

# Increasing Accessibility to Inclusive Education for Learners with Disabilities in Primary Schools in Ndola District, Zambia

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## ABSTRACT

This study focused on increasing access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools. The study was qualitative in nature and employed a descriptive research design. The study used a sample of 18 participants, including 5 teachers, 10 learners with disabilities and 3 school administrators. The instruments for data collection were the FGDs for class teachers, structured interview guide for school administrators and observation checklist from both learners with disabilities and teachers. The study found that the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools were unsuitable learning environment, insufficient teaching and learning materials, being taught by inadequate trained teachers, difficulty in creating relationships between classmates, inadequate parental involvement and support, and legal and policy barriers. These challenges affected the academic performance of learners with disabilities in primary schools. In order to address these challenges, teachers suggested support services such as flexible teaching and learning methods adapted for educating learners with disabilities, parental involvement in the education of their children, appropriate teaching methods with innovative techniques to teaching aids, and equipment with the use of ICTs. The study recommends educational institutions and policymakers to implement inclusive practices and provide necessary accommodations to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities, advocate for inclusive educational policies, leverage assistive technologies, and seek out community resources for support in order to overcome barriers to education effectively, invest in assistive technologies, providing training for educators on inclusive teaching practices.

**Key Words:** Accessibility, Disability, Inclusive Education.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Inclusive education is a global initiative predicated on enhancing human rights, equality, and equity. Before Salamanca, learners with disabilities were frequently separated from mainstream schools and placed in specialized institutions. Progressive reforms have established the right of all children to be educated together in mainstream classrooms. The teacher's attitudes and beliefs have the potential to influence how effectively inclusion is implemented in the classrooms and create a welcoming environment for all learners.

Learners with disabilities face many challenges in schools in Zambia. Because of the challenges faced by these learners, there have been remarkable strides in the education of learners with disabilities and the establishment of support for persons with disabilities since the Republic of Zambia became an independent nation in 1964. Zambia's limited resources, understanding of disabilities as well as social and cultural barriers have hampered efforts to provide special services to learners. To this effect, many policies have been adopted and laws passed to protect the rights of those with disabilities, including access to quality equitable and inclusive education programs. For example, these include the Education reform document (MoE, 1977), Focus on learning (MoE, 1992), Educating our future (MoE, 1996) and the 2012 Education Act.

The first policy that was formulated to cater for persons with disabilities, including those with mild IDs in Zambia was the 1977 Education Reforms Document. This outlined documentation for Special Education and specified the need for integrating and adaptation of the general education curriculum to meet identified and specific needs of learners (MoE, 1977). In addition, the policy document outlined the need of the adequate funding in order for Special Education to be more meaningful and beneficial. This policy document focused on the designing special education curricular and developing teaching materials prescribing building specifications and providing professional supervision of Special Education. During this time, Special Education was understood to be for the intellectually, visually, hearing and physically challenged learners, but progress was very slow.

The second policy that was formulated to cater for persons with disabilities was Focus on learning of 1992. This policy document emanated from the declaration of Education For All at the World Conference on Special Needs Education to reaffirm commitment to Education for All (1990), recognizing the necessity and urgency of providing education for learners, youth and adults with special educational needs within the regular education system. It had earlier signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) and later the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). The Focus on Learning policy document affirms that every person- child, youth and adult shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs (MoE, 1992). This policy stressed the mobilization of resources for Education For All, including learners with mild Intellectual Disabilities (IDs). However, the Focus on Learning education policy was launched when Zambia's economy was declining. This made implementation of the curriculum in Special Schools and Units difficult because all government institutions of learning experienced serious inadequate resources of all kinds, including materials to support the curriculum adaptation and implementation. Further, there were few trained teachers in Special Education to implement the curriculum and let alone teach the learners. These challenges led to the introduction of the third policy document on education- Educating Our Future (1996).

The move toward inclusive education is a global one, which has been in process for over many years since the Salamanca statement in 1994. The approach has been adopted in many countries, both high and low income with varying degrees of policy development and legal frameworks to ensure effective implementation. To this effect, in 1996, a major policy on education, Educating our Future (MoE, 1996) was formulated. This policy focused on formal education. Recurring themes in the document included flexibility, responsive to education needs and enhancement of quality of education for all children. In relation with children with disabilities, the policy emphasized equality of educational opportunity provision of good quality education and improvement and strengthening of the supervision and management of special education across the country (MoE, 1996).

In 2012, the government enacted an Act known as the 2012 Persons with Disabilities Act. The 2012 Act asserts that a person responsible for admission into an education institution shall not refuse to give admission to a person with disability on account of the disability, unless the person with a disability has been assessed by the agency and in consultation with the ministry responsible for health" (Disability Act, 2012). In addition, this law states that the minister responsible for education shall ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system based on disability; and that they should access an inclusive education on an equal basis education.

One of the benchmarks of curriculum adaptation in the Curriculum Framework states that learners with IDs as well as others with severe disabilities who cannot benefit from inclusive curriculum should be provided with an adapted school-based curriculum to match with their capacities (MoE, 2013). Thus, currently all Teacher Education institutions offer special education to all trainee teachers in order to equip them with necessary knowledge, skills, positive attitudes and values in handling learners with Special Educational Needs (MoE, 2013). In addition, MoGE (2016) has provided inclusive guidelines with an emphasis on teachers adapting the curriculum to allow all learners regardless of their disability to increase access to learning content. Despite the formulation of policy documents on the education of learners with IDs, the education Act, the benchmarks provided in the 2013 Curriculum Framework and the content of the MoGE (2016) inclusive guidelines on curriculum adaptation as well as some of the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zambia seem not conclusive (Kalimaposo, Simalalo & Mweemba, 2025).

Studying the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zambia may provide an understanding to teachers and other stakeholders in the Ministry of Education (MoE) on how they may improve the performance of learners with disabilities in schools (Mwendalubi, Mandyata, Bwalya & Chakulimba, 2018; Kandimba, Kalimaposo, Kalunga, Mandyata, Kabwe & Bwalya, 2025). It was against this background the present study sought to explore the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in schools in Ndola district on the Copperbelt Province in Zambia.

### **Problem of the study**

Zambia is a signatory to the international agreements or instruments such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Education Needs (1994). These international agreements emphasize the rights of children to education and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2008) demand for access, equity and quality of educational services for LSEs. Being a signatory Zambia has adopted an inclusive education curriculum whose successful implementation requires teachers with pre- and in-service training in the area of inclusive education and special education. Despite the formulation of policy documents and education Acts that supports the learning of learners with IDs as well as the benchmarks provided in the 2013 Curriculum Framework and the content of the MoGE (2016) inclusive guidelines on curriculum adaptation, there seems to be paucity of empirical studies on the strategies teachers use to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zambian schools. This is because many general and special education teachers do not have pre and in-service training in the area of inclusive education and special education. Furthermore, general education teachers' still have negative attitudes toward working with learners with special needs and there is lack of support from school administration and students' families (Kalimaposo, Simalalo, Mweemba & Hambulo, 2025). Given these challenges surrounding the school administrators, class teachers and learners, stakeholders have been left to wonder on some of the strategies used by teachers to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in schools (Mtonga, Lungu, Kalimaposo & Mandyata, 2021). It is against this background that the present study, sought to explore the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Ndola district. The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To identify the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools.
- ii. To establish how the challenges faced by learners with disabilities affect their performance in primary schools.
- iii. To suggest the strategies to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools.

### **Significant of the study**

This study is significant because inclusive education transforms learning for all learners, not just those with diverse needs. By using a variety of teaching methods such as differentiated instruction and UDL, inclusive classrooms create more engaging and effective learning experiences. Such learning situations promote academic growth by addressing varied learning styles and supporting all learners to realize their potential. Socially and emotionally, inclusive classrooms foster empathy, respect and collaboration by bringing together learners from diverse backgrounds. This setting helps learners develop essential life skills, including emotional intelligence and teamwork, while promoting a strong sense of belonging. The study may help identify the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in schools. Secondly, the information will be useful to government, establish how these challenges affect the performance of learners with disabilities in schools so that strategies are be put in place to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in schools. Thirdly, it is also hoped that the findings of the study may be added to the general body of knowledge on the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in selected schools in Zambia.

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## Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the social model of disability by Rieser (2002). The social model sees disability as the result of the interaction between people living with impairments and an environment. This model encourages the society to view the issue of including persons with disabilities from a human right and equality perspective rather than a focus on the persons with disabilities from participating in any situation as what handicaps them. It therefore carries the implication that the curriculum, environmental assessment procedure, teaching materials and teaching methods must be adapted to enable people living with disabilities to participate in society on an equal basis with others. The model provided an analytical framework for the current study because it assisted in providing the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in schools by considering the following: the curriculum, environmental assessment procedure, teaching materials and teaching methods highlighted in this model. Hence, the theory was quite appropriate for this kind of study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature begins with the discussion on the concept of inclusive education, challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools and strategies to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools.

### The concept of inclusive education

This concept is commonly known as inclusive education. It is based on the principle that all children regardless of ability or disability have a basic right to be educated alongside their peers in their neighborhood schools. This concept was implemented in Western countries in the 1980s, and it has become a matter for the global agenda. The right of children to have access to inclusive education is widely supported in international human rights law; international conventions ratified by its members and the majority of human rights instruments.

The move toward inclusive education is a global one which has been in process for over 25 years since the Salamanca statement in 1994. The approach has been adopted in many countries, both high and low income with varying degrees of policy development and legal frameworks to ensure effective implementation (UNESCO, 2003a.) The concept and practice of inclusive education has gained worldwide attention in the past few decades. From the launching of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 to the more recent UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the global community has supported the vision of transforming policy and practice toward educating all children.

### Challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools

Globally, Brunsting and Sreckovic (2014) and Kalimaposo, Simalalo, Mweemba & Hambulo (2025) opined that one of the challenges faced by teachers working with disabilities learners is teacher burnout. Teacher burnout occurs when teachers undergoing stress for long periods experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. It appears as though teachers of intellectually disabled learners for example do more work as compared to those working with mainstream learners. Some of them complained of emotional burnout as their learners expect more from them than they can offer. It appears as though participants in this study more often than not experienced burnout as they complained of emotional burnout and lack of confirmation for their hard work, which casts doubt on the work they do and minimize their personal accomplishment. Brunsting & Sreckovic (2014) who described teachers as experiencing burnout when the stress they encounter overcomes their resources and abilities to cope adequately, leading them to feel exhausted, cynical, or unaccomplished in their work, support this.

Faiz et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study on teachers' insights on curriculum adaptation involving learners with a developmental disability at the primary school level in Lahore, Pakistan. The study found that lack of teacher training on how to adapt curriculum, for example, adjusting teaching materials, methodologies and handling large class sizes made learning of learners with a developmental disability rather difficult. Some teachers blamed the government for not making proper policies on issues of curriculum adaptation. Very few special education teachers, however, were seen to give extra time and attention as an aspect of curriculum



adaptation. This clearly shows that there is a gap between the expectations of curriculum adaptation and teachers' capacity to adapt the curriculum.

In Africa, Adams (2017) conducted a study on the challenges of teachers' working with learners with disabilities in three special schools in South Africa. The findings of the study showed that the experience of teachers of children with intellectual disability was positive. The teachers' experiences of working with intellectually disabled learners was characterized by feelings of contentment and fulfilment. There was also a sense of exhaustion as many described how tiring it is to work with learners with IDs. The participants also described their experience as very humbling and interesting. According to a study conducted by Nalbant et al. (2013), physical education teachers who were young, had acquaintance with disabilities, and less teaching experience had more favourable attitude scores than the others. In the present study, it appears that both the young and old teachers had favourable attitudes towards working with children with disabilities.

Ruteere et al. (2015) opined that another challenge experienced in teaching Daily Living Skills to Learners with Mental Retardation in Kenya was negative attitude teachers and the school administration (Kalimaposi, Muzata & Zulu, 2025). The study found that negative attitude from both the teachers and the school administration play a significant role in the teaching of Daily Living Skills to learners with disabilities. Negative attitude makes the teacher feel detached from the learners. This limits their attachment and interest in learners with disabilities, and therefore do not teach them well, hence learners continue being dependent on other people. Nevertheless, it is not known if the negative attitude from both the teachers and the school administration was also experienced in teaching learners with disabilities in Zambia primary schools.

Ruteere et al. (2015) & Kandimba, Mandiyata & Simalalo (2023) stated that lack of trained personnel is another challenge experienced when implementing Daily Living Skills to learners with IDs. The study found that teachers who are not trained in the area of IDs did not understand their learners' characteristics hence do not apply teaching methods or even strategies effectively. In extreme cases, ignorance concerning disability can result in quite damaging prejudice, hostility and rejection. This is even more serious if the disability is IDs because of its characteristics of deficits in both adaptive behavior and IQ. Additionally, Koech Report (1999) asserted that the quality of the service for children with special needs in Kenya was adversely affected by acute shortage of specialized aids and equipment, specialized personnel and inappropriate curriculum. Others include insufficient institutions and programmes, lack of coordination and unity of purpose between and among service providers, inadequate support staff, an absence of clear policy guidelines, and lack of legal status on special education, provisions and laxity on the side of government to fund special education materials.

Yusuf and Wahab (2021) conducted a study on challenges faced by teachers when teaching students with Developmental Disability in Erbil City, Asia. The study found that alongside the shortage of staff members, schools lack of trained teachers in the field of special needs education in Asia. There was a huge shortage of teachers trained on special- educational needs-professionals, as well as the lack of teaching facilities and these negatively affected the delivery of quality education to children with developmental disability. In many schools, the class sizes were too big for teachers to facilitate quality learning. Children with developmental disability deserve attention and care in many aspects because they are suffering from limited access to information and they suffer from social stigmatization. Directly or indirectly, these factors reduce the chances of accessing to social services, addressing the educational needs, the need of economic growth and poverty reduction efforts.

Udoba (2014) conducted a study on challenges faced by teachers when teaching learners with developmental disabilities in Tanzania. The study observed that local teachers in most of the primary schools in Tanzania lack training in special needs education for children with developmental disability. The study showed that teachers were inadequately prepared for teaching learners with developmental disability. This entails that colleges were not doing much in preparing teachers for teaching of learners with developmental disability in schools. Despite the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP), that ensured Education for All, the overall quality of primary education in Tanzania for learners with developmental disabilities, remained generally poor. Udoba adds that the shortages of teachers trained on special- educational needs professionals, as well as the lack of teaching facilities, have a negative effect on the delivery of quality education to children with developmental disability. In many schools, class sizes are too big for teachers to facilitate quality learning. Nevertheless, the study by

Udoba did not focus on the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zambia, which was the focus of this current study.

Still in Africa, Chesaro (2020) conducted a study on challenges faced by teachers in Teaching Mentally Challenged and Communication Deficient learners in Mbagathi Special Unit, Kenya. The study findings revealed that lack of adequate fellow teacher support to the challenged learners, lack of adequate parental support to the challenged learners and inadequate physical and financial resources were the major challenges faced by teachers in teaching mentally challenged and communication deficient learners. However, the study by Cheraso (2020) was limited to communication Deficient among learners with disabilities, while the present study focused on the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zambia.

In Zambia, Kandimba, Mandyata and Simalalo (2023) unveiled that there were challenges encountered by teacher in the teaching of learners with moderate IDs in Zambian special schools. These challenges include teachers not having enough time to complete syllabus content, ill- prepared teachers, less time for preparing for class, the learning environment being learner-unfriendly, inadequate instructional resources and supervisors and parents not actively involved in teachers' attempts to adapt the curriculum. However, the study Kandimba *et al.* (2023) focused more on teachers' understanding of curriculum adaptation for learners with moderate IDs unlike the current study that focused on the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zambia.

A study by Mkandawire (2010) on the challenges choking curriculum implementation revealed that among the challenges choking curriculum implementation was lack of teacher experience in teaching learners with severe and profound disabilities (Kalimaposi, Muzata & Zulu, 2025). The study found that learners with severe and profound disabilities required more adaptation and medical attention than the average learners, which they could not receive because teachers had no teaching experience. Mkandawire (2010); Mpolomoka, Mandyata, Movombo, Kabundula & Mohammad (2025); Mwendalubi & Mandyata (2020) suggested that teachers were supposed to be well prepared during training so that they acquired knowledge and skills in handling severe disabilities by creating lesson plans based on individual abilities and adhering to each child's needs. If teachers did not have sufficient experience, it hindered the learners' progression rate at school. However, the study by Mkandawire (2010), took a general approach because it did not focus on the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zambia. Which the current study focused on.

### **Strategies to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in schools**

A study by Adams *et al.* (2016) explored teachers' experiences of learners with disabilities, collaborating with parents in mainstream primary schools in the Lubombo region in Eswatini. The study showed that teachers of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools may be exposed to a variety of experiences in collaborating with parents depending on the severity of the learners' disability. Collaboration between teachers and parents was important for the reflection of practices and exchange of knowledge as a main strategy to generate creativity and innovation to support positive educational experience for the learners with disabilities. Collaboration between teachers and parents may also constitute parental involvement in the education of learners with disabilities, which creates opportunities to plan for individualized care, share information on weaknesses and strengths of the learners to provide meaningful support. Therefore, considering the way in which teachers of learners with disabilities collaborate with parents as key stakeholders in education may provide great opportunities to support teaching and care. Nonetheless, it was not known if such collaboration existed between teachers of learners with disabilities and parents in Zambian schools.

Dashi and Rai (2009) asserts that academic support was the most important support to ensure appropriate education for disabilities. Academic support consisted measures such as provision of instructional materials for children with special needs, providing specialized help to children with special needs in the resource room modifying or adopting the curriculum to suit to the needs of special needs children and rectifying the deficiencies of children with special needs. Dashi and Rai (2009) added that academic support services also include improving the quality of teaching; taking personal care of special needs children; showing positive attitude towards children with special needs; adopting innovative teaching practices; providing remedial instructions to

children with special needs and establishing linkage with special schools and utilizing the expertise and resources of special schools. However, it was not known if the academic support services mentioned by Dashi and Rai (2009) were also provided to teachers with disabilities in Zambian schools.

Another study by Mutezigaju (2015) on implementation of strategies for reducing dropout rates of learners with mild IDs in inclusive primary schools in Rwanda revealed that administrative support is another important measure for implementing children with special needs. These includes measures such as visit of supervising officer or education officer to the schools, giving feedback to teachers for increasing their efficiency, financial assistance to schools for implementing education for children with special needs and constructions of resource rooms in schools or in the centre schools. Further, Dash and Rai (2009) reported other measures such as maintenance of resource rooms, providing in- service education to teachers and the headmasters, deputing teachers to visit model inclusive schools outside the state or country and monitoring and evaluation of the programme. For effective implications of education for children with special needs, administrators are expected to be familiar with the concept, objectives and practices of inclusive education (Kalimaposo, Simalalo & Mweemba (2025); Banja & Mandyata (2018). Such familiarity would help the administrator in supervision, monitoring, control and for providing leadership to the headmasters of schools. Nevertheless, the study by Mutezigaju (2015) did not focus on the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zambia, which was the main focus of the present study.

Mutezigaju (2015) opines that involvement of the community or social intervention was also a necessary condition for the success of education of learners with disabilities. The community may intervene in the programmes in ways such as participating in the decision-making process, meeting the expenses of constructing the resource rooms, sending out of school children to school, encouraging disabled children to attend school regularly and providing or helping the teachers trained in special education. Other ways include providing the salary of the resource teachers, providing aids and equipment's to the schools; supervising the work of teachers, giving feedback to them, helping in dealing with the problems of the handicapped girl child, monitoring the progress of education of special needs children in the locality and transforming the school into a community school. Thus, this study was conducted to establish whether community support was among the strategies that may improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in schools in Zambian schools.

Dash and Rai (2009) in Mutezigaju (2015) pointed out that a crucial barrier to effective education for special needs children is non- involvement of parents in the process of educating children with special needs. In most cases, parents send their children to school but they are not involved in any aspect of inclusion such as assessment, decision-making and education of their children. They are alienated from the school. Moreover, a lot depends on community participation. Non- involvement of parents may act as a barrier for successful education of special needs children. A co-operative, supportive partnership between school administrators, teachers and parents should be developed and parents regarded as active partners in decision-making. Parents should be encouraged to participate in educational activities at home and at school, as well as in the supervision and support of their children's learning. Nevertheless, it is not known if these parental support services were provided to learners with mild IDs in Zambian primary schools.

A study by Alquraini & Gut (2012) and Mandyata (2011) on critical components of successful inclusion of learners with severe disabilities state that inclusion provides an opportunity for students with severe disabilities to build social skills in terms of establishing relationships with their typically developing peers. Some studies indicate that learners with severe disabilities in inclusive education classrooms experience a higher level of interaction with peers than learners with severe disabilities placed in separate classrooms. Finally, children with severe developmental disabilities in inclusive classrooms over a two -year period progressed on a measure of social competence, whereas matched counterparts in segregated settings regressed. If these instructional resources and support services were available enough in inclusive schools and if they were effectively implemented to facilitate retention of learners, the learning of learners with mild IDs in primary schools would enhanced.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a descriptive research design. Mukul and Deepa (2013) and Kalimaposo (2010) state that descriptive research deals with the description of the state of affairs, as it exists at present. Data that was collected was described and this fitted with description of qualitative study, which the researcher chose. The design chosen was imbedded in qualitative method, which collects descriptive data. The research design involved the description of words, which was non-statistical, and its naturalistic approaches consider decisions, actions, beliefs, values and thoughts of participants and attach meaning to them. The target population for this study constituted the teachers, learners and school administrators. The researcher's choice of this population was based on the belief of providing to some extent the data, which was required for the study. The sample size comprised eighteen (18) participants, five (5) teachers, ten (10) learners with disabilities and three (3) school administrators. Class teachers for learners with disabilities were chosen because they were the implementers and the ones who teach learners with disabilities in the schools. Learners were used because they were the beneficiaries of what class teachers teach in schools. School administrators were chosen because they supervised both the class teachers and learners with disabilities in schools. The study employed purposive sampling and quota sampling techniques. Purposive sampling used to select class teachers, learners with disabilities and school administrators because they are believed to have the rich information on the strategies for improving access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Zambia.

With regard to instrumentation, the researcher used in-depth interviews guide for School Administrators, Focus Group Discussions guide for Class Teachers and Observation checklist (for Class Teachers of learners with disabilities). This provided a triangulation of instruments for the data that was collected. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Additionally, Kasonde (2015) pointed out that theming data involves using phrases or sentences to describe or capture the meaning of an aspect of data. Data collected in this study were analyzed according to themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing and reporting themes found within a data set. Thematic analysis was used because it was a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences in the data that is provided. Main and sub themes were generated from the data that was collected.

## Findings

The findings were presented according to research objectives which included challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools, how the challenges affected the performance of learners with disabilities in primary schools, and the strategies to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools.

### Challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools

On the first objective of the study which was on challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools, participants cited many challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools. These were: unsuitable learning environment, insufficient teaching and learning materials, being taught by inadequate trained teachers, difficulty in creating relationships between classmates, inadequate parental involvement and support, and legal and policy barriers. This was reflected in the views of one of the School Administrator participants <SA1> who confirmed that:

*“One of the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in schools was unsuitable learning environment, which does not promote their movement in the schools” (SA 1, 2025).*

In support of this view, male-School administrator participants <SA2> noted,

*“One of the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in schools was insufficient teaching and learning materials. Some schools are still not set up to serve pupils with disabilities. Physical obstacles can have an impact on students with disabilities. Examples of these barriers include non-inclusive sports programs, inadequately constructed classrooms, inaccessible facilities (such as a stair without*



ramps), and a lack of adaptive equipment such as braille educational materials, translators for sign language, and screen readers” (SA 2, 2025).

Contributing on the same, another female teacher participant <Tr 4> acknowledged that:

*“Learners with disabilities experience academic difficulties, lack appropriate support, and face negative stereotypes in educational settings. Within inclusive educational settings, certain students with special needs may encounter instances of peer rejection, which could have negative implications for their social conduct and self-perception” (Tr 4, 2025).*

Adding to the same discussion, another female teacher-participant <Tr 1> reported that:

*“Teachers may encounter difficulties in establishing inclusive learning environments and delivering appropriate support if they have limited fundamental understanding and capacity required to accommodate the different requirements of learners with disabilities” (Tr 1, 2025).*

Contributing on the same, one male teacher-participant <Tr 5>, noted that:

*“Learners with disabilities face adaptive developmental challenges, which involves the life skills required to live independently, can also pose developmental challenges for those with intellectual disabilities. From self-care to social skills, these difficulties can encompass a wide range of everyday tasks and interactions” (Tr 5, 2025).*

Adding to the same discussion, one male teacher participant <Tr 6>, observed that

*“Inadequate legislation, policies, or enforcement mechanisms related to inclusive education can impede progress. One of the factors contributing to challenges in the realm of inclusive education is a limited comprehension of regulations, issues and personalized assistance in this area” (Tr 6, 2025).*

Arising from the findings of the study, the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in schools were unsuitable learning environment, insufficient teaching and learning materials, being taught by inadequately trained teachers, difficulty in creating relationships between classmates, inadequate parental involvement and support, and legal and policy barriers. These challenges affected the performance of learners with disabilities in schools.

### The effect of the challenges on the performance of learners with disabilities in primary schools

On the second objective of the study which focused on how these challenges affected the performance of learners with disabilities in schools, participants unveiled the many effects of these challenges which affected the performance of learners with disabilities in schools. These were presented in the table 7.0 below:

Table 7.0: How the challenges affect the performance of learners with disabilities in primary schools

| Type of Challenges                           | Effect on learners with disabilities                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Unsuitable learning environment              | Affects the learner’s accessibility of resources in the learning environment.                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Insufficient teaching and learning materials | Learners may not have appropriate facilities and learning resources that will respond to their conditions in schools. This phenomenon lead to the pupils’ inability to fully realize their potential both academically and personally.                     |
| Inadequate teacher training                  | Teachers encounter difficulties in establishing inclusive learning environments and delivering appropriate support due to limited fundamental understanding and capacity required to accommodate the different requirements of learners with disabilities. |
| Difficulty in creating                       | Affects the self-care and social skills, which are critical for the learner’s interactions.                                                                                                                                                                |

|                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| relationships between classmates            | This led to rejection by one of the learners by their peers leading to low self-esteem, which resulted in decreased self-confidence and perhaps limited their social growth making it difficult for them to build solid connections with their classmates.                                                                                                                                                   |
| Inadequate parental involvement and support | The negative perceptions hinder parents' willingness to embrace inclusive education initiatives, as they prioritize their child's emotional well-being and social acceptance. This leads to difficulties in navigating social situations, forging relationships, and managing emotions. Learners feel isolated or misunderstood due to their differing abilities, or face stigmatization and discrimination. |
| Legal and Policy Barriers                   | Educators, administrators, and stakeholders find themselves struggling to navigate the complexities of legal frameworks, the complex environment of inclusive policies, and the art of individualized support for students with a variety of needs. This lack of understanding raises obstacles that impede the smooth use of inclusive practices.                                                           |

Source: Researcher's Field data, 2025

These findings were reflected in the views of the one school administrator participant <SA 2> stated that:

*"Due to inadequate teacher training, teachers encountered difficulties in establishing inclusive learning environments and delivering appropriate support due to limited fundamental understanding and capacity required to accommodate the different requirements of learners with disabilities" (SA 2, 2025).*

Contributing on the same, another female teacher participant <Tr 4> acknowledged that:

*"As a result of legal and policy barriers, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders find themselves struggling to navigate the complexities of legal frameworks, the complex environment of inclusive policies, and the art of individualized support for students with a variety of needs. This lack of understanding raises obstacles that impede the smooth use of inclusive practices" (Tr 2, 2025).*

Adding to the same discussion, another female teacher-participant <Tr 1> reported that:

*"Due to inadequate parental involvement and support, it led to parents' willingness to embrace inclusive education initiatives, as they prioritize their child's emotional well-being and social acceptance. This leads to difficulties in navigating social situations, forging relationships, and managing emotions. Learners feel isolated or misunderstood due to their differing abilities, or face stigmatization and discrimination" (Tr 7, 2025).*

Agreeing with the findings above, one teacher participant during interviews <Tr 2> said that:

*"The insufficient teaching and learning materials in schools, led to learners not having appropriate facilities and learning resources that responds to their conditions in schools. This phenomenon lead to the pupils' inability to fully realize their potential both academically and personally" (Tr 2, 2025).*

Adding to the same discussion, one school administrator participant <SA 1> reported that:

*"The difficulty in creating relationships between classmates affects the self-care and social skills, which are critical for the learner's interactions. This led to rejection by some of the learners by their peers leading to low self-esteem, which resulted in decreased self-confidence and perhaps limited their social growth making it harder for them to build solid connections with their classmates" (SA1, 2025).*

Arising from the findings of the study above, it was clear that the challenges experienced by learners with disabilities in primary school affected their academic performance. For example, unsuitable learning environment, affected the learner's accessibility of resources in the learning environment. Due to insufficient teaching and learning materials, learners with disabilities did not have appropriate facilities and learning resources that will respond to their conditions in schools. This phenomenon lead to the pupils' inability to fully

realize their potential both academically and personally. Due to inadequate teacher training, teachers encountered difficulties in establishing inclusive learning environments and delivering appropriate support due to limited fundamental understanding and capacity required to accommodate the different requirements of learners with disabilities. The negative perceptions hindered parents' willingness to embrace inclusive education initiatives, as they prioritize their child's emotional well-being and social acceptance. Consequently, this leads to difficulties in navigating social situations, forging relationships, and managing emotions. Learners feel isolated or misunderstood due to their differing abilities, or face stigmatization and discrimination (Mahlo, Muzata & Kalimaposo). As a result of legal and policy barriers, educators, administrators, and stakeholders found themselves struggling to navigate the complexities of legal frameworks, the complex environment of inclusive policies, and the art of individualized support for students with a variety of needs. This lack of understanding raised obstacles that impede the smooth use of inclusive practices. Thus, there was need for teachers to provide support services to address the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in primary schools (Mtonga, et al. (2021) and (Chisala, Ndhlovu & Mandyata, 2023).

### **Strategies put in place to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools**

On the third objective of the study which focused on strategies put in place to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools, participants suggested many strategies to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools. These were; provision of flexible teaching methods with innovative techniques to teaching aids, and equipment with the use of ICTs, creating an accessible and well-equipped infrastructural environment in promoting inclusive education for all, creating barrier-free and child-friendly environments in the classrooms, flexible teaching and learning methods adapted for educating learners with disabilities, and a call for parental involvement in inclusive classroom influences and support their children's academic achievement. This was reflected in the views of one of the School Administrator participants <SA 1> who confirmed that:

*“To improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools, there was need to have flexible teaching and learning methods adapted for educating learners with intellectually challenged” (SA 1, 2025).*

Agreeing with the findings above, one teacher participant <Tr 3> stated that:

*“There was need for parental involvement in inclusive classroom, which would influence and support their children's academic achievement to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools” (Tr 3, 2025).*

The above views were reflected in a response from one teacher participant from TEVET institution 1 during interviews <Tr 5 > who asserted that:

*“Teachers should provide appropriate teaching methods with innovative techniques to teaching aids, and equipment with the use of ICTs so that they improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools” (Tr 5, 2025).*

The above views were reflected in a response from one teacher participant from TEVET institution 1 during interviews <Tr 6> confirmed that:

*“In order to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools, there was need to create barrier-free and child-friendly environments in the classrooms” (Tr 6, 2025).*

In support of this view, one teacher participant <Tr 10> noted that:

*“Teachers should create an accessible and well-equipped infrastructural environment in promoting inclusive education for all in order to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools” (Tr 10, 2025).*

In conformity with the findings, one female teacher participant <Tr 11> lamented that:

*"I feel that teachers should promote positive attitudes and respect for differences so as to give way to comfort, reverence and friendship so that they improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools" (Tr 11, 2025).*

Contributing on the findings, another teacher <Tr 1> reported that:

*"There was need to reduce exclusion, discrimination, barriers to learning and participation in order to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools" (Tr 1, 20/03/2025).*

Based on the findings of the study above, some of the strategies put in place to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools in Zambia included provision of flexible teaching methods with innovative techniques to teaching aids, and equipment with the use of ICTs, creating an accessible and well-equipped infrastructural environment in promoting inclusive education for all, creating barrier-free and child-friendly environments in the classrooms, flexible teaching and learning methods adapted for educating learners with disabilities, and a call for parental involvement in inclusive classroom influences and support their children's academic achievement (Muyabi, Kalimaposo, Mubita, Mulubale, Haambokoma, Milupi & Mundende (2022). Further, there was need to promote positive attitudes and respect for differences as this gives way to comfort and friendship, and reduces exclusion, discrimination, barriers to learning and participation (Mtonga, et al (2021). By implementing these strategies, the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education may be effectively addressed.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the first research objective unveiled the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools. The study revealed that the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education in primary schools were unsuitable learning environment, insufficient teaching and learning materials, being taught by teachers without skills in special education, difficulty in creating relationships between classmates, inadequate parental involvement and support, and legal and policy barriers. These findings were in line with Kandimba *et al.* (2023) and Mtonga, et al (2021) who unveiled that there were challenges encountered by teachers in the teaching of learners with disabilities in Zambian special schools. These challenges include teachers not having enough time to complete syllabus content, ill-prepared teachers, less time for preparing for class, the learning environment being learner-unfriendly, inadequate instructional resources and supervisors and parents not actively involved in teachers' attempts to adapt the curriculum. Additionally, Asaaju (2015) and Muzata (2017), pointed out that some teachers in schools were not competent to adequately adapt the curriculum due poor funding, inconsistency in policy, lack of adequate and quality trained work force, hence learners hardly accessed the curriculum. Based on the findings, understanding the broad spectrum of developmental challenges associated with common intellectual disabilities becomes pivotal in empowering those affected to lead fulfilling, independent lives (Chisala, Ndhlovu & Mandyata (2023).

The findings of the second objective unveiled how the challenges experienced by learners with disabilities in primary schools affected their academic performance. For example, unsuitable learning environment, affected the learner's accessibility of resources in the learning environment. Due to insufficient teaching and learning materials, learners with disabilities did not have appropriate facilities and learning resources that would respond to their conditions in schools. This phenomenon leads to the pupils' inability to fully realize their potential both academically and personally (Mtonga, Kalimaposo & Mandyata, 2023). Due to inadequate teacher training, teachers encountered difficulties in establishing inclusive learning environments and delivering appropriate support due to limited fundamental understanding and capacity required to accommodate the different requirements of learners with disabilities. The difficulty in creating relationships between classmates, affected the self-care and social skills of learners with disabilities, which were critical for the learner's interactions. This led to rejection by some of the learners by their peers leading to low self-esteem, which resulted in decreased self-confidence and perhaps limited their social growth making it harder for them to build solid connections with their classmates. The negative perceptions hindered parents' willingness to embrace inclusive education initiatives, as they prioritize their child's emotional well-being and social acceptance. This leads to difficulties in navigating social situations, forging relationships, and managing emotions. Learners feel isolated or misunderstood due to their differing abilities, or face stigmatization and discrimination. As a result of legal and



policy barriers, educators, administrators, and stakeholders found themselves struggling to navigate the complexities of legal frameworks, the complex environment of inclusive policies, and the art of individualized support for students with a variety of needs. This lack of understanding raised obstacles that impede the smooth use of inclusive practices. These findings agree with Mkandawire (2010); Kalimaposo, Simalalo & Mweemba (2025); Banja and Mandyata (2018) who stated that due to on the challenges choking curriculum implementation, learners with severe and profound disabilities were critically affected because most teachers lacked experience in teaching learners with severe and profound disabilities resulting in poor performance of the learners. Based on these findings, indeed these affected all aspects of a person's life, including education, work, and daily activities. The researcher's perspective was that there was need as teachers were supposed to offer support services to help learners with intellectually challenges in special schools.

The findings of the third research objective suggested some strategies to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools. These included provision of flexible teaching methods with innovative techniques to teaching aids, and equipment with the use of ICTs, creating an accessible and well-equipped infrastructural environment in promoting inclusive education for all, creating barrier-free and child-friendly environments in the classrooms, flexible teaching and learning methods adapted for educating learners with disabilities, and a call for parental involvement in inclusive classroom influences and support their children's academic achievement (Mandyata, Kasonde-Ng'andu & Chakulimba, 2015). By implementing these strategies, the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education may be effectively addressed. These findings were in consistent with Mutezigaju (2015) who opined that involvement of the community or social intervention was a necessary condition for the success of education of children with special needs. The community intervened in the programme in ways such as participating in the decision-making process, meeting the expenses of constructing the resource rooms, sending out of school children to school, encouraging children with disabilities to attend school regularly and providing or helping the teachers trained in special education. Other ways included providing aids and equipment's to the schools, supervising the work of teachers, giving feedback to them, helping in dealing with the problems of the handicapped girl child, monitoring the progress of education of special needs children in the locality and transforming the school into a community school. Thus, teachers were encouraged to implement these strategies in order to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Concerning accessibility to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools, it was evident that learners with disabilities faced challenges when accessing inclusive education in primary schools. These challenges ranged from unsuitable learning environment, insufficient teaching and learning materials, being taught by inadequately trained teachers, difficulty in creating relationships between classmates, inadequate parental involvement and support, to legal and policy barriers. These challenges affected the academic performance of learners with disabilities in primary schools. For example, unsuitable learning environment, affected the learner's accessibility of resources in the learning environment. The insufficient teaching and learning materials made learners with disabilities not to have appropriate facilities and learning resources to respond to their conditions in schools. Teachers with inadequate training skills encountered difficulties in establishing inclusive learning environments and delivering appropriate support due to limited fundamental understanding and capacity required to accommodate the different requirements of learners with disabilities. The difficulty in creating relationships between classmates, affected the self-care and social skills of learners with disabilities, which were critical for the learner's interactions. The negative perceptions hindered parents' willingness to embrace inclusive education initiatives, as they prioritize their child's emotional well-being and social acceptance. This led to difficulties in navigating social situations, forging relationships, and managing emotions. Learners felt isolated or misunderstood due to their differing abilities, or face stigmatization and discrimination. As a result of legal and policy barriers, educators, administrators, and stakeholders found themselves struggling to navigate the complexities of legal frameworks, the complex environment of inclusive policies, and the art of individualized support for students with a variety of needs. Thus, there was need for teachers to provide strategies to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in schools. Further, there was need to promote positive attitudes and respect for differences as this gives way to comfort and friendship, and reducing exclusion, discrimination, barriers to learning and participation. By implementing these

strategies, the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing inclusive education may be effectively addressed.

Based on the findings of the study on increasing accessibility to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in primary schools in Zambia, the study recommendations were as follows:

1. Educational institutions and policymakers should implement inclusive practices and provide necessary accommodations to address the challenges and diverse needs of learners with disabilities.
2. The Ministry of Education should train more special education teachers to address the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in schools.
3. Increasing advocate for inclusive educational policies, leverage assistive technologies, and seek out community resources for support in order to overcome barriers to education effectively.
4. Investing in assistive technologies, providing training for educators on inclusive teaching practices, and actively seeking feedback from learners with disabilities to ensure their needs are met. By taking a comprehensive and proactive approach, barriers to education can be gradually dismantled, unlocking the full potential of all learners.
5. Teachers should offer a variety of strategies to improve access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in schools.

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