

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing Inclusive Education: Implications for Policy and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive Education remains central to Zimbabwe's education policy framework, as articulated in the Education Act [Chapter 25:04], the National Disability Policy, and national commitments to Sustainable Development Goal 4. Despite these provisions, implementation in rural primary schools remains uneven and poorly documented.

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences and challenges faced by primary school teachers implementing inclusive education in Shurugwi District, Midlands Province, Zimbabwe. The study was guided by the Social Model of Disability and Vygotsky's Social Constructivism.[1][2]

Using purposive sampling, 24 primary school teachers with experience teaching learners with diverse needs were selected from 8 rural schools: communal, farm, and mining contexts. Data were collected through 24 semi-structured interviews, two focus group discussions with 6-8 participants each, and 8 non-participant classroom observations. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.[3]

Findings revealed three interlocking systemic barriers: 1. Inadequate teacher training in differentiated pedagogy and special needs education, with 21 of 24 teachers (87.5%) reporting no pre-service preparation; 2. Resource and infrastructure poverty, including lack of assistive devices, inaccessible buildings, and classes of 48-62 learners; and 3. Attitudinal barriers shaped by low self-efficacy, workload concerns, and perceptions of disability as inability.[4]

The study concludes that exclusion is produced by disabling school environments rather than learner deficits. Recommendations include mandatory inclusive pedagogy in pre-service training, a Rural Inclusive Education Fund for assistive devices, Universal Design for school infrastructure, and school-based coaching to build teacher self-efficacy. Urgent district-level coordination is required to translate national policy into equitable classroom practice.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Teacher Training, Teacher Attitudes, Rural Schools, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Background To the Study

Inclusive education is premised on the principle that all learners, irrespective of disability, gender, or socio-economic background, should have equitable access to quality education within mainstream schools. It extends beyond physical placement to include meaningful participation, curriculum adaptation, and appropriate support.

The Salamanca Statement established inclusive education as a global priority by urging governments to reform education systems to accommodate learner diversity. Zimbabwe has embraced this through the Education Act [Chapter 25:04], the National Disability Policy, and commitments to SDG 4 and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.[5][6][7]

However, translating policy into practice remains a challenge, particularly in rural primary schools where resource shortages, inadequate teacher preparation, and negative attitudes constrain implementation.[8]

Statement Of The Problem

Despite national commitments, teachers in rural districts such as Shurugwi face substantial challenges that hinder effective implementation of inclusive education. Existing Zimbabwean studies have identified training, resource, and attitudinal barriers at national and urban levels. However, there is limited phenomenological evidence showing how these three barriers intersect in the daily practice of rural teachers across different school contexts.[8]

Without context-specific data grounded in teachers' lived experiences, policy interventions risk being generic and ineffective. This study addresses that gap by examining how training deficits, resource poverty, and teacher attitudes collectively challenge rural teachers in Shurugwi District.

Research Objectives

Main objective: To explore the challenges faced by primary school teachers in implementing inclusive education in Shurugwi District.

Specific objectives:

1. Examine teachers' level of training and preparedness for inclusive pedagogy.
2. Assess the availability and adequacy of resources and infrastructure for inclusive education.
3. Investigate teacher attitudes toward learners with disabilities and inclusive education.

Research Questions

Main Question: What challenges do primary school teachers in Shurugwi District face in implementing inclusive education?

Sub-Questions:

1. How adequately are teachers trained and prepared to implement inclusive pedagogy?
2. What resource and infrastructural barriers affect inclusive education in rural schools?
3. How do teacher attitudes influence the implementation of inclusive education?

Significance Of The Study

This study generates locally grounded evidence to inform the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education policy on rural inclusive education. For practice, findings highlight priority areas for teacher professional development, targeted resource allocation, and interventions to shift teacher attitudes. Theoretically, the study tests the applicability of the Social Model of Disability and Social Constructivism in explaining exclusion in rural Zimbabwean schools.[1][2]

Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by two complementary frameworks.

The Social Model of Disability distinguishes impairment from disability and argues that exclusion results from environmental, attitudinal, and institutional barriers. It repositions the "problem" from the learner to the school system.[1]

Vygotsky's Social Constructivism positions the teacher as a mediator who scaffolds learning within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development through differentiation, collaboration, and culturally relevant tools.[2]

Together, the frameworks argue that inclusive education requires removing disabling structures and equipping teachers with pedagogical tools to support all learners.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Teacher Training And Preparedness

Teacher preparation is one of the strongest predictors of successful inclusive education. Effective inclusion requires competencies in differentiated instruction, curriculum adaptation, assessment, and collaborative teaching.[9]

In Zimbabwe, Majoko found that many teachers receive limited preparation in inclusive pedagogies during pre-service education, leaving them inadequately equipped for diverse classrooms. This results in low confidence in adapting curricula and managing learner diversity. International meta-analyses confirm that sustained in-service training improves teachers' instructional competence and willingness to implement inclusive practices.[8][10]

However, access to such training remains limited in rural Zimbabwe due to financial constraints and geographical isolation. From a Social Constructivist perspective, this training deficit directly limits teachers' capacity to mediate learning for diverse learners.[8][2]

Resources And Infrastructure

Adequate resources are fundamental to inclusion. Schools require accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, adapted materials, manageable class sizes, and specialist support.[9]

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, studies consistently report shortages of specialized materials and assistive devices. In Zimbabwe, MoPSE and UNICEF reports from 2021-2023 note that rural schools face overcrowded classrooms, with averages exceeding 50 learners, and limited access to educational psychologists. Majoko observed that Zimbabwean teachers struggle to implement inclusion because classrooms lack basic adaptations.[11][12][13][8]

Applying the Social Model, these material and physical barriers actively produce disability by preventing participation, rather than impairment itself causing exclusion.[1]

Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education

Teacher attitudes shape instructional practices and learner participation. Positive attitudes support adaptation and inclusion, while negative attitudes limit opportunities despite policy support.[14]

Research shows teachers often support inclusion in principle but express concerns about workload, resources, and competence. In Zimbabwe, studies indicate uncertainty about meeting diverse needs due to inadequate preparation. Recent meta-analytic work suggests attitudes are strongly influenced by training, experience, and perceived self-efficacy.[14][8][10]

In rural contexts, these concerns are amplified by large classes and isolation. From both theoretical lenses, negative attitudes function as an attitudinal barrier that, combined with material barriers, disables the learning environment.[1][2]

Research Gap

While national studies in Zimbabwe identify training, resources, and attitudes as barriers to inclusion, there is limited empirical evidence from rural districts that examines how these three barriers interact in teachers' lived practice. Further, few studies apply the Social Model and Social Constructivism together to explain how

disabling environments and limited teacher mediation produce exclusion in communal, farm, and mining schools.[8][1][2]

This study addresses that gap by providing phenomenological evidence from Shurugwi District on how these barriers are experienced together and what that means for policy and practice in similar rural contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative, interpretive phenomenological design was used to capture teachers' lived experiences of implementing inclusive education.[3]

Participants And Setting

Purposive sampling yielded 24 teachers (15 female, 9 male; M experience = 9.4 years) from 8 primary schools in Shurugwi District: 4 communal, 2 farm, and 2 mining schools. Only 6 teachers had received inclusive education in-service training. Interviews were conducted in English and Shona based on participant preference.

Data Collection

Data were collected via:

1. 24 semi-structured interviews, 45-60 minutes each
2. Two focus group discussions, 6 participants each
3. Eight non-participant lesson observations of 40 minutes each, using an inclusive pedagogy checklist focused on differentiation, participation, and accessibility

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used. Codes were derived inductively from data and deductively from the two theoretical frameworks. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity.[3][1][2]

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from MoPSE and the Shurugwi District Education Office. Informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were observed. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Summary of Key Themes

Theme	Key Finding	Prevalence
Training deficit	No pre-service training in differentiation or Special Needs Education	21 out of 24 teachers (87.5%)
Resource poverty	No adapted materials, classes of 48-62 learners	8 out of 8 schools (100%)
Attitudinal barriers	Concerns about workload and low self efficacy	18 out of 24 teachers (75%)

Theme 1: Training And Pedagogical Deficit

Most teachers, 21 of 24 (87.5%), lacked training in differentiation or special needs education. One teacher stated: "We were never taught how to teach a blind child or one who cannot walk. We just use what we know for the able ones."

Without these tools, Social Constructivist scaffolding was not possible. This deficit reflects systemic failure in pre-service and in-service provision, not individual teacher inability.[2][10]

Theme 2: Resource And Infrastructure Poverty

All schools lacked adapted materials. Average class sizes ranged from 48 to 62 learners. A teacher noted: "I have 62 learners and one child with a hearing aid that is broken. I cannot give him attention."

Inaccessible buildings with steps and narrow doorways physically excluded learners with mobility impairments. These findings confirm disability as a social-environmental construct.[1]

Theme 3: Teacher Attitudinal Barriers

While many teachers supported inclusion in principle, fear, workload concerns, and low self-efficacy persisted. Disability was often framed as inability: "These children slow us down. We have to cover the syllabus."

These attitudes weakened conditions for mediated learning. Teachers with prior in-service training expressed more positive attitudes, confirming the link between preparedness and attitude from the literature.[2][10][14]

Synthesis: Exclusion resulted from three interlocking barriers. Teachers lacked training, schools lacked resources, and teachers held negative attitudes. These disabling structures prevented teachers from enacting inclusive, scaffolded pedagogy.[1][2]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Inclusive education implementation in Shurugwi is constrained by training deficits, resource poverty, and negative teacher attitudes. Teachers expressed willingness in principle but felt unsupported and ill-equipped. Inclusion will not advance until these three barriers are addressed together. The findings affirm that exclusion is produced by disabling environments rather than learner deficits.[1]

Implications For Policy And Practice

Policy must target teacher development, resource equity, and attitudinal change. Practice must build teachers' mediating capacity within their Zone of Proximal Development.[2]

Recommendations

1. Professional Development: MoPSE should revise pre-service curricula to include mandatory inclusive pedagogy modules. District Teacher Resource Centres should provide sustained, school-based mentoring on differentiation and Individualized Education Plans.
2. Resources and Infrastructure: Treasury, in collaboration with MoPSE and development partners, should establish a Rural Inclusive Education Fund for assistive devices and adapted materials. New school construction and renovations should adopt Universal Design principles, prioritizing ramps and accessible toilets in phased upgrades.
3. Teacher Attitudes: Schools should implement professional learning communities that address disability awareness and build self-efficacy through peer observation, co-teaching, and collaborative planning.[10][1][12][14]

Limitations And Future Research

This study is confined to one district and to teacher perspectives. Future research should include learners and parents to provide a more holistic understanding of attitudinal and systemic barriers to inclusive education in rural Zimbabwe.

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