



## TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE OF TEACHING LEARNERS WITH MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN SELECTED PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN LUANSHYA DISTRICT, ZAMBIA

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### Abstract:

This study explored teachers' knowledge of teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities (IDs) in Zambian primary schools, an area critical to the promotion of inclusive education. Utilizing an interpretivist research paradigm and an interpretive phenomenological design, the study involved a sample of 15 participants, comprising 3 senior teachers and 12 class teachers selected through homogeneous purposive sampling. This method allowed for a focused understanding of their knowledge and perspectives regarding the teaching of learners with IDs. Data collection involved in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and an observation checklist, with thematic analysis applied to identify key insights. The findings revealed that many teachers lacked sufficient knowledge to adequately support learners with mild intellectual disabilities. This deficiency is concerning, as it directly affects the quality of education for these learners who require specialized instructional approaches. Additionally, many teachers felt unprepared, attributing their discomfort to inadequate training in special education and the inclusive strategies necessary for addressing the diverse needs of their learners. This lack of preparation creates barriers for both teachers and learners, hindering the effective implementation of teaching methods that facilitate learning. In light of these findings, the study calls for policymakers to prioritize inclusive education practices within the national curriculum and recommends a comprehensive revision of teacher training programs. Such changes are essential to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to support learners with mild intellectual disabilities. Every child, regardless of their abilities, deserves a nurturing and effective educational experience, underscoring the fundamental right to education for all.

**Keywords:** intellectual disability, knowledge, teachers, learners, primary school

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## 1. Introduction

Learners with mild intellectual disabilities (IDs) represent a significant portion of students placed in inclusive schools in Zambia. The awareness and understanding of intellectual disabilities among teachers significantly influence their effectiveness within the classroom. Many educators lack a clear grasp of the characteristics and capabilities of learners with mild IDs, leading to potential misunderstandings that adversely affect teaching methodologies and interactions with these students (Chanda & Mumba, 2021). Teachers' inadequate training can hinder their ability to provide the specialized support these learners require, ultimately detracting from the overall learning environment. It is crucial for teachers to receive comprehensive training and resources that enable them to recognize and nurture the unique abilities of all students, contributing to the development of an inclusive and supportive classroom atmosphere.

Intellectual disability (ID) is defined as a neurodevelopmental condition that manifests during the developmental period (typically before the age of 18 years). According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2019), it is characterized by significant limitations in cognitive and adaptive behavioral functioning. Diagnostic criteria include an intelligence quotient (IQ) score of below 70, with classifications including mild (IQ range 50–70), moderate (IQ range 35–55), severe (IQ range 20–35), and profound (IQ less than 20).

Over the years, Zambia has made significant strides toward the inclusion of learners with intellectual disabilities in primary schools, reflecting a broader global trend toward the adoption of inclusive educational practices. Historically, educational systems across the world have often sidelined learners with disabilities, relegating them to separate institutions that isolate them from their peers. In recognition of this pressing issue, the Zambian government has taken important steps to foster inclusive education, aligning its educational policies with international standards, specifically those outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the National Policy on Inclusive Education (MOE, 2017).

Despite these notable advancements toward creating a more inclusive educational environment, the effective implementation of inclusive education in Zambia faces several persistent challenges that must be addressed. Research conducted by Mumba and Mwewa (2020) indicated that a significant number of teachers still feel ill-equipped to adequately support learners with mild intellectual disabilities. This sense of inadequacy stems largely from a lack of knowledge and training regarding special and inclusive education strategies, which in turn affects both teacher confidence and the overall educational experiences of learners with intellectual disabilities. The need for professional development and ongoing support for educators is critical in overcoming these barriers and ensuring that all learners, regardless of their abilities, can participate fully in the educational system.

Furthermore, Zambia has made important progress in promoting the rights of individuals with disabilities by signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of

Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and creating the National Policy on Inclusive Education (Ministry of Education, 2017). While these steps provide a strong foundation for inclusive education, there is still a significant gap between policy and practice that hinders real progress (Chanda, 2018). In theory, the commitment to inclusivity supports diverse learning environments where all learners can succeed. However, when we examine what actually happens in classrooms, the reality can be very different. One major issue is that we do not fully understand how prepared teachers are to effectively support learners with disabilities (Mumba, 2019).

To truly achieve the goal of "Education for All" (UNESCO, 2015), we need to focus on teachers' knowledge and their everyday interactions with learners with disabilities. This understanding is crucial; without it, our high aspirations risk remaining just dreams that do not reflect the actual experiences of learners. To bridge this gap, it is essential to invest in comprehensive training and ongoing support for teachers. By equipping teachers with the right knowledge, we can create a more inclusive environment where all children, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality education and opportunities to succeed. Only then can we turn our vision of inclusive education into a reality, where every child's potential is recognized and nurtured.

Consequently, this study explored teachers' knowledge in teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities in the Luanshya district of Zambia and was guided by the following objective:

- To describe teachers knowledge in teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities in primary schools.
- To examine the indicators of adequate and inadequate knowledge of mild intellectual disabilities that teachers exhibited.

This study aimed to provide important insights to the Ministry of Education (MoE) about teachers' understanding of how to teach learners with mild intellectual disabilities (IDs) in primary schools. It sought to identify gaps in teachers' knowledge and help them make necessary adjustments to better support these learners. The findings highlighted the challenges teachers faced when working with learners with mild IDs, with the goal of improving educational outcomes for these learners. Policymakers and stakeholders can use these results to create policies that would enhance the educational experiences of learners with mild IDs, which is crucial for building positive learning environments.

Additionally, this research is expected spark interest in finding new strategies for teaching learners with mild IDs in Zambia. By addressing these gaps, we can help these learners succeed in their academic pursuits. Overall, this study aimed to improve the quality of education for learners with mild IDs and raise awareness about the need for personalized teaching methods. This will ensure that all learners receive the support they require to reach their full potential in the education system. We hope it encourages more inclusive teaching practices and collaboration among stakeholders, leading to a fairer educational environment for learners with intellectual disabilities in Zambia.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Concept of Intellectual Disability (ID)

Intellectual disability (ID), formerly referred to as intellectual impairment or mental retardation, is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by substantial limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2013), these limitations typically manifest during childhood or adolescence, specifically before the age of 18. This developmental timeline highlights the importance of early intervention and support, as these years are crucial for cognitive and social growth. The concept of ID encompasses a range of challenges that can affect an individual's ability to think critically, learn new information, and manage daily life activities. Intellectual functioning is generally assessed through standardized Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests, while adaptive behavior includes practical skills such as communication, self-care, social skills, and the ability to live independently. The presence of these limitations can impact a person's educational opportunities, employment prospects, and overall quality of life.

Over the years, the understanding and terminology surrounding intellectual disability have undergone significant evolution. Language that was once commonly accepted, such as "mental retardation," has been increasingly recognized as stigmatizing and misleading. Advocates, professionals, and individuals with ID have called for more respectful and accurate descriptions that emphasize the person first, rather than defining them solely by their disability. This shift in terminology reflects a broader movement towards inclusivity and dignity for individuals with disabilities, encouraging society to view them as individuals with unique strengths and contributions rather than as labels or deficits.

Additionally, contemporary understanding of ID incorporates a more nuanced perspective that recognizes the diverse capabilities of individuals within this population. Research has highlighted that people with ID can have varying levels of intellectual functioning and adaptive abilities, which can lead to different life experiences and outcomes. This acknowledgment is essential in shaping educational and support services, ensuring that interventions are tailored to meet individual needs and promote personal growth. Overall, the evolution of the definition and language surrounding intellectual disability underscores a critical shift towards empowerment and respect,

### 2.2 Teachers' Knowledge in Teaching Learners with Mild Intellectual Disabilities

Successful teaching depends on a broad range of teacher knowledge. This consists not only of knowing their subject area inside and out just as Butnan and Cline (2016) opined that teacher knowledge in teaching learners with intellectual disabilities encompasses understanding intellectual disabilities, adaptations and modifications, behavior management, collaboration and teamwork, communication strategies, and ongoing professional development. When teachers lack in these areas, the quality of education suffers greatly.

Many general education teachers, and even some special education teachers, may have a superficial understanding of intellectual disability. Teachers might hold outdated beliefs or stereotypes about ID, viewing it as a fixed, unchangeable condition rather than a spectrum of abilities that can be significantly improved with appropriate support. This can lead to lower expectations for learners with ID. (Qafa, Sina & Prendi 2024). In addition, Ajuwon, (2008) narrated that some teachers exhibit negative perceptions towards learners with special needs, including those with intellectual disabilities, partly due to a lack of information and training. This can lead to bias and reluctance to fully incorporate these learners in the classroom. Teachers sometimes misjudge intellectual disabilities, focusing on what learners cannot do instead of recognizing their strengths and capability. This can lead to minimal hopes, the wrong identification of learners' needs, and delays in providing the right support. Nevertheless, previous studies focused on teachers' knowledge of intellectual disabilities in general, while the current study focused on teachers' knowledge in the teaching of learners with mild intellectual disabilities in Zambian primary schools.

A study by Rudiyati *et al.* (2017) on teachers' knowledge and experience dealing with learners with learning disabilities in an inclusive elementary school in Yogyakarta Special Region, Indonesia, showed that the teachers still do not know how to distinguish children with learning disabilities from children with learning difficulties. Teachers described the characteristics of children with specific learning difficulties as being problematic. Thus, the teacher requires more power to provide solutions instead of giving lessons to learners who do not have learning disabilities. They expressed various objections, including the limitations of teachers in inclusive schools as an obstacle to giving lessons to learners with learning disabilities. The attitude that objects to it because they do not have the proper competence to learning for those who are considered to have learning disabilities, specifically learning difficulties in particular. Nevertheless, the study by Rudiyati *et al.* (2017) focused on teachers' knowledge and experience dealing with learners with learning disabilities, while the current study focused on teachers' experiences in the teaching of learners with IDs in Zambian primary schools.

In addition, Eloff & Kgwete (2007) indicated that studies in South Africa highlighted that many teachers in mainstream schools admit to having only general education diplomas and degrees, with their pre-service training not adequately exposing them to the reality of diverse learner needs, particularly for those with intellectual disabilities. This leads to a lack of confidence and preparedness in adapting their teaching methods. Further, Phasha *et al.* (2013) explained that even in classrooms designed to be inclusive, teachers are not sufficiently trained to teach learners with intellectual disabilities. They often lack the precise training and practical skills needed for things like modifying the curriculum, customizing instruction to diverse learning styles, or creating individualized learning plans. Because of this, they tend to cling to mainstream teaching methods that do not fit well for learners with diverse learning needs. On the other hand, the study by Eloff and Kgwete (2007) was conducted in South Africa, while the current

study focuses on teachers' experiences in teaching learners with intellectual disabilities in Zambian primary schools.

In support, Mutugi (2018) opined that in Kenya, research indicated that a significant challenge faced by teachers is the rigidity of the curriculum, coupled with their inability to modify lesson content, teaching methods, and assessment to suit the demands of children with severe intellectual disabilities, that teachers in early learning programs have disclosed lacking the specialization and necessary resources to meet the needs of children with intellectual disabilities. This points to a gap in their pedagogical knowledge specifically designed for this group. The obstacle is that many general education teachers lack specialized training in special education, making it challenging for them to meet the diverse learning needs of learners with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, limited opportunities for continuous professional development worsen this issue. As a result, teachers often struggle with both basic concepts and practical strategies for supporting these learners. In the same line, a study in Nigeria found that regular classroom teachers possess only "fair knowledge" of how to adapt the curriculum for learners with mild intellectual disabilities. The research concluded that teachers were challenged by a lack of a ready-made curriculum and insufficient training in curriculum adaptation. This resulted in learners with MID often facing difficulties in inclusive settings because the teaching methods used by general education teachers are not tailored to their specific needs (Akanle *et al.*, 2017). Meanwhile, Mutugi (2018) presented an opinion based on studies regarding teachers' knowledge in teaching learners with intellectual disabilities in Kenya, while the current study focuses on teacher experiences in teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities in Zambian schools.

Additionally, Florin *et al.* (2020) argued that general education teachers commonly find it challenging to implement inclusive teaching practices, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which cater to multiple learning needs. This restriction leads to a dependence on usual teaching methods that may not effectively support learners with intellectual disabilities, hindering their ability to learn and succeed and that even though Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are accepted as crucial for addressing the particular educational needs of learners with intellectual disabilities, teachers often lack the necessary competencies and training to develop and put these plans into practice effectively. Along with that, a study on teachers working in specialized educational settings in Sweden highlighted a critical issue: existing professional development frameworks often fail to meet their objectives because teachers tend to set low expectations for the academic advancement of learners with intellectual disabilities. The study emphasized the need for structured strategies that promote fairness and inclusion and found that a teacher's "professional certainty" in their knowledge and skills directly impacts learner engagement and comprehension (D'Agostino *et al.*, 2024). Regardless, the studies mentioned above were conducted outside Zambia, whereas the current study focuses on teachers' knowledge in teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities in Zambian primary schools.

Muzata (2017) conducted a study on curriculum implementation for LSENs in inclusive and special schools. This study established a gap in the teachers' knowledge to implement the curriculum. The study found that Special Education teachers were not involved in the Curriculum Development Process and lacked knowledge and skills in teaching learners with special educational needs at the school level, and this negatively affected curriculum implementation. Further, Muzata and Mahlo (2019) established that teachers' knowledge of curriculum accommodation and adaptation in the context of learners with special educational needs and the strategies they used to adapt the curriculum. The study revealed that although teachers used strategies such as giving extra time, giving different assessment tasks, reducing the amount of material and individualized teaching to adapt the curriculum, the majority of teachers who were teaching learners with special educational needs could not clearly distinguish between curriculum accommodation and curriculum adaptation. The study, however, focused on general disability rather than on teachers' knowledge in teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities in primary schools.

Mortari & Silva (2020) explained that in Italy teacher education system has undergone numerous modifications over the years, often resulting in a fragmented approach that has not consistently provided comprehensive preparation across all pedagogical and subject-specific didactical domains. Historically, in-service training has been less systematized compared to initial training, often relying on individual or associative initiatives rather than a coherent national strategy for continuous professional development. This can lead to uneven levels of knowledge and preparedness among the teaching force. Further, a study by Sartono & Smith (2021) in the Tororo District of Uganda found a strong link between teachers' perceptions and the inclusion of learners with disabilities. The research concluded that teachers' perceptions significantly influence how well learners with disabilities are included in mainstream classrooms. The study also noted that despite a government target for including learners with disabilities, the actual numbers are often much lower, partly due to a lack of knowledge and teacher training at the local level.

Learners with intellectual disabilities often display complicated behaviors like aggression, self-injury, uncooperativeness, and self-stimulation (Fodstad *et al.*, 2012; Luiselli, 2012; Horner *et al.*, 2003). A primary challenge for teachers is identifying that these actions often serve as a form of communication or a response to unmet needs, rather than calculated misconduct. Notable factors contributing to these challenging behaviors include restrictions in cognitive function and adaptive behaviors, such as poor communication skills (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2021; Hollo *et al.*, 2013; Chow, 2018). For example, incapacity to verbally express needs, desires, or emotions can result in irritation and behavioral issues (Marrus & Hall, 2017). Teachers also face the challenge of determining if behaviors are connected to physical causes, like pain or uneasiness, which individuals with intellectual disabilities may battle to communicate (Ali *et al.*, 2014).

Likewise, Ineland & Silfver (2018) justified that teaching learners with intellectual disabilities demands a highly individualized approach because each learner's abilities and needs differ vastly. To effectively control their behavior, teachers need to tailor their strategies. This means considering each learner's unique cognitive profile, attention span, memory capabilities, and processing speed. A universal method simply won't work; therefore, teachers must constantly adjust their teaching techniques and resources to meet these diverse needs. On top of that, Engelbrecht *et al.* (2003) recounted that inclusive classrooms often place significant demands on teachers, who face substantial time constraints and heavy workloads. Providing individualized support and implementing complex behavioral interventions for learners with intellectual disabilities requires considerable time and effort, which can be challenging for teachers to manage alongside their existing responsibilities. This high-pressure situation can ultimately result in increased stress and burnout among teachers. The studies, however, were based on the behavior of learner with intellectual disabilities in general whereas the current study centers on teachers' knowledge in teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities.

Teachers in inclusive classrooms often report feeling inadequately equipped to handle the behavioral needs of learners with intellectual disabilities, largely due to limited special education training (Collier-Meek *et al.*, 2018; Toran *et al.*, 2016). This skills gap can erode their trust and increase anxiety when supporting diverse learners (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). To bridge this gap, teachers require comprehensive, evidence-based professional development in behavior management strategies. The above studies, however, targeted teachers' knowledge in the behavior management of learners with intellectual disabilities, while the current study focused on teachers' knowledge in the teaching of learners with mild IDs in Zambian primary schools.

Teachers may have limited in-depth knowledge of what true inclusion entails beyond simply placing learners with ID in a general education classroom. This includes understanding the philosophical underpinnings and practical implications of inclusive education. (Omojemite2025) Lack of familiarity with national and international policies, regulations, and legislative frameworks related to inclusive education and the rights of learners with disabilities can hinder compliance and effective implementation. In addition, UNESCO (2005) explained that the concept of inclusion is diverse and can be interpreted in varying ways by teachers, administrators, and parents. Some teachers may view inclusion as merely placing teachers with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, which is more similar to integration. However, genuine inclusion requires a profound shift in teaching practices, curricula, and school culture to cater to diverse learning needs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Without this deeper understanding, inclusion can become symbolic, with learners present but not meaningfully engaged or supported.

Apart from that, effective inclusive education relies heavily on smooth collaboration between general education teachers, special education teachers, therapists, parents, and other support staff (Burstein *et al.*, 2004; Chambers & Forlin, 2010). However, teachers often struggle with clearly defining their roles, communicating effectively, and planning together to meet learners' needs. Parental involvement is crucial for learners

with ID, but teachers may lack the knowledge and skills to effectively communicate with, involve, and support families. Teachers may be unaware of community resources or support networks that could benefit learners with ID and their families. When this teamwork is fragmented, it can ultimately undermine the core principles of inclusive education. Nonetheless, the aforementioned studies concentrated on teachers' knowledge of inclusive policies and practices, whereas the current study centers on teachers' knowledge in teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities.

Teachers who feel inadequately prepared or under-skilled in special education strategies often experience a decline in confidence in their teaching abilities (Woodcock & Faith, 2021). Specifically, they may question their capacity to address the complex needs of learners with intellectual disabilities. Insufficient specialized training and practical experience can exacerbate these doubts, ultimately affecting their teaching effectiveness (Hernandez *et al.*, 2016; Montgomery & Mirenda, 2014). Research suggests that perceived gaps in expertise can significantly impact teachers' confidence and attitudes toward teaching learners with intellectual disabilities (Weber & Greiner, 2019). When teachers feel unprepared, they may develop low self-efficacy, doubting their ability to meet the diverse needs of these learners. This can lead to frustration, stress, and hesitation to engage with these learners.

Despite supporting inclusive education in principle, teachers often feel uncertain about the practical realities, which can result in limited support or overlooked needs for learners with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, a study in Nigeria found that teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education vary, with a significant number holding negative views toward learners with intellectual disabilities. The study highlighted the need for more teacher training on disabilities and inclusive practices. It also found that while teachers were willing to support learners, their lack of knowledge about specific disabilities hindered effective instruction (Uchechukwu & Ekaette, 2018). Another study conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe, found that teachers lacked the necessary training to handle learners with learning disabilities effectively. The study revealed that the use of ability grouping disadvantaged learners with learning disabilities, and that large class sizes and a lack of supportive devices further compounded the challenges. The study stressed the urgent need for capacity-building programs to equip teachers with the skills required to successfully implement inclusive education (Mafa, 2017). Moreover, inadequate preparation for managing complex learner needs directly contributes to increased stress and frustration among teachers, hindering effective teaching and the creation of an inclusive learning environment. This, in turn, makes it challenging for teachers to cater to diverse needs, potentially compromising learner outcomes (Carroll, 2019). Research also indicates that high stress levels among teachers are linked to more negative views on inclusion, ultimately affecting educational quality (PLOS ONE, 2018). Conversely, providing teachers with the necessary training and resources enables them to better navigate the demands of inclusive education, leading to a more productive and beneficial experience for all learners. However, the studies centered on teachers' low efficacy in teaching learners with intellectual disabilities, whereas the current study

focuses on teachers' experiences in teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities in Zambian primary schools.

## **2.3 Indicators of Teacher Knowledge on Mild Intellectual Disabilities**

### **2.3.1 Knowledge of Definitions and Characteristics**

Teachers need to possess a comprehensive understanding of the definitions and characteristics of mild intellectual disabilities (ID). These disabilities are primarily characterized by cognitive limitations that typically manifest as an IQ score ranging from 50 to 70. Beyond cognitive aspects, learners with mild ID often encounter significant challenges in adaptive behavior, which includes essential life skills necessary for daily functioning, such as communication, self-care, social interactions, and problem-solving abilities. A thorough knowledge of these characteristics allows teachers to effectively identify learners who require additional support and to modify their instructional strategies to cater to these learners' unique needs (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). This understanding is crucial not just for facilitating academic success but also for fostering social-emotional learning, enabling teachers to create inclusive environments that acknowledge and respect each learner's strengths and challenges.

### **2.3.2 Understanding Educational Strategies**

Teachers must be adept in various pedagogical approaches to effectively meet the needs of learners with mild intellectual disabilities (ID). One particularly successful strategy is differentiated instruction, which entails modifying content delivery, teaching methods, and assessment techniques to accommodate the diverse learning styles and individual requirements of each learner. Such an adaptive approach creates a nurturing environment that enhances learner engagement and supports the growth of social skills (Villa & Thousand, 2022). For example, teachers can implement a range of instructional techniques, such as visual aids, hands-on activities, and collaborative group work, to address the varied needs of their learners. By acknowledging the different ways in which learners process and interpret information, teachers can foster an inclusive classroom atmosphere that not only promotes academic achievement but also facilitates social interaction, helping learners with mild ID develop essential interpersonal skills.

### **2.3.3 Implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)**

Teachers need to be well-versed in the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in order to tailor the educational experience for each learner with mild ID. This collaborative process involves not only teachers but also parents, special education professionals, and other relevant stakeholders working together to set specific, measurable objectives that cater to the learner's distinct capabilities and needs. Regularly monitoring learner progress is a critical component of this process, as it enables teachers to make informed, data-driven decisions that enhance accountability and adaptability in their teaching methods. This continuous assessment ensures that learners receive appropriate support while empowering them to actively

participate in their learning by establishing attainable goals and celebrating their achievements (Gajar, 2020). Such empowerment is vital for boosting learners' self-esteem and motivation, resulting in improved educational outcomes.

#### **2.3.4 Assessments and Modifications**

A solid grasp of effective assessment methods is essential for measuring the progress of learners, particularly those with mild ID. Teachers should employ a combination of standardized tests and alternative assessment strategies, including observational evaluations, portfolios, and performance-based assessments, to gain a comprehensive understanding of each learner's strengths and challenges. This multifaceted approach provides critical feedback that informs instructional adjustments and curricular planning. By utilizing diverse assessment tools, teachers can ensure a more accurate representation of learners' capabilities, enabling them to tailor their teaching methods to better support each learner's unique educational journey (Lerner & Johns, 2020). Furthermore, ongoing assessments create an atmosphere of continuous improvement, allowing both teachers and learners to collaboratively strive for greater academic and personal growth.

#### **2.3.5 Collaboration and Communication Skills**

Effective collaboration and communication with special education staff, parents, and support personnel are essential for fostering a supportive educational environment. Building strong partnerships encourages open dialogue and mutual respect while cultivating a shared commitment to every learner's success. Good communication strengthens the link between home and school, ensuring that all parties involved in a child's education are aligned in their goals and strategies. This may involve regular meetings, progress reports, and opportunities for family involvement in educational processes (Friend & Cook, 2020). By promoting a culture of collaboration, teachers not only enhance the learning experiences of learners with mild ID but also alleviate any concerns while reinforcing family engagement, which is crucial for learner success.

#### **2.3.6 Social and Emotional Understanding**

It is important for teachers to recognize and address the social and emotional challenges that learners with mild ID may face in order to create a supportive and nurturing educational environment. Implementing strategies that foster positive peer relationships and encourage the development of social skills can significantly improve learners' overall well-being, equipping them with vital life skills that extend beyond the classroom (Guralnick, 2016). Teachers can facilitate social interactions through structured group activities, role-playing exercises, and targeted social skills training that emphasize communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. By prioritizing social and emotional comprehension, teachers can craft a more inclusive educational experience that not only promotes academic success but also enriches learners' personal growth and relationship-building capabilities.

### **2.3.7 Cultural Responsiveness**

Understanding culturally responsive teaching practices is essential to effectively address the diverse backgrounds of learners, especially those with mild ID. By recognizing the significance of cultural diversity in the learning process, teachers can cultivate inclusive environments that honor and validate each learner's cultural context, which is vital for improving educational outcomes. This approach facilitates the integration of culturally relevant resources and teaching methods that resonate with learners' lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Culturally responsive teachers are better positioned to engage learners meaningfully, build trust, and create a sense of belonging within the classroom. These practices can help remove barriers to learning, allowing all learners, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, to prosper academically and socially.

### **2.3.8 Inclusion Practice**

Being familiar with inclusive education practices is crucial for developing learning environments where learners with mild intellectual disabilities can thrive alongside their peers. This includes employing collaborative learning methods, such as co-teaching, peer tutoring, and group projects, which promote interaction and cooperation among learners of diverse abilities. Additionally, ensuring that necessary supports, such as assistive technologies and modified resources, are readily available facilitates meaningful participation for all learners (Horn & Stanger, 2021). Inclusive practices not only provide essential support for learners with mild ID to succeed but also enrich the entire classroom community. By fostering a culture of acceptance and teamwork, teachers can enhance social connections and mutual respect among learners, ultimately contributing to a positive and dynamic learning environment.

### **2.3.9 Reflective Practice**

Participating in continuous professional development through reflective practices is vital for teachers aiming to improve their effectiveness in supporting learners with mild ID. This involves regularly evaluating their teaching strategies, seeking feedback from colleagues, and engaging in collaborative learning opportunities, such as workshops or professional learning communities. By reflecting on their experiences and methodologies, teachers can identify areas for improvement and remain updated on best practices, thereby becoming more effective advocates for their learners (Schön, 1987). This dedication to reflection not only encourages personal and professional growth but also enhances the educational experiences of learners, as teachers become increasingly adept at adapting their instructional methods to address the evolving needs of the classroom. Ultimately, reflective practices foster a commitment to lifelong learning, equipping teachers to better serve all learners, especially those with mild intellectual disabilities.

## **2.4 Indicators of Inadequate Knowledge of Mild Intellectual Disabilities among Teachers**

### **2.4.1 Limited Understanding of Definitions and Terminology**

A significant number of teachers demonstrate a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the definitions and characteristics of mild intellectual disabilities (ID), which negatively impacts their ability to provide effective support to affected learners. This ambiguity can create misconceptions about the nature of mild ID, leading to the implementation of inappropriate educational strategies. For example, teachers might mistakenly believe that learners with mild ID are incapable of achieving academic goals that are, in reality, attainable for them (Smith & Straker, 2020). Such misunderstandings can hinder the academic performance of these learners, impair their social integration, and diminish their self-esteem. When teachers lack a clear understanding of essential concepts, they risk unintentionally perpetuating stigmas or adopting negative attitudes, further isolating these learners within the educational setting.

### **2.4.2 Insufficient Knowledge of Classroom Strategies**

Many teachers lack an effective toolkit of instructional strategies specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of learners with mild ID. Research indicates that this deficiency often leads teachers to default to generic teaching approaches, which can disengage learners and leave their specific learning needs unmet (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2018). For instance, techniques like differentiated instruction are frequently underused due to inadequate training, resulting in a failure to adapt lessons to accommodate varying learning styles and abilities. This gap underscores the pressing need for professional development focused on personalized instructional strategies that can significantly improve the educational experiences of learners with mild ID. Targeted training can empower teachers to identify and employ methods that align with individual strengths and challenges, fostering greater engagement and enhancing overall learning outcomes.

### **2.4.3 Inadequate Implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)**

A considerable number of teachers possess limited knowledge about the development and execution of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), which are critical for customizing educational experiences to address the individual needs of learners with mild ID. Insufficient understanding of IEP processes can result in inconsistent application of essential educational strategies and necessary accommodations (Zabala, 2018). Unfortunately, this inconsistency can compromise the support provided to learners, as key accommodations may be missed or inadequately implemented. Therefore, comprehensive professional training in the effective development, implementation, and monitoring of IEPs is essential for teachers to advocate for and support their learners successfully, ensuring that the unique needs of each learner are systematically addressed.

#### **2.4.4 Weakness in Assessment and Evaluation Method**

Many teachers face challenges when it comes to effectively using and interpreting the diverse assessment tools necessary for monitoring the progress of learners with mild ID. A lack of adequate training in various assessment methods can lead to a reliance on standardized tests, which often do not provide a complete picture of a learner's abilities and growth (Berkeley, 2020). This narrow reliance can foster misconceptions about a learner's potential and motivate teachers to forego personalized instructional strategies. To address these concerns, ongoing professional development focused on a range of assessment strategies is crucial. Such training will equip teachers with the skills to utilize various assessment methods—including formative, summative, and authentic assessments allowing them to gain a more comprehensive understanding of each learner's strengths and challenges.

#### **2.4.5 Inability to Foster Social and Emotional Skill**

Teachers frequently lack a thorough understanding of the social and emotional challenges that learners with mild ID encounter, which can adversely impact their social inclusion and overall well-being. Insufficient awareness may lead teachers to inadvertently create classroom conditions that do not support positive peer interactions or emotional development (Dykens, 2020). For instance, without implementing focused strategies to enhance social skills and emotional intelligence, learners with mild ID may find it difficult to establish relationships and actively engage with their peers. Therefore, training in social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies is vital for teachers aiming to cultivate inclusive classroom environments that benefit all learners. By integrating SEL practices, teachers can foster safe and supportive atmospheres that encourage social connections, emotional growth, and heightened learner engagement.

#### **2.4.6 Ignorance of Cultural Factors**

Cultural factors significantly influence the learning experiences of learners with mild ID; however, many teachers remain unaware of how to effectively incorporate cultural competence into their teaching methodologies. Neglecting cultural diversity can lead to misunderstandings regarding learners' behaviors, learning preferences, and engagement levels, which may further exacerbate the challenges these learners face (Gay, 2018). For instance, a teacher who lacks awareness of cultural norms may misinterpret learners' responses or participation styles. Elevating teachers' cultural awareness through dedicated training is crucial to fostering inclusive educational environments. By enabling teachers to recognize and respond appropriately to cultural differences, schools can promote a more equitable system that honors and supports the identities of all learners, ultimately enhancing both academic and social outcomes.

#### **2.4.7 Insufficient Professional Development**

A significant barrier to effective teaching lies in the lack of continuous professional development related to mild intellectual disabilities. Numerous teachers express feelings

of inadequacy and report lacking the training and resources necessary to effectively teach learners with mild ID (Pinder, 2019). This lack of professional support not only undermines teachers' confidence but also restricts their ability to implement effective practices in their classrooms. Comprehensive professional growth opportunities from workshops and training sessions to collaborative learning communities are essential for equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to meet the diverse needs of their learners. Investing in professional development centered on mild ID is crucial for ensuring teachers are well-prepared to create supportive learning environments that promote success for all learners.

### 3. Methodology

This study was grounded in an interpretivist research paradigm, utilizing a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and pedagogical knowledge of teachers working with learners with mild intellectual disabilities (IDs). The research was conducted across three primary schools in the Luanshya District, specifically chosen for their inclusive education settings. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 15 participants, consisting of 12 class teachers and 3 senior teachers, ensuring the collection of rich, expert data regarding the challenges and successes of specialized instruction. To ensure data trustworthiness through triangulation, the researcher utilized in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observation checklists. Following ethical clearance from the University of Zambia and local authorities, data were collected and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis based on the six-step framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). This inductive process involved transcribing and coding field notes and recordings to identify significant themes and sub-themes. Throughout the process, strict ethical protocols were maintained, including securing informed consent, ensuring the right to voluntary withdrawal, and guaranteeing participant confidentiality and harm mitigation to protect the integrity of the study and its contributors.

### 4. Findings

The study revealed three key themes regarding the nature of knowledge teachers possessed about learners with mild intellectual disabilities: adequate knowledge, inadequate knowledge, and insufficient training in Special and Inclusive education

#### 4.1 Indicators of Adequate Knowledge

A positive finding reported that teachers teaching learners with intellectual disabilities had adequate knowledge of identifying the characteristics of learners with intellectual disabilities.

Affirming the findings, one senior teacher participant < SCH 1 > recited that:

*"I have about four learners in my class. One of them is frequently distracted and drowsy during lessons. The other three tend to lose focus easily, causing them to struggle with finishing assignments on time. Even when they complete their work, it often lacks quality. They require close supervision at all times."*

Along the same lines, one teacher participant <SCH1 FG1> stated that:

*"I have two learners with intellectual disabilities. They write at a slow pace and usually don't complete their work on time. Reading is a significant struggle for them. It can be hard and frustrating to teach them, and I have to be constantly available to support them. Their handwriting is also poor, sometimes even unreadable. Outside of class, they are not very social and don't seem to enjoy playing with others."*

Correspondingly, another teacher participant <SCH 2 FG3> recounted that:

*"My observation is that these learners are slow, especially in subjects like mathematics and reading. Their handwriting is poor, and they are rarely active in class. Outside of class, I see them playing with friends, but they seem to have challenges with their speech."*

Arising from findings of the study, teachers working with learners who have intellectual disabilities possessed a solid understanding of the characteristics associated with these learners. This knowledge is vital for effectively meeting the needs of students in the classroom and plays a key role in creating an inclusive learning environment. Teachers' awareness of traits such as distractibility, varying learning paces, and challenges in completing assignments is crucial for adapting their instructional strategies to foster learner engagement and success

#### **4.2 Indicators of Inadequate Knowledge**

The findings revealed that, despite possessing some knowledge, teachers lacked understanding in key areas necessary for teaching learners with intellectual disabilities.

In agreement with the findings, one teacher participant <SCH3 FG4> echoed that:

*"I struggle to understand how learners with intellectual disabilities think and learn. Because of this, my teaching methods aren't effective. I often teach too fast or too slow for them, which makes them frustrated and tune out."*

In the same vein, another teacher participant from <SCH 3 FG 2> lamented that:

*"I find it difficult to adjust my teaching for each learner. My learners are either struggling with too much work or not being challenged enough. I need training on how to break down tasks to suit everyone in my class."*

Likewise, one more teacher participant from <SCH1 FG4> had this to say:

*"I'm not sure how to teach learners with intellectual disabilities because I haven't been trained to do so. I honestly worry they would learn more in a special school than in my class."*

Furthermore, classroom observations uncovered significant gaps in teachers' understanding of how to effectively teach learners with intellectual disabilities. The findings revealed that teachers face challenges in creating an inclusive and supportive environment that caters to the diverse needs of all learners. This lack of comprehension not only affected the educational experiences of learners with intellectual disabilities but also had a negative impact on the overall interactions of the classroom. One key issue identified was the inflexibility of teaching methods and lesson plans. Many lesson plans failed to address the varying learning needs and styles of individual learners. Teachers did not adjust their teaching strategies or modify materials for each learner, which is essential for effective inclusive education. Consequently, learners with intellectual disabilities went without the personalized support they required to thrive academically. This approach ignored the need for differentiated instruction, which limited learner engagement and success.

The findings revealed that teachers had some basic knowledge about learners with intellectual disabilities but lacked a deeper understanding necessary for effective instruction. Many teachers struggled to grasp how these learners think, leading to ineffective teaching that caused frustration and disengagement. They found it challenging to adapt lessons and materials to individual needs, resulting in learners feeling either overwhelmed or unchallenged. Classroom observations highlighted significant gaps in teachers' capacity to create an inclusive environment, negatively affecting the educational experiences of these learners. A key issue was the rigidity of teaching methods and lesson plans, which did not accommodate diverse learning styles. This inflexibility meant that learners did not receive the personalized support they needed to succeed academically.

### **4.3 Insufficient Training in Special and Inclusive Education**

The study indicated that a significant number of primary school teachers teaching learners with intellectual disabilities had not received adequate training in effective teaching strategies.

Confirming the findings, one teacher participant from <SCH1 FG3> affirmed that:

*"Although my initial training provided a foundation in special education, it lacked depth regarding specific teaching strategies for learners with intellectual disabilities. I am seeking further guidance on how to refine my teaching to effectively meet their unique needs."*

Equally, another teacher participant from <SCH 2 FG3> shared that:

*"My college training in special education was all theory and no practical experience. Because of this, I feel unprepared to teach learners with intellectual disabilities in real classrooms. Although I learned important concepts in special education, not having hands-on training makes it difficult for me to teach these learners."*

In agreement, one more teacher participant from <SCH 3 FG 1> had this to say:

*"I did not have the adequate training needed to teach learners with intellectual disabilities. I have challenges in coming up with the best support for my learner with intellectual disabilities."*

In agreement with the findings, a senior teacher participant <SCH 3> stated that

*"Teachers often feel they don't have the right skills or training to teach learners with intellectual disabilities. They frequently express concerns about how to teach learners with intellectual disabilities in the same classes as other learners."*

During class observations, it was noted that many teachers struggled to engage learners, leading to missed opportunities for meaningful interaction and learning. Additionally, some teachers felt overwhelmed by the diverse needs present in their classrooms. This situation not only impacted the educational experiences of learners with intellectual disabilities but also detracted from the overall classroom atmosphere, affecting the motivation and engagement of all learners.

The findings indicated that many primary school teachers lack adequate training in special and inclusive education. This means that numerous teachers have not been properly prepared or taught to effectively meet the diverse needs of all learners. As a result, they often feel unready to provide the necessary support for diverse learners, particularly those with intellectual disabilities. The main goal of inclusive education is to ensure that every learner, regardless of their abilities or challenges, can fully participate in regular classrooms and achieve educational success. However, without sufficient training on implementing inclusive teaching strategies and support systems, achieving this goal becomes very challenging.

## **5. Discussion of Findings**

The study revealed that while teachers have a solid understanding of some concepts related to learners with intellectual disabilities, significant gaps exist in other important areas. Many teachers showed good knowledge of the behavioral and developmental traits associated with these learners, such as difficulties with communication, social skills, and daily living tasks. For example, they could often recognize when a learner needed extra help, such as when a child struggled to follow instructions or participate in group work. This ability to identify learners' needs is a crucial step toward effective teaching.

However, this is in contrast to the findings of Rudiwati *et al.* (2017), which showed that many teachers still have trouble distinguishing between children with learning disabilities and those with other types of learning challenges. In many cases, teachers may oversimplify complex learning profiles, viewing variations in needs as general problems rather than unique challenges that require tailored approaches.

Despite this foundational knowledge, many teachers expressed serious concerns about their ability to teach effectively in inclusive classrooms. This concern highlights a disconnect between understanding theoretical aspects of inclusive education and applying that knowledge in real-life situations. The uncertainty about lesson preparation and assessment noted by Muzata (2017) suggests that teachers might struggle to deliver lessons that are effectively tailored to the individual needs of their learners. Such issues can undermine curriculum implementation, leading to poor educational experiences for learners who need specialized support. This shortcoming not only reflects badly on the educational system but also contradicts the principles of equality promoted in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). When teachers lack the necessary skills to adapt and deliver curriculum effectively, it has serious consequences for both learner academic achievement and broader access to educational opportunities. As a result, this lack of preparedness can limit learners' future success and perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage.

While Eloff and Kgwete (2007) focused on teachers' qualifications, the current study reveals a deeper issue: many teachers lack the confidence to work effectively with learners who have mild intellectual disabilities. Teachers often express feelings of unpreparedness and anxiety when addressing the diverse needs of their learners. This situation reflects ongoing challenges faced by educators today and highlights the urgent need for strong, ongoing professional development. Continuous professional growth is essential for teachers, especially those working with learners with mild intellectual disabilities, as it equips them with the skills and knowledge necessary to meet their learners' diverse needs. Professional development programs should not only address the theoretical aspects of disabilities but also provide practical strategies and tools for classroom implementation.

Furthermore, the findings revealed a significant concern regarding insufficient training in special and inclusive education. Many teachers have not received the specialized training needed to effectively educate learners with diverse learning needs. As a result, they often rely on traditional teaching methods that may not be effective for all learners. The observations made by Florin *et al.* (2020) further highlighted this issue, noting that general education teachers frequently struggle to implement inclusive teaching practices that meet the needs of all their learners. This reliance on conventional methods not only hinders the educational experience of learners with intellectual disabilities but also contradicts the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL emphasizes the need for flexible teaching practices that make learning accessible, engaging, and effective for every learner, regardless of their unique backgrounds, abilities, or needs.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The indicators of insufficient knowledge about mild intellectual disabilities among teachers revealed significant gaps in both comprehension and supportive strategies. Addressing these shortcomings through targeted professional development and enhanced training, is essential for creating an educational environment that is more adept at meeting the diverse needs of all learners. Heightened awareness of definitions, instructional strategies, IEP implementation, assessment methods, social-emotional learning, cultural competence, and the importance of ongoing professional development will lead to improved educational practices and outcomes for learners with mild ID. By focusing on these areas for development, schools can foster inclusive and effective learning environments that empower every learner to thrive.

The need for curriculum re-engineering is paramount in fostering an inclusive educational environment for learners with mild intellectual disabilities. The Ministry of Education should take proactive steps to integrate practical modules on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into the initial teacher training curriculum. UDL is a teaching framework that emphasizes flexible approaches to learning, allowing teachers to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners. A well-designed curriculum that emphasizes UDL will not only enhance the knowledge of new teachers but also lay the groundwork for a more inclusive educational landscape in Zambia

In addition to curriculum re-engineering, it is crucial for schools to implement mandatory

Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Ongoing professional development is essential to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the unique needs of learners with mild intellectual disabilities effectively. By making CPD a requirement, schools can ensure that teachers stay current with the latest teaching strategies, legislative changes, and best practices related to inclusive education. Workshops and training sessions that focus on inclusive education practices will enhance teachers' abilities to tailor instruction and assessment to individual learners. Moreover, such professional development should encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing among teachers, allowing them to learn from each other's experiences and challenges.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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