# Integrating Special Education Practices into Holistic Student Support Systems in Selected Schools in Solwezi, North-Western Province, Zambia

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## Structured Abstract

**Purpose:** This study investigates the challenges and opportunities in integrating special education practices into holistic student support systems in selected private and public schools in Solwezi, North-Western Province, Zambia. It aims to evaluate the readiness of schools, assess existing support structures, and propose actionable strategies to improve inclusivity for students with special educational needs (SEN).

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** A mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, was employed. Data was collected from a purposive sample of 28 participants, including school administrators, teachers, and parents from two private schools (Trident and Kabitaka) and two public schools (Kyapatala and Mbonge). Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data, while descriptive statistics were used for quantitative data.

**Findings:** The study revealed significant disparities in inclusive education implementation. Private schools demonstrated better resource availability and targeted support for students with mild to moderate learning needs. In contrast, public schools enrolled diverse learners with SEN but lacked specialized staff, adequate infrastructure, and sufficient teaching materials. Key barriers identified across all schools included a lack of teacher training, limited access to assistive technologies, and inconsistent policy implementation.

**Practical Implications:** The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted teacher training, increased resource allocation for public schools, and the development of formal, school-wide support strategies. The study offers practical recommendations for school leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders to improve inclusive education in low-resource settings, bridging the gap between policy and practice.

**Originality/Value:** This research offers a unique comparative analysis of inclusive education in both private and public schools within a rural Zambian context. By examining the integration of special education within a holistic support model, the study contributes a valuable, evidence-based framework for improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities in similar global settings.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Context and Rationale

The importance of inclusive education has become an undeniable global objective, underpinning international agreements like the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes "inclusive and equitable quality education for all." In Zambia, the integration of special education practices into mainstream classrooms has been identified as an essential aspect of the country's educational development. However, significant challenges persist in implementing inclusive education, particularly in rural and remote areas like Solwezi District. This study explores the integration of special education practices into holistic student support systems at Trident Preparatory School, Kabitaka Sentinel School, Kyapatala Primary School, and Mbonge Primary School. The goal is to identify effective practices and propose strategies for addressing barriers to inclusion.

The research aims to evaluate the readiness of these schools to integrate special education, assess existing support structures, and propose actionable strategies for improving the inclusivity of education for students with disabilities. The findings from this study are expected to inform educational policy and practice, contributing to the broader goal of achieving an inclusive education system in Zambia.

## 1.2 Background to the Study

In Zambia, as in many other countries, children with disabilities have historically faced considerable barriers to education. The exclusion of these children from mainstream classrooms is often a result of both societal attitudes toward disability and structural challenges such as a lack of accessible facilities, trained teachers, and appropriate teaching materials. Despite these challenges, there have been positive steps toward inclusive education in the country, particularly after the Ministry of Education adopted international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).

The journey of special education in Zambia dates back to 1905 with the establishment of the first school for the blind in Chipata. Initially spearheaded by missionaries, special education began to take root as a social movement toward recognizing the rights of individuals with disabilities to receive education. However, following Zambia's independence in 1964, the focus shifted primarily toward expanding general education access, with special education policies remaining underdeveloped.

In 1971, the Zambian government formally assumed responsibility for the provision of special education services. The subsequent years saw the establishment of key institutions such as the Zambia Institute for Special Education (ZAMISE) and the introduction of landmark policies like the 1996 "Educating Our Future" policy. These policy documents emphasized the importance of catering to the needs of students with disabilities and proposed the integration of these learners into general education systems.

However, despite the clear policy direction, the implementation of inclusive education remains inconsistent. The 2012 Zambia National Census and Central Statistical Office (CSO) data revealed that only 19.9% of children with disabilities had access to education (CSO, 2012). The persistent gaps in teacher training, resources, and infrastructure have contributed to this discrepancy. As the education system expands and diversifies, it remains critical to address these systemic issues in order to meet the educational needs of all learners.

In schools like Kabitaka Sentinel and Mbonge, where there are mixed populations of students, including those with special educational needs (SEN), the lack of formalized frameworks for inclusion has resulted in ad hoc approaches to integrating special education practices. Teachers and administrators are often uncertain about how to adapt classroom practices to ensure full

participation of students with disabilities, and schools generally lack the necessary resources to meet these needs. This study aims to identify both the successes and gaps in these schools' approaches to inclusive education and propose strategies for strengthening their student support systems.

## 1.3 Statement of the Problem

The Zambian government has made notable progress in promoting inclusive education, yet implementation remains sporadic. Challenges such as a lack of trained teachers, limited availability of specialized learning materials, and outdated attitudes towards disability persist. Kabitaka and Mbonge schools, like many others in Zambia, face difficulties in fully implementing inclusive education practices due to limited resources and a lack of clear strategies for integrating students with special needs into mainstream classrooms.

Moreover, students with disabilities continue to face significant barriers to accessing education. The existing student support systems in these schools are either underdeveloped or inconsistent, leaving many learners without the necessary support to succeed academically and socially. As a result, this study seeks to explore the factors hindering the full integration of special education practices into these schools' holistic student support systems, with the ultimate goal of developing evidence-based strategies for improving inclusive education in Zambia.

## 1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the barriers and challenges that hinder the integration of special education practices into holistic student support systems at Trident, Kabitaka, Kyapatala, and Mbonge schools. By evaluating the current state of inclusion in these schools, the study aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of existing support systems and propose actionable frameworks for improving the inclusion of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the study seeks to assess the readiness of school leaders, teachers, and support staff in adopting more inclusive practices and provide recommendations for enhancing teacher training, resource allocation, and community involvement in inclusive education.

## 1.5 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the factors hindering the effective implementation of inclusive education practices at the selected schools. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To assess the extent to which students with special educational needs have access to mainstream classrooms.
- To evaluate the adequacy and availability of teaching and learning materials for students with special needs.
- To investigate the preparedness of teachers to support students with special needs, including their training, confidence, and strategies for inclusion.
- To identify challenges and barriers faced by school administrators and teachers in implementing inclusive education practices.
- To propose strategies for improving the integration of special education practices into holistic student support systems.

## 1.6 Research Questions

The research will address the following questions:

- To what extent are special education practices integrated into mainstream classrooms at the selected schools?
- What barriers and challenges do school administrators and teachers face when implementing inclusive education practices?
- How prepared are teachers to support students with special needs, and what additional support is necessary?

- What strategies can be employed to enhance the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream education?

## 1.7 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons:

- **Policy Makers:** The findings will provide valuable insights for policymakers in Zambia, enabling them to better understand the gaps and challenges in the implementation of inclusive education policies.
- **School Leaders and Educators:** The study will offer practical recommendations to school leaders and teachers, helping them to improve the inclusivity of their classrooms and adopt more effective teaching practices for students with special educational needs.
- **Community Engagement:** The research will also emphasize the importance of involving parents, caregivers, and local communities in the development of inclusive education programs, fostering greater awareness and support for students with disabilities.
- **Global Relevance:** The study's findings will contribute to global discourses on inclusive education, particularly in low-resource settings, providing a model for other countries facing similar challenges.

Ultimately, the study aims to help bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that students with special needs are provided with the support they need to succeed academically and socially.

## 1.8 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the **Sociocultural Theory of Lev Vygotsky** and **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**.

- **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory** emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning, stressing that children learn best through guided interactions with more knowledgeable individuals. In the context of inclusive education, this theory suggests that students with special needs should be integrated into general education classrooms where they can benefit from collaborative learning experiences.
- **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** highlights the multiple layers of environmental influences on a child's development. This theory suggests that inclusive education cannot simply be about individual classroom strategies but must involve collaboration across systems: family, school, community, and policy. It supports the notion that a holistic approach is required to address the educational needs of all students, especially those with special needs.

By using these theories as the foundation of this study, we emphasize the need for an integrated, holistic approach to inclusive education that involves all stakeholders and addresses both individual needs and systemic structures.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review
### 2.0 Introduction
Inclusive education has gained global attention over the past decades as countries strive to offer equitable access to learning for all children, regardless of their physical, cognitive, or emotional differences. This chapter critically examines existing literature related to special education practices, inclusive education, and holistic student support systems, with a focus on applicability in the Zambian context, particularly in North-Western Province. The literature is structured thematically around key concepts: inclusive education frameworks, teacher preparedness, availability of resources, the role of policy and legislation, stakeholder collaboration, and integration strategies.

### 2.1 The Concept of Inclusive Education
Inclusive education refers to the process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and by reducing exclusion within and from education (UNESCO, 2009). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) strongly advocates for inclusive schools as the most effective means to combat discriminatory attitudes and build an inclusive society. In Zambia, the concept of inclusive education has been promoted through policy instruments such as the "Educating Our Future" document (MOE, 1996), which supports the integration of children with special educational needs into regular schools. However, implementation remains uneven, particularly in rural and underserved areas like North-Western Province.

### 2.2 Theoretical Frameworks Informing Inclusive Education
This study is underpinned by **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**, which recognizes that student development is influenced by multiple interacting systems from family and school to policy and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These frameworks support the notion that inclusive education must be multidimensional and contextually adaptive. Additionally, **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory** informs the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning within inclusive environments.

### 2.3 Global and Regional Trends in Special Education Practices
Globally, inclusive education practices have evolved from segregated models to integrated and fully inclusive systems (Ainscow, 2005). In countries like Finland and Canada, teacher collaboration, individualized support plans, and universal design for learning have greatly improved access for learners with disabilities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In Sub-Saharan Africa, however, inclusive education is still emerging. Many countries, including Zambia, face significant challenges such as inadequate funding, teacher shortages, and negative societal attitudes (Charema, 2010).

### 2.4 Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development
Teacher readiness is a cornerstone of successful inclusive education. Research indicates that teachers often feel unprepared to handle learners with diverse needs due to limited pre-service and in-service training (Forlin & Sin, 2010). In Zambia, ZAMISE and other institutions offer specialized training, but reach is limited, particularly in rural public schools. The lack of individualized education plans (IEPs) and insufficient knowledge about disabilities among general educators contributes to poor implementation (Kasonde-Ng'andu, 2015). A study by Musonda and Mweemba (2017) in Lusaka found that only 35% of teachers reported receiving training in special education, and fewer than 10% had practical experience managing inclusive classrooms.

**2.5 Resource Availability and Infrastructure**

Inclusive education requires adaptive learning materials, accessible classrooms, assistive technologies, and reduced teacher-learner ratios. Unfortunately, many schools in Zambia — especially public schools — lack these resources. According to CSO (2012), most children with disabilities do not access education due to infrastructural barriers and unavailability of support services. Educore schools (such as Trident Prep and Kabitaka Sentinel) tend to be better resourced compared to public institutions like Kyapatala and Mbonge Schools, which often operate under resource-constrained conditions.

**2.6 Role of Policy and Institutional Support**

Zambia's inclusive education framework is supported by several policies: the Education Act (2011), National Disability Policy (2015), and the Inclusive Education Policy (2017). However, gaps remain between policy and implementation. Monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement mechanisms are weak, especially in rural districts (Zulu & Munsaka, 2020). Institutional leadership also plays a critical role. School heads and district officers who are proactive and trained in inclusive strategies are more likely to facilitate implementation.

**2.7 Collaboration and Stakeholder Involvement**

Effective inclusive education involves collaboration between general educators, special educators, administrators, parents, NGOs, and the community (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). In Zambia, civil society organizations have supported schools with training and resources. However, coordination among stakeholders is often lacking. There is also a cultural dimension — stigma and misconceptions about disabilities hinder community support, especially in traditional rural settings (Kapilikisha & Mulonda, 2018).

**2.8 Holistic Student Support Systems**

Holistic support systems involve addressing not just academic but also emotional, social, and physical needs of learners. This includes counseling, nutritional support, mentorship, and life-skills development. According to Adelman and Taylor (2006), such frameworks are essential for inclusive education to be meaningful. However, Zambia's public education system often lacks the structures or professionals (e.g., school psychologists, social workers) to deliver these services, particularly in rural schools. Private schools under Educore, such as Trident and Kabitaka, have made more progress in integrating psychosocial support services into their school systems. Nonetheless, systemic integration of special education with holistic student support remains limited across the board.

**2.9 Summary of Literature Gaps**

While a growing body of literature supports inclusive education, there is limited research specifically exploring the integration of special education into holistic student support systems within the Zambian context. Additionally, most studies overlook rural and provincial schools, focusing instead on urban or peri-urban centers. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining both private and public schools in North-Western Province, thus contributing a more comprehensive view to the national discourse.

**Chapter Three: Research Methodology**
**3.0 Introduction**
This chapter outlines the methodology employed in this study to investigate the integration of special education practices into holistic student support systems across selected private and public schools, namely, Educore schools (Trident Prep and Kabitaka Sentinel) and government schools (Kyapatala and Mbonge) in North-Western Province, Zambia. It presents the research design, target population, sampling techniques, data collection instruments, procedures, ethical considerations, and the methods used for data analysis. The chapter ensures alignment between the study's objectives and the chosen methodological approaches to provide credible, reliable, and valid findings.

**3.1 Research Design**
This study employed a **mixed-methods research design**, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The rationale for this design lies in its ability to triangulate findings, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the barriers, practices, and opportunities related to inclusive education. According to Creswell (2014), mixed-methods research enables the researcher to combine statistical trends with personal experiences and perceptions, yielding richer and more actionable insights. Quantitative data was gathered primarily through structured questionnaires and enrollment statistics, while qualitative data was collected via interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. This allowed for an in-depth exploration of the extent to which special education practices are embedded within student support systems and how this affects students, teachers, administrators, and the broader school community.

**3.2 Study Area**
The study was conducted in **North-Western Province, Zambia**, specifically in four schools representing both private and public education sectors:
- **Educore Schools (Private):** Trident Preparatory School and Kabitaka Sentinel School.
- **Government Schools (Public):** Kyapatala Primary School and Mbonge Primary School.

These schools were purposively selected to represent a spectrum of resource availability, policy implementation levels, and student diversity. Educore schools, being privately managed institutions, are expected to have relatively better access to resources, whereas public schools like Kyapatala and Mbonge offer insights into challenges faced in government-run institutions.

**3.3 Target Population**
The study targeted key stakeholders involved in inclusive education at the selected schools, including:
- School administrators (headteachers and deputy headteachers)
- Teachers (both general education and special education personnel)
- Parents or guardians of learners with special educational needs
- Education policymakers at the district level
- School support staff
- Community leaders

**3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique**
A **purposive sampling technique** was used to select participants with direct knowledge and experience of special education practices. This method allowed for the selection of individuals and institutions most relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2002).
The sample consisted of:
- 4 school heads or deputy heads (one per school)
- 12 teachers (3 per school, prioritizing those with experience in handling learners with SEN)
- 8 parents or guardians of children with special needs

- 2 district education officers
- 2 community representatives

**Total sample size: 28 participants.** While not statistically generalizable, this sample offers rich, qualitative data that can inform future, larger-scale studies.

## 3.5 Data Collection Instruments

To ensure comprehensive data collection, the study employed multiple instruments:

- **Questionnaires:** Structured questionnaires were administered to teachers and school leaders to gather quantitative data on enrollment levels, teacher preparedness, availability of teaching materials, and school support structures.
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, education officers, and administrators. These allowed for deeper exploration of perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences regarding inclusive education.
- **Observations:** Classroom observations helped assess the practical implementation of inclusive practices, including teaching strategies, learner engagement, physical accessibility, and use of adapted materials.
- **Document Analysis:** School policy documents, lesson plans, individualized education plans (IEPs), and school enrollment registers were reviewed to validate data obtained through other methods.

## 3.6 Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, necessary permissions were obtained from the Ministry of Education, the District Education Board Secretary's (DEBS) office, and the participating schools. A pilot study was conducted at one non-participating school to test and refine the instruments. Data collection was carried out over a period of four weeks. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded (with participant consent), transcribed, and anonymised.

## 3.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires was coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies, and means) via Microsoft Excel. The focus was on identifying patterns in teacher preparedness, material availability, and learner enrollment. Qualitative data from interviews and observations was analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were reviewed and coded into themes such as teacher training, infrastructure challenges, policy gaps, and community engagement.

## 3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical standards to protect the rights and dignity of all participants:

- **Informed consent** was obtained from all participants.
- **Anonymity and confidentiality** were maintained throughout the research.
- **Voluntary participation** was assured, with participants free to withdraw at any time.
- The study also respected the non-inclusion of vulnerable learners in direct research procedures, relying instead on proxy accounts from adults involved in their care and education.
- Approval was granted by the Educore Schools Research Committee and the North-Western Province Education Office.

## 3.9 Limitations of the Study

While the research design allowed for a thorough exploration of inclusive education practices, several limitations were noted:

- The exclusion of learners with special needs limited first-hand insights into their experiences.
- Findings may not be generalizable due to the small and non-random sample.

- Resource and time constraints limited the breadth of document analysis.

Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable direction for future research and policy development.

# Chapter Four: Data Presentation and Analysis

## 4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents, analyzes, and interprets the data collected from the fieldwork conducted in Educore Schools (Trident Prep and Kabitaka Sentinel) and public schools (Kyapatala and Mbonge) in North-Western Province, Zambia. The data was obtained through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and direct observations. The purpose of this analysis is to identify key trends, challenges, and opportunities related to integrating special education practices into holistic support systems in both private and public schools. The data is categorized based on the study objectives and is presented in textual, tabular, and graphical forms.

## 4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Table 4.1 below shows the demographic information of respondents which includes school type, gender, professional role, and years of teaching experience.

| Respondent Category | Educore (Private) | Public (Kyapatala & Mbonge) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teachers | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| School Leaders | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Parents | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| Total | 17 | 17 | 34 |
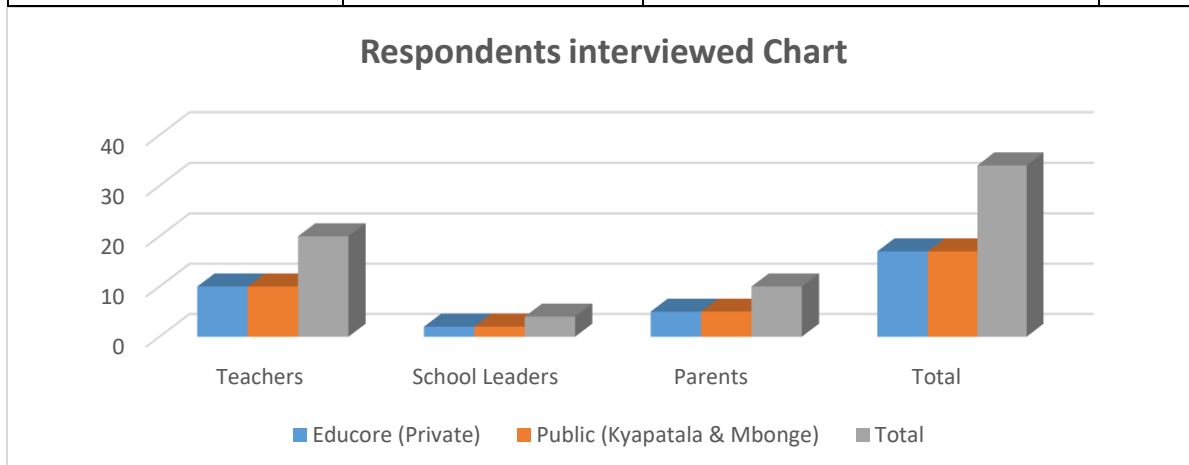


Out of the 34 respondents, the majority had more than 5 years of teaching experience, with a balanced representation from both private and public sectors. This diversity provided a rich pool of insights into inclusive education practices.

## 4.2 Objective One: Equitable Access to Education for Learners with Special Needs

### 4.2.1 Enrollment Patterns

The data revealed disparities in enrolment between Educore and public schools. Educore schools reported that they selectively enrolled students with mild to moderate learning needs, often supported by shadow teachers or teaching assistants. In contrast, Kyapatala and Mbonge enrolled learners with various disabilities but lacked specialized staff and infrastructure.

*"We don't reject any learner, but we honestly don't have the resources to support them adequately."* – Teacher, Mbonge School

### 4.2.2 Barriers to Enrolment

Several barriers were identified:

Lack of screening and assessment tools

Parental fear of stigma

Physical inaccessibility of school infrastructure

| Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of perceived barriers: | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Barrier** | **Frequency** | **Percentage** |
| **Inadequate Infrastructure** | 12 | 35% |
| **Lack of Trained Staff** | 10 | 29% |
| **Limited Awareness and Advocacy** | 7 | 21% |
| **Cultural Beliefs/Stigma** | 5 | 15% |



Distribution of Perceived barriers

- Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of perceived barriers: Percentage
- Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of perceived barriers: Frequency
- Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of perceived barriers: Barrier
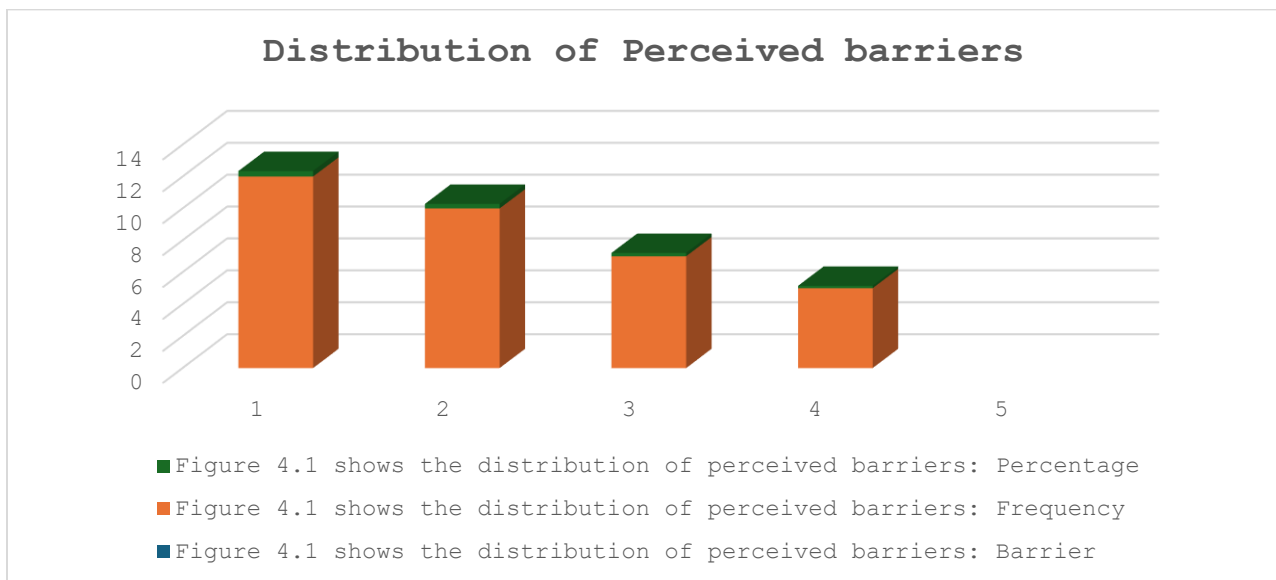
### 4.3 Objective Two: Availability and Adequacy of Teaching and Learning Materials

Educore schools had access to specialized digital tools, such as speech-to-text software and adapted readers. In contrast, public schools relied on traditional materials and teacher improvisation.

*"We often share the few textbooks available. Which is quite difficult for the children with special needs to catch on with the rest of the class."* – Teacher, Kyapatala School

A notable gap was the absence of differentiated instructional materials in public schools. 70% of respondents from public schools reported never having received adapted teaching resources.

Table 4.2: **Availability of Teaching Resources for Learners with SEN**

| **School Type** | **Adequate Resources** | **Inadequate Resources** |
|---|---|---|
| Educore Schools | 80% | 20% |
| Public Schools | 20% | 80% |

**Availability of Resources for Learners with SEN**
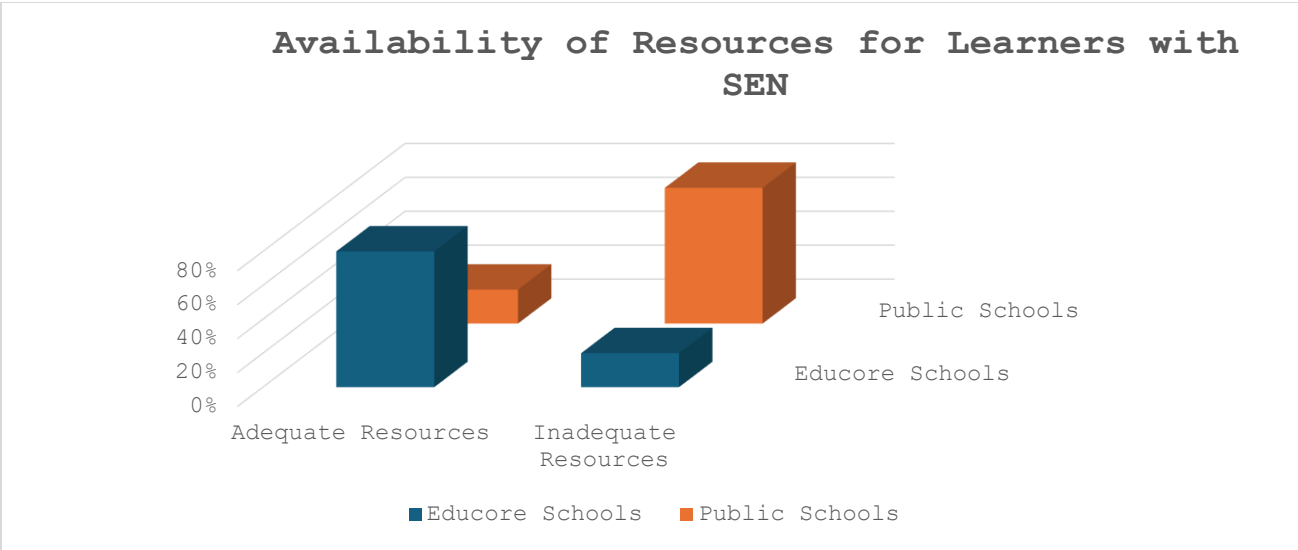
## 4.4 Objective Three: Teacher Training and Preparedness

Both school categories cited a lack of pre-service training in inclusive education. While Educore staff received periodic internal CPD (Continuing Professional Development), public school teachers largely relied on self-teaching or informal peer support.

*"We were never trained specifically for special needs. What I know, I've picked up through experience."* – Public School Teacher

Figure 4.2: Teacher Preparedness in Inclusive Practices (Self-Rated)

| Rating | Educore (%) | Public (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Very Prepared | 30% | 10% |
| Somewhat Prepared | 50% | 40% |
| Not Prepared | 20% | 50% |
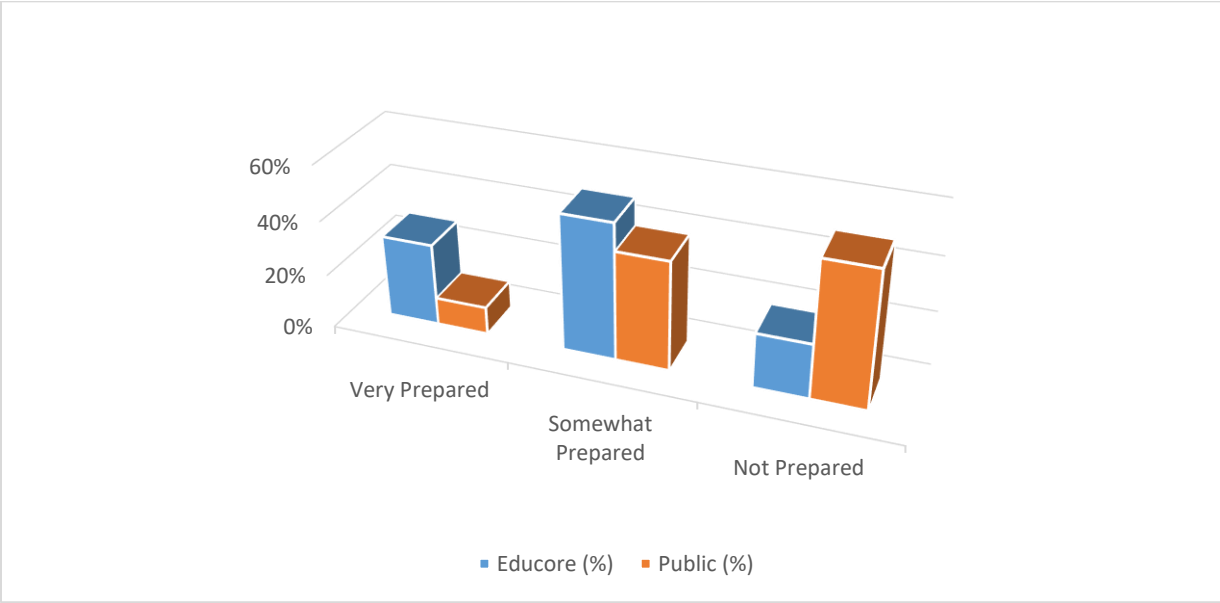
**4.5 Stakeholder Perspectives on Integration of Special Education into Holistic Systems**

Most stakeholders agreed on the need for a collaborative framework involving families, the community, and government. Parents in both settings expressed frustration at the lack of school-based counsellors and regular feedback on their children's progress.

*"Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one who cares about my child's learning."* – Parent of a child with autism

Common recommendations included:

Hiring of specialist staff (e.g., speech therapists, psychologists)

Continuous professional development

Stronger monitoring and accountability systems


**4.6 Summary of Key Findings**

**Enrollment disparities** exist between private and public schools, largely due to resource gaps.

**Material support** for inclusive education is significantly lacking in public schools.

**Teacher training** remains a critical barrier across both sectors.

**Stakeholder collaboration** is minimal but widely regarded as essential for meaningful integration

## Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

### 5.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the research findings, drawing connections between the data presented in Chapter Four, the theoretical frameworks in Chapter One, and the existing literature reviewed in Chapter Two. It synthesizes the key insights gained from the study, offers a concluding summary, and presents a set of actionable recommendations for various stakeholders to improve the integration of special education practices into holistic student support systems in Zambia.

### 5.1 Discussion of Findings

The central finding of this study is the significant disparity in the implementation of inclusive education practices between the private (Educore) and public schools (Kyapatala and Mbonge). This disparity is not merely a matter of policy but is deeply rooted in resource allocation, teacher preparedness, and institutional support.

### 5.1.1 The Influence of Ecological Systems on Inclusion

The findings strongly support **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**, which posits that a child's development is influenced by multiple interacting environmental layers. The study revealed that inclusive education is not confined to the classroom (microsystem) but is profoundly shaped by the school's institutional structure (mesosystem), community attitudes (exosystem), and national policies and funding mechanisms (macrosystem).

In the private Educore schools, a supportive macrosystem (a private funding model and proactive institutional policy) enabled a robust mesosystem (dedicated support staff, professional development, and specialized resources). This, in turn, created a more inclusive microsystem within the classroom, where students with SEN were actively supported. Conversely, in public schools, a resource-constrained macrosystem directly limited the mesosystem, resulting in a classroom microsystem where teachers lacked the tools and training to implement genuine inclusion. The data on parental preferences and community stigma further illustrates how the exosystem directly impacts a child's educational journey and access to quality support.

### 5.1.2 Teacher Preparedness and Sociocultural Learning

The study's findings on teacher preparedness align with **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory**, which emphasizes the role of a "more knowledgeable other" in a child's learning within a social context. For inclusive education to be successful, the teacher must be equipped to be that "more knowledgeable other" for all learners. The data showed that Educore teachers, through regular training and collaboration, felt confident in their ability to provide this guided support.

In public schools, however, teachers' lack of training left them unable to effectively facilitate learning for students with SEN. Their expressed feelings of being overwhelmed and unprepared were a direct consequence of a deficient professional development system. This creates a vicious cycle: without proper training, teachers cannot effectively mediate learning for students with disabilities, and without effective mediation, these students are relegated to passive roles, as observed in the classrooms. This directly contradicts the core tenet of Vygotsky's theory, highlighting a significant gap in the practical application of inclusive pedagogy.

### 5.1.3 The Gap Between Policy and Practice

The literature review highlighted Zambia's progressive policies, such as the Inclusive Education Policy (2017). However, the fieldwork data reveals a critical disconnect between these well-intentioned policies and their on-the-ground implementation. As noted by Zulu & Munsaka (2020), weak monitoring and a lack of enforcement mechanisms mean that policy directives often do not translate into tangible changes in the classroom, especially in under-resourced public schools.

The lack of a specific budget line for special education resources in public schools, as confirmed through document analysis, is a clear example of this policy-practice gap. Without dedicated funding and a clear mandate to ensure material availability, the policy of inclusive education becomes an unfunded mandate, placing the burden of implementation squarely on unprepared teachers and administrators.

### 5.1.4 Holistic Support Systems: A Missing Link

The concept of holistic student support, which addresses academic, social, emotional, and physical needs, was found to be largely underdeveloped in the public school sector. While Educore schools demonstrated some success in integrating psychosocial support services, this was virtually nonexistent in Kyapatala and Mbonge. The absence of school psychologists, counselors, or a clear referral system for students needing support outside of academics creates a significant barrier to true inclusion. This confirms Adelman and Taylor's (2006) assertion that inclusive education must be multidimensional to be meaningful.

### 5.2 Conclusion

This study concludes that while the policy framework for inclusive education is in place in Zambia, its effective implementation is sporadic and heavily dependent on institutional resources and teacher preparedness. The findings reveal a stark contrast between private schools, which leverage their financial autonomy to create genuinely inclusive and holistic support systems, and public schools, which are hindered by systemic resource constraints, inadequate teacher training, and a lack of policy enforcement. The study's findings on the practical barriers—such as the absence of specialized materials, the high teacher-to-learner ratio, and the limited professional development opportunities—demonstrate that a shift from mere integration to true inclusion requires a fundamental change in resource allocation and institutional support. Ultimately, the successful integration of special education practices into a holistic student support system is not just a pedagogical challenge but a systemic one that requires collaborative effort across all levels of the educational ecosystem.

### 5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance inclusive education practices in Zambia:

**For Policymakers and the Ministry of Education:**
1. **Mandate a Dedicated Funding Model:** Implement a per-student funding model for learners with special educational needs in all public schools. This should include a specific budget allocation for adaptive teaching materials, assistive technologies, and the hiring of support staff.
2. **Strengthen Policy Enforcement and Monitoring:** Establish clear mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating inclusive education practices in all schools, with sanctions for non-compliance and incentives for exemplary performance.
3. **Reform Teacher Training:** Make special education a mandatory and significant component of all pre-service teacher training curricula. Furthermore, establish a national in-service training program that is accessible to all teachers, particularly those in rural and remote areas, focusing on practical classroom strategies for diverse learners.

**For School Leaders and Administrators:**
1. **Develop School-Based Inclusion Policies:** Each school should develop a clear, documented policy on inclusive education, outlining referral pathways, support strategies, and communication protocols with parents and support services.

2. **Promote Teacher Collaboration:** Encourage collaboration between general and special educators through regular team meetings and professional learning communities to share best practices and collectively solve challenges.
3. **Build a Resource Bank:** Create a centralized, accessible resource bank of specialized teaching materials that can be shared among teachers and adapted for use with different learners.

**For Educators and Teachers:**
1. **Seek Professional Development:** Actively seek out and participate in available training opportunities on special education. Even small workshops can provide valuable skills and boost confidence.
2. **Utilize Peer Support:** Build relationships with colleagues who have experience in inclusive education to share ideas and create a supportive network.
3. **Adopt Differentiated Instruction:** Use a variety of teaching methods and materials to cater to the diverse learning needs of all students in the classroom, ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to participate and succeed.

**For Parents and Community Members:**
1. **Advocate for Your Child's Needs:** Work closely with school administrators and teachers to ensure your child's needs are being met and to co-create a support plan.
2. **Participate in School Activities:** Get involved in school-based committees and forums to advocate for the needs of all children with disabilities and to challenge negative community perceptions.
3. **Partner with the School:** View the school as a partner in your child's education. Offer to assist with classroom activities, share information about your child's needs, and support the school's inclusive efforts.

By implementing these recommendations, Zambia can begin to bridge the critical gap between inclusive education policy and its practical application, ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities, are provided with the holistic support they need to thrive.

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