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Bridging the Gap: Evaluating the Effectiveness of One-Course Special Education Training in Preparing Teachers for Inclusive Classrooms in Zambia

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Abstract:

Background of Study: Inclusive education is a growing priority in Zambia, yet many teacher education programs rely on a single special education course to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms. This raises concerns about the sufficiency of such training in equipping educators with the necessary competencies.

Aims and Scope of Paper: This study aims to critically evaluate the effectiveness of a one-course special education module in preparing both pre-service and in-service teachers for inclusive classroom settings in Zambia. It explores the perceptions and lived experiences of teachers undergoing this training.

Methods: Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and a pragmatic philosophical stance, the study adopted an interpretive phenomenological design with a qualitative approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 10 student teachers and 5 practicing teachers, selected purposively. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

Results: Findings reveal that while the course provides basic conceptual understanding of inclusive education, it falls short in areas such as practical application, mentorship, and continuous professional development. Participants expressed a lack of preparedness in handling the complexities of inclusive classrooms.

Conclusion: The study concludes that a single-course model is inadequate for preparing teachers for inclusive education. It recommends comprehensive reform in teacher education programs, including longitudinal training, integration of assistive technology, and structured mentorship to enhance teacher readiness and align training with inclusive education goals.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Sociocultural Theory, Special Education Training, Teacher Preparation

1. INTRODUCTION

The global push for inclusive education has highlighted the importance of equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively address the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms. Special education training, which focuses on preparing teachers to work with students with disabilities, plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive practices. Suffice to say, the

adequacy of single-course training in special education for pre-service teachers has been a subject of debate. Rivers and Thomas (2024) argue that minimal training in special education often results in challenges when addressing the needs of diverse learners. Similarly, Martin and Bishop (2024) highlight that single-course training offers foundational knowledge, yet it may not provide the depth and breadth required for implementing inclusive strategies effectively.

Emerging technologies have been identified as tools that can enhance teacher preparation for special education. Howorth, et. al. (2024) note that integrating technology into training programs can help teachers better understand and support students with disabilities. Additionally, inclusive training models from other fields, such as the one proposed by Recker and Scheele (2024) in obstetrics and gynecology education, provide guidance into how cross-disciplinary approaches can improve training efficacy. Vorontsova (2024) underscores the value of integrating humanitarian disciplines into technical education as a way to build a well-rounded skillset that promotes inclusivity. This study seeks to explore whether a single course in special education is sufficient to equip student teachers to

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handle the complexities of inclusive classrooms. By analyzing the existing literature and identifying gaps in training programs, the study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions about improving teacher preparation for inclusivity.

The increasing emphasis on inclusive education has placed significant demands on teachers to address the diverse needs of students in their classrooms. In as much as teacher training programs are expected to prepare educators for these challenges, many pre-service teachers are only required to complete a single course in special education. This minimal exposure raises concerns about whether such limited training is sufficient to equip student teachers with the knowledge, skills, and strategies needed to effectively manage inclusive classrooms. Research indicates that a lack of comprehensive training can lead to difficulties in identifying and addressing the unique needs of students with disabilities, fostering an inclusive learning environment, and applying evidence-based practices (Al Khatip et al., 2024; Martin & Bishop, 2024; Muvombo, Musonda, et al., 2024; Rivers & Thomas, 2024). Despite the availability of emerging technologies and innovative training models, their integration into special education courses remains inconsistent (Howorth et al., 2024; Muvombo, Mpolomoka, et al., 2024; Simwinga et al., 2024). This gap underscores the need to critically evaluate the adequacy of single-course training in special education and its impact on teacher readiness for inclusive education.

The study was guided by the following research objectives:

1. To explore the effectiveness of a single special education course in equipping student teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to manage inclusive classrooms.
2. To identify gaps in current special education training,
3. To propose strategies for enhancing teacher preparation programs for inclusive education.

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky in 1934. The theory emphasizes the role of social interactions, cultural context, and scaffolding in learning. Vygotsky argued that learning is a socially mediated process where knowledge is constructed through interaction with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers or peers. In the context of special education, this theory supports the idea that teachers serve as facilitators, providing individualized support and resources to meet the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms. Thus, by applying this framework, the study explores whether a single course in special education equips student teachers to scaffold learning effectively and foster inclusivity.

The philosophical foundation of this study is anchored in Pragmatism, a school of thought pioneered by philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pragmatism prioritizes practical outcomes and real-world applications, focusing on what works in specific contexts. In educational research, pragmatism emphasizes solving real problems and bridging the gap between theory and practice. Through adopting this framework, the study evaluates how well a single special education course prepares student teachers to apply theoretical knowledge to practical challenges in inclusive classroom settings, ensuring meaningful and actionable findings.

Effectiveness of a Single Special Education Course in Equipping Student Teachers with the Knowledge and Skills Needed to Manage Inclusive Classrooms

Research on the effectiveness of single-course special education training reveals mixed findings, with evidence suggesting that such courses provide only a foundational understanding of inclusive education. Martin and Bishop (2024) conducted a comprehensive study that highlighted the limitations of these programs. In so far as the courses introduced student teachers to essential theories of inclusion and the principles of special education, they were found to lack the depth needed for practical application. The study particularly emphasized the absence of hands-on training opportunities, such as in-classroom simulations or fieldwork, which are critical for developing the skills necessary to manage the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms. This deficiency, according to Martin and Bishop, often leaves student teachers underprepared and lacking the confidence required to address real-world challenges effectively.

Similarly, Delgado and Morris (2023) undertook a comparative analysis of minimal and extended training models, focusing on their respective impacts on teacher readiness for inclusive education. Their findings revealed that teachers who completed only a single course in special education demonstrated a superficial understanding of inclusive practices. This limited comprehension often hindered their ability to implement individualized instruction, which is a cornerstone of effective inclusive teaching. Furthermore, the study noted that these teachers were ill-equipped to collaborate with specialists, such as speech therapists and special education coordinators, due to inadequate exposure to interdisciplinary teamwork during their training. Delgado and Morris concluded that extended training models, which integrate practical workshops and mentorship opportunities, are significantly more effective in preparing teachers to meet the demands of inclusive classrooms.

Moreover, Hernandez and Zhang (2024) explore the perspectives of student teachers who had undergone single-course training in special education. The study revealed a common sentiment of inadequacy among these teachers. Although they appreciated the introduction to inclusive education concepts, they expressed concerns about the lack of preparedness for the dynamic and multifaceted nature of inclusive classrooms. Many participants cited the absence of experiential learning opportunities, such as case studies, peer teaching, and real-world classroom exposure, as a major gap in their training. The authors argued that experiential learning is essential for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, as it allows student teachers to develop problem-solving skills and adapt to diverse classroom scenarios.

McGregor (2024) provides a global perspective on the challenges of inclusive teacher training, underscoring the disconnection between theory and practice in many training programs. According to McGregor, brief special education courses often present theoretical concepts in isolation, without offering practical strategies for their implementation. This disconnect results in a shallow understanding of inclusion, leaving teachers unprepared to address the complexities of diverse classrooms. McGregor called for a paradigm shift toward comprehensive training programs that blend theoretical instruction with practical components, such as mentorship and long-term professional development initiatives. His analysis highlighted the need for sustained support systems to ensure that teachers are not only introduced to inclusive education but are also equipped to implement it effectively.

Ultimately, Blanco and Davies (2024) examine the essential knowledge areas required for effective special education teaching and argued that single courses are insufficient to cover these comprehensively. Their research identified key areas, such as differentiation, assessment strategies, and collaborative practices, which require repeated exposure and practice to master. Single-course training often provides an overview of these topics but lacks the depth needed for teachers to feel confident in their implementation. Blanco and Davies recommended a multi-course approach that integrates these core areas across various stages of teacher education, supplemented by field-based experiences and peer collaboration.

Additionally, Jensen (2023) focuses on capacity-building approaches in teacher training and stressed the importance of ongoing professional development. Despite acknowledging that single courses can provide an initial foundation, Jensen argued that they are inadequate for fostering the sustained growth needed to manage inclusive classrooms effectively. She highlighted mentorship and collaborative learning as critical components of teacher preparation. According to Jensen, these elements not only enhance teachers' practical skills but also provide them with a support

network to navigate the challenges of inclusive education. Her findings emphasized the need for training programs to extend beyond the classroom, offering continuous opportunities for skill development and professional growth.

Gaps in Current Special Education Training and Proposed Strategies for Enhancing Teacher Preparation Programs for Inclusive Education

Research has identified significant gaps in current special education training programs, highlighting the need for innovative strategies to better prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms. Howorth, Marino, and Flanagan (2024) underscore the lack of integration of emerging technologies in many teacher training curricula. Their study highlights the potential of assistive technologies and digital tools to improve accessibility and inclusion for students with special needs (Al-bustanji & Beirat, 2020; Thelma et al., 2024). The authors advocate for embedding technology modules into teacher education programs, which would equip teachers with practical skills to utilize tools such as speech-to-text software, augmentative communication devices and digital learning platforms. These additions, they argue, are vital for creating inclusive environments that cater to diverse learner needs.

Recker and Scheele (2024) offer advice from the field of obstetrics and gynecology, presenting a model for inclusive training programs that could be adapted for teacher education. Their research emphasizes the effectiveness of interdisciplinary approaches, including team-based learning and scenario-based training, in fostering collaboration and critical thinking. By applying these methods to teacher preparation, educators could be better equipped to navigate the complexities of inclusive classrooms. Recker and Scheele argue that exposure to real-world scenarios, such as simulated classroom environments and problem-solving exercises, would enable teachers to develop practical strategies for addressing diverse learning challenges.

Vorontsova (2024) highlights the importance of incorporating humanitarian disciplines into teacher training programs. Her study suggests that courses in empathy, ethics and social justice can significantly enhance teachers' ability to address the socio-emotional needs of students with special needs. By integrating humanities-based approaches, teacher education programs could foster a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of students with disabilities, promoting inclusive attitudes and practices (Banda et al., 2023; Sikanyika et al., 2022). Vorontsova's work emphasizes that empathy and emotional intelligence are as crucial as technical skills in fostering inclusive educational environments.

Smith and Brown (2023) provide a critical evaluation of short-term training programs in special education, identifying their inability to provide sustained support

for teachers. Their research indicates that these programs often focus on theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical application. To address this gap, they propose extending training programs to include modules on collaborative problem-solving, adaptive teaching strategies, and ongoing professional development. Smith and Brown argue that sustained training efforts, such as follow-up workshops and peer coaching, are essential for reinforcing skills and ensuring long-term teacher preparedness for inclusive classrooms.

From the literature by Lui and Huang (2023) they conducted a comprehensive study of teacher training programs in Southeast Asia, identifying substantial gaps in practical preparation for inclusive education. Their findings reveal that many programs lack mentorship opportunities, co-teaching experiences, and longitudinal support, which are critical for building teacher confidence and competence. Lui and Huang advocate for mentorship programs that pair novice teachers with experienced educators, allowing for the exchange of knowledge and real-time feedback. Additionally, literature recommends co-teaching models and extended practicums as strategies to immerse teachers in inclusive environments and provide them with the hands-on experience needed to address diverse student needs effectively.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, specifically using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how pre-service and in-service teachers in Zambia perceive and experience the effectiveness of a one-course special education training module in preparing them for inclusive classroom teaching. As a type of descriptive qualitative research, IPA is particularly appropriate for capturing the depth and nuance of participants' lived experiences, allowing researchers to understand the meanings they assign to those experiences within their sociocultural context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The study purposively sampled 15 participants, comprising 10 student teachers enrolled in teacher education programs that included a single special education course and 5 practicing teachers with similar training backgrounds. Participants were selected from two teacher training institutions to ensure diversity in perspectives as well as maintain relevance to the research objectives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were interviewed individually to gain a personal and detailed account of their experiences with the special education

course and how it influenced their preparedness for inclusive teaching. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions (Mpolomoka et al., 2017; Muvombo, Musonda, et al., 2024), such as:

*How would you describe the effectiveness of the special education course in preparing you for inclusive classrooms?';
'What challenges have you faced in applying the knowledge and skills from the course in real-life teaching scenarios?'*

In addition, two focus group discussion sessions were conducted, each comprising 5-10 participants lasting for 15-25 minutes each. These discussions allowed for the exploration of shared experiences, contrasting views, and collaborative reflections on the training program's strengths and limitations.

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involved familiarization with data, which commenced with transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions being reviewed multiple times to immerse the researchers in the data; generation of initial codes, which involved key phrases and patterns related to the effectiveness and limitations of the special education course being identified and coded. Codes were grouped into overarching themes, such as 'foundational knowledge vs. practical skills gap', 'empathy and inclusion,' and 'need for sustained mentorship'. Themes were refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. Final themes were clearly defined and named, ensuring that they aligned with the research objectives; Producing the report: Findings were synthesized and presented in relation to the study's objectives.

Ethical approval was obtained from Chalimbana University Ethical clearance committee (UREC). Informed consent forms were endorsed by participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and confidentiality of their responses. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms in reporting of findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

The results from interviews with the 10 student teachers (coded as ST TR1 to ST TR10) revealed diverse perspectives on the effectiveness of a single special education course in preparing them for inclusive classrooms. Three overarching themes emerged: foundational knowledge acquisition, limited practical application, and a need for experiential learning.

Most student teachers acknowledged that the course provided essential knowledge about inclusion and special education. As ST TR3 remarked: "The course gave me an

overview of what inclusion means and helped me understand some of the barriers faced by students with disabilities."

Similarly, ST TR8 shared that

"It introduced me to terms like differentiation and accommodations, which were entirely new to me before this course."

However, all participants noted a significant gap in practical training.

ST TR1 explained:

"Even though the course discussed strategies, we were never given a chance to practice them in a real classroom. When I faced a child with learning difficulties during my teaching practice, I felt lost."

ST TR6 echoed this concern:

"It's one thing to learn about inclusion in theory, but applying it in a diverse classroom is a completely different challenge."

Participants unanimously emphasized the importance of hands-on experiences to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

ST TR9 noted:

"I think what's missing is exposure - working directly with students with disabilities during training. That would build our confidence and skills."

ST TR5 added:

"If the course included role-playing scenarios or internships with special education specialists, it would make a big difference."

The interviews with the five practicing teachers (coded as TR1 to TR5) revealed critical gaps in the current special education training programs, particularly with regard to their ability to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms. The responses highlighted themes such as insufficient depth of training, lack of practical support, and the need for continuous professional development.

All participants noted that their training in special education was superficial, covering only basic concepts without addressing the complexity of inclusive practices.

TR2 remarked:

"The training we received was very basic. We learned the terminology, but not enough about how to apply the strategies in diverse classrooms."

TR4 echoed this sentiment:

"Although I understood the concept of inclusion, I was never taught how to differentiate lessons or how to meet the needs of students with diverse learning profiles effectively."

Another key issue was the absence of practical support during their early years of teaching. TR3 shared:

"When I first started teaching, I felt like I was on my own. There were no mentors or ongoing support to help me implement the strategies I had learned in my initial training."

TR5 added:

"I remember facing students with behavioral and cognitive challenges, but I didn't feel equipped to manage them because the training had no real-world context."

All participants emphasized the necessity of ongoing professional development to complement initial teacher training.

TR1 highlighted:

"Short-term courses are a good starting point, but teachers need continual opportunities to refresh their knowledge and skills, especially as inclusion practices evolve."

TR3 further suggests:

"There should be workshops or in-service training that allow teachers to build on what they've learned and stay up to date with new strategies and technologies."

3.1 Discussion

The findings align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1934), which emphasizes the importance of social interactions and guided learning in skill acquisition. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs most effectively within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – the space between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance. The student teachers' experiences highlight a critical gap. In so far as the single course provided foundational knowledge (independent learning), it failed to offer guided opportunities (mentorship, modeling, and collaboration) to apply this knowledge in inclusive classroom settings (Jhonson & Muzata, 2019; Muvombo, Mpolomoka, et al., 2024).

The findings corroborate the literature, where Martin and Bishop (2024) emphasized that a single special education course is insufficient for equipping teachers with practical skills. Similarly, Delgado and Morris (2023) highlight the limitations of minimal training models, noting that they provide only surface-level understanding of inclusive practices. Hernandez and Zhang (2024) reinforce the need for experiential learning, aligning with the participants' call for hands-on training.

McGregor (2024) suggests that inclusive teacher training should integrate mentorship and practice-based learning to ensure alignment between theory and application. This echoes ST TR5 and ST TR9's call for role-playing scenarios and internships, underscoring the value of real-world experiences in bridging the gap between knowledge and practical competency.

In contrast to the theoretical framework of this study, Vygotsky's theory advocates for mentorship and scaffolding to enhance learning, the course structure described by participants lacked these critical

components. Instead, the course emphasized theoretical understanding without providing the necessary social interactions, collaboration, or guided practice that are pivotal for developing competence in inclusive education. This misalignment undermines the potential of student teachers to reach their ZPD in managing inclusive classrooms effectively.

Findings of this study contend that a single special education course may lay the groundwork for understanding inclusion, but it is insufficient for preparing student teachers to address the complexities of inclusive classrooms. The findings reflect a missed opportunity to incorporate Vygotsky's principles of scaffolded learning, particularly mentorship and collaboration, into teacher preparation programs. Future teacher training programs must evolve to integrate experiential learning opportunities including internships, co-teaching, and role-playing scenarios guided by experienced educators or special education specialists. By doing so, these programs can provide the scaffolding necessary for student teachers to develop practical skills and confidence in navigating inclusive classrooms. As the participants' voices resonate with the literature and theory, it becomes evident that the current model of a single special education course is a starting point but not a comprehensive solution. Moving forward, inclusive education training must embrace a holistic approach that bridges the gap between theory and practice, empowering student teachers to create truly inclusive learning environments.

3.2.1 Implication

These findings suggest that teacher training institutions need to redesign their special education modules by embedding experiential learning components such as classroom-based practicum, mentorship from experienced teachers, and continuous professional development. Without such reforms, teachers are likely to continue feeling unprepared, and the implementation of inclusive education will be compromised.

3.2.2 Research Contribution

This study offers empirical insight into the perspectives of both pre-service and in-service teachers in Zambia regarding the limitations of single-course special education training. It contributes to the body of knowledge by integrating Vygotsky's theoretical framework with teachers' lived experiences, highlighting the gap between theory and classroom practice.

3.2.3 Limitation

This study is limited by its qualitative nature and small sample size (15 participants), which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across different regions or institutions. Furthermore, the study focuses solely on teacher perspectives, excluding the voices of learners with disabilities, school leaders, and policymakers.

3.2.4 Suggestion

Future research should adopt mixed-methods approaches to enhance generalizability and include a broader range of stakeholders. Additionally, policy makers and training institutions should consider piloting and evaluating mentorship-based and experiential models of teacher training. These efforts will ensure a more robust, practical, and inclusive preparation of teachers for the demands of diverse classrooms.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted significant gaps in the current special education training programs for teachers, specifically those based on a single-course approach. The results suggest that such courses provide foundational knowledge about inclusion, even though they fail to equip student teachers with the necessary practical skills and sustained support to manage diverse, inclusive classrooms. Participants in the study emphasized the lack of real-world application during their training, inadequate mentorship, and the need for continuous professional development. These findings align with the principles of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction, collaboration, and guided support in the learning process. Teacher training programs that do not incorporate these elements leave educators inadequately prepared for the challenges of inclusive education. The study also echoes previous research indicating that brief, one-course models of special education training are insufficient in preparing teachers for the complexities of inclusion. Therefore, a more comprehensive, integrated approach to teacher preparation is necessary to ensure that teachers are fully equipped to meet the needs of all students in inclusive classrooms.

The study offers meaningful contributions to three key stakeholder groups. For policy makers, it provides evidence to support the reform of teacher education curricula, advocating for the inclusion of longitudinal training components, mentorship programs, and inclusive teaching standards within certification frameworks. Such policies are essential to ensure that inclusive education is not only understood conceptually but practiced consistently across the education system. For teacher educators and training institutions, the study underscores the importance of integrating practical training elements—such as classroom simulations, co-teaching experiences, exposure to assistive technologies, and peer collaboration—throughout the teacher preparation process. These strategies can better bridge the gap between knowledge and application, thereby enhancing teacher readiness. For educational researchers, this study lays the groundwork for further inquiry into effective and scalable models of inclusive teacher training, especially in low-resource contexts. It invites future longitudinal and mixed-methods studies that explore the long-term impact of training reforms on teacher performance and learner outcomes.



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6. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Each writer played a significant role in shaping this document, encompassing the idea formulation for the research, gathering and examining the data, understanding the results, and creating and editing the piece. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission and publication.

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