



## Inclusive Pedagogy and Positive Learner Behaviour: A Mixed Methods Study of Behavioural Outcomes in Zambian Selected Schools

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### Abstract

Inclusive education is increasingly recognized not only as an access strategy but also as a pedagogical approach capable of improving learner behaviour and social outcomes. While global research has focused on participation and equity, limited empirical studies in Sub-Saharan Africa examine behavioral outcomes associated with inclusive pedagogy. This study investigates the relationship between inclusive teaching practices and positive learner behaviour in Zambian schools. The study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed methods design involving 90 participants including learners, teachers, administrators, teacher trainees and community stakeholders. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations and questionnaires. Data are analysed using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. Findings show that inclusive practices such as differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, peer mentoring and positive reinforcement contribute to improved learner empathy, cooperation, confidence and self-regulation. Results further indicate that inclusive classroom environments promote belonging, reduce behavioral conflict and strengthen peer relationships. The study concludes that inclusive pedagogy functions not only as an instructional strategy but also as a behavioral development mechanism. The findings suggest the need to strengthen teacher training in inclusive pedagogy and behaviour support strategies. Policy frameworks should incorporate behavioral indicators alongside academic outcomes. The study contributes empirical African evidence linking inclusive pedagogy to behavioral development and supports the view that inclusive education contributes to social cohesion and holistic learner development.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, learner behaviour, positive behaviour support, inclusive pedagogy, Zambia

### Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as one of the most influential and widely adopted educational reforms of the twenty-first century, driven by global commitments to equity, social justice, and the right to education for all learners. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the UNCRPD (2006), and Sustainable Development Goal number 4 (United Nations, 2015) underscore and mandate the need to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education.

**Problem:** While inclusive education has gained policy attention in Zambia, research has largely focused on structural challenges such as teacher preparedness, infrastructure limitations, and

resource constraints. Far less attention has been given to how inclusive pedagogical practices shape and mediate learner behaviour, social interaction, and classroom climate. This neglect leaves a significant empirical and conceptual gap in understanding the behavioral dimensions of inclusion.

**Gap:** Existing scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa has emphasized access and equity but has insufficiently examined behavioral outcomes such as empathy, cooperation, confidence, and self-regulation. Global studies provide evidence that inclusive classrooms foster prosocial behaviour and reduce prejudice, yet empirical evidence from Zambia remains scarce and underdeveloped. This gap limits and weakens policy and practice by overlooking how inclusion contributes to behavioral development and social cohesion.

**Purpose:** This study systematically examines the relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and positive learner behaviour in Zambian primary schools. By linking classroom practices to behavioral outcomes, the study reconceptualizes and advances inclusive education not only as an access mechanism but also as a behavioral development intervention capable of supporting democratic values and social cohesion.

### **Objectives:**

1. To analyse how inclusive teaching practices influence learner behaviour outcomes such as empathy, cooperation, and self-regulation.
2. To examine the influence of inclusive education on learner self-esteem, participation, and social interaction.
3. To investigate the role of teachers in shaping behavioral outcomes in inclusive classrooms.
4. To identify policy and practice implications emerging from behavioral outcomes of inclusive education.

### **Research Questions:**

1. How do inclusive teaching practices influence positive learner behaviour?
2. How does inclusive education influence learner self-esteem and social interaction?
3. What role do teachers play in promoting positive learner behaviour in inclusive classrooms?
4. What policy and practice implications emerge from behavioral outcomes of inclusive education?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of inclusive education in Zambia, extending the discourse beyond access and equity to include behavioral development and social transformation.

### **Literature Review**

Inclusive education is increasingly acknowledged as a transformative paradigm that promotes participation, achievement, and well-being for all learners (Ainscow, 2020). Rather than conceptualizing diversity as a deficit, inclusive pedagogy reframes it as a valuable resource for learning (Florian, 2020). Earlier scholarship tended to emphasize access, infrastructure, and the placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools. However, contemporary

perspectives shift the focus toward the quality of participation and learner experiences, underscoring that inclusion extends beyond physical placement to encompass meaningful engagement and developmental outcomes. Within this evolving discourse, frameworks propose that, alongside access, participation, and achievement, a fourth dimension—social and behavioral development—must be considered (Messiou, 2022). Scholars further argue that inclusive education must transcend access to ensure genuine participation, with evidence demonstrating that systemic supports and teacher collaboration significantly enhance learner outcomes (Hehir, Katz, & Associates, 2021). This position is reinforced by Katz (2021), who emphasizes the importance of universal design for learning as a foundational framework for embedding inclusivity into everyday teaching practice.

Evidence increasingly demonstrates that inclusive classrooms foster positive behavioral outcomes. Schwab (2021) notes that inclusive environments reduce prejudice and promote social interaction, while Anderson and Boyle (2022) link inclusive practices to democratic values such as respect and participation. Pedagogical strategies including differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, flexible assessment, and positive reinforcement have been shown to improve empathy, cooperation, confidence, and self-regulation. These practices create supportive climates that encourage engagement and behavioral regulation, positioning inclusive pedagogy as both an instructional and behavioral development mechanism.

African studies reinforce these findings, though they also highlight contextual challenges. Research in South Africa and Kenya shows that inclusive practices enhance learner confidence and reduce stigma (Donohue & Bornman, 2021). In Ghana, group-based inclusive learning improved peer relationships and reduced exclusion (Mugo et al., 2020). However, large class sizes, limited teaching materials, and insufficient teacher training remain barriers to effective implementation. These findings suggest that while behavioral benefits of inclusion are evident, systemic constraints must be addressed to sustain impact in resource-limited contexts.

Global scholarship continues to consolidate the relationship between inclusion and behavioral development. UNESCO (2020) underscores that inclusive education contributes to the cultivation of peaceful societies, while OECD (2021) highlights its pivotal role in fostering collaboration skills among learners. Extending this discourse, Waitoller and King Thorius (2023) contend that inclusion functions as a catalyst for broader social transformation, and Messiou (2022) emphasizes the centrality of student voice in shaping genuinely inclusive environments. Taken together, these studies position inclusive education as a driver of both academic achievement and social development, reinforcing its capacity to nurture empathy, cooperation, and democratic values across diverse contexts. Complementing this perspective, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that trust and authenticity in classroom relationships are fundamental to the promotion of positive behaviour. The present study is further anchored in Positive Behaviour Support Theory and Social Identity Theory, which are elaborated in detail within the methodology section.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study employed primarily a qualitative mixed methods design. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and questionnaires were used to capture both lived experiences and descriptive behavioral patterns. The qualitative strand provided depth of understanding, while the quantitative strand offered supportive descriptive data. This design was appropriate given that behavioral outcomes of inclusion are socially constructed and context-

dependent. The justification for this design was that mixed-methods research provides a strong foundation for evaluating inclusive pedagogy and its impact on classroom dynamics (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

### Study Sites

Research was conducted in three primary schools in Chongwe District and one teacher education institution in Lusaka District. These sites were selected because they were actively implementing inclusive education practices, trained teachers, and diverse learner populations representative of typical public education conditions.

### Participants

A total of 90 participants were included, representing learners, teachers, administrators, teacher trainees, and community members. This multi-actor approach ensured triangulation and strengthened the credibility of findings.

**Table1: Participant Recruitment Process**

Stage	Number of Participants (N)
Potential participants identified	120
Participants meeting inclusion criteria	102
Participants consenting	95
Participants completing study	90
Final analytic sample	90

### Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct experience in inclusive education. Inclusion criteria required exposure to inclusive classrooms either as beneficiaries, implementers, or policy actors. This approach ensured rich, relevant data across stakeholder groups.

**Table 2: Participant Demographics**

#	Category	Number	Gender	Age Range	Rationale
1.	Learners	30	Balanced	13–18	Direct beneficiaries
2.	Teachers	25	Mixed	25–55	Implementers
3.	Administrators	10	Mixed	30–60	Policy actors
4.	Teacher trainees	15	Mixed	20–25	Future implementers
5.	Community members	10	Mixed	30–50	External stakeholders

### Data Collection

### **The study used the following tools to collect data:**

- **Semi-structured interviews** : these were used to collect data from teachers, administrators, trainees, and community members to explore practices, perceptions, and behavioral observations.
- **Focus group discussions**: the tool was used to collect data from learners to capture collective behavioral experiences and peer dynamics.
- **Classroom observations**: observations were used to document teacher practices, learner interactions, and behavioral patterns.
- **Questionnaires**: these were used to gather descriptive data on confidence, participation, peer relationships, and classroom climate.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes were developed inductively from qualitative data, while quantitative data were summarized using descriptive statistics. Coding categories were guided by **Positive Behaviour Support Theory** (Sugai & Simonsen, 2020) and **Social Identity Theory** (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), ensuring theoretical grounding in behavioral constructs such as reinforcement, belonging, and regulation.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review committee. Permission was secured from participating institutions. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants, while parental consent and learner assent were obtained for minors. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization and coded identifiers.

### **Conceptual Framework**

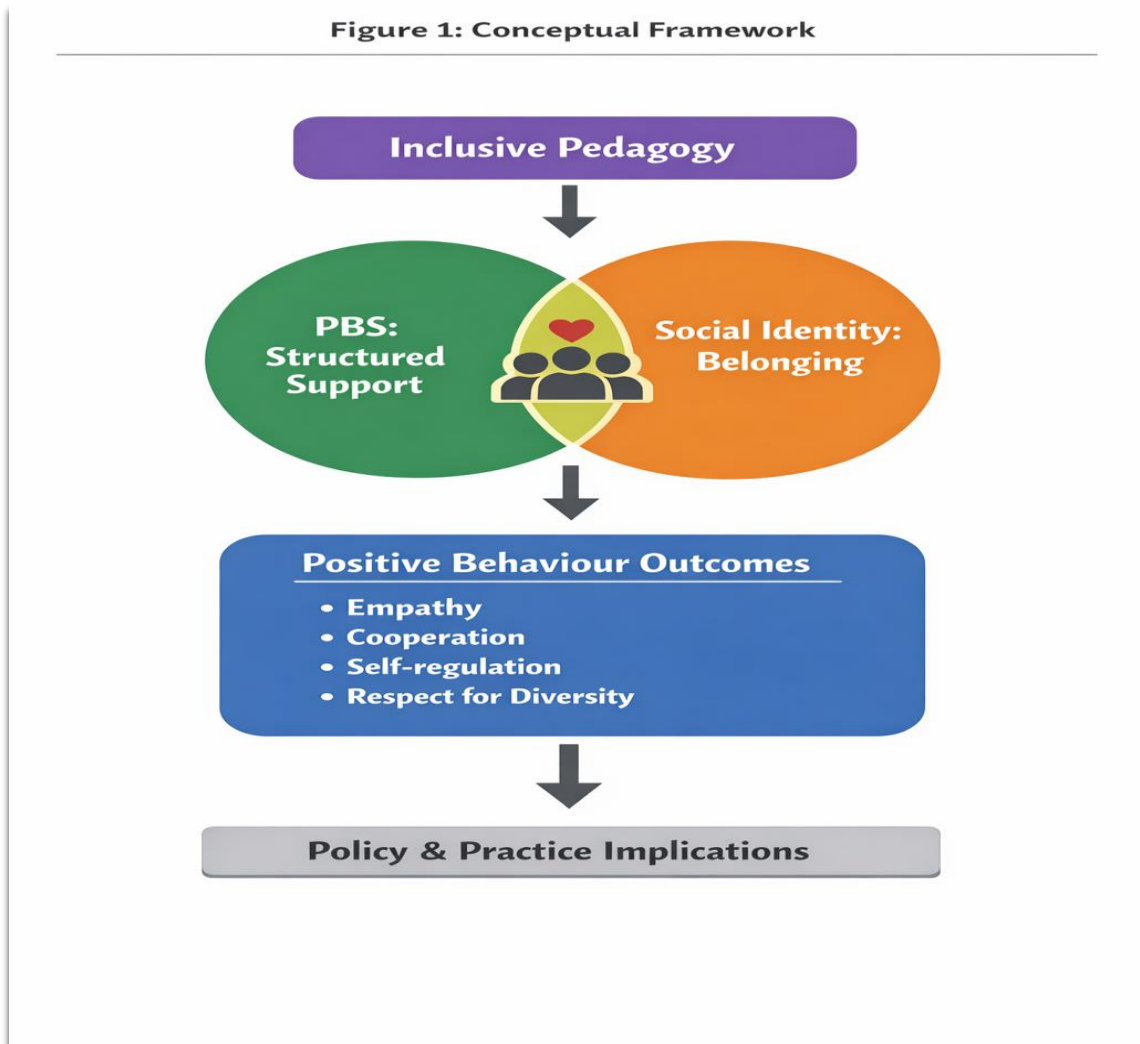
This study was guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives: **Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) Theory** and **Social Identity Theory**. Together, these frameworks provide a lens for understanding how inclusive pedagogy shapes learner behaviour in Zambian classrooms.

PBS Theory emphasizes that behaviour is influenced by environmental supports, clear expectations, and positive reinforcement rather than punitive measures (Sugai & Simonsen, 2020). Within inclusive classrooms, practices such as cooperative learning, scaffolding, and differentiated instruction naturally embed PBS principles by creating structured opportunities for participation and reinforcing prosocial conduct. This framework helps explain why learners exposed to inclusive strategies demonstrated improved self-regulation, empathy, and cooperation.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) complements PBS by highlighting the role of belonging and group membership in shaping behaviour. When learners feel included, they develop stronger positive social identities, which reduce marginalization and foster cohesion. In this study, inclusive classroom climates promoted shared identity across diverse learners, thereby reducing conflict and strengthening peer relationships.

Narratively, these two frameworks converge to show that inclusive pedagogy is not only a teaching strategy but also a behavioral intervention. PBS explains the mechanisms of reinforcement and structure, while Social Identity Theory explains the deeper social dynamics of belonging and identity. Together, they provide a robust conceptual foundation for interpreting

how inclusive practices contribute to both academic and behavioral development in Zambian schools.



## Results and Discussion

### Behavioral Outcomes

Inclusive teaching practices such as cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, and peer mentoring significantly influenced positive behavioral outcomes. Learners exposed to collaborative environments demonstrated improved cooperation, patience, and mutual support. One learner explained: *“Before I did not understand why some learners struggled, but now I help them.”* (L3).

**Discussion:** These findings confirm that inclusive pedagogy functions not only as an instructional approach but also as a behavioral development mechanism. They align with Positive Behaviour

Support (PBS) theory, which emphasizes proactive supports and positive reinforcement (*Sugai & Simonsen, 2020*)

**Policy Implications:** Teacher education programmes should embed training in cooperative learning and differentiated instruction as behavioral development strategies.

**Future Research:** Further studies could quantify the long-term behavioral changes associated with inclusive practices across diverse Zambian school contexts.

### **Social Interaction**

Inclusive classrooms significantly improved learner social relationships. Teachers reported that grouping strategies reduced social stratification and promoted unity: *“Learners no longer isolate others during group activities.” (T2)*. Observations confirmed increased mixed-ability participation patterns.

**Discussion:** These findings support Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), showing that inclusive classrooms reduce “in-group” and “out-group” divisions by fostering shared identity. This strengthens cohesion and reduces prejudice.

**Policy Implications:** School leaders should promote structured group work and peer mentoring to enhance social integration.

**Future Research:** Comparative studies across rural and urban schools could explore how social interaction outcomes vary by context.

### **Confidence and Participation**

Inclusive classrooms contributed to increased learner confidence. Learners reported feeling safer to participate: *“Now everyone is given a chance.” (L8)*. Teachers observed increased voluntary participation among previously withdrawn learners.

**Discussion:** These findings suggest inclusive pedagogy reduces fear of failure and promotes psychological safety. They align with global scholarship (Messiou, 2022; OECD, 2021) that links inclusion to enhanced learner voice and participation.

**Policy Implications:** Teacher training should emphasize scaffolding and supportive feedback to build learner confidence.

**Future Research:** Longitudinal studies could examine how confidence gains translate into academic achievement and lifelong skills.

### **Teacher Role in Behavioral Development**

Teachers played a central role in shaping learner behaviour. Respectful, patient, and encouraging teachers fostered classrooms characterized by similar learner behaviour. Positive reinforcement proved more effective than punitive discipline: *“Group work has helped learners understand each other's strengths.” (T4)*.

**Discussion:** This underscores the importance of teacher modelling in inclusive classrooms. Behavioral outcomes are influenced more by classroom climate than by disciplinary systems, confirming PBS principles.

**Policy Implications:** Teacher education curricula should integrate socio-emotional learning and behaviour modelling strategies.

**Future Research:** Studies could explore how teacher attitudes and modelling vary across different cultural and institutional contexts.

### **Conflict Reduction**

Evidence suggested reductions in bullying, teasing, and social exclusion. Teachers attributed this improvement to increased understanding of learner differences: *“When learners understand differences, bullying reduces because they begin to accept one another.” (T5)*. Administrators reported fewer behavioral referrals in inclusive schools.

**Discussion:** These findings highlight inclusion as a preventative behavioral strategy. They align with Social Identity Theory, showing that belonging regulates behaviour and reduces conflict.

**Policy Implications:** Schools should embed inclusive practices within behaviour management frameworks to reduce conflict and promote cohesion.

**Future Research:** Future work could examine how inclusive practices influence conflict reduction in larger, resource-constrained classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that inclusive pedagogy contributes to positive learner behaviour through improved social interaction, learner confidence and reduced behavioral conflict. The findings position inclusive education as both a pedagogical and behavioral development strategy. Strengthening teacher competencies in inclusive practices may improve both academic and social outcomes. Future policy frameworks should incorporate behavioral indicators within inclusive education monitoring systems.

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Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants in accordance with established ethical standards.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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## Abbreviations

PBS – Positive Behaviour Support

SDG – Sustainable Development Goals

UNESCO – United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization

OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development