

An eye into the 2023 Zambia education curriculum framework: What is there for special and inclusive education in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) in Zambia, a Directorate under the Ministry of Education, has rolled out the 2023 Education Curriculum Framework to guide education in Zambia, replacing the 2013 framework. Emanating from the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, this paper critically analyses special and inclusive education for learners with disabilities in the reviewed curriculum. The paper compares the 2013 curriculum framework to the 2023 one and analyses whether Zambia is progressing in providing special and inclusive education to learners with special education needs. With the help of the QDA Miner qualitative data analysis tool, the study revealed that the content within the two curriculum frameworks is 0.378 similar, a Jaccard coefficient which indicates that the content in the two curriculum frameworks is somewhat similar and not entirely different. Even though there appeared to be an improvement in the 2023 curriculum framework, data by word frequency shows that concepts related to disability and special education need provision are inadequately represented, signalling a continued low-key consideration of education provision for learners with disability. Based on the findings of this study, teachers need capacity building in curriculum adaptations for learners with disabilities and autonomy to modify content, teaching, and learning materials and assessments so that learners with disabilities benefit from the 2023 curriculum goals. Providing the necessary resources for competence-based curriculum implementation is critical for the success of the 2023 curriculum goals.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Eighth National Development Plan (8NDP) sets to enhance access to quality, equitable and inclusive education; improve technical education, vocational and entrepreneurship training; increase access to higher education; and enhance science, technology and innovation [1]. Further, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4

advocates for nations to embrace equity and inclusiveness as the cornerstone for national development. Curriculum reforms are inevitable in a fast-changing world, where the curriculum should always be called upon to address emerging societal challenges. Zambia reviews its curriculum every 10 years [1], [2], [3]. However, curriculum change should be influenced by serious reasons, not necessarily by the period of 10 years. The previous 2013 curriculum was revised because the CDC observed that the old curriculum was overloaded, theoretical, examination-oriented, and inflexible.

Further, the 2013 curriculum was not career-oriented, overlooked skills and values, used a foreign language as the medium of instruction, and fragmented subjects with similar content. It was observed that part of the content was irrelevant to individual and societal needs, lacked the latest technological aspects such as ICT, and did not accommodate cross-cutting issues affecting the community [4]. The 2013 curriculum has been replaced with the 2023 one because it did not realise the nation's desired educational outcomes and aspirations that learners were leaving the school system without knowledge, skills, and values for self-reliance and self-socioeconomic emancipation [1]. The 2023 Education Curriculum Framework, therefore, aims to diversify the education curriculum to make it responsive to the individual needs of learners and society, interlink the education curriculum at all levels of the education system, and strengthen content in the learning areas/subjects in order to provide for meaningful learning experiences that are beneficial to the individual and the nation [1].

So many factors influence curriculum change and development, but among many, cultural values, technological change and politics appear to play a bigger part [5]. It is acknowledged that technological changes influence curriculum change. The 2013 showed this inclination when it introduced computer studies as subjects and emphasised using ICTs in learning to respond to global demands. However, it appears the political hand intruded in it, especially when it came to the language of instruction using the local familiar language from grades 1 – 4 because this aspect did not receive acceptance from several stakeholders, yet it was introduced. Several factors may affect curriculum implementation, including economic conditions, availability of school facilities and equipment, quality, and quantity of human resources, lack of motivation amongst curriculum implementers, and lack of efficient management of time resources [6]. The lack of curriculum reforms in Zambia has affected the implementation of inclusive education [7].

Despite the available literature on curriculum development in Zambia, the challenges related to the 2023 education curriculum have not yet been documented. The implications of the new introductions in the curriculum on the quality of teaching and learning of learners with disabilities require a critical analysis that would facilitate a smooth implementation. The gap is that stakeholders in special and inclusive education do not yet know how the 2023 curriculum impacts the teaching and learning of learners with disabilities. This study, therefore, looks at how the newly introduced curriculum guides the provision of education to learners with disabilities in Zambia.

This study lies within the realms of inclusive curriculum design, which emphasises that, when we design curricula, we should include all students, largely those with disabilities,

in higher education [8]. Kerr S and Baker [8] propound the following key principles for designing an inclusive curriculum:

Principle 1: all inherent requirements for the course need to be articulated and available to students prior to enrolment

Principle 2: regularly evaluate the accessibility and inclusiveness of courses and modify them accordingly

Principle 3: all learning materials and learning technologies used in the course enrolment, delivery, and assessment to be accessible by students using assistive technologies

Principle 4: all learning materials to be presented in plain English to facilitate optimum communication

Principle 5: teaching staff to adopt a flexible and inclusive attitude concerning making alternative arrangements as required due to disability

Principle 6: flexible timelines, assessment tasks, and course requirements

In looking at the 2023 Education Curriculum Framework, focus will be paid to the principles and other positive practices beyond the listed principles.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study endeavoured to answer three research questions:

- a. What are the main changes affecting learners with disabilities in the new curriculum?
- b. How do the newly introduced curriculum issues in the new curriculum influence how special and inclusive education will be offered?
- c. What improvements, if any, has the new curriculum made to the old curriculum concerning the education of learners with disabilities and special educational needs?

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach to discuss the curriculum contents of the 2013 and 2023 frameworks as they relate to how the two curriculums guide the teaching and learning of learners with disabilities at different levels of the Zambian education system. A qualitative approach was appropriate because some statements within the curriculum framework content could be implied and need to be interpreted in the context of disability to overcome biased reporting related to no coverage of special and inclusive education content. A case study design taking the Zambian curriculum as a case study was adopted. Data were collected through document analysis. Two key documents were used: the 2013 Curriculum Framework – Zambia and the 2023 Curriculum Framework Zambia. Thus, content analysis was employed. Text data is systematically categorised in content analysis, and themes are identified [9].

There are two types of content analysis: conceptual and relational. The QDA Miner qualitative data analysis tool used conceptual and relational analyses to obtain meaning from the two data sets (2013 and 2023 curriculum framework). Thus, the analysis involved the search of concepts, words, and sentences that relate to the teaching and learning of learners with disabilities, thus conceptual, but further, we examined how the two sets of data interact to obtain the desired meaning. Thus, two data sets were uploaded on QDA Miner in this study and themes were identified. The main codes were the levels of education; namely early

childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, and searches involving disability-related concepts and the application of others to teaching learners with disabilities were sought. By using the levels, similarities and differences between the two curriculum frameworks were coded. Figure 1 below shows the coding of the two frameworks used in the study.

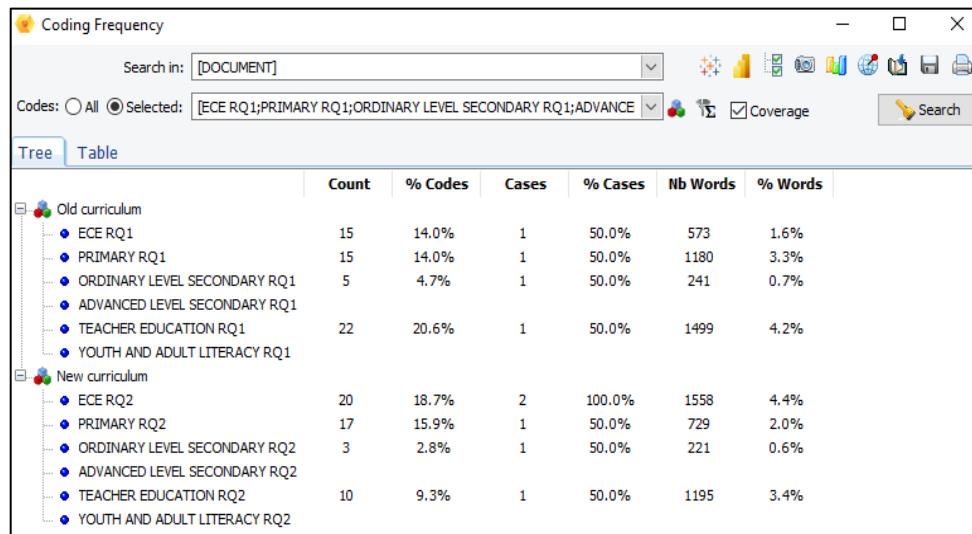


Figure 1. QDA Miner Coding sample

After that, sense was obtained using code similarity, node similarity, crowd query, and coding frequency. The cloud query suggests no representation of special and inclusive education concepts such as disability, adaptation, special education needs, inclusive education, accommodation, and adaptation, among others. The similarity analysis revealed a similarity between the primary level content, the ordinary level, and teacher education level content at the Jaccard 1.000 coefficient. This appears to demonstrate the emphasis given to the levels right from history. The other reason is that the similarity between Early Childhood Education (ECE) and teacher education was 0.500. Different analyses were run. Figure 2 below shows a sample analysis that showed the Jaccard relationship in content at 0.387.

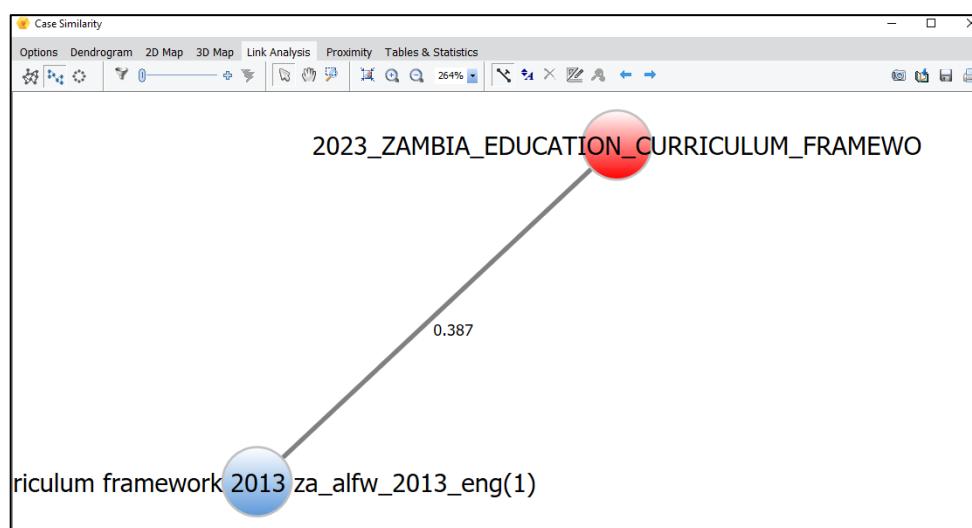


Figure 2. QDA Miner case content relationship analysis sample

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study have been presented and discussed simultaneously to gain a better insight into the implications of the new introductions in the 2023 Education Curriculum Framework.

What Informed the Policy Change

It is groundbreaking that Zambia now realises the significant role of inclusive education and policy in national development. An inclusive society is undoubtedly the cornerstone for economic development, allowing everyone to contribute their skills to the development of their country. Persons with disability equally have many skills they can contribute to national development. It is impressive to note that on the guiding principles informing the curriculum, inclusiveness and equity are the first principles. In this principle, the national curriculum emphasises that all learners, regardless of differentiating characteristics, which include disability, should access, participate and benefit from inclusive education. The principle of quality education provision for learners with a disability is consistent with the 1996 Educating Our Future document, Ministry of Education [10] while the principle of participation resonates with Article 3 of the general principles for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), United Nations [11] a principle that if faltered makes inclusive education rhetoric. Zambia is working very hard towards inclusive development, domesticating international protocols that favour persons with disability so that they participate equally in national development. This proactive attitude should be supported amidst society's negative attitudes that frustrate the participation of persons with disabilities in national affairs. There is a greater need to build capacity within the education system to build inclusive, participatory educational institutions and programs [12]. Our mandate is to actualise the meaning of participation in education, that teachers should practice and participate in the national economy that government implementers should practice.

We have often sung very good songs in policies that have remained unactualised. Building on a strength that Muzata noted among Zambian teachers is that they are well ahead in understanding the meaning of inclusive education [13]. If the school curriculum is used to break the barriers to inclusion, society will be fully inclusive. As an ongoing process, schools can address social inequities, poverty, and marginalisation by creating school cultures and environments that promote and encourage active participation of their families and communities and the learners with disabilities in education [12].

The other principles of accountability, transparency, and partnership. Social justice and integrity, if well applied to the benefit of all learners, including those with disabilities would make this curriculum the best in time where the inclusion of learners with disabilities is concerned.

Language of Instruction

Zambia has made a very big twist in the language of instruction. The 2013 curriculum employed local languages, called familiar or zonal languages, misconstrued for the mother tongue [14], [15]. Citing the Education Act 2011, the 2023 curriculum says English is the

official language of instruction from early childhood to tertiary level of education, but for learners with hearing impairment, sign language will be used as a language of instruction. Education policies should be linked to the laws that govern the country. It is not easy to comprehend how the 2013 curriculum came into being when the 2011 act was not repealed. This aside, the 2013 curriculum was contested by some scholars as it was seen to suppress the minority languages, thereby killing Zambia's cultural and language identity by promoting only 7 local languages spoken on radio, namely Bemba, Kaonde, Lozi, Tonga, Luvale, Lunda and Nyanja at the expense of other approximately 73 languages, commonly called as dialects [14].

The familiar language of instruction policy further posed challenges for teachers in expressing their competence since they were also from different language backgrounds, and their training was in English. To level the playing field, where all learners should face the same difficulties and opportunities regarding language of instruction, English appears more acceptable for a multilingual community like Zambia. The shift to local languages from grades 1- 4 disadvantaged learners with hearing impairment who then needed to first learn in some familiar language that is not their mother tongue and later, after grade 4, come to learn through English [16]. The new argument in the 2023 curriculum supporting the use of English from elementary levels is that it builds a strong learning foundation for learners [1]. For learners with hearing impairment, especially the deaf, the 2013 curriculum, which promoted teaching the deaf in sign language as a familiar language, appeared to leave gaps because learners with hearing impairment are taught in American English, not the Zambian sign language. In any case, Muzata and Mahlo [16] noted that since learners with deafness in schools come from different sign language backgrounds, learners who are deaf may have been finding challenges in learning in a classroom where a different familiar language is used for instruction. The best idea would be to teach in a mother tongue, meaning Luvale with deaf children would introduce Luvale sign language to their children, etc. According to the new curriculum, English will be the medium of instruction across the curriculum, and the Zambian language could still be used to explain some English concepts or be learned as a subject [1].

Learning the Zambian language as a subject is a good practice if made compulsory that every Zambian learner should at least learn the mother language as a subject. This would protect the indigenous Zambian languages and dialects from extinction. Thus, a patriotic nation should never ignore the cultural heritage that language carries. It may be surely possible to encourage the learning of our various local languages to support our learning through the English language medium of instruction. Controversial as it is, the issue of language is political, and the possibility of politicians using it for political mileage is detrimental to a democratic, inclusive society. The curriculum should never be used as a conduit for political gains or gaining popularity because it affects learning and undermines national unity and development. Thus, constructivist psychologists firmly believe that language is an effective tool for learning, and it houses the tools of our culture, which help us to understand our environments and ourselves. No one should alienate another into their language for any reason. We are born with a right to speak and use our mother's tongue. Although this discussion sounds so true and realistic, using the English language in

instruction will only solve the inequality in learning and not the inherent power to learn in our mother tongues, which researchers approve of more for improving academic achievement. Thus, for learners with disabilities and specifically those who are deaf, their mother tongue is the first language they learn to use, i.e., sign language, somehow different in their case. It may not be their mother's language unless one is born from a deaf parent. Even then, deaf parents who have been to school use local sign language to depict their local communities. This means that Zambians could have as many sign language versions as the more than 73 languages in the country [16]. If this were the case, the policy pronouncement saying sign language will be the medium of instruction for learners with hearing impairment at all levels may have misgivings [1]. First, the policy does not specify the learners' sign language. Using a well-developed Zambian sign language would enable learners with hearing impairment to benefit from the curriculum with fewer barriers.

Life Skills And Health Education

This component embraces vocational skills and skills for a person's psychological well-being. The component appears to resonate with the 2013 vocational pathway, although the departure avoids the concept of vocational and academic pathways. In the 2013 education curriculum framework, choosing one career pathway had implications. First, learners regarded vocational subjects as inferior. Second, there was a tendency to think that learners with disabilities were good at vocational subjects [17] and such stereotypical attitudes that the vocational curriculum favoured them were growing. In any case, the vocational pathway was not realised due to a lack of support. The vocational, like the academic pathway, should be for all learners if well supported. For learners with disabilities, life skills, whether vocational or psychic, are necessary for their well-being.

Today's competitive job market requires learners to have skills that help them work for themselves and earn a living rather than depending on formal employment. Thus, learners, whether with or without disabilities, should be able to use their hands and machines to make items they can sell and earn money. For instance, sewing, weaving, netting, basket making, car repairs, welding, bricklaying, making of tiles and other sorts of life skills that can earn money on the current market should be provided for in the curriculum. Life skills are not meant to make things for sale only but also to make some for home use so that expenditure on buying is minimised. The school curriculum before the 80s enabled learners to work in workshops. The psychic-based skills are necessary to equip learners with disabilities with self-awareness, decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, effective communication, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and coping with emotions and stress. In a society where breach of human rights is common and poverty prevalent, these skills can help learners with disabilities deal with the pressures brought by disability.

Entrepreneurship and Financial Education

Entrepreneurship education is crucial in giving skills to learners. When provided early in life, it creates a mind of hard work. For learners with disabilities, skills-oriented courses can broaden the opportunities for entrepreneurial opportunities. To be able to erase the begging tag given to persons with disabilities, especially the blind begging in the streets,

this component, if granted the utmost attention it deserves, would empower persons with disabilities with independent living skills. Combining entrepreneurship and financial literacy can strengthen the skills for functionality in society. Thus, one's ability to earn money has to move in tandem with other skills, such as budgeting and being able to reinvest capital into businesses.

Mental Health Inclusion

The inclusion of mental health in the curriculum should help to address several problems society is facing with its youths engaging in various self and interpersonal harm decisions such as suicide. This is because children do not have the skills to manage the problems they face, thereby bringing about mental disorders, suicide, and depression [1]. Disability equally brings about psychological pressure that accumulates to levels where one would want to commit suicide, becoming mentally disturbed or depressed, thereby bringing about other health complications. The introduction of this component should bring in facilities for rehabilitating parents of children with disabilities who face much psychological stress as a result of having a child with a disability and persons with disabilities themselves. Persons who acquire a disability after being born or when they are grown up are more at risk of depression and mental health difficulties. Parents whose children are born without a disability and later acquire a disability need counselling services. How this will be provided requires meticulous planning by implementers. Having it as a cross-cutting issue in different subjects would be helpful but teaching it as a subject makes it prominent.

Early Childhood Education

Structuring early childhood education 0-6 years to be part of the education structure is a positive development as it mandates schools to develop children in the learning domains, namely numeracy, literacy, emotional, and cognitive development. The omission within the 2023 Education Curriculum Framework is early childhood education's role in screening children's domain strengths and disabilities, which leads to early interventions. The 2013 curriculum recognised the early identification of developmental challenges and the tools for assessment of children's strengths and weaknesses in early years. The curriculum noted the significance of early assessment in facilitating the development of the child's domain using a culturally approved Zambian assessment tool (Child Development Assessment Tool for Zambia - CDAZ) [2]. What is not clear in the 2023 curriculum is the statement that early childhood assessment and monitoring tools will be introduced using technology. On another page (page 16) of the 2023 curriculum, screening and assessment for disabilities and transitioning from home to ECE will be conducted using different tools. Hopefully, this is not a departure from using Zambian development assessment tools such as CDAZ. Culturally responsive assessment yields reliable results for the placement of children in school. Children are better assessed using the tools of their culture to yield valid results that allow for appropriate placement and service provision.

Reduction of Years for each Level of Education

The 2023 curriculum has made early childhood education part of the main school progression system. Early childhood will be 3 years, primary 6 years, ordinary (O) secondary level 4 years, and 2 years for those who will go for Advanced (A) levels and degree level qualifications, taking a minimum 3 years and a maximum of 6 years as in the case of medicine. The emphasis on course duration contradicts a competency-based curriculum. If the aim is to attain competencies, the focus should not be on the period in which such competencies should be attained but on the ability of learners and the support given to them to attain the desired competencies. For a curriculum that recognises divergence and inclusion of different abilities in learners, the need to be flexible becomes highly desirable not to use the curriculum to exclude some individuals. In any case, the prescription of how many subjects a learner should take and how long they should take at a particular level of education (course) should be implemented with care because it brings barriers to curriculum achievement. Learners with disabilities, depending on their disability needs, should choose a particular number of subjects per year according to what they can manage and still be allowed to take the remaining subjects in a particular grade the following year. As a result, they can take as long as they can afford to complete a particular education phase. This way, even the other learners with no disabilities can prescribe the acquisition of competencies rather than completing a program. In an inclusive education era, saying they take 6 years in primary school is too prescriptive. A statement that applies to this discourse should have been included in the curriculum to guide implementers with rigid minds who may use the prescription as a weapon to disadvantage persons and learners with disabilities.

Competences in Early Childhood Education

The confusion between outcomes and competencies keeps luring readers and even scholars. Even though the 2023 Education Curriculum claims to be competence-based, while the 2013 one was outcome-based, the 2013 one refers to competencies in early childhood education. According to the 2013 curriculum framework, the competencies expected to be achieved at the early childhood level are social interaction skills, elementary pre-literacy skills, elementary pre-numeracy skills, and fine and gross motor skills. Such competencies were achieved through predominant play activities via subjects such as Social Studies, Integrated Science, Pre-Mathematics, Literacy and Language, and Expressive Arts [2]. The 2023 curriculum framework also recognises the key focus domains for children in early childhood education. These are physical development (fine and gross motor skills), cognitive and intellectual development (creativity, thought process, attention, and memory), language development (receptive and expressive language), social and emotional development (social, emotional, spiritual, and moral aspects of a child's life) and aesthetic development (appreciation of beauty) [1]. The learning areas through which the said competencies would be delivered have been reduced to three: English Language or Sign language Literacy or Braille, or Zambian Language, Pre-mathematics and Science and Creative and Technology studies. Eye catching for learners with disabilities is the recognition that sign language and braille be offered to learners who are deaf and visually impaired to ensure early literacy acquisition. However, it is not clear how the different learners with disabilities will acquire

the other important competencies that relate to their emotional, cognitive, and physical development. While recognising the domains is cardinal, diverse syllabuses are hoped to address the physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development needs of learners with disabilities. It is not arguable that learners with disabilities usually lag in many developmental domains owing to the disabilities they have. For instance, learners with cerebral palsy need early fine and gross motor practice, which calls for an elaborate syllabus and support tools to develop such competencies. Learners with visual impairment and those who are deaf may need high interactional activities that bring them closer to their peers and other community members. For the deaf, this includes communication through sign language, which, if only learned and developed by the deaf, would not be helpful in their interaction because their peers who are not deaf do not know sign language. Although it appears difficult, sign language could be learned by other children who are not deaf to allow inclusion, interaction, and participatory learning, which facilitates the development of competencies. Cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development can develop when children can interact with one another and through play, competences acquisition is effective. Studies on the acquisition of social competencies show a positive relationship between expressive language skills among SLLs and receptive societal language skills among DLLs [18].

Categories of Special Education Needs in the 2023 Education Curriculum

The 2023 Education Curriculum has provided a broader view of the categories of disabilities compared to the 2013 curriculum, which outlined disabilities as hearing, visual, physical, intellectually impaired, and gifted/talented learners [2]. This understanding continued to limit stakeholders' understanding of disability categories and limited the provision of services to only five categories. This appeared to discriminate against other categories [19]. The categories of disabilities in the 2023 Education Curriculum are Autism Spectrum Disorder, Behavioral and Emotional Disorders, Deafblindness, Giftedness, Hearing impairments, Health impairments, Intellectual and Developmental Disability, Multiple disability, Orthopedic and Physical impairments, Specific Learning Difficulties, Speech and Language impairments, Traumatic brain injury and Visual impairments [1]. This shows an improvement in the construction of disability so that everyone is included in education. The limitation of disability categories in various education statistical bulletins is a form of discrimination that works against the policy of inclusion that the Ministry of Education has embraced [19]. Limiting categories of disabilities to five in 2013 and four in 1977 meant concentration for preparation of teachers and teachers' practice was limited to the named categories, yet other learners with disabilities also needed attention. This inclusion means teachers should be prepared to meet their learning needs in various categories. It means strengthening teacher competencies in teacher education institutions and revising curricula to provide for the different categories of disabilities. It must be noted that the named categories in the 2023 Education Curriculum are equally not exhaustive. There is a need for a flexible approach to meeting the needs of categories of disabilities that may not have been named in the curriculum.

Diagnostic Assessment

The concept of assessment requires specific reference as to what type of assessment is being referred to. Assessment can be diagnostic or educational. Diagnostic assessment aims to uncover defects in an individual's biological or psychological functioning. It can be an assessment for disability or disease. Educational assessment is concerned with the evaluation of learning, usually conducted after learning has taken place. It is meant to provide feedback on the attainment of curriculum goals.

The 2023 Education Curriculum places early assessment for school readiness at the early childhood level and will be conducted at 3 to 5 years. The purpose is to examine the attainment of developmental milestones [1]. The other school readiness assessment would be given at the end of the preschool level to determine readiness for grade one for determining developmental milestones or competencies at the time they were in early childhood level. Assessment for disabilities and school readiness is not mentioned. It is not clear then the role of assessment for disabilities and placement in the 2023 Education Curriculum if it has not been given the due recognition. Zambia has a deficit in assessment facilities for diagnostic purposes related to disability, and the curriculum should have given direction on how the education system will link with the health facilities in the assessment for disabilities. Diagnostic assessment is accompanied by other services that could be carried out at home or in school in collaboration with assessment experts from health facilities. This weak link within the Zambian curriculum has continued to disadvantage children with disabilities as to how they can access therapy services at hospitals and how they can receive education in schools.

Educational assessment

Educational assessment aims to evaluate the attainment of curriculum objectives. It may be formal or informal, summative or formative. However, educational assessment, for many years, has worked against learners and students with disabilities in schools and higher education institutions. For a long time, educational assessment has appeared to be a weapon for exclusion because teachers and examination bodies failed to recognise the use of adaptations [20]. Providing guidelines for accommodating learners with disabilities is crucial for a curriculum that puts inclusion at the centre of teaching and learning. For instance, the addition of time, a change of environment where assessment can be conducted, provision of devices that enlarge, read, and write for students, or other assistive devices and technologies that enable access to the curriculum before and during assessment are crucial for inclusive assessment. The key principles for inclusive assessment are accommodation, modification, and adaptation. Adaptation is the umbrella concept that embraces accommodation and modification. Accommodation is an adaptation practice that does not change or alter the curriculum or learning expectations by changing the setting or method of teaching or doing assessment. The change helps a student overcome or work around the disability; for example, allowing a student who has trouble writing to give answers orally [21]. The content learners cover and are assessed on is the same for those with and without disabilities, but to ensure that all learners access the content fairly, some changes for those with disabilities should be made according to their disabilities so that they access curriculum and assessment tasks.

Accommodations range from changes in the learning environment to pedagogical changes. Thus, the extra provisions that enable students with disabilities to complete writing an examination or test should be highlighted within the curriculum, or a guiding statement that frees teachers to employ such strategies needs to be included. This is missing. For instance, how many extra minutes or hours should be given to learners with disabilities writing a 2- or 3-hour examination paper? If they have to write within the given time, they will not complete it because of the restrictions posed by the disability.

The other principle, modification, refers to changes in the content or assessment tasks provided to learners with disability. If something is modified, it changes a small quantity of its shape but not so much to water down its originality. There is content that some categories of learners with disabilities cannot manage to learn because of their disability. If such content is removed, it should not water down the achievement of curriculum goals but should allow the person with a disability to reach their potential. For instance, learners who are blind from birth cannot learn the concept of colours [4]. If an examination includes such a topic (of colours) as compulsory, learners with visual impairment would be disadvantaged. Modifications can be made by reducing or omitting content when teaching or assessing the students. This needs to be included in the curriculum so that teachers are guided on what to do when implementing the curriculum.

However, the 2023 curriculum has outlined the 13 categories of disabilities that would use the mainstream curriculum, saying learners with severe learning disabilities will have an adaptive curriculum and adapted technology suitable for their disabilities [1]. This statement is not clear. Does it mean the mentioned categories do not need adaptations when using the mainstream curriculum? This appears misplaced and demonstrates a lack of understanding of the curriculum's concepts of adaptation (accommodation and modification) for learners with disabilities. The reference to learners with severe learning disabilities only requiring an adaptive curriculum equally shows a limitation in understanding what learning disabilities are. In this context, it appears to refer to all the severe disabilities. All learners with disabilities need curriculum adjustments to suit their needs, considering how the disability impacts their functioning and how it affects their learning and taking of assessments. The question remains, without guidance from the curriculum framework, "*What will be modified, how will the content be modified, and to what extent should the modification be so that it does not dilute the quality of the content or objectives? Are teachers prepared to modify content? What accommodations should be made?*" While the details are expected in the syllabuses, guiding statements should be indicated in the curriculum framework. The lack means absence in the syllabuses as well. [7] reported Zambian teachers complaining that reasonable accommodations were only applied to learners with sensory impairments, like the visually impaired, neglecting all others who equally need accommodations. Teachers are prepared in special education and not inclusive methodologies. For the 2023 education curriculum to be effectively implemented, teachers must upgrade in inclusive methodologies and curriculum adaptation. The idea of stressing teachers to modify content without training on how and what to modify compromises the quality of education delivery to learners with disabilities [4], [7]. The curriculum should specify that teachers for learners with disabilities or in inclusive classrooms would be trained

in inclusive methodologies and adaptation strategies. The absence leaves teachers to work out of charity, a retrogressive syndrome to the practice of inclusion.

Automatic Progression

In 2018, the Ministry of Education in Zambia introduced the automatic progression policy [22]. Automatic progression allowed learners to move from one examination phase to another level of education even when their performance at the lower level was not very good. For instance, learners in grade 7 could proceed to grade 8 even when they had failed to reach the cutoff point. Research, however, shows that the policy did not help promote learners because they had lower self-esteem and faced learning challenges [22]. The policy was further reported to delay learners' progression and delayed syllabus coverage by teachers [23]. For special education, this policy may have worked well for learners with disabilities. It increased access, perhaps at the expense of quality. The policy appeared favourable if the emphasis was on competencies rather than examination results. Competences enable self-sustenance after the completion of school. The 2023 education curriculum has abolished the automatic progression policy. Learners have to pass the examinations at grade 6 for them to enter form 1. Otherwise, they have to enrol in a skills institution. As specialist researchers, we are yet to see whether the newly introduced policy on progression will be favorable to learners with disabilities or not. However, one obvious thing is that, in the absence of necessary teaching and learning support that is adaptable to the needs of learners with disabilities, most learners with disabilities are likely to be excluded from higher education.

Special Educational Needs

The 2023 education curriculum has specific pages on which special education statements have been provided to guide the education of learners with disabilities. On page 15, the framework says that specialised interventions in Daily Living Activities (ADL) and Home-Based Care will be provided to enhance their independent living in school, at home, and in society. This statement has serious implications for practice, especially concerning home-based care. This inclusion is critical in the provision of special education services to learners with disabilities who, by the gravity of their disabilities, cannot be in school but still need the services of teachers to help the children acquire skills for self-help. The parents also need such skills to help their children with disabilities. The idea is to broaden the functions of the teacher beyond the classroom. Teacher skills need to be transplanted in parents for parents to participate in intervention programs for their children at home. Home visits by teachers, via a programmed schedule a fortnight would make teacher skills relevant beyond the classroom. This means that teachers need support in the form of funds to reach the villages where the children are found. They need transportation, travel allowances, and support materials. Skills for daily living are already being provided in schools, and it is hoped that parents are equally engaged in supporting teachers to implement the skills at school and home.

On 4.2.3 of the 2023 Education Curriculum, pages 18 – 20, much of special education needs is discussed. The 2023 Education Curriculum says Learners with Special Education

Needs and Disabilities (SEND) at the primary school level will be exposed to the regular curriculum. However, the emphasis will be on teaching and learning practical subjects so that learners obtain independent living skills. The following statements have been echoed to guide on special education:

- a. Braille shall be compulsory for all learners with visual impairment at Primary School.
- b. Sign language shall be compulsory for all learners with hearing impairment at the Primary school level.
- c. Adapted syllabi for learners with visual impairments shall be introduced in all learning areas.
- d. Level 16+ is introduced for learners with intellectual disabilities after level 3, where learners will be exposed to prevocational skills to create a foundation for those who may proceed to trade training institutions.

The pronouncements have serious implications for the education of learners with disabilities. Making braille compulsory for all learners with visual impairment at the primary school level is good for teaching literacy. However, the early introduction of ICT skills and specifically the use of the computer in primary school would help overcome dependency on braille, which research has shown has its limitations at different times. In any case, the phrase 'compulsory for all learners with visual impairment' appears too generalised. There are different types and degrees of visual impairment, some of which do not need braille but other assistive devices to learn. To subject them to learning braille would be unfair. It is important to state that Braille should be compulsory for learners who have severe visual loss (blind). Other learners with other visual impairments will be supported using assistive devices applicable to their visual impairment. Some learners have colour blindness. Visual impairment in colours incapacitates colour differentiation. The individual with this type of visual loss does not need braille. Some learners have astigmatism, others have strabismus and myopia, and still others have hyperopia. These types of visual loss have their own needs and not braille. An inclusive curriculum should be sensitive to all the needs of the different categories of disabilities.

The other statement, which says sign language will be compulsory for all learners with hearing impairment at the primary school level, is also insensitive to the different types of hearing impairment. While learning sign language as a mode of communication is relevant for all, including those with hearing loss, there is a need to recognise the different categories within hearing loss who do not entirely depend on sign language to learn or communicate. Some learners with hearing loss may need assistive technologies and devices to hear. Such assistive technologies include hearing aids, other amplifications, and cochlear implants. There is a need to make these technologies available so that they aid learners with hearing loss to access speech.

On the statement that refers to adapted syllabi for learners with visual impairment, adaptations are not for one disability category. Learners with dyslexia, memory problems, attention deficits, and physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy, to mention a few, need adaptations specific to their needs.

The increase in the number of impairments listed in the curriculum is positive. Sadly, the 2023 curriculum does not spell out how the learners will be helped to learn, a practice usually left to the teacher to think about at their discretion. This tendency will continue to disadvantage other categories of learners with disabilities in the country. For instance, learners with dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, autism, deaf-blindness, hyperactivity, communication problems, and others appear to receive a raw deal of attention from the 2023 curriculum framework, more so like the 2013 curriculum framework.

Sign Language

While emphasising that sign language will be the language of instruction for learners with severe hearing loss (the deaf), the 2023 Education Curriculum has demonstrated inconsistencies regarding sign language as a subject at most grade levels, only appearing as a core learning area at upper primary. This, too, needs to be corrected so that teachers are properly guided. Further, the failure to state whether we continue with American sign language or develop a Zambian sign language continues to be in Limbo. Sign language learning has been included only for learners with hearing impairment, defeating the purpose of inclusion in mainstream. Does this mean hearing impairment cannot benefit from inclusive education now or in the future?

On learners with intellectual disabilities, consideration for an adapted curriculum has been recorded, but such a curriculum should bring out learning areas with practical content at levels 1, 2, and 3. The 2023 Education Curriculum brings in an important note on time allocation for learners with intellectual disability, saying time allocation will be based on the ability of the learners and circumstances that may prevail. This note is also important for assessment, especially when assistive technologies cannot help them complete tasks quickly. For instance, learners with health impairments, memory and attention disabilities, cerebral palsy, and other physical disabilities that affect fine and gross motor movement, among others, need time consideration. Some disabilities easily tire the student. It is unclear why sign language is captured in learning area 2 in the table when learners with intellectual disabilities do not communicate in sign language unless it refers to both intellectual and hearing impairment.

Special and Inclusive Education at Secondary School Ordinary and Advanced Levels

There are major changes in the curriculum at the secondary level. The shift brings in a 2-phased secondary education level, with the first 4 years being Ordinary (O level) and the other 2 being advanced (A level). Grades are now called forms; thus, secondary education runs from forms 1 to 4 for the Ordinary level and 5 and 6 as Advanced levels. Those that reach Form 5 and 6 prepare themselves for university education, while those that end at Form 4 can decide on lower qualifications such as diplomas and certificates in fields of choice. The curriculum introduces eight pathways a child can choose from: Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Business and Finance, Agriculture Science, Home Economics and Hospitality Technology, Performing and Creative Arts, and Physical Education and Sport [1]. Four compulsory subjects (English, Mathematics, Civic Education, and Computer Studies (*non-examinable*) and three others can be chosen from the other pathways. However, some

subjects are compulsory for specific pathways. For instance, learners taking Physical Education and Sports take English language, Mathematics, Biology, Physical Education, Computer Science, and Civic Education, and the seventh subject is selected from any of the subject groupings. In this case, it is a must that a learner taking physical education and sports should take Biology and Physical Education besides the compulsory subjects and the subject of choice from any group.

The subjects have been reduced to 7, the maximum a learner can take, contrary to the previous curriculum, which had eight subjects. The previous curriculum used two pathways, namely vocational and career pathways. From the analysis, the previous curriculum pathway notion has not been done away with because the organisation of the subjects appears to maintain the two pathways but split into eight. It appears that the higher we go in the levels of education, the more learners with disabilities are ignored. The 2023 Education Curriculum at the secondary school level (both O and A levels) seems to have ignored the concepts of adaptation, sign language, and braille as principles that enable learners with disabilities to learn at all levels of education. Studies have shown that teaching students with disabilities at advanced levels has proven problematic, especially for learners with hearing impairment because of sign language vocabulary inadequacy, making some subjects difficult to teach because some concepts have no signs [16]. At the secondary level, the 2023 curriculum guides teachers on the subject combinations and pathways, ignoring how learners with disabilities should be taught and assessed. Assessment has many times disadvantaged learners with disabilities at this level, further making their ambitions for advanced higher education difficult. Key considerations for the inclusion of learners with disabilities are:

- a. Simplified content for some categories of disabilities
- b. Teaching in sign language for learners who are deaf and depend on sign language to communicate.
- c. Using total communication in teaching learners with hearing impairments
- d. Modified methods of teaching
- e. Accommodative modes of assessment according to the different categories of disabilities
- f. Modifying content and educational assessment, either by omission, replacement, or simplification of content according to the needs of different disabilities
- g. Additional time for learning and assessment
- h. The need for adapted syllabuses to guide teaching
- i. The need for adapted learning material to aid learning

These requirements need statements guiding teachers on what to do. There is also a need to train teachers in inclusive methodologies. Remaining silent on the necessary adaptations for learners with disabilities and emphasising this at the primary school level means sentencing learners with disabilities to the primary level of education. This retrieves the gains Zambia has made in promoting inclusive education.

Teacher Preparation in Special and Inclusive Education

Zambia has continued to maintain special schools to meet the needs of learners with severe disabilities who cannot benefit from teaching in mainstream schools. Thus, teacher

education in the 2023 curriculum refers to specialised and inclusive teachers. Inclusive teachers will train in the colleges of education and universities. The Zambia Institute of Special Education (ZAMISE) is recorded to be one main institution that trains teachers of learners with disabilities. The 2023 Education Curriculum Framework further notes other institutions that prepare teachers to teach learners with disabilities, although they have not been itemised as was in the 2013 curriculum. One very important introduction in the 2023 education curriculum is the introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the training of teachers. This component has been missing in implementing adaptation strategies for learners with disabilities. Teachers lack skills in using ICTs for education purposes and teaching and learning of learners with disabilities [24]. The Diagnostic Report by UNESCO reiterates the incompetency of teachers in ICT skills, with a few only having basics. The problem is further exacerbated regarding specialised ICTs for teaching learners with different disabilities. Compounded with the challenges of internet connectivity and access to ICT skills, teachers, especially those in rural areas, do not utilise ICTs in their teaching [3]. It is hoped that the introduction of ICTs to teachers will resonate with learners' curriculum at the secondary school level since information technology is compulsory at that level. Teacher skills in ICTs will enable them to employ various methods of teaching learners with different disabilities and assess learners with disabilities by employing modern technology assessment practices and allowing learners access to the curriculum [25]. Investing in advanced technologies that enable the full participation of learners with disabilities can help Zambia achieve SDG 4, emphasising inclusiveness and equity for sustainable development. We are looking forward beyond Job Access to Windows (JAWS) for learners who are blind to software that can enable teachers' teaching to be translated into sign language via a screen, thereby removing the dependent concept of human interpretation. The use of text to speech should be well developed for accuracy from different ethnic languages to avoid misrepresentation of concepts.

The special and inclusive education course in the teacher education curriculum is a positive consistent consideration from the previous curriculum so that non-specialist teachers have inclusive content knowledge and skills to teach learners included in the mainstream classrooms. While ECE and Primary school teachers will be required to obtain a diploma to teach in the schools, it is not stated what will be required for special education teachers except that they will specialise in one disability category. The mention of ZAMISE and other institutions to train teachers in different special needs areas is not explained, whether it will be at the diploma or degree level. Before the 2023 curriculum framework, teachers were prepared at diploma and degree levels.

What is further forgotten is the fact that in educational institutions, students with disabilities also enrol and require curriculum modifications for them to learn well. The curriculum should focus on what and how the content, the learning, and the methods of teaching can be made accessible to students who have disabilities.

Introducing special and inclusive education courses for teacher education at the secondary school level has been a long time advocacy issue. However, the silence on mobility and orientation for learners with severe visual impairment leaves this important component that enables students to access curriculum delivery venues such as classrooms

and libraries. It is hoped that this component is captured in special and inclusive education courses so that student teachers are prepared to teach orientation and mobility in order for them to competently transfer mobility skills to learners in primary and secondary schools. Orientation and mobility skills promote independence and confidence in academic work for those with severe vision loss. The broadening of categories of disability requiring trainee teachers to specialise in teaching is a further positive development in the 2023 education curriculum. Tining will no longer focus on the four traditional categories: visual, hearing, physical, and intellectual impairments [26]. The categories for which teachers should specialise include Autism Spectrum Disorder, Behavioral and Emotional Disorders, Deafblindness, Giftedness, Hearing impairments, Health impairments, Intellectual and Developmental Disability, Multiple disability, Orthopedic and Physical impairments, Specific Learning Difficulties, Speech and Language impairments, Traumatic brain injury and Visual impairments [1]. While this is applauded, the silence on how learners with disabilities will be equitably taught at secondary school creates a mismatch in the curriculum. The need to sensitise potential trainee teachers on the different categories becomes significant. While specialisation does not sit well with the principle of inclusion, Zambia has maintained both special and inclusive education in providing education to learners with disabilities.

Introducing Sociology of Special Education is well-modified thinking of the 2023 education curriculum, realising that group dynamics influence learning. This introduction makes sociology a well-applied area specifically for learners and persons with disability in general. Children with disabilities are affected by so many social-related issues, which include myths, beliefs, and negative attitudes that influence the way persons with disabilities interact with the general society. It is also worth noting that some categories of disabilities have their own culture. The deaf culture is a unique social issue deserving the attention of all interested partners.

The Link Between the 2023 Education Curriculum and Other Faculties Vs the Industry

The ultimate aim of the curriculum is to link the tasks therein to the industry so that the curriculum graduates serve in various sectors of the economy. Identifying the 8 pathways creates a democratic space for learners to make a choice that fits their ability and interest. However, without curriculum adaptations, realising this may be difficult because learners would struggle to learn and make good use of their chosen careers. The 8 pathways should create broader options for all learners, including those with disabilities, to compete for different career options in universities and colleges. Thus, even those with disabilities want to be doctors, engineers, agriculturalists, computer scientists, criminal investigators, mining experts, nurses, lawyers, journalists, etc. The curriculum is silent on how the different subject areas would respond to the different programs in colleges and universities away from education programs. It is only hoped that the different faculties have curricula that consider modifications for students with disabilities enrolled. However, education should lead by embedding the necessary facilities for curriculum adaptation. Lecturers need training and support to include students with disabilities in the different programs.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has revealed an obscured picture of how the 2023 education curriculum framework will be implemented to effectively benefit learners with disabilities at the different levels of the education system. QDA Miner analysis shows that while there are some similarities, differences are also noted, judged by the Jaccard coefficient index of 0.378. While the 2023 curriculum framework shows a positive regard for inclusive education and how learners with disabilities will learn and be taught at the primary school level, there has not been adequate consistency in guiding the teaching and learning of learners with disabilities, particularly at the secondary school level. More emphasis is placed on primary school level and teacher preparation. This appears to ignore the ladder of ascendance that learners with disabilities also desire. Thus, from ECE, learners with disabilities need to progress to primary, then secondary, and later post-secondary and higher education like other learners without disabilities. A barrier to ascending to higher-level careers is created without adaptations to teaching methods, materials, learning environments, and assessment at the secondary school level. This appears to be the biggest challenge of the 2023 Education Curriculum Framework, yet the principle of inclusion and equity guides it. It is recommended that curriculum amendments be made to areas lacking guidance for teaching, learning, and assessing learners with different disabilities. Teachers need training in curriculum adaptations (accommodations and modifications) for them to be able to implement the curriculum inclusively. There is a further need to clarify various statements that refer to braille, sign language, and adaptations provided in the framework so that teachers who are implementers are not misguided on who and how to teach learners with disabilities. The various misgivings noted in this paper require meticulous attention to implement the curriculum with the inclusive taste it gives.

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