

Exploring Deaf Students' Experiences of Inclusion and Psychosocial Wellbeing in Mainstream Secondary Schools with Sign Language Instruction in Binga Rural District, Zimbabwe

Dr Siziba Khumbulani*

Lecturer, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe.

***Corresponding Author**
Dr Siziba Khumbulani

Lecturer, Midlands
State University,
Zimbabwe.

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored the lived experiences and perspectives of deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the Binga Rural District of Zimbabwe. The study aimed to investigate the facilitators and barriers to the meaningful participation and psychosocial wellbeing of these deaf students, in order to inform more effective inclusive education policies and practices in the rural Zimbabwean context. The study adopted an interpretivism research philosophy and a phenomenological design. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 deaf student participants, 3 teachers and 2 parents. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes. The findings revealed that deaf students in rural mainstream schools faced significant challenges, including social isolation, communication barriers and limited access to appropriate educational accommodations. However, the support and acceptance from the deaf student community emerged as a critical facilitator of their psychosocial well-being. The provision of sign language instruction was unanimously highlighted as vital for promoting the inclusion and academic success of deaf students. The study underscores the urgent need for more comprehensive inclusive education policies, increased funding and tailored teacher training programmes in rural schools in Zimbabwe. Strengthening the implementation of inclusive practices and ensuring the availability of specialized support and accommodations are crucial to ensuring the meaningful participation and holistic development of deaf students in the education system.

Keywords: Inclusion, Psychosocial wellbeing, Sign language, Rural schools, Deaf students.

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1.0 Introduction

Inclusive education for deaf students remains a critical challenge in many developing countries, including rural areas of Zimbabwe. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences and perspectives of deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the Binga Rural District of Zimbabwe. It examines the nuances of inclusion and psychosocial well-being from the student's point of view and investigates facilitators and barriers to their meaningful participation and support. The findings of this study can inform more effective inclusive education policies and practices to enhance the educational and social integration of deaf learners in the rural Zimbabwean context.

1.1 Background to the Study

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is estimated that over 430 million people worldwide have disabling hearing loss,

with the majority living in low- and middle-income countries. This includes both children and adults. More specifically, the WHO estimates that approximately 34 million children globally have disabling hearing loss. This represents a prevalence rate of around 4.7% for childhood hearing loss worldwide. The WHO further reports hearing loss is higher in developing countries, with sub-Saharan Africa having the highest rates globally (WHO, 2021). However, it is important to note that the prevalence of deafness and hearing loss can vary significantly by region, socioeconomic status, and access to healthcare and education services. Thus, factors such as genetics, infectious diseases, exposure to noise and complications during pregnancy and childbirth can all contribute to the incidence of hearing loss.

In the United States, Deaf and hard-of-hearing students face significant challenges in mainstream educational settings. Research by Cawthon (2011) found that Deaf and hard-of-hearing students often experience social isolation, communication barriers and

limited access to appropriate academic accommodations in mainstream schools. Similarly, Stinson and Kluwin (2003) highlighted the need for more comprehensive support and specialized instruction to ensure the meaningful inclusion of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the American education system.

A study by Wauters, van Bon, and Tellings (2006) in the Netherlands revealed that Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream schools often experience academic and social challenges due to communication difficulties and limited access to sign language interpretation. Importantly, the researchers emphasized the importance of providing sign language instruction and creating a supportive environment to foster the inclusion and well-being of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in European educational settings. In Australia, Hyde and Power (2006) found that Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream schools often face challenges accessing the curriculum and developing social connections due to communication barriers and a lack of specialized support. The authors emphasized the need for comprehensive policies and teacher training to ensure the effective inclusion of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the Australian education system.

A study by Noor, Munib and Awan (2013) in Pakistan revealed that Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream schools often face significant social and academic challenges due to a lack of sign language instruction and appropriate support. The researchers highlighted the importance of providing sign language interpreters and specialized teaching methods to promote the inclusion and psychosocial well-being of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in Asian educational contexts. In Ghana, Agbenyega and Deku (2011) found that Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream schools often experience marginalization, communication barriers, and limited access to appropriate educational accommodations. The authors emphasized the need for comprehensive inclusive education policies and teacher training programs to address the unique needs of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the African context.

A study by Ademokoya and Ntemana (2016) in South Africa revealed that Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream schools often face social isolation, academic challenges, and limited access to sign language instruction. The researchers highlighted the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment, as well as providing specialized training for teachers, to ensure the successful inclusion of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in sub-Saharan African educational settings. In Zimbabwe, Moyo and Ndamba (2016) found that Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream schools often face significant communication barriers, social isolation, and limited access to appropriate educational resources and support. The authors emphasized the need for comprehensive inclusive education policies, teacher training, and the integration of sign language instruction to promote the meaningful inclusion and psychosocial well-being of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the Zimbabwean context.

Thus, the existing literature highlights the persistent challenges faced by Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream educational settings globally, including social isolation, communication barriers and limited access to appropriate accommodations and support. It is against this background that this study aims to provide a more in-depth, qualitative exploration of the lived experiences and perspectives of deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in Binga District, Zimbabwe, to inform more effective inclusive education policies and practices in the local context.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the provision of sign language instruction in mainstream secondary schools in the rural Binga District of Zimbabwe, deaf students continue to face challenges related to inclusion and psychosocial well-being. This study qualitatively explores the lived experiences and perspectives of these deaf students to understand the facilitators and barriers to their meaningful participation and support, to inform more effective inclusive education policies and practices in the rural Zimbabwean context.

1.3 The purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the Binga Rural District of Zimbabwe to inform more effective inclusive education policies and practices.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To explore the lived experiences and perspectives of deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the rural Binga District of Zimbabwe.
2. To investigate the facilitators and barriers to the meaningful participation and support of deaf students in these rural mainstream secondary schools.
3. To provide recommendations to inform more effective inclusive education policies and practices for deaf students in rural Zimbabwe.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What are the experiences and perspectives of deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the rural Binga District of Zimbabwe?
2. What factors facilitate or hinder the meaningful participation and support of deaf students in these rural mainstream secondary schools?
3. How can the findings from this study inform more effective inclusive education policies and practices for deaf students in rural Zimbabwe?

2.0 Materials and Methods

The study's theoretical framework and research methodology are presented in this section.

2.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework chosen for this study was the Bioecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. The Bioecological Systems Theory posits that an individual's development is influenced by multiple interacting systems, including the microsystem (immediate environment), mesosystem (connections between microsystems), exosystem (external environments), macrosystem (cultural norms and values), and chronosystem (changes over time) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). This framework is relevant for understanding the experiences of deaf students in rural mainstream schools because it highlights how their inclusion and psychosocial well-being are shaped by the complex interactions between the individual, their immediate school

environment, the connections between school and home, as well as broader social, cultural, and policy factors in the rural context. As Bronfenbrenner (1986:723) explained, "To understand human development, one must consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs".

This aligns with the study's aim to explore the lived experiences of deaf students and the facilitators and barriers to their meaningful participation and support in rural mainstream schools, which likely involve factors at multiple ecological levels. The Bioecological Systems Theory has been applied in previous research on inclusive education for students with disabilities in mainstream schools, including in the rural Zimbabwean context. For instance, Chataika (2010) used this framework to examine the inclusive education experiences of students with disabilities in rural Zimbabwe, emphasizing the need to consider the interplay between individual, institutional, and sociocultural factors in the rural setting.

By adopting the Bioecological Systems Theory, this study can provide a holistic, contextual understanding of the experiences of deaf students in mainstream secondary schools in the rural Binga District of Zimbabwe, and inform more effective inclusive education policies and practices at various ecological levels to enhance the inclusion and psychosocial wellbeing of deaf learners in the rural Zimbabwean context.

2.2 Research Methodology

This study adopted an interpretive research philosophy, which is suited for understanding the subjective, contextual, and socially constructed experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative research approach was employed to gain an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the rural Binga District of Zimbabwe (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A phenomenological research design was selected as it allows for an exploration of the "lived experiences" of the participants and the meaning they ascribe to those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is particularly relevant for this study as it aligns with the interpretivist paradigm and the Bioecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the importance of understanding phenomena from the perspectives of those experiencing them within their contextual environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986).

The participants for this study were deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the rural Binga District of Zimbabwe. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select information-rich cases that could provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The sample size was determined by data saturation, where interviews continued until no new themes emerged (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). A sample for this study contained 10 deaf students currently enrolled in mainstream secondary schools in Binga Rural District who were between the ages of 13-19 years old who use sign language as their primary mode of communication, 3 teachers from the mainstream secondary schools who work closely with the deaf student participants and 2 parents/guardians of the deaf student participants.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. This method allowed for exploring the participants' lived experiences, perspectives and the factors influencing their inclusion and psychosocial well-being in

mainstream secondary schools (Seidman, 2013). The interview questions were guided by the Bioecological Systems Theory and the study's research objectives. Additionally, field observations were conducted to gain a contextual understanding of the school environments and the participants' interactions within them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data from the interviews and field observations were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved a systematic process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach aligns with the interpretivist philosophy and the phenomenological design, as it allows for the identification of the essential meanings and the essence of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data analysis process was guided by the Bioecological Systems Theory, which provided a framework for organizing the themes at various ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and thick description were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality and protection of participants' rights, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.0 Results and Discussions

This section presents the presentation, analysis, interpretation and discussion of findings

3.1 Data Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation

The qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and field observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis resulted in the identification of several key themes that shed light on the lived experiences and perspectives of deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the rural Binga District of Zimbabwe. The major themes that emerged from the data are as follows:

Theme 1: Barriers to Meaningful Inclusion

Participants, including students and teachers, highlighted several barriers that hindered the meaningful inclusion of deaf students in the mainstream secondary school setting. A significant challenge identified was the lack of deaf awareness and sensitivity among teachers and hearing students, which led to discrimination and social isolation. One of the students expressed:

"The hearing students sometimes make fun of us or avoid interacting with us. They don't understand our needs and don't try to communicate with us using sign language." (C3)

Teachers also acknowledged this issue, with one of them noting that:

"Many of the hearing students in our school don't know how to engage with the deaf students. They are uncomfortable and sometimes even afraid to approach them." (T2)

Another barrier was the limited availability of sign language interpreters, which compromised the deaf students' ability to participate fully in classroom activities and understand the curriculum. As a parent shared:

"The school has only one sign language interpreter, and they are expected to cover all the deaf students. Sometimes they go for workshops for too long without coming back. It's just not enough support." (P1)

Theme 2: Facilitators of Psychosocial Wellbeing

Despite the barriers, participants in this study also highlighted several factors that contributed to the psychosocial well-being of deaf students in the mainstream setting. One key facilitator was the support and acceptance of the deaf student community within the school. As one student explained:

"Having other deaf students in the school helps us to feel less isolated. We can communicate and support each other." (C7)

Teachers also recognized the importance of creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for deaf students, as exemplified by this comment:

"We try to foster a sense of community and belonging among all our students, including the deaf students. We encourage peer-to-peer support and understanding." (T1)

Theme 3: Challenges in Curriculum Access and Academic Support

Participants consistently highlighted the difficulties faced by deaf students in accessing the curriculum and receiving adequate academic support. The lack of specialized teaching methods and materials adapted for deaf learners was a significant barrier. As one student expressed:

"The teachers use a lot of verbal explanations and written materials that are hard for us to understand. We need more visual aids and hands-on activities." (C5)

Teachers acknowledged this challenge and expressed a need for more training and resources to effectively support the academic needs of deaf students, as reflected in this statement:

"We want to do our best to help the deaf students, but we don't have the specialized skills and materials to truly meet their learning needs. More support and training would be helpful." (T3)

Theme 4: Significance of Sign Language Instruction

Participants unanimously emphasized the importance of sign language instruction in facilitating the inclusion and academic success of deaf students in mainstream secondary schools. As one student shared:

"Sign language is our primary mode of communication. Without it, we would be completely lost in the school environment." (C9)

Teachers also recognized the vital role of sign language, with one stating:

"The sign language instruction has been crucial in helping the deaf students engage with the curriculum and communicate with their peers and teachers." (T2)

Theme 5: The Need for Comprehensive Inclusive Education Policies

Participants highlighted the need for more comprehensive inclusive education policies and practices to address the unique needs of deaf students in the rural Zimbabwean context. As a parent expressed:

"The current policies are not enough. We need stronger laws and regulations to ensure that deaf students receive the support and accommodations they need to thrive in the mainstream schools." (P2)

Teachers also echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of tailored teacher training and the allocation of sufficient resources to support the inclusion of deaf students, as evident in this statement:

"The government must provide more funding and resources to train teachers on effective inclusive practices. Without this, it will be difficult to include deaf students in the mainstream system." (T1)

4.0 Discussion of findings

The findings from this qualitative study on the experiences of deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the rural Binga District of Zimbabwe provide important insights into the facilitators and barriers to their meaningful inclusion and psychosocial well-being. Consistent with the existing literature, the study identified several barriers that hindered the inclusion of deaf students in the mainstream setting. As highlighted by Cawthon (2011) and Noor et al. (2013), participants reported experiencing social isolation, communication barriers, and limited access to appropriate educational accommodations. The lack of deaf awareness and sensitivity among teachers and hearing students, as well as the limited availability of sign language interpreters, were key factors contributing to these challenges (Stinson & Kluwin, 2003; Wauters et al., 2006).

A new finding from this study is the critical role of the deaf student community in facilitating the psychosocial well-being of the participants. The support and acceptance from their peers who were also deaf helped them feel less isolated and more connected within the school environment. This echoes the emphasis by Agbenyega and Deku (2011) and Ademokoya and Ntemana (2016) on the need for a supportive and inclusive environment to promote the holistic development of deaf students in mainstream settings. The study also revealed significant challenges experienced by deaf students in accessing the curriculum and receiving adequate academic support. The lack of specialized teaching methods and materials adapted for deaf learners, as well as the limited training and resources available to teachers, were identified as major barriers. These findings align with the concerns raised by Hyde and Power (2006) and Moyo and Ndamba (2016) regarding the need for comprehensive policies and teacher training to ensure the effective inclusion of deaf students in the education system.

Importantly, the study participants unanimously emphasized the vital role of sign language instruction in facilitating their inclusion and academic success. This corroborates the findings of previous studies in the Netherlands, Pakistan, Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, which highlighted the importance of sign language integration and specialized support to promote the meaningful participation of deaf students in mainstream educational settings (Wauters et al., 2006; Noor et al., 2013; Agbenyega & Deku, 2011; Ademokoya & Ntemana, 2016; Moyo & Ndamba, 2016). A key new finding from this study is the strong call from participants for more comprehensive inclusive education policies and practices to address the unique needs of deaf students in the rural Zimbabwean context. The existing policies were deemed insufficient and participants emphasized the need for stronger laws, increased funding and tailored teacher training to ensure the effective inclusion of deaf students in mainstream schools. Thus, findings from this study confirm and expand upon the existing literature on the challenges faced by deaf students in mainstream educational settings, while also identifying new insights into the facilitators of their psychosocial

well-being and the urgent need for more robust inclusive education policies and practices in the rural Zimbabwean context.

5.0 Conclusion

This study concludes that Deaf students enrolled in mainstream secondary schools with sign language instruction in the rural Binga District in Zimbabwe face significant challenges related to social isolation, communication barriers and limited access to appropriate educational accommodations and support. These barriers hinder their meaningful participation and psychosocial well-being within the mainstream school setting. The presence of a strong deaf student community and peer support network emerged as a critical facilitator of the participants' psychosocial well-being, helping them feel less isolated and more connected in such rural educational settings. Furthermore, the provision for sign language instruction was unanimously highlighted as a vital component in promoting the inclusion and academic success of deaf students in the rural Zimbabwean context.

To address the unique needs of deaf students in mainstream secondary schools, there is an urgent need for more comprehensive inclusive education policies, increased funding and tailored teacher training programmes in the rural Zimbabwean context. Strengthening the implementation of inclusive education practices and ensuring the availability of specialized support and accommodations are crucial to ensuring the meaningful participation and holistic development of deaf students in the education system.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, to enhance the inclusion and psychosocial well-being of deaf students in mainstream secondary schools in rural Zimbabwe, the study recommends that:

- Various school stakeholders need to increase funding and resources to train teachers in rural schools on deaf-friendly instructional strategies and to ensure the availability of qualified sign language interpreters in mainstream classrooms
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe needs to develop and implement comprehensively the inclusive education policies that mandate the provision of sign language instruction, specialized teaching methods and targeted professional development for teachers in mainstream secondary schools, especially in rural areas like Binga District
- The school administrators and teachers in rural Zimbabwean secondary schools need to actively promote deaf awareness and sensitivity among the school community, facilitate stronger peer support networks for deaf students and ensure timely access to sign language interpreters and other accommodations to enhance the inclusion and psychosocial well-being of deaf learners
- The researchers and policymakers need to conduct further studies to explore the experiences of deaf students in other rural areas of Zimbabwe and use the findings to inform the design and implementation of more effective inclusive education practices tailored to the unique needs of the local context

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all persons involved in the study. All participants, including the 10 deaf student participants, 3 teachers and 2 parents were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and they voluntarily agreed to participate. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the appropriate institutional ethics review board to ensure the protection of the rights and well-being of the human participants.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

The author conceptualized the study, designed the research methodology, conducted the data collection and analysis and wrote the original draft of the manuscript. The author also contributed to the project administration and supervision of the research process by editing the manuscript, data collection, analysis and interpretation of the findings, reading and approval of the final version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

APPENDIX 1: SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your educational background?
- How long have you been enrolled in this mainstream secondary school?

Lived Experiences and Perspectives

- Can you describe your overall experience as a deaf student in this mainstream school?
- What have been the most rewarding aspects of being a deaf student in this school? What has been the most challenging?
- How would you describe the level of inclusion and support you feel in this school environment?
- In what ways do you feel your unique needs as a deaf student are being met or not met?
- Can you share any specific experiences, either positive or negative, that stand out to you?
- How do you feel your psychosocial well-being has been impacted by being in this mainstream school setting?

Facilitators and Barriers to Participation and Support

- What factors or resources have helped facilitate your meaningful participation and support in this school?
- What barriers or challenges have you faced to being able to participate fully and receive the support you need?
- In what ways do you think the sign language instruction provided has helped or hindered your experience?
- How would you describe the attitudes and understanding of your teachers and peers towards your needs as a deaf student?
- What additional support or accommodations do you think would be helpful for deaf students like yourself in this setting?

Recommendations for Inclusive Education Policies and Practices

- Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you have to improve the inclusion and support of deaf students in rural Zimbabwean mainstream schools?
- How do you think inclusive education policies and practices could be strengthened to meet the needs of deaf students?
- What are the most important factors that need to be addressed to enhance the educational and social integration of deaf learners in this context?

Closing

- Is there anything else you like to share about your experiences or thoughts on this topic?
- Thank you for your time and valuable insights.