

## Research Article

# Discovering Ways of Mitigating Challenges Experienced by Special Education Teachers in Mainstream Schools

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## Abstract

This study focused on Discovering Ways of Mitigating Challenges Experienced by Special Education Teachers in selected Mainstream secondary schools of Western Province Zambia. The research objectives were to establish special education teacher's challenges experienced in mainstream schools, to determine how the challenges experienced by special education teachers affect their roles and to discover ways of mitigating special education teachers challenges experienced in the two selected mainstream schools of Mongu District Western Province Zambia. The study was qualitative in nature and employed the interpretivism paradigm. The study used the Hermeneutic research design. The study used research instruments that targeted 23 respondents and these were semi structured interview guide, observation checklist and focus group discussion guide for special education teachers who taught in mainstream schools, school administrators and a PTA chairperson from one of the two selected schools. The findings of the study reviewed the following challenges; inadequate assistive technology devices in mainstream schools, insufficient trained inclusive education specialists, inadequate teaching and learning resources, lack of special education departments in mainstream schools and special educational duties being undermined as significant challenges. The study discovered ways of mitigating the challenges experienced such as adequate financial and human resource support, creating a special education department, collaboration with regular teachers, using assistive technological devices, need for flexible classroom layouts, involving parents in the need to advocates for incorporating inclusive practices into daily routines. Based on the study findings, it was recommended that school administrators allow special education teachers to submit budgets for teaching resources required, new technological assistive devices be used in mainstream schools, establish partnerships with non-governmental organizations to provide additional resources and support required, PTA chairpersons to support school initiatives on community engagements programs concerning inclusive education and furthermore to advocate for the creation of a special education departments in mainstream secondary schools. A further research on discovering ways of mitigating challenges experienced in mainstream schools can be carried out in other districts mainstream schools.

## Keywords

Mitigating, Mainstream School, Challenges, Special Education Teachers

## 1. Introduction

The extent of children's conditions, be it a severe disability in a mainstream setting or a specialized unit. Before delving or a severe learning need, determines whether they are placed into mitigating the significant challenges special education

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Received: 25 September 2024; Accepted: 7 November 2024; Published: 23 June 2026



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teachers experienced in supporting special learners within the mainstream schools, it is imperative to understand the key terms inclusive education. [1] stated that inclusive education is an educational approach and philosophy that seeks to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, or other differences, are educated together in a supportive, equitable and engaging environment. Despite the idealistic vision of inclusive education, some scholars argue that the practical implementation often falls short [6, 2]. While the principles of inclusive education are commendable, the reality is that many schools lack the understanding of the roles practiced by special education teachers and support necessary to effectively implement these practices, leading to inconsistent and often inadequate educational experiences for learners with disabilities.

The inclusion of learners with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools had been widely advocated for and implemented globally. [3] conducted research on the effectiveness of inclusion. The researcher disclosed that the roles that characterize a special education teacher placed in a mainstream school such as collaboration with regular education teachers, assessment and evaluation, creating individualized education programs (IEPs), behavioral management, advocacy for learners and parents, professional development and assistive technology integration were vital. The roles of a special education teacher in mainstream schools includes fostering inclusive classroom environments, teaching social-emotional skills, and providing positive reinforcement to promote appropriate behavior, individualized instruction, behavior management, collaboration with general education teachers and support for students with disabilities, but until now little if any is known on special education teachers challenges experienced in mainstream schools, hence the reason for this study.

Advocacy and commitment towards inclusive education is evidenced by various countries agreeing to a number of policies formulated during the UNESCO lead conference which established the Education for All Policy Framework (leaving no one behind) at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education held from the 7th to the 10th of June 1994 in Spain. About 92 governments and 25 international organizations showed their commitment by endorsing the policy on actualizing inclusive education [4]. This is supported by UNESCO, which highlights the significance of inclusive education in fostering resilient and equal societies. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report, "a move towards more inclusive education is imperative" and this commitment by numerous governments and organizations reflects a global recognition of this necessity [4]. The government state of Ohio Canada for instance showed their commitment towards these policy frameworks by recruiting as many trained specialist teachers as possible in mainstream schools. In spite of this wonderful approach, little was done on highlighting the challenges experienced by special education teachers in mainstream schools which this study aimed at bringing out.

Special education teachers in mainstream schools receive multifaceted support to enhance inclusive education [5]. In South Africa for instance, the ministry of education embraced multifaceted support to specialist teachers in mainstream schools such as ongoing professional development and training on the latest teaching strategies and technologies, collaborative planning time with general education teachers, and access to specialized instructional materials and assistive technology [7]. The ministry also acknowledged administrative support as being critical, with school leaders advocating for inclusive practices and mentorship programs for specialist teachers. Classroom aides and behavior specialists provide additional assistance, while therapists, counselors, and psychologists offer specialized services. Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are developed through team collaboration, supported by IEP management teams. Most importantly understanding legal requirements and receiving advocacy support to ensure compliance with special education laws are emphasized. Engaging parents through workshops and leveraging community resources is also a plus. Further, emotional and professional support networks, including teacher support groups and wellness programs, help manage the stresses of their roles. Together, these resources create a comprehensive support system that fosters an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. In spite all the support given, the study left out the challenges experienced by special education teachers in mainstream schools which this study focused on.

Recent recruitment initiatives in Zambia had seen a significant increase in the number of teachers hired, including special education teachers, [9]. In 2023, the government recruited 7,221 teachers to address the high demand for educators, a substantial increase from the initially budgeted 4,500 positions. This recruitment was aimed at improving the teacher-pupil ratios in both primary and secondary schools. In 2022, the Zambian government undertook an even larger recruitment drive, hiring 30,496 teachers. This was a historic move for the country applauded by all stakeholders. The Special Education Teachers Union praised the initiative and urged the government to specify the number of special education teachers recruited. They emphasized the need to improve the ratio between specialist teachers and learners with disabilities in both mainstream and special units. The tremendous figures shown above shows the government's efforts in improving the teacher pupil ratios and advocacy from the union to specify specialist teachers among new recruits leaving out the challenges experienced by special education teachers in mainstream schools which this study embarks on discovering.

## 1.1. Statement of the Problem

It is a challenge for special education teachers in mainstream schools to effectively execute their roles. This was supported by [8] who stated that manifested support were significant in stressing the roles of special education teachers in the

mainstream schools. Never the less it is not known if any weather attention was paid to disclose the challenges special education teacher's experienced in mainstream schools.

## 1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to delve into the challenges experienced by special education teachers in the two selected mainstream schools of Mongu District in Western Province.

## 1.3. Research Objectives

1. Establishing challenges experienced by special education teachers in the two selected mainstream schools in Mongu District.
2. Determining how the challenges experienced by special education teachers affect their roles in two selected mainstream schools in Mongu District.
3. Discovering ways of mitigating the challenges experienced by special education teachers in the two selected mainstream schools in Mongu District.

## 1.4. Research Questions

1. What challenges are faced by special education teachers in mainstream schools?
2. What are the important roles of special education teachers in the mainstream schools?
3. To which extent can roles be upheld and challenges mitigated in mainstream Schools?

## 2. Presentation of Findings

This section provides the findings on "special education teachers challenges experienced in mainstream schools in Mongu district of Western province Zambia". During presentations, the researcher took into account the three objectives; to discover ways of mitigating special education teachers challenges experienced in the two selected mainstream schools. The findings were structured around questions asked in the semi-structured interview guide, focused group discussion guide and observation checklist.

### *Discovering Ways of Mitigating Special Education Teacher's Challenges Experienced in Mainstream Schools*

In order to suggest ways of addressing the special education teacher's challenges experienced in the two selected mainstream schools, data was collected from the school administrators (ad) of school K and school M, PTA chairperson (PTC) and special education teachers (STr) from school K and M. The data was collected using Semi- Structured interview guide.

In order to discover ways of mitigating special education teachers challenges experienced in the mainstream school, the researcher needed to establish ways of mitigating special education teachers challenges experienced in the two selected

mainstream schools. The answers to the questions are reflected in the following responses. Ad1 from School K stated that *"on the importance of differentiated instruction and ongoing professional development for teachers, our school remains resolute. "By tailoring our teaching strategies to accommodate various learning styles and needs, we can better manage the diversity in our classrooms. Regular workshops and training sessions help teachers adapt their methods effectively."*

Ad2 from School M highlighted that *the school suggests adopting a collaborative approach. "Creating small teaching teams with regular and special education teachers working together can significantly improve how we address diverse learning needs. This ensures that each teacher can focus on their area of expertise while supporting one another."*

STr1 from School K responded that *"I recommend creating a special education department in the mainstream. This can create awareness on the relevance of special education teachers in mainstream schools. Having our own department can bring about the much needed respect we deserve in our schools."*

STr2 from School K highlighted that *"we need to value adaptive technology. Using tools such as speech-to-text software and audiobooks can help accommodate different learning needs and make the learning environment more inclusive."*

STr1 from School M stated that *"I propose regular assessments and feedback sessions. Conducting frequent assessments helps us understand how each learner is progressing and adjust our teaching methods accordingly."*

STr2 from School M responded that *"there is need for flexible classroom layouts. Creating a classroom environment that allows for various learning stations can help address different needs and enable learners to work at their own pace."*

PTC from School K suggested that *"involving parents in the implementation process is the way to go. By engaging parents in school activities and decision-making, we can foster a more supportive environment for inclusive education."*

Ad1 from School K added that *"we need to advocates for incorporating inclusive practices into daily routines. We should ensure that inclusive education principles are embedded in every aspect of school life, from lesson planning to extracurricular activities."*

STr2 from School K said that *"in order for us to emphasize the role of school culture, we need to promote a culture of acceptance and understanding through regular school-wide initiatives that can help integrate inclusive practices into daily activities."*

STr1 from school M stated that *"I recommend regular monitoring and evaluation. We need to continuously assess how inclusive practices are being implemented and make necessary adjustments to improve."*

STr2 from School M suggests that *"providing resources and support is the right approach. Ensuring that teachers have access to resources and support for implementing inclusive practices is crucial for everyday success."*

PTC from School K indicated that *there is need to highlight the importance of education and communication. "Hosting workshops and informational sessions for parents can help them understand the benefits of inclusive education and address their concerns."*

Ad2 from School M said that *"I suggest creating parent support groups. Establishing groups where parents can share experiences and strategies can help build a supportive network for inclusive education."*

Ad1 from School K proposed that *"we need optimizing classroom management techniques. Implementing strategies such as peer tutoring and group work can help manage large class sizes more effectively."*

STr1 from School K said that *"I recommend prioritizing key interventions. Focusing on the most critical needs and using targeted interventions can help address the challenges of high teacher-pupil ratios."*

STr2 from School K indicated that *"advocating for differentiated instruction can do the job. Tailoring teaching methods to the individual needs of learners helps ensure that everyone receives the attention they require."*

STr1 from School M stated that *"I suggest using a rotational approach. Rotating between individual, small group, and whole class activities can help manage attention and engagement more effectively."*

Ad2 from School M said that *"we need to emphasize on early screening and assessment. Conducting early assessments helps in identifying disabilities sooner, allowing for timely interventions."*

STr2 from School M indicated that *"I recommend using assistive technologies. Assistive technologies can aid in identifying and addressing the needs of learners with disabilities more effectively in large classes."*

PTC from School K stated that *"advocating for targeted professional development is required. Investing in specialized training for both regular and special education teachers ensures that all staff are equipped to handle diverse needs."*

Ad1 from School K said that *"I suggest partnering with external experts. Collaborating with organizations that specialize in special education can provide additional training and support for our staff."*

STr1 from School K stated that *"I recommends seeking community support. Engaging local businesses and community organizations for donations and support can help improve material resources."*

STr2 from School M indicated that *the best approach is to start advocating for policy changes. Lobbying for policy changes at the district or national level can help secure more funding and resources for special education."*

Ad2 from School M stated that *"there is need to propose creating a dedicated budget for special education in the mainstream school. Allocating specific funds for special education ensures that financial constraints do not hinder our efforts."*

STr1 from School K said that *"I recommend implementing support systems for staff. Providing counseling and support*

*for teachers helps manage the emotional toll of working in special education."*

STr2 from School K stated that *"regular workshops and peer mentoring is the way to go. Ongoing workshops and a mentoring system where special education teachers support regular teachers can enhance their skills in inclusive education."*

Ad1 from School K indicated that *"emphasis on integrating special education training into teacher preparation programs should be prioritized. Ensuring that teacher training programs include special education components can better prepare future educators."*

PTC from School K stated that *"I recommend advocating for increased funding. Working with policymakers to secure additional funds for inclusive education can help address resource shortages."*

STr1 from School M indicated that *"there is need to start exploring alternative funding sources. Seeking grants and community funding opportunities can provide additional resources for special education teachers in the mainstream schools."*

STr2 from School M said that *"we need to advocate for the use of adaptive teaching aids. Incorporating assistive technologies and alternative teaching aids can enhance the learning experience for students with special needs."*

STr1 from School M indicated that *"I proposes the use of inclusive teaching strategies. Implementing strategies such as differentiated instruction and flexible grouping can help include learners with special needs without disrupting the class."*

STr2 from School K stated that *"we need to start fostering a positive classroom culture. Creating a supportive and understanding classroom environment helps integrate students with special needs more seamlessly."*

PTC from School K highlighted that *"I suggest implementing attendance tracking systems. Monitoring attendance and addressing issues proactively can help ensure consistent learning for all students."*

STr2 from School M stated that *"collaborating with regular teachers is the way to go. Building strong partnerships with regular teachers can contribute to a more dedicated approach of fostering inclusive education to learners with disabilities in mainstream schools."*

Based on the findings of the study it was discovered that there are ways of mitigating special education teachers challenges experienced in the mainstream school. For instance, tailoring teaching strategies to accommodate various learning styles and needs, creating small teaching teams where regular and special education teacher's work together, creating a special education department, using tools such as speech-to-text software and audiobooks can help accommodate different learning needs and make the learning environment more inclusive, regular assessments and feedback sessions, need for flexible classroom layouts, involving parents in the implementation process, need to advocates for incorporating inclusive practices into daily routines, promote a culture of acceptance

and understanding through regular school-wide initiatives that can help integrate inclusive practices into daily activities, regular monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that teachers have access to resources and support for implementing inclusive practices, hosting workshops and informational sessions for parents can help them understand the benefits of inclusive education and address their concerns creating parent support groups, optimizing classroom management techniques, prioritizing key interventions, differentiated instruction, using a rotational approach, early screening and assessment, using assistive technologies, targeted professional development, partnering with external experts, seeking community support advocating for policy changes, creating a dedicated budget for special education in the mainstream school, implementing support systems for staff, regular workshops and peer mentoring, integrating special education training, advocating for increased funding, start exploring alternative funding sources, use of adaptive teaching aids, inclusive teaching strategies, fostering a positive classroom culture, implementing attendance tracking systems and collaborating with regular teachers.

### 3. Discussion of Findings

This chapter discusses the findings on special education teachers challenges experienced in mainstream schools. The focus was to discover ways of mitigating special education teachers challenges experienced in the mainstream schools in Mongu District of Western Province Zambia.

#### *Ways of Mitigating Challenges Special Education Teachers Experience in Mainstream Schools*

According to the research findings on discovering ways of mitigating special education teacher's challenges experienced in mainstream school, it was noted that; tailoring teaching strategies to accommodate various learning styles and needs, creating small teaching teams where regular and special education teacher's work together, creating a special education department, using tools such as speech-to-text software and audiobooks can help accommodate different learning needs and make the learning environment more inclusive. The researcher also reviewed that regular assessments and feedback sessions, need for flexible classroom layouts, involving parents in the implementation process, need to advocates for incorporating inclusive practices into daily routines, promote a culture of acceptance and understanding through regular school-wide initiatives that can help integrate inclusive practices into daily activities, regular monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that teachers have access to resources and support for implementing inclusive practices, hosting workshops and informational sessions for parents could help them understand the benefits of inclusive education and address their concerns. Finally creating parent support groups, optimizing classroom management techniques, prioritizing key interventions, differentiated instruction, using a rotational approach, early screening and assessment, using assistive technologies, targeted pro-

fessional development, partnering with external experts, seeking community support advocating for policy changes, in order to discover ways of mitigating challenges faced by special education teachers in mainstream schools, the following were the findings; creating a dedicated budget for special education in the mainstream school, implementing support systems for staff, regular workshops and peer mentoring, integrating special education training, advocating for increased funding, start exploring alternative funding sources, use of adaptive teaching aids, inclusive teaching strategies, fostering a positive classroom culture, implementing attendance tracking systems and collaborating with regular teachers.

The findings of the study were partially similar to the study by Mwape, [10] in a study carried out in Kabwe, on Inclusive Education in Zambia about Policy, Curriculum, Practice, Family, and Teacher Education Issues and Challenges. The current study discovered policy reforms, capacity-building programs, and community involvement as key strategies which Mwape [10] brought out.

The findings of the study were partially similar to the ecological system model of Bronfenbrenner, [11] which states that fostering inclusive classroom environments, teaching social-emotional skills, and providing positive reinforcement to promote appropriate behavior might be able to mitigate the challenges Special education teaching in the mainstream demanded for. This was so because the current study discovered that individualized instruction meets academic standards while fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment for all learners.

Basing on the findings of the study on the ways of mitigating special education teacher's challenges experienced in mainstream schools, the author was in agreement with the findings of this study. The authors opinion was that a special education department be created that might enhance inclusive education, advocate for more trained specialist teachers in mainstream schools and start exploring alternative funding sources. Such undertakings could contribute in the mitigation process.

### 4. Conclusion

Special Education Teachers in mainstream schools are undermined. The challenges they experience are visible and cannot go unnoticed. The schools where the study was conducted discovered some of the ways of mitigating the challenges experienced and these were providing adequate financial and human resources, creating a special education department, collaboration with regular teachers, using assistive technologies, community support, need for flexible classroom layouts, involving parents in the implementation process, need to advocates for incorporating inclusive practices into daily routines.

### Abbreviations

PTA Parents Teachers Association

SEN Special Education Needs  
 IEP Individualized Education Plan  
 NGO Non-Governmental Organizations

## Author Contributions

**Chipo Habowa:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

**Penda Annie:** Supervision

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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- [11] Penda Annie: Supervision

## Research Field

**Chipo Habowa:** Special Education

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