Inclusivity in Primary School: A Case of Primary Schools in Goromonzi District of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Education inclusiveness is a global imperative, which aims to ensure that all learners, irrespective of their diverse needs, abilities, or backgrounds, are taken care of within the mainstream education system. The global concern for inclusive education is expressed in the goal and targets of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development goal number four, which states that governments must ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN, 2015). The targets aim at addressing issues of gender, access, quality, skills development, affordability, facilities, and the supply of qualified personnel. In Zimbabwe, the inclusive education policy was formalized through various legal instruments, including the Education Act, 2016. Despite the existence of policy frameworks, the implementation of inclusive education in rural schools faces systemic challenges. The paper uses mixed methods research. A total of one hundred participants responded to questionnaires and interviews. The participants were from ten purposively selected primary schools in Goromonzi district. School heads from the selected primary schools automatically became respondents, and teachers and parents were selected through random sampling. The paper analyzes the gap between the national policy of inclusive education and implementation practices in Goromonzi District of Zimbabwe. Drawing from Disability Studies in Education and the Socio-Ecological Model, the paper argues that true inclusivity remains a pipedream due to inadequate teacher training, a lack of specialized resources, structural barriers in infrastructure, and insufficient allocation of the national education budget toward specific learning needs. Lack of access and the requirement for parents to pay fees and levies still function as hinderances to education inclusivity. The paper proposes a multilevel intervention framework which focuses on capacity building for resource teachers, community sensitization, and equitable distribution of assistive technologies. Recommendations are centered on policy enforcement and resource mobilization to transform inclusive education from a mere policy declaration to an actionable and sustainable reality.

Keywords: Education Inclusivity, Inclusive Education, Primary Schools, Special Educational Needs, Structural Barriers

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Education has historically served as both a tool for social advancement and a reflection of structural inequalities within societies. The principle of inclusive education ensures that all learners, regardless of background or ability, participate fully in learning emerged as part of global movements for equity in the twentieth century. Early education systems, particularly during colonial periods in Africa, emphasized segregation and elitism. In Zimbabwe, missionary and colonial schools preserved existing hierarchies, privileging academic excellence among a small minority while excluding learners with disabilities, girls, and those from poor rural backgrounds (Zvobgo,1999). Education was therefore a means of social reproduction rather than transformation, promoting access for a few. This early exclusionary model laid the foundation for deeply entrenched disparities, where inclusivity was conceptualized as charity rather than a right. The legacy of these structures continues to influence classroom practices and teacher attitudes in Zimbabwean primary schools.

The post-independence era marked a decisive shift toward educational expansion and inclusion. Zimbabwe's Education Act of 1987 and the introduction of universal primary education were revolutionary in providing access to formerly marginalized groups. However, this expansion prioritized enrollment statistics over inclusive

pedagogical practice (Chireshe, 2017; Mpofu & Ndlovu, 2020). Schools became overcrowded, and teachers lacked specialized training to support learners with diverse needs. In principle, every child had the right to education, yet in practice, children with disabilities, those from low-income families, and learners in remote communities remained disadvantaged. As in other post-colonial contexts, inclusivity was often interpreted narrowly as physical access to classrooms rather than meaningful participation in learning. This approach institutionalized a superficial form of inclusion, one that met quantitative targets but failed to address the qualitative dimensions of equity.

The 21st century brought renewed international pressure to operationalize inclusion through frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education. Zimbabwean policies began to align with these commitments through the introduction of the 2015 *Inclusive Education Policy Framework* (MoPSE, 2015) and, more recently, the *Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework* (MoPSE, 2024). Yet the implementation gap remains significant. Studies reveal that while most primary schools in Goromonzi District enroll learners with disabilities, they lack trained personnel, assistive technologies, and infrastructure to sustain meaningful inclusion (Chikasha & Mutepfa, 2021). Teachers often rely on conventional pedagogies unsuitable for learners with cognitive or physical impairments, reinforcing exclusion within inclusion. The challenge is not merely policy compliance but the transformation of teacher beliefs and institutional cultures that sustain exclusionary practices.

Contemporary reforms promoting Education 5.0 and inclusive pedagogy reflect a shift from symbolic to substantive inclusion. However, neoliberal influences marked by resource constraints, performance metrics, and examination pressure continue to erode inclusive ideals (Dzimiri, 2022). Schools prioritize measurable academic outcomes over holistic learner development, creating tension between inclusion and efficiency. In Goromonzi district, teachers express frustration over limited classroom resources, high pupil-teacher ratios, and inadequate support from district education offices. The resulting culture fosters a "compliance mindset," where inclusivity is reduced to ticking policy boxes rather than transforming learning environments (Dzimiri, 2022). This reality exposes the fragility of inclusion efforts.

The current educational landscape in Zimbabwe underscores the urgency of redefining inclusivity as both pedagogical and societal transformation. Effective inclusion in primary schools requires collective participation teachers, parents, and local communities working as partners in nurturing each learner's potential (Moyo, 2023; Ndlovu, 2024). In rural setups where socioeconomic diversity and rural-urban disparities intersect, inclusive education can only succeed through context-sensitive strategies that integrate indigenous knowledge systems, peer mentoring, and flexible curricula. Teachers must move beyond perceiving inclusion as an administrative obligation and embrace it as a philosophy of care, equity, and the exercise of human rights. Framing inclusivity as an ongoing, community-anchored practice rather than a policy objective can help restore education's moral and social purpose. Schools must shift from aspirational rhetoric to genuine inclusivity that provides education for all.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Zimbabwe's commitment to inclusive education as a national policy, its implementation in rural primary schools is symbolic rather than substantive. Schools nominally enroll all learners but consistently fail to provide the necessary structural, pedagogical, and human resource support required for meaningful inclusion. Teachers end up catering for Special Educational Needs without the requisite training. Classrooms are architecturally inaccessible and the school administration often lacks the budget or policy clarity to secure specialized learning materials. This discrepancy between policy and practice leads to marginalization and poor academic outcomes which effectively transform the ideal of inclusive education into an unattainable pipedream for the most vulnerable children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship reveals persistent challenges in achieving educational inclusivity within Zimbabwean primary schools because of a range of factors. Studies highlight how competition for resources, performance-based evaluations, and policy fragmentation undermine the inclusive ideals promoted in the Education Act and

the Heritage Based Curriculum Framework. Dzimiri (2022) associates the adoption of neoliberal education models with increased teacher stress and reduced focus on the diverse needs of learners. This situation is also evident in rural districts such as Goromonzi, where inclusion often becomes a procedural obligation rather than a meaningful pedagogical commitment. Chireshe (2017) observes that teachers tend to prioritize examination outcomes and administrative compliance, leading to the exclusion of learners with disabilities, those from poor backgrounds, and those requiring differentiated instruction. The result is a system that measures success through academic performance rather than learner participation and personal growth.

Conversely, collaboration among teachers, parents, and communities has been identified as a key driver of genuine inclusivity. Moyo (2023) argues that schools engaging parents and local leaders in decision-making processes record better attendance and learner engagement. These community-based approaches echo the spirit of generativity proposed by Erikson (1982), which emphasizes the importance of mentorship and shared responsibility across generations. Experienced teachers and parents transmit practical wisdom, while younger educators contribute innovative methods and technological adaptability. This intergenerational collaboration nurtures both academic and social inclusion by balancing traditional teaching practices with contemporary learner-centered approaches.

Research indicates that institutional frameworks and digital tools can strengthen inclusive education when effectively integrated (Kingstone & Bristow, 2024). In contexts like Goromonzi, such frameworks are often constrained by inadequate infrastructure and teacher training. Mpofu and Ndlovu (2020) argue that while inclusive education policies exist, they are rarely accompanied by continuous professional development programs or sufficient resource support. Schools frequently depend on donor-funded interventions that are short-term and unsustainable. Teachers express a need for localized inclusion models grounded in community realities, where indigenous knowledge systems and peer mentoring can bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Efforts to integrate indigenous knowledge into primary education in Zimbabwe are growing yet remain inconsistent. Initiatives promoting local languages, traditional games, and community service have proven effective in fostering inclusion, especially for learners from marginalized groups (Ndlovu, 2024). However, these approaches are often undermined by policy inconsistencies and a lack of material support. Banda and Smit (2024) emphasize that inclusive education must recognize emotional, cultural, and ethical dimensions to ensure that all learners feel represented and valued in the classroom. This perspective aligns with current reforms under Education 5.0, which promote holistic learning that balances cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Although challenges persist, Goromonzi District offers promising examples of inclusive progress. Schools that involve parents use participatory teaching methods and integrate digital learning have demonstrated measurable improvements in learner confidence and participation (Chikasha & Mutepfa, 2021). These successes illustrate that inclusivity thrives when education is treated not as a bureaucratic task but as a shared moral and social responsibility. Reframing inclusion as an ongoing community partnership can transform primary education from a policy aspiration into a lived reality.

Theoretical Framework

The paper integrates the Disability Studies in Education framework, the Socio-Ecological Model and African-centred epistemologies of inclusivity, to critically examine the implementation of inclusive education in Goromonzi district. Disability Studies in Education framework is grounded in the Social Model of Disability, which redefines disability as a product of environmental and institutional barriers rather than individual impairments (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). Within this framework, exclusion is understood as a structural and epistemic injustice that arises from inaccessible infrastructure, rigid pedagogies, and a lack of teacher preparedness. Applying the framework to rural contexts like Goromonzi district reveals how policy rhetoric about inclusion often masks the persistence of exclusionary school cultures. Titchkosky (2011) observes that the problem lies within the unaccommodating educational environment, and not the child with disabilities. This theoretical orientation shifts the focus of inclusive education from fitting the learner into the system to transforming the system to value and support diversity.

The Socio-Ecological Model by Bronfenbrenner (1979) complements Disability Studies in Education by situating disability and inclusion within interconnected social systems that influence a learner's experience.

Learning and participation are shaped through the microsystem (classroom practices and teacher attitudes), mesosystem (home-school interactions), exosystem (district-level policies and resourcing), and macrosystem (national ideology and cultural attitudes toward disability) (Neal & Neal, 2013; McLeroy et al., 1988). This multi-level approach exposes how the failure of one system undermines the success of another. For instance, even the most inclusive classroom efforts cannot thrive if exosystemic constraints such as limited funding for assistive technologies or the absence of specialist teachers persist. Aligning all systems is therefore essential for sustainable implementation of inclusive education.

African epistemologies such as *Unhu/Ubuntu* provide a culturally grounded dimension to this framework, emphasizing interdependence, respect, and collective responsibility in the education of all children (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Nhemachena, Hlabangane & Matowanyika, 2020). Ubuntu-based inclusive education conceptualizes disability not as a deficit but as a variation of humanity requiring communal support and care. This aligns with Disability Studies in Education's call for epistemic justice by recognizing Indigenous philosophies that value every child's contribution to the community (Chimhenga, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Integrating *Unhu/Ubuntu* with the Socio-Ecological Model underscores the cultural and social dimensions of inclusion, reframing it as a moral and communal obligation rather than a bureaucratic requirement. Based on the Traditional African Education system, society has an obligation to train and prepare all youths for adult roles.

Disability Studies in Education, the Socio-Ecological Model, and African-centred theories present a holistic analytical lens for understanding inclusive education. They emphasize that effective inclusion must dismantle both physical and epistemic barriers, align social systems, and embed indigenous values of mutuality and belonging. This synthesis advances the view that inclusive education must go beyond policy compliance but demonstrate a deliberate effort towards a transformative praxis that respects and recognizes every learner as a stakeholder in the educational community and society.

METHODOLOGY

A sequential mixed-methods approach was employed to investigate the barriers and enablers of inclusive education implementation in Goromonzi district. The study adopted this approach to capture both the breadth of systemic challenges and the depth of individual experiences among teachers, school heads, and parents. Phase One involved a structured questionnaire distributed to one hundred participants, comprising sixty teachers, twenty school heads, and twenty parents across twenty primary schools in Goromonzi district. The schools, school heads and parents were purposively selected, and teachers were selected through random sampling. The questionnaire assessed participants' attitudes towards inclusive education, awareness of disability policies, availability of resources, and perceptions of school readiness for inclusion. Respondents were also asked to identify specific infrastructural, pedagogical, and attitudinal barriers affecting learners with disabilities.

Phase Two involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with the same number of school heads, teachers, and parents' representatives. The interviews explored participants' lived experiences with the implementation of inclusive education. They focused on teacher preparedness, community perceptions of disability, policy-practice gaps, and the role of indigenous knowledge systems and *Unhu/Ubuntu* values in supporting inclusive schooling.

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify dominant trends in resource distribution, teacher training levels, and policy awareness. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using NVivo software, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns such as structural exclusion, cultural attitudes, and system misalignment across ecological levels. Ethical protocols were strictly observed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the protection of sensitive information related to children and disability. The mixed methods approach enabled triangulation of findings to strengthen the reliability, validity and trustworthiness of the findings.

Key Findings

Quantitative results revealed strong conceptual support for inclusive education among participants, with 84% of teachers and school heads endorsing the principle of inclusive schooling. However, only 28% reported receiving formal training in special needs education, and fewer than 20% indicated the presence of disability-friendly

infrastructure such as ramps, tactile learning materials, or Braille textbooks. The findings exposed a significant gap between policy endorsement and practical implementation.

Qualitative findings yielded four dominant themes. First, systemic disjuncture emerged as a major barrier, with teachers reporting that district-level resource allocation and inspection systems were poorly aligned with inclusive education mandates. The lack of coordination between policy and practice undermined local initiatives to support learners with disabilities. Second, attitudinal exclusion persisted within schools, where disability was often associated with incapacity rather than diversity. Teachers and parents described stigma rooted in cultural beliefs, leading to subtle but pervasive marginalization of learners with special needs. Third, structural and infrastructural constraints were widely cited, including overcrowded classrooms, absence of assistive technologies, and limited access to specialist staff such as educational psychologists or sign language interpreters. Fourth, pedagogical gaps were evident, as most teachers relied on traditional methods unsuited to diverse learning needs. Those few who employed differentiated instruction linked their success to personal experience or peer mentorship rather than formal training.

A school head from Goromonzi expressed the dilemma noting, "*We are willing to include every child, but the system itself is not inclusive. The problem is not the child's disability it is our structures."* Such testimonies underscore the Disability Studies in Education perspective that barriers lie within the educational system rather than the learner. The findings affirmed Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model which shows how breakdowns at the exosystem level, particularly in funding and policy enforcement, undermine progress at the microsystem level, the classroom. The insights highlight that meaningful inclusion requires structural reform, culturally grounded teacher preparation, and the integration of African philosophies such as *Unhu/Ubuntu* to transform inclusive education from policy rhetoric into lived practice.

While acknowledging the diverse role the philosophy of *Unhu/Ubuntu* can play in the integrated approach to the implementation of inclusive education, as it promotes mentorship and shared responsibility across generations, the traditional discourse around disability must be transformed. There must be robust efforts to address traditional practices that stigmatize disability. *Unhu/Ubuntu* and indigenous knowledge practices have not managed the issues of disabilities fairly due to traditional practices, cultural beliefs, and connotations about disability.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings confirm the premise that education inclusivity in Goromonzi District primary schools remains a pipedream due to persistent structural and pedagogical deficits. Quantitative results revealed a striking contrast between philosophical support and practical readiness. While 92% of teachers agreed with the principles of inclusive education, only 18% reported confidence in their ability to implement inclusive practices effectively. Additionally, 85% of schools lacked basic assistive devices, illustrating a profound gap between policy endorsement and actual capacity to provide meaningful inclusion. These figures highlight that despite conceptual alignment with inclusive ideals; schools are hindered by systemic limitations that prevent the translation of theory into practice.

The theme of symbolic inclusion emerged strongly in both teacher and school heads narratives. Learners with disabilities were physically present in classrooms, yet their participation in learning activities remained limited. The findings validate the Disability Studies in Education perspective, showing that inclusion cannot be measured by physical presence alone. School infrastructure, the pace of the curriculum, and generic teaching methods were part of the disabling factors. Teachers reported that learners were often unable to engage with lessons because classroom layouts were inaccessible, learning materials were standardized, and teaching strategies did not accommodate diverse learning needs. Symbolic inclusion, therefore, masked the deeper inequities that perpetuate educational exclusion.

Unfunded mandates were identified as a critical barrier to effective inclusive education. The findings align with the Socio-Ecological Model by illustrating how gaps at the Exosystem level affect classroom functioning. National policies and the broader Macrosystem mandate inclusion, yet school administrations often lack the financial resources to implement these directives. District-level budget constraints and competing priorities

forced schools to make tough decisions between essential general infrastructure and accessibility upgrades. As a result, teachers and learners operate in classrooms deprived of necessary tools and materials, undermining the Microsystem where learning occurs. Resource limitations create a structural hierarchy that privileges the majority while marginalizing learners with disabilities and reinforcing systemic inequities.

The theme of parental burden highlighted weaknesses in the Mesosystem. Parents were frequently called upon to provide specialized instruction, funding for assistive devices, and personal support to ensure that their children could participate in learning. This overreliance on parents reflects a breakdown of the collective responsibility envisioned in *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy, which emphasizes communal support and shared accountability in education. For inclusive education to move beyond symbolic gestures, the state must actively provide the necessary resources, ensuring that partnerships between schools and families are genuine collaborations rather than burdens shouldered by parents alone.

The findings underscore that meaningful inclusion in Goromonzi primary schools requires systemic reforms, including adequate funding, culturally responsive pedagogies, accessible infrastructure, and the institutionalization of communal support frameworks. Structural, pedagogical, and social barriers must be addressed for the goals of inclusive education to remain attainable.

Implications

The findings have significant implications for national education policy and local practice:

- Policy Re-articulation: The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education must move beyond vague mandates and issue clear, funded guidelines on inclusive education, including minimum infrastructural standards and mandatory budgetary allocations for assistive technology in all primary schools.
- Teacher Training: The current model of minimal in-service training is insufficient. Pre-service teacher education must be overhauled to include rigorous, practical specialization, and transforming the perception of inclusive education to a core pedagogical skill.
- Resource Mobilization: The Ministry, in conjunction with district offices, must establish a Resource Hubs in districts to pool and distribute specialized equipment.
- Cultural Shift: The paper demonstrates the need for a sustained community sensitization campaign to shift the macrosystem's perception of disability from one of charity or stigma to one of social justice and required accommodation.
- Education must be free and compulsory at primary school: Other barriers to inclusivity must be addressed. The problems of poverty, low income, socio-economic status, orphanage, unemployment, gender discrimination, and child marriages perpetuate exclusion in education.

Recommendations

The paper makes the following recommendations:

- Mandatory and Funded Infrastructure Audit: The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should allocate a specific grant for the mandatory auditing and modification of all primary school infrastructure.
- Specialized Resource Teacher Deployment: The government must recruit and deploy Resource Teachers to provide specialist support, mentor mainstream teachers, and manage resource allocations.
- Curriculum Differentiation Training: Implement mandatory, practical, and assessed Differentiated Instruction training for all in-service primary school teachers shifting the pedagogical focus from content delivery to adaptive learning.
- Establishment of a District Assistive Technology Bank: Create a centrally managed resource bank at the district level for sharing costly assistive devices and learning materials.

- Policy Enforcement Mechanism: Introduce a clear monitoring and evaluation framework, linking school heads' performance and resource eligibility to measurable indicators of meaningful inclusion and the academic progress of learners.

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