
EXPLORING TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN TRIALLING THE 16+ LSEND SYLLABUS IN SELECTED SPECIAL SCHOOLS IN ZAMBIA

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ABSTRACT

The study explored teachers' experiences in trialling the 16+ LSEND syllabus in selected special schools in Zambia, focusing on their understanding of the syllabus, instructional strategies, challenges encountered, support systems, and strategies for enhancing implementation. A qualitative phenomenological research design was adopted to capture the lived experiences of teachers within their natural teaching contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected teachers and document analysis of lesson plans and curriculum guidelines. Thematic analysis revealed that teachers generally understood the syllabus as a competence-based curriculum emphasizing functional skills, independence, and vocational preparation. Teachers employed hands-on, differentiated, and collaborative instructional strategies, but their implementation was constrained by resource limitations, large class sizes, learner diversity, and limited professional development. Support from school administration, colleagues, parents, and external organizations was reported, though often inconsistent. The study recommends enhanced policy support, continuous professional development, provision of adequate resources, reduced class sizes, structured supervision, and strengthened community engagement to improve the effectiveness of the 16+ LSEND syllabus. The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of curriculum implementation through the lenses of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Fullan's Theory of Educational Change, highlighting the interplay between teacher competence, systemic support, and learner outcomes in inclusive education settings.

KEYWORDS: 16+ LSEND syllabus, competence-based curriculum, special education, teacher experiences

INTRODUCTION

The 16+ LSEND (Learners with Special Educational Needs and /or Disabilities) syllabus is a specialized curriculum introduced by the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) under Zambia's Ministry of Education to cater for learners with special educational needs who are aged 16 years and above. The syllabus was designed to provide a continuation pathway for learners who complete basic education within special schools but may not be able to proceed to mainstream academic routes due to their diverse learning needs and disabilities. It aims to equip learners with practical competences that enhance independence, employability, and social integration. The curriculum integrates key areas such as communication skills, numeracy, personal and social development, entrepreneurship, basic vocational skills, home management, and community participation. The syllabus aligns with Zambia's Competence-Based Curriculum Framework (2023) and supports the national vision for inclusive and equitable quality education, as articulated in SDG 4 and the Education for All (EFA) goals. It reflects a paradigm shift from traditional knowledge-based instruction toward competence-oriented learning, where learners demonstrate what they can do with the knowledge and skills acquired. In practice, the 16+ LSEND syllabus is implemented mainly in special schools and resource centres, and ultimate goal is to ensure that learners with disabilities acquire skills for independent living, self-reliance, and meaningful participation in their communities.

The introduction of the 16+ LSEND syllabus in Zambia represents a major policy shift aimed at equipping learners with functional, vocational, and life skills necessary for independent living and employability. The syllabus aligns with the 2023 Competence-Based Curriculum Framework, which emphasizes skill acquisition and learner-centered approaches. However, despite the government's efforts to promote inclusive and skills-based education, there are growing concerns regarding how effectively the 16+ LSEND syllabus is being implemented in special schools. The effectiveness of this curriculum largely depends on how teachers understand, interpret, and implement it in diverse classroom contexts. Examining teachers' lived experiences provides critical insight into the successes, challenges, and professional support mechanisms necessary to ensure meaningful curriculum delivery and learner achievement. In the study by Gorman et al (2023), reported that preliminary observations and anecdotal reports suggest that many teachers face difficulties in interpreting and applying the

syllabus due to limited training, inadequate teaching and learning resources, and unclear assessment guidelines. Furthermore, the extent to which teachers understand the aims, content, and pedagogical demands of the syllabus remains underexplored. Therefore, inconsistencies in curriculum delivery may undermine the attainment of intended learning outcomes, particularly for learners with diverse educational needs.

Given that teachers play a pivotal role in translating curriculum policy into classroom practice, it is critical to understand their experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms in trialling the 16+ LSEND syllabus. Thus far, there is limited empirical evidence in Zambia examining how teachers in special schools engage with this newly introduced curriculum. This study will provide valuable insights into the realities of trialling the 16+ LSEND syllabus from the perspective of teachers the main curriculum implementers. The findings will help policymakers and curriculum developers at the Ministry of Education and DCD in particular to refine and strengthen the syllabus, ensuring it aligns with the competence-based curriculum framework. Furthermore, the study will inform teacher education programs on the necessary competencies required for effective LSEND instruction, thereby contributing to the broader goal of inclusive and equitable quality education in Zambia as envisioned in SDG 4. This study therefore seeks to explore teachers' experiences in trialling the 16+ LSEND syllabus in selected special schools in Zambia, with a view to identifying challenges and proposing strategies for enhancing its effective implementation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Fullan's Theory of Educational Change (2007) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978). These two complementary frameworks provide a lens for understanding how teachers experience, interpret, and implement the 16+ LSEND syllabus within the broader context of Zambia's inclusive and competence-based education reform.

Fullan's theory emphasizes that meaningful educational reform depends on the capacity and motivation of teachers, the clarity of the innovation, and the presence of supportive conditions. According to Fullan, change is a complex process influenced by personal, institutional, and systemic factors. Teachers' understanding of the innovation, access to professional development, availability of resources, and leadership support determine how effectively new curricula are implemented. In the context of this study, Fullan's theory helps explain how teachers engage with the 16+ LSEND syllabus how they make sense of its goals, adapt their teaching practices, and respond to challenges within their school environments.

The theory also highlights the role of systemic support, including supervision, material provision, and collaboration, in sustaining curriculum implementation. Thus, it provides a conceptual basis for examining both the facilitators and barriers that shape teachers' experiences with the 16+ LSEND syllabus.

While, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory posits that learning and development are socially mediated processes that occur through interaction, collaboration, and the use of cultural tools. Within the educational context, this theory emphasizes the importance of scaffolding, peer collaboration, and adapting instruction to meet learners' developmental and contextual needs. Applied to this study, the theory underscores the teacher's role as a mediator who facilitates learning by tailoring instructional strategies to the abilities and challenges of learners with special educational needs. It further supports the idea that effective implementation of the 16+ LSEND syllabus depends on how teachers create supportive and inclusive learning environments that promote active participation, skill development, and independence among learners.

Together, Fullan's and Vygotsky's theories provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences with the 16+ LSEND syllabus. Fullan's theory focuses on the systemic and institutional aspects of change, while Vygotsky's theory highlights the instructional and learner-centered aspects of curriculum delivery. Their integration enables the study to explore not only how teachers implement the syllabus but also how contextual, institutional, and pedagogical factors influence their experiences and effectiveness.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore teachers' lived experiences in trialling the 16+ LSEND syllabus in selected special schools in Zambia. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it focuses on understanding participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of a phenomenon as it occurs in its natural context. This design enabled the researcher to gain in-depth insights into how teachers comprehend the syllabus, apply instructional strategies, face challenges, and utilize available support systems during curriculum implementation.

Study Population and Sampling

The population comprised teachers working in selected special schools trialling the 16+ LSEND syllabus in Zambia. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience in trialling the syllabus, ensuring that the data collected was rich and relevant. A total of 15 teachers were selected across three special schools, representing a range of teaching experience and subject areas.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method. This allowed participants to freely express their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe deeper on specific issues. Interview questions focused on teachers' understanding of the syllabus, instructional strategies, challenges faced, support received, and suggestions for improving implementation. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition, document analysis of lesson plans, teaching materials, and the 16+ LSEND syllabus was conducted to corroborate interview data and gain insight into how the curriculum was being operationalized in practice.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility was ensured through member checking, where participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of their responses. Triangulation of interviews and document analysis enhanced the validity of findings, while detailed descriptions of the research context and participants supported the transferability of results.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were read repeatedly to identify emerging patterns, codes, and themes related to teachers' experiences, instructional strategies, challenges, and support mechanisms. Themes were then organized to provide a coherent understanding of how the 16+ LSEND syllabus was implemented in selected special schools.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant authorities. Participants provided informed consent, and their confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

Findings

The study explored teachers' experiences in trialling the 16+ LSEND syllabus in selected special schools in Zambia. Their experiences are presented in detail by using themes generated during data analysis.

Theme 1: Teachers' Understanding of the Goals and Structure of the 16+ LSEND Syllabus

Teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of the 16+ LSEND syllabus as a competence-based curriculum designed to equip learners with functional, vocational, and life skills. They emphasized that the syllabus goes beyond academic learning to focus on independence, employability, and community participation. For instance, one teacher stated: *"I understand the 16+ LSEND syllabus as a curriculum that helps learners gain practical skills for everyday life. It is not only about academics, but about making them independent and able to survive in the community."*

Teachers also highlighted the structured nature of the syllabus, which organizes learning into specific areas with clear objectives, guiding lesson planning and competence development: *"For me, the syllabus is structured around functional skills like communication, numeracy, and vocational abilities. It guides us on what learners need to know and do at this stage of their education."*

Another participant has this to say: *"The syllabus is organized into learning areas, and each area has clear competences. This structure helps me plan my lessons according to what each learner can achieve."*

Several teachers described the syllabus as a progression beyond basic education: *"I understand it as a step beyond basic education. It focuses on life skills, personal development, and community participation rather than just writing exams."*

Contributing on the same another participant indicated: *"I see the goals of the syllabus as preparing learners for employment and self-reliance. It is clear in showing the competences each learner should develop before leaving school."*

These findings indicate that teachers are generally aligned with the intended purpose of the 16+ LSEND syllabus, recognizing its role in fostering both functional competences and learner independence.

Theme 2: Instructional Strategies Used by Teachers

Teachers employed a range of learner-centered instructional strategies to implement the 16+ LSEND syllabus effectively. Hands-on, practical approaches were frequently highlighted as critical to engaging learners and facilitating competence acquisition. The following were the views: *"I always use hands-on activities because learners understand better when they practice rather than just listen."*

Another participant pointed out that: *“I incorporate role-playing and simulations to teach life skills like handling money, cooking, and cleaning.”*

Teachers emphasized differentiated instruction, adapting lessons to meet the individual needs of learners: In support one had to say the following: *“I adapt my lessons to individual learner needs. For example, I use visual aids for those who struggle with reading and practical demonstrations for those who learn by doing.”*

Collaborative learning was also reported as an effective strategy, promoting social interaction and peer learning, has indicated: *“Group work is very important. It helps learners learn from each other and develop social skills.”*

Teachers further highlighted the importance of continuous assessment during lessons to monitor understanding and competence development: *“I constantly check learners’ understanding through questions and practical tasks to ensure they are learning the intended competences.”*

These strategies demonstrate that teachers are actively engaging learners through interactive, contextually relevant methods that align with the practical and life skills focus of the syllabus.

Theme 3: Challenges Faced by Teachers

Despite their understanding and effective instructional approaches, teachers reported several challenges that hinder smooth implementation of the syllabus. The most prominent challenges include resource limitations, learner diversity, large class sizes, limited professional development, and difficulties in assessment. These findings were evidenced in the following verbal account given by one participant from during interviews who said that: *“One major challenge is the lack of sufficient teaching and learning materials. It is difficult to teach practical skills without the proper equipment.”*

In conformity with the above findings, one participant during interviews said that: *“Some learners have multiple disabilities, and it takes a lot of time and effort to attend to all their needs. and large class sizes make it hard to give individual attention, which is crucial in this syllabus.”*

Another participant during interviews stated that: *“There is limited professional development on the 16+ LSEND syllabus, so we often have to figure out how to implement it on our own.”*

Contributing on the same, another participant confirmed that: *“Assessment is difficult because many of the learners cannot complete written tasks, and alternative assessments are not well-guided.”*

These findings indicate that systemic and logistical challenges can significantly limit the effectiveness of curriculum delivery, despite teachers' competence and commitment.

Theme 4: Support Systems Available to Teachers

Teachers reported receiving support from multiple sources, including school administration, colleagues, parents, and external organizations. Administrative and peer support facilitated problem-solving and professional collaboration. As evidence to these findings, one participant had this to say: *"We receive support from school administration through regular meetings where we discuss challenges and possible solutions."*

Contributing on the same, another participant confirmed that: *"I get support from colleagues through peer discussions and sharing teaching strategies."*

Support from external bodies, such as the Curriculum Development Centre and NGOs, was acknowledged but described as infrequent: *"The Curriculum Development Centre provides guidelines and some training, but it is not always frequent."*

These findings were supported by another participant during interviews who noted that: *"Some NGOs offer workshops and resources that help us improve how we deliver the syllabus."*

Parental involvement was also noted as valuable for reinforcing skills and providing additional materials: *"Parents sometimes assist by providing materials or helping reinforce skills at home."*

These findings suggest that while support systems exist, they are not consistently structured, highlighting the need for formalized, sustainable support mechanisms.

Theme 5: Strategies to Enhance Effective Implementation

Teachers proposed several strategies to improve the delivery of the 16+ LSEND syllabus, focusing on professional development, resource provision, class management, supervision, and community collaboration. This was confirmed by participant who supported these findings: *"There should be more regular training on the 16+ LSEND syllabus to help us understand new methods and assessment techniques."*

Adding to the same discussion, another participant expressed additional feelings by saying that: *"Providing adequate teaching and learning materials will make practical lessons easier to implement."*

In contributing on the views above, one participant during interviews indicated that: *“Reducing class sizes or providing more support staff would help us give individual attention to learners.”*

Another participant with similar views expressed that: *“Continuous supervision and feedback from the Ministry or Curriculum Development Centre would improve implementation.”*

On the same, one participant had this to say: *“Collaboration between teachers, parents, and the community can help reinforce skills and make learning more meaningful for the learners.”*

These strategies align closely with the study’s findings on challenges and support systems, providing actionable recommendations for improving curriculum implementation at both policy and school levels.

DISCUSSION

Teachers’ Understanding of the Goals and Structure of the 16+ LSEND Syllabus

The study found that teachers have a fairly clear understanding of the 16+ LSEND syllabus, particularly its emphasis on functional skills, independence, and vocational competencies. The study found that teachers generally understand the 16+ LSEND syllabus as a functional, life skills-oriented curriculum aimed at preparing learners for independence, employability, and community participation. Teachers acknowledged that the syllabus moves beyond purely academic content, reflecting Zambia’s Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) Framework, 2023, which emphasizes skill acquisition, problem-solving, and learner-centered approaches (Anderson, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2023). This understanding is consistent with Fullan’s (2007) assertion that successful curriculum implementation requires teachers to comprehend the aims and rationale of educational innovations.

Moreover, teachers acknowledged the structured learning areas within the syllabus, which guide lesson planning and competence development. This reflects Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the importance of scaffolding and guided instruction. Teachers’ awareness of structured learning areas enabled them to plan lessons that respond to learners’ abilities, supporting Vygotsky’s assertion that knowledge is socially mediated and contextually grounded. By understanding the structure of the syllabus, teachers are able to provide tailored learning experiences that match the developmental and functional needs of learners with disabilities. However, some teachers indicated gaps in depth of understanding regarding certain learning areas, particularly in assessment procedures, which

suggests a need for continuous professional development to strengthen curriculum knowledge and implementation capacity. This observation resonates with UNESCO (2017), which emphasizes the necessity of ongoing teacher training in the effective delivery of competence-based curricula for learners with special educational needs.

Instructional Strategies Used by Teachers in Implementation of the 16+ LSEND Syllabus

The study revealed that teachers employ a combination of hands-on, differentiated, and collaborative instructional strategies to implement the 16+ LSEND syllabus. Practical, activity-based approaches such as role-playing, simulations, and real-life task exercises were highlighted as effective in developing life skills (Anderson, 2022), consistent with the syllabus's functional competence goals. These strategies are strongly supported by Vygotsky's (1978) principle of socially mediated learning, which underscores the role of interaction and engagement in knowledge acquisition. They are also consistent with global best practices in special education, which stress individualized and learner-centered approaches to support meaningful learning outcomes (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Chansa, 2021).

Differentiated instruction emerged as a key strategy, allowing teachers to adapt lessons according to learners' abilities, interests, and disabilities. This finding aligns with global best practices in special education, which recommend individualized approaches to support meaningful learning outcomes for learners with diverse needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Additionally, group activities were reported to enhance social interaction, peer learning, and collaborative problem-solving, reinforcing the CBC's focus on developing both cognitive and socio-emotional competences. These results demonstrate that teachers are actively applying learner-centered approaches. Nonetheless, the effective use of these strategies is often constrained by resource limitations and class sizes, which impacts the depth and consistency of curriculum delivery.

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementation of the 16+ LSEND Syllabus

A significant finding is that teachers face multiple challenges in trialling the 16+ LSEND syllabus, including insufficient teaching and learning materials, large class sizes, learner diversity, and limited professional development. These challenges are consistent with previous studies on special education curriculum implementation in Zambia and other developing countries (Chansa, 2021; Mulenga, 2020). The lack of adequate resources limits the teachers' ability to conduct practical lessons effectively, while large class sizes hinder

individualized attention, which is critical for learners with disabilities. Furthermore, limited training and guidance in assessment strategies exacerbate the difficulties of measuring competence attainment accurately. These challenges underscore Fullan's (2007) argument that educational reform is a complex process influenced not only by teachers' understanding but also by systemic and environmental factors. Further, Fullan's (2007) in the Theory of Educational Change, emphasized that successful curriculum implementation is influenced by both teacher capacity and systemic conditions. The challenges also reflect broader issues in inclusive education, where teachers often struggle to meet the needs of learners with diverse disabilities without adequate support (UNESCO, 2017).

Support Systems for Teachers in Implementation of the 16+ LSEND Syllabus

The study revealed that teachers receive support from multiple sources, including school administration, colleagues, parents, and external organizations such as the Curriculum Development Centre and NGOs. Peer collaboration and administrative guidance were particularly valued, as they provide opportunities for sharing strategies and problem-solving. These findings align with the sociocultural perspective, which emphasizes that learning and professional development are socially mediated processes that benefit from collaboration and mentorship. This finding is supported by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which emphasizes that learning and professional development are socially mediated and benefit from collaboration. Similarly, Fullan (2007) highlights that systemic support is a key factor in the successful adoption of educational innovations. The limited nature of support reflects a gap between policy intentions and practical realities in special schools. However, the support was often reported as inconsistent or limited, particularly regarding formal professional development and resource provision. This indicates a gap between policy intentions and practical support, which could compromise the sustainability and effectiveness of curriculum implementation. Strengthening support systems, including formal mentoring, regular supervision, and partnerships with NGOs, could enhance teachers' capacity to implement the 16+ LSEND syllabus effectively. Policy frameworks must prioritize sustainable and structured support mechanisms for special education teachers.

Strategies for Enhancing Implementation of the 16+ LSEND Syllabus

Teachers suggested strategies to improve syllabus implementation, including regular professional development, provision of teaching resources, reduced class sizes, continuous supervision, and community involvement. These strategies aim to address both pedagogical

and systemic barriers. These recommendations align with Fullan's (2007) assertion that successful educational change requires investment in teacher capacity, adequate resources, and supportive structures. They are also consistent with global research on inclusive and competence-based education, which highlights that teacher preparedness, material support, and community collaboration are critical for effective curriculum delivery (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; UNESCO, 2017). Trialling these strategies could enhance teachers' confidence, pedagogical skills, and ability to provide individualized instruction, ultimately improving learning outcomes for learners with special educational needs.

CONCLUSION

The study highlighted that teachers are central to the successful implementation of the 16+ LSEND syllabus. The discussion reveals that teachers generally understand and actively implement the 16+ LSEND syllabus using learner-centered strategies aligned with competence-based education principles. While they demonstrate understanding and employ effective instructional strategies, systemic challenges limit full curriculum realization. However, systemic challenges, resource constraints, and limited support hinder full realization of curriculum goals. Addressing these challenges through policy support, professional development, and school-level interventions is critical for improving the quality of special education in Zambia and achieving the intended goals of competence-based learning for learners with disabilities in Zambia. The findings underscore the interplay between teacher competence, instructional strategies, systemic support, and policy implementation, confirming the relevance of Fullan's Theory of Educational Change and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory in understanding curriculum implementation. The study reinforces Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, demonstrating that teachers' practices are socially mediated and influenced by collaboration, mentorship, and environmental resources. Similarly, Fullan's Theory of Educational Change is evident in the interplay between teacher competence, systemic support, and curriculum adoption. Practically, the findings provide evidence for policymakers, teacher educators, and school administrators to design targeted interventions that enhance the implementation of the 16+ LSEND syllabus. Trialling these recommendations can lead to improved learning outcomes, greater learner independence, and better preparation for employment and community participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, and in line with the study objectives, the following recommendation were made:

Policy-Level Recommendations: The study recommends that the Ministry of Education develop comprehensive guidelines, clear assessment strategies, and monitoring tools for the 16+ LSEND syllabus while ensuring adequate funding for resources, training, and support services. Additionally, regular review mechanisms should be established to evaluate curriculum effectiveness and teacher capacity, aligning implementation with national and international inclusive education standards.

Teacher Professional Development Recommendations: The study recommends trialling continuous in-service training that emphasizes differentiated instruction, hands-on vocational skills, and functional life skills. Therefore, mentorship programs should be facilitated to allow experienced teachers to guide less experienced colleagues, while collaborative professional learning communities should be encouraged to share strategies, teaching aids, and best practices across special schools.

School-Level Recommendations: The study recommends that schools prioritize the provision of adequate teaching and learning materials, including visual aids, assistive technologies, and vocational tools, while considering reducing class sizes or deploying teaching assistants to enhance individualized instruction. Also, school-community partnerships should be strengthened by engaging parents, local businesses, and NGOs, and structured supervision and feedback mechanisms should be implemented to monitor teacher performance and provide professional guidance on syllabus implementation.

Consent for participants

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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