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# THE EFFICACY OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES IN ZIMBABWEAN RURAL SCHOOLS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

## ЕФЕКТИВНІСТЬ ІНКЛЮЗИВНОЇ ОСВІТНЬОЇ ПРАКТИКИ В СІЛЬСЬКИХ ШКОЛАХ ЗІМБАБВЕ: ПРОБЛЕМИ ТА МОЖЛИВОСТІ

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose.** The purpose of this research is to assess the extent of implementation and the efficiency of inclusive education practices at a selected secondary school in Zimbabwe.

**Methodology.** The study employed a qualitative research design; data was

**Мета.** Метою дослідження є оцінка ступеня впровадження та ефективності практик інклюзивної освіти в середній школі в Зімбабве.

**Методологія.** У дослідженні використовується якісний дизайн дослідження; дані були зібрані за допомогою

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gathered through interviews, and observed responses, from 15 purposive-selected participating teachers, holding different teaching positions. Consequently, the study relied on social learning theory (SLT) to determine how the process of implementing and participatory education for all is in its local context.

**Results.** The results show that although Zimbabwe has robust national legislation that protects the rights of students with disabilities to access inclusive education, the process is plagued by poor physical facilities, lack of appropriate training for teachers, and social prejudice towards people with disabilities. Some of the implementation differences that stood out included the areas of students with disabilities, policy, resources, and teachers. Accordingly, the study concludes that unless teachers in Zimbabwean secondary schools begin to practice inclusive education in a more focused manner, it is unlikely that many of the disabled students will be empowered to participate fully.

**Conclusions.** Among the suggestions are improving physical and communication access to school buildings, and providing on-going staff training on integration, promoting cooperation among the various actors, and the development of sound assessment mechanisms. This study adds to the existing literature on the predictors of effective inclusive education in Zimbabwean secondary schools. It offers implications on how to foster the educational experiences of students with learning disabilities.

**Keywords:** disability, inclusive education, rural secondary schools, teacher training, Zimbabwe.

інтерв'ю та спостереження за відповідями 15 цілеспрямовано відібраних учителів-учасників, які займали різні вчительські посади. Отже, дослідження покладалося на теорію соціального навчання, щоб визначити, як відбувається процес впровадження освіти та для всіх учасників освітнього процесу в місцевому контексті.

**Результати.** Результати показують, що, хоча Зімбабве має надійне національне законодавство, яке захищає права учнів з обмеженими можливостями на доступ до інклюзивної освіти, цьому процесу заважають погані фізичні умови, відсутність належної підготовки вчителів, а також соціальні упередження щодо людей з обмеженими можливостями. Деякі відмінності в реалізації, які виділялися, стосуються учнів з обмеженими можливостями, політики, ресурсів та вчителів. Відповідно, дослідження наголошує, що якщо вчителі середніх шкіл Зімбабве не почнуть практикувати інклюзивну освіту більш зосереджено, малоймовірно, що багато учнів з обмеженими можливостями отримають гарну освіту.

**Висновки.** Серед пропозицій – покращення фізичного та комунікаційного доступу до шкільних будівель, забезпечення постійного навчання персоналу з питань інтеграції, сприяння співпраці між різними учасниками освітнього процесу та розробка ефективних механізмів оцінювання доступності інклюзивної освіти. Це дослідження доповнює наявну літературу щодо передумов ефективної інклюзивної освіти в середніх школах Зімбабве. Воно дає рекомендації, як сприяти освітньому досвіду учнів із вадами навчання.

**Ключові слова:** інвалідність, інклюзивна освіта, сільські загальноосвітні школи, підготовка вчителів, Зімбабве

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has been practiced and implemented in the global context aiming at equal provision of education for every student regardless of the learning ability or disability and other attributes. In Zimbabwe, the use of inclusive education is one of the few progressive revisions in the education system that gives marginalized students a chance to be in mainstream schools or sit in normal schools containing normal students only, but for disabled people there is a special school for disables only.

For Ainscow (2020), Nera and Nyikadzino (2023), Chansa-Kabali and Nyoni (2024), such practices led to the formation of segregated educational communities which in essence, ensured that able-bodied students remained separated from disabled students and other forms of discrimination and isolation within learning environment were experienced. Benay (2024) and Mutanga's (2022) extensive study findings show that

such a segregation denied students with disabilities a chance to interact with their peers thereby enhancing the isolation of students with disabilities within the educational system.

Furthermore, it can result in loneliness and prevent the formation of social relationships. Students in such marginalization as postulated by Chidakwa et al. (2023), Mungure et al. (2021), and Dube and Moyo (2022) receive poor support, which deems them unfit to contribute to society. These perceptions also continue to engrave forced marginalization and rejection of people with disabilities within society, thereby compromising the self-worth and accessibility of these students. The severity of these difficulties proves the need of inclusive education initiatives that strive to eliminate such gaps which fragment students and fail to provide them equal scholarly rights and opportunities for social development.

The Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE) (2017) has launched massive reform measures to enhance suitable teaching for all (refer to Chapter Three – Education Sector Reforms). Most of these changes resonate with the standards found in the Dakar Framework for Action, a global process geared towards improving education systems that promote equity and non-discrimination for all students (Chuchu & Chuchu, 2016; UNESCO, 2000; Saziso & Chimhenga, 2021).

That is why MOPSE's focus on inclusive education means that the ministry wants to create a more equal and effective learning environment that pays special attention to students' abilities and their needs. It is this critical endeavour that aims to remove impediments to learning, promote education and improve learning for every student throughout Zimbabwe.

An example of such practices is the implementation of academic success and the development of a more caring and tolerant climate at school, which lets every student grow and become a valuable member of society (UNESCO, 2000). Thus, MOPSE strives to establish a framework for the creation of a society with diversity and social justice for all the students to access self-enabling education by these combined strategic endeavours.

Nilholm (2021), Tiernan (2022), and Schwarz (2023) say that while inclusive education aims at equity through an assuasive approach, it causes obstacles for all the parties to education. According to the learning of Zickafoose et al. (2024), inclusive education exerts pressures on existing resources; it also causes considerable shifts to the distribution of teaching strategies, behaviour management, and physical environments.

One of the challenges that teachers face is the issue of multiple expectations within a single classroom, which requires more overtime training and development. Additionally, Carvalho, Cosme & Veiga (2023) also argued that the schools face a major problem of inadequate funding and resources in implementing inclusive practices.

Basha (2024) adds that there are challenges faced by parents and caregivers in ensuring appropriate support for their children. Students without disabilities may experience disruptions during the adaptation of classrooms to accommodate all students. These challenges explain why teachers face numerous challenges while implementing inclusive education and why it is advisable to effectively support student with disabilities, it requires complete support structures and strategic planning.

This study also considers the current educational policies on inclusion in Zimbabwe that have been made through a combination of national reforms and international conventions. The key measures in this direction have been undertaken by MOPSE that has introduced policies on education for the integration of all students including those with a disability (Muresherwa & Jita 2023).

Such an educational policy as the MOPSE policy on Inclusive Education, as well as the CRPD policy, corresponds to the principles of the Dakar Framework for Action, which underlines the formation of an atmosphere at school where every student is accepted and can learn in conformity with his/her potentials (UNESCO, 2000). Teacher-training courses have also advanced in offering adequate knowledge and tools to teachers on how to appropriately address diverse classrooms which are apparent today (Chidarikire, 2023).

Nevertheless, problems like poor funding, insufficient facilities, and the social perception of disabled people have not changed much (Mukhopadhyay, 2019). Chidakwa et al. (2023) and Ainscow (2020) also pointed out the difference between the availability of progressive legislation on education and the discrepancy of its inadequate practical realization due to lack of sufficient resources and, consequently, further support for teachers and schools. Nevertheless, Zimbabwe does not stop at the campaign for equality in education for disabled people as the country grasps the importance of the enhancements and further investment.

Several challenges have been observed despite the Zimbabwean government's implementation efforts to create inclusive education. One of them is resource deficiency which consists of: schools being underfunded, school infrastructures and instructional materials for supporting inclusive learning and teaching (Mukhopadhyay, 2019). Another aggravating factor is that teachers are not well-trained to meet the needs of students with disabilities in general classrooms (Chidarikire, 2023).

Also, social issues create a major challenge that hinders the inclusion and integration of special needs students due to prejudices and discrimination as identified by Chidakwa et al. (2023) and Mungure et al. (2021). Therefore, these challenges may contribute to a lower enrolment of students with special needs thus interfering with their achievements as well as development. However, one can observe several significant possibilities, including raising the profile and awareness as well as campaigning for improved policies and practices.

These advocacy improvements have ensured that more people and governments appreciate the importance of inclusion in education, and thus induce change in politics, as well as the allocation of more resources in methods of developing teacher training programs (Nilholm, 2021). This growing awareness is beneficial for the improved efficiency and incorporation of inclusive education practices so that a more inclusive learning environment is equitable for all students.

However, the extent to which inclusive education has attained these goals and objectives at the secondary school level still evokes some controversy (Basha, 2024; Mungure et al. 2024). Despite the fact that inclusive education may prove to be effective in making the educational environment more inclusive and supportive (Nera & Nyikadzino, 2023), there are certain obstacles which, when addressed in proper manner, may help to fully unlock all the aforementioned benefits of the concept.

This requires consistent engagement, resources, and effort of all stakeholders to ensure that necessary practices are experienced, followed, and continued for them to yield positive results in the process of implementing inclusive education in different learning institutions (Mutanga, 2022; Chidarikire, 2023). However, in another argument, Mungure et al. (2024) noted that there is a need to strengthen policy frameworks and legislation in order to support the promotion of inclusiveness.

As noted by Mueller (2019), Yebaoh et al. (2023), and Makwerere and Dube (2021), from the theoretical viewpoints, it is fundamental to understand that disability is accompanied by inborn prejudice and stereotyping along with labelling. The individual with a disability who undergoes inclusive education has the potential to demolish such barriers within the learning environment.

Therefore, strengthening the policies, and legislation, which includes the enhancement of the existing legislation with policies that dictate the processes of educational implementation, can reduce these challenges and help develop an integrated education system that embraces every student and fosters his or her talents and abilities. For this reason, this has stirred the researchers' interest in ascertaining the effectiveness of inclusive education within secondary school institutions.

Consequently, the current study employs a qualitative interpretive research approach that enables the researchers to develop an understanding on the effectiveness of the inclusive education practices that are implemented in Zimbabwean schools. To achieve more specific and comprehensive information, the study used qualitative instruments – interviews and observations, with the participants being the teachers who are directly involved in the process of inclusive education.

These approaches were effective in establishing the challenges and potential in the current existing inclusive education practice, as well as promoting the growth of more effective strategies in the provision of inclusive education in Zimbabwe.

This study aims at critically analysing the possibility and feasibility of applying inclusive education in Zimbabwe and some of the obstacles that can be met together with the prospects for their further enhancement.

Hence, since inclusive education seeks to ensure that every student in a classroom gets a fair shot at learning, it is at the precipice of eradicating the justice-gap in education. The purpose of this study is to design appropriate interventions for improvement by finding and studying the particular challenges that teachers, students and policymakers experience in the advancement of inclusive education in schools.

Additionally, the study aims to identify innovative practices from other jurisdictions that may inform progressive changes within Zimbabwe's education sector hence enriching the understanding of the various policies and practices' needed of the students. The study is anchored in the following research objective:

*To evaluate the efficacy of inclusive education practices in Zimbabwe, identifying the associated challenges and exploring the opportunities for improvement.*

### **Theoretical Approach: Social Learning Theory**

The study is anchored in Social Learning Theory (SLT), which was postulated by Albert Bandura. According to SLT, learning is social and occurs through observation and

imitation, which involves modelling (Miller et al., 2024; Lai et al., 2023). SLT indicates that people revise their behaviour and gain new information through positive reinforcement from other people with special attention directed towards an environment in which new learning occurs, as stated by Zickafoose et al. (2024).

This theory provides good background information that can help understand the moderating factors of implementing inclusive education practices in Zimbabwe. In the context of an inclusive classroom, Miller et al. (2024) found that learning by observing peers as well as peer interaction occurs between disabled and non-disabled students. This social learning setting can help in developing the desired behavioural and academic performance amongst all the students in the context of an integrated classroom (Nera & Nyikadzino, 2024; Saziso & Chimhenga, 2021).

For example, non-disabled students can learn over a period of time how to appreciate and tolerate fellow students with disabilities (Chidakwa et al., 2023), while on the other hand, disabled students can equally learn through observing other normal students perform. This creates a cordial interaction where all the students can develop socially and academically since they are observing each other. The students without disabilities get to learn and embrace diversity and ensure they come up with positive attitudes for the disabled students to ensure the society is supporting (Mitra & Dominik, 2023).

On the other hand, students with disabilities get an opportunity to learn models of social and academic conduct to benchmark on, which improves their learning and integration into the class. Thus, the described dynamic process emphasizes the role of integration within the educational process and the inclusion of all students, regardless of individual differences in their needs.

Additionally, the interpretive paradigm has relevance for studying the social processes and interactions that underpin SLT. On this basis, Miller et al. (2024) states that SLT is closely related to the interpretive paradigm, as does Lai et al. (2023). Through interviews and observations, researchers gain insights into how students learn from each other in an inclusive setting. The above qualitative methods and tools used in collecting rich data are characteristic of SLT as they allow the researcher to elaborate on the nuances of the process of learning in groups and independently, as well as during classroom interactions.

This way the researchers were able to learn from the students how learning happens inclusively. Experiences of participants interacting with each other revealed different occasions in which observational learning has occurred (Chansa et al., 2024) to show the role of social relations in the learning of students. Moreover, perceptions captured in interviews also provide qualitative evidence of how teachers display inclusive behaviours (Ederm & Kaya, 2020), and how students emulate the teachers' behaviours (Lai et al., 2023), affirming the efficacy of modelling as a strategy for promoting inclusive practice.

Also, the above strategies have been useful in that observations have provided a straight view of the social negotiations and learning processes in inclusive classrooms. In the words of Garira (2020), it is possible to observe how students communicate with peers and their environment, which eventually promotes the learning process. In fact, such observations have provided real-time documentation of social learning processes, providing real-world examples of the theories that support it (SLT) such as Miller's et al., (2024) Lai et al., (2023), and Mutanga (2022).

In addition, through observation, it has been possible for scholars to learn how the classroom context either facilitates or limits implementing inclusion. Other aspects from the literature and previous research studies that have been noted as worthy of consideration include the resources that are available and how the classroom is physically designed (Mukuna & Maizere, 2022), because of their impact on the creation of a relevant social learning environment.

Thus, it has become possible for researchers with the use of SLT in tandem with qualitative methodologies to gain a good perception of how the practices of inclusive education are experienced as well as put into practice within its setting. This integration has turned out to be quite useful in pinpointing certain processes of social learning that determine the prospects or difficulties of inclusive education. As highlighted under the application of SLT, the knowledge gathered has led to the creation of measures to improve the policy on inclusion.

Therefore, besides enriching the theoretical understanding of the concept of inclusive education, this approach provides practical recommendations for teachers and policymakers striving to increase the levels of inclusion and efficaciousness of learning practices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To get a deeper insight of education practices of inclusion in Zimbabwe an interpretive research paradigm was used. This paradigm was especially beneficial for this study since the researchers obtained qualitative data by using interviews as well as observation methods that do not limit the participants' responses and interactions to predetermined options. These data collection tools helped in gathering rich information that includes: acquiring the depth of the participants' experience and the perception of the phenomena under study.

Consequently, the use of open-ended interviews enabled the participants to express their ideas and experiences in their own words (Kelly, 2023; Wilkerson & Polman, 2022; Leavy 2022; O'Conner & Joffe, 2022), which helped the researchers to examine the first research question and discover the participants' specific experiences. Interviews were supported by observations which provided the researchers with real time contextual and behavioural data about inclusive education settings, making up for the deficits of a qualitative approach (Terrell, 2023). This approach allowed for a gain in a rich and detailed understanding of the factors affecting the implementation of inclusive education, thus revealing the strengths and problems within the system.

The study adopted purposive sampling, which was spearheaded by criterion sampling as elucidated by Carvalho et al., (2023) to arrive at a sample of fifteen teachers. As defined by Hossan et al. (2023), purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which, participants are selected based on features that are of importance to the study's question.

In this study, the criteria were defined, as such the teachers' qualifications, years of experience and their practice within inclusive education. This was useful in identifying participants who came up with the most relevant and valuable information on the effectiveness of inclusive practices preferring quality over quantity. The sample size also ensured that the research conducted a comprehensive and fruitful analysis of the data

as recommended by Sharma (2017) and guaranteed diversification in the group. The outcomes have been summarized in the following table results of the analyses performed. Their demographics have been summarized in the table below.

**Table 1**

*Demographic characteristics of participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Work experience	Qualifications
O	Female	17	Masters
C	Male	14	Certificate
E	Male	13	Masters
F	Female	13	Diploma
M	Female	15	Masters
A	Male	9	Diploma
H	Female	10	Degree
D	Female	16	Masters
B	Male	13	Certificate
K	Female	10	Diploma
N	Male	11	Degree
T	Male	8	Diploma
Y	Female	10	Degree
Z	Female	15	Certificate
X	Male	9	Diploma

Some of the participants' strengths and possible issues that can be derived from the analytics are as follows: there are fifteen participants and their level of qualification is: five had Diplomas in Education, three had Certificates in Education, four had Degrees in Education and three had a Masters' Degree in Education. Such a variety of qualifications provided a broad picture of inclusive education practices, while Master's degree holders contributed theories to the discussion and others shared practical experience.

Concerning the work experience, the participants also presented adequate work experience and had worked for an average of 12 years. Eight years, which is critical for gathering rich data on the realities and possibilities of the implementation of inclusion policies. Concerning the gender distribution, there are eight females and seven males, so they are not similar but different, so opinions will diversify.

The type of analysis deemed appropriate for the qualitative data collected was thematic analysis since it involves the identification of the themes that stand out in the data. This method offered a setup for organizing and analysing data thoroughly but with a lot of freedom in arriving at an improved meaning of the issue under analysis. Coding processes that enabled themes to be found, interpreted and reported in the gathered data was beneficial in providing an organized yet versatile method of analysing large volumes of information.

The four-step process has been started with data transcription to achieve the internalization of the data and then systematic coding has been done to point out the

significant segment which has been needed for analysis. These codes were then grouped into potential themes and these were then reviewed and enhanced and given validity by the researcher to represent the data.

Last, themes were identified and labelled while reaching a thematic map and writing an elaborated story line focusing on data extracts that provided evidence for the themes. Such an approach helped to gain a systemic and detailed vision of the data, responsive to the richness and variability of the participants' experiences and views.

## RESULTS

### Theme 1: Inclusive Education Preparedness and Implementation in Rural Schools

The study's conclusions show that most institutions are woefully unprepared to serve students and teachers with disabilities. Despite regulatory regulations requiring accessibility features like ramps and proper sanitation facilities, places including schools, libraries, ablution blocks, and sporting areas are frequently inaccessible to those using wheelchairs. Participant C states,

*"Yes, we are aware that buildings and facilities must accommodate students and staff with disabilities, but our schools were constructed a long time ago. Currently, we have very limited funds to even consider altering buildings and sporting facilities."*

The recognition of the need for accessible buildings is a positive first step, as it indicates an awareness of the legal and moral obligations to accommodate individuals with disabilities. However, this awareness alone is insufficient if it is not followed by concrete actions to address the infrastructural deficits. The issue of limited funds further complicates the situation as participant E says,

*"Unless we are funded, the status quo remains, which puts students and staff living with disabilities at a disadvantage. It is a very unfortunate situation, which hopefully will be corrected shortly."*

This statement emphasizes the importance of funding in achieving educational equity for individuals with disabilities. It highlights the disadvantages schools face, frames the issue within a moral context, and anticipates future improvements. Without adequate funding, the educational system cannot evolve to become truly inclusive and just, leaving those with disabilities at a continued disadvantage.

The remarks made by participants C, F, and M provided insight into the practical implementation issues and the legislative requirements for the accessibility of educational institutions for people with impairments. The legal structure designed to promote inclusivity and accessibility is highlighted by Participant C's remark that *"All buildings are required by law to include ramps, wheelchair-accessible ablution facilities, and accessible classrooms, libraries, and athletic spaces for individuals living with impairments."* The recognition of the rights of people with disabilities to equal access to educational facilities and resources is reflected in this legal duty.

Nonetheless, a notable implementation gap is highlighted by Participant F's remark that *"Many schools lack provisions for wheelchair users in critical places such as classrooms, libraries, toilet blocks, and sporting grounds."* Therefore, these practical challenges continue to impede the successful integration of inclusive practices in educational

settings, even in the face of legislative mandates. Consequently, this lack of standard preparation suggests a systemic failure to prioritize and operationalize inclusivity within school infrastructure and operations needing attention of all stakeholders.

According to Participant M, *"The implementation of inclusive education reveals there was little action in most schools, and this badly harmed inclusivity in education."* This statement highlights the gap between the goals of policy and the realities on the ground. The failure to meet these standards hampers inclusivity and directly impacts the ability of students with disabilities to fully participate in school activities, perpetuating exclusion and marginalization.

Generally, these quotes demonstrate the complexity of the issues that inclusive education programmes must overcome. They stress the need to go above and beyond legal requirements to guarantee genuine diversity and accessibility in educational settings. Thus, developing truly inclusive learning environments where everyone, regardless of ability, can flourish and engage fully is a problem that calls for coordinated efforts at many levels, including policy formation, resource allocation, and doable implementation techniques.

## **Theme 2: Enhancing inclusive education through preparation and professional development**

This situation calls for a shift in perception towards inclusivity, aiming to create an equal society that values everyone's contributions regardless of ability. The adoption of inclusive education has revealed a lack of proactive measures in most schools, negatively affecting the inclusivity of education. The inadequacy of facilities is compounded by a significant gap in teachers' knowledge and skills regarding inclusive education. Thus, participant A had this to say:

*"To enhance inclusive education, we need to ensure that schools have adequate infrastructure and resources to support students with disabilities. This includes accessible facilities, assistive technologies, and specialized teaching materials."*

The findings show that the adoption of inclusive education faces challenges due to inadequate infrastructure and a gap in teachers' knowledge and skills. To address these issues, participant H argued:

*"Schools must have accessible facilities, assistive technologies, and specialized teaching materials."*

Moreover, T adds to this observation by pointing out that:

*"The lack of workshops or professional development opportunities exacerbates the problem."*

The preceding texts demonstrate the difficulties Zimbabwe has implementing inclusive education, particularly when it comes to improving school facilities and resources for students with disabilities. However, participants emphasised that investing in teachers' ongoing professional development and modernising school facilities are two essential steps towards improving inclusive education in Zimbabwe.

Thus, the study argues for the need of a comprehensive strategy that includes financing for infrastructure upgrades and a dedication to continuing teacher education is needed to address these problems. Zimbabwe may go closer to developing an inclusive learning

environment that meets the various needs of all of its students, promotes equality, and advances the general health of its educational system by giving priority to these areas.

Furthermore, X's assertion emphasizes the importance of CPD for teachers saying,

*"Continuous learning through workshops, seminars, and training sessions is essential for teachers to stay updated with modern teaching trends and inclusive practices. Teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively support students with diverse learning needs."*

*"CPDs also help in stimulating an inclusive teaching and learning environment that compliments diversity, student's involvement and eliminates barriers to consider variety needs and preferences".* [Participant O]

It is therefore concluded that there is critical need for enhancing teacher training programs and the institutionalization of CPD to effectively implement inclusive education. Addressing these needs requires a comprehensive approach, including *"revisions to initial teacher training programs"* (Participant D), *"policy support for continuous professional development"* (Participant K), and *"fostering collaborative networks for sharing best practices"* Participant Y.

This highlights that CPD is not a one-time event but an ongoing process crucial for equipping teachers with the skills needed to adapt to the dynamic landscape of inclusive education. In Zimbabwe, where the educational system faces numerous challenges, the implementation of effective CPD programs can help bridge the gap in teachers' knowledge and skills, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education. Therefore, the prioritisation of ongoing learning and skill development in the education system can ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to create inclusive learning environments that support the diverse needs of all students.

Through further discussion, it was noted that the capacitation of community members also enables them to become advocates for inclusive education. Participant Z says;

*"Schools do not exist in isolation because they reside within the communities they serve and must cultivate relationships with the communities."*

This means that communities may be geographic catchment areas, former students and alumni associations, and youth groups, can be associated with the school. These communities may promote powerful learning that facilitates educational achievement for all students. There is a strong sense of community that embraces all who are part of the school. Participant Y echoed:

*"The involvement of local rural community members can raise awareness about the importance of inclusion, advocate for policy changes, and promote the rights of students with disabilities within their communities."*

Participant B supported the above point and said:

*"When community members are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills, they can collaborate more effectively with schools, parents, and other stakeholders to support students with disabilities. This collaboration fosters a sense of unity and shared responsibility for inclusive education."*

In conclusion, the verbatims together highlight the need for a multifaceted strategy to improve inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Strong CPD initiatives, updates to basic teacher preparation, support for policies, cooperative networks, and community involvement are all part of this. Teachers can benefit from each other's experiences and innovations by working together in collaborative networks to share best practices, which fosters an ever-evolving and improving of the community of practice.

These issues can be resolved so that Zimbabwe can establish an inclusive education system that accommodates each student's unique needs and promotes a supportive and accepting community. This holistic approach ensures that both teachers and community members are well-prepared to contribute to an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

### **Theme 3: Bridging the gap through societal perceptions and policy implementation**

Despite Zimbabwe being a signatory to numerous international conventions on the rights of students with disabilities, there is a lack of full compliance in practice. This implies that although policies exist on paper, their implementation is inadequate. The discourse around inclusive education, as reflected in the comments of participants, show deep challenges and opportunities inherited in the country's educational landscape. Participant B's comments:

*"Schools should be held accountable for implementing inclusive education policies, leading to stagnation in progress. Effective monitoring and evaluation are essential to identify gaps and ensure that inclusive education initiatives are making a meaningful impact."*

Despite the existence of inclusive education policies, findings show the existing gaps between policy formulation and effective implementation on the ground. This stagnation in progress necessitates robust "... *monitoring and evaluation*..." mechanisms to identify deficiencies and ensure that inclusive education initiatives translate into tangible outcomes for students with disabilities.

Accordingly, considering the nation's complex cultural and socio-economic situation, participants claimed that decisions about inclusive education policies and practices need to be carefully considered and discussed with the appropriate stakeholders. A key tenet of effective inclusive education in Zimbabwe is echoed by Participant K's appeal,

*"There is a need for collaboration and consultation before making vital decisions for the success of inclusive education"*.

This guarantees that policies have support from all stakeholders and are relevant to the context, encouraging a sense of ownership and dedication to their execution. These elements ensure that policies not only have the support of all stakeholders but are also contextually relevant, fostering a sense of ownership and dedication to their execution.

Throughout history, people with disabilities have frequently had their voices and viewpoints ignored while making decisions. In the context of Zimbabwe, Participant C's claimed that:

*"Disabled persons should be consulted demonstrates a major relationship between policymakers and those affected by the policies is especially relevant."*

Thus, to create inclusive education policies that are genuinely responsive to the needs and experiences of disabled students, their ideas must be acknowledged and taken into consideration. Policies that are co-created with input from disabled students are more likely to be relevant and effective in the long term, as they are based on real needs and experiences.

It was also observed that the active participation of all stakeholders in inclusive education was in line with the deeply embedded communal spirit in Zimbabwean society. *"All stakeholders—teachers, parents, government entities, and the community—must be actively involved and have their voices heard for inclusive education to be successful,"* contends participant F.

Accordingly, inclusive education cannot be accomplished by lone efforts; rather, it necessitates the cooperation of parents, teachers, the government, and the larger community. As a result, it demands that all voices be acknowledged and heard. Consequently, Zimbabwe ought to promote an inclusive learning environment that is consistent with its shared values of solidarity and togetherness.

The results also highlight the need for a cultural and educational shift, which is necessary to create an inclusive environment where all individuals are valued and supported through campaigns and workshops. Participant N's insights on this matter suggest that,

*"In addition to policy reforms and procedural adjustments, creating an inclusive environment requires a fundamental shift in attitudes, beliefs, and practices."*

This calls for persistent efforts, such as awareness campaigns, training workshops, and advocacy initiatives aimed at challenging entrenched stereotypes and promoting a culture of inclusivity and acceptance. It is concluded that collaborative efforts ensure that diverse perspectives and needs are considered, leading to more effective and inclusive policies and practices.

Generally, the results as a whole show how intricately linked and multifaceted the issues are that are driving inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Thus, a comprehensive strategy that includes legislative reform, stakeholder participation, handicapped person empowerment, and cultural transformation is needed to address these issues. Zimbabwe can endeavor to establish an educational system that genuinely recognises and caters to the varied requirements of every student by adopting these concepts.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of the study draw attention to the disparity between legal obligations and the actual implementation of inclusive education in rural schools, a problem that is prevalent not only in Zimbabwe but also globally. As it has been seen before, there is promising legislation in Zimbabwe that includes a Chapter on Children with Disabilities in the Constitution of Zimbabwe (Amendment No. 20) of 2013 and the Education Amendment Act of 2020, however, the problem has been the effective implementation of those policies and laws.

Such flaws are most sharply manifested in community implementation, especially when it comes to rural regions. In this regard, the problem under discussion is not exclusive to Zimbabwe (Saziso et al. 2021; MoPSE 2021). This is a problem that is typical for many developing and transitional countries of middle income in today's world (Kazachiner,

2020), (Dovzhenko, 2022). Hence, the issue of policy implementation to practice underpins the reform agenda in Zimbabwe to attain inclusive education for children with learning difficulties.

Also, the findings of this study are in line with the findings of Dube and Moyo (2021) regarding the poor existing infrastructural provisions in the rural schools of Zimbabwe. These schools don't have adequate facilities like ramps for the disabled, decent toilets, and proper functioning classroom. Lack of funds and inadequate resources are among the biggest challenges when trying to address the needs for inclusive education. Moreover, Nera and Nyikadzino (2023) conclude that these difficulties are worsened by the aging infrastructural barriers in the rural schools.

Most of these schools were built when this place was colonized and have not been revamped to the present type of schools. This is mostly attributed to financial stringency in the government through which the schools are funded; there are always other needs that are prioritized above an infrastructure investment in schools. To that end, the study recommends that the government fully commit itself to the realisation of education for high quality by pursuing the implementation of all education policies and laws. To overcome the researched gaps that exist between policy and practice, more than the provision of adequate resources is needed, policy facilitation must address the need of coming up with effective implementation strategies.

While there is some recognition of the need for inclusion for students with disabilities, and evidence of this as presented in the research, there seems to be a lack of knowledge on how to promote these inferences. The teachers and the school administrators might be cognizant of the legal provisions required to develop cultures free from discriminations; however, they may not possess adequate knowledge or training or access to the necessary resources to make such cultures inclusive ones. Insufficient preparation of teachers who are intended to address the diversity of students, specifically students with disabilities, is one of the challenges.

According to Makaya (2023) some of the teachers may have prior knowledge of inclusive education training. However, this study reveals that there is a scarcity of teachers for inclusive education particularly in rural education facilities. To encourage the teaching profession in rural areas, this study suggests that governments should set aside funds for inclusionary education initiatives, offer incentives, create satellite centres, use technology, and create communities that support rural teachers.

Furthermore, the study establishes the need to employ a multidimensional strategy in order to improve the existing practice of implementing inclusive education in Zimbabwe. As pointed out by Chansa-Kabali and Nyoni (2023) and Makaya (2022), there is a need to enhance the infrastructure, facilities and resources in schools and to increase the teachers' awareness and understanding of the intention to support inclusion in rural schools in Zimbabwe.

In addition, participants pointed out the importance of availing CPD in the form of workshops, seminars, and training that would provide the teachers with the knowledge and skills that would enable them to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms (Dube & Nyoni 2021; Garira, 2020; Nera & Nyikadzino, 2023). Thus, a noticeable gap in the knowledge and skills of teachers that is connected with the practices of inclusive education can be closed.

Tertiary institutions acknowledge the need to practice inclusion but fail to practice it effectively mainly due to insufficient preparation among teachers, which needs to be addressed with the help of the above-discussed suggestions. Therefore, the focus of the study on the CPD initiatives is in line with the research best practices highlighted in the previous literature reviews by Lemeyu et al. (2023). These CPD opportunities are important because they prepare teachers with enough knowledge to address students' needs that have learning difficulties.

Moreover, some elements of initial teacher training courses need redesign to include extensive sections referring to inclusive education with specific focus on the necessity for preparing future teachers for inclusive classes. Nyamayedenga (2022) stressing this, urged such revisions to clearly enable teachers to not only know the policy of inclusive education but to also know how the policies can best be implemented.

Further, policy support for CPD and inclusive education practices is among those crucial parts that can foster the successful enhancement of inclusive education strategies (Schwarz, 2023, Tafirenyika et al., 2023, Tiernan, 2022). Therefore, Saziso et al. (2021) highlighted the need for policy support alongside sufficient funds and other resources that are needed for successful implementation of inclusive education policy. Further, creating networking groups of teachers can help in the sharing of such practices and ideas that may help in solving difficulties in new and efficient ways (Muresherwa & Jita, 2023; Mutanga, 2022).

Another importance of these networks is that they may be used to complement each other by sharing resources in acknowledgment that they are working under constrained environments. Once again, local rural communities are essential for the inclusion of all students, and their participation is deemed to be necessary to support schools' use of inclusive education. Musengi (2021) posits that the involvement of the community could go a long way in the sensitization of society in the inclusion of students with disabilities in schools and clamors for policies that support this.

As affirmed by Garira (2020), and Nera and Nyikadzino (2023), it is posited for communities to assist students with disabilities which makes the education system more accommodating to such students. Chidarikire (2023) posited that although the government makes policies regarding inclusive education, the community needs to play active roles in the policies' implementation. This can enhance funding of extra funds for schools and pave the way for special provisions for disable students (Makwerere & Dube, 2021).

It is for this reason that the study finds that infrastructural development, constant teacher professional development, and IT support, along with membership in collaborative networks, and community support intervention are all requirements for the creation of an inclusive learning environment in Zimbabwean rural schools.

Moreover, the study's outcomes highlight the importance of adopting an integrated strategy to address the research gaps that separate policies on inclusive education from the realization of these policies in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is a member of most of these international conventions; however, in practice, it has challenges in meeting the requirements fully.

Sources of such a disconnect between legal provisions and implementation can be attributed to factors such as lack of monitoring and evaluation. For this reason, capacity for monitoring and evaluation should be developed to identify lapses in the execution of inclusive education programs, and for purposes of ascertaining that they bear the intended impacts (Chidarikire, 2023; Makofane & Malatji, 2022; Yeboah et al., 2023).

Yuwono and Okech (2021) also emphasized the need to make a systematic evaluation to track the trend, and any changes to do the required amendments in some of the formulated policies and practices. For addressing the lack of monitoring and evaluation of inclusive education in rural schools, governments need to auto fund, collaborate with universities, and use systematic assessment for measuring the progress in an effective way in rural schools.

Hence, the study emphasizes the need for the involvement of persons with disabilities and working with other individuals and stakeholders in decision-making processes of inclusion of disabled individuals in their education. This approach makes policies realistic by being informed by the culture, and desirable as it would be adopted by stakeholders making it relieves on the Zimbabwean culture which is deeply rooted on communalism.

As pointed out by Yeboah et al. (2023), it is equally possible to increase the quality of inclusive education policies by engaging local communities and persons with disabilities in policy-making and furthering their policies' execution. This makes it not only effective in making people have ownership of over the processes but also tapping into local knowledge, thus ensuring the long-term sustainability of the inclusive education strategies.

The studies highlight the necessity of change in the culture and educational systems, which accept diversity. This can only be made possible through constant awareness creation through campaigns, sensitization through workshops and good advocacy work geared towards dismantling prejudice and advocating for inclusion (Chidarikire, 2023; Villareal et al., 2022). According to Makaya (2022), the attitudes of society towards disability define the success of inclusive education in equal measure to end the major obstacles, such as infrastructure and policies.

Hence, specific awareness raising initiatives and education programmes are pivotal in changing people's attitudes and encouraging an acceptance of diversity within a given society. Thus, these endeavours can positively address profound bigotry and help in implementing and establishing the principles of inclusive education learning environments.

This analysis reveals that the issues of inclusive education in Zimbabwe are numerous and diverse requiring a coordinated approach to their solution. This should include policy change at the legislative level, a change of people's perception towards disability, the promotion of disability among disabled persons, and organizational change. The sought-for legislative changes should be targeted at building on the existing practices and guaranteeing that they are implemented fully (Van Mieghem et al., 2020).

Superiority of stakeholder engagement is needed, and this can be attained by establishing forums for conversation and interaction among teachers, policymakers, parents, and disabled persons (Triviño-Amigo et al., 2022). The concept of enabling people with one or more disabilities entails not only making education accessible for

them, but also engaging them in the decision making and functioning of the education systems (Makaya, 2022).

There is also a need for change within the cultural beliefs regarding such cases, and which, requires constant awareness creation and educational programs, to fight stereotypes (Makaya, 2023). By such synergy, it will be possible to systematically address the identified impediments to implementation of inclusion in education in Zimbabwe.

Thus, the study provides a clear picture of the challenges that one is likely to encounter in the achievement of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. This literature backs the holistic approach of supporting sustainable inclusive education because it does not call for measures from a single sector of the society or governance system but from all the sectors (Chidarikire, 2023; Dube et al., 2021; Nera & Nyikadzino, 2023; Yeboah et al., 2023; Yuwono & Okech, 2021).

It is only possible to make this necessary link if Zimbabwe adopts such a broad and coherent approach as the one sketched above that would help utilise the rhetorical commitments to inclusion for the benefit of students with disabilities and other groups in their interactions with schools as well as minimise the barriers that prevent schools from translating these commitments into practice.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of the study further indicate that there is inadequate parity between policy and legal growth in relation to promoting and practicing inclusion for students with disabilities in Zimbabwe and particularly in rural communities. Despite Zimbabwe having signed several international conventions with regard to students with disabilities there is always a lack of follow through with such pledges since the facilities are poor, resources scarce and proper teachers who understand students with disabilities not easily found.

The findings imply that more efficient and effective monitoring and evaluation should be applied in order to overcome such gaps. The actual realization of such an important and noble concept as inclusive education entails the participation of all the main stakeholders – disabled persons, teachers, policymakers, and the community. This way, the policies are made to be in-touch with the context and the community and this applies to Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, constant awareness, educational processes, and the insistence on the portrayal of diversity will need to be carried out in order to completely eliminate stereotyping and enforce people's tolerance. This is equally as significant as modifying infrastructural and policy-related issues that affect the integration of disabled students. Therefore, it can be claimed that in order to expand the gap between policy and practice, it is possible to speak about the application of a complex strategy.

Any such strategy should focus on modifications of the legal framework to improve those policies, teacher training and their professional growth, engagement of key stakeholders, and engagement of the community. It is also important to encourage the real involvement in the process of decision-making regarding education of people with disabilities.

Therefore, education cannot be a solitary affair, and all aspects of society and leadership need to jointly contribute to inclusive education. Through infrastructural development, upgrading of teachers training and knowledge, soliciting support of all involved stakeholders and altering people's perception of disability, the education system in Zimbabwe has the ability to be changed to effectively accommodate the diversities of all students.

The approach presented in this study, which is supported by the literature, is a comprehensive strategy for positive change. Perhaps, the approach proposed in the study might help to make education better and free from discriminative practices, and form an inclusive society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the research conclusions and discussions, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the realization of inclusive education in Zimbabwe. The schools and the government should:

- Include the development of sound frameworks for monitoring inclusive education initiatives effectiveness through the identification of specific yardsticks for its impact and use of such data for policy purposes.
- Optimise the course content of pre-service teacher training and focus on the development of core modules which deal with the concept of inclusive education, as well as initiate the process of continuous professional development for teachers serving in schools.
- Stake enough funds to improve the physical structures of schools especially in the rural areas to enhance their compliance with a barrier free environment for disabled students.
- Incorporate people with disabilities to engage fully in advocacy strategies for changes and foster partnerships, and mechanisms for sharing of the best practice models.
- Organise and implement programs such as awareness creation, capacity building through training, and advocacy with the view of altering people's perception towards disability.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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