

**Perceptions of Parents of Children Living with Disabilities on Inclusive Education. A  
Case of Two Urban High Schools in Gweru  
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**Abstract**

This study investigated the perceptions of parents of children living with disabilities regarding the efficacy of inclusive education in two urban high schools in Gweru, Zimbabwe. The research was conducted at two selected urban High Schools in Gweru, Zimbabwe. The schools used were Thornhill High School and Chaplin High School. The study was qualitative in nature. A target population of 154 people was used. A sample of 45 was used. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used. Data were also collected from parents and teachers of children living with disabilities, key informants, including three representatives from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and two officials from local NGOs working with children living with disability. Data were collected through focus group discussions and interviews. The findings revealed that children with disabilities experience significant social isolation and discrimination, which negatively affects their academic and social development. This, in turn, places a substantial psychological and emotional burden on their parents. The study concludes with recommendations for community-based support, family-centred care and the provision of specialised school facilities and equipment to better support these children and their families.

**Key Words:** Perception, parents, children, disability, school education, psychological, emotional

**Introduction**

Globally perceptions of parents towards children living with disabilities vary, often viewing disability as an evil sign or curse (Anderson, 2006; Murray, 2016). This has resulted in the psychological and emotional stress of parents and the segregation of their children in schools due to a lack of knowledge, irrational beliefs and anxiety (Murray, 2016).

Within the African context, disability is commonly perceived as a curse from ancestral spirits or a punishment, leading to rejection and humiliation for parents from their extended families and society (Shava, Tlou, & Mpofu, 2019). The education system in Africa often disregards parents of children living with disabilities, with a shortage of affordable learning centres due to a lack of resources, financial limitations and economic hardships (Twala, Ntinda, & Hlanze, 2015). In countries like Nigeria and Ghana, disability is also linked to witchcraft and poverty (Oyele, 2020; Oneki, 2013).

In Southern Africa, cultural traditions reinforce the view of disability as a curse or bad omen, causing parents to feel like outcasts in society and sometimes preventing them from sending their children to school (Afolabi, 2014; Mazibuko, 2011).

Zimbabwe is no exception to these issues. Parents feel their problems are not receiving adequate attention (Chimedza, 2016), and the education system is perceived as exclusive due to the limited number of disability learning centres (Kanjere, 2014; Kondo, 2017). In Gweru,

specifically, lack of special needs facilities in urban high schools force parents to seek education in other cities, which incurs additional costs. This situation motivated the researchers to conduct an in-depth study on the perceptions of these parents. Parents with children living with disabilities have got some psychological and mental challenges. Therefore, what could be done to improve the perceptions of parents with children living with disabilities in inclusive education?

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of parents of children living with disabilities on the efficacy of inclusive education. The following objectives were created.

1. To explore the perceptions of parents with children living with disabilities in High Schools
2. To analyse the effects of child disabilities on inclusive education to parents of living with disability children.

These were guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the perceptions of parents with children living with disabilities in High Schools?
2. What are the effects of disability in inclusive education on parents of living with disabilities children?
3. What could be done to improve the perceptions of parents of children living with disabilities?

Inclusive education, which integrates students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, has gained global momentum (Unisson Disability, 2024). Parental involvement is a critical factor influencing children's development, fostering academic skills, positive attitudes and social competence (Easterseals Arkansas, n.d.). This review examines parental perceptions of inclusive education for children living with disabilities in high schools and analyses how a child's disability affects parental views on inclusive education.

#### *Parental perceptions of inclusive education in high schools*

Parents hold varied perceptions regarding inclusive education for children living with disability. Many appreciate the opportunities for socialisation, friendship development and the potential for their children to become productive citizens (Changing Perspectives, 2024; Kids Together Inc., n.d.). Inclusive settings can also facilitate the development of speech and social skills through interaction with typically developing peers (Mom Psych, 2014). Studies across diverse countries indicate a general parental preference for educating children living with disability in regular classrooms (Mapepa & Magano, 2015). Research suggests that parents of both children with and without disabilities hold slightly positive attitudes toward inclusive education (Mapepa & Magano, 2015).

However, some parents expressed concerns about teachers' preparedness and resources to effectively implement inclusive practices (Hammad, et al., 2024). Parents of typically developing children sometimes worry that students with disabilities may receive disproportionate attention, potentially impacting their own children's learning (UNESCO Digital Library, n.d.). Some parents of children living with disabilities report encountering negative attitudes from other parents who question the appropriateness of mainstream placements (Hammad et al., 2024).

Parental attitudes are significantly shaped by perceived support from teachers and administrators (Al-Dababneh, 2024). Concerns include potential social isolation, negative attitudes, inadequate instruction and a lack of trained teachers (Al-Dababneh, 2024). Some parents believe educators may misinterpret disability-related behaviours as intentional (Al-

Dababneh, 2024). Furthermore, parents may feel that Individualised Education Program (IEP) objectives are not effectively implemented and that their involvement in the IEP process is limited (Al-Dababneh, 2024).

#### *Effects of child disability on parental views of inclusive education*

The nature and severity of a child's disability significantly influence parental perspectives on inclusive education (ResearchGate, 2025). Parents of children with mild intellectual disabilities tend to hold more positive attitudes toward inclusion compared to those whose children have severe intellectual disabilities (O'Connor, 2007). Parents of children with moderate-to-severe disabilities may recognise both academic and social advantages in inclusive settings (O'Connor, 2007).

Negative experiences or perceptions can lead to reservations. Some parents may believe that students with disabilities will struggle to keep up with lessons and that their presence may negatively affect classroom dynamics. Some parents report difficulties engaging with schools and feeling overwhelmed by challenges in mainstream settings (Al-Dababneh, 2024).

#### *Parental involvement and its challenges*

Parental involvement is a key element of successful inclusive education (Al-Dababneh, 2024). This includes active participation in communication, learning activities and school events (Al-Dababneh, 2024). Effective collaboration between parents and professionals leads to the best outcomes for children living with disability (Al-Dababneh, 2024).

However, several barriers can hinder parental involvement. These include language differences, diverse cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic factors and information overload. Financial constraints can also limit parents' ability to participate in their children's education. Some school professionals may lack the knowledge or support needed to partner effectively with families (Owen, 2016).

#### *The role of parents in facilitating inclusive education*

Parents play various roles in promoting safe, high-quality inclusive schools for students with intellectual disabilities (Hammad et al., 2024). These roles include making school choices, participating in educational decision-making and advocating for their children's needs (Hammad et al., 2024). Parents can provide unique insights into their child's abilities and difficulties, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of their educational needs (Hammad et al., 2024).

Given the complexities of mainstream schools, parent-teacher partnership is particularly important in inclusive education (Hammad et al., 2024). Parents can advocate for students with intellectual disabilities, who may face low expectations (Hammad et al., 2024). They can also help foster inclusive school cultures (Hammad et al., 2024).

### **Materials and methods**

This study employed a qualitative research method to explore parental perceptions and the effects of child disability on inclusive education in two urban high schools in Gweru, Zimbabwe—Thornhill High School and Chaplin High School. The target population included parents, teachers, key informants from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and officials from local NGOs, totalling 154 individuals. A sample of 45 participants was selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, ensuring that those with relevant experiences and insights were included. Data were collected through focus group discussions with parents, some interviews with parents and teachers and semi-structured interviews with

key informants. This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, challenges and perceptions regarding inclusive education. The qualitative data was thematically analysed to identify recurring themes and insights. Ethical approval was obtained and informed consent was secured from all participants. This case study research design enhances the richness of the findings and provides a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding inclusive educational settings.

## **Results**

The researchers wanted to have an in-depth understanding of what disability is to parents of school going children living with disabilities.

### *Perceptions of disability*

Data gathered through interview guide shows that majority of the informants said that disability is having physical or mental challenges that prevents one from using his or her physical or cognitive abilities. One informant said, "Disability is a condition whereby one's physical or mental abilities are not functioning well as they are supposed to do". Data gathered through Focus Group Discussions indicated that majority said that disability is having difficulties or being handicapped in doing certain tasks. One of the informants said, "Disability is having physical or mental challenges"

### *Living with children with disabilities among peers non-living with disability at School*

The study wanted to find out how does children living with disabilities feel at school with other peers without disability. Data gathered through interviews indicate that majority said that children living with disabilities are considered as disrupting or disturbing peers living without disabilities. One of the informants said, "My child feel that she is not equal when she looks at herself with other children". Data gathered through focus group discussions shows majority said that children living with disabilities cannot be understood by non-living with disabilities children during play time. One parent said, "Our children feel that they are not equal to others when they are at school"

### *Being a parent of a child living with disability*

To ascertain the feelings of parents of children living with disabilities, the researchers asked how these parents feel when seeing their child living with disability among others without disabilities. Data gathered through interviews revealed that majority of the informants feel that it was better their children had no physical or mental challenges just like others. In an interview with one responded who states, "I feel that it was good if my child had no disability just like others when I see him among other children without disabilities". Data gathered through focus group discussions revealed that majority of the informants said, "Whenever I see my child among other children without disabilities, I feel that it was better if my child had no disability just like others".

### *Societal perceptions*

The researchers wanted to understand how parents of children living with disabilities feel in the society and at home. From the interviews conducted, most of them said that when their children living with disabilities are at home, they feel great because they are living with loving people, but in the society, they are discriminated and isolated. One informant said, "My child when she is at home, she is fine with it because we are there to support her but in the society that we live she is discriminated and isolated. She doesn't have people to play with in the society because of her condition and this breaks my heart".

Data gathered through focus group discussion also shows that majority of the informants feel that at home their children are tolerable but, in the society, they live they feel that people are isolating them and mocking them because of their disabilities.

#### *Effects of disability on parents*

The study also sought to gather data on the effects of disability of children on parents and below are some of the major effects identified by the researchers.

#### *Nature of disability*

The study wanted to find out how the nature of disability possess a challenge to living with disability children. Data gathered by the researcher through interviews indicate that majority of the informants said that disability makes the child to be unable to walk, play or do certain things. In an interview one of the informants said, “My child cannot do other things because he cannot walk on his own”.

From the data gathered through focus group discussions, majority of the informants mentioned that; “Our children living with disabilities they cannot do certain house chores because their disability prevents them from using their physical and cognitive abilities”.

#### *Performance of children living with disabilities at school*

It was critical for this study to unearth how children living with disabilities perform at school. Data gathered through interviews shows that majority of the informants said that their children were not performing good at school because of disability. In one interview the responded said, “My child is not performing well at school because of mental condition”.

Data gathered through focus group discussions also revealed that majority of the informants said that their children were performing poor at school and stated, “My child is not doing well at school because of the condition he has. There are no special needs teachers to teach him, and this is affecting him”.

#### *Interaction of children living and non-living with disabilities at home*

The study wanted to find out how children living with disabilities interact with other non-living with disabilities peers at home. Data gathered through interviews shows that majority of the informants said that their children were not much interacting with other children at home because of their disabilities. In an interview the one informant mentioned, “Many a times my child cannot play with other children at school and at home because of the disabilities”.

Data gathered through focus group discussions also indicate that majority of the informants said, “Children living with disabilities do not play with others much because they are always excluded in play games”.

#### *Children living with disabilities in society*

Data gathered by the researchers through interviews shows that majority of the informants said that their children cannot play well with other children in the society because of their condition. In an interview the responded said,

*“My child cannot play with others in the society because she has got autism which makes her to be always alone. Sometimes she can be violent because her cognitive functioning is affected which makes it difficult to play with other children in the society”.*

Data gathered through focus group discussions also shows that majority of the informants mentioned that; “Children living with disabilities most of the times play alone in the society because they are isolated due to their physical and cognitive challenges”.

### *Effects of disabilities on school performance*

Data gathered through interviews shows that majority of the informants said that disability affects the performance of their children in such a way that they cannot concentrate with schoolwork or take it seriously. One interviewee said, “Although my child is going to school, she cannot pay attention and concentrate because of her disability. To her education is worthless”.

Data gathered through focus group discussions also indicated that majority of the informants said, “My child whenever he is at school he cannot pay attention because of his mental challenge”.

### *Parents' perceptions about the interaction of their children with others both at school, at home and in the society*

Data gathered by the researchers through interviews shows that most of the informants indicated that parents of children living with disabilities were not comfortable with how the children behave at home, school and society. One of the informants said, “My child is an introvert because he doesn't want to interact with other children be it at home, school or in the society. His interaction with other children is very low”.

Data gathered through focus group discussions also shows that majority of the informants said, “My child whenever she interacts with other children be it at home, school or society she is always laughed at, and this makes her cry a lot”.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the perceptions of parents of children living with disability regarding inclusive education in two urban high schools in Gweru, Zimbabwe. The study revealed that parents of children living with disability predominantly understand disability as a condition that impairs physical or mental functioning, which aligns with both medical and social models of disability where impairment is recognised as limiting an individual's capacity to perform certain tasks. However, what emerged strongly from the findings was the emotional burden carried by these parents, who consistently expressed a desire that their children had no disability just like others. This finding resonates with Beresford and Sloper's (2017) observation that disability imposes not only physical limitations but also psychological challenges on both children and their caregivers. The finding that parents experience emotional distress when observing their disabled children among non-disabled peers reflects the internalised stigma that pervades communities in Zimbabwe and across Africa, consistent with Chimedza's (2016) assertion that parents of disabled children feel their concerns are inadequately addressed by both society and educational institutions.

A significant finding of this study relates to the differential treatment experienced by disabled children at home versus in the broader society. While parents reported that their children felt accepted and loved within the family environment, they experienced discrimination, isolation, and mockery in the community. This dichotomy reflects the deep-seated cultural beliefs about disability that persist in Zimbabwean society, where African societies often view disability through a spiritual lens, associating it with ancestral curses, witchcraft, or punishment for familial transgressions as noted by Shava, Tlou and Mpofu (2019). The findings support the work of Thwala, Ntinda and Hlanze (2015) who documented similar experiences in Swaziland, where parents of disabled children reported feeling disregarded by their communities. The persistence of such negative perceptions in Gweru's urban setting is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that urbanisation and exposure to modern education have not significantly altered traditional beliefs about disability, creating a hostile environment for both disabled children

and their parents who must constantly defend their children's dignity and right to participate in community life.

The study identified multiple ways in which having a child with disability affects parents psychologically, socially and practically. The finding that parents spend considerable time caring for their disabled children, often at the expense of other responsibilities, corroborates Dobson, Middleton and Breardworth's (2018) research on the impact of childhood disability on family life, a caregiving burden exacerbated by the lack of adequate support services and inclusive educational facilities in Gweru. Parents expressed concern about their children's academic performance, noting that disability often impedes concentration and engagement with schoolwork, supporting Gona et al.'s (2010) who documented similar challenges faced by children with disabilities in educational settings. However, it is important to note that poor academic performance may not be solely attributable to the disability itself, but also to the lack of appropriate teaching methods, assistive devices and specialised support in mainstream schools, reflecting Kondo's (2017) observation that the Zimbabwean education system remains largely exclusive with insufficient disability learning centres to cater for diverse needs.

The finding that disabled children experience limited social interaction with non-disabled peers at school, at home and in the community is particularly concerning, as this social exclusion not only affects the child's psychosocial development but also reinforces parental anxieties about their children's future. The study revealed that disabled children often play alone, are excluded from games, or are subjected to mockery when they attempt to interact with peers, aligning with Heiman's (2002) research on the social isolation experienced by children with disabilities and its impact on family dynamics. The study also revealed that some disabled children, particularly those with autism or cognitive impairments, may withdraw from social interaction voluntarily, either due to their condition or as a protective mechanism against anticipated rejection. This complex interplay between disability characteristics and social environment creates additional challenges for parents who must balance their desire for their children to socialise with the need to protect them from hurtful experiences.

The findings of this study have significant implications for the implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe, as while policy frameworks such as Education 5.0 acknowledge the importance of inclusive education, the practical realities in Gweru's urban high schools fall far short of this ideal. The shortage of specialised facilities, trained teachers, and appropriate learning materials means that children with disabilities are merely present in mainstream schools rather than genuinely included in the educational process. The experiences of parents in this study suggest that inclusive education, as currently practiced, may inadvertently reinforce exclusion by placing disabled children in environments ill-equipped to meet their needs, supporting Murray's (2016) critical analysis of disability exclusion which argues that mere physical integration without adequate support systems does not constitute genuine inclusion. For inclusive education to be effective, it must address not only the physical presence of disabled children in schools but also their academic, social, and emotional needs.

The study's findings underscore the critical importance of community engagement in addressing the challenges faced by children with disabilities and their parents, as the isolation and discrimination experienced by families in Gweru reflect broader societal attitudes that must be addressed through targeted awareness campaigns and community education programmes. As recommended by the study participants, the establishment of community disability support groups could provide platforms for parents to share experiences, access information, and advocate collectively for their children's rights. The role of civic organisations and government

ministries in promoting disability awareness cannot be overemphasised, and while some progress has been made in Zimbabwe particularly through the work of organisations such as the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and various NGOs, the findings suggest that these efforts have not yet translated into meaningful change at the community level in Gweru. A more coordinated approach involving schools, health services, social welfare, and community leaders is needed to create an enabling environment for children with disabilities and their families.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on disability in African contexts, challenging the applicability of Western models of disability without appropriate cultural adaptation. While the social model of disability, which distinguishes between impairment and disability, provides a useful framework for understanding the experiences of disabled children in Gweru, it fails to adequately capture the spiritual and cultural dimensions that shape local perceptions, as Afolabi (2014) and Oyele (2020) have noted that in many African societies, disability is understood not merely as a functional limitation but as a phenomenon with spiritual and moral significance. The study also highlights the need for theoretical frameworks that recognise the interconnectedness of child and parental wellbeing, as the emotional distress experienced by parents in this study was not merely a response to their children's impairments but a reflection of their own marginalisation within communities that stigmatise disability. This finding supports the family systems perspective advocated by Oneki (2013), which emphasises the need to understand disability within the context of family dynamics and broader social relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the research, it is concluded that while the concept of inclusive education is present, its practical implementation in Gweru is hindered by deep-seated negative societal perceptions of disability. These perceptions result in the social exclusion of children with disabilities, which severely impacts their academic progress and social development. The lack of adequate support systems, including limited learning centres and specialised resources within the education system, places a substantial psychological and emotional burden on parents. The study concludes that addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged approach involving community awareness and structural changes within the education system.

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