

## **Early childhood education in Zambia: inclusion of children with disabilities**

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### **Abstract**

Inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education in Zambian schools has great benefits to children themselves, their families and the nation but these children seem to be neglected. They are often overlooked in mainstream programmes and services designed to provide early education. They also do not receive the specific supports required to meet their rights and needs. Children with disabilities and their families are confronted by barriers including inadequate legislation and policies, negative attitudes, inadequate services, and lack of accessible environments. If children with disabilities and their families are not provided with timely and appropriate early education and support, their difficulties can become more severe and resulting into negative lifetime consequences, increased poverty and profound exclusion. By 2013, Zambia had more than 133,000 children with disabilities who were out of school despite being of school age. The majority of these children were below the age of eight. These children need early education. This paper therefore, emanates from the knowledge gap about why 133,000 children with disabilities are out of school despite being of school age. It discusses early childhood education in Zambia in relation to; (i) benefits of early childhood education to children with disabilities and (ii) inclusiveness of schools for early childhood education in Zambia.

As regards benefits of early childhood education in Zambia, children that are exposed to early childhood education perform fairly well and better than those who had no opportunity for the preschool learning. In terms of inclusiveness of schools for early childhood education in Zambia, Despite government of the Republic of Zambia's effort and implementation of early childhood education, children with disabilities were not visible or catered for in any of the developments, very little if anything was happening to ensure that the children with disabilities acquire early education and gain or benefit the way able bodied children do. This inability to support such children can be seen from several factors. For instance, in the budgets made by government towards early education in 2012 and 2013 financial years, there was no mention of early education for children with disabilities. Among the teachers recruited, there was no teacher with specific training towards children with disabilities. Even teachers for ordinary preschool children have been deployed in other classes rather than preschool. In addition, most of the schools have no materials that could be used for early education in general and specifically for children with disabilities. This sad situation only leaves to show that most of the schools that were newly established as providers of early childhood education, teachers and administrators had not been prepared for the program. The authors believe that if children with disabilities are given early education, they can develop cognitively, socially and physically to the betterment of their wellbeing and society. The paper therefore, recommends that deliberate efforts by schools to include learners with disabilities in early education should be encouraged as its benefits to children with disabilities; their families and the nation are immense.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, disabilities, early childhood education

### **1. Introduction**

Early childhood is the period from prenatal development to seven years of age. It is a crucial phase of growth and development because experiences during early childhood can influence outcomes across the entire course of an individual's life. For all children, early childhood provides an important window of opportunity to prepare the foundation for life-long learning and participation, while preventing potential delays in development. For children with disability, it is a time to ensure access to interventions which can help them reach their full potential.

In recent past, there has been a growth in interests in early childhood education among different stakeholders. For instance, the importance of early childhood education for all children was endorsed in the World declaration on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, 1990) and the Convention on the rights of the Child (1998). Additionally, the world conference on Special Needs Education (Salamanca, Spain, 1994) highlights early education as a priority area.

The government of Republic of Zambia has also recognised the important role of early childhood education in child development as reflected in the Sixth National Development Plan (2011-2015). The policy on education – Educating Our Future of 1996 also brings out the importance of early childhood education in building early experiences in the child. In addition, the policy brings out the need for early childhood education in building up “cultural capital” and to compensate for disadvantages that may arise from disadvantaged homes where reading, writing, or other education-related materials are absent (Ministry of Education (MoE) 1996). The government aspires to increase access to early childhood education from the current 17 percent to 30 percent by the year 2015, as a result, Zambia has increased budgetary allocation to increase access to early childhood education. In the 2012/2013 financial year, for instance, government provided six billion kwacha (six million Kwacha rebased) to the establishment and provision of early childhood education. In order to show further commitment to this cause, the

government recruited one thousand and one hundred (1100) preschool teachers in October, 2013 (Post newspaper, 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2013). Certain schools were chosen to provide early childhood education and newly recruited teachers were deployed.

With the creation of early childhood centres and deployment of early childhood teachers, it was hoped that many children would access early childhood education in public early childhood centres. However, this is not the case especially for children with disabilities as 133,000 were still out of school in 2013. They are deprived the chance of being part of a group with their peers, to play and to learn together with them. Such a situation is worrisome because the benefits of having them educated are immense. Research has shown that early intervention is crucial for children with disabilities since children with disabilities show significant lags in development compared to their peers without disabilities (Brimbring, 2007; Smith 2009; Kirk and Gallagher 1999) [8]. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of America 1994 All children have the right to early childhood education and when children with disabilities are deprived of early childhood education it implies deprivation of many of their rights. Some of the rights include; the right to play with other children; right to enjoy their childhood like other children of their age; the right to form friendships; the right to opportunities and stimulation to promote their maximum development and realise their full potential (Mendis, 2006) [11]. It is, therefore, essential that children with disabilities should have access to early childhood education in Zambia just like their peers without disabilities.

This paper focuses on the benefits of providing early childhood education to children with disabilities and inclusiveness of schools for early childhood education in Zambia. The term *children with disabilities* will be used throughout this paper. As regards the cause of disability in children, some of them are born with a disabling health condition or impairment, while others experience disability as a result of illness, injury or poor nutrition. Children with disabilities therefore, include those with health conditions such as cerebral palsy, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, traumatic spinal cord injury, Down syndrome, and children with hearing, visual, physical, communication and intellectual impairments. A number of children have a single impairment while others may experience multiple impairments. For example a child with cerebral palsy may have mobility, communication and intellectual impairments. The complex interaction between a health condition or impairment and environmental and personal factors means that each child's experience of disability is different. Similarly, the Persons with Disability Act (2012) part 1.2 defines a persons with disability as "*a person with permanent physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder that person to fully and effectively participate in society on an equal basis with others.*"

The paper argues that it is highly desirable and beneficial for the government of Zambia to provide inclusive early childhood education to children with disabilities as it does to the ordinary peers. In order to create informed discussion in this paper, a comprehensive search of materials published locally and internationally was undertaken. The discussion is significant to policy makers and implementers of policy on

early childhood education. At the time when there is no policy or when the policy is still at draft level, policy makers may realise the immense benefits that early childhood education brings to the ordinary children and children with disabilities. In turn, policy makers may hasten to conclude the process of finalising the policy and enactment of the law on early childhood education in Zambia. Implementers of early childhood education include learning institutions and education personnel who support early childhood education programmes to ensure quality education is provided. This paper may motivate them to support quality early childhood education for children with disabilities, contribute to national economic development, provide a service to families and strengthen equality of opportunities for children with special education needs. Having provided a preamble of the paper and its main gist, let us proceed to discuss the benefits of providing early childhood education to children with disabilities.

## **2. Benefits of providing early childhood education to children with disabilities**

There is a growing consensus among scholars such as Brimbring (2001, 2006 and 2007); and Osborne and Adic (2005) that experiences of children in their early years are very important in affecting their long term cognitive, social, emotional, physical and intellectual development. To this effect, experiences should include formal and informal education. However, in most instances, children with disabilities are discriminated from formal education. The authors argue that child development does not only affect the child's well-being, but also his or her capacity to contribute to the well-being of society in general. During the first five years of life, the young child develops the foundational skills needed to regulate and express emotion, interact and form relationships with others, and expresses needs and wants. These foundational skills impact the child's success in communication and language development, peer relationships, social adjustment, school success, and quality of life as an adult. Depriving children with disabilities early education implies depriving them a bright future.

It is also evident that when children participate in early childhood education, their participation is positively associated with gains in mathematics and literacy, school achievement, intelligence tests, reduced grade repetition and reduced misplacement of provisions for special education. In line with this argument, Keneneka (2013) assessed the benefits of early childhood education in Chibombo district and found that early childhood education improved school retention and completion rates, increased learners' interest in learning and reduced dropout and repetition rates. Her findings are also consistent with many other studies that have been done in the area of early childhood education. Two of the best known studies are the Perry Preschool Study (Barnett, 1995) [2] and the Consortium of Longitudinal Studies (Lazar, Darlington, Murray, Royce & Snipper, 1982) [9]. An analysis of the Perry study shows that one dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education programmes by policy makers resulted in saving seven dollars in preventative costs associated with truancy, school dropout, and teen pregnancy.

Similarly, Stegeline, (2004) [18] found that investing in good quality early childhood education brought cost savings and benefits to governments, children and their families. It can

therefore, be argued that public spending on early childhood education programmes can result in good returns in terms of maternal employment, high lifetime earnings, increased usage of special education services, lesser criminal activity, and reduced expenses of procuring medical provisions which end up putting pressure on the already weak national economy.

Another benefit of providing early childhood education to children with disabilities is that it increases probability of identifying children with special educational needs which may help in starting early intervention (Deiner, 2013). In Zambia where early identification of children with special educational needs has remained a challenge, early childhood education centers can help in early identification of children with special educational needs. Early detection of children's learning disabilities would allow schools, teachers, and parents a much better opportunity to identify and also to understand the learner's disability. Overall, this will help to get the most out of the potential of learners with disabilities.

Participation in early childhood education improves language proficiency of children. Cohen and Bagshaw (1973) carried out a study in Britain and found that the attendance of two and a half hours a day at a British nursery school appeared to result in children attaining greater improvement in language proficiency and concept formation than those of a similar social economic background who had not attended nursery school. We know that early years of child development are critical to language development of a child. The findings of Cohen and Bagshaw (1973) therefore, may be generalised to our debate on the benefits of providing early childhood education to children with disabilities in Zambia and may bring out similar benefits.

Despite these known benefits of early childhood education, most children with disabilities in Zambia do not access early childhood education. Most teachers do not have training in providing early childhood education to children with special educational needs as a result are not able to give these children the same education opportunities they give ordinary children. Bridging these gaps is an urgent necessity if children with disabilities are to be equal participants in, and beneficiaries of, early childhood education.

### **3. Inclusiveness of schools for early childhood education in Zambia**

The topic of inclusive education or at times known as inclusive schooling has brought questions about whether schools are real inclusive to children with disabilities in Zambia. Inclusive education is being questioned because by 2013 Zambia had 133,000 children with disabilities out of school despite being of school age. The majority of these children were below the age of eight (Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS, 2013) [26]. This is the age group that needs early education. This section therefore, discusses inclusiveness of early childhood education in Zambia. It begins with the definition of inclusive schooling and proceeds to discuss key issues in promoting inclusive education and an analysis of schools to answer the question why many children are not accessing early education in Zambia.

**3.1 Definition of inclusive schooling and education:** One may ask, as to what inclusive schooling is all about. Globally, an inclusive school is a place where every pupil regardless of his or her disability belongs, is accepted, supports and is

supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met. In addition, all pupils are expected to be provided with appropriate educational opportunities and resources within the mainstream environment (Ainscow 2003) [1] and (Ndlovu and Simui, 2009) [14]. The concept of 'within the mainstream environment' used in the above description inclusive schooling has most times been misunderstood to the point of placing pupils in a class where they cannot benefit from the teaching. For example, placing a pupil with hearing impairment in a class where the teacher does not use sign language to communicate what is teaching. Such a pupil may be at a loss or disadvantaged resulting in dropping out of school or performing poorly.

As suggested by UNESCO, (2004) [19], inclusion is concerned with the process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education.

We believe that rather than being a marginal issue on how some learners can be integrated in mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners. When and wherever it is practiced, inclusive education should aim towards enabling teachers and learners both to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment of the learning environment, rather than a problem. Inclusion emphasises on providing opportunities for equal participation of children with disabilities whenever possible into general education, but leaves open the possibility of personal choice and options for special assistance and facilities for those who need it (Ainscow, 2003) [1]. To the contrary, there are some pupils who have been 'dumped' in a hostile environment or classes in the name of receiving inclusive education. The authors wonder why pupils who cannot benefit from teaching because the teacher or teachers do not have the skill to communicate to them either in sign language or braille are placed in such classes. Surely the Education policy and the Education Act in Zambia do not allow such placement to mean inclusive schooling. Instead, the Education policy document; Educating Our Future of 1996 states that;

*"To the greatest extent possible, the Ministry will integrate pupils with special educational needs into mainstream institutions and will provide them with necessary facilities. However, where need is established, the Ministry will participate in the provision of new special schools for the severely impaired."* (MoE, 1996:69).

Additionally, the Education Act of 2011 article 129 on medium of instruction for hard of hearing learners states that "an educational institution shall use sign language as a medium of instruction to any learner who uses sign language as the learner's first language or who has special need for sign language." Having acquired knowledge about inclusive schooling and education, let us discuss key issues in promoting inclusive education.

**3.2 Key issues in Promoting Inclusive Education:** This section discusses key issues in promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities in Zambia. Figure 1 shows ten key issues in promoting inclusive education.



Adapted from Tanya and Amerena (2006:78)

**Fig 1:** Key Issues in Promoting Inclusive Education

The first key issue is situational analysis. An important starting point in promoting inclusive education is to conduct a situational analysis which identifies existing resources, initiatives and highlights the way forward. Situational analysis is followed by consideration of learning environments. In our Zambian schools, learning environments are not usually conducive to learning or the inclusion of children with disabilities. For instance, most learning environments are inaccessible to pupils using wheel chairs and those with visual impairments using walking canes without a person aid. Creating a welcoming and physically accessible environment in which children can learn is a major part of inclusive education. The third key issue in promoting inclusive education is teacher education and their ongoing professional development. As pointed out by Tanya and Amerena (2006) <sup>[16]</sup>, teachers are arguably the most valuable human resource available to promote inclusive practices. If they do not believe in inclusion, they can become a major barrier to progress. In many cases teachers do not have confidence, basic skills and knowledge needed in attending to all children into their classes. The fourth key issue is child-to-child principles. Children can play a role in their own education and in the education of their peers. In the context of large class sizes and over-worked teachers, children are a valuable human resource. The methodology of child to child has great potential to bring about changes in attitude and in mobilising the often under-utilised human resource of large numbers of children. The

fifth key issue is parent and community involvement. Studies by Ndhlovu, (2004) <sup>[15]</sup>, Tanya and Amerena (2006) <sup>[16]</sup>, and UNESCO, (2009) <sup>[20]</sup> found that countries which have made the most progress towards inclusion in education are those countries with strong parents' organisations which have campaigned for their children to be included. In addition, UNESCO (2009) <sup>[20]</sup> found that it was most effective when families were closely involved in the assessment process, enabling them to seek appropriate diagnostic and therapeutic services to support their child's well-being and development. Through early assessment coupled with intervention, families gained relevant information, especially about what their child could do and about interventions that will optimise his or her learning potential. Unfortunately, Mwanza (2010) <sup>[10]</sup> found that in some schools, in Lusaka District, parents were not involved in the education of their children with disabilities. The sixth key issue in promoting inclusive education is inclusion through school improvement. Inclusive schooling may be motivated by school improvement or school improvement may be a result of inclusive education. Whichever factor is motivating the process, school improvement must take place. An improved school environment is a recipe to inclusive schooling and quality education; as a result, it should be promoted. The seventh key issue in promoting inclusive education is inclusive policy development. Policy makers need to consider inclusive education in the mainstream policy. Commonly, inclusive



education is seen by policy makers as a version of special education and so it is not a mainstream issue. Consistent with this view is that of Tanya and Amerena (2006) <sup>[16]</sup> who states that the major international documents such as the UN's Standard Rules, Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Salamanca and Dakar Frameworks all indicate that children with disabilities have a right to education. Some go further and state clearly that they have the right to attend their neighbourhood school. Yet very few national policy documents make this clear. Too often the issue of 'special needs education' is seen as something separate and so is marginalised from the main education policy. The situation is not different in Zambia because there is no policy on early childhood education, as a result, the provision of early childhood education is guided by government statements in policy document Educating Our Future of 1996 which states that;

*"the provision and funding of early childhood and pre-school education will be the responsibility of Councils, local communities, non-govern organisations, private individuals and families"* (MoE, 1996:8)

This policy statement is risky and ends up discriminating children from poor backgrounds from accessing early education in private owned institutions. Local councils used to have welfare halls and facilities where early childhood education was provided but these have become dilapidated and in some cases used for other different services. As a result, early childhood education is more of the preserve for the affluent who are able to pay for the education of their children in privately owned institutions. These institutions are not mostly conducive to children with disabilities. The challenge therefore, is to ensure that inclusive education is reflected in national government and funding agency policies.

In order to address this challenge to inclusive early childhood education, the Zambian government in its manifesto commonly known as the PF Manifesto of 2011 states that;

*"under the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) government, early childhood education was completely ignored despite overwhelming research evidence that it was a critical requirement for the later social and intellectual growth of the child. With regret it had been a preserve of a few well-to-do urban families."*

*In order to increase access to and improve the quality of early childhood education, the PF government shall:*

- *Streamline the operations of the early childhood education sector;*
- *Provide and facilitate early childhood education centres and teachers in all local government wards in Zambia;*
- *Provide teacher training at diploma and degree levels in early childhood education to promote professionalism in the sector. (PF Manifesto, 2011:7)*

The eighth key issue in promoting inclusive education is early childhood development. In many countries early childhood education continues to be overlooked and under prioritised. Inclusive early childhood education can lay the foundation for lifelong inclusion in both education and society. However, where early childhood education centres exist are often in a poor state of repair or so expensive that not everyone affords them.

The ninth key issue in promoting inclusive education is economic empowerment. Poverty reduction and economic empowerment are key to the success of inclusive education

programmes. To this effect, inclusive education cannot be implemented in isolation because disability and poverty are inextricably linked. Tanya and Amerena (2006) <sup>[16]</sup> also points that poor children are less likely to receive intervention and support and more likely to suffer lasting impairments. Similarly, families struggling with disability of their child are more likely to be trapped in poverty due to a range of challenges that include negative attitudes, problem with mobility and exclusion.

The tenth key issue is the role of special schools in promoting inclusive education. There is unhelpful debate between those who believe in promoting special schools and those who seek to promote inclusive practices. Surprisingly, in the midst of this debate, ZANEC (2013) <sup>[25]</sup> noted that the majority of children with disabilities were not attending school at all in Zambia. If we follow the UK approach to the issue, the roles of special schools in promoting inclusive education include:

- Sharing expenses with mainstream schools to support greater inclusion
- Promoting greater staff and pupil movement between mainstream and special school sectors.
- Encouraging special schools to participate in twinning arrangements with mainstream schools. (Tanya and Amerena, 2006) <sup>[16]</sup>.

The authors believe that in the case of Zambia, the debate for and against special schools and inclusive education is not backed by the Education policy or the Education Act. The Education policy statement in 1996 Educating Our Future policy document clearly guides that, where need is established for special schools, the Ministry will support it (MoE, 1996). Similarly, at the international level, Dyson (2004) <sup>[4]</sup> advised that inclusion would not be achieved just because all countries close their special schools and place children with disabilities in regular classes. There is need therefore, to address the concern of developing support structures, specialist resources and professionals for children characterized as having special educational needs. As noted by Ndhlovu, (2008) <sup>[13]</sup> the dilemma in Zambia is that a push for inclusion without such development has resulted in children being inadequately supported. For instance, he found that lack of skills in sign language and braille by teachers for communicating to pupils with disabilities especially those with hearing and visual impairments negatively affected their access to inclusive education. Among the teachers recruited, there was no teacher with specific training towards children with disabilities. (ZANEC 2013) <sup>[25]</sup> This is against the view of Tyler (1944) 'a classic writer and developer of ideas on curriculum' who argued that in order to implement any curriculum, teachers and materials should be made available before learners are introduced. This idea was echoed by UNESCO (2013) <sup>[21]</sup> whose director argued with governments that it was unfair to introduce a new curriculum on early childhood education without providing the required ingredients to the system. UNESCO (2013) <sup>[21]</sup> also indicated that the provision of early childhood education to children with disabilities was a vital and necessary step for any government to consider. Having discussed key issues in promoting inclusive education, the paper proceeds to provide an analysis of schools in relation to how inclusive they are to children with disabilities.

#### **4. An analysis of schools for children with disabilities**

Despite the government policy on education (MoE 1996) and

its efforts to address challenges of exclusion through the Inclusive Schooling Programme (INSPRO), there is still a problem of a large number of 133,000 children with disabilities not accessing education in schools. Current practice in schools is not consistent with policy on inclusive schooling. Schools have not been inclusive for a long time. For instance, Kasonde-Ngandu & Moberg (2001) <sup>[7]</sup>; Ndhlovu (2008) <sup>[8]</sup>, Simui and Waliuya (2008) and ZANEC, (2013) <sup>[25]</sup> found that there were large number of children with disabilities not accessing education in schools, inaccessible infrastructure, negative attitudes by ordinary teachers towards children with disabilities, ordinary teachers lacked skills in sign language and braille thereby not be able to communicate with pupils with hearing and visual impairments and teaching and learning materials were not suitable for children with disabilities.

In addition, ZANEC (2013) <sup>[25]</sup> found that most of the schools that were newly established as providers of early and preschool education, teachers and administrators were not prepared for the programme. Those schools which have preschool teachers, they have deployed them in other classes rather than preschool. Most of the schools have no materials that could be used to teach early education. It can be argued therefore, that the fact that able bodied early childhood education was not visible in the selected schools, it would not be workable that children with disabilities could be available. It would also be a fallacy to think or suggest that children with disabilities would have learning materials in such schools. This is probably the reason why 133,000 children with disabilities are not in pre-schools despite being of school age. Figure 2 summaries the situation in schools where children with disabilities have been included.



The situation in schools suggests that schools are not inclusive to children with disabilities.

**Fig 2:** The situation in schools where children with disabilities have been included

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

The paper has discussed the benefits of providing early Childhood education to children with disabilities and determined inclusiveness of schools for children with disabilities. As regards the benefits of providing early childhood education to children with disabilities the paper concludes that public spending on early childhood education programmes can result in good returns in terms of maternal

employment, high lifetime earnings, increased usage of special education services, lesser criminal activity, and reduced expenses of procuring medical provisions. when children participate in early childhood education, their participation is positively associated with gains in mathematics and literacy, school achievement, intelligence tests, reduced grade repetition and reduced misplacement of provisions for special education. That experience of children in their early years is very important in affecting their long term cognitive, social,

emotional, physical and intellectual development. Providing early childhood education to children with disabilities also increases probability of identifying children with special educational needs which may help in starting early intervention. In addition, participation in early childhood education by children with disabilities improves their language proficiency. Concerning inclusiveness of schools for children with disabilities the paper concludes that schools were not conducive for inclusive education. They were characterised with negative attitudes by ordinary teachers towards children with disabilities, rigid teaching methods, inaccessible learning environment, many drop-outs and repeaters, unsupported teachers and schools, parents not involved in the education of their children, lack of teaching aids and equipment and lack of specialised training in inclusive education or special education.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the discussion, the following was recommended:

1. Since it is evident that there are benefits in providing early childhood education to children with disabilities, government should invest in the early childhood education.
2. The Ministry should involve parents in the education of their children.
3. In order to address the negative attitudes of ordinary teachers towards pupils with disabilities, schools should conduct sensitization talks during continuous professional developments meetings and workshops.
4. In order to have a framework to guide the provision of early childhood education, the Ministry should finalise the policy on early childhood education

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