

Inclusive Teaching Efficacy among Early Childhood Teachers in Zambia

Derick Singogo¹, Kenneth Kapalu Muzata²
^{1,2}University of Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' beliefs about their capabilities can impact the quality of implementation of education policies. The inclusive education policy is not an exception in this case. This study explores teachers' beliefs about their capabilities to teach inclusive early childhood education (ECE) classes under the inclusive education policy. This study has conceptualized this belief as inclusive teaching efficacy. A Qualitative approach with a sample of 15 ECE teachers and two educational officers was interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Data were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The major themes from the analysis reveal interesting insights into teachers' beliefs about their capabilities to handle inclusive ECE classes. Their capabilities were influenced by knowledge, exposure, training, and CPDs, among other emerging themes. This study demonstrates the need to prepare teachers for the implementation of policies or policy changes in Education. Most importantly, the study targets teachers' self-beliefs, which feeds into their motivation and quality implementation of the inclusive education policy. It was recommended that inclusive ECE teachers be exposed to inclusive CPDs and that training institutions beef up curricula to equip teachers with adequate knowledge to manage inclusive ECE learners.

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Corresponding Author:

Derrick Singogo & Kenneth Kapalu Muzata

Department of Educational Psychology, Sociology and Special Education, School of Education, University of Zambia

Email: muzatakenneth@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of early childhood education (ECE) cannot be overemphasized. It provides children with a foundation for future learning and development. Studies have shown that high-quality early childhood education is critical for brain development and enhances children's school readiness [1], [2]. The inclusive education policy provides that all learning environments at all levels of the education system should accommodate all kinds of learners. This should include learners with disabilities and should reflect in both

structure and processes. It suffices to argue that all teachers at all levels of the education system should have the capacity, competence, and confidence to deliver material in an inclusive learning environment [3]. Initially, moderate or severe learners with special needs were expected to be handled by special education teachers whose training is built on teaching learners with varying difficulties and needs. It is expected for teachers with such training to have higher inclusive teaching efficacy, competence, and capacity as compared to those whose focus was different or general (ECE, Science, Mathematics, social studies) [4].

Literature in educational psychology has also demonstrated that teacher efficacy is linked to performance and motivation in a teacher's work. While several factors have been found to limit the implementation of education policies, such as the inclusive education policy in Zambia and similar contexts [5], teaching efficacy around inclusive education among early childhood teachers has not been given adequate attention in research and practice. This is because ECE has barely had any special education teachers meaning it is often ignored that this level of education may have learners with special needs or other behavioral difficulties that interfere with learning. While this may be the case, little is known about the inclusive teaching efficacy of teachers in ECE [6]. This situation is a concern because some education policies have failed or faced severe difficulties due to the under-preparation of key implementing stakeholders in every necessary domain of that policy.

From a psychological viewpoint of education, it can be argued that how a teacher feels about one's ability to deliver a policy influences their ability to implement that particular policy with high fidelity [7]. Teacher preparation in the provision of inclusive education is very significant. This policy is essential because it includes all learners regardless of status [8]. Scholars have argued that teachers are not equally efficacious in all teaching situations [9]. Hence, one may feel efficacious in teaching a particular group of students and may feel more or less efficacious under different circumstances, such as teaching learners with special needs instead of the average group of learners. With the evidence that teachers' self-efficacy is a powerful construct of teacher quality over time, it is necessary to consider the teaching task, context, and personal competence [10]. For example, teachers may handle learners with special education needs in an inclusive classroom with mixed feelings [11]. Research has shown that most schools newly established in Zambia as providers of early childhood education lacked adequate and qualified teachers for the program [12]. It is further revealed that special education teachers in Zambia were not adequately involved in developing the 2013 revised curriculum [13]. The author noted that teachers had a limited understanding of the curriculum adaptation necessary for implementing the curriculum for learners with special education needs.

Further, it was also shown that care in language use, especially for learners with education needs, is vital. Teachers must understand how to attend to learners with special needs and those without in an inclusive class [14], [15]. Another study in the Kabwe district established that including learners with learning disabilities was almost just rhetoric [16]. Teachers are vital stakeholders in the provision of inclusive education. Therefore,

their self-efficacy beliefs about their ability to handle an inclusive class of learners are significant [17].

Further, it was found that teachers' ability to handle an inclusive ECE class was affected by the number of learners with special needs in an inclusive class [18]. This showed that increasing the number of students with special educational needs (SEN) in a given inclusive class led to changes in teacher practices, lowered job satisfaction, and increased stress levels [19]. There are several challenges in implementing inclusive education, such as lack of funding, ill teacher preparation, and insufficient mentorship [20]. Other challenges faced in implementing inclusive education were inadequate teacher training, negative attitudes as well as lack of support were critical barriers to the effective implementation of inclusive education [21]. The study under review is significant because it brought critical barriers to inclusive education provision. However, there was a need to explore teachers' inclusive self-efficacy in the context of early childhood education learners. The Inclusive Teacher Efficacy (ITE) gap must be considered at all levels to appreciate teachers' input in inclusive education, specifically focusing on their self-efficacy [22].

Further, it was also revealed that teachers felt ill-prepared to handle learners with diverse needs due to inadequate training. Pre-service training is critical to achieving effective inclusive education implementation. The inadequate preparation of teachers negatively impacts the success of inclusive education. Early childhood education provides a foundation for the education system. It requires critical attention from well-prepared teachers to implement the policy as required [23].

Theoretical Perspective

This study adopted Albert Bandura's Social learning theory of self-efficacy. The theory postulates that individuals' beliefs about their abilities are essential in determining their behavior and success. Bandura [24] argues that self-efficacy beliefs can influence behavior, so an individual with high self-efficacy is likelier to persist in facing challenges. They set higher goals and engage in effortful behavior to accomplish them. The theory was adopted to guide the study as it relates well to exploring inclusive teaching efficacy among ECE teachers in Zambia. The beliefs that ECE teachers hold as they manage inclusive ECE learners are a severe issue of interest. This is because they may determine the success or failure to implement the policy under review [25], [26].

2. METHOD

The study used a qualitative design [27] and an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). A sample of 17 participants was used. It comprised 15 ECE teachers drawn from a population of 400 Government ECE teachers and two senior education officers, one from the College of Education and another from the district office. The two officers were picked because they are key informants at the college and district level, respectively. The study used non-randomized purposive sampling to select the province, education leaders, and teachers but used random sampling for the district and schools. Teachers were approached after permission was granted by the Ministry of Education and

the school head teachers. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted upon informed consent from the participants (ECE teachers). For the education leaders, interviews were conducted at their offices. Data were collected through audio recording and further transcribed verbatim. After that, two researchers read transcripts several times for triangulation purposes. Data analysis was done using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA involves a rigorous and systematic data analysis process involving multiple rounds of data coding and interpretation to identify patterns, themes, and underlying meanings in the data [28]. Data were grouped into meaning units, condensed into codes then codes were later regrouped into themes. Interactions in the data were done through thematic mapping to show how themes interacted. All ethical considerations were made.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that ECE teachers believed that they had difficulties in implementing the inclusive education policy in their sector. They felt that they were insufficiently trained and lacked experience in the sector. It was also revealed that teachers had difficulties including ECE classes with large numbers of children with SEN and lacked mentorship.

3.1. Sources of ITE

The study further revealed themes associated with sources of teachers' self-beliefs in their abilities to teach learners in an inclusive class. This finding was significant because getting the insight of the sources also provided enablers of ITE required to strengthen the implementation of the inclusive education policy. Interpretive Phenomenological analysis revealed several sources, including the learning environment, Pre-service training, and in-service training.

3.1.1 Learning environment

The study revealed that the learning environment influenced teachers' beliefs in their abilities. The learning environment meant the ECE classroom characteristics and the school support system. By classroom characteristics, participants meant space, ventilation, and furniture size. The size of the classroom and whether it was permanently allocated to the ECE learners was a factor. Teachers felt that the disturbance that came with the shifting and relocation to other undesignated rooms due to national examinations and other events that required relocation affected them. The school support system meant interacting with workmates and administrators. They felt undermined by the way their colleagues addressed them. The following verbatim substantiates this finding;

One teacher said; *To have a big classroom and more teaching aids. I know I can make them using locally available materials, but they require space. Even aah, I do not know if I can also talk of the outside; we do not have enough spaces where learners can do other activities, and we do not have enough space. Yeah, it is small. It affects me (Mseka ECE TR).*

The other pointed out: *the issues of exams. During exams, they shift like that chart on the wall is removed because of exams; it is something else I tell you. The class is small and unsuitable for ECE learners as they need to move on a freeway. Yes, I get frustrated by those shifting, yeah, stressing issues. I advise that ECE class be permanent even during exams; it should be permanent and will help us. (Umoda ECE TR)*

This finding shows that classroom size was an essential source of inclusive teaching efficacy among ECE teachers. This finding was in tandem with the findings of Alabi et al. [19] on a Nigerian sample which revealed that learning environments influence the teachers' belief in their capabilities. The possible reason for the similarity could be that, generally, teachers are more likely to participate in policy implementation at the school level when the work environment is stable and supportive in both structure and processes. In this case, the environment involves the people and the space these ECE teachers operate from. However, this finding is an eye-opener to school administrators. The school support system is essential to facilitate a user-friendly and motivating learning environment for teachers and learners. There is a need to provide large classrooms for ECE learners to allow teachers to display their teaching aids without unnecessary disturbances.

3.1.2 The in-service training

The study also found that teachers believed there was a need for in-service training to orient them with inclusive classroom context skills. While the inclusive education policy is critical, in-service teachers need exposure to it with references to its implementation process. This is important because, without precise exposure, it would not yield the intended purpose of the policy. This study revealed that the participants were not knowledgeable enough to implement the policy effectively. This means they lacked relevant knowledge and skills to handle inclusive ECE learners. The following verbatim confirms: *Ummmm, it is difficult because I am not trained to handle such children with special needs. I do not know braille or sign language; we were just taught basics, so I do not know how to handle these children; even if I tell them to scribble sometimes, I leave them so they will catch up in their own time (Mseka ECE TR).*

The study showed that in-service ECE teachers did not believe in their abilities to handle an inclusive ECE class mainly due to a lack of relevant knowledge to handle learners with special needs in an inclusive class. The teachers believed they were well-trained to handle ECE learners in a regular class but lacked inclusive education knowledge due to a lack of exposure to inclusive training. Contrary to this finding is the study by Muzata [14], who revealed that teachers had relevant knowledge of inclusive education. However, they had difficulties understanding the principles of inclusive, but this study indicated that lack of confidence in their knowledge affected teachers' abilities to handle inclusive ECE learners. Therefore, there is a need for exposure to continuous professional development (CPD) focused on understanding inclusive teaching and learning process. This finding is supported by Hofman and Kilimo [9], who argued that most teachers support the concept of inclusion at all levels without the willingness to teach in inclusive classrooms. Most in-service teachers were exposed to inclusive education policy while in-

service, which may lead to the belief and feeling of inadequacy to manage inclusive learners.

3.1.3 The in-service training

The study further revealed that teachers felt that there was a need for curriculum adjustment in the ECE teacher training institutions in order to enable to empower pre-service teachers with relevant knowledge and skills for an inclusive class of learners. The curriculum adjustment meant a gap in the teacher training institutions where the participants felt they only learned the basics in their colleges, which did not prepare them for a whole fledged inclusive class. One teacher said: *Maybe by getting training, mmmm because as far as I know, some teachers have trained to handle all children with special needs. Yes, but not much was learned regarding our training. They need to add more to help us* **(Beto ECE TR)**.

The study showed that ECE teachers believed there is much more to be done to help trainee teachers acquire adequate, relevant knowledge and skills to handle an inclusive ECE class of learners. Similarly, Muzata [13] argued that the curriculum development process is critical and requires sufficient stakeholder involvement. However, the study mentioned above found that educators in Zambia were left out of the 2013 curriculum development process, making the implementation process challenging for learners with special education needs. It is essential, therefore, to point out that ECE teacher training institutions beef up their curriculum to prepare teachers for inclusive classes of learners, as this will change their perception and positively affect their inclusive teaching efficacy (ITE).

3.1.4 The number of children with special needs

The study showed that the number of learners with special education needs in an inclusive class was perceived to affect a teacher. This means that the more children with SEN in an inclusive class, the more difficult and stressful it was to handle such a class. This was a great deal in that teachers indicated that they would leave some learners with SEN unattended as they required individual attention. The following verbatim confirms: *ummm, it is usually challenging; maybe I can manage two or three, even those who should have a mild disability, but if it is a considerable number, it is difficult. As far as I know, one child with SEN equals ten children, the so-called normal ones* **(Nyaku ECE TR)**.

The study revealed that teachers were uncomfortable with the increased number of children with SEN in inclusive classes. It was indicated in the finding that one child with SEN was equal to ten learners without special needs. Other scholars found that increasing numbers of students with SEN led to changes in teacher practices, lower job satisfaction, and increased stress levels. What is critical in this study is that teachers are dealing with learners at the foundational level of education [18]. There is a need to address issues of numbers in inclusive classes as teachers believe that their performance is affected, and indeed the theory upon which this study is anchored postulates that these beliefs may lead to poor implementation of inclusive education in policy if left unattended.

3.2. Cross-cutting Themes

Thematic mapping revealed more insights where themes seemed to interact. Associations and causality governed the interaction. The ITE gap was pointed out at the college level. While ECE teachers are trained and monitored, attention is biased toward general classroom management. The ECE coordinator stated: *We need adjustments at the college level starting from our curriculum, such as monitoring tools and approach to lesson delivery. There is a need for orientation workshops for every lecturer; I think it would prepare our students well for inclusive teaching.*

The education officer from the district added: *over the monitoring tool, nothing much is said on inclusive education, but there is a revised tool which I so far do not know the content of. Revision of the tool is the way to go in order to guide our teachers well to plan and implement the policy. Orientations on using the monitoring tool are also needed to help ourselves and extend it to others.* The finding shows that the implementation of the policy needs a multisectoral approach. The college curriculum must be designed to address a typical inclusive class of learners when preparing ECE teachers. The monitoring tool must promote inclusivity at all times. The finding was in tandem with other scholars [16][21], who revealed inadequate teacher training to implement inclusive education. The possible similarity in the results is that teacher preparation is focused mainly on non-inclusive learners. This creates an ITE gap, making it difficult for teachers to act competently in the context of inclusive classes. The CPDs focused on handling inclusive learners promote confidence in teachers who feel inadequately prepared for inclusive learners. The key relationships in the findings, as indicated in the thematic mapping below, are that inclusive education policy implementation success is related to relevant policy knowledge and awareness. The IPA revealed that ECE teachers were not knowledgeable enough to handle an inclusive class. The teachers were passionate about managing such a class of learners but believed they had insufficient knowledge of their methodology for an inclusive class.

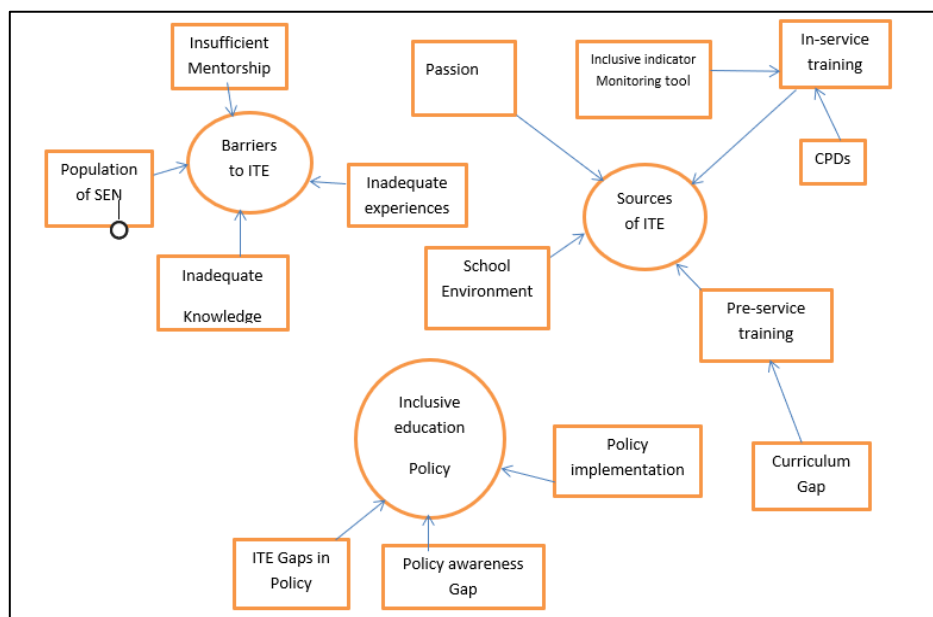


Figure 1. Thematic map of results

4. CONCLUSION

The study revealed exciting findings on ECE teachers' beliefs about inclusive learners. The study showed that teachers' lack of confidence in handling inclusive learners affected the implementation of the inclusive education policy. Lack of good mentorship, experience managing inclusive learners, and the number of children with SEN in an inclusive class influenced teachers' beliefs about teaching children with SEN. The study further explored sources of teachers' efficacy in handling ECE learners. The pre-service training, school environment, and in-service training were critical issues among the sources. The implementation of the inclusive education policy leaves a lot to be desired. Every teacher may be considered effective in providing inclusive education, but it is important to note that other teachers may not possess inclusive teaching efficacy. This means that they may believe in their competency to handle a non-inclusive class and doubt themselves if exposed to an inclusive class.

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