

Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Zambia: A Call for Policy Action

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Abstract

Early childhood education is thought to be foundational for the development of human capital and offers a window of opportunity for accelerated brain development. Zambia has made advancements in enhancing access to quality ECE. However, current initiatives have also shown inequitable access especially for children with disabilities. The effectiveness of a comprehensive inclusive early childhood education agenda has been explored in this paper as a compelling case for promoting equitable access for all qualified children. The major objective of the educational system is to serve as a social integration institution, and inclusive education is frequently considered as the path to achieving this objective. The paper is premised on the argument that the early years are crucial for inclusion because this is the period when the foundation for lifetime learning and the development of core values and attitudes is laid. Conversely, learning and developmental inequalities first manifest themselves in a child's early years, prior to their entry into primary school. It is simply too late to start talking about inclusion when children are already in primary school.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Inclusive early childhood education, Rights-Based Approach, policy, legislation

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Introduction

Early childhood is said to be a developmental stage where the brain matures more rapidly resulting in the orderly development of perceptual, motor, cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional, and self-regulation skills (Shankoff and Phillips, 2000). It is crucial to provide early childhood development interventions to vulnerable children (Matafwali & Kabali, 2017). The basis for future health outcomes, socialisation, scholastic success, future wages, and overcoming societal obstacles is laid in the early years (Cunha & Heckman, 2006). The body of evidence demonstrates that ECE has long-term benefits. In order to succeed in the profession and subsequently in life as an adult, survival skills must be developed. Research has further demonstrated that exposure to quality early childhood treatments results in better cognitive capacities and decreased repeat and drop-out rates (Cunha, Flavio, and Heckman, 2004). Although there is scarcity of statistics on the frequency of impairments among children in Zambia who are five years old or younger, global reports indicate that 53 million of the one billion people with disabilities worldwide are children under the age of five. (World Health Organization Report on Disability, 2011). These alarming statistics raises concern on the heightened risk levels for children everywhere, Zambia inclusive. However, through early intervention, many of the developmental risks and long-term effects of developmental delays can be avoided. This research aims to investigate the viability of inclusive early childhood education as a desirable option to address the needs of children with developmental delays.

The concept of inclusive Early Childhood Education

The concept of inclusive education is broad, complex, and sometimes ambiguous. In defining inclusive education, scholars have different views and perspectives. Nonetheless, inclusive education is related to equity, diversity, equality, citizenship, justice, and universality (Rapp & Corral- Granados (2021). According to UNESCO's definition of inclusive education (2005), inclusive education is a process that addresses and responds to the variety of needs of learners by enhancing involvement in learning, cultures, and communities while lowering exclusion from and within the educational system. According to other academics, inclusive education is both an educational objective and a practice that strives to eliminate obstacles so that all students can access, participate in, and benefit the most academically and socially from school (Slee, 2018). When inclusion is seen as a goal for education, it embodies the core ideas of accessibility, equality, equity, participation, and relevance. Inclusion is viewed as an educational concept that celebrates learner diversity and classroom diversity. Other scholars have summarised it as follows:

Inclusive education involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures, and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all children of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences (Hehir et al.; 2016, p. 3).

Theoretical framework- System Theory

The Niklas Luhmann systems theory, which perceives education as the social system, served as the theoretical foundation for this paper. It is important to first take into account how the educational system interacts with other functional systems that may be able to include or exclude people (Luhmann et. al., 2013). Within the context of the theory, an inclusive early childhood education system should not only be produced by the system through policy pronouncements, but must also be observed within the system. A model of connected systems and arguments is used to expand on the systems theory.

Moral argument for Inclusive education

Regardless of aptitude, every infant and young child and his or her family have the right to engage in a wide range of activities and contexts as complete members of their families, communities, and society. This is what inclusive early childhood education involves (Guralnick, 2001). Diversity, reducing obstacles, equal opportunity, respect, a celebration of differences, serving the needs of all children, ongoing processes, overcoming exclusion, greater access, and increasing involvement are listed as the core characteristics of inclusive ECE by Devarakonda (2013). (p. 7). Xu and Filler (2008) summarized inclusive ECE based on the following three criteria: (1) complete inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classroom and community activities with their classmates who are usually developing; (2) educational goals and objectives.

Equity argument

Inclusive education applies to all learners. There is convincing evidence that inclusive early childhood education can offer both children with disabilities and children without them long-term advantages. According to Rea et al. (2002), children with disabilities in inclusive early childhood classrooms outperformed peers in a variety of subject areas, including language, arithmetic, science, and social studies. Hehir et al. (2016) also found that learners with disabilities who were included in inclusive early childhood classrooms had better reading and math skills, high attendance rates, a lower risk of behavioural issues, and higher chances of completing secondary education.

For students with disabilities in inclusive ECE classrooms, other studies have discovered improved outcomes in the social-emotional domains (Holahan & Costenbader, 2000; Strain, Bovey, Wilson, & Roybal, 2009; Vidákovich & Habók, 2019); cognitive development (Hoyson, Jamieson, & Strain, 1985; Peters, 2004; Strain & Bovey, 2011; Strain & Hoyson, 2000; de Leeuw). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that youngsters without disabilities who attend inclusive early childhood classrooms have less prejudice and are more welcoming of others who are different from them (Hehir et al., 2016). The inclusion of both disabled and able-bodied kids can promote the development of social skills, peer modelling, positive self-image, problem-solving abilities, and mutual respect. It is thought that these qualities may be passed on to their families, benefiting them.

Economic argument

It might be argued that inclusive education is still far more economical than a segregated one. not just in terms of ongoing expenses, but also in terms of the long-term costs to society (Slee, 2018; UNESCO, 2005). The only way to achieve complete societal integration and a person's full potential development is considered as an inclusive system (Reheman, 2010). Early childhood education that is inclusive is a human rights problem. With inclusive education, students with disabilities are given the same chance to take part in the same activities and programs as their counterparts without impairments. Additionally, inclusive early childhood education offers a chance for early intervention to lessen side effects and a systematic approach to the early identification of children at risk. Contrarily, the exclusion of children with disabilities

According to the ILO, excluding people with disabilities can cost low- and middle-income nations up to 7% of their national GDP (Nannyonjo, 2007). The World Bank also predicts that by not funding comprehensive early childhood education, these low-income nations would continue to lose billions of dollars in potential revenue. For instance, it was predicted that in Bangladesh, the absence of education and employment opportunities for those who care for those with disabilities might cost the nation US\$1.2 billion yearly, or 1.74% of GDP (World Bank, 2008). Without a doubt, funding inclusive early childhood education dramatically lowers the costs of special education, remedial instruction, and medical care while also enhancing learning results for students with disabilities (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child). The window of opportunity for neuroplasticity, according to neuroscience, is in the early years. If this is missed, children with disabilities may be referred for a continuum of specialised services later in life, such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, and other special services, which could put additional strain on already scarce resources (Hearst et al., 2020). The aforementioned makes it abundantly evident that inclusive early childhood education is not only essential for children with disabilities but also by far the most effective and economical route to a society that is inclusive.

Inclusive ECE as a human right

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Development Agenda, as well as other international agreements to which Zambia is a party, provide a significant opportunity to promote an inclusive ECE agenda. All girls and boys should have access to high-quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by 2030 in order to prepare them for primary school, according to SDG 4:2. According to international agreements, the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) sets the tone for the global appeal in recognition of the equal right to education with Article 26. This document embodies the long road to inclusive education. Despite not being legally obligatory, the 1993 United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities provide moral and political pressure. Further acknowledging education as a human right to be enjoyed by all children on the basis of equality of opportunity is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Additionally, Zambia participates in regional human rights agreements. The right to education is guaranteed by Article 17(1) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples. The right to education is further recognised in Article 11 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children, and Article 13 of the charter requests that States Parties implement special protections for children, especially those with impairments.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted in 2006, and Zambia ratified it in 2010. This advance in disability law is arguably the most progressive to date. The CRPD codifies the international agreement on the nature and extent of the rights of people with disabilities by upholding the key values of autonomy, non-discrimination, equality, and accessibility. This has highlighted a paradigm shift away from the medical model and toward the promotion of the social model and the Rights-Based Approach to the regime for people with disabilities. The social model of disability considers how a particular child may be affected by physical and social constraints (Oliver, 1990). According to this concept, the child is seen from an all-encompassing perspective. On the other hand, the rights-based approach upholds seven fundamental principles: universality and inalienability; indivisibility; interdependence and interrelatedness; equality and non-discrimination; participation and inclusion; empowerment; accountability; and respect for the rule of law, which provides legal rigor to influence policy decisions and practice. The RBA is a living example of the non-negotiable core values of equality and non-discrimination in the provision of services, particularly to the most disadvantaged and in needy members of society. The fact that the enjoyment of one right depends partially or entirely on the achievement of another illustrates how interrelated human rights are, according to this statement. ECE should be viewed in this regard as essential to advancing the realization of other rights and a means of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The RBA also promotes the idea of participation and inclusion, which aims to ensure that environments that are safe and welcoming to learners and that appreciate diversity are available.

At the strategic level, UNESCO (2015) has stressed the urgent need for all children to have equitable access to education and has urged nations to put policies in place that aim to address any kind of exclusion and inequality. The Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action, which states that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective way to combat discriminatory attitudes, foster welcoming communities, develop an inclusive society, and ensure education for all, serve as a foundation for this call (UNESCO 1994). The Dakar Framework of Action (2000) then urged countries to strengthen and extend early childhood education and care, particularly for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children (UNESCO, 2000, p.15).

In addition to raising the bar for the applicability of pertinent laws as well as accountability in the execution of policy commitments, the fundamental principles published in international instruments go above and beyond the simple adoption of laws and policies. As a result, the transition from policy to action necessitates a proactive approach to policy decisions that gives the most vulnerable and in need members of society priority when allocating resources and providing services.

Overview on Early Childhood Education in Zambia

The Nursery Day Care Act, which regulated the delivery of preschool, was passed in 1957, marking the beginning of early childhood education in Zambia. While the Ministry of Education continued to be in charge of teacher training, material creation, and standard monitoring throughout this time, ECE was overseen by the Ministry of Local Government and Housing. The mandate for ECE was shifted from the Ministry of Local Government and Housing to the Ministry of Education through a Government Gazette in 2004, which marked a significant advancement. Since then, Zambia has designated early childhood education as a policy priority issue. The 1996 Education Policy acknowledged the crucial part ECE played in creating the groundwork for education (MoGE, 1996).

The development and implementation of ECE curricula, the annexation of ECE centers to existing public schools as a strategy to increase access, the placement of qualified ECE teachers on the government payroll, and the provision of teaching and learning materials are just a few of the policy interventions that demonstrate the

significant progress that has been made. With 1,849 instructors deployed overall, 2,992 ECE centers annexed to government primary schools since 2015, and an increased proportion of grade one entrants with ECE experience rising from 15.5% in 2012 to 29.9% in 2018, these advances have produced favorable effects (MoGE, 2018).

Challenges and opportunities

Despite these achievements however, there are a number of challenges negatively impacting on national efforts to scale-up ECE initiatives in Zambia. These include among others inequitable access, gaps in the policy environment, inadequate funding, inadequate trained personnel, and lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials as discussed in the next section.

Inequitable access

The achievements in the ECE sector conceal significant levels of inequality. For instance, vulnerable children from rural and difficult-to-reach areas and children with impairments are disproportionately underrepresented in the contemporary debate on ECE (Matafwali et al., 2012; Muzata et al., 202; Matafwali & Munsaka, 2011). The Zambian Government was commended by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities for progressive achievements in improving access to education. However, it was noted that access to ECE was still relatively restricted, particularly for underprivileged people (United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability Report, 2014). Inflexible curricula, lack of specialist personnel and teacher training chances to improve pedagogical practices, lack of policy and legal backing are only a few of the obstacles to inclusive education that have been extensively documented elsewhere.

Policy and legislative environment

To encourage efforts toward an inclusive ECE agenda, Zambia has a wide range of well-formulated and well-intended policies and practices. Since 1977, there has been an education policy that serves as the foundation for special education. The right to education is acknowledged in the 1996 education policy "Educating Our Future," and policies like the National Policy on Disability from 2016 and the National Implementation Plan on Disability are inclusive and helpful. Education has been cited as a key pillar to support the growth of human capital and productivity in Zambia's 7th National Development Plan and Vision 2030. (Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 2017). The Education Sector Skills Plan (ESSP) 2017–2021 has highlighted the following strategic policy priority areas in the ECE because it views ECE as a facilitator for achieving high-quality education.

The context of reasonably solid legislation is equally crucial. The Disability Act of 2012 was undoubtedly the most significant piece of legal change in Zambia's disability landscape. Early Childhood Education is not included in the Disability Act, but its rules promote equality of chances for everyone in the delivery of education. The Education Act of 2011 further stipulates that every effort must be taken to guarantee that all eligible children have access to early childhood education. Even though the Zambian Constitution is silent on early childhood education, its Article 23 emphasizes the fundamental human rights value of non-discrimination, which serves as the cornerstone for the equalization of chances for everyone. The inclusive early childhood agenda can be advanced with the aid of a strong policy and legal foundation. The achievement of inclusive ECE is, however, a distant goal for Zambia due to deficiencies in enforcement mechanisms and an apparent gap between policy ambitions and reality.

Insufficient financial resources

Although developing policies, laws, and strategic plans is a significant step toward promoting inclusive ECE, it is not a goal in and of itself. The successful implementation of inclusive ECE may be impacted by variables including insufficient resources and suitable facilities. It is common knowledge that sufficient financial resources, are needed to implement inclusive ECE. ECE, which has a pitiful yearly financial allocation of less than 1%, is the education sector's most underfunded subsector, which is unfortunate for Zambia. Local important stakeholders, including the Zambia National Education Coalition, who highlighted that the government had budgeted just K11.2 million in the 2020 budget compared to K13.9 million for ECE 2019, have drawn attention to this fiscal imbalance. The sector depends substantially on outside assistance to maintain operations, particularly from working partners. Improved access to early childhood education can result from higher domestic funding supported by donor assistance. It is also critical to remember that, even with the limited resources at their disposal, inclusive early childhood education can advance as long as decision-makers recognize that disabilities are both a human right and a crucial component of educational policy. With this in mind, it will be possible to organise, allocate, and distribute resources in a way that takes into account the disability dimension by seeing inclusive early childhood education through the lens of human rights and at the policy level. Inadequate funding has had a negative effect on the effectiveness and quality of service delivery.

Lack of suitable equipment and facilities

In addition to inadequate finance, the education sector lacks the necessary instructional resources to support inclusive ECE. In a survey on inclusive education in Zambia, the majority of the teachers agreed that it improved social justice, but they also noted that implementing inclusive education in actual practice was challenging in a setting with limited resources because it does not ensure that all children will participate effectively (Morbeg, 2003). According to other studies, the low investment in inclusive ECE is largely a result of the widespread

misconception that it is too expensive to include children with disabilities, which is exacerbated by the lack of accurate information on the prevalence, educational opportunities, and academic success of kids with disabilities (Saebnes et al., 2015).

Inadequately skilled and trained personnel and few prospects for professional growth

Fundamentally, teaching involves imparting to students a body of already-existing knowledge and abilities. Thus, integral to inclusive ECE is Individually Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). According to Weeks (2000), instructors are essential in fostering learning environments that support DAP principles during policy design and implementation. The proficiency of teachers in inclusive education pedagogy is a significant factor in determining how responsive an inclusive classroom is to learner variety, according to Chinhara and Sotuku (2020). As a result, in order to effectively teach in inclusive classrooms, teachers must possess a depth of knowledge, a wide range of abilities, and a positive outlook on life. According to Prinsloo (2001), the most important problem that has to be solved in inclusion education is the training and empowerment of teachers to recognize and successfully support students who encounter learning hurdles.

However, the research that is currently available demonstrates that ECE in Zambia has difficulties due to a lack of properly qualified professionals in regular schools to manage challenging teaching environments and address the particular requirements of students with disabilities in the classroom (Matafwali et al., 2013). Together with this, there aren't many options for CPD that emphasize inclusive education. The capacity of teachers to respond to the unique needs of students is improved by CPD programs, which are supplementary to both initial and in-service teacher training. There is now only one college of education (Zambia Institute of Special Education) that offers inclusive ECE diploma training for teachers. By prioritizing inclusive pedagogies and approaches, preservice training readiness can be improved. Insufficient instruction in inclusive pedagogy at teacher training level suggests that many ECE teachers may be inadequately prepared to respond to learner diversity.

Lack of multisectoral coordination

The requirements of children with impairments span a wide range and cannot be satisfied in a single setting. Identification of all pertinent stakeholders who would be essential in the identification, evaluation, and intervention to reduce developmental risks is the key to inclusive ECE. Although the multisectoral strategy is gradually developing, Zambia's ECD sector is currently fragmented. Although the 7th National Development Plan advocates a multisectoral approach, activities pertaining to disability are typically planned and implemented in isolation.

Implications for policy and practice

Zambia has made great strides in the field of early childhood. However, the limited access to ECE for children with impairments is explained by a number of the reasons mentioned in this research. While it is outside the purview of this paper to reach a consensus on what inclusive early childhood education should look like, the paper promotes the following proactive policy action.

Strengthening legislative and policy environment

According to UNESCO (2019), the inclusive education agenda needs to be context-driven. Although the Disability Act of 2012 and the Education Act of 2012 marked advancements in the legal landscape, the provision for inclusive early childhood education is insufficient, blurring the lines between enforcement measures and practice. Since Zambia currently lacks an integrated ECD policy, the policy climate is rather remote for enhancing equitable access. Therefore, improving the legal and regulatory framework continues to be a strategic approach of increasing state actors' accountability.

Enhancing Early identification intervention efforts

The first step in early detection and management is developmental screening. The urgent need for culturally and linguistically appropriate measures with strong evidence of reliability, validity, and feasibility that will allow the generation of population-based data on children at risk of developmental delays and those with disabilities has been highlighted in UNICEF's World Report (2019) on Inclusive Early Childhood Education and other previous studies (Matafwali & Serpell, 2014). The Ministry of Education has recognized a significant difficulty in promoting inclusive ECE, as the absence of systematic documentation of normative data on developmental milestones of children aged 0–6. (MoGE, 2017 p.54). The availability of demographic data is essential for informing national resource allocation and program outcome measurement. Although the Education Statistical Service has made efforts to collect information on school-age children with disabilities, the available education data lacks visibility on the proportion of children with disabilities currently benefiting from ECE.

Strengthening mechanisms for Continuous Professional Development of ECE teachers

On the availability, readiness, and attitudes of instructors, inclusive early childhood education cannot be implemented effectively. Teachers have a vital role in the effectiveness and quality of inclusion, and their incapacity is seen as a major impediment to effective inclusion. In order for students to actively participate in the learning process, teachers must be qualified and skilled enough to comprehend the complexity of inclusive classrooms, use efficient delivery methods for the curriculum, and adapt the learning environment and teaching

and learning resources. Additionally, it entails offering specific services, such as Braille printing and Sign Language interpreters, to pupils who have hearing and visual impairments, respectively. Scaling is therefore essential.

Increased funding

Sadly, governmental spending on the ECE sector is inadequate, despite the strong justification for the long-term advantages of investing in young children. Public funding for the early childhood sector will be increased, guaranteeing quality and equity in service delivery. A multisectoral approach to programme design, coordination, and alignment across financial streams is essential to maximising resources and improving efficiency given the multidimensional nature of ECE. To meet all the requirements of children with impairments, one sector is insufficient. To support government efforts, it would be crucial to investigate cutting-edge finance options like Public-Private Partnership (PPP).

Strengthening Multisectoral Approach

ECE aims to promote a child's holistic development, including their physical health, social and emotional growth, linguistic development, and cognitive growth (Naudeau et al., 2011). For the delivery of a continuum of services across sectors, a multisectoral approach to policy creation and implementation continues to be an effective tactic. With its emphasis on health, nutrition, early learning opportunities, and safety and security, the World Health Organization's (2018) announcement of the Nurturing Care Framework presents a fantastic opportunity to use a multisectoral approach to ECE service delivery.

Strengthen mechanisms for family involvement

In educational literature, the advantages of family involvement in ECE have been underlined. Family participation aids in extending educational opportunities outside the classroom and fostering a nurturing home environment for children. Improvements in academic performance, school attendance, and positive behaviours are all related to family participation (Neaum, 2013). Since parents are their children's first teachers, they must be actively involved in ensuring that the inclusionary attitude is carried outside of the classroom. By empowering families to actively participate in their children's education through age-appropriate play-based learning activities, strong school and home connections will help promote supportive home environments (Weiss, 2006).

1.1.2 Conclusions and Recommendations

The most practical method for implementing inclusive education is one that uses a systems thinking perspective. Early identification and diagnosis of children at risk of developmental delays and or with impairments is made possible by inclusive early childhood education, which in turn enables medical professionals, parents, and teachers to better meet the needs of the children and implement effective interventions. Implementing an inclusive early childhood education at the national level would call for creating an enabling policy environment that explicitly states and supports a robust system for early identification and intervention, allowing for flexibility in the curriculum, and working in tandem with other sectors to lessen the burden of risks and enhance young children's survival, growth, and development. Overall, the Zambian government and its stakeholders should put policies that support inclusive ECE into practise through adequate funding, increased teacher training, parental awareness, an improved school environment, the provision of appropriate teaching and learning material, and the development of positive attitudes. *Every child matter and matters equally*, according to UNESCO (UNESCO, 2019). The Rights Based Approach to policy implementation carries a legal appeal that shows the potential for a long-term strategy in the delivery of educational services that ensures no child is left behind. Zambia has the chance to benefit from the political fervour and the global push for increased spending in the formative years, when every child can survive and thrive.

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