

Inclusivity in early childhood education in Southern Africa: A Montessorian critique

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Background: Early childhood education (ECE) in Southern Africa has gained increasing attention for its role in promoting educational equity. At the same time, inclusive education has been promoted across the region. Both ECE and inclusive education face challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited infrastructure and sociocultural stigma. Research indicates that Montessori pedagogy shows promise as a catalyst for inclusivity in ECE. However, its application is associated with elite and private school settings, which obscures its inclusivity potential.

Aim: This study examined how Montessori pedagogy can support inclusive ECE in Southern Africa.

Setting: The study focused on four countries: Malawi, South Africa, Eswatini and Zimbabwe.

Methods: The study employed policy analysis in a conceptual research framework to assess the relevance and adaptability of Montessori education for inclusive ECE.

Results: Findings suggest that Montessori education has the potential to strengthen inclusivity in ECE. Achieving this requires adapting learning environments with local materials, integrating inclusive and community-centred practices and rethinking educator roles through modular and context-specific training.

Conclusion: When reinterpreted with an emphasis on inclusivity, Montessori education can be a transformative approach for inclusive ECE. Realising this potential involves dismantling its elitist image. It also requires promoting culturally responsive adaptations and mainstreaming inclusive principles into policy, pedagogy and educator training.

Contribution: This study contributes to the discourse on inclusive education by providing a regionally grounded argument for reimagining Montessori education as a tool for inclusivity in ECE. It offers policy-relevant insights into designing teacher education, learning environments and curricula that are community-responsive, accessible and inclusive.

Keywords: educational equity; inclusive pedagogies; Montessori education; policy analysis; responsive curriculum.

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is increasingly recognised as an important foundation for lifelong learning and sustainable development (Engdahl & Furu 2022). In Southern Africa, the urgency to strengthen ECE systems is highlighted by ongoing inequalities in access and outcomes, especially for children from marginalised communities (Clark et al. 2024; Fredman, Donati & Naicker 2022). Rad et al. (2022) argued that the global commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, has heightened the importance of inclusive approaches in ECE. Despite national policy commitments to inclusivity across the region, countries such as Malawi, South Africa, Eswatini and Zimbabwe continue to face challenges in implementing inclusive practices at the ECE level. Wright et al. (2023) identified issues such as limited educator capacity, resource constraints and entrenched cultural beliefs that impede effective inclusion.

In this context, Montessori education, initially developed as a method for the public good, shows promise for advancing inclusivity in ECE. The Montessori approach emphasises child-centred and experiential learning that accommodates learners with diverse needs by promoting autonomy, sensory engagement and holistic development (Montessori 1912). However, in many Southern African contexts, Montessori education has become associated with exclusivity and privilege, primarily available in affluent and private education settings (Murray et al. 2023).

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This disconnect between the inclusive intent of the Montessori education and its elitist application invites questions about how Montessori principles are understood and practised.

According to Wisbey (2023), Montessori classrooms, ideally, are inclusive by design. They offer freedom within boundaries that enable children to make choices and take responsibility for their learning. However, in practice, not all Montessori classrooms succeed in adapting to the diverse abilities and backgrounds of learners (Omidire et al. 2025), particularly in under-resourced settings like many Southern African educational contexts. Some interpretations overlook the inclusive and social justice aspects of Montessori's vision. This situation results in practices that seem exclusive under the pretence of individual freedom. For instance, the lack of cultural relevance in materials or strict adherence to traditional Montessori guidelines can marginalise children from different linguistic, cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds (Wisbey 2023). While studies such as Murray et al. (2023) have explored the benefits of Montessori pedagogy, limited research investigates its role in building inclusive ECE in low-resource and culturally diverse Southern African environments. Furthermore, there is a lack of conceptual clarity regarding how Montessori education can be adapted to meet local inclusivity needs without perpetuating socioeconomic and cultural barriers. In this study, I respond to these gaps by critically examining the convergence of Montessori philosophy and inclusive education in ECE, through a conceptual analysis of policies and literature from Malawi, South Africa, Eswatini and Zimbabwe. Of course, when analysing an education policy, it is very important to connect it to what it entails in the curriculum. Therefore, although this study does not focus on curriculum, I make some references to the relevant curriculum frameworks where necessary.

Aim and objectives

This study aims to critically examine the potential of Montessori education to support inclusive ECE in Southern Africa and to provide conceptual insights for reframed Montessorian practices in this context. Specifically, the study:

- Assesses the status of inclusive education in ECE in Malawi, South Africa, Eswatini and Zimbabwe.
- Analyses how Montessori principles are interpreted and applied in ECE in these countries.
- Proffers a recontextualised Montessorian approach that promotes inclusive ECE.

Literature overview

Malawi's ECE framework is largely shaped by collaboration with international development partners (Chimombo 2007). The National Policy on Early Childhood Development (ECD) (2017) emphasises inclusivity, but operational and curriculum challenges undermine this emphasis. Munthali, Mvula and Silo (2014) found that community-based childcare centres (CBCCs) are central to Malawi's ECE

strategy. Neuman, McConnell and Kholowa (2014), while acknowledging the fragility of the CBCCs, agreed that these centres have demonstrated potential in integrating children with disabilities but face chronic underfunding and shortages of trained educators. When applied, the Montessori method is either a privilege reserved for private urban settings or driven by donor programmes in rural areas (Wisbey 2023). Furthermore, the application of Montessori principles lacks local adaptation, hence inconsistencies in inclusivity.

South Africa offers a unique context with legal and policy frameworks supporting inclusive ECE, such as the White Paper 5 (2001) on ECD, the White Paper 6 (2001) on inclusive education and the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2015). Still, implementation remains problematic because of systemic inequalities, resource disparities and inadequate teacher training (Atmore, Van Niekerk & Ashley-Cooper 2012; Harrison 2020; Visser et al. 2021). The Montessori approach is widely used in both public and private ECE centres in South Africa. However, its implementation falls short of promoting inclusivity. Organisations like Inclusive Education South Africa work towards bridging these gaps through educator training and advocacy.

Eswatini has prioritised inclusive education in its National Education and Training Sector Policy (2018). Through this policy, the country promotes mainstreaming learners with special educational needs and disabilities from ECE levels. Nonetheless, there is a clear gap between inclusive education policy and practice in Eswatini (De Souza, Kaunda & Potgieter 2024). The lack of specialised teacher training programmes in inclusive pedagogy and limited resource allocation hinders effective inclusive school and curriculum reform (Nxumalo 2020). Community perceptions also influence inclusivity, as disabilities are still widely stigmatised. Although Montessori-inspired schools exist, they mainly serve urban elites and their inclusive potential remains underutilised in public ECE settings.

Zimbabwe has made policy advances towards inclusive education. The Education Amendment Act (No. 15 of 2020) mandates the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools and ECE centres. However, implementation is hampered by limited educator training, inadequate infrastructure and societal stigma (Mazuruse, Nyagadza & Makoni 2021). Despite these challenges, innovative curriculum models have emerged. For example, Mharadze (2025) reported that the Jairos Jiri Association integrates inclusive practices in ECE through community-based rehabilitation programmes. Chinhara and Kuyayama (2024) wrote:

Montessori, a renowned philosopher in early childhood and special education needs advocated for the prepared teaching and learning environment where individual teaching and learning needs of students are taken account of learning environments should ensure that teaching and learning materials are age and developmentally appropriate to address that learning gap. (p. 8)

Still, applying Montessori principles in the Zimbabwean ECE settings remains superficial, limited to classroom aesthetics rather than fundamental pedagogical shifts (Chinhara & Kuyayama 2024).

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study is based on three interconnected constructs: inclusive education, ECE and Montessori pedagogy.

Inclusive education

Inclusive education is seen as a way to remove barriers to learning and participation for all learners, regardless of ability, language or socioeconomic background (De Souza, Kaunda & Potgieter 2024). As Underwood, Valeo and Wood (2012) noted, inclusive education involves culturally responsive practices, differentiated instruction and child-sensitive environments. It ensures that all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have fair access to learning opportunities by promoting participation, accommodating diverse needs and creating supportive, flexible and non-discriminatory environments. In ECE, inclusivity goes beyond physical access; it includes adapting teaching strategies, materials and classroom dynamics to serve a wide range of learners, including those with disabilities, from minority groups or experiencing socioeconomic disadvantages. In Southern Africa, inclusive education is a priority, aligned with the SDGs, which stress equitable, quality education for all. However, despite policy progress, actual implementation remains a big challenge. Cultural misconceptions, scarce resources and limited teacher training hinder the development of genuinely inclusive environments.

Early childhood education

Early childhood education encompasses the holistic development of children from birth to age before they enter formal schooling (South Africa, Department of Social Development [DoSD] 2015). It usually focuses on cognitive, emotional, social and physical growth (Neuman et al. 2014). It is a vital stage that influences lifelong learning, behaviour and well-being. Still, ECE faces challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, underqualified staff and inconsistent policy execution. Research studies have constantly argued that adopting a transformative approach rooted in culturally relevant and pedagogically effective frameworks can equip young learners with the values, skills and knowledge for a sustainable future.

Montessori pedagogy

Montessori education is a child-centred, constructivist approach developed by Maria Montessori in the early 20th century. Montessori education offers a pedagogical model supporting autonomy and holistic development (Moll 2004). It is based on the belief that children learn best through self-directed activity, hands-on learning and collaborative play within carefully

prepared environments. Montessori's philosophy respects individual differences, promotes autonomy and encourages natural curiosity – attributes that align well with the broader aims of inclusive education. The Montessori method entails a structured yet flexible learning environment where children engage with didactic materials designed to develop sensory perception, practical life skills, literacy, numeracy and cultural understanding (Montessori 1912). Learning is self-paced and supported by trained educators who observe, support and facilitate rather than instruct in the traditional manner. Mixed-age classrooms encourage peer learning, leadership and social skills, while the focus on order, concentration and independence advocates for holistic growth.

Research methods and design

This study employed a conceptual research design using policy analysis as its methodological and analytical framework (as explained in Heck 2004). The research was deductive. It began with established Montessori principles, child-centredness, autonomy and the prepared environment and systematically tested their applicability against existing ECE policy frameworks and contextual realities in selected Southern African countries. Rather than generating new empirical data, the study critically examined, deconstructed and reconstructed these principles to develop a contextually adapted framework for inclusive ECE in the region. The study's analysis drew on primary policy documents and secondary literature relevant to ECE and inclusivity in Malawi, South Africa, Eswatini and Zimbabwe. Complementary academic and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or non-profit organisations (NPOs) reports were included to provide evaluative and implementation perspectives. This ensured that interpretations are sufficiently triangulated.

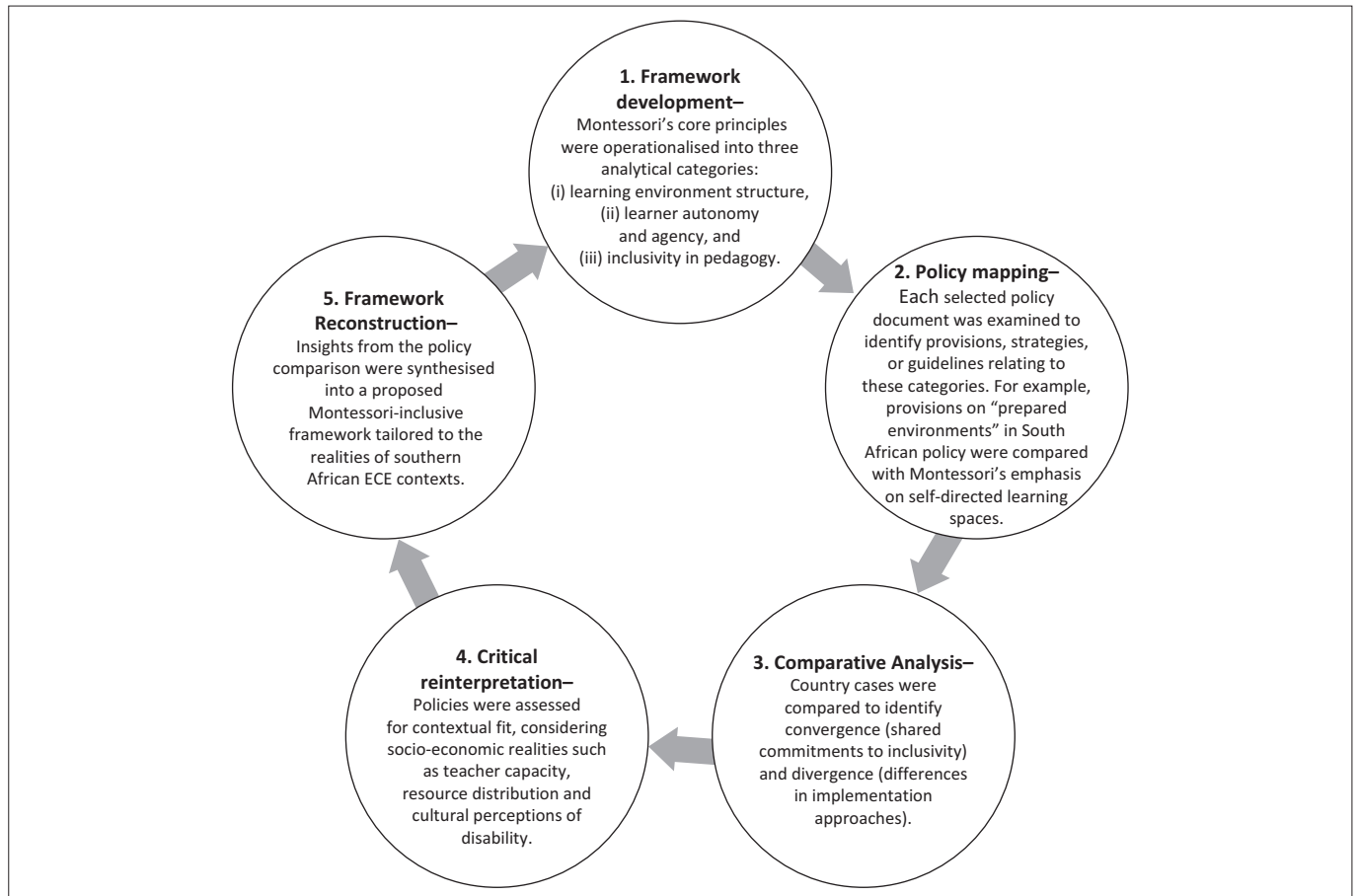
The selection was guided by three criteria: (1) *relevance* – documents had to explicitly address ECE policy, inclusive education policy or Montessori application in the country context, (2) *authority* – preference was given to official government publications (e.g. national policy frameworks, white papers, legislative acts) and widely cited international or regional policy reports and (3) *temporal scope* – to ensure contemporaneity, documents from 2015 onwards were prioritised, unless an earlier policy retained legal or operational significance. Table 1 shows the key policy documents selected.

The policy analysis followed the deductive approach outlined by Young and Diem (2018). Figure 1 shows the policy analysis cycle used in this study.

The conceptual work was rooted in the socioeducational environment of Southern Africa, a region characterised by

TABLE 1: Selected policy documents for analysis.

Country	Policy framework
Malawi	National Policy on Early Childhood Development (2017)
South Africa	National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2015)
Eswatini	National Education and Training Sector Policy (2018)
Zimbabwe	National Early Learning Policy (2023)



ECE, early childhood education.

FIGURE 1: Policy analysis cycle in the study.

cultural diversity, economic disparities and systemic educational challenges. Although the study did not involve fieldwork, it drew upon the realities of resource-constrained and multicultural communities, where inclusive education remains an ongoing policy and pedagogical challenge. As a conceptual inquiry, there was no empirical population or sampling process; instead, the study engaged with policies, literature, theories and models (as explained in Jaakkola 2020). This approach aimed to synthesise theoretical insights and develop a new pedagogical perspective. As this study was nonempirical, data generation involved policy analysis and critical engagement with existing frameworks and pedagogical philosophies. Data analysis involved policy analysis and reinterpretation as shown in Figure 1, deconstructing core Montessori principles, such as child-centredness, autonomy and prepared environments and reassembling them through the lens of contextual relevance, cultural responsiveness and inclusive pedagogy. Theoretical insights were compared, challenged and reconfigured to propose a refined approach suitable for the Southern African context. Analytical rigour was maintained through reflexive critique. As a conceptual, nonempirical study, no human participants were involved, and therefore, ethical approval was not required. Still, I adhered to scholarly standards of academic integrity, citation and responsible scholarship.

Research findings from policy analysis

I conducted a policy analysis of the policy documents outlined in Table 1 using the analytical framework shown in Figure 1. The analysis resulted in three categories and six themes, as shown in Table 2.

In the following sub-sections, I present these categories and themes supported by evidence from the policy documents and literature. The presentation shows the status of inclusive education in ECE in the selected countries. It also gives insights into how the Montessori pedagogy can be reinterpreted and applied in ECE settings for inclusivity in the Southern African contexts.

Setting the policy agenda

In Malawi, the 2017 National Policy on ECD not only acknowledges considerable progress in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) access but also highlights persisting disparities in inclusivity, especially for vulnerable groups. The policy reveals that 'only 45.36 per cent of targeted ECD children attend ECD centers' (p. 15), leaving over half of the target population, mostly in rural areas and among children with disabilities, without access to early education. The concept of inclusion is defined within the policy as 'the creation of an

TABLE 2: Categories and themes from policy analysis.

Category	Themes
Setting the policy agenda	Problem identification Policy formulation
Turning policy into practice	Policy adoption Policy implementation
Reviewing and refining policy pathways	Policy evaluation Policy maintenance and reinterpretation

enabling environment for all children to access basic and essential ECD services regardless of their gender, social, economic, political, religious, physical and health status' (p. 6). However, implementation lags significantly behind this vision. For instance, the policy reports that 'most ECD centers are not child and disability friendly... There are inadequate ECD services for children with special needs' (p. 22). Additionally, it highlights that 'children with special needs, children on the street and other vulnerable children' remain the most underserved (p. 22). Efforts to improve inclusivity include strategic goals like early identification and referral for children with disabilities, development of inclusive infrastructure and training for caregivers. Nonetheless, limited resources, inadequate infrastructure and lack of trained personnel hinder the realisation of an inclusive ECD framework. The policy states, 'despite these remarkable achievements, the sub-sector still faces a number of challenges which include... insufficient qualified and motivated caregivers, limited play and learning materials' (p. 10).

South Africa's National Integrated ECD Policy (2015) presents a progressive vision for inclusive education, but implementation challenges persist. The policy links ECD to equity and inclusivity in that:

[W]hen all children and their caregivers, including those who face barriers to access and early learning, such as poverty, geographical location (i.e. physical distance from services) and developmental difficulties, have the opportunities to access an age-and-developmental-stage-appropriate early childhood development services. (p. 12)

This broad and rights-based view is rooted in constitutional and international commitments to equality and non-discrimination. The policy explicitly commits to inclusivity, stating: 'Specific attention also needs to be given to the vulnerability of children with disabilities to abuse, neglect and exploitation' (p. 27). This includes children with disabilities from rural areas and those in poverty. The state's obligations extend beyond mere provision: 'measures to address barriers faced by vulnerable children, including young children living in poverty, those living in underserved areas and young children with disabilities' (p. 25). Despite this progressive framing, the policy acknowledges deep disparities in access and quality:

While access to early childhood development programmes is increasing, with 33.8 per cent of children from birth to four years (not yet turned five) attending an early childhood development centre and 16 per cent being with child-minders or day mothers in 2014, early learning and care programmes are not universally available or equitably accessible to vulnerable children. Access to

early childhood development programmes is therefore currently inequitable, with the poorest children having the least access. Young children whose caregivers cannot afford to pay user fees are also excluded from these programmes. Overall, only an estimated 20 per cent of birth to four-year-old children in the poorest 40 per cent of households have access to some form of out-of-home care. The quality of programmes currently provided at many partial care facilities providing early childhood development programmes in impoverished communities is also insufficient to ensure good child outcomes. Children with disabilities are largely excluded from any of these programmes. (pp. 43–44)

According to the South African ECD policy, rural, informal and marginalised communities lack access to registered centres, and services are fragmented and not comprehensive. A critical shortcoming is the lack of inclusive design in infrastructure and curriculum. The policy notes: 'Early childhood strategies do not, in the main, consider the learning needs of children with disabilities' (p. 44). Moreover, insufficient intersectoral coordination undermines the implementation of inclusive objectives.

The Eswatini Education and Training Sector Policy (2018) presents inclusive education as a foundational value but highlights significant implementation challenges, particularly in the early childhood phase. The policy recognises ECCE as a vital part of the education system and calls for equitable access across all social groups:

To prioritise the expansion of equitable access to early learning to accommodate all children in Eswatini aged 0 to 8 years to quality ECCDE and ensure the full integration of the nation's most vulnerable children. (p. 41)

Despite this progressive stance, the policy notes that ECCE in Eswatini shows that:

Failure to invest in the early cognitive development of children requires disproportionate investment in remedial action in later years but cannot recover the position. Early investment in the child's formative years has shown to give the best returns on human capital development and should be prioritised. A supplementary ECCDE policy will be developed to address the complexity of this sub-sector's needs, not least the historical imbalance and inequity in provision and failure to balance ECCDE resourcing and structure in relation to the rest of the basic education system. (p. 41)

As a result, access is uneven, with rural areas particularly underserved. There is no mention of a government-funded universal pre-primary education system, but the commitment to inclusion is clearly stated:

As a cross-cutting approach, IE should inform and guide the sub-sector policy rationales, goals and objectives at all levels of the education sector. Inclusive education requires the development of a flexible system that includes a range of different learning environments and different kinds of support so that all individuals can learn effectively according to their intellectual capacity, skills, talents and interests. Inclusive education has a clear focus on the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups but also benefits all learners. (pp. 12–13)

However, in practice, inclusive provisions for children with disabilities or those from marginalised communities remain minimal at the ECCE level. The policy identifies structural gaps such as the lack of trained ECCE practitioners, insufficient regulation of private ECCE centres and the absence of a unified curriculum. These limitations hinder the full realisation of inclusive early education. Although there are goals to 'develop and introduce an articulated ECCE curriculum to ensure the harmonised provision of standardised, quality ECCE services and introduction to age-appropriate life skills' (p. 24), these are yet to be implemented.

The Zimbabwe National Early Learning Policy (2023) highlights a strong commitment to inclusion. It:

[S]eeks to address the challenges of low access, inequitable services, insufficient quality and inclusivity in the provision of early learning services. Thus, the policy provides for strategies to enhance universal access to quality, equitable, affordable and inclusive early learning education programme based on global best practices. (p. 2)

It situates inclusion within its values framework, which:

[R]ecognises that investment in quality early learning is a sure way of enabling equity and inclusiveness in education as well as improving the children's learning trajectory, performance and skills development. (p. 14)

Despite this policy ambition, there is an inequitable provision for children from rural areas and vulnerable households, inadequate participation of children with disabilities and insufficient quality of services. Studies confirm that many rural ECDE centres lack ramps or accessible facilities. This reveals a gap between policy rhetoric and reality: while the policy formally mandates inclusion and equitable access, underfunding and weak infrastructure, teacher training deficits and cultural stigma around disability continue to hamper genuine inclusive ECE practice.

Turning policy into practice

Although the Malawian ECE policy does not explicitly reference Montessori pedagogy, it reflects several aligned principles, particularly in its recognition of holistic and child-centred development. The policy emphasises that 'children progress at a unique rate, have an individual learning style and possess diverse abilities' (p. 9), echoing Montessori's foundational belief in respect for the individual child's developmental pace. Furthermore, the emphasis on experiential learning – 'young children learn through active exploration of their environments where there is a balance between self-discovery and adult initiated/selected activities' (p. 9) – mirrors Montessori's hands-on and discovery-based approach to learning. The idea that 'children's learning is based on prior knowledge and experiences... guided by nurturing adults' (p. 9) similarly resonates with the Montessori emphasis on guided independence and a prepared environment. However, the application of these principles appears more philosophical than practical. The policy's implementation strategies focus heavily on CBCCs

and volunteer caregivers, with minimal reference to structured pedagogical models. There is no formal alignment with Montessori's defined materials, structured independence or mixed-age classrooms. Moreover, while the Montessori method advocates for well-trained, specialised teachers, Malawi's ECD system struggles with 'more untrained caregivers working in ECD centers with no salary/honoraria' and 'high caregiver turnover' (p. 16). This inconsistency suggests a gap between policy and practice in quality pedagogy.

The South African ECD policy does not specifically reference Montessori education; however, several underlying Montessori-aligned principles are present, albeit in implicit forms. These include child-centred pedagogy, holistic development and an emphasis on the role of the environment in learning. The policy advocates that:

[A]n effective and holistic early childhood development programme for children with disabilities is required to ensure that these children are guaranteed equal opportunities to access comprehensive early childhood development services necessary to ensure their rights to survival, growth, development and protection to their full potential. (p. 46)

This echoes the Montessori's focus on the cognitive, emotional, physical and social dimensions of the child. It also supports 'a holistic curriculum, active child play with concrete materials, and sensitive, mediated caregiver-child interaction' (p. 114), aligning with Montessori's emphasis on experiential and self-directed learning. However, practical application is cumbersome. Public ECD programmes rely on generic or non-standardised curricula, and training of ECD practitioners varies widely in quality. The policy acknowledges this inconsistency in that the quality of ECD service varies widely and is not responsive to children's developmental needs. Moreover, Montessori's key structural components, like multi-age groupings, specialised learning materials and carefully prepared environments, are not systematically embedded in South Africa's mainstream ECD settings. Resource constraints, especially in underprivileged areas, make the implementation of such structured pedagogical approaches difficult. While some private and NGO or NPO-run centres do implement Montessori education, these are primarily fee based and concentrated in urban areas, thus inaccessible to most children. This reinforces the gap between policy ideals and educational practice, particularly for marginalised groups.

The Eswatini Education and Training Sector Policy does not explicitly reference the Montessori method; however, several Montessori-aligned principles can be inferred from its objectives for ECD. The policy aspires to 'develop and adopt a school readiness programme, including the development of early learning development standards and ensure the establishment of sufficient additional ECCDE posts to meet agreed provisioning norms' (p. 42), which closely aligns with Montessori's multi-dimensional and child-centred educational philosophy. Montessori education is fundamentally grounded in the belief that children

learn best in a structured and prepared environment that allows self-directed exploration. The Eswatini policy echoes this when advocating to 'develop and introduce an articulated ECCE curriculum to ensure the harmonised provision of standardised, quality ECCE services and introduction to age-appropriate life skills' (p. 24). This reflects an understanding of developmental readiness, a key tenet of Montessori pedagogy. However, the implementation of Montessori-like principles appears to be mostly confined to better-resourced and privately operated ECCE centres in urban settings. There is no system-wide integration of Montessori practices, and the current regulatory gaps leave room for wide variability in pedagogical approaches. The lack of standardised training for ECCE practitioners is a further challenge. The policy wants to 'ensure that every classroom in every ECCDE centre has at least one trained teacher or caregiver' (p. 42). Without professionalised training, even implicit Montessori-inspired practices, such as emphasis on observation, independence and hands-on materials, are unlikely to be systematically applied or sustained.

Although Zimbabwean policy does not explicitly reference 'Montessori', elements of its child-centred thrust resonate with Montessorian values. For instance, the Infant School Module is described as 'for pupils from ECD A to Grade 2, and ensures quality early learning for optimal development and school readiness' (p. 2). The policy promotes a responsive curriculum with learning materials available and equitably distributed and 'ensuring a responsive curriculum supported by instructions materials that are available and equitably distributed to all learners, and that there is professionally qualified staff' (p. 14). The policy reports that in rural ECDE practice, teachers have established learning centres: maths play, language play, culture play, designed to promote children's independence and their ability to make decisions, mirroring Montessori's prepared environment approach. However, the constraints of space, lack of materials and lack of guidance in pedagogy mean these centres fall short of Montessori fidelity. Thus, while principles of learner-centred activity, independence and responsive materials exist in practice and policy, they are informal, inconsistent and unaligned with a fully Montessorian framework.

Reviewing and refining policy pathways

The integration of Montessori principles into ECE across Southern Africa is gaining momentum as educators and policymakers seek pedagogical approaches that promote inclusive education and align with SDGs. Despite this growing interest, a significant gap remains in understanding and applying these principles in local contexts. The Montessori method emphasises child-centred learning, sensory-based education and the importance of prepared environments (Montessori 1912). Its core principles include respect for the child, the concept of the absorbent mind, sensitive periods, auto-education and viewing the teacher as a guide rather than a traditional instructor (Moll 2004). These concepts are especially valuable in ECE, where inclusive

education should be a priority as an educational foundation. Montessori principles accommodate diverse needs and abilities, which is essential in inclusive settings as they promote autonomy, self-directed learning and personalised education (Murray et al. 2023).

In Malawi, community-based ECE centres have begun integrating some Montessori principles informally, even without official recognition (Wisbey 2023). According to Neuman et al. (2014), CBCCs serve as platforms for early education, health and nutrition. Here, principles such as independence, sensorial exploration and practical life are embedded informally. These centres are run by local volunteers who use locally sourced materials resembling Montessori tools (Munthali et al. 2014). The pedagogy is adapted to local languages, customs and ecological contexts. Challenges remain, including limited teacher training. Nonetheless, these centres demonstrate how Montessori concepts can be localised to support inclusive ECE.

South Africa boasts the most structured ECE sector among these countries, with a relatively high number of accredited Montessori schools. The South African Montessori Association (SAMA) plays a key role in standardisation and training. However, 'it is therefore not surprising that all Montessori schools in South Africa are privately owned' (Omidire et al. 2025:9). The national curriculum does not strongly foreground Montessori's emphasis on individual pacing and non-competitive learning. Although the government mandates inclusive education through the White Paper 6, Montessori practices are rarely mainstreamed in public ECE settings (Omidire et al. 2025). Nonetheless, some integrated models exist where public schools adopt Montessori methods through partnerships with NPOs like Inclusive Education South Africa, offering a blueprint for inclusive ECE.

In Eswatini, interest in ECE has grown following policy shifts endorsing early education (Matsvange, Mudimba & Simangele 2021). While Montessori practices are not yet common, particular attention is being paid to them among private providers, as is the case elsewhere in Southern Africa. Nevertheless, systemic issues hinder broader adoption. National ECE policies do not explicitly incorporate Montessori or similar pedagogies. Most Montessori implementations remain confined to urban and affluent regions, which limits access for marginalised populations. Lack of exposure among educators and policymakers results in fragmented adoption (Matsvange et al. 2021). Nonetheless, pilot programmes supported by NGOs illustrate that Montessori-based interventions can improve learning outcomes and promote inclusivity for children with disabilities and from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In Zimbabwe, ECE has benefited from increased government support, especially since the introduction of mandated 2 years of pre-primary education (Mangwaya, Blygnaut & Pillay 2016). Some private and NGOs have

adopted Montessori practices; however, widespread implementation faces hurdles. Mupondi-Masuka, Nyika and Kangai (2017) observed that many early childhood educators are trained in conventional methods and lack Montessori-specific pedagogical skills. Additionally, Montessori is frequently viewed as an elitist and Western approach, incompatible with local cultural and educational norms. Still, case studies from urban centres show that Montessori-based ECE centres successfully incorporate inclusive practices by adapting resources and classroom structures to local contexts.

Discussion

The findings from the policy analysis confirm existing literature that supports the Montessori method as conducive to inclusive learning when appropriately contextualised. Scholars such as Lillard (2011) have emphasised the method's adaptability and its alignment with differentiated instruction. However, this study critically examines how Montessori education can be reconstructed to meet the diverse needs of ECE learners in Southern Africa, where systemic inequities and postcolonial legacies continue to influence educational outcomes. Previous research on inclusive education in the global South (e.g. Donohue & Bornman 2014) highlighted challenges such as inadequate teacher preparation, inaccessible materials and marginalisation of local languages and cultures. By reframing established principles in light of regional realities, the study presents a culturally responsive framework with practical implications for training, curriculum development and policy-making. In this framework, I advocate for five constructs (emerging from the themes presented in the findings) to inform inclusive ECE: community-centred learning, inclusive adaptations,

capacity building, holistic and peace education and an expansive curriculum, as illustrated in Figure 2.

The analysis of policy frameworks across Malawi, South Africa, Eswatini and Zimbabwe shows that while inclusivity is consistently prioritised in ECE, achieving it remains fragmented. Montessori pedagogy offers a coherent and adaptable foundation for designing inclusive systems within this policy landscape. Its core principles of prepared environment, learner autonomy and agency align closely with the inclusive aims embedded in these national frameworks (Lillard 2011; Moll 2004).

Community-centred approaches illustrate how the policy agenda could be more effectively shaped. For instance, CBCCs in Malawi already function as key early learning sites, yet a lack of structured training limits their potential for inclusive pedagogy. The Montessori method's emphasis on environmental responsiveness and social interdependence (Moll 2004) lends itself to empowering these centres through targeted capacity building for volunteers, parents and caregivers. Training in simplified Montessori techniques, focused on sensorial and practical life activities using local materials, could transform homes and shared spaces into vibrant learning environments. When communities are engaged as co-educators and co-creators of resources, autonomy, respect and order become embedded in familiar social structures, making inclusivity an organic outcome rather than an external imposition.

This reframing of the policy agenda also requires early attention to universal accessibility. Montessori's tradition of careful observation and differentiated learning resonates with policy goals for early identification and support for children with disabilities (Wisbey 2023). Explicit commitments to embedding universal design principles such as tactile and multi-sensory materials, visual supports and calm zones would ensure that inclusivity is not a remedial measure but a foundational design principle (Underwood et al. 2012). Policies that articulate 'access for all' need to detail the physical and pedagogical features that make such access meaningful from the outset.

Moving from commitment to practice requires that policies be adopted and translated into consistent, contextually relevant action in ECE centres. Here, capacity building is vital. The Montessori approach positions the adult not as a conventional instructor but as a prepared guide: observant, responsive and respectful (Lillard 2011). This conception should be embedded in national professional development strategies through modular and context-appropriate training frameworks. Delivered in short, locally accessible cycles, such training can prioritise observation, environmental preparation and facilitation over direct instruction. When combined with mentorship, peer learning and community supervision, these strategies can address the chronic problem of uneven implementation quality.

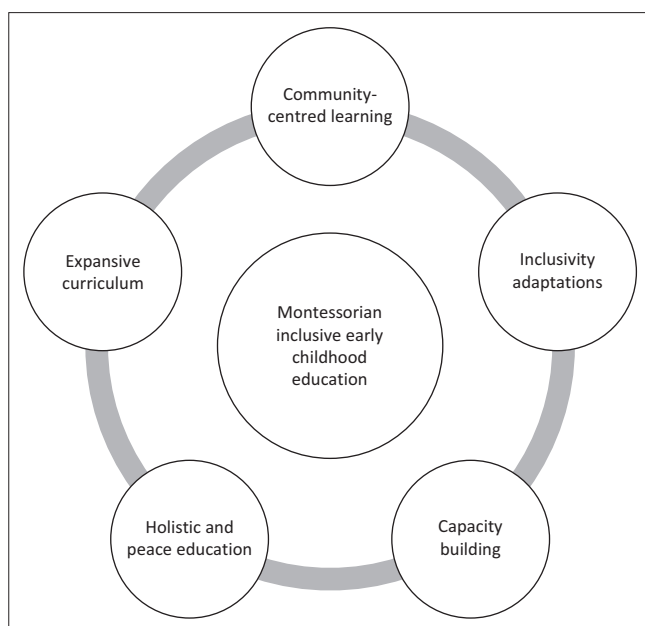


FIGURE 2: Montessorian model for inclusive early childhood education.

Policy translation into practice is also strengthened when curriculum reform reflects local realities. Southern African ECE policies promote holistic development, which Montessori extends to include emotional, social and spiritual dimensions (Murray et al. 2023). Implementation could incorporate storytelling, emotional literacy, cooperative problem-solving and mixed-age groupings that encourage empathy and inclusive peer relationships. White's (2009) insistence that education must reflect the child's world can guide a recontextualised Montessori curriculum that integrates indigenous knowledge systems, home languages and cultural customs. In Zimbabwe, for example, inviting community elders and artisans into classrooms could enrich Montessori's open-ended activities with local narratives, music and crafts, transforming Eurocentric materials into culturally resonant learning experiences.

An evaluation of implementation across the four countries reveals a common pattern: strong rhetorical commitments to inclusivity but limited and uneven application in practice. Malawi's CBCCs demonstrate adaptability with locally sourced materials, yet high caregiver turnover undermines continuity. In South Africa, NPO–public school partnerships integrating Montessori principles offer promising models, but these remain geographically limited without systemic adoption. Eswatini's private ECCE centres may incorporate Montessori-inspired practices, yet public provision remains largely untouched by such methods. In Zimbabwe, rural classrooms establish learning centres that mirror Montessori's prepared environment, but constraints in space and materials prevent consistent application.

These findings point to the need for ongoing policy refinement that addresses not just access and enrolment but the quality of pedagogy, adaptability of environments and cultural relevance of curricula. A reimagined Montessori model, centred on community engagement, inclusive adaptations, educator capacity building, holistic and peace education and culturally expansive curricula, offers a framework for bridging the gap between aspiration and reality. Policy revisions should promote creating and distributing culturally relevant materials and incentivise inclusive training programmes. Teacher education institutions should integrate modules on inclusive Montessori methods, cultural competence and sustainability. Educators should be encouraged to co-create learning environments with families and communities, using locally available resources to reinforce inclusivity.

Conclusion

In this study, I examined the transformative potential of Montessori education in promoting inclusivity in ECE in Southern Africa. While Montessori pedagogy advocates for principles of autonomy, holistic development and respect for individual learning needs, its adoption across the region remains constrained by elitist perceptions, inadequate training and infrastructural inequalities. The policy analysis presented here suggests that inclusivity can be effectively

promoted by adapting Montessori principles, such as prepared environments, sensorial learning and mixed-age groupings, to local contexts through community resources, culturally relevant content and modular teacher training. Policies in Malawi, South Africa, Eswatini and Zimbabwe demonstrate a commitment to inclusive ECE, but systemic gaps hinder their full realisation. By repositioning Montessori as a community-centred and inclusive approach rather than an elite and urban-centric model, ECE systems can become more equitable and responsive. Achieving this reimagining requires educators, policymakers and communities to collaborate in developing culturally resonant curricula, accessible learning environments and teacher development pathways grounded in inclusive education.

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The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Ben de Souza: The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Disclaimer

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