

Strategies for Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Primary Classrooms in Gwembe District

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Abstract

This study investigated strategies used to support pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream primary classrooms in Gwembe District. It focused on identifying the methods teachers use, the challenges they face, and possible measures to improve inclusive education. A qualitative case study design was adopted, with data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis involving headteachers, classroom teachers, and special education teachers. The findings revealed that teachers apply various strategies such as differentiated instruction, peer support, individualized education plans, continuous assessment, and collaboration with parents to meet diverse learning needs. However, several challenges were identified, including large class sizes, insufficient teaching and learning materials, limited training in special education, and negative attitudes toward inclusion. The study concludes that while inclusive education is widely supported, its effective implementation requires improved teacher capacity, adequate resources, and stronger policy support. It recommends enhanced teacher training, better resource allocation, and increased collaboration among stakeholders.

Keywords: Special Educational Needs (SEN), Inclusive Education, Differentiated Instruction, Teacher Training, Classroom Challenges, Primary Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the study entitled “Strategies for Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Primary Classrooms.” It situates the study in contemporary inclusive education discourse, outlines the background and rationale, states the research problem, purpose, objectives and questions, and defines key terms. The chapter also describes the significance, scope, and delimitations of the study and concludes with a summary that links this chapter to the literature review. The presentation draws on international and regional scholarship on inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Response to Intervention (RTI)/MTSS, and classroom-based supports for pupils with SEN.

Background to the Study

Inclusive education has been established as an international policy and ethical imperative since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and is reinforced by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the SDG 4 target on inclusive, equitable education. The conceptualisation of Special Educational Needs has shifted from a narrow deficit model toward ecological and social models of disability that emphasise barriers in curricula and environments rather than solely individual impairment. Contemporary inclusive pedagogy therefore foregrounds flexible curricula, differentiated instruction, and proactive classroom design.

At the classroom level, teachers are central to translating policy into practice. Empirical studies show that mainstream primary teachers employ a range of strategies — differentiated tasks, scaffolding, explicit instruction, peer tutoring, co-teaching, formative assessment, and

assistive technologies — to increase access and participation for pupils with SEN Systematic approaches such as UDL and RTI/MTSS provide frameworks for anticipatory design and tiered intervention.

Despite strong theoretical and policy endorsements, the implementation of effective classroom supports is uneven. Research from diverse contexts highlights persistent constraints: inadequate pre-service and in-service teacher education, large and heterogeneous classes, scarce specialist support, limited planning time, resource shortages, and attitudinal barriers that undermine teacher self-efficacy. In many lower- and middle-income countries, including Zambia and comparable African settings, these constraints are amplified by infrastructure deficits and funding systems that do not adequately translate policy into school-level resources

This study responds to the need for contextually grounded evidence on the concrete strategies teachers use in mainstream primary classrooms, the challenges that impede their use, and pragmatic measures that can strengthen school-level capacity for inclusion. By examining classroom practices and teacher perspectives, the research aims to inform teacher development, school organisation, and policy alignment so that children with SEN can access meaningful learning and social participation.

Statement of the Problem

While national and international policies increasingly mandate inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream primary classrooms, a persistent gap remains between policy aspirations and classroom reality. Many teachers report limited preparedness to design and implement inclusive instruction, and schools often lack the collaborative structures, specialist personnel, and material resources needed for high-quality support. The lack of empirical, context-specific documentation of classroom strategies and the barriers to their consistent application undermines efforts to scale effective practices. Therefore, there is a need for systematic inquiry into which strategies teachers actually use, what challenges constrain their practice, and which measures — pedagogical, organisational and policy-level — are feasible and likely to improve support for pupils with SEN in mainstream primary classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate strategies used by teachers to support pupils with Special Educational Needs in mainstream primary classrooms, to examine the challenges teachers face in implementing those strategies, and to identify measures that can enhance effective support. The study seeks to bridge the gap between inclusive policy and classroom practice by producing actionable evidence for teachers, school leaders and policy makers.

Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify strategies used by teachers to support pupils with Special Educational Needs in mainstream primary classrooms.
2. To examine challenges faced by teachers in supporting pupils with Special Educational Needs.
3. To establish measures that can enhance effective support for pupils with Special Educational Needs in mainstream primary schools.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What strategies do teachers use to support pupils with Special Educational Needs in mainstream primary classrooms?
2. What challenges do teachers face in supporting pupils with Special Educational Needs?
3. What measures can be put in place to improve support for pupils with Special Educational Needs in mainstream primary schools?

Significance of the Study

This study has practical and scholarly significance. Practically, it provides evidence about classroom strategies and barriers that can inform teacher professional development, school planning, and resource allocation. Findings can guide teachers toward evidence-based practices (e.g., explicit instruction, scaffolding, UDL adaptations, use of assistive technology) and help school leaders organise collaborative structures (co-teaching, planning time, multidisciplinary teams) to support implementation (Florian, 2014; Murawski & Swanson, 2001). For policy makers and education planners, the study offers data to align policy with resourcing models and accountability systems that support inclusive outcomes (Mitchell, 2014). Academically, it contributes to the literature by documenting context-specific practices and constraints, and by proposing a framework for integrating classroom strategies with systemic supports.

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

The study is confined to selected mainstream primary schools and focuses on classroom teachers, headteachers, and special education personnel involved in supporting pupils with SEN in Gwembe district. It examines teacher-reported and observed classroom strategies, perceived challenges, and suggested measures for improvement. The study does not include special schools, and findings may not be directly generalisable to segregated special education settings or to all national contexts; however, the insights will be relevant to comparable mainstream primary settings, especially within similar resource environments.

Operational Definitions of Key Terms

1. Special Educational Needs (SEN): Learning difficulties or disabilities that necessitate additional or different educational provisions beyond standard classroom practices.
2. Inclusive Education: An approach that seeks to provide equitable access to education for all learners in mainstream schools by removing barriers to learning and participation.
3. Mainstream Primary Classroom: A regular grade classroom in a primary school where pupils of varying abilities are educated together.
4. Support Strategies: Pedagogical methods, curriculum adaptations, classroom organisation, assessment practices, assistive technologies and collaborative arrangements used to enhance learning and participation of pupils with SEN.
5. Universal Design for Learning (UDL): A proactive framework for curriculum design that provides multiple means of representation, expression and engagement to accommodate learner variability.

Chapter Summary

This chapter established the rationale and foundational parameters for a study examining strategies for supporting pupils with SEN in mainstream primary classrooms. It situated the inquiry within contemporary inclusive education debates, stated the problem and purpose, and set out objectives and research questions that orient the investigation toward practical and policy-relevant outcomes. Chapter Two presents an extended review of theoretical frameworks and empirical studies relevant to classroom strategies, teacher capacity, systemic enablers and barriers to inclusion, and evidence-informed measures to strengthen support for pupils with SEN.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education, defined as the practice of educating children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream settings alongside their peers, has become a central policy and research priority worldwide). The rationale for inclusion is ethical (equity, human rights), educational (access to richer social and academic environments), and pragmatic (cost-

effective use of resources) (Despite widespread policy endorsement, translating inclusion into effective classroom practice for pupils with SEN in mainstream primary schools remains a global challenge. This literature review synthesizes empirical and theoretical work on strategies teachers use to support pupils with SEN, the challenges they face, and measures that can enhance effective support, situating the discussion within contemporary paradigms of inclusive pedagogy.

Conceptual and theoretical frameworks for understanding SEN in mainstream classrooms

Historically, SEN was conceptualized within a deficit model that located difficulties within the child and focused on diagnosis and remediation. More recent frameworks emphasize a social-relational and ecological understanding: difficulties arise from interactions among the child, the curriculum, classroom practices, and broader systemic factors. The social model of disability reframes disability as created by barriers in society and the environment rather than individual impairment alone. Contemporary inclusive pedagogy draws on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, response to intervention (RTI) tiers, differentiated instruction, and asset-based approaches that foreground learners' strengths. Florian and Black-Hawkins argue for "inclusive pedagogy" that presumes diversity is the norm and that teaching strategies should be flexible to meet varying needs.

Strategies used by teachers to support pupils with SEN in mainstream primary classrooms

Differentiated instruction and curriculum adaptation: A substantial body of literature identifies differentiated instruction as a primary classroom-level strategy. Differentiation involves varying content, process, product, and learning environment to match pupils' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Studies demonstrate that when teachers adapt tasks (simplified text, chunking, use of visuals), modify assessment demands, and provide tiered activities, pupils with learning difficulties make greater gains. Curriculum adaptation also includes Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or individualized learning goals that guide classroom modifications. However, effectiveness depends on teachers' skill in designing and implementing high-quality, evidence-based adaptations.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL):

UDL promotes multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression to make curricula accessible to diverse learners (CAST, 2018). Research in primary contexts shows UDL-aligned practices — multimodal materials, flexible grouping, varied assessment options — can reduce barriers and increase engagement for children with language, attention, and cognitive needs. While UDL is conceptually attractive, empirical implementation is uneven; teachers require professional learning to translate UDL principles into concrete classroom routines.

Differentiated classroom management and co-teaching: Inclusive classrooms commonly use adaptive classroom management and cooperative learning structures (e.g., peer tutoring, small-group instruction) to scaffold pupils with SEN. Cooperative learning and structured peer support have been associated with improved social integration and academic outcomes for pupils with SEN. Co-teaching—where a general and a special educator jointly deliver instruction—has been promoted as an effective model for inclusive primary classrooms, offering real-time differentiation and support (Murawski & Swanson, 2001). Empirical studies report benefits in terms of increased access to grade-level curriculum and behavioral support, although co-teaching quality varies with planning time, role clarity, and teacher relationships.

Instructional scaffolding and explicit instruction: Explicit teaching strategies—clear modeling, guided practice, feedback, and scaffolding—are effective for many pupils with

SEN, particularly those with reading, writing, or numeracy difficulties). Scaffolding through prompts, visual supports, graphic organizers, and worked examples reduces cognitive load and supports independent application of skills. Meta-analyses indicate that structured literacy approaches (phonics, explicit decoding instruction) produce reliable gains for pupils with dyslexia or reading difficulties.

Assistive technology and multimodal supports:

Assistive and instructional technologies (e.g., text-to-speech, speech-to-text, graphic organizer software, interactive whiteboards) offer significant support for pupils with diverse needs, improving engagement, independence, and access to curriculum). In primary settings, technology-mediated supports have enhanced reading comprehension, writing fluency, and classroom participation for pupils with learning and communication needs). However, successful integration depends on teacher competence, availability of devices, and alignment with pedagogical goals.

Formative assessment, progress monitoring, and individualized planning:

Ongoing assessment and progress monitoring enable targeted interventions and adjustments. Use of frequent, curriculum-based measures helps teachers identify learning gaps and evaluate responses to instruction—central to RTI models that aim to provide early, graduated support before intensive special education placement (Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2012). Collaborative IEP development and review involving teachers, parents, and specialists is associated with clearer strategies and better pupil outcomes when implemented with fidelity.

Social-emotional and behavioral supports

Many pupils with SEN require supports that target social skills, emotional regulation, and behavior. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and social skills instruction are commonly used to create predictable environments and teach replacement behaviors (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Research suggests whole-school approaches that combine classroom practices with school-wide expectations are effective in reducing challenging behavior and promoting inclusion.

Collaborative practices and family engagement

Effective inclusion is rarely the work of a single teacher. Collaboration among general and special educators, therapists, psychologists, and paraprofessionals, as well as partnerships with families, are critical. Family involvement contributes to continuity of strategies across home and school and correlates with better academic and social outcomes. School-based multidisciplinary teams that meet regularly to plan and review interventions enhance coherence and responsiveness.

Teacher attitudes, knowledge, and reflective practice:

Teachers' beliefs about inclusion and their sense of self-efficacy strongly influence the implementation of strategies. Professional knowledge—both pedagogical and content-specific—plus reflective practice and ongoing professional development are repeatedly identified as prerequisites for effective inclusive practice. Teacher inquiry, mentoring, and coaching models show promise in translating theoretical approaches into classroom practice (Harris & Jones, 2019).

Challenges faced by teachers in supporting pupils with SEN

Insufficient training and professional development:

Across contexts, teachers report inadequate pre-service and in-service training in inclusive pedagogy, assessment, and differentiation. Many teachers feel unprepared to meet the complex needs of pupils with autism, severe behavioral needs, or multiple disabilities, citing limited exposure to evidence-based instructional techniques.

Workload, time constraints, and lack of planning time:

Differentiation and individualized planning require significant time for assessment, material preparation, and collaboration—time many teachers report they do not have. Lack of scheduled planning time for co-teaching teams or collaborative problem-solving undermines the consistency and quality of support.

Resource limitations and inadequate support services:

Insufficient access to specialist personnel (special educators, speech and language therapists, educational psychologists), teaching assistants, and assistive technology constrains teachers' ability to implement recommended strategies (EADSNE, 2009; UNESCO, 2020). Funding models that allocate resources based on diagnoses rather than on observed need can create inequities (Mitchell, 2014).

Class size and heterogeneous classrooms

Large class sizes and wide variability in pupil needs make individualized attention difficult. Teachers struggle to balance the needs of pupils with SEN with other cohort demands, affecting the intensity and quality of interventions (Wang & Walberg, 1993).

Role ambiguity and insufficient role clarity in co-teaching

Co-teaching can be undermined by unclear role expectations, limited joint planning, and power imbalances between general and special educators when roles are poorly defined, support can become fragmented or marginalizing.

Attitudinal and systemic barriers

Negative or low expectations, stigma, and cultural beliefs about disability impede inclusive practice (Systemic factors—policy-practice gaps, accountability systems focused narrowly on standardized test outcomes, and fragmented service delivery—also limit inclusive implementation)

Lack of evidence-informed practice and fidelity issues

Even when teachers use recommended strategies, variations in implementation quality (fidelity) reduce effectiveness. There is also a gap between research evidence and classroom practice, with some teachers relying on intuition or tradition rather than evidence-based interventions

Measures to enhance effective support for pupils with SEN in mainstream primary schools

Strengthening teacher preparation and ongoing professional development

Research underscores the importance of robust pre-service training in inclusive pedagogy, differentiation, behaviour management, and use of assistive technologies. Professional development that is sustained, job-embedded (coaching, mentoring, lesson study), and focused on classroom practice produces better transfer to teaching than one-off workshops. Collaborative professional learning communities can foster shared practices and peer .

Promoting collaborative models and multidisciplinary teams

Formalized structures for collaboration—scheduled joint planning, shared goals, and clearly defined co-teaching models—enhance the effectiveness of classroom support. School-based multidisciplinary teams that include parents and community professionals enable coordinated assessment and intervention, reducing fragmentation

Implementing tiered support systems and early intervention

RTI and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) provide frameworks for early identification and graduated intervention, reserving intensive resources for pupils who need them most (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Evidence supports the effectiveness of early literacy interventions and targeted numeracy support in preventing long-term difficulties (Torgesen, 2005).

Investing in resources, assistive technology, and infrastructure

Allocating resources to ensure access to specialists, paraprofessionals, and appropriate technologies is essential. Schools that invest in teacher access to evidence-based resources, adaptive materials, and technology report improved participation and academic outcomes for pupils with SEN.

Embedding UDL and inclusive curriculum design

Moving from ad hoc accommodations to proactive curriculum design that anticipates learner variability reduces the need for individualized patchwork solutions (CAST, 2018). School-wide adoption of UDL principles, supported by training and exemplar materials, can make classrooms more accessible by design (Meyer et al., 2014).

Policy alignment and funding mechanisms

Policy coherence—linking national directives to school-level resourcing, accountability structures that value inclusive outcomes, and funding models that provide flexible support based on need—facilitates effective inclusion. Policies should incentivize collaboration and provide clear guidelines on reasonable accommodations.

Fostering positive attitudes, high expectations, and a culture of inclusion

Interventions that build teacher self-efficacy, reduce stigma, and promote the benefits of heterogeneity contribute to more supportive classroom climates. Whole-school approaches that embed inclusive values in leadership, staff development, and pupil culture are more sustainable (Ainscow, 2005).

Monitoring, evaluation, and research-practice partnerships

Ongoing monitoring of implementation fidelity and pupil outcomes allows schools to refine strategies. Research-practice partnerships, where researchers and practitioners co-design and test interventions in real contexts, help bridge the research-to-practice gap and generate usable knowledge.

Gaps in the literature and directions for future research

Despite a robust literature, several gaps remain. First, much research is concentrated in high-income countries; comparative studies in low- and middle-income contexts are limited though critical given differing resource constraints and cultural factors. Second, while many strategies (UDL, differentiation, co-teaching) are promising, there is variability in evidence quality, and few large-scale randomized controlled trials examine whole-class inclusive strategies in real-world primary settings. Third, longitudinal research linking classroom strategies to long-term social, academic, and well-being outcomes for pupils with diverse SEN profiles is sparse. Finally, more work is needed on cost-effectiveness and scalable models that align with different education systems' capacities.

Synthesis and implications for the study objectives and research questions

What strategies do teachers use?

The literature indicates a constellation of classroom- and school-level strategies: differentiated instruction, UDL-informed materials, co-teaching and collaborative models, scaffolding and explicit instruction, use of assistive technology, ongoing formative assessment, and social-emotional supports. Effective practice blends proactive curriculum design with targeted, evidence-based interventions (Tomlinson, 2014; Florian, 2014).

What challenges do teachers face?

Teachers face challenges of insufficient training, heavy workloads, limited planning time, resource shortages, large and heterogeneous classes, role ambiguity in collaborative models, attitudinal barriers, and systemic policy-practice misalignments. These challenges interact, making singular solutions insufficient.

What measures can enhance support?

Measures include strengthening teacher education and sustained professional development, formalizing collaborative structures, implementing tiered support systems (RTI/MTSS),

investing in resources and assistive technologies, embedding UDL in curriculum design, aligning policy and funding, fostering inclusive school cultures, and promoting research-practice partnerships. These measures must be context-sensitive and supported by ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter described the research design and methods that guided the investigation into strategies for supporting pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream primary classrooms. It detailed the study design, population and sampling procedures, research instruments, data collection and analysis techniques, validity and reliability/trustworthiness procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations and delimitations.

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods convergent design, combining quantitative descriptive survey methods with qualitative case study approaches to generate both breadth and depth of understanding. The quantitative strand captured prevalence and patterns of strategy use and perceived challenges across a sample of mainstream primary teachers, while the qualitative strand explored in-depth classroom practices, teacher reasoning, and contextual factors through observations, interviews, and document analysis the convergent design allowed triangulation of findings to enhance validity.

Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised classroom teachers, headteachers, and special education personnel in selected mainstream primary schools within the study district. A multistage sampling procedure was used. First, purposive sampling identified schools with documented enrolment of pupils with SEN to ensure relevant experience. Within selected schools, census sampling was used for headteachers and special educators, while stratified random sampling selected a representative sample of classroom teachers across grades and experience levels. For the qualitative component, purposeful criterion sampling selected four case schools representing variation in size, urban/rural location, and resource profiles to capture diverse practices

Research Instruments

Four instruments were developed and piloted:

1. Teacher questionnaire: A structured instrument with Likert-scale and closed items assessing frequency of strategy use, perceived effectiveness, training background, resource availability, and perceived challenges (adapted from Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin, 2012).
2. Headteacher interview guide: Semi-structured questions about school policy, resource allocation, coordination of support services, and institutional enablers/barriers (Bryman, 2016).
3. Teacher interview and focus group guide: Open questions probing instructional choices, classroom management for diverse learners, use of assistive technology, collaboration with specialists, and reflective accounts of successes and challenges.
4. Classroom observation protocol: A structured observation checklist and field notes template recording instructional routines, differentiation, use of visuals/assistive tech, peer interactions, and behaviour supports (adapted from classroom observation frameworks used in inclusive education research; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

In addition, document analysis of IEPs, school inclusion policies, timetables, and resource inventories were conducted.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity of instruments was established through expert review by specialists in special and inclusive education and a pilot study in two non-study schools. Reliability of the

questionnaire scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (threshold $\alpha \geq 0.70$) and item analysis; instruments were revised accordingly (Field, 2013). For qualitative data, trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data sources (questionnaires, interviews, observations, documents), member checking with interviewees, thick description, and an audit trail of coding decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining ethical clearance and permissions from education authorities and school heads, data collection proceeded in three phases. Phase 1 administered questionnaires to sampled teachers during scheduled meetings; response rate exceeded 85%. Phase 2 conducted semi-structured interviews with headteachers and focus groups with teachers in each case school. Phase 3 involved classroom observations (minimum two per case teacher) and collection of relevant documents (IEPs, class plans). Data collection occurred over a six-week period to minimize disruption to school schedules.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics in SPSS. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) summarized strategy prevalence and perceived challenges. Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests examined associations between teacher characteristics (qualification, years' experience) and reported practices; where appropriate, t-tests or ANOVA compared group means. Qualitative data (interview transcripts, observation notes, documents) were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. NVivo software supported coding, development of thematic matrices, and identification of patterns across cases. The convergent design integrated quantitative and qualitative results at the interpretation stage to produce a coherent set of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation; pseudonyms were used in reporting. Data were securely stored and accessible only to the research team. Care was taken to avoid disruption to teaching and to maintain professional respect in observations and feedback.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations included reliance on self-reported measures that may be subject to social desirability bias and the contextual focus on a specific district which limited national generalizability. Delimitations included exclusion of special schools and secondary levels by design to maintain focus on mainstream primary contexts.

3. CONCLUSION

This study examined strategies used by teachers to support pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream primary classrooms in Gwembe District, the challenges faced, and possible improvement measures. The findings show that teachers are actively using various inclusive strategies such as differentiated instruction, scaffolding, peer-assisted learning, formative assessment, and social-emotional support. This indicates that inclusive education is being practiced, though often informally. However, the effectiveness and consistency of these strategies vary across schools due to differences in teacher training, resource availability, and institutional support. Teachers with more professional development demonstrated greater confidence and better implementation of inclusive practices. The study also found that major barriers—such as large class sizes, limited time, lack of specialist

support, and insufficient resources—significantly hinder effective inclusion. These challenges highlight systemic limitations, especially in rural areas.

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