

# Management Strategies for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Mainstream Classrooms: Evidence from Selected Special Units in Lusaka Province of Zambia

Charity Busiku and Beatrice Matafwali

## ABSTRACT

The study sought to establish management strategies and parental involvement in management of learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Special Units in Lusaka. A descriptive design using qualitative research approach was used to conduct the study. The sample consisted of thirty (30) participants comprising 6 school administrators, 12 teachers and 12 parents from 6 selected primary special schools and units and communities in Lusaka district. Purposeful sampling procedure was used to select school administrators, teachers, and parents. Interview guides and observation checklists were used as data collection tools. Data was then analyzed thematically. The study revealed that teachers mainly use individualized and group approaches. It was further revealed that a combination of management strategies are applied including: use of real sensory objects, music, ADL, ABC therapy, time-outs, games and counseling to foster learning, communication, social and behavioral development which however rarely used. However, involvement of parents was minimal and challenges such as lack of knowledge, specialised professionals, materials and resources, assessment, poor pre-service training, communication barriers, over enrolment, lack of multi-disciplinary approach among other challenges were major barriers to implementation of effective management. The study recommends continuous professional development for teachers and improved home school collaborations.

**Keywords:** Autism, Children, Management, Special Primary Schools and Units

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**C. Busiku\***

Department of Educational Psychology Studies, Chipata College of Education, Zambia.

(e-mail: busikucharity@yahoo.com)

**B. Matafwali**

Department of Educational Psychology Sociology and Special Education.

University of Zambia, Zambia.

(e-mail: bmatafwali2000@yahoo.com)

\*Corresponding Author

## I. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a diverse developmental disorder associated with atypical development in social functioning, language and communication and unusual behavioral interests (Marsh & Wolfe, 2002). Autism has long term prognosis and may affect individual functioning in social relations and independent living later in life. Increasingly, evidence on the increasing prevalence rates of Autism Spectrum has propelled the need for early identification and intervention through an inclusive approach. Research has demonstrated that educational related intervention including behavioral strategies and rehabilitative therapies are cornerstones of management of Autism Spectrum Disorders (Myers & Johnson, 2007). Such intervention approaches if well integrated with family approach do not only help in enhancing the child's day to day functioning but also in promoting overall development to enhance the child's

ability to learn, socialize and equips the family with necessary knowledge and skills to manage the child and cope with the disorder in the home setting. Although the policy and legislative environment is reasonably sound for inclusion of children with disabilities within mainstream classrooms, research on classroom management for children with Autism is relatively limited. This study therefore explored management strategies employed by teachers to create supportive learning environments for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in inclusive classrooms.

## II. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

ASD is often associated with developmental delays with an estimated 80% of children with Autism having deficits in intellectual functioning ranging from mild to profound whereas 20% have average or above average intelligence (Marsh & Wolfe, 2002). These deficits might affect the child's potential to learn in diverse ways including inability

to filter unnecessary information (Wainwright-Sharp & Bryson, 1996), difficulties with selective attention or shifts in focus (Ochs Kremer-Sadlik *et al.*, 2001), and deficits with attending to meaningful aspects of the learning environment, especially when it's not explicitly stated (Klin, 2000). This is compounded by challenges in other areas of development including: social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, creative play and sensory processing (Bowe, 2004; Wilmshurst & Brue, 2010). Other scholars have also highlighted deficits in following classroom instruction, along with the subtle vocal and facial cues of teachers (Bowe, 2004; Wilmshurst & Brue, 2010).

Despite growing evidence on Autism Spectrum Disorders, there is inadequate knowledge and awareness of the condition in Sub Saharan Africa, Zambia inclusive as documented by Bakare *et al.* (2011, 13). Nyoni (2011) observes that there is not much research and knowledge on Autism in Zambia among health and medical professionals. Tood *et al.* (2014) note that today's teachers still report feeling unprepared to meet challenges of Autism. Munsaka and Matafwali (2013) have further observed that even though Autism Spectrum Disorders is recognized in Zambia, it has not received adequate attention in the current education provision. This knowledge gap coupled with lack of policy framework and inaccessible diagnostic and treatment services has resulted into underrepresentation, misunderstanding, and misplacement of children with Autism in the education system (Munsaka & Matafwali, 2013). Studies have further shown that children with ASD are approximately 20 times more likely to be socially excluded at school compared to their peers (Humphrey 2008).

Education provision for children with Autism should therefore go beyond merely focusing on academic but must encompass strategies that address communication, socialization and behavioral problems of the child. Classroom management has therefore been identified as an effective strategy to support children with Autism in the learning process. Several management strategies such as therapy of maladaptive behaviors, communication, social skills, daily-living skills, play and leisure skills, structured educational processes have been highlighted (APA, 2013). Effective implementation of management strategies largely depends on teacher's knowledge and understanding characteristics of Autistic children. Hart and Malian's (2013) study on special education directors on teacher preparation and licentiate in Autism spectrum disorders revealed that most teacher graduates receive minimal to no preparation in evidence-based practices for students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum disorders. Additionally, parents play a major role in the management of children with ASD as they are considered the first teachers (Desforjes, 2003). Munsaka and Matafwali (2013) have emphasized that the management strategies for children with ASD cannot be effective without parental involvement hence the need to foster home-school environment relationships to ensure consistence in providing supportive and stimulating environments and generalization of behaviors in different settings. Todd *et al.* (2014) study in Bridging the Gap in Teacher-Parent Partnership for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders reveals that teachers have

reported barriers in not knowing effective strategies to engage parents, not having time after completing all their tasks to address parent engagement and not realizing the value of family participation.

### III. STUDY OBJECTIVES

- a) Determine the management strategies used in meeting the needs of learners with autism in school.
- b) Establish parental involvement in the management strategies of learners with autism in school.
- c) Establish challenges faced in the management strategies of learners with autism.

### IV. METHODS

A qualitative design was applied to explore perception of teachers on effective strategies to creating and maintaining an inclusive classroom for children with ASD within mainstream classrooms. The research goal was to explore management strategies applied by teachers for including children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. A descriptive study was conducted using in-depth interviews.

#### A. Participants

A purposively selected sample of six (6) school administrators, twelve (12) teachers and twelve (12) parents in selected schools of Lusaka district of Zambia.

#### B. Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Zambia Research Ethics Committee for Social Sciences. Informed consent was obtained from participants.

#### C. Data Analysis

Data was analysed using qualitative approaches and classified according to themes.

### V. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

#### A. Management Strategies for Learners with Autism in Schools

The study revealed that management strategies employed by the teachers depend on the teachers understanding on the characteristics of the Autistic child and is highly individualized. The common responses on the understanding of Autism are that children lack social interaction, communication/speech, repetitive /violent behaviors, emotional instability, acts in own world and ways, intellectual/ mental disorder and do not want noise. Instructional strategies are individual based and all teachers mentioned the use of an individualized education plan alongside group learning.

One teacher at a special unit explained that, "*the teaching and learning for autistic children is different because they differ in intelligence and are unique so mostly through the IEP*". Another teacher mentioned that, "*other autistics benefit from group learning you know they are prompted to talk and interact with peers so we also use it alongside the IEP*".

And a head teacher from a special school explained that, *“we accommodate learners with autism by making sure that we restructure certain learning environments, allocate readily available materials and of course sensitize other learners and peers.”*

### 1. Teaching goals

The study revealed that children with mild to moderate Autism progress to higher learning whilst the severe are mainly taught Activities for Daily Living (ADL). One female teacher mentioned that, *“the goal is to help those with mild autism to progress to higher grades while those with severe to attain independence for daily living skills like toileting, feeding, sensory input, dressing, eating, etc. and to be able to communicate their needs.”*

Another female teacher mentioned that, *“goals depend on whether autism is severe moderate or mild and our goal is to mainstream those to upper grades in the regular classes after acquiring basic skills or independence.”*

### 2. Specialized teaching and learning materials

When questioned on specialized materials both head teachers and teachers revealed that learners with autism require specialized materials. A female head teacher mentioned that, *“you know children with autism lack imagination attention socialization and communication therefore require materials that can make them learn. You know they need practical hands on materials to concentrate. It is a pity that we do not have enough materials.”*

A male teacher from a special unit said, *“Learners with autism need to use materials that are both at home and school to continue the routine process of learning”.*

Another female teacher added that, *“we engage materials and activities that they like and can help with speech and social interactions, but we have challenges accessing practical objects.”*

### 3. Social and communication management strategies

Teachers and head teachers gave out the following strategies such as the use of group learning, sports, school assembly, music, peers, games, use of objects and cultural and extra-curricular activities to foster social and communication. One male teacher explained that, *“I use class play activities to make the child learn social skills and sometimes playing with sand water bouncing a ball with friends but in mind of the mood of the child.”*

While another female teacher added that, *“objects like pictures, toys music enhances them to talk it is just that we lack materials here”.* On the other hand, head teachers and teachers find difficulties in fostering social development of learners with Autism due to the withdrawn nature of the disability. One teacher mentioned that, *“Children with autism interact naturally when they want to and have their own ways of communicating. It is hard to make them to interact.”*

Out of the 6 schools visited, only 2 schools offer speech therapy to learners with Autism. There are no trained speech therapists in most of the schools to help children with speech problems.

A teacher at a special school revealed that, *“I am not a trained speech therapist to offer speech therapy to learners with no communication skills but where I manage to help*

*with my strategies I come in but it is difficult with the large class numbers and parents who enroll children late.”* Another teacher explained that, *“I strategically include goals on language in an IEP if a child has problems with speech in my teaching which I foster through music or games.”*

### 4. Behavioral management strategies

All the head teachers and teachers revealed that all learners with Autism in the schools have behavioral problems such as self-stimulatory, repetitive, disruptive, aggressive, isolative and hyperactive behaviors among others. Strategies such as ABC therapy, time outs, keeping the child busy with work and talking firmly are commonly used on learners with behavioral problems in the schools the study was carried out.

One head teacher from a special school indicated that, *“I advise children with behavioral problems to take time-outs move backwards when they are irritated. You know children with autism have problems taking turns because they get attached to a particular object or want sameness in routines.”*

Another female teacher added that, *“the control of a child’s behavior should match from home to school and all signs must be similar but it is rare because you find the child absconds for a long time.”*

On the other hand, teachers mentioned the failure of controlling behaviors of learner’s. For example one teacher explained that,

*“Since communication is a challenge with children with autism, they easily get frustrated because they cannot be heard or say their wants and managing the behavior they will portray is merely impossible to control until maybe when the child just calms down.”* It was also notable through observations in most schools that teachers were unable to control disruptive behaviors of learners with Autism due to the large numbers of learners with other disabilities in the classes.

### B. Parental Involvement in the Management of Learners with Autism

When head teachers, teachers and parents were questioned on parental involvement in the learning of children with autism, the study established from all those other parents are involved while other parents are not. One male head teacher from a special a special unit noted that,

*“I say yes and no because not all parents are engaged in the learning of their children apart from delivering necessities. For some it is like a relief to drop the child at school what happens there they don’t mind. In certain instances, we have heard that parents are still hiding their children in homes.”*

A female teacher from a special school said, *“Some parents are involved because we call for meetings especially when trying to plan for the learners for routines to continue at home. We have orientation with the new parents.”*

While another female teacher from a special unit said that, *“there are no direct activities we can use to involve the parents in the actual learning process apart from meetings and maybe home work. There is not much we can do you know.”*

One of the parents from a low-density area pointed out

that, *"I attend PTA meetings and school discussions when am called at the school and I help my child with homework which teachers give. I also try to provide materials needed."*

And another parent from a high density area explained that,

*"I do not understand Autism and i am the only person parent fending for our family hence it is not easy to be involved to provide materials needed and my husband says it is waiting time taking our child to school as he regards him mental."*

### 1. Strategies for parental involvement

Strategies such as orientation and school programs, parent teacher meetings, open day, homework, IEP and discussions were brought forth by the head teachers and teachers. For example, a female head teacher at a special school said,

*"We teach parents strategies that they can use on the child at home too because you know when managing a child with autism a no at home school should be the same at school. They need routines not to get confused so we sit down with parents to develop a program."*

A female teacher from a special unit added that, *"we give homework to children which requires their parents to help even during holidays. You know we try to use the IEP for our learners which also involve the parents input."*

On the other hand, a male teacher from a special school mentioned that, *"parents are not really involved because there are no activities for them. They are willing to learn though there is not much which can be done and in certain instances parents do not want to be told what to."*

In addition a parent mentioned that, *"I am willing to learn more about autism but the school does not provide opportunities for me to learn more. My role s is to bring the child and provide the disinfectants and materials required."*

### C. Challenges Faced in Management of Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Several challenges are faced by the head teachers, teachers and parents in managing children with autism in the selected Zambian schools.

#### 1. Lack of knowledge and specialized professionals

Surprisingly, even though most teachers in the specials schools and units were trained in special education, the majority complained to have no proper knowledge on the disability and the lack of other personnel such as speech therapists as all the learners have speech and communication problems in the schools. One teacher with a degree in special education lamented that,

*"What I feel is that we graduate from college without really understanding how to reach to these children. You find strategies on your own when you even didn't learn about it. There is a lot to be done. You know sometimes we fail to control our learner's behaviors."* It was also evident through observations that some teachers were not able to cope up with certain behaviors of the learners during lessons.

Another teacher mentioned that, *"the knowledge I have on Autism is not practical enough to meet the specific needs of the learners. Look at the University of Zambia and Zambia Institute of Special Education (ZAMISE) they do not offer specific full year courses on Autism but a course on visual*

*impairment is there maybe if we were trained on Autism on its own we would have had wider knowledge."*

In addition a teacher at a special school expounded that, *"most children with Autism have speech problems now as we are not trained therapists and we find problems in communicating with the learners when teaching and you know communication is part of our daily lives. The IEP we put across doesn't even work because the collaboration that is supposed to be there is only done by the teacher."*

One female head teacher added that, *"we are not trained on the appropriate practical strategies to reach out to learners with autism and because we do not have collaboration with other line ministries that can help like the ministry of health to form strategies together on a round table. Another head teacher added that, "we have challenges in assessment because they only give us the outcome and hence a lot of work is lamped on the teacher who is supposed to be a psychologist, caregiver, speech and occupational therapist because people are not there."*

And a parent revealed that, *"after diagnosis at the hospital I was not told what to do next until I enrolled my child in school after asking around in the compound I live. I would like to learn more about it so that I can help my child."*

#### 2. Lack of resources, materials and relevant curriculum

Head teachers and teachers revealed the lack of resources, materials and transportation for learners which are all attributed to poor funding from government. Majority of the teachers mentioned the lack of teaching materials like textbooks that match the 2013 curriculum. One female teacher at a special unit explained that,

*"Children with Autism need to use various activities when learning and materials that attract them but we do not have hence it is difficult to teach".* While another teacher added that, *"there are no proper books to meet the curriculum and certain topics are not relevant to children with Autism looking at their daily routines and rituals."*

A head teacher from a special school emphasized that, *"teaching and learning materials are a big challenge because our learners for them to learn need visual real objects that help with mental tasking because they always have a problem and we do not have so they easily get bored. And madam some activities for social interaction need resources."*

#### 3. Overcrowding in classrooms and discrimination

There is over enrolment of learners with special needs and understaffing of teachers in all the schools observed that affects delivery of lessons and controlling of disruptive behaviors of autistic children. One teacher explained that,

*"Classroom numbers are big we end up generalizing lessons as a group and fail to render individual attention to the learners and at times it takes time for them to grasp concepts and you find that they have communication barriers."*

Another teacher added that, *"it is not easy to handle children with Autism in a group and their violent behavior of throwing toys is difficult to control because the teacher is overloaded with other learners and it takes time to know the learners."*

Additionally, head teachers and teachers revealed that there is discrimination of learners from regular teachers and classes. One teacher mentioned that, *“Administration would rather stock in the ‘normal classes’ and laboratories and look at abilities of special children to be going nowhere.”*

#### 4. Absenteeism of learners and lack of parental involvement

Teachers complained of absenteeism of learners with autism which disrupts the learning progress. Teachers attributed absenteeism to the lack of transportation and commitment of certain parents towards learning. A teacher from a special school explained that, *“it draws us back in learning because routines are disturbed and you find that you have to start from scratch the day the learner’s reports. Parents also do not help with homework”*. Another teacher explained that, *“learners especially those from compounds do not even bring necessities required such as disinfectants and tissue and you know toileting is a problem for most of these children.”*

On the other hand one parent explained that, *“I do not work and the little my husband makes cannot allow us to buy the required material or even go to UTH for speech therapy. Sometimes my child remains for school because of no transport.”*

Another parent explained that, *“it has been difficult for me to cope with my child because after diagnosis I have not learnt much apart from what I see and hear from his teachers.”*

## VI. DISCUSSION

Management of Autism spectrum involves therapy of maladaptive behaviors, communication, social skills, daily-living skills, play and leisure skills and structured educational processes (AAP, 2007). The study revealed that management strategies employed by the teachers depend on the understandings on the characteristics of the Autistic child. The findings of the study on strategies employed are in line with Ehiemua’s (2014) study who discussed educational implications with regard to characteristics of the learner who can be placed in mainstream, inclusive or special schools. The head teachers and teachers from the schools gave out educational, social and behavioral management strategies with the use of specialized materials and objects that are used to meet the needs of learners. Even though strategies were given, it was acknowledged from all the schools that there are not fully trained to meet the needs of learners with Autism and attributed to poor-pre service training and lack of seminars.

It is worth noting that even though educational strategies were outlined, the study findings did not reveal different instructional strategies that teachers use in meeting the needs of learners with Autism in the schools which are explained in detail by Flynn and Healy (2012) such as demonstrating and modeling expected skills, providing visual schedules through written or picture symbols to increase understanding, maintaining eye contact to capture attention and motivate learners with the use of reinforcement such as short breaks of favorite toy or activity. Such instructional strategies might increase the

likelihood of the learners to be engaged, enjoy and be attentive in the learning process. There is need therefore to make Autism preservice training intense or be taught as a full course to allow adequate practical knowledge be obtained.

As the study established that learners with autism in all the schools have problems with social interaction and communication, teachers use various strategies to foster. Similarly, Jordan (2003) explains that socially, children with Autism experience profound difficulties in relating to other people even when they have average or above average intelligence. On the other hand, other head teachers and teachers revealed finding difficulties in fostering social development of learners with Autism due to the withdrawn nature of the disability. The findings are similar to the findings of Mwalikanga (2012) who when examining how teachers influence the development of social interaction for learners with autism in Tanzania revealed challenges described by the teachers such as the lack of knowledge on Autism, poor support from parents and environment challenges

Out of the 6 schools visited, only 2 schools offer speech therapy to learners with Autism. There are no trained speech therapists in most of the schools to help children with speech problems and most of the educators revealed finding challenges in fostering social and communication development to the learners. It is expected that speech therapy is offered to learners with communication and speech problems. Folden (2009) therefore, stresses the use of early intensive behavioral interventions such as the ABA and speech therapy to promote social and language-communication development in children with Autism.

In all the schools under study, learners with autism have behavioral problems and strategies such as ABC therapy, time outs, keeping the child busy with work and talking firmly are commonly used on learners. Addabo (2011) also emphasizes the use of ABC therapy in behavioral intervention to know when the child is stressed, has communication barriers, lacks understanding and attention, sensory stimulation, and escapes from demands and loss of control. On the other hand, the findings of the study also revealed that behaviors of children with autism cannot be controlled.

The failure to control disruptive behaviors can be attributed to the lack of knowledge on the disorder and due to the large numbers of learners with other disabilities in the classes. The findings are consistent with the findings of the studies by Hart and Malian (2013) and Busby *et al.* (2012) who reveal that teachers lack basic knowledge with minimal or no training and field-based experiences in handling and accommodating children with Autism in schools. It can therefore be assumed that children with Autism are mismanaged or do not acquire a meaningful education that is supposed to help in minimizing the deficits of the disorder that are characterized by social, communication and behavioral problems as the teachers reported to having low knowledge on the disorder. Behavioral therapy is therefore cardinal for all educational practitioners in order to be able to manage learners with Autism Spectrum disorders. Coming to parental involvement, there is the lack of collaboration with parents and other required professionals on the

Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Teachers reported parents not being collaborative and also not finding ways of including parents in the teaching and learning activities. On the other hand, Parents attributed to teachers not providing opportunities for involvement in school issues of their children with Autism. Similarly, Todd *et al.* (2014) study in Bridging the Gap in Teacher-Parent Partnership for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders reveals that teachers have reported barriers in not knowing effective strategies to engage parents, not having time after completing all their tasks to address parent engagement and not realizing the value of family participation. Both teachers and parents need to realize the importance of collaboration and their contribution to improve the education provided to the child with Autism.

Lastly, a number of challenges were indicated by the educators and parents in managing learners with autism of which some have already been identified in the above paragraphs. The lack of knowledge on the disorder, relevant curriculum to suit the needs of learners, lack of materials, resources and specialized professionals, discrimination and parental involvement. The findings are similar to Geraldina (2015) which reveals challenges such as poor pre-service training, lack of knowledge and seminars, limited time, lack of relevant teaching and learning, lack of cooperation between parents of autistic learners and teachers, and the general curriculum in teaching children with autism in Tanzanian regular school.

This study established in all the Zambian schools under study that there is less funding towards special education which makes it highly impossible to buy the specialized materials for children with Autism. It is suggestive that there has not been proper planning by Ministry of General Education on the learners with Autism as there is no proper provision of materials and supervision of the education provided to the learners. There is need for funding in schools to at least meet the basic requirements of the learners. In addition, discrimination of learners with Autism in special units from regular teachers, learners and administrators is portrayed in negative attitudes and sharing of resources. Alexander (2014) in Tanzania also notes that children with developmental disability are being discriminated. Administrators need to realize the importance of learners with special needs. Negative attitudes from regular teachers and peers affect the self-esteem of learners with special needs and can also have adverse effects on intellectual functioning. As children with Autism are usually withdrawn, the negative attitudes reduce chances of social interaction which may also hinder language development as the children have limited interaction.

The Equality Act (2010) affirms that schools must not discriminate against a pupil because of their disability and in Zambia, the Persons Disability Act in chapter 65 outlines that a person shall not discriminate against a person with a disability on the basis of disability. The introduction of inclusive education in Zambia means that administrators and regular teachers must be aware of special needs of learners with disabilities.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Management of children with Autism Spectrum disorders in primary special schools and units is dependent on the teachers understanding of the characteristics of the disorder and is highly individualized. Even though schools gave out various educational, social and behavior management strategies that are used to meet the needs of learners with ASDs, it was acknowledged that they lack knowledge on the disorder and are not fully trained to meet the needs of learners and attributed to poor-preservice training and lack of seminars. It can be concluded then that learners with Autism are not receiving a meaningful education that realizes their full potential considering the education rendered to them by teachers who lack knowledge or are not trained to meet their needs. Head teachers, teachers and parents identified challenges such as lack of knowledge on the disorder, communication barriers with learners, lack of speech therapists, relevant teaching and learning materials, general curriculum, overcrowding of learners and poor teacher and parent collaboration amongst other challenges that affect management of children with Autism in schools.

## SUGGESTIONS

In order to improve on management of learners with Autism Spectrum disorders in the primary schools and special units, there is need for workshops and seminars for in-service teachers on Autism to increase knowledge levels and revision of teacher training programs in colleges and universities to meet the current needs of learners with Autism. The Ministry of General Education to liaison with the Ministry of Health in providing trained speech therapists in schools to help learners with speech and communication barriers and the distribution of required materials in schools to foster teaching and learning of children with Autism spectrum disorders. Lastly, there is need for sensitization and strengthening of teacher and parent collaboration to aid understanding on the disorder and parental involvement.

## LIMITATIONS

The major challenges faced in this study included prolonging data collection as teachers perceived being interviewed as a disruption during both teaching and break times and parents were reluctant to participate as they felt that they did not know much of the about management of learners with Autism Spectrum disorders. Lastly, there is lack of previous research studies relating to the teaching and learning of learners with Autism spectrum disorders in Zambia.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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**Charity Busiku** holds a Master's degree in Special Education from the University of Zambia. She is currently a Senior Lecturer for the Educational Psychology Studies Department, Chipata college of Education, Zambia. She researches into areas such as Special Education, Psychology, Early childhood and Theory and practice.

**Beatrice Matafwali (PhD)** is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Zambia. Obtained a PhD in Special Education from the University of Zambia/Leiden University in Netherlands. Beatrice also holds a Master's degree in education, Bachelor of Arts degree with education, and Bachelor of laws degree and other professional qualifications. She has been teaching Special education for more than ten years and conducted extensive research in Literacy, Early Childhood studies and child assessment and disability studies.