

Lived Experiences of Learners with Disabilities at Lunsemfwa Primary School, Kapiri-Mposhi District, Zambia

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Abstract: The attainment of the Sustainable Development Goal number 4 on education is dependent on how effective inclusive education is implemented in various countries. Even though the implementation of inclusive education is well articulated at primary level, little is being done to monitor its effectiveness. Therefore, in this article, we explore the lived experiences Lived Experiences of Learners with Disabilities at Lunsemfwa Primary School, Kapiri-Mposhi district, Zambia. The article rides on phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of learners with various disabilities. Key among the study objectives includes exploration of the lived experiences of learners with disabilities. The findings revealed that learners with disabilities faced the challenges of stigma from peers, lack of support from parents and guardians, lack of socialisation and negative attitudes by teachers and peers. These challenges are as a result of lack of sensitisation by the stakeholders on disability and also lack of skills on how to handle learners with disabilities by some teachers. Therefore, this calls for the government to provide in-service training to teachers in order to improve on their teaching and learning skills. Guidance and counselling in primary schools should be strengthened in order to get away with stigma among peers.

Key Words: Disability, Exploring, Inclusive Education, Learners, Lived Experiences, Zambia

I. CONTEXT

This paper is an excerpt from the principal researcher's Master of Special Education dissertation. The Masters programme was offered by the University of Zambia (UNZA) in collaboration with the Zimbabwe Open University and has been running since 2014 (Manchishi, Simui, Ndhlovu & Thompson, 2020; Simui, 2018; Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu, Cheyeka & Kakana, 2018).

This study focused on the learners with disabilities at Lunsemfwa primary school located in central province of Zambia. Inclusive education plays an important role to children living with disabilities. Inclusive education has been defined as a philosophy based on democracy, equality and human rights (Stain back & Stain back, 1996). The concept of inclusive education was adopted during the Salamanca conference (UNESCO,1994). It is based on the premises that students with exceptional abilities and backgrounds benefit both academically and socially in a learning environment where they are served alongside typically achieving peers, as opposed to being segregated. Hence, inclusive education is

based on the philosophy that all children can learn and that they belong in the mainstream school, participating in class and school activities. The school that educates all students with different abilities in the main stream is called an inclusive school.

Inclusion is an argument that under pins the accommodation of diversity in the pursuit of an education for all children. However, teaching is dynamic, complex process defined by specific contexts (Auskey, 1994) impacted in turn by political, economic and social parameters. It has been observed that Zambia is among the developing African countries which has been, influence by a strong vision of inclusion as the best way to provide education, to students with disabilities. This is in accordance with the policy Educating our future (Ministry of Education, 1996). The origin of the study, lie in the recognition by the Zambian government that within the world community there is a move to include children with disabilities in regular classrooms. The government was clearly seen such practices as providing a way forward towards greater inclusion. Inclusion is part of a much larger picture than just placement within the regular classroom in the neighbourhood school. It attempts to locate education in the boarder context of equality freedom, democracy and community benefit derived interaction of a society. To gain an understanding of the inclusive practices being practiced at Lunsemfwa Primary in Kapiri Mposhi District, a review of the literature on inclusive education in Zambia and other parts of the world was done using thematic approach. Thematic reviews of literature are organized around a topic or issue. Literature was reviewed according to the objectives of the study which were, how prepared teachers are for inclusive education, learners with disability experience of inclusive education and the strategies applied to mitigate exclusion of learners with disability in school.

Statement of the Problem

Although a lot of research has been done on the practices of inclusive education in some African countries and some parts of Zambia, their findings cannot be generalised. Most of these researches were done in higher education institutions living a gap in the lower level of education. There is need, therefore, to explore the inclusive practices in Kapiri district in order to gain the insight of inclusive education at the lower level of

education. Even though Zambia has ratified and domesticated the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disability through the Education Act on Persons with Disabilities of 2012, little is known regarding the lived experiences of learners with disabilities within the lower education sub-sector. It is against this great desire by the government of Zambia to cater for all the children in terms of education that this study was able to explore the inclusive education practices at Lunsemfwa Primary School in Kapiri-Mposhi district.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the inclusive educational practices at Lunsemfwa Primary School in Kapiri-Mposhi District, Zambia.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- i. Describe teachers' preparedness for inclusive education
- ii. Explore lived experiences of learners with disabilities in inclusive education.
- iii. Describe strategies applied to mitigate exclusion in school.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Development Ecology theory identifies four environmental systems which are microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystems. The Microsystem is the setting in which the individual lives. These contexts include a person's family, peers, school and neighbourhood. It is in the microsystem that the most direct interactions with social agents take place, such as with parents, peers and teachers. The individual is not a passive recipient of experiences in these settings, but someone who helps to construct the settings. The micro-level relates to the classroom level and how the organisation of learning is managed, how teachers can meet the whole range of individual needs, as well as teachers' attitudes towards inclusive settings. This level also includes the individual level of learners and their engagement and involvement with education, how they experience their schooling and their sense of belonging to the wider school-context (Ainscow, 2016). The Mesosystem refers to relations between microsystems or connections between contexts. Examples are the relationship of family experiences to school experiences, school experiences to church experiences, and family experiences to peer experiences. For example, children whose parents have rejected them may have difficulty developing positive relationships with teachers. While the Exosystem involves links between a social setting in which the individual does not have an active role and the individual's immediate context. For example, a husband's or child's experience at home may be influenced by the mother's experiences at work. The Macrosystem describes the overall societal culture in which individuals live. Cultural contexts include developing and

industrialised countries, socioeconomic status, poverty and ethnicity. The boundary is defined by national and cultural borders, laws and rules. Therefore, this study based its arguments on the four environmental systems as explained above because what happens in one level affects the other levels too. These ecological environments are inter linked as observed by (Christensen, 2016) in study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Worldwide, about one billion people, including children (approximately 15.6%) of the population live with some form of disability (WHO, 2011). In addition, disability appears to have disproportional effects on people and children in particular, from lower income countries and those living in the poorest of the world's population. According to UNICEF (2013), while access to education for other children is improving the same cannot be said for children with disabilities. They remain most negatively marginalised and excluded from education. They continue to experience dismissive attitudes, discrimination, and are largely invisible in official statistics used for education planning and programme implementation (Banda, & Islam, 2012). Such discrimination and exclusion have a negative effect on their livelihoods (UNICEF, 2013). UNESCO (2014) further notes that more than half of the 57 million children out of school are in Sub-Saharan Africa, (UNESCO, 2014). At present, a number of studies on the education of learners with disabilities in higher education have been conducted including that of Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson (2004) and that of Muzata, Simalalo, Kasonde-Ng'andu, Mahlo, Banja and Mtonga (2019) in Zambia. The study, whose purpose was to investigate the impact of multiple policy innovations on the participation and experiences of disabled students in higher education in Scotland and England between 2001 and 2003. Emerging from Riddell *et al.*, (2004) research study were the following findings: most institutions had staffing and structures in places to develop policy and provision for disabled students. Educational provisions for persons with disabilities have supportive policies in a number of areas including admissions, infrastructure and into some strategic plans. However, there was an apparent gap between policy and practice, with students encountering barriers to the choice of institution and subject, access to the physical environment and to the curriculum (Riddell *et al.* (2004). Alderley *et al.*, (2015) carried out a small-scale research project which took place in one primary school in the north-east of England. The study aimed to listen to children's views about how the practices of teachers helped and/or hindered their sense of inclusion in classrooms. Inclusion was understood here in a broad sense rather than specifically relating to children with special educational needs. Participatory research tools were used as part of group interviews with children from three different year groups. Even though the children were mostly happy with their school experience, it was noticeable that there were some areas for concern for some children that related to four interconnecting themes: unfairness, shouting, loneliness and seating plans. All of these themes seemed to be

connected with children's interpersonal relationships with teachers and with each other and can be seen as crucial in terms of understanding inclusion in schools and further developing existing practices.

However, Lourens (2015), in his thesis, focused on the lived experiences of higher education for students with a visual impairment in South Africa. The study findings described the challenges related to the transition from school. In addition, participants discussed complex social interactions with non-disabled peers, in which the latter reportedly offered help, and avoided or stared at participants, leaving them feeling "not seen". Third, within the learning environment, the participants were sometimes confronted with unwilling lecturers, a lack of communication amongst important role-players, late course material and/or headaches and muscle tension from the effort of reading with limited sight (Lourens, 2015).

Related to Lourens (2015) study above is Maguvhe (2015) pitched within South African context, who focused on factors that limited the participation of the visually impaired learners in mathematics and science education. The study revealed that teacher motivation and mentorship in mathematics and science methodologies and the use of tools for learner empowerment was lacking. It further revealed that teachers lacked the requisite skills in special education to harness learner potential in mathematics and science. This situation necessitates government action in teacher training and development. Similarly, with Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu, Cheyeka, and Makoe, 2019; Simui, Muzata, Sakakombe & Mtonga, 2019;

Simui, 2018; Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu, Cheyeka, Simwinga and Ndhlovu, 2018; Simui, Waliuya, Namitwe, and Munsanje, 2009 who in their case study of exploring the status of inclusive education with reference to learners with special education needs at higher education levels in Zambia pointed out to a mismatch between policy and practice, negative attitudes, inaccessible learning environment and learning content among others cited as the major disablers to the success of learners with special education needs. Thurston (2014) describes discomfort experienced by students with disabilities generated by peers outside their network of friends. Equally, Dart, Nkanotsang, Chizwe and Kowa (2010) reported that the students experienced low self-esteem, loneliness and a lack of acceptance from their fellow students, consequently contributed to poor academic performance. Negative attitudes appear to influence nearly all the other disabling factors reported above.

III. METHODOLOGY

Methodology and research design direct the researcher in planning and implementing the study in a way that is most likely to achieve the intended goal. It is a blueprint for conducting the study (Burns & Grove 1998:745). In order to explore the lived experiences of learners with disabilities the study was conducted using Hermeneutical phenomenology which concentrates on interpreting the concealed meanings in

the phenomena that are immediately revealed to direct investigation, analysis and description (Omery 1983: 15). In addition, Langdrige (2007) argues that our experiences can be best understood through stories we tell of that experience. To understand the life world, we need to explore the stories people tell of their experiences, often with the help of some specific hermeneutic (Langdrige, 2007). This could indicate immediate probing during the interviews. The element of interpretation makes the research more interesting and meaningful for understanding social structures, policies and practices from the vantage point of personal perspective of the actors visible clearly in the research study.

Ten learners with disabilities from Lunsemfwa primary were purposively picked to participate in this study. Their identities have been withheld and letter L has been used. Below is the sample profile of the participants.

Table: Participant's Profile

Participants	Sex	Age	Grade	Challenges
L1	female	5 years	5	- Hard of hearing - Stammering - Reading
L2	male	14 years	5	- Reading
L3	female	14 years	6	- Hard of hearing
L4	female	15 years	6	- Reading
L5	female	16 years	7	- Slow in understanding
L6	female	13 years	7	- Understanding
L7	female	14 years	8	- Writing - Walking
L8	male	14 years	4	- Reading
L9	Male	13years	5	- Reading
L10	female	15 years	8	- Reading

In this study, the researcher used the following research tools namely: Structured interview guide and focused group discussion guide. Use of multiple tools strengthened the validity and reliability of the study findings as evidence was collaborated and triangulated from different viewpoints. The instruments used were in-depth semi-structured interview guide and Focused Group Discussion guide. Both instruments were used to collect data from children with disabilities. Data analysis was done thematically. The researcher used qualitative method to analyse the data by using things and later interpreted.

In this study, Guba's (1981) four criteria was applied. The four elements are: (i) credibility, (ii) transferability, (iii) dependability, and (iv) confirmability. Unlike in quantitative researches where validity and reliability are the buzz words, in qualitative researches, the four highlighted elements are meant to assure the findings and the research process as trustworthy. According to Guba (1981) and Brewer and Hunter (1989), triangulation ensures that the research findings are credible. Triangulation encompasses the application of diverse

methods, such as observation, focus group discussions and individual interviews, which form the major data generation strategy for qualitative research. In line with the above guide, the current study deployed the following data generation approaches: individual interviews and focused group discussion. According to Morrow (2005), and Shenton (2004), findings of a study are transferrable if other researchers are able to generalise the findings to the given setting.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Reading Difficulties

Results from the study indicated that most of the learners with reading difficulties feel hurt when their friends are reading. They usually admire the art of reading. For example, L9 always admires the friend when they are reading and parents are also not willing to help and that possess a great challenge to him. Friends are also not there to help. This becomes a big problem when teachers reach a point of being tired of helping the child with reading difficulties and refer to parents for help who are also not willing to help. In this way learning to read for the child becomes difficult and as a result the child will drop out of school. Having teachers and parents who are willing to motivate the learning of the child with disabilities.

I don't feel good when my friends are reading and I also admire them. But my friends do not help me in reading. They don't answer when I am asking them. When it comes to my parents, they don't say anything about my problem of reading. My teacher tells me to ask my parents to teach me at home but they don't teach me (L9, 2021).

The case of L2 seems to be different in the sense that he has the elder sister who helps him to read at home, but the teacher punishes him for failure to read. This type of punishment does not motivate the learner instead it demotivates. This type of behaviour by the teacher can lead to the child's drop out of school. Punishing a child with a disability cannot solve the problem of reading instead the teacher needs to have a big heart of helping the child accordingly.

I feel hurt if I fail to read. My friends do not help me in class but my elder sister teaches me at home. My teacher punishes me if I fail to read and that makes me feel sad. I have been given a book by my teacher to read at home (L2, 2021).

Living with a disability affects the social interactions as well if not well managed. This is the case of L4 who finds it difficult to associate with other friends despite her not knowing how to read in grade six. If parents are not able to help in reading, then friend can also help and this is a big challenge with her. Parents are supposed to be aware of their child's disability and give her the support that she needs like in the case of L3 whose parents are working together with the teachers. Shouting at a child with a problem cannot solve anything but making the problem worse. Repeating the child in the same grade do help in some instances but not in all

circumstances. The teacher should come up with better ways of helping the child than repeating her all the time.

I don't know how to read and I feel hurt and shy if I fail to read when my friends are reading. My friends do not help me when I fail. I usually play alone. My parents usually shout at me and tells me that as old as you are you don't know how to read, you need to concentrate when you are in class. My teacher encourages me to read and tells me that I will repeat if I fail to read (L3, 2021).

Similarly, L8 does not receive any help from parents in terms of reading and this makes school difficult. Neither does he receive any help from friends.

I don't know how to read and that makes me feel sad. My parents do not say anything and my friends do not help me in anyway despite as playing together. My teacher usually gives me books to give my friends and always encourages me to learn how to read (L8, 2021).

For L10, Atleast she has supportive parents who gives her hope and also a very supportive friend and this makes learning easy despite having the disability. When you have people who are supportive around you it becomes easy to concentrate than when people around you are not supportive.

I don't know how to read and I have been repeated twice. I feel hurt in my heart when my friends are reading. I have a friend who is very helpful. She usually reads for me when I fail to read. My parents tell me to concentrate with school work and listen when the teachers are teaching. Other teachers do not say anything over my problem but my English teacher tells me that one day I will also learn how to read (L10, 2021).

Those with difficulties in reading revealed that, they experienced a lot of pain and shame during reading time. This made them not to concentrate much during lessons. Parents at home also threaten them to stop paying for their school fees if they continue to fail to read. This affects their learning. This is in line with Bronfenbrenner's microsystems which talks about the interactions between peers, parents and children also between teachers and pupils. Good interactions at home and school helps in the learning process. Failing to read makes them feel inferior as the result the interactions between peers is affected. This includes those with speech disorders. It was revealed that most of the times they are laughed at by their peers and that makes them feel bad. Because of the same problem most of the time they are found alone.

Writing and Walking Difficulties (Coordination)

The feeling of being born differently is always painful if not accepted well. Having the physical challenge attracts the attention of people around you. Some will feel sorry for you and some will make you a laughing stone. This is the case of L7 who has the physical challenge. She still feels the pain

despite her having full support from both parents and teachers. And because of that her grade 7 results were affected negatively. For a child with physical disability to learn well in an inclusive education set up there is need to sensitise the entire school on disability so that the child can receive total support. Parents and teachers support matters more.

I have difficulties in writing and walking since my childhood and I have been repeated once because of the same problem. The feeling is painful and it affected my grades at grade 7 and that made me not to pass well. I sometime fall when I am walking and feel some pain. My mother is very nice and she has always been there for me. My is a teacher and she always helps me with school work because my father stays very far. My friends feel sorry for me and I have a friend who is very helpful with class work and also encourages me when I am feeling low. Since I know how to read, sometimes I help my friends in class but they do not respond well. There is a lot of negativities in my class. Teachers are really friendly and understands a person. My English teacher has been so helpful when it comes to writing. I have even improved in leaving spaces between words (L7, 2021).

This is in line with Thurston (2014) who described the discomfort experienced by students with disabilities generated by peers outside their network of friends. Equally, Dart, Nkanotsang, Chizwe and Kowa (2010) reported that the students experienced low self-esteem, loneliness and a lack of acceptance from their fellow students, consequently contributed to poor academic performance. Negative attitudes appear to influence nearly all the other disabling factors reported above.

Hard of Hearing and Speech Disorders (Stammering)

Hearing and speaking are very cardinal in the learning process. Having difficulties in hearing and speaking will always affect how well someone learns. This is the case of L3 who has the problem of hearing and speaking. Her disability has led her to being lonely most of the times.

She doesn't have friends and also friends refuse to eat her food when she shares with them. This causes a lot of pain in her life. Most of people with hearing impairments likes shunning away from friends. This is because they feel uncomfortable if friends are chatting and laughing while them, they cannot hear properly what their friend are laughing at. To make the matters worse she even forgets things easily. The only thing that encourages her to be in school is the caring of teachers and parents

I have problems with hearing due to the medication I was given when I had fallen heal. I have been repeated twice because of the same problem. I feel very bad about this problem. I usually forget things when my mother sends me but my mother supports me very much. I don't usually interact with friends due to the same problem. None of my friend knows that I have a hearing problem.

I am usually found alone. The teacher tells me to sit in front, I don't know whether he was told by my mother that I have a problem with hearing (L3, 2021).

The case of L 1 is different because the grandmother who stays with her thinks, she does it deliberately when stuttering. She is forced to speak well by her grandmother. This makes her feel very bad. However, the teacher understands her and this gives her hope of being in school. This type of disability needs to be accepted by the parents even before the child is enrolled in school so that she can receive the maximum support that she deserves from teachers and peers.

I have a problem with hearing and stammering and I don't feel good about it. My grandmother always tells me to speak properly and that hurts me so much. My friends laugh at me when I am speaking and tells me to speak properly. That makes me feel hurt. My teachers always encourage me to speak and also sits me in front (L1, 2021).

This is in line with Alderley et al., (2015) who carried out a small-scale research project which took place in one primary school in the north-east of England. The study aimed to listen to children's views about how the practices of teachers helped and/or hindered their sense of inclusion in classrooms. Inclusion was understood here in a broad sense rather than specifically relating to children with special educational needs. Even though the children were mostly happy with their school experience, it was noticeable that there were some areas for concern for some children that related to four interconnecting themes: unfairness, shouting, loneliness and seating plans. All of these themes seemed to be connected with children's interpersonal relationships with teachers and with each other and can be seen as crucial in terms of understanding inclusion in schools and further developing existing practices.

Difficulties in Understanding

Understanding difficulties are so common among learners with disability. This is the case of L5 who was born prematurely and then later on developed the problem of slow in understanding things. She feels hurt when the teacher finishes teaching without her understanding anything. Learning requires understanding, therefore, if the child is an able to understand fast then it poses a great challenge and this is what led her to repeat in different grades. With the help and encouragements from teachers, parents and friends she has been able to stay in school up to grade seven where she is now. A teacher who understands his or her learners motivate them to learn.

I have problem with understanding things when the teacher is teaching. I am a bit slow. I have been repeated twice. I don't feel good when my friends understands and the I fail to understand. My parents encourage me to understand fast. My friends help me now but they used to laugh at me before I knew how to read. My teacher

understands and encourage me to understand things fast, (L5, 2021).

For L6 the situation is worse despite her being in school. She has the problem of understanding but she does not receive support from parents and peers. She only has hope in the teacher. This makes learning very difficult for her because she always thinks of what she will do when her parents stop paying for her. Learning requires a free mind.

I have a problem with understanding things when the teacher is teaching and I feel hurt. My parents say if you repeat, I will stop paying for you. My friends do not give me any help. If I don't understand I ask the teacher to read again (L6, 2021).

During the focus group discussion, some learners revealed that they were unable to share foods with their friends. Their friends usually refuse to get food from them and that makes them feel hurt. This kind of behaviour by peers reduced the chances of learners with disabilities to remain in school. This is in line with Ainscow (2016) who explained in his research how the microsystems level helps the individual level of learners and their engagement and involvement with education, how they experience their schooling and their sense of belonging to the wider school-context.

V. CONCLUSION

Most of the learners with disabilities who are found in inclusive schools face a lot of challenges which are hidden behind their shining faces. Sometimes these challenges are accepted while at times they bring too much pain. The findings revealed that most of the learners with disabilities had good relationship with the teachers and teachers were very helpful in their learning process despite having challenges of stigma from their peers, lack of support from parents and guardians. The issue of repeating them by teachers was done to encourage them to put more effort and concentrate much when learning. It was also revealed that most of the peers were not supportive to their learning except a few who were able to help others in reading. Most of these learners do not have friends because of their disabilities, peers were also scared of sharing food with them. For parental support, some parents were supportive, to the learning of their children but others were condemned them for failure to read, failure to speak properly and also failure to understand fast what the teachers were teaching.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the current study, the researcher's recommendations to the government, the school and other similar settings are as follows:

- i. Teachers should provide help to learners with difficulties in reading and writing in their free time or during prep using resource rooms so that they are not repeated regularly as that demotivates them and also encourages dropping out of school.

- ii. The government should provide in- service teacher training in special education to all the teachers in the inclusive schools in order to equip teachers with skills on how to handle learners with disabilities.
- iii. Guidance and counselling should be strengthened in all-inclusive schools so that there is full, sensitisation o disability how learners with disabilities should be treated by teachers, peers, parents and the community as at large for this contributes to the well-being of learners with disabilities.
- iv. The government should provide inclusive schools with more funds in order for the infrastructures to be renovated in terms of painting and also constructing resource rooms. Furthermore, things like radio, television sets and also computers motivate learners to remain in school and learn dispute facing challenges.

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