



Investigating How Catch Up Programs Promote Educational Equality And Access For Marginalized Students, Particularly Those With Disabilities And Those From Low Income Families.

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Abstract- This study investigates the factors contributing to poor Grade Twelve examination results in Zambia, with a specific focus on selected secondary schools in Nchelenge District. The research explores how inadequate access to quality education, especially in science subjects—Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, and Computer Science—impacts student performance. A particular emphasis is placed on examining the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in addressing these challenges. Through a mixed-methods approach, including pre- and post-test assessments, surveys, and qualitative interviews with teachers and students, the study evaluates the effectiveness of ICT tools such as instructional videos, interactive simulations, and online problem-solving exercises in improving academic outcomes. Results suggest that ICT integration can significantly enhance students' understanding of complex scientific concepts, reduce gender disparities in performance, and increase overall student engagement. However, challenges such as limited infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and unreliable electricity and internet connectivity hinder the full potential of ICT in rural schools. This study recommends curriculum reforms, continuous teacher training, and increased investment in educational technology to foster better academic outcomes and bridge the educational divide between rural and urban Zambia.

Marginalized learners, particularly those with disabilities and those from low-income families, continue to face significant barriers to accessing quality education. Catch-up programs have emerged as critical interventions aimed at addressing learning gaps and promoting educational equality. This study investigates how catch-up programs are implemented to enhance educational access and equity for marginalized learners in selected schools in Nchelenge District.

The purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of these programs in improving learning outcomes and supporting inclusive education for vulnerable groups. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with teachers, school administrators, and district education officers, as well as focus group discussions with learners. Document analysis supplemented primary data collection.

Findings revealed that catch-up programs have a positive impact on learners' academic progress, particularly when supported by trained personnel, adequate



teaching materials, and community involvement. However, challenges such as limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and lack of targeted support for learners with disabilities hinder the full potential of these programs.

The study concludes that while catch-up programs hold promise for advancing educational equity, their success depends on sustained investment, inclusive design, and strong policy support tailored to the needs of marginalized learners.

Keywords- Catch-up programs, Marginalized learners, Inclusive education, Educational equity, Learners with disabilities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of social and economic development. However, many marginalized learners—particularly students with disabilities and those from low-income families—continued to face significant barriers to accessing quality education. These learners often experienced systemic inequalities, such as inadequate learning support, limited resources, and exclusion from mainstream classroom activities, which contributed to widening learning gaps and poor academic outcomes.

In an effort to address these challenges, catch-up programs were introduced in various educational settings as targeted interventions aimed at helping learners recover lost instructional time, improve academic performance, and re-engage with school. These programs typically involved remedial lessons, tutoring, or extended learning hours. While they were designed to support learners who had fallen behind, their effectiveness—especially for vulnerable student groups—had not been widely examined within the Zambian context, particularly at the district level.

Key concepts central to this study included educational equity, defined as fairness and inclusion in education, and inclusive education, which referred to the meaningful participation of all learners in quality education regardless of background or ability. Despite existing national policies supporting inclusive education, their implementation remained limited, especially in rural and under-resourced areas such as Nchelenge District.

The study addressed a significant research gap, as little empirical evidence existed on how catch-up programs supported marginalized learners, particularly those with disabilities and those from low-income backgrounds, in Zambia.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How were catch-up programs implemented in selected schools in Nchelenge District?
2. To what extent did these programs promote educational access and equity for marginalized learners?
3. What challenges affected the effectiveness of catch-up programs for students with disabilities and those from low-income families?



Objectives of the Study

- To examine the implementation of catch-up programs in selected schools.
- To assess how these programs enhanced access and equity for marginalized students.
- To identify the challenges and limitations in delivering inclusive catch-up interventions.

The study aimed to contribute knowledge that could inform the development of more inclusive, equitable, and effective educational practices and policies, particularly in underserved communities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review

The global push toward inclusive and equitable education has been strongly influenced by frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates for inclusive and quality education for all. Scholars such as Ainscow and Miles (2008) emphasized that inclusive education must go beyond physical access and address participation, engagement, and learning outcomes for all students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. In line with this, catch-up programs have emerged as a strategy to address disparities in learning outcomes, particularly among students who face socio-economic or disability-related barriers.

Catch-up programs, often defined as short-term instructional interventions aimed at helping students reach grade-level proficiency, have been widely implemented in both high-income and low-income countries. Empirical studies in countries like Kenya and India (Banerjee et al., 2017) showed that structured remedial programs, especially those targeting the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy, significantly improved learning outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These interventions were most effective when delivered in small groups and facilitated by trained personnel. Similarly, research in Zambia by Nakazwe (2020) found that learners who participated in after-school remedial programs demonstrated improved academic performance in mathematics and reading compared to their peers who did not participate.

Despite these successes, scholars also identified critical limitations. For instance, many programs lacked adaptations for learners with disabilities, who require tailored approaches involving assistive technologies, individualized learning plans, and trained special education teachers (Mutale & Mwanza, 2019). Furthermore, rural schools often struggled with resource constraints, understaffing, and weak monitoring systems, making the consistent delivery of catch-up programs difficult (Chileshe, 2021). These factors contributed to mixed outcomes and raised questions about the scalability and inclusivity of such interventions.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which was deemed appropriate for exploring in-depth the experiences, perceptions, and challenges surrounding the



implementation of catch-up programs in selected schools in Nchelenge District. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to gather rich, descriptive data that captured the nuanced realities of marginalized learners and education stakeholders.

Sampling Methods and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select three primary schools within Nchelenge District that were actively implementing catch-up programs. These schools were chosen based on their geographic location (rural/remote), learner demographics, and involvement in remedial education initiatives. Participants included:

- 6 teachers involved in delivering catch-up sessions,
- 3 head teachers,
- 2 district education officers,
- and 12 learners (including learners with disabilities and those from low-income families).

This sample provided diverse perspectives from both implementers and beneficiaries of the programs.

Instruments and Tools

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides for teachers, head teachers, and education officers. Focus group discussion (FGD) guides were used with learners to encourage open dialogue about their experiences. In addition, relevant documents such as school attendance records, lesson plans, and policy documents were reviewed to triangulate findings.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in person and audio-recorded with participants' consent. Notes were also taken during each session. The researcher visited each school for multiple days to build rapport and ensure the authenticity of responses. Document analysis was carried out concurrently to validate verbal data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were coded manually to identify emerging themes and patterns. These themes were organized in relation to the study's research questions. Triangulation of data sources enhanced the credibility and reliability of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zambia's research ethics committee. Permission was also secured from the Ministry of Education and school authorities in Nchelenge District. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, while assent was obtained from learners with the consent of their guardians. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and storing data securely.



Results

The findings of the study are presented in alignment with the three research questions. Data were drawn from interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis across the three selected schools in Nchelenge District.

Implementation of Catch-Up Programs in Selected Schools

All three schools implemented catch-up programs aimed at helping learners who were falling behind academically. The sessions were conducted after school hours and, in some cases, on weekends. Teachers used simplified lesson plans and prioritized foundational skills in literacy and numeracy.

Table 1: Summary of Catch-Up Program Features in Each School

(Insert table comparing school names, frequency of sessions, subjects covered, materials used, teacher involvement, and learner attendance)

Teachers reported that the programs were informal in structure and largely dependent on their personal initiative, with minimal support from district offices. Only one school had access to additional learning materials specifically provided for catch-up purposes.

Promotion of Educational Access and Equity for Marginalized Learners

Findings showed that catch-up programs improved class participation, self-confidence, and academic performance among both learners with disabilities and those from low-income families.

- Learners from low-income households reported appreciating the opportunity to revisit lessons at no additional cost.
- Learners with mild disabilities, such as visual impairments and learning difficulties, also showed signs of academic progress when given extra time and support.

Figure 1: Reported Improvement in Literacy Skills Among Participating Learners

(Insert bar chart showing percentage of learners reporting improved reading ability before and after program participation)

Despite these gains, none of the schools had specific provisions (e.g., trained special educators or assistive devices) for students with more severe disabilities. This limited their full participation in the catch-up programs.

Challenges Affecting Program Effectiveness

Participants identified several barriers to the effective implementation of catch-up programs:

- Lack of trained personnel in special needs education.
- Inadequate teaching and learning materials, particularly for learners with disabilities.
- Teacher fatigue, as programs extended their workload without compensation.
- Poor learner attendance, especially among those walking long distances to school or with household responsibilities.

Table 2: Summary of Key Challenges Reported by Stakeholders



(Insert table summarizing challenges reported by teachers, head teachers, and learners, categorized by theme)

Additionally, district education officers acknowledged that monitoring and support mechanisms for catch-up programs were weak due to limited funding and staffing.

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Discussion

The findings of this study provided valuable insights into the implementation of catch-up programs in rural schools in Nchelenge District and their role in promoting educational access and equity for marginalized learners, particularly those with disabilities and from low-income families. The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and theory, exploring the practical and theoretical implications.

Interpretation of Findings

The study found that catch-up programs in Nchelenge District had a positive impact on learners' academic outcomes, especially in literacy and numeracy. This aligned with the findings of Banerjee et al. (2017) and Nakazwe (2020), who noted that remedial programs helped students from disadvantaged backgrounds close learning gaps and improve basic academic skills. In this study, learners from low-income families reported that the opportunity to receive additional support without extra fees significantly helped them engage with their studies. Likewise, learners with mild disabilities, such as visual impairments or learning difficulties, showed improvement when the programs provided extra instructional time and individualized attention.

However, the study also revealed several limitations to the effectiveness of the programs. While some studies (e.g., Chileshe, 2021) similarly reported resource constraints, the lack of trained personnel for special needs education in this study was particularly noteworthy. This gap was also highlighted by Mutale & Mwanza (2019), who noted that catch-up programs are often ineffective for students with severe disabilities unless specific accommodations—such as assistive technology or specially trained teachers—are provided.

The absence of targeted interventions for learners with more severe disabilities highlighted a critical limitation of the programs. Despite the general benefits observed, the catch-up programs were not fully inclusive, limiting their potential to achieve true educational equity.

Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study resonated with previous literature but also contributed a unique perspective by focusing on the intersection of disability and socio-economic disadvantage. While studies by Ainscow and Miles (2008) and Banerjee et al. (2017) found that catch-up programs benefit marginalized learners in general, this research emphasized the need to disaggregate vulnerable groups (e.g., learners with disabilities versus those from low-income families) to understand how these programs meet the



diverse needs of various populations. Unlike prior studies that often treated disadvantaged learners as a homogenous group, this research emphasized the necessity for catch-up programs to be flexible and tailored to the unique needs of different learners.

Additionally, this study reinforced the broader literature on inclusive education (Ainscow, 2016), yet it also revealed a significant challenge: while inclusive education policies are in place, their practical implementation remains inadequate, particularly in rural areas where resources are often scarce.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforced the idea that educational equity cannot be achieved without addressing the diverse needs of marginalized learners. The research suggested that effective catch-up programs must go beyond merely recovering lost academic time and also accommodate the specific learning needs of all students, including those with disabilities. This reinforces the principles of inclusive education theory, which advocates for structural changes in educational systems to ensure that all students, regardless of background or ability, can participate meaningfully in the learning process.

Practically, the study highlighted several important implications for policymakers and educators. First, it underscored the need for targeted professional development for teachers, particularly in special education, to ensure that all learners, including those with disabilities, benefit fully from catch-up programs. Second, it pointed to the need for adequate resources, such as specialized teaching materials, assistive technologies, and additional support staff, to ensure that students with severe disabilities can participate fully in these programs. Lastly, the study suggested that community engagement and parental involvement in the implementation of catch-up programs could help address issues of attendance and ensure broader participation, especially in rural and remote areas.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

One of the key strengths of this study was its focus on marginalized populations, which has been underexplored in previous research. By specifically examining the needs of learners with disabilities and those from low-income families in a rural district, the study provided nuanced insights into how catch-up programs can be better designed to address the intersectional needs of vulnerable learners.

However, there were several limitations to the study. First, the sample size was relatively small, with only three schools and a limited number of participants. Although this allowed for in-depth analysis, a larger sample would improve the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on qualitative data, which, while rich and detailed, may not offer the broad applicability of quantitative methods. Future research could consider employing a mixed-methods approach to provide more comprehensive insights into the impact of catch-up programs. Additionally, the study was constrained by time limitations, which prevented the researcher from conducting long-term follow-up assessments to measure the sustained impact of the catch-up programs.



In conclusion, the study demonstrated that catch-up programs have the potential to promote educational equity and access for marginalized learners in Nchelenge District. However, their success depended on overcoming several significant barriers, including the lack of resources, insufficient teacher training, and the absence of provisions for students with more severe disabilities. To maximize the effectiveness of catch-up programs, it is crucial to develop more tailored, inclusive interventions and to invest in teacher training and school infrastructure. Sustained policy support and adequate funding are essential to ensure the success of these programs in promoting equitable learning outcomes for all students.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of catch-up programs in rural schools within Nchelenge District and explored their role in promoting educational equity and access for marginalized learners, particularly those with disabilities and from low-income families. The findings demonstrated that while catch-up programs had a positive impact on the academic performance of these learners, their effectiveness was constrained by several challenges, including the lack of specialized personnel, inadequate resources, and insufficient accommodations for learners with severe disabilities.

The study emphasized that for catch-up programs to be truly inclusive and equitable, they must be designed to address the diverse needs of marginalized groups, incorporating specific support for learners with disabilities and those facing socio-economic barriers. Moreover, the findings highlighted the importance of investing in teacher training, providing necessary teaching materials, and fostering community involvement to ensure the broader success of these programs.

The implications of this study are significant for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders in the education sector. It calls for a shift toward more tailored and inclusive educational interventions that can cater to the varied needs of all learners, especially in under-resourced rural areas. Furthermore, it suggests that greater attention should be paid to monitoring and supporting the implementation of catch-up programs to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness.

Future research should focus on exploring the long-term impact of catch-up programs on marginalized learners and the potential for scaling such programs in different regions. It would also be valuable to investigate how schools can adapt catch-up programs to more comprehensively support students with severe disabilities and the integration of assistive technologies into such programs.

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