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Insights of Primary Education Provision Guide on Inclusive Education Practices in Zambia

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Abstract

Inclusive education remains a central pillar in global and national education reforms aimed at promoting equity and access for all learners, including those with disabilities. In Zambia, the Primary Education Provision Guide serves as a key policy document intended to support the implementation of inclusive practices at the school level. This study critically examined insights of Primary Education Provision Guide on Inclusive Education Practices in Zambia. The study adopted a qualitative documentary analysis design, using the Guide as the primary data source. Data were analysed through document familiarisation, coding, thematic categorisation, and interpretation guided by inclusive education principles. Findings revealed that the Guide demonstrates commitment to equitable access, non-discrimination, learner participation, special learning environments, teacher responsibility, and collaboration.

However, significant gaps were identified, including the absence of structured identification and assessment procedures, Individualised Education Plans, comprehensive teacher training guidelines, adequate provision of accessible learning materials, and clearly defined institutional support systems. Further limitations concerned disability-specific interventions, parental and community involvement, infrastructure accessibility, and monitoring and accountability mechanisms. The study concludes that although the Guide provides a foundation for inclusive education, its limited operational guidance constrains effective implementation. Strengthening the Guide through practical implementation frameworks is essential for promoting equitable access, meaningful participation, and improved learning outcomes for all learners.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Inclusive Education Practices Primary Education Provision Guide, Special Education

Introduction

Inclusive education has gained global recognition as a fundamental human right and a critical component of equitable education systems. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement emphasize the need for schools to accommodate all learners regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions (UNESCO, 1994) [22]. Similarly, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 2015) [24].

In Zambia, educational reforms have increasingly prioritized inclusive education, as reflected in national policy frameworks and curriculum reforms (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023) [13]. The Primary Education Provision Guide is a key instrument designed to translate these policy commitments into practice at the school level. It outlines expectations for access, participation, and quality in primary education, including provisions related to learners with special educational needs (SEN).

However, the existence of policy commitments does not necessarily guarantee effective implementation. Research has shown that many education systems struggle to move from inclusive policy rhetoric to practical implementation due to limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and weak institutional support systems (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2014) [2, 8]. This gap is particularly evident in special education, where effective provision requires structured frameworks, specialized interventions, and coordinated support mechanisms. This study critically examined the Primary Education Provision Guide to addresses special and inclusive education at the primary level. The analysis focuses on both the strengths of the guide and the key gaps that limit its effectiveness in operationalizing inclusive education.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Social Model of Disability and the Inclusive Education Framework, which provided complementary perspectives for critically examining Zambia's Primary Education Provision Guide. The Social Model of Disability, associated with Oliver (1990) ^[19], views disability as arising substantially from societal and environmental barriers rather than individual impairments alone. It guided the examination of barriers such as inaccessible school infrastructure, inadequate teaching and learning materials, insufficient teacher preparation, inflexible curricula, and limited institutional support. This perspective helped assess whether the Guide adequately addresses structural barriers that prevent learners with disabilities from accessing and participating meaningfully in primary education.

The Inclusive Education Framework, informed by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) ^[22], emphasises equitable access, meaningful participation, learner diversity, appropriate support, and the removal of barriers to learning. It guided the assessment of the Guide's provisions concerning teacher responsibilities, special learning environments, accessible resources, individualised educational support, parental involvement, and institutional collaboration. Together, the two perspectives provided a basis for identifying the Guide's strengths and gaps in addressing inclusive and special education. They also informed the analysis of whether its policy commitments are supported by practical implementation strategies, adequate resources, and monitoring mechanisms necessary to improve educational access, participation, and learning outcomes for all learners.

Methods and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative documentary analysis design, which is widely used in policy research to interpret and evaluate written documents (Bowen, 2009) ^[4]. The Primary Education Provision Guide served as the primary data source.

The analysis involved several stages:

1. Document familiarization through repeated reading.
2. Coding of relevant content related to inclusive and special education.
3. Thematic categorization into areas addressing special education and existing gaps.
4. Interpretation of findings using established inclusive education frameworks.

Documentary analysis was appropriate for this study as it enabled a systematic examination of policy intentions, underlying assumptions, and implementation directives (Bowen, 2009) ^[4]. The analysis was guided by principles of inclusive education, including equity, participation, accessibility, and individualized support (Florian, 2014) ^[8]. The study was driven by ethical issues such as the authenticity and credibility of the document under analysis. The analysis of Primary Education Provision Guide was based on a public policy document and did not require ethical clearance. The analysis was conducted in a systematic and transparent manner with clear documentation of the processes of coding and theme categorisation.

Findings and Discussion

The interpretation and discussion of findings on the Primary Education Provision Guide in Zambia. The findings of this

study have been presented and discussed simultaneously to gain a better insight into the implications of the new Primary Education Provision Guide on inclusive and special education provision at primary level. The findings are organized around two themes namely: Inclusiveness of the Primary Education Provision Guide in Zambia and Unaddressed Priorities in the Primary Education Provision Guide.

Inclusiveness of the Primary Education Provision Guide in Zambia

Recognition of Inclusive Education Principles

The guide demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusive education by foregrounding equitable access for all learners, including those with disabilities, as a central policy priority. Its emphasis on non-discrimination in enrolment, active participation of learners with special educational needs (SEN), and inclusion within regular classrooms reflects a shift from segregated to inclusive schooling models. This orientation is consistent with rights-based frameworks that position education as a fundamental human right, as articulated in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) ^[22] and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) ^[24]. By promoting access and participation, the guide aligns with global discourses that conceptualize inclusion not merely as placement but as meaningful engagement in learning processes (Ainscow, 2020) ^[2]. However, while the policy rhetoric is progressive, the absence of detailed implementation strategies raises concerns about its practical realization. This supports Badawieh *et al* (2024) argued that strong policy commitments often coexist with weak operationalization in inclusive education systems.

Provision for Special Learning Environments

The guide acknowledges the necessity of additional support structures by providing for special units, resource rooms, and adaptations within mainstream schools. This reflects an understanding that inclusion is not a one-size-fits-all model but requires flexible and responsive learning environments to accommodate diverse learner needs. Such provisions resonate with Ainscow's (2020) ^[2] argument that inclusive systems must balance participation in mainstream settings with access to specialized support. The recognition of resource rooms suggests an attempt to provide targeted interventions without fully segregating learners from their peers. However, the lack of clarity on how these environments are to be resourced, managed, and integrated into the broader school system limits their effectiveness. Chiluba and Njapawu. (2019) ^[5] indicates that without clear operational guidelines, such structures risk becoming isolated or underutilized. Therefore, while the guide acknowledges the importance of supportive environments, it falls short in ensuring their functional implementation.

Teacher Responsibility for Diverse Learners

The guide places significant responsibility on teachers to address individual learner differences and apply adapted teaching strategies within inclusive classrooms. This expectation aligns with inclusive pedagogical frameworks that emphasize responsiveness to learner diversity through approaches such as differentiated instruction (Adebisi, 2024). By positioning teachers at the center of inclusive practice, the guide reflects the widely held view that teachers are key agents in the realization of inclusive

education (Farhadovna, 2025). However, the expectation is largely implicit and not supported by clearly defined competencies or professional standards. This creates a gap between policy expectations and the practical realities faced by teachers, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Afriani (2025) ^[1] highlighted that without adequate training and support, teachers may struggle to effectively implement inclusive strategies. Consequently, while the guide acknowledges the critical role of teachers, it does not sufficiently equip them to fulfill this responsibility.

Collaboration and Support Systems

The guide makes general reference to collaboration with specialist services and school-level coordination as part of supporting learners with special educational needs. This reflects an understanding that inclusive education requires collective responsibility and cannot be achieved through classroom practices alone. The emphasis on collaboration aligns with Chisala and Sememba (2025) who underscored the importance of multidisciplinary approaches involving educators, health professionals, and social services. However, the provisions remain broad and lack specificity regarding roles, structures, and processes for collaboration. Without clear frameworks, coordination efforts may be inconsistent and dependent on individual school initiatives. That effective collaboration requires structured systems, defined responsibilities, and sustained institutional support. Similarly, Zulu (2021) argued that collaboration require coordinated efforts from educators, support staff, parents, and external specialists. Effective collaboration among stakeholders is a cornerstone for the successful implementation of inclusive and special education programs. Thus, while the guide acknowledges the importance of collaboration, its lack of operational detail limits its practical impact.

Unaddressed Priorities in the Primary Education Provision Guide

Lack of Identification and Assessment Procedures

The guide does not provide clear frameworks for early screening, identification, or assessment of learners with special educational needs. This omission is significant, as early identification is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective special education provision (UNESCO, 2020) ^[23]. Without standardized tools and procedures, schools may struggle to accurately identify learners who require additional support. The absence of referral pathways further complicates access to specialized assessment and intervention services. In support Kumar *et al* (2026) ^[11] emphasized that delayed or inaccurate identification can lead to poor educational outcomes and increased exclusion. Moreover, the lack of structured assessment systems in the guide undermines the ability to plan targeted interventions. Therefore, this gap represents a critical weakness in the guide's approach to inclusive education.

Absence of Individualized Education Planning (IEPs)

The guide lacks explicit provisions for the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), which are central to effective special education practice. IEPs provide a structured mechanism for tailoring instruction to individual learner needs and monitoring progress over time (Pasiningsih 2024) ^[20]. Their absence suggests that support for learners with SEN may remain

generalized rather than personalized. This undermines the principle of inclusion, which requires responsiveness to individual differences rather than uniform approaches. Afriani (2025) ^[1] highlighted the importance of IEPs in improving learning outcomes for learners with disabilities. Without such frameworks, teachers may lack guidance on how to adapt instruction effectively. Consequently, the omission of IEPs significantly limits the guide's capacity to support individualized learning.

Limited Guidance on Teacher Training

The guide does not provide clear direction on teacher competencies or professional development required for inclusive education. This creates a disconnect between policy expectations and teacher preparedness, a challenge widely documented in inclusive education literature (Pasiningsih, 2024) ^[20]. Teachers are expected to implement inclusive practices without adequate training or support, which may lead to ineffective or inconsistent practices. In support Badawieh *et al* (2023) ^[3] indicated that teacher competence is a critical determinant of successful inclusion. The absence of structured training frameworks also limits opportunities for continuous professional development. Furthermore, it undermines efforts to build a sustainable inclusive education system. Therefore, this gap highlights the need for deliberate investment in teacher capacity building at primary education level in Zambia.

Inadequate Provision of Teaching and Learning Materials

The guide provides limited attention to the provision of assistive technologies, adapted instructional materials, and accessible learning resources. This omission restricts the ability of learners with disabilities to participate meaningfully in classroom activities. Teachers feel inadequately prepared for inclusive education due to a lack of special education coursework, practical skills like Braille and sign language, and a critical scarcity of teaching materials. UNESCO (2020) ^[23] emphasizes that access to appropriate learning materials is essential for inclusive education. Without such resources, inclusion may remain symbolic rather than substantive. Additionally, the lack of guidance on resource allocation and utilization further exacerbates the problem. Also, in line with Nyavor (2020) who showed inadequate resources are a major barrier to effective inclusion in many education systems. Therefore, the guide's limited focus on materials significantly undermines its inclusivity goals. The Guide should have addressed inclusive education more comprehensively on the frequency on provision of materials in accessible format for all learners. Its limited focus undermines its inclusivity goals by failing to adequately promote equitable access, meaningful participation, and improved learning outcomes for all learners.

Weak Institutional Support Systems

The guide does not clearly define the roles of special education specialists or outline mechanisms for multidisciplinary collaboration. This is contrary to Munjanja & Hendricks (2025) ^[16] who argued that effective inclusion requires coordinated efforts involving educators, therapists, psychologists, and social workers. Institutional support systems which played a crucial role in assisting learners by providing counselling, wheelchair-accessible residences, food parcels and motorised wheelchairs needed to be

addressed by the guide. The absence of such structures limits the capacity of schools to address complex learner needs. Gull *et al* (2026) ^[10] noted how weak organizational support forces heavy reliance on manual self-disclosure by students, failing to provide structural administrative accommodations, resulting in localized academic and psychological stress. This weakens the institutional framework necessary for supporting inclusive education. Despite the crucial role of institutional support systems, there is a significant gap in the guide to enhance students' awareness of and ability to access or use the services. Furthermore, the lack of integration with health and social services reduces the effectiveness of interventions. Munjanja & Hendricks (2025) ^[16] suggests that strong institutional support systems are essential for sustainable inclusive practices. Therefore, this gap highlights a critical area requiring policy strengthening. Embedding that in the guide can help strengthen communication and encouraging students to disclose their disabilities through efforts by administrators, disability services and faculty staff could improve access to support.

Lack of Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

The guide does not provide clear indicators or tools for monitoring inclusive education outcomes. It highlights significant gaps, misalignments, and systemic failures regarding monitoring and accountability mechanisms in special and inclusive education. This limits the ability to assess progress and ensure accountability in implementation. Monitoring and evaluation are essential components of effective policy implementation (UNESCO, 2020) ^[23]. Without measurable indicators, it is difficult to determine whether inclusion goals are being achieved. In support Mondal (2023) ^[14] noted that the absence of accountability structures may also lead to inconsistent practices across schools. Inclusive education cannot be achieved solely by formulating policies and schemes, effective implementation of such provisions requires a robust monitoring mechanism. Therefore, this gap undermines the effectiveness of the guide. There was need for a guide to clearly bring out the comprehensive monitoring system to track input, process, and outcome indicators to ensure quality education. This is also in line with Badawieh *et al* (2023) ^[3] who indicated the need for robust monitoring systems as critical for improving educational quality and equity.

Limited Attention to Specific Disabilities

The guide treats learners with special educational needs as a homogeneous group, overlooking the diversity of disabilities and learning needs. The limited recognition of learners with Specific Disabilities by the guide limits the development of targeted interventions for specific categories such as visual, hearing, or intellectual impairments. Inclusive education literature emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing diverse learner needs (Pasiningsih, 2024) ^[20]. A generalized approach may fail to provide appropriate support for all learners. Therefore, this gap reduces the effectiveness of the guide's inclusive approach. Furthermore, it may lead to inequities in educational provision. López Sánchez & Castillo-González (2025) ^[12] highlights a clear shift away from historical "blanket" models toward understanding comorbidities, precise cognitive profiles, and systemic data disparities across specific domains. Numerous obstacles exist in most

educational scenarios regarding the preparation of educators and their strategies for addressing the needs of these students. Grigorenko (2020) highlighted that tailored strategies are essential for effective inclusion. The advent of technologies like game-based learning enables the implementations of inclusive educational methods.

Insufficient Parental and Community Involvement

The guide does not sufficiently emphasize the role of parents and communities in supporting inclusive education. This is a significant limitation, as parental involvement is critical for reinforcing learning and supporting learners with disabilities. Motshusi *et al* (2024) ^[15], highlighted the importance of community engagement in promoting inclusive practices. Without active participation from families, interventions may be less effective. Additionally, community awareness is essential for addressing stigma and promoting acceptance. Chisala (2023) ^[6] showed that strong home-school partnerships enhance educational outcomes for learners with SEN. Therefore, the limited focus on parental involvement weakens the guide's overall effectiveness. Which is contrary to assertion of Eden *et al* (2024) ^[7] who indicated that sustainable improvement of special needs education requires effective collaboration among government, families, schools, communities, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders. Parents and communities are indispensable stakeholders in improving educational outcomes for children with special needs. Parents provide emotional, educational, financial, and psychological support, while communities create enabling environments through advocacy, resource mobilization, awareness creation, and collaboration with schools. Their combined efforts can significantly reposition inclusive and special education to achieve national educational goals.

Infrastructure and Accessibility Gaps

The guide provides limited attention to infrastructure and physical accessibility, which are essential for inclusive education. Research indicates that physical barriers are a major obstacle to inclusion in many contexts (Chiluba and Njapawu, 2019) ^[5]. Universal design principles emphasize the need for environments that are accessible to all learners (Tu *et al*, 2025) ^[21]. Without appropriate infrastructure, learners with physical disabilities may face significant barriers to participation. The lack of guidance on accessibility standards further exacerbates this challenge. Therefore, the findings highlight major obstacles for individuals with disabilities, stressing the need for comprehensive strategies to enhance accessibility and inclusiveness in schools. Addressing these barriers requires deliberate policy and resource allocation. Therefore, the guide's limited focus on infrastructure represents a critical gap in its approach to inclusion.

Conclusion

The Primary Education Provision Guide represents an important policy step toward inclusive education in Zambia. This study critically examined the Primary Education Provision Guide with a focus on its implications for special education at the primary level. The analysis revealed that while the Guide provides a structured framework for general education delivery, it offers limited specificity regarding the identification, assessment, and instructional support for learners with special educational needs. The teachers and

school administrators face challenges in translating policy into practical strategies that address the diverse learning needs of all students. The findings further indicate that gaps exist in the guidance on individualized planning, resource allocation, and the integration of assistive technologies, which are essential for fostering inclusive classrooms. Despite these limitations, the Guide presents opportunities for enhancing special education provision through the adoption of clear frameworks, professional development, and the establishment of multidisciplinary support systems. Therefore, aligning the Primary Education Provision Guide with inclusive education principles is critical to ensuring that all learners, regardless of ability, can access quality education and achieve their full potential at the primary level. Addressing these gaps will enhance the implementation of inclusive education and improve learning outcomes for all learners.

Recommendations

To strengthen the guide, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. There is a critical need to develop and implement comprehensive, standardized frameworks for the early identification and assessment of learners with special educational needs, including clear screening procedures, validated assessment tools, and well-defined referral pathways to ensure timely and appropriate interventions.
2. The education system should institutionalize the systematic development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), ensuring that each learner with special educational needs receives tailored instructional support, continuous progress monitoring, and goal-oriented interventions aligned with their specific learning profiles.
3. It is essential to clearly define teacher competencies for inclusive education and establish robust pre-service and in-service training programmes that equip educators with the pedagogical knowledge, practical skills, and professional confidence required to effectively support diverse learners in inclusive classroom settings.
4. The provision and equitable distribution of assistive technologies, adapted teaching and learning materials, and accessible educational resources should be prioritized to enhance meaningful participation, engagement, and learning outcomes for learners with diverse abilities and disabilities.
5. There is a need to establish well-coordinated multidisciplinary support systems alongside comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, including clearly defined performance indicators and accountability structures, to ensure effective implementation, continuous improvement, and sustainability of inclusive and special education practices.

Consent for participants

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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