



Exploring the contextual factors affecting parental involvement in the education of children with autism spectrum disorder at the Caleb Center of children with autism, in Kabwe District

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the contextual factors influencing parental involvement in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), focusing on the Caleb Centre for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Kabwe District, Zambia. The study targeted parents of children with ASD and teachers at the Caleb Centre. A qualitative case study design was adopted, and participants were selected using purposive sampling. The study involved 29 participants, comprising 24 parents and five teachers who served as key informants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) and analysed thematically. The study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement. The study embraced a qualitative case study design and utilized semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as well as thematic analysis. The study established that parental involvement was shaped by economic constraints, time pressures, cultural beliefs which appeared to manifest in form of stigma, emotional burden and caregivers stress, family support and institutional factors. These findings were communicated by parents and guardians who were in large part women (67% women and 33% male). When the study ventured to establish barriers, it was found that poverty, unstable employment for most parents who came from poor neighbourhoods like Makululu, rigid meeting schedule, limited ASD training, inadequate institutional resources at The Caleb Centre and community, all contributed to limiting parental involvement. In totality, the study concluded that Parental involvement in ASD education is multifaceted and governed by the prevailing context of different settings. It requires collaboration among families, schools, communities, and policymakers. All in all, promoting flexible parental engagement, build capacity and awareness within the community, enhance ASD parent training and psychosocial support, improving institutional capacity, enhancing community awareness, and implement ASD-specific education policies will all go a long way in improving the delivery of education to this vulnerable demography.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Contextual Factors, Cultural Stigma, Inclusive Education, Parental Involvement, Socio-Economic Constraints, Special Education

I. INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement does not stop at enrolling into school and leaving all the work to the school and teacher, rather it involves many layers of active participation of the parent in the child's education, this is true for children who are not on the spectrum and even more so for children with ASD. That is to say it involves school participation, teacher communication, home-based learning, advocacy, and participation in Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), all of which improve educational outcomes for children with ASD (Mocho et al., 2025; Gaspar & Sahay, 2025). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an intricate neurodevelopmental condition that plays an instrumental role in how humans take in information, communicate and interact with the world around them. Helping children with ASD get through each day asks for more than just classroom approaches. It requires personalized educational tactics that appeal to the child's unique strengths and trials. Equally important is the partnership between parents and schools, as consistent collaboration helps nurture both academic progress and behavioral development (Hodges et al., 2020; WHO, 2025).

Recently, the world has seen an international drive towards an education system that includes all regardless of their developmental needs. There has been recognition that parents are invaluable cogs of children with disabilities, and that includes those with Autism Spectrum Disorder. International organisations such as the United Nations have set up binding frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) accentuate the need for corroboration among schools, families, communities, and governments to ensure equitable and quality education for all learners (United Nations DESA, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Scholarly work often shows that with parents heavily involved in activities like educational planning, communication with teachers, and the implementation of learning activities at home, children with ASD exhibit improvements in communication, social interaction, adaptive behaviour, and academic achievement (Al-Dwaikat et al.,



2026; Muliadi et al., 2025). The opposite is also true when there is limited involvement; discrepancies emerge when parental is patchy. Limited parental engagement often results in inconsistent learning experiences between home and school, reducing the effectiveness of educational interventions. These findings underscore that parental involvement is not merely a complementary aspect of ASD education but a fundamental component of successful educational and developmental outcomes.

The quality of parental involvement has been found to be greatly influenced by socio-economic status, cultural beliefs, institutional capacity, geographical location, and family dynamics (Kalman, 2020; Saracosti et al., 2024). In Zambia, parents are regularly confronted with limited specialised services, resource constraints, and persistent cultural stigma surrounding ASD all of which reduces their ability to actively participate in their children's education (Saracosti et al., 2024). This is compounded by institutional challenges such as; inadequate resources, limited trained personnel, and weak support systems, hindering structured collaboration between parents and educators (Saracosti et al., 2024). Further, communities in Kabwe such as Makulu are a hive misconception about autism, cultural stigma, emotional caregiving burdens, and limited social support further constraining parental engagement, while strong family and peer support can enhance participation. This study brought together theoretical definitions of parental involvement, realities of how children with ASD develop social economic and cultural circumstances within the communities these families live in. This was done to gain an understanding on how contextual factors shape the forms, extent, and effectiveness of parental involvement in the education of children with autism in Kabwe District.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the well-established importance of parental involvement in enhancing the educational outcomes of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), its effectiveness in Zambia remains constrained by multiple contextual challenges such as limited awareness of ASD, stigma and discrimination, inadequate support services, poor communication between schools and families, and insufficient inclusive education resources. Studies conducted in Zambia have shown that many parents of children with ASD experience social isolation, negative community attitudes, and lack of counseling and institutional support, all of which reduce meaningful participation in their children's education (Chalwe et al., 2021). In many settings factors including poverty, cultural stigma, limited awareness of autism, and inadequate institutional support significantly hinder parents' ability to actively participate in their children's education.

Although existing studies highlight general barriers within special education, there is limited empirical research specifically examining how these contextual factors shape parental involvement in ASD-focused educational settings in Zambia. This gap restricts the development of targeted interventions and policies aimed at strengthening home-school collaboration. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the contextual factors influencing parental involvement at the Caleb Centre in order to generate evidence that can inform inclusive educational practices and improve outcomes for children with autism.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To examine the socio-economic, cultural and family related factors affecting parental involvement in the education of children with ASD at the Caleb Centre.
- ii. To assess how institutional policies, practices and support systems influence parental involvement in the education of children with ASD
- iii. To identify strategies for enhancing parental involvement in the education of children with ASD at the Caleb Centre.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study is underpinned by two theories namely; Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and Epstein (1995) Framework of Parental Involvement.

2.1.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner developed his influential theory in 1979, the Ecological Systems Theory which elucidated that parental involvement is greatly influenced by a number interconnected environmental systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Microsystem refers to the child's immediate family and environment the child interacts with directly. This means family, teachers, peers and classroom settings. Mesosystem represents the interaction between microsystems and relationships between parents and teachers. Strong collaboration here is crucial for consistent support. The exosystem refers to external environs that end up affecting the child's welfare and schooling. The most obvious examples are parents' workplace, social services, school rules and regulations; all these could limit how parents are involved. Macrosystem is the broader cultural, social, and economic context including societal attitudes



toward disability, cultural beliefs and national education policies. These shape how parental involvement is valued and supported. These layers combine to illustrate how family and home dynamics, school environment, culture values, employment conditions and social economic truths inform the nature and quality of parental engagement in education of their children with ASD (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

2.1.2 Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement

Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement (1995) identifies six dimensions of parental engagement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and community collaboration. Epstein's model works in tandem with Bronfenbrenner in the case of this study by illustration through six practical dimensions of parental engagement: Parenting, which involves supporting development of children in the home through regular routines, discipline and emotional care? In the case of ASD this is likely to involve behavioral management approaches and establishing a structured home environment (parents will establish consistent daily schedules (wake-up, meals, homework, bedtime) to reduce anxiety and help children with ASD anticipate transitions). In terms of communicating which deals with open dialogue between parents and educators. When done effectively, communication helps progress for the child. Volunteering is a heightened a parent's involvement contribution through time and skills to school activities. In places like the Caleb Centre can translates in with therapy and awareness campaigns. Learning at Home: parents help with academic in the home environment, in ASD they help strengthen social skills, communication exercise and structure homework routines. Decision-Making: Parents participate in school governance and policy decisions. Their input ensures that ASD-specific needs are considered in institutional planning. Community Collaboration: Partnerships between schools, families, and community organizations. This is vital in Kabwe, where community awareness campaigns can reduce stigma and foster inclusion. The theory showed that despite the fact that parents may actively support their children at home and kept in contact with teacher about their children. Their full involvement is limited by time, resources and institutional factors (Epstein, 1995).

The two theirs provided a complete picture to apply in examining barriers, enablers and forms of parental involvement and forms of parental involvement in ASD education within the socio-economic and cultural context of Kabwe District.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Contextual Factors Affecting Parental Involvement in the Education of Children with ASD

Many Western countries have made significant progress in developing systems and support mechanisms for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Studies conducted in these contexts indicate that parental involvement in the education of children with ASD is strongly influenced by institutional support, government policies, and the availability of educational and community resources. The presence of supportive institutional structures, enabling policy frameworks, and adequate resources can enhance parents' capacity to participate in their children's education and contribute to improved educational outcomes for children with ASD (Muliadi et al., 2025; Al-Dwaikat et al., 2026; Anderson, 2020).

At the same time many other studies show that despite support barriers such as financial strain, emotional stress, time constraints, limited ASD knowledge and cultural stigma continue to affect parental engagement (Nelson et al., 2013; Muliadi et al., 2025; Franz et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2020). Studies done around the region and the continent show that parental involvement is shaped by socio-economic, cultural, systemic factors, including poverty, weak institutional support, limited awareness and poor school-family communication (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). Zambian parental involvement is constrained by inadequate ASD-specific policies, limited specialised services, cultural stigma, economic hardship, and institutional challenges, which reduce parents' ability to actively participate in their children's education (Nyoni, 2022; Wonani & Muzata, 2019; Matafwali, 2022).

2.2.2 Institutional Policies, Practices and Support Systems Influencing Parental Involvement

Developed countries have institutionalised parental involvement through policies such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) programmes, and structured parent training, strengthening collaboration between parents and schools (Franz et al., 2017; Al-Dwaikat et al., 2026; Anderson, 2020). In contrast, African countries generally lack comprehensive institutional frameworks to support parental engagement, leaving parents to navigate educational and healthcare systems with minimal formal support (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). In Zambia, limited ASD-specific policies, inadequate trained personnel, poor communication systems, and insufficient educational resources weaken home-school collaboration and parental participation (Nyoni, 2022; Wonani & Muzata, 2019; Matafwali, 2022).

2.2.3 Strategies for Enhancing Parental Involvement in ASD Education

Evidence from developed countries demonstrates that structured policy frameworks, parent training programmes, and collaborative school-family partnerships effectively enhance parental involvement and improve



educational outcomes for children with ASD (Muliadi et al., 2025; Al-Dwaikat et al., 2026; Anderson, 2020). African literature recommends strengthening institutional support, improving school-family communication, increasing ASD awareness, and reducing socio-economic and cultural barriers to improve parental engagement (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Franz et al., 2017). In Zambia, strengthening ASD-specific policies, expanding specialised services, improving parent education, enhancing communication systems, and reducing community stigma are identified as key strategies for improving parental involvement (Nyoni, 2022; Wonani & Muzata, 2019).

2.3 Research Gap

A major research gap identified in the literature is the limited availability of ASD-specific empirical studies on parental involvement within the Zambian context. Most existing studies tend to generalise disability under broader special education categories without focusing specifically on Autism Spectrum Disorder, thereby overlooking the unique educational and behavioural needs of children with autism and their families (Chalwe, 2022). Additionally, previous studies have largely concentrated on stigma, cultural perceptions and general challenges in special education, with limited attention given to practical forms of parental involvement such as home-based learning support, participation in Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) and home-school collaboration within specialised centres. Furthermore, there is inadequate context-specific research examining how institutional practices, communication systems and socio-economic realities influence parental engagement in ASD education at specialised institutions such as the Caleb Centre in Kabwe District. Consequently, this study has filled gap by providing localised, empirical evidence on the extent, forms, challenges and strategies for enhancing parental involvement in the education of children with ASD in Zambia.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design and was guided by the interpretivist research paradigm. That is to say it looked at the lived experiences of teachers and parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This study design was relevant because it made it possible gain an exhaustive understanding of the lived experience and perception that teachers and parents alike have when it comes to parental involvement in the education of children with ASD. The design helped reveal socio-economic, cultural, family and institutional factors that shape parental involvement at Caleb Centre. It also complemented the interpretivist paradigm by allowing participants to share their own meanings and experiences, thereby generating rich, context-specific data that directly addressed the study objectives

3.2 Study Area

The survey was done within the confines of the Caleb Centre for Children with Autism. This is in the Central Province Capital of Kabwe, Zambia. The former mining town is characterised by low economic activity and wide spread lead contamination.

3.3 Target Population

The school targeted parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their educators.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

Purposive sampling technique was utilized in the course of this research with 29 interviews carried out. 24 parents were surveyed and 5 Teachers. This was enough for the requirement for interpretivist paradigm. It adhered to the saturation point in qualitative research, where collecting any more information after 24 parents becomes unnecessary because the information starts repeating itself.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used. Open-ended questions to explore participants lived experiences.

3.6 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for identification of recurring themes on parental involvement, including: Teacher-parent communication, home-based learning support, participation in school activities and decision-making.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards to safeguard the rights, privacy, and welfare of all participants involved in the research process. Key ethical principles observed included informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with clear and adequate information regarding the objectives of the study, the nature of their involvement, and the intended use of the findings. They were

informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without facing any negative consequences or disadvantage.

To protect participants' identities, no personal identifiers such as names or contact details were included in the data collection instruments or research reports. Confidentiality was maintained by ensuring that all information obtained from participants was treated with strict privacy and accessed only for academic purposes related to the study. In addition, all collected data were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access or misuse. These ethical safeguards were implemented throughout the research process to uphold the dignity, autonomy, and overall well-being of the participants in line with accepted research ethics guidelines (Israel & Hay, 2006).

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Demographical Information

Gender Distribution of Parents (n=24)

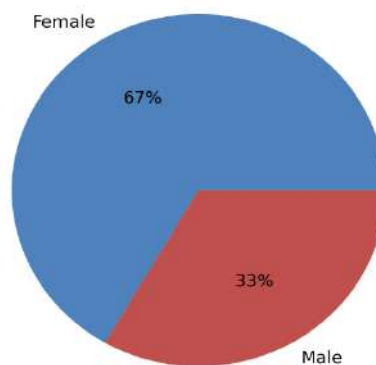


Figure 1

Gender Distribution of Parents

The gender distribution of the participants shows that 16 out of the 24 parents interviewed were female (67%), while 8 were male (33%). This indicates that female caregivers, particularly mothers, are the dominant participants in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder at the Caleb Centre.

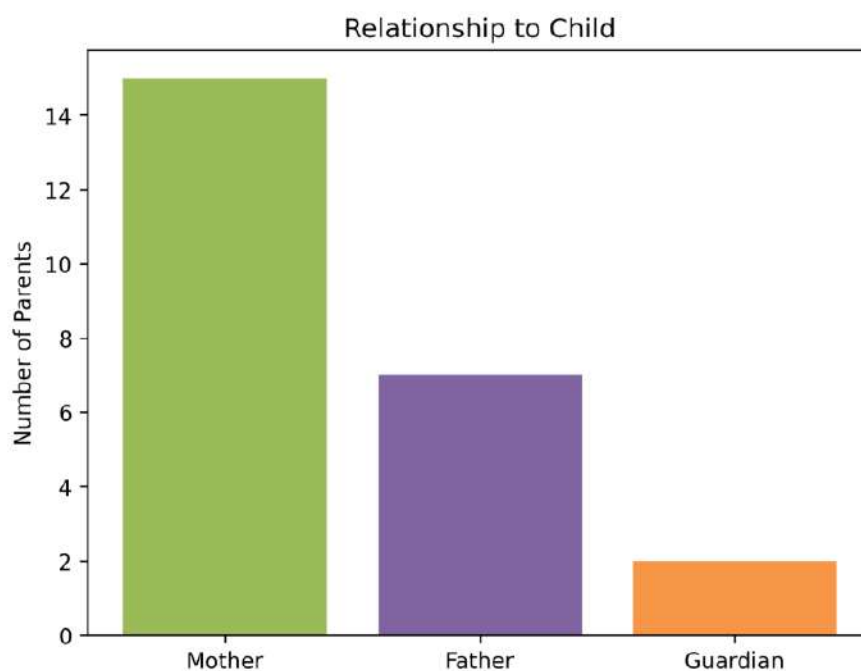


Figure 2

Relationship With Child

The distribution of participants by relationship to the child shows that 15 out of the 24 participants (62.5%) were mothers, 7 participants (29.2%) were fathers, and 2 participants (8.3%) were guardians.

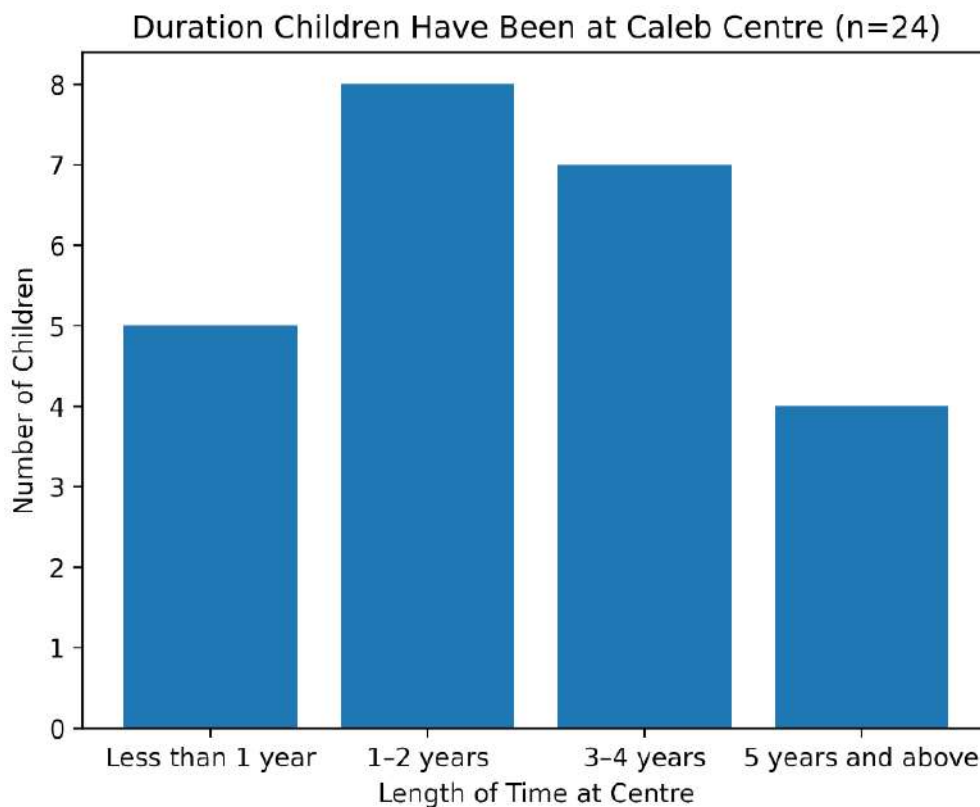


Figure 3

Duration of Children Learning at Caleb Centre

The distribution of children by duration at the Caleb Centre shows that 8 out of 24 children (33.3%) have been enrolled for 1-2 years, 7 children (29.2%) for 3-4 years, 5 children (20.8%) for less than one year, and 4 children (16.7%) for five years and above.

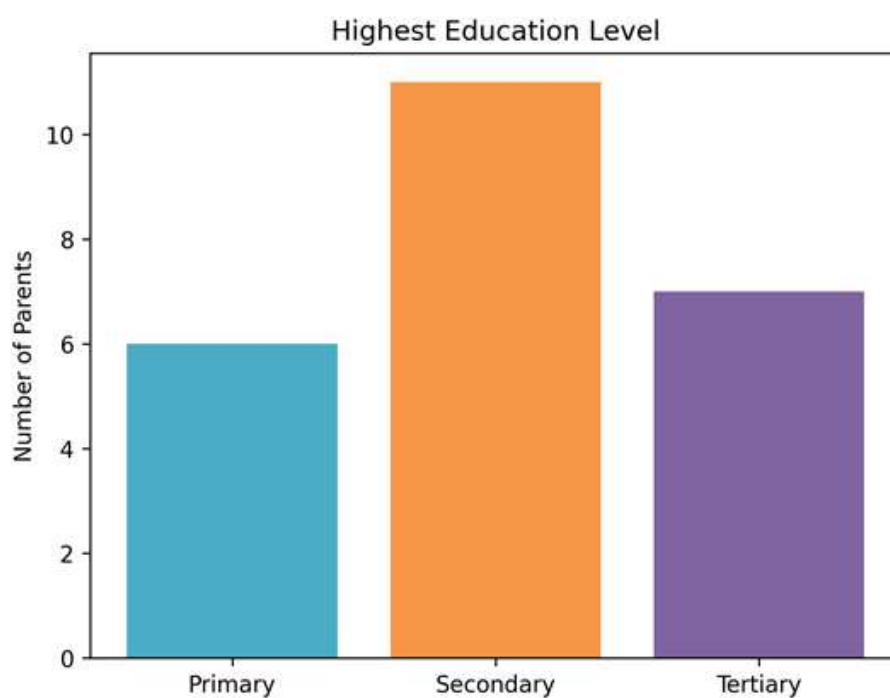


Figure 4

Distribution of Highest level attained

The educational profile of the participants indicates that 11 out of the 24 parents (45.8%) attained secondary education, 7 parents (29.2%) had tertiary education, while 6 parents (25.0%) had only primary education.

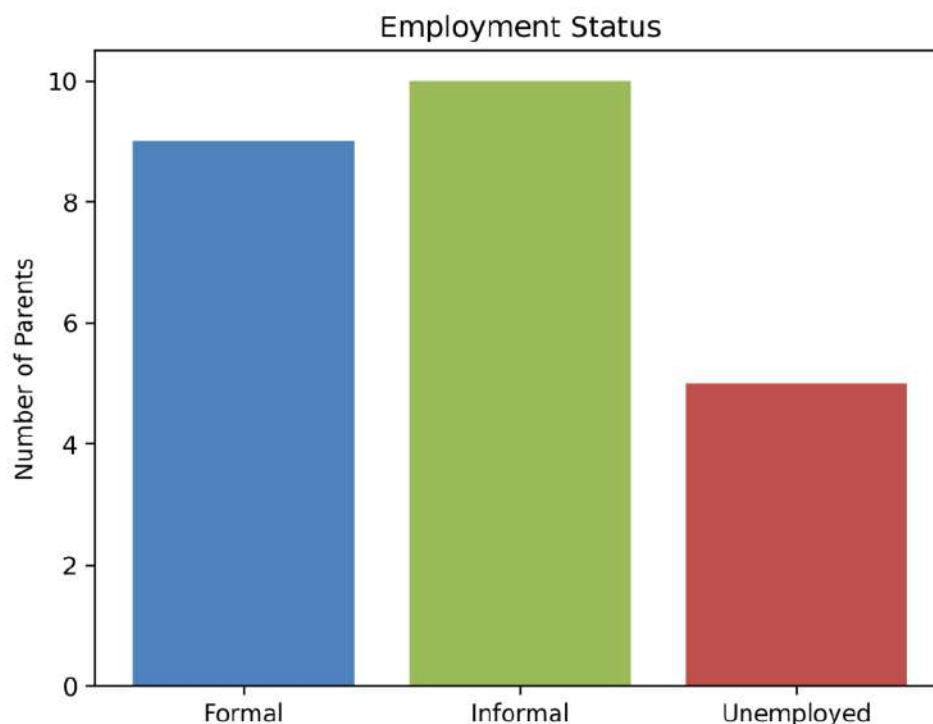


Figure 5

Employment Status of Parents

The employment status of the participants shows that 10 out of 24 parents (42%) were engaged in informal employment, 9 parents (38%) were formally employed, while 5 parents (20%) were unemployed. This distribution indicates that the majority of parents rely on informal or unstable sources of income, which has direct implications for their capacity to be consistently involved in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

4.1.1 Examining the socio-economic, cultural and family related factors affecting parental involvement in the education of children with ASD at the Caleb Centre.

Table 1

Findings on Socio-economic, Cultural and Family-related Factors Affecting Parental Involvement

ID	Response	Theme
P1	My income from selling vegetables is unstable, so attending meetings and buying learning materials is sometimes difficult.	Economic constraints
P2	My work as maid Work keeps me away from home for long hours limit the time I can spend at the Centre.	Time constraints
P3	Some family members believe autism is spiritual, which reduces family support.	Cultural beliefs and stigma
P4	Transport costs prevent me from visiting the Centre regularly.	Economic constraints
P5	Community stigma makes me hesitant to discuss my child's condition openly.	Social stigma
P6	Being the main caregiver causes emotional stress and fatigue.	Emotional burden
P7	Balancing work and caregiving responsibilities affects my involvement.	Time constraints
P8	Financial pressure limits my ability to provide learning materials at home.	Economic constraints
P9	Lack of understanding about autism initially reduced my confidence to engage.	Knowledge gaps



P10	Single parenting increases the burden of caregiving and school involvement.	Family structure challenges
P11	Support from close family members helps me stay involved.	Family support
P12	Cultural beliefs blaming mothers affect my confidence.	Gendered cultural expectations
P13	Community misunderstanding of autism limits social support.	Social stigma
P14	Employment responsibilities sometimes conflict with school activities.	Time constraints
P15	Emotional exhaustion affects how consistently I can engage.	Emotional burden
P16	Limited income affects transport and learning resources.	Economic constraints
P17	Cultural silence around disability discourages discussion.	Cultural norms
P18	Poverty makes consistent involvement very difficult.	Economic hardship
P19	Support from peer parents encourages my involvement.	Peer support
P20	Work stress affects my availability for school activities.	Time constraints
P21	Extended family support improves my participation.	Family support
P22	Fear of stigma makes me less open at school.	Social stigma
P23	Emotional stress from caregiving affects engagement.	Emotional burden
P24	Balancing multiple responsibilities limits my involvement.	Time constraints

The findings indicate that parental involvement in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder at the Caleb Centre (dependent variable) is influenced by several socio-economic, cultural and family-related factors (independent variables). Socio-economic Factors: conomic constraints emerged as one of the strongest determinants of parental involvement. Five parents (P1, P4, P8, P16 and P18) reported that unstable incomes, poverty, transport costs and inability to purchase learning materials reduced their participation in school meetings and home-based learning activities. Similarly, five parents (P2, P7, P14, P20 and P24) indicated that demanding work schedules and long working hours limited the time available to participate in school activities. These findings suggest that socio-economic circumstances significantly reduce parents' ability to engage consistently in their children's education.

Time Constraints and Employment Pressures: Time-related challenges emerged as another dominant contextual factor, with 5 parents (P2, P7, P14, P20, and P24) citing long working hours, employment responsibilities, and competing household duties as limiting their involvement. Parents engaged in informal or low-paying employment reported little flexibility to attend meetings or participate in school activities. This finding demonstrates that even when parents value involvement, structural constraints related to work significantly reduce their participation. Within Epstein's framework, this limits parents' ability to engage in activities such as volunteering, communication, and school-based decision-making.

Cultural Beliefs and Social Stigma: ultural perceptions of autism strongly influenced parental involvement. Parents (P3, P12, and P17) reported beliefs that autism is spiritual in nature, associated with witchcraft, or blamed on mothers. Additionally, several parents (P5, P13, and P22) described community stigma and fear of judgment, which discouraged open engagement with teachers and other parents. These findings demonstrate how the macrosystem, as described by Bronfenbrenner, shapes parental behaviour through deeply rooted cultural norms and belief systems. Such stigma not only isolates families socially but also undermines parents' confidence and willingness to participate actively in their children's education.

Emotional Burden and Caregiving Stress: Emotional strain emerged as a significant contextual factor affecting parental involvement. Parents (P6, P15, and P23) described caregiving fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and psychological stress resulting from being the primary caregivers of children with ASD. This emotional burden reduced their consistency in school engagement and participation in educational activities. These findings highlight that parental involvement is also influenced by parents' mental and emotional well-being, an aspect often overlooked in policy and practice.

Family-related Factors: Family dynamics played a dual role, either constraining or facilitating involvement. Parents such as P10 reported that single parenting increased caregiving demands, making school involvement more difficult. Conversely, others (P11, P19, and P21) noted that support from extended family members or peer parents enhanced their ability to remain engaged. This underscores the importance of social support networks within the microsystem and mesosystem in strengthening parental involvement.

Knowledge Gaps and Confidence: Some parents such as (P9) (13 others during interviews) indicated that limited understanding of autism initially reduced their confidence to engage with the Centre. This suggests that parental involvement is also influenced by access to information and awareness, reinforcing the need for training and sensitization programmes to empower parents with knowledge and skills.



4.1.2 Institutional policies, practices and support systems influence parental involvement in the education of children with ASD.

Table 2

Findings on Institutional Policies, Practices and Support Systems Affecting Parental Involvement

ID	Response	Theme
P1	Regular communication from teachers motivates my involvement.	Effective communication
P2	Meeting times sometimes clash with work schedules.	Scheduling challenges
P3	Training workshops would help me support learning at home.	Need for capacity building
P4	Teachers are approachable, which encourages engagement.	Supportive staff
P5	Limited resources reduce the Centre's ability to involve parents frequently.	Resource constraints
P6	Counselling services would help parents cope better.	Need for psychosocial support
P7	Clear feedback on progress encourages home follow-up.	Positive feedback mechanisms
P8	Infrequent workshops limit my understanding of autism.	Limited institutional support
P9	Guidance from teachers improves my confidence.	Supportive practices
P10	Flexible meeting schedules would improve participation.	Scheduling flexibility
P11	More structured parent programmes are needed.	Institutional capacity gaps
P12	Resource shortages affect parent engagement activities.	Resource constraints
P13	Teachers' openness strengthens collaboration.	Positive school climate
P14	Better communication systems would improve involvement.	Communication systems
P15	Training would help align home and school strategies.	Capacity building
P16	Transport support would increase attendance.	Logistical support needs
P17	Regular updates motivate parental participation.	Consistent communication
P18	Limited funding affects parent-focused initiatives.	Financial constraints
P19	Parent forums would strengthen engagement.	Collaborative platforms
P20	Clear schedules help me plan participation.	Institutional organisation
P21	More awareness programmes would help parents.	Awareness and sensitisation
P22	Staff support encourages trust.	Institutional trust
P23	Counselling services would improve emotional readiness.	Psychosocial support
P24	Additional learning resources would help parents support children.	Resource provision

At the Caleb Centre, parental involvement is shaped less by intention and more by the institutional environment within which families and teachers operate. The findings show that school policies, communication systems, resource availability, scheduling practices, and psychosocial support structures collectively determine how effectively parents participate in their children's education. In these findings it can be seen that institutional policies, practices and complimentary infrastructure play a significant role parental involvement in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Communication Systems: Parents were seen making it clear that clear and consistent communication emerged as the strongest enabler of engagement. Parents who received regular feedback, approachable interactions from staff, and timely updates on learner progress reported higher levels of motivation and trust in the Centre. This steady flow of information strengthened collaboration between home and school, reinforcing shared responsibility for the child's learning. However, institutional organisation also created barriers. Fixed meeting schedules often conflicted with parents' work commitments, limiting attendance and participation. This suggests that involvement is frequently constrained not by lack of interest, but by structural rigidity in school planning and scheduling practices.

Institutional Organisation: Several parents reported that fixed meeting schedules conflicted with work commitments, thereby reducing attendance at school activities. Participants recommended more flexible meeting arrangements to accommodate parents with varying work schedules. This finding indicates that institutional scheduling



practices can either facilitate or hinder parental involvement. Capacity Building and Resource Support: Capacity-building opportunities were identified as a critical gap. Parents expressed a strong need for training programmes and workshops to improve their understanding of autism and strengthen their ability to support learning at home. Where such programmes were infrequent or limited, parental confidence and effectiveness were reduced.

Resource constraints further weakened institutional capacity to sustain meaningful parental engagement. Limited funding and shortages of learning materials reduced the Centre's ability to implement consistent parent-focused activities. Parents also highlighted the absence of transport support and other logistical assistance, which further restricted participation. Psychosocial Support: In addition, psychosocial support emerged as an overlooked but essential need. Parents indicated that counselling services would help them manage emotional stress and caregiving burdens, thereby improving their readiness and consistency in engagement. This points to the close link between emotional well-being and educational participation.

Despite these challenges, positive institutional practices helped sustain involvement. Supportive and approachable teachers, structured parent forums, clear communication channels, and a generally collaborative school climate strengthened trust and encouraged continued engagement. These practices created a sense of partnership between parents and the Centre, even within a resource-constrained environment.

4.1.3 To identify strategies for enhancing parental involvement in the education of children with ASD at the Caleb Centre.

Table 3

Findings on Strategies for Enhancing Parental Involvement

ID	Response	Theme
T1	Parents play a critical role in reinforcing learning and behaviour strategies at home.	Home-school reinforcement
T2	Parents are essential partners in understanding the child's behaviour and progress.	Collaborative partnership
T3	Parental involvement ensures consistency between home and school.	Continuity of support
T4	Parents provide valuable information about the child's behaviour outside school.	Information sharing
T5	Without parental involvement, progress in ASD education is very limited.	Importance of parental role
T1	Most parents communicate with us at least once a week by phone.	Regular communication
T2	Engagement varies; some parents communicate frequently while others rarely do.	Uneven engagement
T3	Parents often check progress informally rather than through meetings.	Informal communication
T4	Attendance at meetings is less frequent than phone communication.	Limited physical participation
T5	Parents support homework and behaviour management at home.	Learning at home
T1	Children whose parents are involved show better behaviour control.	Behavioural improvement



T2	Parental involvement improves children's social interaction skills.	Social development
T3	Academic progress is stronger when parents reinforce learning at home.	Academic improvement
T4	Consistent parental support reduces emotional outbursts.	Emotional regulation
T5	Lack of parental involvement slows overall child progress.	Impact of low involvement

Teachers identified several strategies that could strengthen parental involvement in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The findings show that strengthening home-school partnerships, improving communication, increasing parental training, promoting home-based learning support and adopting flexible communication methods would increase parental involvement. Teachers explained that parents who consistently reinforced learning and behaviour management at home contributed to better behavioural, social, emotional and academic outcomes for children with ASD. Conversely, limited parental involvement was associated with slower child progress, highlighting the importance of implementing strategies that encourage sustained parent participation.

Interviews conducted with the five teachers at the Caleb Centre identified several strategies for enhancing parental involvement in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Teachers consistently emphasised that strengthening collaboration between parents and the school was essential for improving children's educational outcomes. Three teachers (T1, T3, and T5) indicated that parents should be encouraged to reinforce learning activities and behaviour management strategies at home to ensure consistency between home and school environments. They explained that continuity of support enables children with ASD to apply skills learned in school within their daily home routines. Two teachers (T2 and T4) further recommended strengthening collaborative partnerships by encouraging parents to regularly share information about their children's behaviours, challenges, and progress outside the classroom, allowing teachers to develop more responsive educational and behavioural interventions.

Teachers also identified improved communication as a key strategy for increasing parental involvement. Teacher T1 recommended maintaining regular weekly communication between parents and teachers through telephone calls and other accessible communication channels. Teacher T3 suggested encouraging both formal and informal communication to accommodate parents' varying schedules, while T4 recommended increasing attendance at school meetings by adopting more flexible meeting arrangements. Teacher T2 observed that parental engagement varied considerably across families and suggested that additional efforts should be made to motivate less active parents to participate consistently in their children's education.

The teachers further recommended strengthening home-based parental support as a practical strategy for enhancing involvement. Teacher T5 encouraged parents to continue supporting homework, reinforcing behaviour management techniques, and maintaining structured daily routines at home. According to the teachers, these practices contribute to positive developmental outcomes for children with ASD. Specifically, T1 associated increased parental involvement with improved behaviour control, T2 linked it to better social interaction skills, T3 related it to improved academic performance, and T4 connected it with enhanced emotional regulation. Conversely, T5 stressed that limited parental involvement was associated with slower educational, behavioural, and social progress, highlighting the need to promote sustained parental engagement through collaborative home-school partnerships.

4.2 Discussion

This study examined the contextual factors shaping parental involvement in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder at the Caleb Centre in Kabwe District. The findings demonstrate that parental involvement is not solely determined by individual willingness, but is embedded within a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, emotional, and institutional conditions. These findings strongly relate to existing literature reviewed in the study and provide context-specific evidence from Zambia.

Economic constraints emerged as a central barrier to effective parental involvement. Parents reported unstable incomes, high transport costs, and limited financial capacity to provide learning materials, all of which restricted participation in school-based activities. These findings are consistent with Donohue and Bornman (2014), who found that poverty and limited financial resources significantly reduce parental engagement in ASD education within African settings. Similarly, Wonani and Muzata (2019) observed that many Zambian parents rely on informal support systems due to financial hardship and inadequate institutional support. However, this study extends the literature by demonstrating that financial hardship not only reduces participation but also reshapes parental involvement patterns, with parents relying more heavily on home-based support strategies rather than school-based participation.



Time constraints associated with employment responsibilities further limited parental participation. Parents engaged in informal or inflexible work arrangements reported difficulty attending meetings and school programmes. These findings support Nelson et al. (2013), who argued that caregiving responsibilities and employment pressures often reduce parents' ability to participate consistently in ASD educational activities. The findings also align with Donohue and Bornman (2014), who noted that many African parents struggle to balance work obligations with school involvement due to weak institutional support systems. The evidence from Kabwe District therefore reinforces earlier assertions that conventional parental involvement models often fail to consider labour realities in low-income settings.

Cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding autism were also found to significantly influence parental engagement. Some parents associated ASD with spiritual causes or maternal blame, leading to reduced confidence and reluctance to engage openly with schools. These findings are consistent with Franz et al., (2017) and Wonani and Muzata (2019), who found that autism is frequently interpreted through spiritual or cultural lenses in African and Zambian contexts, resulting in stigma and social exclusion. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) observed that societal misconceptions about ASD discourage families from seeking educational support. This study contributes further by showing that stigma not only shapes parental perceptions but also directly undermines parent–teacher communication and limits school-based participation.

Emotional burden and caregiving stress emerged as additional constraints to parental involvement. Parents described fatigue, psychological strain, and emotional exhaustion associated with continuous caregiving responsibilities, which affected the consistency of their involvement. These findings are in agreement with Nelson et al. (2013), who identified emotional stress and caregiving pressure as major barriers to parental engagement in ASD education. Likewise, Muliadi et al., (2025) observed that parents often feel overwhelmed by the complexities of supporting children with ASD. However, the current study emphasises emotional well-being as a critical but often overlooked determinant of sustained parental engagement in the Zambian context.

The findings also revealed that institutional factors significantly shape parental involvement. Parents highlighted the importance of effective communication, supportive teacher-parent relationships, flexible meeting schedules, and parent training programmes in strengthening engagement. These findings support Epstein's (1995) Framework of Parental Involvement, which emphasises communication, learning at home, and collaboration between schools and families as essential dimensions of parental engagement. Similarly, Al-Dwaikat et al. (2026) and Anderson (2020) found that structured training programmes and collaborative support systems improve parents' ability to support children with ASD. However, unlike developed contexts where such systems are institutionalised, this study found that institutional support at the Caleb Centre remains constrained by limited resources, infrequent workshops, and inadequate psychosocial support services.

The findings further affirm the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). Parental involvement was influenced by interconnected systems, including the family environment (microsystem), parent-school interactions (mesosystem), employment and economic conditions (exosystem), and broader cultural beliefs (macrosystem). These findings are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's argument that child development and parental engagement are shaped by interactions across multiple environmental systems. The study therefore reinforces the view that parental involvement in ASD education cannot be understood in isolation from broader socio-economic and cultural realities.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the contextual factors influencing parental involvement in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder at the Caleb Centre in Kabwe District. The findings demonstrate that parental involvement is a context-dependent and multidimensional process shaped by interrelated socio-economic, cultural, emotional, and institutional factors. Economic hardship, unstable employment, and associated time constraints significantly limit parents' ability to participate in school-based activities. Cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding autism further constrain engagement by reducing parental confidence and openness, while emotional caregiving burdens affect the consistency of involvement.

Institutional factors also play a critical role. Effective communication, supportive teacher-parent relationships, and a positive school climate enhance parental engagement, whereas limited resources, infrequent training programmes, and rigid scheduling reduce participation. The findings further confirm that parental involvement is strongest in home-based activities, particularly in supporting learning and behaviour management, but remains limited in formal school-based participation. Overall, the study affirms that parental involvement in ASD education cannot be understood in isolation from the broader socio-ecological environment. Addressing barriers to involvement therefore requires a holistic approach that integrates family, school, and societal dimensions.



5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance parental involvement in ASD education: Parental involvement in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the realities of family life, institutional capacity, and broader societal attitudes. Schools and specialised centres can play a pivotal role by adopting flexible engagement strategies. This includes offering adaptable meeting schedules, using mobile-based communication platforms, and designing parent-friendly programmes that accommodate demanding work commitments. Such flexibility ensures that parents remain actively engaged without being constrained by rigid institutional structures.

Equally important is the strengthening of parent training and awareness. Regular workshops and sensitisation programmes can empower parents with practical skills to support learning and manage behaviour at home. By deepening their understanding of ASD, parents are better equipped to collaborate with educators and reinforce interventions beyond the classroom. To sustain this involvement, institutions should provide psychosocial support services. Counselling and peer support groups can help parents cope with emotional stress and caregiving fatigue, thereby enhancing their resilience and capacity for long-term engagement.

At the institutional level, enhancing capacity is critical. Investment in resources, trained personnel, and structured parent engagement programmes strengthens collaboration between families and schools, ensuring that interventions are consistent and effective. Beyond the school environment, inclusive community awareness campaigns are essential to reduce stigma and misconceptions surrounding ASD. By fostering a supportive community, these initiatives create an enabling environment where parental involvement is valued and encouraged. Finally, policy-level interventions are necessary to institutionalise these efforts. Policymakers should prioritise parental involvement in ASD-specific frameworks, provide financial and logistical support, and reinforce inclusive education systems. Together, these recommendations highlight the need for coordinated action across families, schools, communities, and government institutions. Such collaboration can create a supportive ecosystem that not only strengthens parental engagement but also improves educational outcomes for children with ASD in Zambia.

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