal with the systemic counseling of abused learners and the inclusion and counseling of secondary school learners, respectively. The Zimbabwe Education Act of 1987 focuses on the right to education for all learners, and therefore, educational psychologists engage in outreach programs; in-service training of teachers and administrators on special needs education and programming to ensure education for all learners. The Disabled Persons Act of 1996 allows educational psychologists to provide advice on attitudinal and physical-structural barriers (provided to school administrators, teachers, and parents/guardians) to educational opportunity for learners with disabilities. The Secretary's Circular No. 2 of 2000 promotes the inclusion of learners with albinism with reference to meaningful inclusion in schooling and cocurricular activities. The Children's Protection and Adoption Act of 1990 allows educational psychologists to promote the acquisition of behavior-management skills at rehabilitation facilities for child offenders (e.g., delinquent behavior). The Sexual Offences Act of 2001 articulates the provision of counseling services to sexually abused children and expert testimony to courts on the intellectual functioning of abused learners with intellectual disabilities. Director's Circular No. 7 of 2005 offers guidelines for the inclusion of learners with disabilities in all school competitions. Given the essential role of these policies in shaping educational service delivery in Zimbabwe, it is essential to understand how they affect the work of educational psychologists in the current socioeconomic environment.

Inflation Rates

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2009) the country recorded an inflation rate of 79.6 billion percent month-on-month and 89.7 sextillion percent year-on-year in mid-November 2008. The country experienced constant shortages of fuel, food, medicine, and hard currency, and the Gross Domestic Product per capita dropped by 40%. Additionally, agricultural output fell by 51%, and industrial production dropped by 47%. These severe economic blows led to the abandonment of the local currency (the Zimbabwean Dollar) as a medium of exchange in April 2009 (Kavila & Roux,

2017). The multicurrency system adopted comprised the US Dollar, the South African Rand, and the Botswana Pula. This resulted in an abrupt end to hyperinflation (IMF, 2009; RBZ, 2010) due to a government of national unity.

The annual inflation rate decreased from 3.2% in 2010 to -2.5% in 2015 and then started to rise from 2016 with a percentage of -0.93 to a percentage of 42.10% in 2018 (RBZ, 2019). The inflation rate in Zimbabwe has exhibited an uphill trend from 2018 to the present rate of 285% (Kuwaza, 2022). For the past two years, the country has been battling an exodus of skilled and unskilled citizens, which have forced South Africa to put in place various mechanisms, including tightening its border (Mangwaya, 2022). Mangwaya further quoted the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZimStat), which indicated that a total of 908, 914 individuals left the country during the census period held from April 21–30, 2022, with the highest number being found in Masvingo, which is closer to the South African boarder (Zimstat, 2022). Such a scenario makes it necessary to determine roles of educational psychologists in a high inflationary environment.

Aim of the Study

The main thrust of the current study was to phenomenologically explore the experiences of educational psychologists' professional endeavors in Masvingo urban. More precisely, the study examined the extent to which educational psychologists matched the laid down specifications pertaining to their professional operations during a high inflationary environment. In particular, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do educational psychologists experience their roles and responsibilities in a high inflationary environment?
2. How does this experience of high inflation inform or shape the operations of educational psychologists?

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design was employed in the study. According to Groenewald (2004, p. 44), "phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of people involved." The phenomenological research design was deemed by the researchers to be the most appropriate research design because participants were asked to describe their professional experiences regarding their roles and responsibilities during a harsh economic environment from 2016 to the present. The phenomenological research design allows research participants to reflect on their circumstances and narrate them in a manner that paints a rich picture of the phenomenon of interest.

Positionality Statement

The two authors of this research are middle- or late-career academics with doctoral studies in educational psychology. Both are bilingual in English and Shona in Zimbabwe, which allowed for the study participants to feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences in a way they felt could best express their thoughts and feelings. The first author once worked as a principal educational psychologist in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe and has had experiences in working with psychologists. The first author contends that being immersed in the context of educational psychological services allowed him to relate to the participants and develop trust. As noted later, by writing a full description of his experience, the first author attempted to avoid imposing his own experience on educational psychological services while analyzing the data.

Research Context and Participants

Masvingo Province was purposefully selected because it was closer to the researchers and has the highest number of people who left the country during the census period held from April 21 to 30, 2022; moreover, the town is closer to the South African border. The department of SPS and LW falls under the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. According to Nkoma and Hay (2018), the department has the following responsibilities: (a) counseling students and parents/guardians; (b) transferring special needs children from one school to another at parental request; (c) psychological assessments; and (d) placement of special needs children.

Given the scarcity of educational psychologists in Zimbabwe, the population in Masvingo Province was small in size to the extent of being precisely six. Five assistant/educational psychologists (three males; two females) had between 12 and 19 years of experience. One refused to participate due to health problems. A total of five participants was in line with Creswell (1998) and Dworkin (2012) who recommended a minimal of five participants for a phenomenological study. Recruitment of participants was done face-to-face through the principal educational psychologist who was given the authority letter to carry out the research by the Provincial Education Director. All participants can speak fluent English and Shona.

Data Collection Methods

Englander (2012) indicates that phenomenological research aims to encounter the phenomenon via the participant's description. Questions that are part of a phenomenological interview should therefore meet the criteria of description (Giorgi, 2009). Such questions need to focus on participants' descriptions of the situation in which they experienced the phenomenon (Nkoma & Hay, 2018). To gather this information, open-ended questions were used and the meanings of their narratives were interpreted. Willis indicated that different people and different groups have varied perceptions of the world. It follows that participants in this study will verbalize their experiences and that multiple perspectives will allow for a deeper understanding of the situation (Morehouse, 2011).

In-depth interviews were done at SPS and LW offices in Masvingo urban. A preliminary meeting was conducted with the participants one week prior to the interview. According to Nkoma and Hay (2018, p. 6) “such a meeting provided the opportunity to establish trust with participants, to complete consent forms, and also to review research questions and give participants time to dwell and ponder on the experience.” In order to collect data about the lived experiences of educational psychologists, in-depth face-to-face phenomenological interviews were carried out.

Each interview lasted between 41 and 55 min with an average interview time of 47 min. The interview protocol included open-ended questions on their views in carrying out their roles and responsibilities and their lived experiences regarding successes and challenges in an inflationary environment. The following questions were asked:

1. How do you view your critical roles and responsibilities as an educational psychologist during the high inflationary environment?
2. Name and identify the strengths of your perceived major policy documents that guided your operations during this period.
3. How did you experience barriers when rendering support services?
4. What are your perceived solutions to these barriers?

The primary researcher who speaks fluent Shona and English carried out the interviews in English, and interviews were audio recorded using a cell phone by the second researcher with permission from participants and were coded by the primary researcher. The researchers used the pseudonyms EP1, EP2, EP3, EP4, and EP5 to identify the five educational psychologists who took part in the current study. The audio-recorded interviews were later transcribed verbatim. Soon after the individual interview, key words, phrases, and sentences were transcribed.

The policy documents that guide educational psychologists’ work in Zimbabwe, which were mentioned elsewhere in the introduction, were reviewed by participants in order to understand how they influenced their behavior and practices as psychologists.

Research Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Authority to carry out the research was initially sought from the university and then the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The Provincial Education Director of Masvingo Province was then contacted. During the preliminary meeting, participants were told that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons for doing so. Completion of consent forms was done using a colleague (a university lecturer) as a neutral person during this period. Privacy and confidentiality were assured to participants in regard to how data would be used and stored. Participants were also assured that there was no anticipated harm in participating in the study.

Data Analysis

Moustakas' (1994) approach and document analysis were used to analyze data. Moustakas' phenomenological analysis follows five steps. First, the primary researcher started with a full, written description of his experience as a principal educational psychologist. By setting aside the primary researcher's personal experiences, the focus was then directed to participants in the study. This was done before data collection and analysis of interview data. The researcher was attempting to recollect examples of personal experiences as an educational psychologist. This implied that the researcher was made aware of biases which would then mitigate their impact on the interview process or analysis of data (Grocke, 1999). Second, a list of significant statements (pulled from the interviews) was then developed. Statements in the interviews, which focused on how individuals were experiencing their roles and responsibilities in a high inflationary environment, were found and these significant statements were listed (horizontalization of the data); each statement was treated as having equal worth and a list of nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statements was then developed.

Third, significant statements were then grouped into larger units of information called themes. Fourth, a description of educational psychologists' professional endeavors in a high inflationary environment was then written. This textual description of the experience included verbatim examples. Fifth, an overall description of the phenomenon of school psychology in an inflationary environment incorporating both textual and structural descriptions was then written. This overall description represents what the participants experienced in regard to the practice of school psychology in an inflationary environment and how they experienced it (the context).

Document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Government policy documents (all the documents under the section on *Policy Documents*) were given to participants to review before their interviews and were used to supplement data gained through the interviews. The policies were scrutinized from three perspectives: context, text, and consequences. The text was subjected to analysis (textual analysis) in order to consider what was said and what was not. Also, there is need to consider what was interpreted by educational psychologists. Five aspects considered to be critical in policy analysis include document production and location; authorship and audience; policy context; policy text; and policy consequences (Busher, 2006). These aspects provided the scope needed for questioning.

Nonstatistical content analysis, which uses the presence or absence of a certain content, was utilized. Content was analyzed using the inductive approach which involved close reading and rereading of the document and allowed the primary researcher to extract categories from the data itself. Seeing repeated word patterns, similar phrases, and ideas is the basis for creating a structuring of categories which may lead to subcategories or themes being recognized within these categories (Cardno, 2018). The document was annotated with headings that occurred during several readings of the text and these were refined to provide a coding guide.

The actual analysis activity involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation (Bowen, 2009). The purpose was to organize information into categories.

Credibility

In order to ensure findings accurately reflected participants' experiences, transcripts were returned to participants for feedback so that what was missing could be added. During triangulation, the concurrent examination of individual interview data and policy documents ensured that they shed light on participants' behavior and practices as psychologists.

Results

Participants indicated that the transcript indicated their views. The following four themes emerged from the study: (a) critical roles, successful, and unsuccessful experiences; (b) diverse views on major policy documents; (c) barriers in rendering support services; and (d) perceived solutions.

Theme 1: Critical Roles, Successful, and Unsuccessful Experiences

The research participants generally concurred that critical roles during inflation involved psychoeducational assessments, training of specialist teachers in classrooms for students with special needs, multidisciplinary team work, drug use/misuse intervention, and advocacy and consultation. These roles were viewed as critical and successful in providing services to children with disabilities, while assessing children with multiple disabilities, participating in Individual Education Plans, and crisis prevention and intervention were viewed as critical but unsuccessful ones (i.e., these services were needed but educational psychologists were not able to provide them).

A critical role involved diagnostic consultations for cases of learners with intellectual disabilities, visual impairment, and hearing impairment; these were mostly done in urban schools, although some rural schools with transport could arrange for educational psychologists to carry out psychological assessments of learners with disabilities in their schools and surrounding communities. The high inflationary environment made them distribute schools in urban areas closest to psychologists' place of residences.

EP2 made the following remarks:

Under the harsh economic conditions, we initiated a program of allocating schools close to educational psychologists' residential areas in urban areas. Rural schools with transport can take us for assessments. Remedial tutors in districts carry out screening tests of students. One of the key areas which I have successfully accomplished is carrying out psycho-educational assessments for purposes of school placement.

The successful training of teachers in urban primary schools with special classes and resource units was done in collaboration with special needs lecturers:

In my area of jurisdiction, I managed to train specialist teachers on teaching methodologies with the assistance of two resource persons who are lecturers in special education at Great Zimbabwe University (EP4).

When probed about mainstream teachers, the participant indicated the following:

We have inadequate training on inclusive education practices.....we only had one workshop way back in 2016 in Masvingo. I understand that we need to curb the unnecessary placement of learners in special schools and resource units.

Two participants highlighted the critical role of intervention on drug and behavioral problems:

The least I can say is that as an educational psychologist, there are many services which I have given to learners in need of psycho-educational services. Remember that the psychological services department deals with all issues that affect the welfare of all learners at all levels. These include learners with addiction, behavioral problem (EP1).

We carry out interventions on drug misuse/use when schools report these incidences (EP4).

In communities, participants work in partnership with governmental and nongovernmental organizations, with the aim of telling communities where to access assistive devices for learners with disabilities, school fees and uniforms, and rehabilitation services from governmental and nongovernmental agencies. Other experiences in communities were on how to identify children with disabilities early and special education programs available for them.

Community outreach programs are mostly done in partnership with the ministries of Social Services, Home Affairs and Health. Non-governmental organizations which include the National AIDS Council (NAC), UNICEF, CAMFED, and PLAN Zimbabwe. The communities are made aware of disabilities associated with learners, child abuse and drug use/misuse. Early identification and intervention is emphasized.....these are usually done at least once a year in areas where non-governmental organisations work..... They provide transport, pay fees, uniforms and provide food for orphans and vulnerable children (EP3).

Participants also identified several critical roles that they were not successfully able to fulfil. For instance, one participant noted inadequacy of training in assessing children with multiple disabilities:

A teacher referred a 10 year of child who could not see nor hear. I only did an informal assessment because there was no communication between us...I lack skills with such children (EP1).

A participant indicated the need for participating in the design of Individual Education Plans:

We need to actively participate in individual education plans for learners with disabilities. This workload is just too much for us.....this requires transport for parents and us to visit schools (EP3).

Another critical role that participants felt they had minimal experience in was crisis prevention and intervention on violence and suicide.

There was case of suicide at a certain high school which was prompted by gangs in a neighboring day school. My provincial director asked me if I was capable of handling the case. This needed reading several articles in order to find evidence based intervention...I managed to tell her that I have little experience on this (EP5).

Theme 2: Diverse Views on Major Policy Documents that Guide Educational Psychologists' Operations

As noted above, policy documents were given to psychologists to reflect on prior to the interviews. Participants viewed different circulars as having a major role in guiding their operations in a high inflationary environment. The following narrations highlighted their experiences:

P: 36 is critical in our operations because it specifies the need to carryout assessments and provide recommendations in special schools, resource units and special classes....if we cannot do this, then we are giving a disservice (EP3).

The Education Act specifically state the right of education of all learners. This is a major policy document in any environment.....even those who are not in school, due to several reasons, can benefit from it. It mandates schools to enroll any child regardless of disability or gender. Our assessments then focuses on what the child knows and needs to know. The socio-economic environment makes it difficult to identify such children who are at home or failing to pay school fees (EP 2).

Circulars are many.... I feel that all are important in our operations. For example, there is a circular that guides schools on learners with disabilities in school competitions. They need not be segregated... (EP. 1).

A participant indicated that policies are not being reviewed by the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education.

We need the presence of progressive policies which are continuously amended (EP2).

Most of the policies are outdated and do not consider the roles of psychologists in a resource-constrained country. Overall, the experiences of participants and analysis of the circulars indicate that circulars need updating; moreover, they are written by Permanent secretaries and Directors in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and do not acknowledge that (1) learning also occurs at home and communities and that (2) all children can learn and need support. Lastly, these policies do not specify the roles and responsibilities of educational psychologists.

Theme 3: Barriers to Rendering Support Services

Participants indicated shortages of educational psychologists, migration, benefits of outreach programs, multidisciplinary team work, and resource constraints and training as affecting their operations. Shortages of personnel were highlighted by two participants. For example, EP2 stated:

In all fairness, I am persuaded to say that we are not adequately staffed and as a result some professional issues take too long to be attended to thereby compromising our ultimate effectiveness.

Related to the problem of shortages, EP4 described how training and registration of psychologists can limit the availability of qualified service providers:

Training of assistant psychologists by senior psychologists was initially done to those with a basic degree in psychology and work for SPS. This was for free. After 3 years of internship, they got registered. The brain drain of experienced psychologists resulted in assistants not being trained for several years. To make things worse, the regulatory body tightened on the registration. Now a Master of Science degree in Educational and a year's internship is required for registration after writing a board of exams (EP4).

Another participant added the following:

Shortages of senior psychologists has resulted in the regulatory body allowing those in private practice to charge us in hard currency. It's difficult to pay for annual subscription, pay for training and take care of your family. Why compound problems? (EP2)

Furthermore, as noted by EP3, there was no migration of personnel to the diaspora, which limited service delivery:

This department didn't experience any person leaving the country, although there is pressure from former colleagues who once worked for SPS and LW to make us join them in the diaspora...maybe because most of us are more than 40 years old and have families

or lack of financial resources to pay for registration, visas, and airfare. South Africa has now put in place some severe restrictions on those who want to work there (EP 3).

Another barrier was that, while educational psychologists routinely engaged in assessment, community outreach, and intervention were necessary to promote the well-being of youth and families. In particular, the benefits of outreach programs over assessments were indicated by EP 4:

Although we carry out individual assessments in the office, the ideal thing to do is to carry out community outreach programs.

Additionally, one participant indicated resource constraints, which often limited the extent to which educational psychologists could provide services to youth and families in rural locations:

We regularly grapple with transport challenges mainly due to the limited number of available vehicles. Remember we have to reach out to the needy in far and wide places in the entire province. So interventions in rural schools are limited (EP 1).

Finally, the socioeconomic environment negatively impacted the operations of psychologists, as indicated by EP1:

Lack of material resources in form of up-to date ability tests, transport,.....these are beyond our control. Such challenges make me think outside the box. They motivated me to do a Masters in Community Psychology so that I can render effective services in communities. I collaborate with NGOs so that we can provide transport and download some psychometric tools for use.

Theme 4: Perceived Solutions

Solutions to some of the barriers included multidisciplinary team work, decentralization and increasing the number of psychologists, training of psychologists and reduced continuous professional development requirements, and changing attitudes of education personnel.

One participant's experiences indicate the benefits multidisciplinary team work:

Stakeholder involvement is crucial because at the end of the day it is our job together. So if we come together and move together, we are likely to score. We need to involve everyone, other government departmental officials, the students, education officials, lecturers, NGOs, politicians... everybody should be involved (EP2).

Collaboration was further highlighted by EP4:

Most psychologists do not have a teaching qualification. However, they work hand and glove with other SPS and LW personnel with teaching qualifications. These include remedial tutors and speech correctionists (formerly, speech therapists).

Another solution proposed related to the decentralization of service delivery to ensure the availability of support across provinces. For instance, the decentralization of psychologists was highlighted as follows:

More educational psychologists are needed. In fact, the proper thing is to ensure that each of the seven districts in the province is manned by at least one dedicated educational psychologist (EP 1).

In addition to highlighting decentralization, participants noted that the continuing professional development requirements of the ZPA needed to change as well.

The ZPA needs to consult us on training needs and decentralize so that everyone benefits from all provinces. Our training needs vary by province hence focusing on training that is localized in Harare is not cost-effective for us. They emphasize the acquisition of CPD points rather than our needs (EP5).

The AHPCZ needs to revise CPD points downwards. 40 points is rather too much in this environment. We struggle to have these every year when we want to review our practicing certificates (EP4).

Finally, another participant highlighted the need to change the attitudes of teachers and administrators (e.g., through workshops) to increase the utilization of psychologists.

There is a need to hold workshops for teachers and administrators so that they become aware of our functions. Such workshops might change their views on psychologists and learners but resources are hard to come by (EP3).

Discussion

Even in fiscally austere times, psychologists in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, fulfill vital roles, which include psychoeducational assessments, training of specialist teachers in separate classrooms, multidisciplinary teamwork, drug use/misuse intervention, advocacy, and consultation. The SPS and LW department provide services on a peripatetic basis—that is, visiting schools for purposes of consultation and providing services (Mpofu et al., 2007), with minimal involvement of rural schools. Such roles of participants focused on individual approaches to service delivery that are not sustainable (Dowdy et al., 2015), particularly when resource-restricted economic conditions prevail. The work of Masvingo educational psychologists appears to be more oriented toward tertiary prevention, wherein prevention focuses on an already existing disorder rather than primary prevention—which seeks to prevent the problem before it occurs.

Roles for all educational psychologists include psychoeducational evaluations, consultations, prevention, intervention, research, and evaluation and such services occur at the level of individuals (parents, educators, and learners) and systems (family, schools, classrooms, school systems, and community organizations) (Fagan & Wise, 2007; Farrell, 2004; Lansdown et al., 2014). For example, participants' experiences captured the advocacy and awareness, and consultative roles of members in the department of SPS and SNE. This interfacing results in the provision of comprehensive support services. This is in tandem with Cook et al. (2010) who indicated that educational psychologists provide services that support learners to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally through consultation with educators, parents, professionals, and other community members involved in the educational and psychological empowerment of learners. They collaborate with a variety of stakeholders to provide a safe and nurturing learning environment in order to improve the quality of life of all children. Diagnostic consultations were done in urban schools, while assessments in rural schools were done by remedial tutors. This resulted in reduced availability, range, and quality of services to students and families, including the use of unqualified personnel (NASP, 2017). It was also found that institutional partners such as the National AIDS Council (NAC), UNICEF, CAMFED, PLAN Zimbabwe, and the Victim Friendly Unit of the Zimbabwe Republic Police were involved by educational psychologists in the psychoeducational service provision matrix. This collaborative approach is consistent with an ecosystemic model of service delivery, which according to Hay (2012) and Nkoma and Hay (2018), is likely to yield more positive results than the traditional medical approach. Several studies underscored the notion that educational psychologists who employ the ecological model of service delivery are likely to be more effective than those who adhere to the medical model (Jones, 2021; Nathan & Brown, 2018; Hay, 2012).

Some barriers to the provision of psychological services concerned assessing children with multiple disabilities, shortages of psychologists, participating in Individual Education Plans, negative attitudes, lack of collaboration between the ministry and the regulatory body, and crisis prevention and intervention. In particular, participants highlighted the low psychologist-to-learner ratio in Masvingo. The shortage of educational psychologists in Zimbabwe might be partly due to the stringent accreditation standards, lack of Master of Science degree programs in educational psychology at tertiary institutions, and the harsh economic environment that makes professionals look for greener pastures outside Zimbabwe (Nkoma, 2018). The factors identified by the respondents largely aligned with the findings of previous researchers. For example, Nkoma (2018) and Mpofu et al. (2007) established that educational psychologists can be effective if the prerequisite materials and human resources are available. Issues of human resources, which respondents made frequent reference to and have been evidenced in international research, are present in virtually all countries in the world. Specifically, many parts of the world have never met the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP's) recommended ratio of 500 or fewer learners per school psychologist (Fenning et al., 2023). For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, Jimerson, Stewart, Skokut, Cardenas & Malone (2009) found that in South Africa there were 1,178 educational psychologists for more than 10 million school-age children, 18 for 624,820 school-age children in Namibia,

12 for 502,884 in Botswana, 500 for more than 44 million in Nigeria, 10 for more than 4 million in Zambia, 18 for more than 11 million in Uganda, 15 for more than 11 million in Kenya, and 3 for more than 13 million school-age children in Tanzania. Fagan (2004) summarizes these shortages by saying “it appears there has never been a time when the supply of school psychologists was sufficient to meet demand” (p. 419). The Principal Educational Psychologists’ survey in the UK indicated difficulties recruiting for vacant posts due to a lack of applicants to fill them and an overall shortage of educational psychologists being trained (Department for Education, 2019).

Masvingo educational psychologists wrestled with resource constraints (e.g., transport and access to ability tests). Literature indicates factors such as access to funding, physical resources, and technology impact service delivery (Merrell et al., 2012; NASP, 2010; Nkoma & Hay 2018). The current political and economic environments in Zimbabwe make it difficult to source funds from donors for procuring vehicles and psychometric tests for the department of SPS and LW wherein the Zimbabwean government suspects regime change from nongovernmental organizations and Western countries.

Participants also highlighted a lack of collaboration between the AHPCZ and the Ministry. The two have different requirements for psychologists. This finding was in tandem with those of Nkoma (2018), who found that the Ministry hired assistant psychologists with a basic psychology degree while the AHPCZ recognizes personnel with a Master of Science degree for training and registration. Registrations as Community Psychologists and Counselling Psychologists are not recognized by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education.

There is no legislation but rather policies that are in tandem with educational psychologists’ roles and operations in Zimbabwe. Participants indicated policies that appear to be outdated and not in line with the changing socioeconomic landscape. Makhalemele and Nel found that one of the challenges encountered by educational psychologists was mediocre coordination and collaboration with the national Department of Education, especially with regard to policy implementation and general service delivery. The need for a clear framework of policies is crucial. For example, the NASP Practice Model (2020) is an official policy regarding the delivery of school psychological services in the United States while in Britain, the Framework for Assessment and Intervention (DECP, 1999) is used. Such domains of practice inform the range of knowledge and skills educational psychologists have and outline how services are integrated to best meet the needs of students, families, and the school community (CSDE, 2021).

Pivik et al. (2002) summarize barriers to the operations of psychologists as involving a lack of knowledge, bureaucratic inflexibility, and beliefs toward resource availability. Developing countries require higher qualifications of psychologists but have insufficient funding, support, or knowledge to be able to assume an effective system-wide approach for all learners (Forlin et al., 2013).

Additionally, the high inflationary environment made it necessary for participants to serve schools in urban areas closest to their place of residence. Participants described the poor remuneration of psychologists and the socioeconomic status of parents/guardians as factors that made it difficult to do telepsychology. Also, participants were responsible for their own bills for transport to and from Harare for training and

renewal of registration as psychologists. In general, Masvingo educational psychologists carry out their roles and responsibilities at a cost, and this is not sustainable. School fees in most Zimbabwean schools are fully paid in United States Dollars (USD) or a combination of Zimbabwean dollars and USD. This makes it necessary to adopt a partially or fully traded model (refer to Lee & Woods, 2017) in regard to the role and contributions of the educational psychologist. Such a model requires educational psychologists to generate income from schools in order to meet some or all of its costs.

The barriers mentioned earlier highlight the need to sustain educational psychological services in resource-constrained contexts like Zimbabwe. First, the lack of material resources might be alleviated by adopting a partially or fully traded model (refer to previous paragraph). Second, policies that were alluded to by participants were written by Directors or Permanent Secretaries, who were not psychologists, in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Policies need to be clear on the delivery of school psychological services, therefore, the involvement of psychologists in policy formulation is critical. Such a scenario allows revising or reformulating educational policies based on international standards and provides psychologists with additional opportunities to engage in curriculum-based assessment, direct intervention, and consultation activities (Merrell et al., 2012). Lastly, adoption of a two-pronged approach to the training of educational psychologists is suggested. One method (i.e., the first prong) might be to embark on two years of training for personnel within the SPS and LW department who hold a basic degree in psychology and can get registered after passing a board of examinations. The second method is similar to the AHPCZ's current regulations wherein an intern with a Master of Science degree undergoes a one-year internship under the supervision of a registered senior psychologist and then completes board of examinations in order to be registered.

Different masters' degrees can enhance educational psychological services in schools and communities and therefore need recognition by the Public Service Commission, which is responsible the recruitment of educational psychologists in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Training on assessment of learners with multiple disabilities and IEPs can be provided by psychology lecturers at Zimbabwean universities and supplemented by the American Psychological Association and/or the British Psychological Association. Universities in Zimbabwe are encouraged to offer Master of Science degree programs in educational psychology.

Brain drain was not an issue in Masvingo Province. This may be due to difficulties in finding alternative lucrative jobs in Zimbabwe and the stringent conditions in South Africa. Also, poor remunerations on the part of psychologists make it difficult for them to register and/or travel abroad. The results differed from the outcomes of studies by Nkoma et al. (2012) and Nkoma and Hay (2018) in which brain drain was identified as a pronounced challenge affecting the operations of educational psychologists. Also, research as part of their job description was not mentioned. Research has the highest CPD points (20), which are a requirement of AHPCZ for continuous professional development (AHPCZ, 2016).

Conclusion and Implications

This study prompts lessons for better practice in African and other resource-constrained contexts. Educational psychologists in Masvingo Province fulfil vital roles even in fiscally austere times. These include psychoeducational assessments, training of specialist teachers in classrooms for students with disabilities, multidisciplinary team work, drug use/misuse intervention, and advocacy and consultation. However, they do so at a cost and this is not sustainable. Therefore, generation of income from schools so that they meet some or all of its costs is suggested. Decisive steps in order to sustain educational psychological services in resource-constrained countries like Zimbabwe were proffered in training and revising or reformulating educational policies.

Limitations

Examining only one province out of 10 and not accompanying educational psychologists on some of their field visits to get a relatively true picture of what was obtaining on the ground are viewed as limitations. The sample size was relatively small, and perspectives were limited to educational psychologists' views to Masvingo Province. Future research should include larger samples and involve collecting additional data (e.g., perhaps through accompanying psychologists in their field trips), as this may allow for a more comprehensive understanding of practice in areas impacted by inflation.

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