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EDITORIAL

Advancing the Science of Human Development in a Changing World

Human development is neither linear nor isolated. It unfolds through continuous interactions among biological processes, psychological experiences, interpersonal relationships, cultural meanings, social structures, and the environments in which individuals live. The five contributions featured in this issue of *Optimal Development* collectively reinforce this understanding, demonstrating the importance of interdisciplinary scholarship in explaining behavior, promoting wellbeing, and addressing contemporary developmental challenges.

A major strength of this issue is its attention to behavior as both a product of development and a potential target for meaningful change. The paper traces the evolution of behavioral science from Pavlov and Thorndike to B.F. Skinner and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) provides an important historical and conceptual foundation for understanding how behavior can be systematically studied and modified. Its application to the acquisition of two-word phrasal minds in a Nigerian child with autism demonstrates the practical value of evidence-based behavioural intervention while drawing attention to the need for cultural validation and contemporary neuro-affirming ethical practices. The emphasis on assent, dissent, and technological integration is particularly relevant to the future development of behavioural science.

The issue also examines behaviour within broader social and developmental contexts. The systematic review of adolescent sexual health demonstrates that knowledge does not automatically translate into safe sexual practices. Peer pressure, socioeconomic circumstances, family communication, cultural norms, substance use, and media exposure interact to shape adolescent sexual behaviour. This knowledge-behaviour gap highlights the need for interventions that extend beyond information provision to address the environments within which young people make decisions.

Similarly, the review of gender differences in psychopathology illustrates the complex pathways through which psychological difficulties develop across the lifespan. Although females tend to demonstrate greater vulnerability to internalizing disorders and males higher rates of externalizing difficulties, the paper appropriately cautions against deterministic interpretations. Gender interacts with biological maturation, psychological processes, and sociocultural experiences, underscoring the need for an integrative biopsychosocial-developmental framework.

Culture emerges even more explicitly in the study of Nigerian youths' understanding of Koro syndrome. Limited awareness and the influence of spiritual interpretations on

help-seeking demonstrate how cultural beliefs can shape mental health experiences and decisions about professional care. These findings call for culturally responsive mental health education that neither dismisses indigenous belief systems nor permits misinformation to obstruct appropriate care.

Finally, the exploration of the baby mama phenomenon brings family structure, stigma, psychological well-being, and social change into the conversation. The paper highlights the stress experienced by mothers, the challenges associated with social stigma, and the potential developmental implications for children growing up in diverse family arrangements. Importantly, it invites a more nuanced examination of family diversity rather than simplistic assumptions about what constitutes a successful family.

Taken together, the five contributions demonstrate that **optimal development requires more than understanding individuals in isolation**. Behaviour, Mental Health, Sexuality, Family relationships, Disability, and Cultural beliefs are embedded within social systems that can either constrain or facilitate human flourishing. The scholarship presented in this issue therefore calls for interdisciplinary, culturally grounded, developmentally sensitive, and ethically responsible approaches to research and practice.

African Gender Studies Quarterly is committed to creating a scholarly platform where diverse perspectives converge to advance knowledge of gender and human development across the lifespan. We invite researchers, practitioners, educators, policymakers, and scholars across disciplines to continue generating evidence that does not merely explain human behaviour, but contributes meaningfully to the creation of conditions in which individuals, families, and communities can flourish.

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BRIDGING THE GENDER GAP: HOW ZIMBABWE'S EDUCATION POLICIES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CLASH WITH CLASSROOM REALITIES

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Abstract

Despite a robust legislative framework, including the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) and the Education Amendment Act (2020), the implementation of inclusive education (IE) remains a significant challenge. This article examines the disconnect between "top-down" policy aspirations and the "bottom-up" realities of the Zimbabwean classroom. Using a qualitative meta-analysis of recent literature and policy documents, the study identifies critical barriers such as resource scarcity, inadequate teacher training, and persistent societal stigma. Findings suggest that while social acceptance of learners with disabilities is rising, the lack of a specific, harmonized Inclusive Education Policy leads to "unplanned inclusion," where learners are physically present but pedagogically excluded. The article recommends a localized, better-funded implementation strategy to bridge this gap.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Zimbabwe, Education Amendment Act 2020, Policy-Practice Gap, Disability Rights,*

Introduction

Zimbabwe has long been lauded for its high literacy rates and commitment to the "Education for All" agenda, transitioning from a post-independence model of segregated special education to a modern, inclusive approach. In theory, inclusive education represents more than just the physical placement of children in a classroom; it demands a total restructuring of school cultures and teaching practices to ensure that every learner, regardless of ability, can thrive. However, as of 2026, a profound

disconnect has emerged between the progressive legal mandates issued in Harare and the daily, lived experiences of teachers in both rural and urban schools. While legislation suggests a nation on the brink of total inclusivity, the practical reality is often characterized by "unplanned inclusion," where students with diverse needs are physically present but remain pedagogically sidelined due to a lack of resources, specialized training, and accessible infrastructure. This article interrogates these systemic disconnects by analyzing how Zimbabwe's

ambitious education policies clash with classroom realities, ultimately proposing a localized framework for sustainable implementation

Background to the Study

The historical development of Zimbabwe's education system reflects a gradual transition from a segregated colonial-era medical model, which focused on deficits in learners with disabilities, toward a rights-based, inclusive education framework (Munyati, 2018). Following independence in 1980, the government adopted an integration approach, placing learners with disabilities into mainstream schools through specialized resource units. While this increased physical access, it frequently resulted in social and pedagogical isolation, limiting learners' participation and sense of belonging (Chireshe, 2017). Internationally, inclusive education gained prominence through the 1994 Salamanca Statement, which redefined inclusion as a process requiring systemic restructuring of schools to respond to the diversity of all learners (UNESCO, 1994). Zimbabwe reinforced this commitment by ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2013, legally obligating the state to provide an inclusive education system across all levels (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013).

This international commitment translated into a domestic legal landscape characterized by progressive legislation. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) guarantees the right to education for all citizens, and the Education Amendment Act of 2020 explicitly prohibits schools from denying enrollment on the basis of disability or ethnic background (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Additionally, the National Disability Policy of 2021 provides a cross-sectoral roadmap for operationalizing inclusion (Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, 2021). In addition Zimbabwe is a signatory to United Nations Sustainable Development Goals with goal 4 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all while goal 5 focuses on gender equality and women empowerment. Despite these sophisticated legal instruments, a persistent "policy-practice gap" remains, particularly in marginalized urban and rural districts, where the realities of classrooms do not align with legislative intentions (Mpofu, 2024).

A central factor contributing to this gap is the absence of a harmonized, standalone National Inclusive Education Policy, resulting in fragmented implementation dependent on scattered ministerial circulars (Mavhunga, 2023). This situation has led to what some scholars describe as "unplanned inclusion," whereby

learners with complex needs are enrolled in mainstream classrooms without adequate systemic support or specialized instructional resources (Ncube, 2025). While social attitudes toward disability are gradually improving in Zimbabwean communities, the lack of standardized guidelines and assessment mechanisms leaves both teachers and parents navigating inclusion without a clear pedagogical framework (Gukurume, 2024).

Macroeconomic constraints further exacerbate the implementation challenges. Despite recommendations from international frameworks, such as the Dakar Framework for Action, which advocates allocating 20% of national budgets to education, Zimbabwe's education spending has frequently hovered around 16.9%, leaving programs such as the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) underfunded and unable to provide essential assistive technologies (World Bank, 2022). Consequently, many schools, particularly in rural districts such as Zaka and Bikita, remain physically inaccessible and lack Braille machines, hearing aids, and adapted furniture required to fulfill legal mandates for reasonable accommodation (Chivhayo & Hove, 2024). This financial shortfall creates a scenario in which inclusive education is mandated by law but limited by practical infrastructural constraints.

Human resource capacity represents a further dimension of this challenge. While Zimbabwean teachers generally support the philosophy of inclusion, many report feeling underprepared to meet the diverse needs of learners (Chireshe & Chireshe, 2019). High student-to-teacher ratios, coupled with reliance on conventional teaching methods, often marginalize learners with cognitive, sensory, or physical impairments (Mavhunga, 2023). Moreover, mandatory in-service training on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is often absent, leaving educators reliant on a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to accommodate learner diversity (Mpofu, 2024). These factors collectively highlight the pressing need to reconcile Zimbabwe's progressive legal frameworks with the resource-depleted and overcrowded realities of contemporary classrooms, ensuring that inclusive education moves from legislative aspiration to practical reality. Therefore, the background of this research is situated within the tension between a progressive legal mandate that promises "Education for All" and a practical reality defined by resource scarcity, infrastructure deficits, and a specialized "brain drain" of expert educators leaving the country.

Research questions

- i. How has Zimbabwe's education policy historically influenced the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools?
- ii. What factors contribute to the gap between inclusive education policies and classroom practice in Zimbabwe?
- iii. How do economic and infrastructural challenges affect the implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwean schools?
- iv. How does teacher preparedness impact the effectiveness of inclusive education in Zimbabwe?

Literature Review

Historical Evolution: From Colonial Segregation to the "Legacy of Separation"

The historical trajectory of Zimbabwe's education policy reflects a global shift from the medical model of disability to a social, rights-based approach. Following the 1994 Salamanca Statement, international standards mandated that schools adapt to the child, rather than forcing the child to fit the system. However, Zimbabwe's colonial legacy established a dual system that institutionalized learners with disabilities in segregated special schools, a practice that persisted as the primary mode of delivery well into the

late 1990s (Chireshe, 2023). This era was defined by the "medical model," which viewed disability as a deficit to be cured or hidden, rather than a diversity to be accommodated. Consequently, the foundations of the national education system were built on exclusion, creating a specialized silo for "handicapped" learners that was entirely detached from the mainstream pedagogical flow (Musengi, 2024).

Following the international push for equity in the early 2000s, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) initiated a transition toward "integration," a middle-ground strategy that involved placing resource units within mainstream school premises. However, critical analysis of this period reveals that integration was largely a spatial arrangement rather than a pedagogical revolution. While learners with disabilities were physically present on the same grounds as their peers, they remained confined to specific units, receiving instruction from specialist teachers in isolation. This historical reliance on segregated units has inadvertently birthed what contemporary scholars identify as a "legacy of separation" that continues to haunt the education system as of 2026. This legacy manifests as a psychological barrier among general education teachers who often view learners with disabilities as outside their professional scope, thereby stalling the progress of genuine, unified

inclusion in the classroom (Mutanga, 2022).

By 2026, the "clash" within the Zimbabwean education system is recognized not merely as a lack of resources but as a deeply rooted systemic rigidity inherited from its phased history. Despite the legislative progress seen in the 2020 Education Amendment Act, the historical baggage of the colonial era ensures that the transition from "integration" to "inclusion" remains incomplete. Many schools continue to operate under a "deficit-thinking" framework where the presence of a learner with a disability is seen as a burden to the standard curriculum rather than an opportunity for Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Scholarship emphasizes that without a deliberate effort to dismantle the historical silos created by the old resource unit model, the system will continue to provide physical access without providing the cognitive and social access necessary for true equity (Chitayo et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2025).

The Policy-Practice Gap: Legal Mandates vs. Operational Fragmentation

A critical factor contributing to the chasm between inclusive education theory and classroom reality in Zimbabwe is the absence of a harmonized, stand-alone National Inclusive Education Policy. While the Global Sustainable Development Goal

4 (SDG 4) demands equitable education for all, Zimbabwe's domestic legal framework remains lacking across various documents. While the Education Amendment Act of 2020 and the National Disability Policy of 2021 provide high-level legal mandates and recognize education as a fundamental right for all, yet they lack the standardized, operational guidelines necessary for school-level implementation (UNICEF, 2025). Without a clear, unified policy directive that dictates how inclusive education should be funded, monitored, and assessed at the district level, the legal mandates remain aspirational rather than actionable. This vacuum results in a fragmented approach where inclusion is left to the discretion of individual school heads rather than being a mandatory systemic standard (Chitayo et al., 2024).

This policy fragmentation leads directly to a phenomenon known as "unplanned inclusion," where schools enroll diverse learners to meet legal quotas or social pressure without a corresponding adjustment in institutional capacity. Recent literature identifies this as a "top-down" implementation failure; the administrative push for increased enrollment has significantly outpaced the systemic capacity for pedagogical support (Mafa & Makuba, 2024). Because there are no specific operational manuals to guide the transition, many schools simply place

learners with diverse needs into overcrowded mainstream classrooms without providing the necessary specialized aids or modified curricula. This results in "locational integration" rather than functional inclusion, leading to a sense of frustration for both the learners, who feel left behind, and the staff, who feel ill-equipped to manage the classroom diversity (Chidarikire, 2023).

Furthermore, the gap is widened by the misalignment between inclusive rhetoric and the rigid nature of national assessment frameworks. While the Heritage-Based Curriculum aims for inclusivity, the high-stakes nature of the Continuous Assessment Learning Activities (CALA) often lacks the flexibility required for learners with cognitive or sensory impairments. Scholarship from 2025 suggests that the current examination-oriented system creates an inherent "clash" with inclusive principles, as teachers are incentivized to focus on high-performing students to maintain school pass rates (Majoko, 2025). Consequently, the lack of a policy that mandates "Universal Design for Learning" (UDL) as a standard assessment tool ensures that the system remains exclusionary in practice. Without reconciling these administrative and assessment rigidities, the legal promises of 2020 will continue to falter at the classroom

door throughout 2026 (ZIMCodd, 2024).

Economic and Infrastructural Barriers: The Crisis of Physical Access

Economic and infrastructural challenges remain the most visible barriers to the effective implementation of inclusive education within the Zimbabwean context. Whereas, the national education budget—approximately 16.9% in 2025—falls short of the 20% Dakar Framework benchmark, this limits the thrust for inclusive learning environments (UNICEF, 2023). This funding gap directly translates into a lack of essential resources, as contemporary studies indicate that less than 5% of schools nationwide possess disability-friendly infrastructure, such as ramps, elevators, or adapted sanitation facilities. Consequently, the fiscal shortfall ensures that the physical environment of most schools remains fundamentally exclusionary, reinforcing a "locational" rather than "functional" approach to inclusion (Chakuchichi et al., 2025).

In rural districts, the clash between policy and reality is even more pronounced, as many learners with physical or sensory disabilities are physically excluded by the lack of durable, accessible buildings and the rugged terrain. Research conducted in early 2025 across Mashonaland East

and Masvingo provinces highlights that the distance to the nearest "resource-equipped" school acts as a primary deterrent for families of children with disabilities (Magaracha & Sibanda, 2025). Furthermore, while the government has ratified a National Priority Assistive Product List (APL) to include 55 essential items, the actual availability of these products in rural satellite schools remains negligible. This geographical disparity creates a "dual-tier" inclusion system where urban centers receive marginal improvements while rural learners remain largely invisible to the national education grid (UNICEF, 2025).

Beyond physical structures, the high costs associated with specialized instructional materials such as Braille kits, hearing aids, and text-to-speech software often exceed the reach of the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM). Although BEAM is intended to support vulnerable children, recent evaluations in 2024 and 2025 suggest it is frequently overwhelmed by demand and fails to cover the "hidden costs" of disability, such as specialized transport and repair of assistive devices (ZimTreasury, 2025). This financial strain leaves the most vulnerable learners without the tools necessary for basic literacy, effectively ensuring that even if they are enrolled in a mainstream school, they are "pedagogically sidelined" from the learning process. Scholarship argues

that without a significant increase in targeted, equity-based funding, the infrastructure gap will continue to undermine the legal mandates of the Education Amendment Act through 2026 (World Bank, 2025).

Teacher Preparedness: Addressing the "Incapacitation Crisis"

Teacher preparedness serves as the decisive variable in the effectiveness of inclusive education, yet recent findings suggest a significant "incapacitation crisis" across Zimbabwe's teaching fraternity. Despite the mandatory inclusion of special needs modules in teacher training colleges, the training remains largely theoretical and lacks sufficient practical exposure to diverse classroom settings (Hlatywayo, 2025). This pedagogical gap is compounded by a historical disconnect between college curricula and the realities of the Heritage-Based Curriculum, which demands high levels of differentiation. As of early 2026, a vast majority of practicing teachers in mainstream school's report feeling fundamentally unskilled in essential technical areas, such as Braille literacy, Sign Language, and the formulation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (Majoko, 2025).

Furthermore, the structural environment in which these teachers operate severely undermines their ability to apply inclusive strategies. High teacher-to-pupil ratios often

exceeding 1:40 in urban government schools make the implementation of differentiated instruction nearly impossible, as the sheer volume of learners prevents the delivery of one-on-one support for those with high-intensity needs (Marambi et al., 2024). This pressure is exacerbated by the "brain drain" of specialized educators to neighboring countries like South Africa and Botswana, leaving a vacuum of mentorship within Zimbabwean schools. Consequently, the remaining staff are often overwhelmed, leading to a "sink or swim" environment where inclusive education is viewed as an additional burden rather than a core professional responsibility (Chireshe, 2026).

Ultimately, this lack of preparedness ensures that even when learners with disabilities are physically present in the classroom, they remain "pedagogically sidelined." Without the ability to modify materials or use assistive technology, teachers often default to a "one-size-fits-all" instructional method that excludes learners with sensory or cognitive impairments. Recent scholarship suggests that until teacher professional development moves toward a continuous, school-based coaching model rather than one-off workshops, the "incapacitation crisis" will continue to widen the gap between Zimbabwe's policy aspirations and its classroom outcomes through 2026 and

beyond (UNICEF, 2025; Chidarikire, 2023).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The Social Model of Disability: A Shift in Paradigm

The foundational pillar of this study is the Social Model of Disability, which provides the primary lens for analyzing the systemic "clash" within Zimbabwe's education system. Unlike the traditional Medical Model, which pathologizes disability as a biological deficit residing within the child, the Social Model frames disability as a socio-political construct (Chireshe, 2023). Within this perspective, the barriers to learning are not the students' physical or cognitive limitations, but rather the failure of schools and educational systems to provide ramps, sign language interpreters, Braille materials, and other reasonable accommodations. In the Zimbabwean context, this model illuminates that the gaps observed in inclusive education are rooted in systemic and environmental factors, rather than in the learners themselves. For example, when the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education mandates universal enrollment without providing the necessary accommodations required by the Education Amendment Act of 2020, the result is effectively a medical-model approach masked as

social inclusion (Chitayo et al., 2024). This creates a disabling environment in which infrastructure, curriculum design, and pedagogical practice act as barriers to equitable education.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

To understand how national-level policy fails to translate effectively to rural classrooms, the study applies Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). This theory posits that a child's development and learning outcomes are influenced by multiple nested systems, which must function in harmony for inclusive education to be effective.

The Macrosystem encompasses high-level legal mandates and cultural values. While Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution and the 2021 National Disability Policy are progressive, these frameworks remain aspirational if lower-level systems do not support their implementation.

The Exosystem represents administrative and economic structures, such as national and district education offices. Here, the "clash" is particularly visible, as the 16.9% allocation of the national budget to education in 2025 is insufficient to fund the assistive technologies and support services needed for grassroots implementation (UNICEF, 2025).

The Microsystem, the immediate classroom environment, is where policy outcomes are most directly experienced. The theory demonstrates that when the pressures of the Macrosystem intersect with a resource-deprived Microsystem, teachers are left ill-equipped and overstretched, resulting in what some scholars describe as "teacher incapacitation" (Marambi et al., 2024).

The Theory of the Policy-Implementation Gap

This study further integrates the Theory of the Policy-Implementation Gap, which explains the divergence between intended policy and its practical implementation. In developing economies such as Zimbabwe, this gap is often widened by top-down policymaking, where decisions are formulated at the national level without adequate consultation with street-level bureaucrats—teachers who are ultimately responsible for enacting inclusive practices (Hlatywayo, 2025). This framework elucidates why policies like the Education Amendment Act of 2020, though legally robust, may feel like a "paper promise" to teachers managing overcrowded classrooms with minimal training and no specialized resources.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a Conceptual Goal

Finally, the framework employs Universal Design for Learning as a conceptual benchmark for assessing and guiding the bridging of the inclusion gap. UDL emphasizes designing curricula from the outset to meet the needs of the greatest number of learners, rather than retrofitting accommodations for a few (UNESCO, 2024). By comparing Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum with UDL principles, the study identifies a rigid pedagogical structure that often excludes learners with diverse cognitive, physical, gender and sensory needs. UDL thus provides both a conceptual goal and a practical lens for evaluating and improving inclusive practices in Zimbabwean schools for girls and boys.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and Thematic Analysis. Unlike a traditional narrative review, an SLR follows a rigorous, transparent, and protocol-driven process to identify, appraise, and synthesize all high-quality evidence relevant to the research questions. This approach is particularly suited for interrogating the "policy-practice gap" in Zimbabwe, as it allows for a comprehensive cross-

examination of official government mandates against independent academic critiques and NGO field reports published between 2020 and 2026.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data for this article were purposively sampled from three primary categories of textual evidence to ensure a holistic view of the Zimbabwean education landscape. Government policy documents, including the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), the Education Amendment Act (2020), and the National Disability Policy (2021), were analyzed alongside various Secretary's Circulars that provide operational directives for schools.

Academic peer-reviewed journals were sourced through a systematic search of databases such as Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL), and ERIC using specific keywords like "Inclusive Education Zimbabwe" and "Pedagogical Barriers". To ensure findings reflect the post-Amendment Act era, only studies published between 2020 and 2026 were included. Finally, institutional reports from bodies such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the Education Coalition of Zimbabwe (ECOZI) were examined to provide critical data on funding, enrollment statistics, and infrastructural readiness.

Data Collection Process

Data collection followed a rigorous three-stage screening process to maintain academic integrity. The Identification stage involved gathering 150 potential sources through targeted keyword searches. This was followed by Screening, where titles and abstracts were reviewed to ensure documents specifically addressed inclusive education within the Zimbabwean primary and secondary sectors. In the final Eligibility stage, a full-text review was conducted, resulting in a final dataset of 45 core documents. These documents were organized into a digital repository and categorized by their level of influence, ranging from Macro-policy and Meso-administrative to Micro-classroom perspectives.

Data Analysis: Thematic Synthesis

The gathered data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, following the established six-step framework which begins with Familiarization through repeated reading of the policy documents and journals to identify initial patterns. This led to Initial Coding, where specific segments of text were labeled with identifiers such as "Lack of Braille," "Teacher Burnout," or "Budget Deficit". These codes were subsequently grouped into Themes based on recurring challenges identified across various provinces, from resource-starved schools in rural

districts to overcrowded urban classrooms in Harare. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, a constant comparative method was employed, verifying the themes against the original documents to ensure they accurately represented the data. This rigorous process ensures that the findings are not merely anecdotal but are grounded in a systematic synthesis of the existing body of knowledge regarding the Zimbabwean education system.

Findings / Results

The Infrastructure Clash: Mandated Accessibility vs. Environmental Barriers

The data reveals a stark contradiction between the legislative requirement for "Reasonable Accommodation" and the physical reality of Zimbabwean school grounds. While the National Disability Policy (2021) mandates that all public buildings, including schools, must be accessible, systematic reviews of rural school clusters in provinces like Binga and Masvingo show that environmental barriers remain the norm.

The majority of these institutions still lack basic ramps, modified latrines, and widened doorways. This clash transforms "inclusion" into a form of physical struggle; even when a learner is enrolled, the lack of an accessible environment limits their movement and

independence. As the evidence suggests:

"In many rural settings, the school gate is the first and final barrier. Without ramps or modified toilets, the student with physical disabilities is technically 'enrolled' but functionally 'excluded' from the rhythm of school life. The environment remains the disabling factor, not the impairment itself." (Hlatywayo, 2025).

This infrastructure deficit effectively nullifies the Social Model's goal of removing barriers to participation. It creates a system where the burden of "fitting in" is placed entirely on the learner, rather than on the institution to adapt, reinforcing the very segregation that the 2020 Education Amendment Act sought to dismantle.

Human Resources and the "Incapacitation" Crisis

A second critical clash point exists within the domain of human resources and classroom management. While national policy underpinned by the Education Amendment Act (2020) envisions a decentralized support system featuring special needs experts and itinerant teachers, thematic synthesis of current evidence indicates a widespread state of "pedagogical incapacitation" (Chireshe, 2023). This crisis is fundamentally driven by extreme teacher-to-pupil ratios that

frequently exceed 1:50 in urban government schools and marginalized rural districts.

The research highlights a significant disconnect: the state mandates inclusion but fails to provide the "scaffolding" required by the Social Model of Disability. According to reports from UNICEF Zimbabwe (2025), the lack of specialized support staff means that mainstream teachers are often left to manage complex learning disabilities without the necessary tools or training. The impact of this overload is best captured by the following academic evidence:

"Even when educators maintain a positive philosophical attitude toward diversity, the delivery of individualized instruction becomes 'mathematically impossible' under such overcrowded conditions. The teacher is forced into a survivalist mode where the needs of the one are sacrificed for the management of the fifty." (Majoko, 2024, p. 89).

"We are seeing a trend of 'physical presence but pedagogical absence.' Learners with disabilities are marginalized by a 'one-size-fits-all' instructional approach, as teachers—overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the general student population are forced to prioritize the majority over the individual." (Hlatywayo & Muranda, 2025).

This results in an environment where the legal promise of inclusion does not translate into an equitable learning experience. Without reducing class sizes or providing the itinerant specialist support promised in policy circulars, the mainstream classroom remains a site of exclusion hidden behind a veneer of integration.

The Fiscal Clash: Policy Funding vs. The Reality

Perhaps the most structural clash point identified in this synthesis is the persistent financial gap between state aspirations and actual expenditure. While international benchmarks, such as the Dakar Framework for Action, stipulate that 20% of the national budget should be allocated to education to sustain quality inclusive programs, current longitudinal data indicates that Zimbabwe's spending has consistently hovered at approximately 16.9% (ZIMCODD, 2024). This 3.1% shortfall is not merely a statistical deficit; it represents a significant funding chasm that directly stifles the procurement of essential assistive technologies, including Braille embossers, hearing aids, and specialized software required for digital inclusion.

Systematic analysis of ECOZI (2025) and UNICEF (2025) reports reveals that inclusive education is frequently treated as a secondary "add-on" rather

than a core budgetary priority. This fiscal neglect forces schools to rely on dwindling parental levies or inconsistent donor funding to support learners with disabilities, creating a localized "lottery of access" where inclusion depends on a school's geographic wealth rather than national policy. As one report poignantly noted:

"The legal promise of 'Reasonable Accommodation' remains an unfunded mandate at the school level. Without a dedicated treasury line for inclusive infrastructure, the 2020 Amendment Act is a vehicle without fuel." (ECOZI, 2025, p. 14).

Consequently, the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), which is intended to support the most vulnerable, is often described in scholarly literature as being "*critically underfunded and overstretched*," leaving schools unable to bridge the gap between enrollment and actual pedagogical support (Chitayo et al., 2024). This fiscal reality reinforces the Medical Model by default; when mainstream schools lack the funds to adapt, the system is forced to rely on the few, specialized "islands" of support that already exist, further stalling the movement toward national systemic integration.

The Cultural Clash: Legislative Integration vs. Stakeholder Anxiety

Thematic analysis of NGO field reports and recent academic inquiries indicates a sharp contradiction between the legal push for communal integration and the deep-seated anxieties held by parents and educators. While the 2020 Education Amendment Act promotes the Social Model of Disability by advocating for the removal of barriers, the "micro-classroom" reality—characterized by high pupil-to-teacher ratios and a lack of specialized supervision—often drives stakeholders back toward the Medical Model of segregated special schools. Stakeholders increasingly perceive mainstream schools as "unsafe" or "unprepared" environments for children with severe impairments. The following insights reflect the depth of this anxiety:

"If the teacher cannot manage fifty healthy children, how will she have time to help my daughter who cannot speak? The mainstream is not a place for learning for us; it is a place of neglect." (Musengi, 2021, p. 52).

"Inclusive education is a noble idea, but without specific protection for our children, it becomes an experiment in bullying and social isolation. At the special school, he is among his peers; in the mainstream, he is a target." (Parent Interview, ECOZI Field Report, 2024).

This tension suggests that until the underlying physical and financial "clashes" regarding infrastructure and funding are resolved, parents will continue to view special schools as a pragmatic "safe haven" rather than an outdated mode of segregation. The movement toward inclusion is therefore stalled not by a lack of will, but by a lack of Institutional Readiness. Consequently, the policy remains a top-down mandate that fails to address the micro-systemic fears of the families it is intended to serve, reinforcing the need for a more holistic, resource-backed approach to social integration.

Discussion

The systematic "clashes" identified in the findings are not merely operational failures but are primarily a result of severe policy fragmentation and a lack of legislative cohesion within the Zimbabwean education sector. A critical synthesis of the data reveals that Zimbabwe currently lacks a standalone, comprehensive "Inclusive Education Policy." Instead, the mandates for inclusion are scattered across a disparate array of Secretary's Circulars (such as P36 and P2), the 2013 Constitution, and the 2020 Education Amendment Act. This fragmentation creates a "standardization vacuum" where the quality of education for a child with a disability is not determined by a national standard of care, but rather by the geographic and administrative

"luck" of their placement. Consequently, a learner in Bulawayo may receive superior support compared to a peer in a Mashonaland East rural school simply due to the individual initiative or "motivation" of a specific school head rather than a predictable state-led framework (Hlatywayo, 2025; Musengi, 2021).

The researchers argue that this policy fragmentation is a form of "institutional neglect." Without a central, legally binding Inclusive Education Policy that links the national budget directly to classroom-level "Reasonable Accommodations," the 16.9% funding reality will continue to stifle the 20% aspiration. The data suggests that the "clash" is not just about a lack of money, but about the power dynamics of policy prioritization. When inclusive education is hidden within general circulars rather than highlighted in a standalone act, it loses its "budgetary voice." To bridge this gap, Zimbabwe must move beyond the current piecemeal approach and establish a unified inclusive framework that harmonizes the industrial goals of Education 5.0 with the human rights requirements of the Social Model, ensuring that no child's education depends on the "luck" of their geographic location.

The findings of this study suggest that the current policy fragmentation in Zimbabwe is more than a mere

administrative oversight; it arguably represents a form of systemic institutional neglect. While the legislative framework provides a moral "gold standard," the absence of a central, legally binding National Inclusive Education Policy prevents the alignment of the national budget with the practical requirement for "Reasonable Accommodations" at the school level. Without a unified act, inclusive education remains relegated to scattered ministerial circulars, which inherently lack the fiscal authority needed to secure a larger share of the education budget beyond the current 16.9% reality (UNICEF, 2025).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the tension between Zimbabwe's progressive inclusive mandates and its classroom realities signifies a profound policy practice dichotomy that cannot be resolved through legislation alone. While the 2020 Education Amendment Act provides a robust legal foundation, this study has demonstrated that "inclusion" remains largely symbolic due to a fragmented policy framework, a critical 16.9% funding gap, and a pervasive state of teacher "incapacitation" in overcrowded mainstream settings. The continued reliance on special schools as "specialist havens" highlights a pragmatic survival strategy rather than a rejection of inclusive ideals; it is a response to a system that currently

prioritizes physical presence over functional academic participation. To move forward, Zimbabwe must transition from a piecemeal approach to a unified, well-resourced Inclusive Education Policy that harmonizes the industrialization goals of Education 5.0 with the human rights requirements of the Social Model. Only by bridging these structural and fiscal gaps can the Zimbabwean education system transform from a site of "pseudo inclusion" into an equitable ecosystem where the principles of *Ubuntu* are realized for every learner.

Recommendations

- Legislative Action: The Ministry of Primary and

Secondary Education (MoPSE) must finalize and gazette a specific Inclusive Education Policy.

- Teacher Capacitation: Mandatory in-service training on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for all practicing teachers.
- Budgetary Realignment: The government should meet the 20% Dakar Goal for education spending, with a specific ring-fenced fund for assistive technologies.
- Community Awareness: Utilizing mass media (as seen with ECOZI's "Education 15" TV show) to combat the cultural stigma surrounding disability.

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