

Exploring Pedagogical Orientations: A Critical Analysis of Teacher Perceptions towards Inclusive Education in ECD Environments in Zvishavane District

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the pedagogical orientations of Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers towards inclusive education within Zvishavane District, Zimbabwe. Inclusive education promotes the integration of learners with diverse learning needs and is strongly supported by both national and international educational frameworks. Despite this emphasis, practical implementation remains a challenge at grassroots level, particularly in rural settings. To explore this issue, the study adopted a qualitative approach rooted in an ex post facto design, which allowed the researcher to examine existing practices and perspectives on inclusive teaching strategies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The target population comprised ten ECD teachers and five school heads selected from rural schools in Zvishavane District. The study focused on gathering their perceptions regarding preparedness, available support systems, and classroom strategies used to foster inclusivity in ECD environments. The findings reveal significant gaps in teacher training and resource availability, highlighting the urgent need for targeted professional development. The study recommends the strengthening of teacher support mechanisms and curriculum adaptations to promote inclusive education in early learning institutions.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Teacher Perceptions, Pedagogical Strategies, Early Childhood Development (ECD), Cultural Stigma

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Inclusive education is a key global educational principle, as it supports the right of all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, or emotional challenges, to learn together with their peers in mainstream classrooms. Zimbabwe, like many countries under the United Nations (UN) banner, has committed to offer inclusive education as a core component of its educational policies. This endeavour is grounded to the provisions in international frameworks such as the Education for All (2000) and the Salamanca Statement (1994), which advocate for the integration of children with special educational needs (SEN) into regular educational settings.

Zimbabwe committed to inclusive education as evidenced by the adoption of key international policies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Salamanca Statement. These global frameworks emphasise on the need to ensure that all children have the right to education, regardless of their physical, intellectual, or emotional needs, to access quality education (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006). In line with these commitments, Zimbabwe introduced national initiatives such as the Revised National Policy for Early Childhood Education (2015), which aims to promote inclusivity at the foundational stages of learning. However, despite these policy advancements, the translation of inclusive education into practice remains illusive, particularly in rural districts such as Zvishavane. Madhuku (2016)

points out that infrastructural deficits, limited resources, and a lack of adequately trained teachers continue to hinder effective implementation.

ECD is a critical stage in human development where inclusive education has to be promoted for sustainability in future education endeavours and co-existence in communities. According to UNESCO (2017), early intervention significantly improves long-term outcomes for children with diverse learning needs. Ainscow (2005) highlights that the early years are particularly important for fostering inclusive values, as children at this stage are still forming their understanding of diversity and are more receptive to positive social norms. Furthermore, inclusive practices in ECD settings lay the foundation for future academic and social success (Miller et al., 2013). Gartner and Lipsky (2002) add that early exposure to diversity can prevent the development of stereotypes and biases, making early childhood an ideal period for cultivating inclusive attitudes.

Zvishavane District, situated in Zimbabwe's Midlands Province, presents unique socio-economic conditions that significantly impact the implementation of inclusive education. Tawengwa (2018) notes that the district is predominantly rural, with many children residing in areas that lack essential infrastructure. As a result, ECD centres in the region often operate under constrained conditions, characterized by insufficient teaching materials, inadequately equipped classrooms, and limited access to assistive technologies. The demographic composition of Zvishavane includes a notable number of children with disabilities, yet the district's educational infrastructure is largely unprepared to address their needs. Kanyoka (2017) emphasizes that the lack of teachers trained in inclusive pedagogies further compounds the challenge, leaving many learners without the necessary support to fully participate in the learning process.

The discrepancy between policy and practice is particularly cannot be overstated in Zvishavane District. Although inclusive education is endorsed at the national level, many local educators are ill-equipped to implement inclusive strategies effectively (Chenoe, 2014). Tawengwa (2018) observes that professional development opportunities are limited, funding is inadequate, and suitable teaching aids are often unavailable. Moreover, cultural beliefs and attitudes toward disability can pose significant barriers. As Mutasa (2016) explains, disabilities are sometimes viewed through the lens of stigma or superstition in certain communities, further obstructing efforts to promote inclusive education.

Teacher perceptions are pivotal in shaping the success of inclusive education. Deng (2019) asserts that educators' beliefs and attitudes directly influence their instructional choices and the inclusiveness of their classroom environments. If teachers perceive inclusion as impractical or undesirable, they are less likely to adapt their teaching to accommodate diverse learners. According to Tawengwa (2018), such negative attitudes can result in passive resistance and hinder the realization of inclusive practices. Therefore, understanding the perceptions of ECD teachers in Zvishavane is crucial for identifying existing barriers and crafting effective professional development programs aimed at fostering inclusive mindsets.

This research seeks to bridge the gap between policy and practice by investigating the perceptions of ECD teachers in Zvishavane District. By exploring how educators understand and experience inclusive education, and how these perceptions shape their pedagogical approaches, the study aims to uncover both the challenges and potential pathways toward effective implementation. Kanyoka (2017) argues that such research is vital for informing context-specific interventions and enhancing inclusive education in under-resourced, rural districts. With this literature available, an educational gap was evident, hence this study intends to contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies that support teachers and improve the learning experiences of diverse ECD learners in Zvishavane District and beyond.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on key educational theories and concepts that guide the understanding of teacher perceptions and practices in inclusive education. The framework draws from social constructivism, inclusive education principles, and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). These concepts serve as the lens through which ECD teacher beliefs, behaviours, and the challenges faced in inclusive teaching are explored.

Social constructivism

Social constructivism, as articulated by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes the role of social interaction and collaboration in the learning process. This theory argues that knowledge is constructed through interactions with others and the environment, rather than simply being transmitted from teacher to student. In the context of inclusive education, this framework suggests that students with diverse needs can benefit from learning in a social environment where they actively engage with peers, teachers, and the curriculum in ways that promote mutual understanding and shared learning experiences. Teachers' perceptions of inclusion are influenced by how they view the social roles of their students, and how they believe students can construct knowledge together.

In ECD classrooms, where children's developmental stages are varied, the social constructivist approach supports the notion that learning is enhanced through collaboration, dialogue, and problem-solving. The teacher's role is not just to transmit knowledge but to facilitate meaningful interactions that promote cognitive and social development in all students, including those with disabilities. Therefore, this theory underpins the study's exploration of how teachers in Zvishavane District perceive and create collaborative, inclusive learning environments.

Inclusive education

Inclusive education, as defined by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), is the practice of providing quality education for all learners, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or needs, in mainstream classrooms. This concept emphasizes increasing participation in the learning process, creating an inclusive culture that values diversity, and minimizing barriers to learning.

In Zimbabwe, inclusive education policies, including the Revised National Policy for Early Childhood Education (2015), advocate for the inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular classrooms. However, as denoted by Chenoa (2014), the actual implementation of these policies is often hindered by inadequate resources, lack of teacher training, and cultural resistance to inclusive practices. In this study, inclusive education serves as a critical concept to explore how ECD teachers in Zvishavane perceive their ability to implement these policies and to what extent they engage in practices that meet the diverse needs of all learners.

In line with inclusive education, the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (UNESCO, 2005) emphasises that every child has the right to access quality education, which underscores the importance of inclusion from the earliest years. In the rural context of Zvishavane, the study examines whether inclusive education is more than a policy directive but a reality in classrooms, especially with the existing resource constraints and teacher training gaps.

Teacher efficacy

Teacher efficacy refers to a teacher's belief in their ability to positively impact student learning, regardless of external factors such as the students' socioeconomic status or challenges. According to Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001), teacher efficacy plays a significant role in determining the extent to which teachers feel capable of addressing the needs of all students, particularly those with disabilities. In the context of inclusive education, teacher efficacy is crucial as it affects how teachers adapt their teaching methods and believe they can successfully include students with diverse needs in the learning process.

In rural districts like Zvishavane, where teachers may face limited professional development opportunities and training in inclusive pedagogies, teacher efficacy may be compromised. This study will explore how teacher efficacy in Zvishavane impacts the effectiveness of inclusive education practices. If teachers perceive themselves as capable and equipped to meet the needs of diverse learners, they are more likely to engage in inclusive practices and adapt their teaching strategies. On the other hand, if teachers have low efficacy, they may avoid or inadequately implement inclusive strategies.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2018), offers a set of principles for curriculum development that gives all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL advocates for providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression in the classroom to cater to the diverse needs of learners, including those with disabilities. UDL is based on the understanding that learners differ in how they perceive and engage with information, and the goal is to remove barriers to learning by offering flexible teaching methods.

In the context of this study, UDL serves as a practical tool for examining how teachers in Zvishavane design their lessons and classroom activities to accommodate diverse learners. By exploring the application of UDL, the study can identify the strategies teachers use to ensure that all students, regardless of their needs, have access to the curriculum. In ECD classrooms, where children have varying developmental stages and learning needs, UDL can be particularly effective in creating an inclusive environment that supports every child's learning.

Teacher perceptions and pedagogical orientations

Pedagogical orientation refers to the beliefs, values, and instructional methods that guide teachers' teaching practices. Teachers' perceptions of inclusion play a significant role in shaping their pedagogical orientations and, consequently, the way they approach inclusive teaching. According to Hargreaves (2000), teachers' beliefs and experiences with inclusion influence their teaching practices, classroom management, and the extent to which they incorporate inclusive strategies.

This study aims to explore the relationship between teacher perceptions and their pedagogical orientations in Zvishavane. Understanding how teachers view inclusion whether as a challenge or an opportunity will provide insight into the barriers they face in implementing inclusive education. Moreover, it will shed light on the need for targeted professional development to shift perceptions and practices toward more inclusive teaching methodologies.

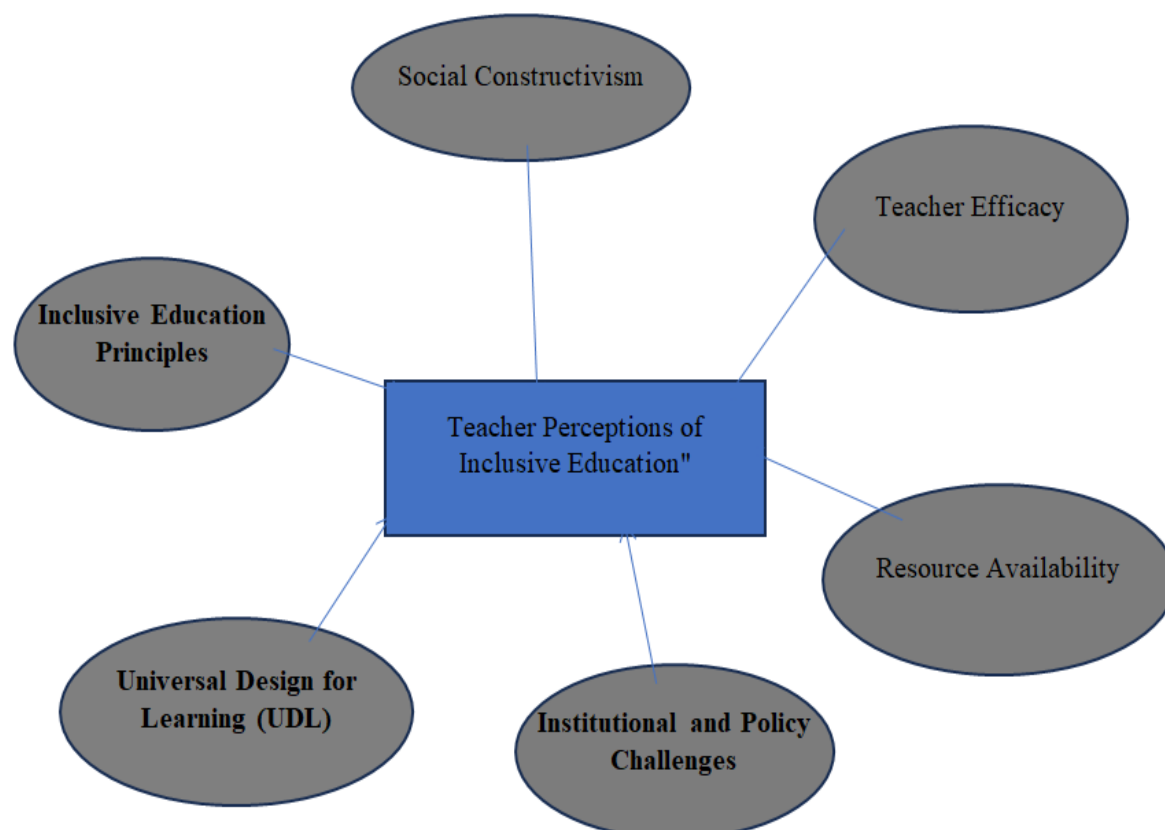


Fig 1.1

LITERATURE REVIEW

Policy and legal frameworks for inclusive ECD programmes in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's commitment to inclusive education is rooted in its endorsement of global agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Salamanca Statement, both of which emphasize the right of all children, regardless of disability, to access inclusive and quality education (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006). Nationally, the Education Act (2006) and the Revised National Policy for Early Childhood Education (2015) mandate the integration of learners with special needs into mainstream education. These policies also promote teacher training and the provision of inclusive learning environments (Pritchard & Lacey, 2019).

However, research by Madhuku (2016) and Chitiyo et al. (2014) shows that policy implementation in rural Zimbabwean districts like Zvishavane is hindered by a lack of resources, poor infrastructure, and insufficient training for ECD teachers. The gap between policy and practice remains substantial. In contrast, countries such as Finland have effectively operationalised inclusive education through robust policy frameworks backed by sustained teacher training and government investment (Hehir et al., 2016). Similarly, South Africa's White Paper 6 (2001) emphasizes district support teams and inclusive resource centres, gradually building capacity for inclusion (Engelbrecht & Green, 2007). These comparative cases highlight the need for Zimbabwe to invest in both systemic infrastructure and community-based implementation strategies.

Teacher perceptions towards inclusive education

Teacher perceptions significantly influence the success of inclusive education. In rural Zimbabwe, studies reveal that many ECD teachers lack adequate knowledge and training to support learners with diverse needs, resulting in skepticism, frustration, or passive resistance to inclusion (Chenoa, 2014; Tawengwa, 2018). Borg (2014) found that educators often feel overwhelmed when placed in inclusive settings without prior exposure or support, which negatively affects their teaching efficacy and learner outcomes.

Globally, teacher attitudes have proven to be a strong determinant of successful inclusion. Ainscow (2005) highlights that positive experiences and professional development increase teacher willingness to embrace inclusion. In Australia, Florian and Rouse (2009) found that training in inclusive pedagogies boosts teacher confidence and engagement. Similarly, in Ghana, Agbenyega (2007) reported that when teachers perceive inclusive education as feasible and rewarding, they are more likely to adapt their instructional methods to accommodate all learners. This suggests that reshaping teacher attitudes in Zimbabwe will require not only training but also exposure to inclusive success stories, mentorship, and peer support networks.

Pedagogical strategies for inclusive ECD environments

Effective pedagogical strategies are central to inclusive education. Differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, group work, and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are globally recognised strategies that allow flexibility and accessibility in teaching (CAST, 2018). In Zimbabwe, however, many ECD classrooms particularly in rural districts like Zvishavane still rely on traditional, teacher-centred instruction that limits participation for children with disabilities (Pritchard & Lacey, 2019).

Internationally, countries such as Canada have successfully implemented UDL frameworks in early education, offering multiple pathways for engagement and assessment to cater to diverse learners (Rose & Dalton, 2009). Similarly, in Kenya, the use of inclusive classroom practices such as visual aids, tactile learning, and small group interaction has enhanced engagement and reduced learning disparities (Mwangi & Orodho, 2014). These approaches are often enabled by a combination of teacher training and access to appropriate teaching aids. Zimbabwe can benefit from adapting these practices while addressing its local constraints by encouraging innovation, contextualisation, and resource-sharing among ECD teachers.

Challenges to implementing inclusive education in rural ECD settings

The implementation of inclusive education in rural Zimbabwean contexts is constrained by structural, social, and economic challenges. Studies by Chitiyo et al. (2014) and Kanyoka (2017) point to insufficient

infrastructure, limited access to assistive technologies, and a critical shortage of teachers trained in inclusive education. Moreover, cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding disability exacerbate exclusion, particularly in rural communities like Zvishavane (Mutasa, 2016).

These issues are not unique to Zimbabwe. In India, Singal (2008) found that traditional beliefs and lack of awareness among parents and communities often prevent meaningful inclusion. Similar findings were reported in rural Ethiopia, where Fentiman et al. (2008) identified poverty and deep-seated cultural views as barriers to inclusive practices. In response, successful programs in Uganda have focused on community engagement, awareness campaigns, and capacity building to shift cultural perceptions (Abosi & Koay, 2008). Zimbabwe could adopt similar community-driven strategies to address attitudinal and logistical barriers in rural districts.

Professional development and teacher training for inclusive education

Sustainable inclusive education requires continuous professional development and initial teacher training focused on inclusive pedagogy. In Zimbabwe, while inclusive education is gradually being integrated into teacher education curricula, many in-service teachers, especially those in remote areas have had little to no exposure to inclusive teaching methods (Davis & Florian, 2014; Tawengwa, 2018).

In contrast, Ireland has adopted a national model of inclusion-focused continuous professional development that includes online learning modules, workshops, and mentorship (Winter & O'Raw, 2010). In Botswana, the government has partnered with NGOs to deliver hands-on inclusive education training, resulting in increased teacher preparedness and learner outcomes (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2012). These examples illustrate the importance of both pre-service and in-service teacher support in developing inclusive classrooms. Zimbabwe could enhance its teacher training system by investing in ongoing capacity-building, establishing inclusive teaching hubs, and encouraging reflective practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the perceptions of teachers towards inclusive education in ECD environments in Zvishavane District, Zimbabwe. The research aimed to critically analyse how teachers perceive and implement inclusive education practices and the challenges they face in promoting an inclusive learning environment for young learners. A combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), classroom observations, and document analysis was employed to collect a rich dataset of teachers' attitudes, experiences, and the pedagogical strategies they use in inclusive ECD settings. The study involved 60 participants, including ECD teachers, school administrators, and educational support staff, ensuring diverse perspectives on the topic.

The study targets ECD teachers, school administrators, and district education officers in Zvishavane District, where rural educational challenges impact the implementation of inclusive education. A purposive sampling technique is used to ensure that only participants with direct experience in inclusive teaching are selected. The rationale for purposive sampling is to gather data from educators who have firsthand knowledge of the opportunities and barriers associated with inclusive education (Patton, 2015).

The study sample consists of:

- 10 ECD teachers working in different schools across the district,
- 2 school administrators responsible for supervising ECD programs,
- 3 district education officers involved in policy implementation and teacher training.

This combination of participants ensures that the study captures perspectives from both classroom practitioners and policymakers, leading to a comprehensive analysis of inclusive education practices.

Classroom observations were conducted over six months in selected ECD centers in Zvishavane District. The observations aimed to examine teachers' pedagogical approaches in inclusive classrooms, particularly focusing

on the strategies they used to engage all learners, including those with diverse learning needs. Observations were systematically recorded to capture interactions between teachers and students, the use of teaching materials, and classroom management techniques that facilitated inclusivity. The researcher noted specific examples of how teachers adapted their teaching methods to cater to learners with varying abilities and learning styles. Previous studies, such as those by Mavhunga (2021) and Mutisi (2019), have demonstrated that inclusive education often requires teachers to adopt flexible and differentiated teaching strategies, and this study sought to observe these practices in the field.

The study incorporated document analysis by reviewing educational records from ECD centers in Zvishavane, including lesson plans, teaching materials, and inclusive education policies. This analysis aimed to identify the extent to which inclusive education principles are embedded in the curriculum and teaching practices. The study also examined the availability and use of resources to support inclusive education, such as specialized learning tools or individualised education plans (IEPs) for children with disabilities. Document analysis helped to uncover whether teachers' perceptions of inclusive education align with the written policies and practices in place at the institutional level. Previous research by Chikowore (2020) and Nyamunda (2022) has shown that institutional support plays a critical role in shaping teachers' perceptions and practices regarding inclusion.

Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with ECD teachers, school administrators, and educational support staff in Zvishavane District. These interviews provided an in-depth exploration of teachers' personal views and attitudes toward inclusive education, as well as their perceived challenges in implementing inclusive practices. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to discuss their experiences, concerns, and the factors that influence their approach to inclusive education. The interviews also explore knowledge of inclusive education among ECD teachers. According to Nyamunda (2022) and Mavhunga (2021), teachers' perceptions are often shaped by their knowledge and experience, as well as the institutional and community support they receive.

Focus group discussions were conducted with ECD teachers and support staff to capture the collective experiences and views on inclusive education. The FGDs provided a platform for teachers to discuss their perceptions of inclusion, the pedagogical strategies they use, and the barriers they encounter. The discussions focused on key issues such as teacher preparedness, resource availability, and community attitudes towards inclusive education. FGDs are particularly useful for exploring shared beliefs and experiences, and they allowed participants to reflect on their practices in a group setting. The FGDs also provided a space for participants to discuss their personal and professional challenges, helping to identify common trends in the perceptions of inclusive education in Zvishavane.

Data collected from interviews, FGDs, classroom observations, and document analysis were analysed using thematic coding. This approach, as outlined by Creswell and Clark (2023), enabled the identification of key themes and patterns in teachers' perceptions of inclusive education. Thematic analysis helped to categorise and interpret the data into significant themes, such as teacher preparedness, classroom management strategies, and perceived barriers to inclusion. Triangulation was used to cross-check data from different sources, ensuring the credibility of the findings, while member checking allowed participants to validate the findings for accuracy. By triangulating the data, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' pedagogical orientations towards inclusive education.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants' rights and dignity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including teachers and school administrators. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant educational authorities, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the study. Data were anonymised to protect the identity of participants, ensuring privacy and confidentiality. The researcher also ensured that no harm or distress was caused during observations or interviews. Ethical considerations followed the best practices in qualitative research, particularly when working with educators and children in sensitive educational contexts (Creswell & Clark, 2023).

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Teachers' knowledge and awareness of inclusive education.

This theme explores the level of knowledge and awareness that ECD teachers in Zvishavane District have regarding inclusive education. Data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations revealed varying levels of understanding of inclusive education practices. The findings indicate that teachers who have received formal training in inclusive education exhibit higher levels of knowledge and confidence in their ability to implement inclusive strategies compared to those without formal training.

Observation data summary

Table 1:2: Knowledge and awareness of inclusive education among ECD teachers in Zvishavane District

Source of Data	Formal Training in Inclusive Education (N=12)	No Formal Training in Inclusive Education (N=12)	Total Occurrences (N=24)
Awareness of inclusive teaching methods	10 cases	3 cases	13 cases
Use of differentiated instruction strategies	9 cases	4 cases	13 cases
Confidence in handling children with disabilities	8 cases	2 cases	10 cases
Awareness of educational policies for inclusion	11 cases	5 cases	16 cases
Ability to adapt learning materials for diverse learners	7 cases	1 case	8 cases

Table 1.2

Observations found that teachers with formal training in inclusive education were significantly more aware of inclusive teaching methods and educational policies. They were also more confident in adapting classroom strategies and materials to meet the diverse needs of learners, including those with disabilities. Teachers without formal training showed limited awareness of these methods and were less likely to use differentiated strategies in their classrooms. When discussing their approach to supporting children with special needs, where many teachers admitted that they lacked the skills and knowledge to make appropriate modifications.

Findings of the study

The findings from interviews with ECD teachers in Zvishavane District revealed a marked disparity in awareness and understanding of inclusive education practices, based on whether teachers had received formal training. The data are presented below:

Teachers with formal training in inclusive education

Teachers who had undergone formal training in inclusive education demonstrated a strong conceptual and practical grasp of inclusive education principles. These educators reported confidence in adapting teaching methods and fostering an inclusive classroom culture that supports all learners, including those with disabilities.

One participant explained:

“Inclusive education is essential in my classroom. I always try to make sure that every child feels included, whether they have special learning needs or not. My training has helped me understand the importance of adjusting the curriculum to meet the needs of all students. It’s not just about teaching, but ensuring that every child participates, even if they have different abilities.”

This response reflects a comprehensive understanding of inclusive pedagogy, where the teacher actively modifies instruction to ensure every child’s participation. These teachers consistently mentioned employing

strategies such as differentiated instruction, use of visual aids, and group-based tasks to meet diverse learning needs.

Another ECD teacher uncovered that:

“When I am planning my lessons, I always consider how I can modify them to help children with disabilities. For example, I use picture cards for children who struggle with reading, and I make sure the classroom space is welcoming and accessible for all learners.”

These examples demonstrate that formal training empowered teachers to implement inclusive strategies confidently and proactively. Their awareness extended beyond theoretical understanding to include practical classroom adaptations tailored to learners' specific challenges.

Teachers without formal training on inclusive education

Conversely, teachers who had not received formal training expressed limited knowledge of inclusive education and reported uncertainty in applying inclusive teaching methods. While these teachers showed empathy toward learners with special needs, they acknowledged a lack of preparedness in addressing the diverse needs present in their classrooms.

One untrained teacher admitted:

“I try my best to include all the children, but sometimes I don’t know what to do when a child can’t follow the lesson. I don’t know how to make them feel part of the class when they are falling behind. I’ve never been trained on how to handle these situations.”

This quote highlights a significant confidence gap. Teachers without training often relied on trial-and-error methods, lacking structured support or guidance to apply inclusive practices effectively. Their responses reflected frustration and a strong desire for professional development.

Another participant emphasised that:

“We don’t have much support, and the class is often chaotic. I know some children have special needs, but I don’t know how to help them in the best way. If we had more training, I think I would be able to understand how to support them better.”

This further reinforces that while there is willingness among ECD teachers to support inclusive practices, the absence of formal training limits their effectiveness in doing so.

DISCUSSION OF RESPONSES

The findings underscore a significant divergence in the knowledge and application of inclusive education strategies between trained and untrained ECD teachers in Zvishavane. Teachers with formal training were better equipped to foster inclusive environments, citing the use of differentiated instruction, adapted learning materials, and intentional lesson planning as key enablers of inclusion.

In contrast, untrained teachers lacked both the conceptual grounding and practical tools necessary for inclusion. Their responses revealed an urgent need for professional development and institutional support. This training gap contributes to the inconsistent application of inclusive education principles in rural ECD settings and underscores the importance of investing in teacher capacity-building as a prerequisite for effective inclusive education implementation.

The responses from teachers with formal training align with existing research, which suggests that professional development in inclusive education equips educators with the essential tools and confidence to apply inclusive strategies effectively (Forlin, 2010). These teachers emphasised that their training helped them recognise the

importance of equity and inclusion, enabling them to create a more supportive and adaptable classroom environment.

Pedagogical strategies for inclusive education in ECD environments

Effective pedagogical strategies are essential for successful inclusion. The study found that while many teachers were familiar with the concept of differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), they faced challenges in integrating these strategies due to resource limitations, lack of training, and large class sizes.

ECD teachers in the study employed a variety of strategies, with differentiated instruction being the most commonly used approach. This involved adjusting teaching methods, resources, and assessments to accommodate the diverse learning needs of children. Teachers reported using visual aids, group activities, and peer tutoring to help children with special needs engage with the curriculum.

One teacher explained: *"I try to use visual aids like pictures and diagrams to explain concepts, especially for children who struggle with verbal communication. It helps them to better understand and remember the material."*

In addition to differentiated instruction, some teachers adopted peer tutoring, where students who grasp concepts more quickly were paired with their peers to provide additional support.

Another ECD teacher alluded that: *"Peer tutoring has been quite effective. It helps children with disabilities feel included, and it also benefits other students by encouraging teamwork."* Most ECD teachers however, expressed difficulty in fully implementing UDL principles, as they lacked access to diverse learning materials and assistive technologies.

Challenges implementing pedagogical strategies

Despite the recognition of these strategies, many teachers struggled to implement them effectively due to challenges such as insufficient resources, inadequate classroom space, and a lack of specialised training.

A teacher described the difficulty of adapting their methods: *"While I try to use group activities and visual aids, there are not enough resources like books or learning materials. It is challenging to accommodate all learners when there are not enough materials to go around."*

Teachers also mentioned the challenge of large class sizes, which made it difficult to provide individualised support to every child.

Lack of resources

One of the primary barriers highlighted by teachers was the lack of adequate teaching materials, including assistive technologies and accessible learning resources for children with disabilities. Research suggests that access to appropriate materials is critical for facilitating inclusion in the classroom (Florian, 2014). Without these resources, teachers are unable to provide the individualised support required by children with special needs. Additionally, the physical infrastructure of many schools, such as inadequate classroom layouts for children with mobility challenges, further limits the ability to create inclusive learning environments (Muchandiona, 2025; Pritchard & Lacey, 2019). These findings align with the broader literature on the challenges faced by schools in rural settings, where resource allocation is often insufficient to meet the needs of diverse learners (Chitiyo et al., 2014).

Training gaps

Another significant challenge identified in the study was the disparity in teacher training. While some teachers had received training in inclusive education, many others felt unprepared to meet the diverse needs of their students. According to research by Muchandiona (2025), insufficient pre-service and in-service training is a

common issue hindering proper inclusivity in many education systems, particularly in rural areas. Teachers who had received specialised training were more confident in applying inclusive teaching strategies such as differentiated instruction and peer tutoring. However, those with minimal training felt ill-equipped to address the needs of children with disabilities, which echoes the findings of previous studies that highlight the need for ongoing professional development in inclusive education (Forlin, 2010).

High learner-teacher ratio

The issue of large class sizes also emerged as a significant obstacle to implementing inclusive pedagogical strategies. Teachers in Zvishavane reported difficulty in providing individual attention to students, particularly those with special needs. This finding is consistent with research that emphasizes the negative impact of large class sizes on teaching quality and individualised support (Muchandiona, Mwaruta & Chiromo, 2025; Ainscow, 2005). In classrooms with high learner-to-teacher ratios, it becomes challenging to tailor instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners, and children requiring additional support often do not receive the attention they need. Studies have shown that smaller class sizes and individualised support are essential for effective inclusive education (Pritchard & Lacey, 2019).

Cultural beliefs and social barriers

In addition to logistical challenges, cultural beliefs and social stigma about disabilities posed significant barriers. Some parents and community members held negative views about children with disabilities, often perceiving them as a burden. This societal stigma contributed to a lack of parental support and involvement in the educational process for children with special needs.

One teacher echoed that: *"Some parents believe that children with disabilities cannot learn, so they do not send them to school or support their learning at home. This creates a barrier to inclusion."*

The findings from this theme highlight the significant challenges faced in implementing inclusive education in rural ECD settings, particularly in areas like Zvishavane. These challenges are multifaceted, with both material and social factors playing a critical role. A primary barrier identified was the lack of resources, including insufficient infrastructure and a shortage of specialized staff. Teachers and administrators reported that many schools lacked the necessary physical infrastructure, such as accessible classrooms and adaptive learning materials, which are essential for creating an inclusive learning environment. The shortage of trained teachers in inclusive education further compounded this issue, as educators often felt ill-prepared to support children with special needs effectively. This aligns with findings from previous studies, which suggest that inadequate resources and insufficient teacher training are major obstacles to inclusive education in rural areas (Chitiyo et al., 2014).

In addition to material limitations, social factors also played a significant role. Cultural stigma surrounding disabilities was frequently mentioned as a barrier to parental involvement and community support for inclusive education. In many rural communities, there are still misconceptions and negative attitudes towards disabilities, which can lead to the exclusion of children with special needs. Parents and community members often viewed disabilities as a social stigma, which led to reluctance in seeking educational support for affected children. This social exclusion was noted as a critical factor that hinders the full integration of children with special needs into educational settings, echoing the findings of previous research that highlights the role of cultural attitudes in the success of inclusive education (Smyth, 2012).

To address these challenges, the study emphasises the need for targeted interventions. It is crucial to allocate resources more effectively to ensure that schools are adequately equipped to support children with disabilities. This includes improving infrastructure to make schools physically accessible and providing assistive technologies to support diverse learners. Furthermore, there is a strong need for teacher training in inclusive education. Teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively support children with special needs and create an inclusive classroom environment. Ongoing professional development programs are essential for enhancing teachers' abilities and confidence in using inclusive teaching strategies (Davis & Florian, 2014).

In addition to these material and educational interventions, community awareness programs are critical to reducing stigma and promoting acceptance of children with disabilities. Such programs should focus on educating parents and community members about the benefits of inclusive education and challenging existing misconceptions about disabilities. By fostering a more inclusive and supportive community environment, these programs can help increase parental involvement and ensure that children with special needs receive the support they need to succeed academically. This approach is supported by studies that emphasize the importance of community engagement in the success of inclusive education (Muchandiona, 2025; Florian, 2014).

Conceptual model for inclusive education in rural ECD Settings

This study's findings underscore the multifaceted nature of inclusive education in rural ECD settings, emphasising the interplay between teacher capacity, resource availability, community engagement, and policy support. To provide broader applicability beyond Zvishavane, this section proposes a conceptual model grounded in existing educational theories and empirical evidence.

Teacher capacity and efficacy

Teacher knowledge, skills, and beliefs about inclusion significantly influence the quality of inclusive education (Muchandiona & Manyumwa, 2024; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Formal training enhances teacher efficacy by equipping educators with strategies such as differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which accommodate diverse learners (CAST, 2018). Continuous professional development is critical in rural contexts where initial training opportunities may be limited (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). This model highlights teacher capacity as a foundational pillar for effective inclusion.

Resource availability

Adequate material resources, including adaptive teaching aids and accessible infrastructure, are essential for implementing inclusive practices (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Resource limitations, especially in rural settings, constrain teachers' ability to apply inclusive pedagogies fully (Chigona & Chetty, 2008). Aligning resources with UDL principles ensures that curriculum content is accessible to all children, regardless of ability or developmental stage (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Community and cultural engagement

Cultural beliefs and community attitudes towards disability strongly impact inclusive education (Slee, 2011). In many rural areas, stigma and misconceptions marginalise children with special needs, reducing parental involvement and community support (Muchandiona, 2025). The model incorporates community engagement strategies to foster positive attitudes, enhance awareness, and build collaborative partnerships crucial for sustainable inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Policy and support systems

While inclusive education policies provide a necessary framework, effective implementation requires practical support, monitoring, and specialist services (UNESCO, 1994). This model stresses the importance of coherent policy frameworks adapted to rural realities, with dedicated funding and mechanisms for teacher training, resource allocation, and community mobilisation (Miles & Singal, 2010).

Interconnectedness of model components

These components are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, well-trained teachers (Teacher Capacity) require adequate materials (Resource Availability) to implement inclusive curricula effectively. Simultaneously, community support (Cultural Engagement) bolsters teacher efforts and fosters inclusive school cultures. Robust policies and systemic support ensure sustainability across these domains.

Implications for policy and practice

This conceptual model offers a comprehensive framework for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders seeking to promote inclusive education in rural ECD settings. It highlights the need for an integrated approach addressing human, material, social, and systemic dimensions. By adopting such a framework, governments and education authorities can better tailor interventions that respond to the unique challenges of rural areas, ensuring that inclusive education moves beyond policy rhetoric into meaningful practice.

CONCLUSION

This study provides vital insights into the current realities of inclusive education in rural ECD settings in Zvishavane, emphasising the interconnected roles of material and social factors in shaping inclusive practices. Drawing from foundational educational theories such as social constructivism, inclusive education principles, teacher efficacy, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) this research highlights both the progress and persistent challenges within these contexts.

Teachers with formal training in inclusive education demonstrate higher self-efficacy and greater confidence in implementing inclusive pedagogies, such as differentiated instruction and peer tutoring, aligned with UDL principles. Their understanding reflects the social constructivist emphasis on collaborative and interactive learning environments where all ECD learners can participate meaningfully. Conversely, untrained teachers often struggle to adapt their methods, revealing a critical gap in professional development that directly affects the quality of inclusion.

The study also confirms that cultural stigma around disabilities remains a significant barrier, limiting community support and parental involvement. This social dimension resonates with the inclusive education principle that emphasises minimising learning barriers through culturally responsive approaches and community engagement. The lack of adaptive resources and specialist support further complicates teachers' ability to enact inclusive practices effectively.

Synthesising these findings within the Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Education in ECD settings in rural Zimbabwe, the study proposes a multifaceted policy approach anchored on three core pillars: resource enhancement, capacity building through sustained professional development, and fostering inclusive community attitudes. Such an integrated model reflects the theoretical underpinnings of teacher efficacy and UDL, emphasising that successful inclusion requires empowering teachers and creating flexible learning environments responsive to diverse needs, while simultaneously addressing cultural and infrastructural constraints.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study therefore advocates for policies that transcend mere legislative mandates and actively invest in equipping rural ECD teachers, mobilising communities, and providing necessary resources. Only through this holistic and theory-informed framework can inclusive education flourish in rural Zimbabwe, ensuring equitable learning opportunities for every ECD child regardless of ability.

Schools in rural areas there is need for improved infrastructure to accommodate ECD learners with special needs not as passive recipients of the learning process, but as active participants. This includes ensuring that ECD classrooms are physically accessible, providing adaptive materials, and equipping schools with assistive technologies. Funding should also be directed towards acquiring specialised teaching materials tailored for children with disabilities, which are currently scarce in many rural schools for use in ECD settings.

Teacher training programmes should be expanded to include a focus on inclusive education strategies, ensuring that ECD teachers are adequately prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners. Ongoing professional development opportunities, such as workshops and mentorship programs, should be made available to ECD teachers, especially those in rural areas who may not have had the opportunity to receive formal training in inclusive education.

Addressing the cultural stigma surrounding disabilities is crucial for creating a supportive ECD learning environment for children with special needs. Community awareness programmes should be implemented to educate parents and community members about the benefits of inclusive education and to challenge misconceptions about disabilities within ECD settings. Parental involvement in inclusive ECD programmes should be enhanced through workshops, outreach programmes, awareness campaigns and community meetings to help parents understand the importance of inclusion and how they can support their children's learning at home.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should prioritise recruiting and training specialised staff to support disabled learners in ECD settings in their diverse forms. Additionally, teachers could be provided with opportunities for collaborative work with specialists to enhance their own knowledge and capacity to teach diverse learners. Special education assistants need to be trained to support teachers in the classroom, working with ECD learners who require individualised attention or assistance with tasks.

Schools should also seek partnerships with non-governmental organisations and other external bodies that specialise in inclusive education. These partnerships can provide much-needed resources, including educational materials, financial support, and expertise in inclusive teaching practices. Collaboration with local and international organisations can also help to raise awareness about the importance of inclusive education and foster a culture of inclusion in the wider community.

The Zimbabwean government should establish clear and comprehensive policies that support the implementation of inclusive education at all levels, starting with ECD environments. These policies should include specific guidelines on how to integrate children with special needs into mainstream schools and ensure that the necessary resources and training are available to teachers. Policy frameworks should also address issues such as funding, the recruitment of specialised staff, and the creation of a supportive learning environment for children with disabilities. Policy compliance has to be promoted in all ECD environments through proper checks, assessments and supervisions

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