# Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Education: Parents' Perceptions in Rural Areas of Mudzi District, Zimbabwe

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**Abstract**

This study examined parents' perceptions in Mudzi District, Zimbabwe, regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education. Inclusive education is a fundamental right ensuring equal learning for all, yet children with disabilities still face discrimination, stigma, and infrastructural barriers. This qualitative research used structured interviews with 12 parents: 4 parents of children with disabilities and 8 parents of children without disabilities selected through snowball sampling. The findings showed many parents were concerned about teachers' ability to manage inclusive classrooms effectively. They also felt disappointed by the lack of attention to their children's needs and the limited learning resources. Economic challenges and cultural beliefs linking disability with misfortune further hinder acceptance. The study underscores the need for improved teacher training, awareness campaigns, and coordinated efforts to support inclusive practices.

*Penelitian ini mengkaji persepsi orang tua di Distrik Mudzi, Zimbabwe, mengenai inklusi anak penyandang disabilitas dalam pendidikan anak usia dini. Pendidikan inklusif diakui secara global sebagai hak mendasar yang memberi kesempatan belajar setara bagi semua anak. Namun, anak penyandang disabilitas sering menghadapi diskriminasi, sikap negatif, dan hambatan infrastruktur yang membatasi akses. Penelitian kualitatif ini menggunakan wawancara terstruktur dengan 12 orang tua: 4 orang tua anak penyandang disabilitas dan 8 orang tua anak tanpa disabilitas yang dipilih melalui snowball sampling. Temuan menunjukkan banyak orang tua khawatir pada kemampuan guru mengelola kelas inklusif secara efektif. Mereka juga kecewa atas kurangnya perhatian terhadap kebutuhan anak dan terbatasnya sumber belajar. Tantangan ekonomi dan keyakinan budaya yang mengaitkan disabilitas dengan kemalangan turut menghambat penerimaan. Penelitian ini menekankan perlunya peningkatan pelatihan guru, kampanye penyadaran, dan upaya terkoordinasi untuk mendukung praktik inklusif.*

## A. Introduction

Inclusive education is more than just placing children with disabilities in regular classrooms; it is a dynamic framework for creating equitable learning environments for all students (Shaeffer, 2019). This approach involves adjusting teaching methods, infrastructure, and support services to ensure meaningful participation. Inclusive learning has been shown to promote fairness and enrich students' experiences with and without disabilities (Rogahang et al., 2024). From an early age, inclusion encourages empathy, acceptance, and a sense of belonging (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). However, inclusion does not happen automatically, as family socialisation and societal attitudes often present obstacles to acceptance (Leidy & Parke, 2015). Therefore, inclusive early childhood education programs are vital for building socially just societies. Furthermore, early inclusion creates long-term educational and economic benefits by supporting a smooth transition from school to employment, allowing individuals with disabilities to contribute meaningfully to national development (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021).

International frameworks have firmly established inclusive education as a fundamental right for all children (de Beco, 2022). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) affirms every child's right to education without discrimination. It recognises the entitlement of children with disabilities to special care and support to ensure their effective access to education (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). This principle is strengthened by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which in Article 24 obligates states to guarantee an inclusive education system at all levels and to provide reasonable accommodation to facilitate learning (United Nations, 2022). These commitments are further reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all  (United Nations, 2015).

Within the African context, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) underscores the right to education for children with disabilities and obliges member states to take measures to ensure their full participation. In Zimbabwe, these commitments are reflected in national policies such as the Education Act (1987, revised 2020) and the Zimbabwe Early Learning Policy (The Education Act, 2020), which emphasizes the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream early childhood education. Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs targeting children aged four to six encompass ECD A (4-5-year-olds) and B (5-6-year-olds) classes, which are considered an important entry point for inclusive practices  (Rose M. Mugweni, 2017), supporting cognitive, social, and emotional development while enabling early identification and intervention (Chinhara & Kuyayama, 2024).

Despite these policy frameworks, inclusive education in Zimbabwe, particularly in rural areas, continues to face significant challenges. Limited resources, shortages of trained teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate infrastructure often constrain the realisation of inclusive ideals (Majoko, 2018). Cultural and religious beliefs further complicate efforts, as disabilities are sometimes attributed to supernatural causes or interpreted as social stigma, which can marginalise families and limit community acceptance of inclusive practices (Haihambo & Lightfoot, 2010; Mukushi et al., 2019; Nxumalo & Mchunu, 2017). While several studies have examined educators' perspectives and policy-level challenges, there is limited empirical evidence on how parents in rural districts such as Mudzi perceive inclusive early childhood education and how these perceptions influence participation, acceptance, and advocacy for children with disabilities  (Taderera & Hall, 2017).

Parents are critical stakeholders in early learning. Their perceptions, expectations, and beliefs significantly influence whether children with disabilities are enrolled in inclusive settings and how

effectively they participate (Stark et al., 2011). Research in various African contexts shows that cultural norms, socio-economic status, prior exposure to inclusive education, and parents' educational backgrounds shape attitudes toward inclusion (Barrio et al., 2019; Paseka & Schwab, 2020).

Cultural context plays a particularly influential role in shaping perceptions. In many African communities, disability is associated with stigma, ridicule, or supernatural beliefs that can undermine support for inclusion (Nanthambwe & Magezi, 2025). For example, in Botswana, traditional beliefs have reduced parents' willingness to embrace inclusive practices (Abosi & Koay, 2008; Jonas, 2014). In Namibia, disabilities are sometimes attributed to witchcraft or improper family relationships, resulting in negative community attitudes (Haihambo & Lightfoot, 2010). These social norms often affect how parents perceive their children's participation and how peers interact with them in schools.

Beyond cultural factors, the type and severity of a child's disability, personal experiences, and the availability of resources strongly influence parental attitudes. Parents are more supportive when they have positive experiences, adequate information, and trust in teachers' capacity to address diverse needs (Babik & Gardner, 2021). Conversely, concerns arise when schools lack trained staff, appropriate materials, or individualized plans (Barrio et al., 2019). However, in Zimbabwe—especially in rural districts like Mudzi—there is limited empirical evidence on how parents perceive inclusion and what challenges or enabling factors shape these perceptions. Given these considerations, further investigation is necessary to contextualise inclusive education practices in rural Zimbabwe.

Addressing this gap is essential for shaping policies and practices responsive to local realities. Understanding parents' perspectives can assist stakeholders in designing targeted interventions to raise awareness, foster trust, and enhance the quality of inclusive education services in rural communities. In this context, the present study aims to explore and analyse parents' perceptions in Mudzi District concerning the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education. The study investigates explicitly parents' experiences of inclusion in early learning for children with and without disabilities in the Zimbabwean rural setting.

Unlike previous research that has mainly focused on educators' perspectives or policy-level barriers, this study focuses on rural Zimbabwean parents' perceptions of inclusion in early childhood education, a topic largely overlooked in existing research. By comparing the experiences of parents of children with and without disabilities in Mudzi District, the study reveals unique cultural and socio-economic factors shaping attitudes and practices, offering valuable insights to inform policy and intervention strategies, and strengthening inclusive early learning.

## B. Research Methods

The study was conducted in Mudzi District, a rural area in Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe, with a predominantly agrarian economy and extensive subsistence farming. Educational infrastructure is limited, with many schools under-resourced despite establishing early childhood education programmes across the district to improve access. Socio-cultural dynamics are shaped by traditional values and customs, with community leaders and spirit mediums exerting considerable influence on local attitudes and decisions. Extended family structures are common, and grandparents and relatives play key roles in childcare and socialisation. These contextual factors provide a meaningful backdrop for examining parental perceptions and practices regarding early childhood education in rural settings.

The study adopted an interpretive research philosophy to explore parents' perceptions of the inclusion of children with disabilities in early learning. This approach facilitated understanding the meanings participants ascribed to inclusion within their natural socio-cultural context (Creswell,

2014). A qualitative design was employed to give voice to parents of children with and without disabilities. It enabled in-depth probing of their views and experiences in ways that purely quantitative data could not capture (Cohen et al., 2017). Specifically, a phenomenological approach was used to describe the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of inclusion among parents in Mudzi District (Creswell, 2014). This approach emphasises understanding everyday life as participants perceive it, allowing their perspectives to emerge with minimal reinterpretation by the researcher (VanderStoep & Johnston, 2009).

The study purposively selected 12 parents whose children were enrolled in early learning programmes at two schools in Mudzi District. The 12 participants identified through snowball sampling were 4 parents of children with disabilities and 8 parents of children without disabilities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights. All participants were adults who provided informed consent after receiving clear information about the study's purpose. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any stage without any consequence or expectation of material benefit.

Table 1 summarises participants' demographic characteristics. Most were female caregivers, reflecting cultural norms of childcare responsibility. Educational attainment ranged from primary to tertiary education, which may influence parents' perceptions of inclusive education.

Table 1
Demographic Data of the Participants

| Level of education | Number of Participants | Gender | Parents of Children with Disability | Parents of Children without Disability |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Primary school education | 5 | 1 male 4 females | P1 and P2 | P5, P6, and P7 |
| Secondary school education | 6 | 1 male 5 females | P3 and P4 | P8, P9, P10 and P11 |
| Tertiary level | 1 | 1 female | 0 | P12 |

Source: author's analysis (2023).

After obtaining permission to visit parents in the area, the researchers scheduled interviews in advance at dates and times convenient for each participant to minimise disruption. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes. All data were anonymised to protect participants' privacy.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data. This approach enabled the researchers to identify and explore underlying themes and patterns in the interview transcripts, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the topic. Gray (2004) explains that qualitative data analysis is a rigorous and logical process through which data are given meaning. Both researchers independently immersed themselves in the data, assigned codes to relevant segments, and refined themes through an iterative process. To enhance credibility, participants were invited to review summaries of their statements (member checking) to confirm accuracy and ensure that interpretations reflected their intended meaning.

This study was conducted for professional development purposes without financial support or sponsorship from any institution. Ethical principles governing educational research were strictly observed to ensure participants were treated with dignity, fairness, and respect. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from relevant community authorities, including traditional leaders. All participants received clear information about the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including voluntary participation and withdrawal without penalty, and provided informed consent. To protect privacy, data were anonymised, pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was stored securely and accessed only by the researchers. Cultural sensitivity guided all

activities to align with local values and norms. The research only involved interviews on educational experiences, so it posed minimal risk. These ethical practices ensured compliance with established standards and enhanced the credibility and contextual relevance of the findings (Garg et al., 2022).

## C. Result & Discussion

This section presents and discusses the study's results on parents' perspectives and experiences related to the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education. The following themes emerged from the findings: benefits and positive outcomes, challenges and barriers, factors influencing parental views, support systems and resources, and strategies for programme development.

### 1. Benefits and Positive Outcomes of Inclusion

Some parents recognised the value of inclusive education as a means to promote acceptance, empathy, and diversity among children. Participants with at least secondary education appeared more aware of the potential benefits of inclusion, perceiving it as an opportunity to reduce discrimination and foster social inclusion. P9 remarked, "Children with disabilities also learn from those without disabilities that we are all human, which helps them not to look down on those with disabilities. In turn, they learn to show love to those with disabilities."

Similarly, P12 highlighted that inclusive environments enable children to develop essential life skills, such as patience and understanding, by interacting with peers with different abilities. P12 said, "Children with disabilities learn essential skills and interact with able-bodied peers, developing empathy, patience, and understanding. Inclusive environments benefit all children by exposing them to diverse learning styles and real-world scenarios, promoting academic growth and empathy." The results of this study are consistent with findings by scholars who argue that inclusive learning environments can support academic growth and foster a sense of belonging for all learners (Li & Singh, 2022; Long & Guo, 2023).

Despite these positive perceptions, some parents noted that cultural beliefs continued to shape attitudes toward inclusion. For example, P1 described how his child was generally accepted and played well with others, but occasionally faced jeering and negative comments. P1 reported that, "My child was friendly, sociable, played with others well, and in rare cases, there have complained of incidents of fighting or incidents of jeering. The child seemed to be getting on well with other children." This ambivalence reflects the influence of prevailing cultural narratives that associate disabilities with curses or supernatural punishment (Mukushi et al., 2019). In communities where disability is perceived as a form of misfortune, social stigma often extends to families, which can discourage participation in inclusive programmes (Nxumalo & Mchunu, 2017).

The tendency for more educated parents to express positive views aligns with the study, which found that educational attainment correlates with higher acceptance of inclusive practices (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). This suggests that awareness-raising efforts targeting parents with limited formal education may be critical for expanding understanding of inclusive education's benefits. Moreover, these findings highlight the importance of early exposure to inclusive settings as a strategy to normalise diversity and reduce bias among children. Overall, while several parents appreciated the potential of inclusive education to cultivate respect and empathy, lingering cultural misconceptions posed barriers to fully embracing inclusion. Addressing these challenges requires both community-level sensitisation initiatives and capacity-building efforts that equip educators and families to support children with disabilities more effectively.

## 2. Factors Influencing Parental Views

Parental awareness of inclusive education varied considerably among participants. The concept of inclusive education is often misinterpreted or misunderstood, especially among parents with lower levels of education. Some parents, particularly those with lower levels of formal education, perceived inclusion merely as the physical placement of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms without recognising the need for tailored support, resources, and teacher training. As P4 explained, "No one talked to us about inclusive education. We are used to situations where these children (with disabilities) attend their special schools because they disturb our children." Concerns about how inclusion might affect their own children's learning were widespread among parents of children without disabilities.

Parents of children without disabilities generally view inclusive education with skepticism. This uncertainty is associated with apprehensions that their children's learning might be negatively impacted by the presence of children with disabilities, when teachers are not adequately trained to manage diverse children. P5 remarked, "Some of these children are troublesome; they tear books and do not write properly. The teacher should just ignore them." Some parents of children without disabilities have negative views on inclusion, and these can cause children with disabilities to be withdrawn from school.

These perspectives suggest a limited understanding of inclusive education principles and underscore persistent stereotypes that children with disabilities cannot learn effectively. Odongo (2018) documented similar findings, noting that parents often fear that teachers will be overwhelmed by diverse needs, compromising the education of children without disabilities. UNESCO (2009) further highlighted that misconceptions can discourage parental support for inclusive practices.

The lack of awareness regarding the educational rights of children with disabilities contributes to the perpetuation of exclusionary attitudes (Hirpa, 2021). The tendency to view disabilities through a deficit lens reinforces stigma and undermines efforts to promote equity in early learning settings. As Paseka & Schwab (2020) observed that strengthening parental understanding of inclusive education is essential for cultivating more supportive attitudes. These findings indicate that targeted community sensitisation programmes and accessible information about inclusive education policies could play a pivotal role in reshaping parental perceptions and fostering acceptance.

## 3. Challenges and Barriers

Many parents of children with disabilities expressed dissatisfaction with the extent to which their children benefited from inclusive early learning. P1 observed:

> You can have a look at my child's book—there is nothing meaningful written here. I am just wasting my money. The teacher does not pay any attention to my child. It is better if the child stays at home.

Similarly, P3 reported that her child, who was repeating ECD A, still could not identify numbers from one to ten, raising concerns about the effectiveness of instructional practices. These experiences illustrate widespread perceptions that teachers lack the training and resources necessary to address diverse learning needs. Taderera & Hall (2017) similarly found that many parents believe schools are ill-prepared to meet the educational requirements of children with disabilities, a sentiment rooted in cultural norms and systemic neglect.

Economic constraints further compounded these challenges. Several parents noted the inability to afford specialised learning materials or assistive devices, which are often expensive and difficult to

access in rural communities. P1 explained, "The issue of availability of resources and allocation is one of the biggest challenges encountered in inclusion." Rural schools are disadvantaged because parents lack the financial resources to support schools. The situation is worsened when there are children with disabilities who may require assistive devices. Parents of children without disabilities also expressed apprehension that scarce educational resources would be diverted, potentially compromising the quality of learning for all students. These concerns align with Makori & Onderi (2014) which revealed that several barriers exist that influence parental involvement in ECD, including low levels of education, low socio-economic status, and cultural constraints as critical barriers to effective inclusion.

Despite these obstacles, some parents acknowledged positive social outcomes associated with inclusive education. P8 observed, "Children see themselves as equals and will not discriminate against those with disabilities, nor will they see other children as lesser; they do not stigmatise." However, these views coexisted with entrenched negative attitudes within schools and communities. As P6 noted, "Negative attitudes and beliefs of staff, families, and the community are some challenges that are faced daily with regards to inclusion. Some may have misconceptions about the capabilities of children with disabilities among others"

Such findings are consistent with Taderera & Hall (2017), who documented low levels of disability awareness and pervasive stereotypes in Zimbabwean schools. This suggests that while inclusion has potential benefits, its success depends on addressing structural and attitudinal barriers. The results highlight the interplay between inadequate resources, limited teacher preparation, and persistent stigma undermining inclusive practices. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated interventions, including increased funding for infrastructure and materials, specialised training for educators, and sustained community sensitisation initiatives to combat cultural misconceptions.

## 4. Support Systems and Resources

Resources are vital for successfully implementing inclusion in early learning programs. Participants identified limited resources and insufficient support systems as significant barriers to effective inclusion. The lack of trained teachers became a significant concern, with many educators lacking specialised skills to support children with disabilities. P12 remarked,

> *The other challenge pertains to the lack of relevantly qualified personnel who can effectively implement inclusion practices in the schools. The educators do not receive specific training in inclusion practices; they rarely work with children who have special needs while training.*

These concerns echo findings that reported that pre-service teacher training rarely includes components on inclusive pedagogy, leaving educators underprepared for diverse classrooms (Majoko, 2018).

In addition to human resource challenges, infrastructural barriers were prevalent. P2 expressed, "Children with disabilities have difficulties in getting to toilets and classrooms due to unavailable ramps." This reflects the previous research that early childhood development programmes in disadvantaged schools often lack age-appropriate facilities and adequate learning materials (Chinhara & Kuyayama, 2024; Rose M. Mugweni, 2017).

The absence of a dedicated policy framework on inclusive education compounds these limitations. While Zimbabwe relies on the Education Act (2020) and constitutional provisions, these documents lack detailed guidance on implementation, funding, and accountability mechanisms. P11 highlighted the need for targeted interventions:

*There is a need for more opportunities for teachers to attend workshops, short courses, and seminars on inclusion practices. It would also be important for specialised support staff like speech therapists to be easily accessible. Workshops that educate families about inclusion should be initiated and strengthened. Adequate funding is necessary to acquire resources that facilitate inclusion. Policies that mandate inclusive practices in early learning programmes should be advocated for and supported.*

These insights are consistent with a previous study that advocates the formation of parent organisations to promote advocacy, training, and resource mobilisation. Without dedicated funding and clear policies, schools struggle to provide inclusive learning environments that meet the diverse needs of all learners (Mariga et al., 2014). The findings underscore the interplay between infrastructural inadequacies, insufficient teacher preparation, and policy gaps that collectively constrain inclusion. Addressing these issues requires integrated efforts to improve physical access, build teacher capacity, establish clear regulatory frameworks, and mobilise community support.

## 5. Strategies for Enhancing Inclusion in Early Learning

Participants identified various strategies to enhance the inclusivity of early learning programs. A common theme was the need for more funding to upgrade infrastructure and acquire learning resources specific to children with disabilities. P6 emphasised: "Government and other stakeholders should create partnerships that will work towards addressing gaps in inclusion. There is a need to establish more funding avenues for early childhood inclusive programmes." These perspectives are consistent with a literature that documented parents in Sri Lanka similarly called for government-led initiatives to raise awareness about inclusive education and secure additional funding (Jazeel, 2017). In the Zimbabwean context, Dube et al. (2021) also highlights the importance of specialised teacher training, financial assistance for families, and improvements in school infrastructure.

In addition to financial support, participants underscored the critical role of teacher capacity-building. They argued that efforts to mainstream inclusion would remain largely symbolic without adequate pre-service and in-service training on inclusive pedagogies. Furthermore, several parents recommended that workshops and community sensitisation campaigns be prioritised to counter pervasive stigma and misconceptions about disability. As P11 suggested, "Workshops that educate families about inclusion should be initiated and strengthened. Adequate funding is necessary to acquire resources that facilitate inclusion." While these recommendations reflect international best practices, their successful implementation requires careful consideration of rural communities' socio-cultural and economic realities. For example, persistent beliefs associating disability with misfortune could undermine community buy-in unless sensitisation efforts are adapted to local contexts (Mariga et al., 2014).

Among the strategies discussed, enhancing teacher training and promoting community awareness emerged as the most immediate priorities, given their potential to improve instructional practices and societal attitudes. However, these efforts risk remaining fragmented and unsustainable without clear policy frameworks and sustainable funding mechanisms. These results underscore the need for a multi-pronged approach that combines policy development, targeted funding, educator capacity-building, and culturally responsive community engagement to advance inclusive early childhood education.

## D. Conclusion

This study revealed that parents' perceptions play a critical role in shaping inclusive early childhood education outcomes in rural Zimbabwe. While many parents recognised social benefits, such as improved peer relationships and empathy, limited awareness and entrenched cultural beliefs often

hindered acceptance of inclusive practices. Financial constraints and inadequate resources further restricted meaningful participation for children with disabilities.

These findings extend the social model of disability by demonstrating how parental attitudes mediate the impact of structural barriers on inclusion outcomes. Strengthening parental understanding and engagement emerged as essential to promote more effective and equitable learning environments. However, the study was limited to a single rural district and focused solely on parents' perspectives, excluding children's voices. Future research could adopt longitudinal and participatory approaches to capture evolving attitudes and experiences more comprehensively.

To advance inclusive early childhood education, stakeholders should prioritise targeted education campaigns to address misconceptions, support parent networks, and expand professional development for teachers. Collaborative efforts involving government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and community leaders are vital to improving infrastructure, providing adequate resources, and developing clear policy frameworks that sustain inclusive practices.

## E. Acknowledgement

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