

**INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN EDUCATION THROUGH COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT. THE CASE OF TWO SCHOOLS IN DOMBOSHA****Liana Musekiwa***

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education thrives when communities actively engage in the learning, fostering environments where all students, regardless of background, abilities, or socioeconomic status, have equal opportunities to succeed. By involving parents, local organizations, and other stakeholders, schools can create structured frameworks that address the diverse needs of students. This study examines the role of community participation in educating learners with disabilities in the Domboshava community. This paper explores the role of community engagement in promoting inclusive practices within education, emphasizing collaborative efforts between schools, families, and local organizations. A participatory action research was adopted, utilizing focus group discussions and community-based workshops to facilitate inclusive practices. The collected data was transcribed and analyzed thematically. A sample of 10 learners with disabilities, 5 learners without disabilities, 10 parents from the marginalized group, 5 educators, and 10 community members was drawn through purposive sampling from the Domboshava community. Social inclusion theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory were adopted for the study as they provide valuable foundations for understanding and implementing inclusive education. Community awareness campaigns, partnerships with organizations, and advocacy efforts strengthen this collaborative approach, emphasizing shared responsibility in building equitable and supportive learning environments for every child. Ultimately, this paper underscores the importance of shared responsibility in creating inclusive educational landscapes that empower learners and strengthen communities.

KEYWORDS: Community engagement, Inclusive education, inclusive practice, action research.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is a main topic in many nations nowadays, which has made it a fundamental principle in ensuring that all learners, regardless of background, abilities, or socioeconomic status, have equitable access to quality education. Inclusive education is validated by the ratified United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN 2006), which aims to equalize education and promote learning opportunities for all. Many countries are committed to inclusive education and have signed the CRPD. Zimbabwe is among them.

Community participation is one of the key factors in the success of inclusive education, as it fosters environments that support and empower diverse learners. This study explores the role of community engagement in promoting inclusive practices within education, with a specific focus on learners with disabilities in the Domboshava community.

Ultimately, this paper underscores the importance of shared responsibility in shaping inclusive educational landscapes, where every learner is empowered to succeed. By fostering collaborative relationships and advocating for inclusive policies, communities can play a crucial role in ensuring that all students receive the support they need to thrive academically and socially.

Though the community engagement plays a critical role in inclusive education, it faces some challenges that affect implementation. Some of the challenges are economic constraints, social-cultural influences, and limitations of resources. Not only do communities have barriers, but learners with disability themselves face challenges in accessing education. Common barriers such as accessibility, stigma, and lack of resources.

Background

In many societies, including Zimbabwe, education for learners with disabilities has traditionally faced numerous challenges. These range from societal attitudes and misconceptions to practical barriers such as inadequate resources and inaccessible infrastructure (Hameed, 2023). While Zimbabwe has made notable strides in promoting inclusive education through policies and frameworks, gaps still exist in ensuring learners with

disabilities receive the support they need to thrive academically and socially. Zimbabwe has followed some regulations from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Salamanca conference (EFA), the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities (CRPD). All these frameworks have one aim, which is recognizing human rights and one of them is education for everyone. Hence, learners with disabilities should be considered.

From time immemorial, people have had different perceptions and beliefs about disabilities, which have led society to exclude people with disabilities. However, the community influence has never been positive; in most cases, it has been negative due to those perspectives and beliefs. Albrecht (2021) postulates that disability was seen as a punishment from the gods, and the community believes that: one who has a disability or their parents have sinned, and that was their reward to have a child with disability. Communities have discriminated, segregated, and alienated children with disabilities for a long time, especially when it comes to the issue of education.

Looking at African communities, it clearly shows that disability has been a major cause of educational exclusion. Traditionally, Africans believed that children with disabilities were a source of shame to the family and were kept in back rooms where no one could see them (Okunade, Adediran, Coker, Bakare, Ijiga, Odulaja & Adewusi, 2023). Negative cultural beliefs associated with punishment, evil, and witchcraft relegated people with disabilities and their families to second-class citizenship, marginalizing them in their communities (Musekiwa, 2025). In such conditions, thinking about their education was a miracle, while some of them were killed.

Involving communities in the education of learners with disabilities can be a key factor in addressing their exclusion. Research has shown that community engagement can significantly enhance educational outcomes for children with disabilities, fostering a sense of belonging, boosting self-esteem, confidence, and reducing stigma and discrimination (Hameed, 2023; Raza and Iqbal, 2023).

Exploring community engagement in inclusive education, this study seeks to address critical questions about the effectiveness of collaborative approaches, identify best practices, and highlight areas for improvement. The findings will contribute to the ongoing efforts to build a

more inclusive and equitable education system, not only in Zimbabwe but also in similar settings worldwide.

Statement of the problem

Learners with disabilities in Domboshava encounter numerous barriers to accessing quality education, including societal stigma, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient resources, and limited educator training. Despite efforts to promote inclusive education, active engagement of the community in supporting learners with disabilities remains insufficient. Challenges such as isolation, low academic achievement, and restricted social integration, undermining their potential to thrive, come from a lack of collaboration between community members. To ensure equal opportunities for learners with disabilities, there is a need to explore strategies that enhance community engagement and provide some frameworks that improve educational outcomes for these learners.

Research objectives

1. Investigate the impact of community engagement in improving educational outcomes for learners with disabilities in Domboshava.
2. Identify the challenges faced by the communities in supporting inclusive education.

Research questions

1. How does community involvement impact the educational outcomes of learners with disabilities in Domboshava?
2. What challenges do communities face in supporting inclusive education for learners with disabilities?

Theoretical framework

Social inclusion theory

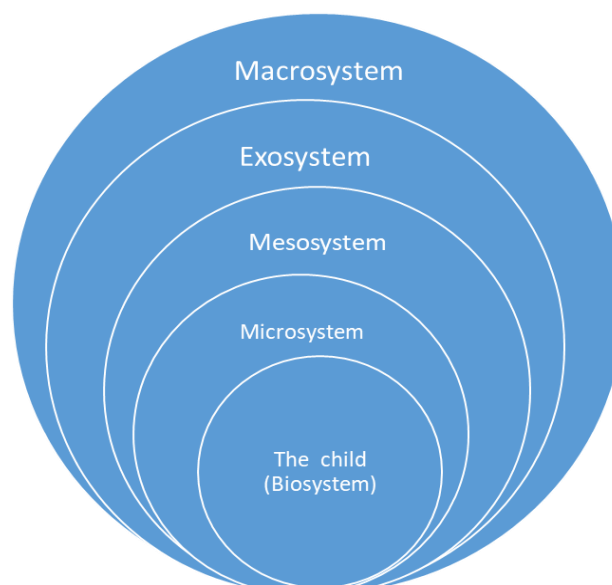
The theory is centered on the idea that everyone, regardless of their background, abilities, or circumstances, should have equal opportunities to participate fully in society or community (Ainscow, 2020). It challenges systemic barriers and promotes equitable access to education, employment, healthcare, and other social benefits. In the context of education, this theory emphasizes three major components, which are equal access, active participation, and empowerment. All learners must receive necessary support to access education and the academic environment. These include learning materials, financial, moral, and or assistive devices that help learners during the learning process. Ainscow (2020) identified strategies

and activities that facilitate participation and representation as an ongoing learning process in the context of diverse populations aimed at ensuring the constant redress of barriers to accessing opportunities for inclusion.

On active participation, the theory encourages every individual to take part in different activities that take place either in the community or school. Communities, educators, and children have to work together to remove obstacles preventing marginalized groups from engaging in learning. There is a need for collaboration and cooperation in any activities taking place. This will help learners with diverse needs to be fully included in the education system. People should recognize the strengths and potential of every individual, fostering a sense of belonging and contribution. By recognizing everyone in the community helps boost one's self-esteem and confidence. Gidley et al. (2010) pointed out that the theory argues that exclusion, whether due to disability, economic status, race, or other factors, limits personal and societal development. The main thrust of the theory is to include everyone, regardless of their background. By applying social inclusion principles, communities can create collaborative, inclusive spaces where all individuals are valued and supported.

Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological

Proposed by Bronfenbrenner, the theory highlights the roles of multiple environmental influences (family, school, and community) in shaping a child's development. The interconnected systems' impact on the learning of children with disabilities, starting with the learner him/herself. The support the child gets from the family, school, and community will help the child to reach his/her potential.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Engagement in Education

Community engagement in education refers to the active involvement of local communities in supporting and enriching the educational experiences of students (Okunade et al., 2023). Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) posit that community engagement extends the support network beyond the family unit, enriching the educational experience through diverse perspectives, resources, and opportunities.

It is vital because it recognizes that education extends beyond the boundaries of the school and acknowledges the diverse resources and expertise available within the community to support student learning and development (Borup et al., 2020). There is collaboration and cooperation between different stakeholders that include school, family, business people and others as they work together towards the success of learners. Communities (business people) can provide additional resources such as books, technology, funding, and facilities to enhance the learning environment and expand educational opportunities for learners with disability (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). By doing this, the community engagement in enhancing inclusive education because at times learners with diverse needs will be lacking the above-mentioned resources.

Advice and guidance provided to learners with disabilities by community members will help them develop skills, explore career pathways, and navigate various challenges. Students can have mentors from the community who offer guidance, support, and encouragement, assisting them in setting goals, building confidence, and developing essential life skills (Okunade et al., 2023). Community members can serve as role models, providing diverse support that will guide learners with different needs. Hence, an African proverb states, 'It takes a village to educate a child.'

Literature indicates that when communities are informed about the principles and benefits of Inclusive Education, they become active supporters and advocates (Eden, Chisom, & Adeniyi, 2024). Community engagement helps in mobilizing resources, both financial and human, essential for creating and maintaining Inclusive Education settings. Community members can contribute through fundraising, volunteering, and providing expertise, thereby addressing resource gaps (Smith, 2017). Musekiwa (2025) pointed out that the community can help in raising awareness about the importance of Inclusive Education and reducing the stigma, discrimination associated with disabilities.

Communities play a vital role in advocating for policies that support Inclusive Education. They can influence local and national governments to implement and fund Inclusive Education initiatives, ensuring that schools have the necessary support structures in place (Eden et al, 2024). A well-informed and engaged community can create a supportive environment for Inclusive Education. Parents, teachers, and community members collaborate to ensure that inclusive practices are effectively implemented, leading to better educational outcomes for all students (Okunade et al., 2023). Community involvement allows for ongoing feedback, helping schools to continuously improve their inclusive practices. This participatory approach ensures that the needs of all students are met and that Inclusive Education initiatives are responsive to the community's unique context.

Research highlights that when parents actively participate in their children's education, it fosters better learning outcomes and emotional well-being. Similarly, community engagement plays a vital role in creating an inclusive environment by raising awareness, reducing stigma, and providing additional support services. For instance, a study conducted in Kamonyi District, Rwanda, demonstrated the positive impact of community involvement in promoting inclusive education, emphasizing the role of local leaders, educators, and parents in supporting learners with disabilities.

Challenges Faced by Learners with Disabilities

Socio-economic Factors and Inclusive Education

Socio-economic factors significantly influence the implementation and success of inclusive education (Musekiwa, 2025). These factors include the availability of resources, financial stability, and the socio-economic status of families and communities. According to Smith (2017), families with higher socio-economic status are more likely to have access to educational resources, which enhances learning opportunities for children with special needs. Conversely, communities with limited resources may struggle to provide adequate support for inclusive education, leading to disparities in educational outcomes (Eden et al., 2024). Additionally, socio-economic disparities can affect teacher training and the provision of necessary accommodations for students with disabilities (Miller & Hutchins, 2021). It becomes difficult to support the child when parents have a low income.

Social Culture and Inclusive Education

Culture significantly influences the implementation of Inclusive Education by shaping attitudes, beliefs, and practices within educational systems and communities. Cultural norms

and values can either facilitate or hinder the acceptance and integration of Inclusive Education practices (Albrecht, 2021; Musekiwa, 2025). Conventional customs and beliefs can either facilitate or obstruct Inclusive Education. According to Miller & Hutchins (2021), certain cultures, communal living, and support are highly valued, which can be advantageous for Inclusive Education. On the other hand, in cultures that place a high value on uniformity and conformity, inclusive practices may encounter opposition. Cultural aspects that affect inclusion are the level of community involvement in school activities. Inclusive Education programs typically have greater success in communities when residents actively participate in school activities and support inclusive practices. A study conducted by Warren (2022) discovered that Inclusive Education programs were carried out more successfully in places where there was a high level of parental and community advocacy and involvement.

Cultural attitudes and beliefs about disability and diversity play an important role in shaping Inclusive Education practices. Societies that value diversity and inclusivity are more likely to support Inclusive Education policies and practices (Smith, 2017). Social culture influences the level of community engagement and support for Inclusive Education. In communities with a strong tradition of collective responsibility and mutual aid, there is often more active participation in creating inclusive environments, which includes advocacy for necessary resources and support for inclusive practices (Eden, et al, 2024) The level of community engagement in education, which is often culturally driven, affects the implementation of Inclusive Education. In cultures with high community involvement in education, there tends to be more support for Inclusive Education initiatives. This community support is crucial for mobilizing resources and fostering a supportive environment for all students.

Cultural norms and values shape educational practices and pedagogies. For example, cultures that emphasize collaborative learning and community involvement are likely to adopt inclusive teaching methods that cater to diverse learning needs (Miller & Hutchins, 2021). Conversely, cultures that prioritize competition and individual achievement may face challenges in implementing Inclusive Education. Social culture also influences the development and implementation of policies and legislation related to Inclusive Education. Cultural values around equity, justice, and human rights can drive the creation of policies that promote Inclusive Education. In societies where these values are deeply embedded, there is often stronger legislative support for Inclusive Education initiatives (Warren, 2022). The social inclusion theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the varying

degrees of inclusiveness within society. Looking at the theory, it guides on how societies with their different beliefs can be inclusive, hence resonates well with the study.

Methodology

By adopting participatory action research, this study explores how collaborative efforts among schools, families, and local organizations contribute to creating structured frameworks that address the diverse needs of students. Participatory research is a qualitative approach that conforms to the interpretivism paradigm. The premise of interpretive research is that reality is socially constructed; therefore, there are multiple realities (Creswell, 2024). This paradigm recognizes that reality is subjective and based on individual interpretation (Flick 2023), making qualitative research methodology ideally suitable for this approach. The paradigm was appropriate for this research because it aimed to find the reality based on the participants' experiences of the external world. This design was chosen to align with the researchers' objective: to discover the impact of community engagement and to collect the experiences shared by participants in a dialogic process within their natural environment.

Participants

Participants were purposively and conveniently selected. The study recruited a total of 40 participants. These participants included 10 students with disabilities, 5 learners without disabilities, 10 parents of learners with disabilities, 10 community members, and 5 teachers. These were taken from the Domboshava community.

Data collection methods

Through focus group discussions, interviews, and community-based workshops/ meetings, stakeholders collaborate to enhance equitable learning opportunities. Focus group discussions for learners with disabilities and those without were used to collect data. Learners interacted and shared their perceptions, feelings, and views towards the phenomena. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and they enabled the researcher and the participants to engage in dialogue (Chafe, 2024), allowing each party to follow up on the dialogue. Follow-ups on the dialogue enabled the researchers and participants to understand each other and bring relevant and quality data to the fray. It enables more data to be captured within a short period. The interviews and focus group discussions were done in a convenient place for the participants. Interviews lasted from 15 to 25 minutes, while FGDs took 45 to 90 minutes. Both interviews and FGDs were recorded using a digital recorder. Meetings were also conducted for the

participants to air out their views and challenges they face during the implementation of inclusive education.

Findings and discussion

Community Engagement in Education

The findings revealed that positive active partnerships, community engagement, and collaboration result in the successful implementation of inclusive education. When fully engaged, community, educators, and parents significantly contribute to reducing discrimination and fostering inclusive environments. In responding to the questions asked the following are responses from the participants in focus group discussions and meetings held:

The training of parents on their roles and responsibilities in identifying learners with learning barriers in accepting and tolerating one another in working towards enhancing the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Parents said

We buy learning materials for our children and ensure they attend school regularly, regardless of disabilities. we also encourage children to study and succeed, showing commitment to their children's education.

Planning, working together, and playing each role is the key to implementing successful inclusive education. We need to know our role in the school, and our role is important in community engagement and collaboration in enhancing the successful implementation of inclusive education. (participant 5).

Another parent from FGD

These meetings help us in decision-making, tolerating and accepting one another, which will be critical in enhancing the successful inclusion of learners with learning disabilities.

Some business people provide transport and equipment for children with disabilities, such as arranging wheelchair support or pooling resources to facilitate school attendance for those with disabilities. They also provide materials needed, like books, pencils, and pens. We appreciate their efforts. (participant 6)

The head teacher said

Some parents participate in regular school meetings where they discuss issues related to Inclusive Education. They share ideas, experiences, and provide input on how to improve inclusion for children with disabilities. In one instance, parents organized fundraising events to purchase educational materials that support children with different learning abilities, fostering a more inclusive environment in classrooms.

Parents and community engagement play a vital role in advocacy, emotional support, and collaboration with schools on the implementation of inclusive education. Bowen & Kisida (2024) emphasized that community engagement is crucial for creating inclusive educational environments, particularly in settings where resources are limited. Borup et al. (2020) explored the strategies used by communities to support inclusive education. This illustrates how community collaboration can address resource gaps. This presents another way in which the community and participate in the implementation of Inclusive Education by supporting schools in the integration of Inclusive Education. This resonates well with Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological where microsystem plays an important role in the education of a child. Their support is seen through the findings of the study. If the family, community, and school do not support learners with diverse needs, inclusion will not take place.

Challenges faced by the community**Socio-Economic Barriers**

The findings show that parents are participating in and contributing to their children's education; however, they face some challenges. Parents interviewed provided the following responses, with most noting financial problems as their primary barrier.

I have a child with disability and I want him to attend school like others, but I have challenges in providing what is needed at school. His teacher told me that he needs some assistive devices to aid his hearing, and I cannot afford to buy those aids. (participant 1).

I survive on selling vegetables, and I will not get money to buy items needed at school, as we want food to eat at home. In addition to that, I am the father and the mother as my husband left me after having a child with disability. (participant 2).

I have five children they all need to go to school, which puts the burden on me to buy uniforms for all of them. There are some extra resources needed for the one with disability, which I find difficult to buy because the items are expensive. (participant 5).

The source of income for the majority of parents is agriculture and vending. Most people in Domboshava survived on selling vegetables, and the business does not bring much, hence financial constraints remain the main barrier that hinders them from supporting their children in accessing education. Those sources are not sufficient given the size of the space where to practice them, and sometimes the availability of parents to practice those activities (Musekiwa, 2025). Most parents in villages are employed in low-income jobs and struggle to fulfil basic living needs, preventing them from getting involved in the education of their children (Bowen and Kisida, 2023).

Financial constraints and the high cost of specialized learning materials often hinder access to inclusive education. Looking at the place where the study was done, one can confirm that the above-mentioned barriers can be observed among other rural areas in Zimbabwe.

Among these parents, some might have more than one child going to school and they all need school fees and other things like uniforms, books and pens (Musekiwa, 2025). This becomes a challenge to support all children, hence they tend to give first preference to the able-bodied ones. The added cost of schooling children with disabilities is again an added constraint to the economic situation of the family having a child with disability. In addition to the requirements, those children need food when they come back from school, so some parents find it difficult to provide it. By aligning the socially inclusive theory to the study, it can be easily seen that the community has been involved in inclusive though, facing some limitations. The theoretical foundation offers valuable insights for many people and scholars seeking to promote more inclusive societies.

Community Participation

Engagement frameworks are often insufficient, leading to low involvement from parents and local leaders. Less engagement of parents in their children's education can be a barrier to promoting Inclusive education. As indicated by the findings, the following excerpts support:

I go to work, so sometimes when there is a meeting at school, I cannot attend. If I choose to attend, I will be asked questions at work or go under a hearing. (participant 2)

I spend a lot of time in the garden/ fields working, growing tomatoes and vegetables so that I have something to sell and get money for our living. I could not find time to attend school meetings and participate in the programs held there. (participant 4).

The curriculum is changing every time, and I have seen it as difficult that my child with disability cannot handle or understand what is needed. There are new things, content that is coming up almost every day, which gives more challenge in my child to comprehend. (participant from FDG).

The most commonly cited barriers on the part of parents, especially for dual-income earners, are work commitments or other home-school scheduling conflicts, material and psychosocial deprivation suffered by either parent or child, and parents having inappropriate beliefs and values underlying a fatalistic view of education (Miller & Hutchins, 20; Otani, 2020). Some parents may also lack the knowledge or confidence about how to be appropriately involved (Malone, 2020).

Some parents' own negative experiences as students may also influence their attitudes towards their children's academic learning and their teachers (Eden et al., 2024). Some believe that children with disabilities are not able to do certain activities or may not succeed academically, hence they neglect them. Challenges that inhibit parent engagement can include: work commitments, demands of other children, childcare difficulties, and lack of time generally (Borup et al, 2023). Parents perceiving themselves as unqualified to participate, a sense of disenfranchisement, lack of common understanding between school staff and parents about what constitutes parent involvement, leading teachers to blame families and parents to feel unappreciated (Smith, 2017). They may have had negative school experiences themselves and may feel unwelcome or uncomfortable in a school environment. They may feel that they have no contribution to make or that they will be perceived as overstepping their role (Malone, 2020).

There are many factors cited in the current literature explaining parents' limited involvement in their children's education. These include, among others, the inability of some parents to understand the educational system; the majority of parents lack knowledge about how the school system works and its concept of parental involvement (Bowen & Kisida, 2024).

Social-Cultural Influence

Stigma and misconceptions about disability persist, though religious values and community solidarity provide some support. Cultural barriers, traditional beliefs and stigmatization continue to limit the understanding and implementation of Inclusive Education. This has been evidenced by the following exceptions from respondents from meetings and focus group discussions.

Traditional beliefs lead to lower community expectations for children with disabilities like where community members conclude that Inclusive Education is for people with disabilities. Some believe that children with disabilities are not able to do certain activities. (participant 1).

Some parents believe that educating children with disabilities is a waste of time; keeping them at home and isolating them from their peers and children often denies them the right to play or interact with other children. (participant 3).

One parent conveyed

Some families hide children with disabilities from the public because they feel ashamed and fear social ostracism, and it creates conflicts in the family to identify its originality. They start to blame each other.

And one of the village leaders said

The mindset of some families leads to children with disabilities being insulted or given stigmatizing names, which reinforces their exclusion and hinders their integration into mainstream schools.

Certain local beliefs perpetuate the idea that disability is hereditary or caused by supernatural forces, and this belief system creates discrimination within families and communities, where children with disabilities are marginalized, insulted, and even physically and emotionally abused. Some parents view these children as burdens, and in some cases, girls with disabilities face double discrimination due to cultural attitudes that undervalue the education of girls. (participant 3).

There are some cases where children with disabilities are insulted by their parents, and in extreme cases, are subjected to violence or forced into dangerous situations, such as sexual abuse, due to their vulnerability and lack of support from the community. (participant 4).

Some people in the community still see disabilities as shameful or view the inclusion of children with disabilities as unnecessary or secondary to the education of able-bodied children. According to Warren (2022) discovered that Inclusive Education programs were carried out more successfully in places where there was a high level of parental advocacy and involvement. According to Mugisha and Mutesa (2020), social networks enable communities to leverage collective resources and expertise, thereby overcoming challenges that individual stakeholders might face.

In some parts of the community, disabilities are seen as a curse or punishment from God, leading to significant social stigma and discrimination (Albrecht, 2021). This stigmatization makes parents reluctant to send their children to school, limiting their access to education. Even children themselves may not want to go to school due to labelling. According to the given examples, it is clear that reinforcing the exclusion leads people with disabilities to trauma and a lack of self-esteem and confidence.

Due to cultural misconceptions, children with disabilities often experience emotional trauma. They are denied the opportunity to play, interact, or attend school with their peers, which damages their self-confidence and overall well-being (Musekiwa, 2025; Otani, 2020). Musekiwa (2025) states that the community needs to understand the rights of people with disability and to make sure that all children are considered the same and that having a child with disability is not a curse because they are children like others.

CONCLUSION

Community engagement plays a crucial role in making inclusive education effective. When families, educators, and local organizations work together, they create a network of support that enhances learning opportunities for marginalized groups. The Domboshava community, like many others, faces challenges in fully implementing inclusive education, requiring strategic efforts in advocacy, resource allocation, and policy development to bridge existing gaps.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher makes the following recommendations. The study recommends collaboration and cooperation among community members to practice inclusiveness in the Domboshava community. More workshops and training sessions should be conducted to educate parents about the importance of their involvement in the education of

learners with disabilities. Also educating the community on disability issues to remove cultural beliefs. Encourage local leaders and organizations to actively participate in supporting learners with disabilities. Lastly, the government should also help in terms of financial support.

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