



Implementation of Special Education Programmes at Junior Secondary Schools in Botswana: Challenges and Opportunities for Curriculum Improvement

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Abstract. This study evaluated the implementation of special education programmes in junior secondary schools in Botswana's Kweneng region. Despite strong policy frameworks like the Inclusive Education Policy (2011), a significant gap exists between policy intent and classroom practice.

A qualitatively dominant mixed-methods approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with administrators, teachers, students with special needs, and their parents across six schools (N=54). Findings revealed that implementation is severely hindered by systemic barriers: a critical lack of trained special education personnel, with programmes often coordinated by guidance counsellors without specialist training; severe shortages of assistive technologies and adapted learning resources; and protracted delays in psychological assessments. Furthermore, curriculum delivery remains rigid, with minimal differentiation or adaptation to diverse learner needs. However, the study also identified key opportunities for curriculum improvement. These include the integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to foster flexible pedagogy, strategic investment in continuous professional development for teachers and administrators, and the formal establishment of dedicated special education units within schools.

The study concludes that special education programmes are central to Botswana's inclusive education agenda but require targeted systemic reforms, robust resource allocation, and a shift from policy rhetoric to actionable, supported practices to realize equitable and quality education for all learners.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Education Programmes, Curriculum Adaptation, Universal Design for Learning, Teacher Training, Botswana,

1. Introduction

Botswana, like many nations, has made significant legislative strides towards inclusive education through key policy frameworks such as the Revised National Policy on Education (1994) and the Inclusive Education Policy (2011). These policies advocate for the integration of learners with special needs into mainstream classrooms, aligning with international commitments like the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Special education programmes are introduced as a foundational strategy to achieve this inclusion, designed to provide individualized support, equitable access, and curriculum adaptations for diverse learners (UNESCO, 2020).

However, a persistent disconnect exists between policy aspirations and practical implementation. Studies indicate that challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and cultural stigma hinder the effectiveness of these programmes (Kuyini & Mangope, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). This is particularly critical at the junior secondary level (Forms 1-3), where academic demands intensify and the need for robust support systems becomes more acute. This study, therefore, critically examines the implementation of special education programmes in junior secondary schools, focusing on their effectiveness, the systemic challenges faced, and the tangible opportunities for curriculum improvement to bridge the existing gap.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored by three complementary theoretical frameworks that provide a robust lens for analysis.

The primary framework is Inclusive Education Theory (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), which advocates for equitable access and meaningful participation in mainstream education. It emphasizes the need for systemic adaptation and curriculum flexibility, directly aligning with Botswana's policy goals while highlighting the current implementation gaps, such as rigid teaching methods. Secondly, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Rose, Meyer, & Hitchcock, 2002) offers a practical, structured approach to operationalizing inclusivity. UDL prescribes specific strategies for providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, which could directly translate policy into classroom practice.

Finally, the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990) shifts the focus from individual learner deficits to societal and systemic barriers. This model resonates strongly with the findings related to stigma, inaccessible infrastructure, and delayed assessments, emphasizing that exclusion is a result of institutional failure rather than student impairment.

Collectively, these theories allow for a comprehensive diagnosis of implementation failures and provide a foundation for proposing actionable, multi-level solutions for reform.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopted a multiple case study design (Yin, 2023) to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the implementation of special education programmes across six junior secondary schools in the Kweneng region of Botswana. A qualitatively dominant mixed-methods approach was employed, utilizing a convergent parallel design where qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then merged for interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach was guided by the pragmatic paradigm, prioritizing practical outcomes and context-specific insights.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

A total of 54 participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure rich, context-specific insights from key stakeholders directly involved in or affected by Senior Teacher Guidance and Counseling, twelve mainstream teachers, eighteen students with special needs, and twelve parents of students with special needs. Furthermore, the schools themselves were selected to reflect both urban and rural settings special education delivery. The participant group was comprised of six school administrators, six special education teachers, who are officially designated as , a strategy aimed at capturing a diversity of experiences and resource contexts. See Figure 1 for the demographic profile of mainstream teacher participants.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using two primary instruments:

3.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with school administrators and special education teachers to explore policy understanding, classroom practices, and systemic challenges.

3.3.2 Structured Questionnaires: Administered to mainstream teachers, students, and parents. These included Likert-scale items for quantifiable data and open-ended questions for qualitative insights.

Qualitative data from interviews and open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Quantitative data from closed-ended questionnaire items were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency distributions and percentages) to identify trends in stakeholder perceptions. Data triangulation across sources and methods enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the findings.

4. Findings and Results

4.1 Challenges in Implementation

The data revealed profound systemic barriers that cripple the effective implementation of special education programmes.

4.1.1 Lack of Policy Clarity and Trained Personnel

Administrators universally reported that special education exists as "empty rhetoric" (ADM A) and is "the most neglected department in our schools" (ADM F). A critical finding was the severe lack of qualified personnel. The individuals coordinating special education programmes were overwhelmingly guidance and counselling teachers without specialist training. One stated, "I am not a specialist in special education... I just coordinate activities and manage statistics" (SPED TR A). This role misalignment leads to ad-hoc management and a complete absence of pedagogical differentiation, as teachers reported using standard methods like group work with "nothing specific for learning difficulties" (SPED TR E).

4.1.2 Severe Resource Shortages and Assessment Delays

All stakeholders highlighted a crippling lack of resources. Administrators lamented the absence of basic tools like "duplicating machines for running notes for students with written difficulties" (ADM A). A most critical barrier was the protracted delay in accessing psychological assessments. Administrators reported waiting lists of 4-5 years, and many families cannot afford private assessments, leaving learners unidentified and unsupported for their entire junior secondary school career (ADM C).

4.1.3 Inadequate Teacher Preparedness and Support

Quantitative data from mainstream teachers (N=12) was stark: 100% had students with special needs in their classrooms, yet 75% felt unprepared to teach them. The most common challenges were a lack of training (75%), a lack of support (75%), and large class sizes (66.7%). Over half (58.3%) reported receiving no support at all, and none had access to specialized teaching materials. The findings discussed in this section are summarized in Figure 2.

4.2 Stakeholder Experiences and Perspectives

4.2.1 Student Voices

The student questionnaires (N=18) revealed a mixed experience. While 55.5% reported enjoying school, only 27.8% felt supported by their teachers. Academic difficulties were prevalent, with 55.6% struggling to complete assignments and 33.3% having trouble understanding lessons. Crucially, 83.3% reported receiving no extra help in school. Their open-ended responses called for more personalized help, assistive resources, and extra time to complete work. Students' experiences and perceptions presented in this section are illustrated in Figure 3.

4.2.2 Parental Perspectives

Parents (N=12) expressed frustration with systemic failures. Many highlighted the financial and logistical barriers to assessments: "My child was assessed late because I had no money to pay for private tests" (A-PAR 1). They also felt excluded from the educational process, noting a lack of communication from schools. While some appreciated teachers' efforts, they overwhelmingly advocated for "trained people to assess and support our children, not just teachers guessing" (E-PAR 1).

4.3 Opportunities for Curriculum Improvement

Despite the challenges, the study identified strong opportunities for reform rooted in stakeholder insights.

4.3.1 Integration of UDL Principles: Teachers and administrators expressed a strong need for digital and visual learning tools. SPED TR D noted, "Many students struggle with text; they learn better through hands-on or visual materials." This aligns perfectly with the UDL framework, which promotes multiple means of representation.

4.3.2 Professional Development: There was a unanimous call from teachers and administrators for mandatory pre-service and in-service training in inclusive pedagogies and special education strategies.

4.3.3 Systemic Restructuring: A primary recommendation from administrators and special education teachers was the establishment of dedicated special education departments staffed with trained specialists, mirroring structures in primary schools.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the implementation of special education programmes in Botswana's junior secondary schools is fundamentally constrained by a lack of systemic capacity and support, reflecting a clear gap between policy and practice. The reliance on untrained personnel, exemplified by guidance counsellors managing special education, results in a form of "inclusion by default" rather than "inclusion by design." This lack of specialized knowledge directly contributes to the absence of pedagogical differentiation in classrooms, a finding that aligns with Kuyini et al.'s (2023) work on teacher preparedness in Southern Africa.

The severe resource shortages and assessment delays are not merely logistical issues but are indicative of a deeper systemic failure. These barriers operationalize the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990), demonstrating how learners are excluded not by their disabilities but by an inaccessible system that fails to identify their needs and provide the necessary tools for participation.

However, the identified opportunities point towards a clear path for curriculum improvement. The openness to UDL principles suggests a readiness for pedagogical change that can make the curriculum inherently flexible and accessible. The strong advocacy for dedicated structures and professional development underscores that stakeholders are aware of the solutions but lack the institutional support and resources to implement them. This echoes Booth and Ainscow's (2002) assertion that inclusive education requires a whole-system reform encompassing culture, policy, and practice.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that while special education programmes are a vital component of Botswana's inclusive education agenda, their current implementation is ineffective due to systemic barriers including untrained personnel, resource inadequacies, and a non-adaptive curriculum. To bridge the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality, the study proposes the following evidence-based recommendations:

6.1.1 Institutionalize Special Education Units: Every junior secondary school must establish a dedicated special education unit staffed with qualified professionals, not guidance personnel.

6.1.2 Mandate Targeted Professional Development: Teacher training programs, both pre-service and in-service, must integrate comprehensive modules on inclusive pedagogy, UDL, and special education strategies.

6.1.3 Embed UDL in Curriculum Design: National curriculum frameworks should be revised to incorporate UDL principles, promoting flexible teaching methods, diverse learning materials, and adaptive assessments.

6.1.4 Equitable Resource Allocation: The Ministry of Education must prioritize and ensure the equitable distribution of assistive technologies, learning resources, and psychological assessment services across all schools, particularly in rural areas.

6.1.5 Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation: Develop and implement clear national guidelines and frameworks for monitoring the implementation and impact of special education programmes at the school level.

By adopting these recommendations, Botswana can transform its special education programmes from a neglected policy element into a powerful vehicle for achieving genuine inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners.

Figure 1: Demographic Information of Mainstream Teachers (N=12)

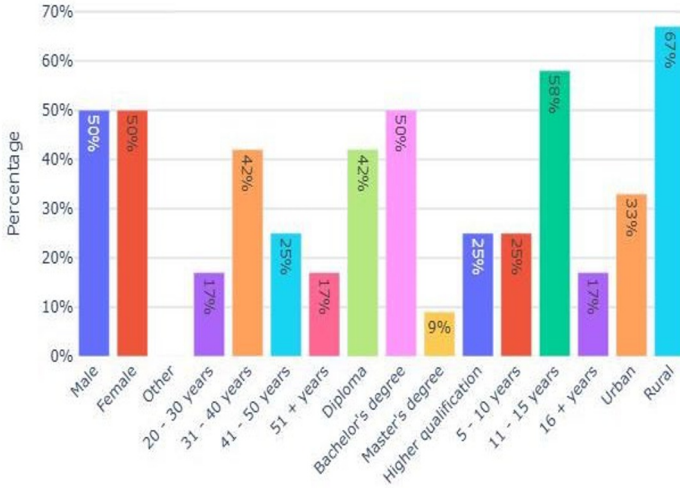


Figure 2: Mainstream Teachers' Preparedness and Challenges (N=12)

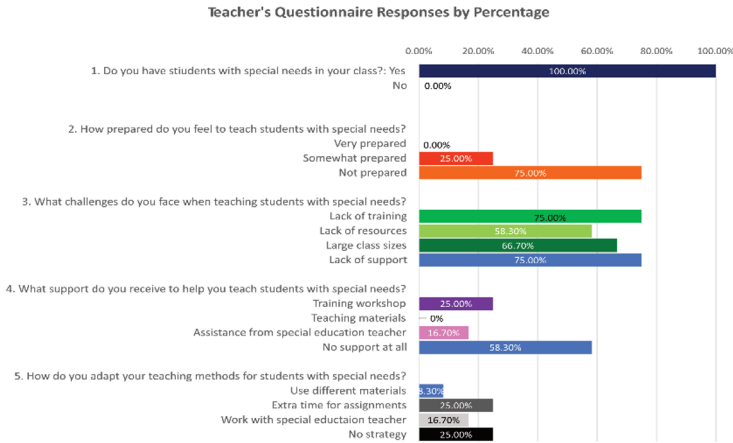
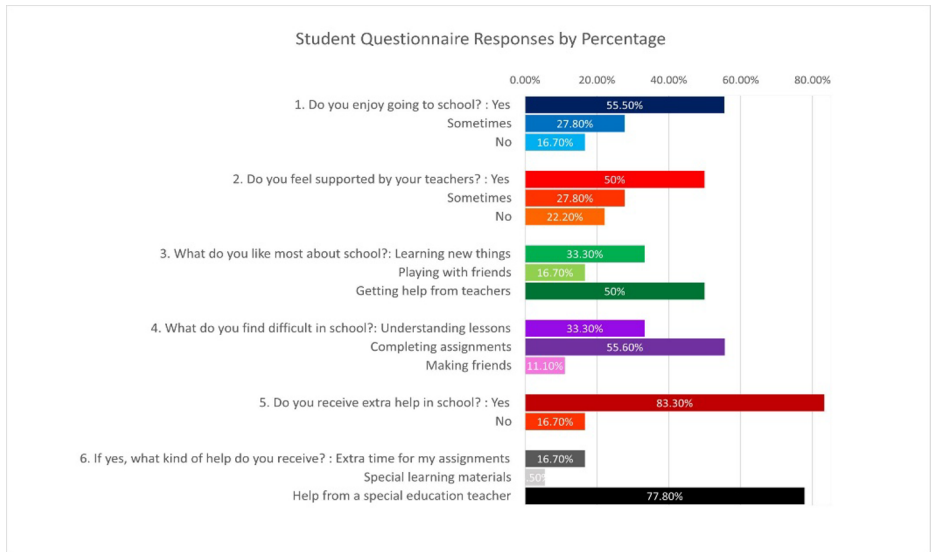


Figure 3: Experiences of Students with Special Needs (N=18)



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