

The Interplay of Reflexivity, Role Conflict, and Methodological Complexity in Qualitative Research with Deaf Learners in Lusaka District, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research with Deaf learners presents unique methodological and ethical challenges that are often overlooked in standard research training. When the researcher simultaneously occupies multiple roles such as teacher, sign language interpreter, and investigator, the interplay of reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity becomes particularly pronounced. This study explores these interconnections, drawing on global methodological literature while paying specific attention to the under-researched Zambian context. Using an integrative theoretical framework combining post-qualitative inquiry, reflexive epistemology, and role theory, the article analyzes how dual or multiple roles influence data generation, interpretation, and representation. The findings reveal three major insights: firstly, reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity are deeply intertwined phenomena that multiply rather than merely add to research challenges; secondly, ethical dilemmas concerning informed consent, confidentiality, and representational authority are heightened when the researcher controls the linguistic channel and holds institutional power over Deaf learners; and thirdly, while practical strategies such as structured ethical reflection, analytic generalization, and radical transparency exist, they require contextual adaptation for under-resourced settings such as Zambia. The study concludes with three recommendations: the adoption of a dual-role reflexivity protocol for researchers; the development of specific institutional and ethics committee guidelines for Deaf research in Zambia; and the establishment of a national working group on Deaf research methodology to build local capacity and knowledge. This study contributes to the growing literature on qualitative methodology by centering the often-invisible labor of interpreter-researchers and by offering context-sensitive guidance for ethical, rigorous, and reflexive research with Deaf learners in linguistically diverse and resource-constrained environments.

Keywords: Reflexivity, role conflict, methodological complexity, Deaf learners, interpreter-researcher, sign language, dual roles, inclusive education

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the growing attention to reflexivity and researcher positionality within qualitative inquiry reflects a broader epistemological shift away from positivist notions of researcher neutrality and toward an understanding of inquiry as an embodied, situated, and relational practice (Agee, 2009; Adams St. Pierre, 2024). Rather than viewing the researcher as a distant observer who simply records reality, contemporary qualitative scholarship recognizes that researchers inevitably shape and are shaped by the research encounter. This shift emerges from post-structural and interpretivist critiques that highlight how knowledge is co-constructed through interactions, power dynamics, and the researcher's social, cultural, and linguistic identities. As Adams St. Pierre (2024) argues, the researcher is not merely present in the research process but is entangled within it, making reflexivity central to methodological rigor and ethical responsibility. In research involving Deaf learners, these issues surface with heightened intensity because communication itself becomes a site of methodological negotiation and ethical risk. Deaf education spaces globally are linguistically

complex, often requiring the mediation of sign language interpretation, cultural bridging, and accommodation of diverse communicative repertoires.

Across Africa, the situation is further complicated by limited formal recognition of national sign languages, inadequate interpreter training, and scarce educational resources for Deaf learners. In many African countries, inclusive education policies exist on paper, but implementation remains weak, and Deaf learners are often placed in mainstream classrooms without adequate support. Researchers working in these contexts frequently find themselves assuming multiple roles such as teacher, interpreter, counselor, and investigator out of necessity rather than design. This multiplicity of roles, while born of practical constraints, introduces profound methodological and ethical challenges that remain underexplored in the African qualitative research literature. For example, a researcher who serves as both interpreter and data collector may inadvertently influence participant responses, blur the boundaries between pedagogical support and research inquiry, or face dilemmas about when to act as an advocate versus when to remain a neutral observer.

In Zambia, the situation is emblematic of these broader continental challenges. The country has made strides toward inclusive education, including the development of a national sign language policy and the establishment of special education units within higher education institutions. However, Deaf learners in Zambian universities and colleges continue to face significant barriers, including a shortage of qualified sign language interpreters, limited awareness among faculty about Deaf cultural and linguistic needs, and a lack of research specifically focused on Deaf learners' experiences in higher education. Zambian researchers who study Deaf populations often operate with minimal institutional support, limited methodological guidance, and little opportunity for peer reflection on the unique dilemmas posed by dual roles. Recent Zambian studies have highlighted persistent challenges in special education and inclusive practices. For instance, Kandimba, Mandyata, and Simalalo (2023) explored teachers' understanding of curriculum adaptation for learners with moderate intellectual disabilities and found that while policy frameworks exist, implementation remains inconsistent due to inadequate training and resources.

Similarly, Kandimba, Kalimaposo, Mandyata, Bwalya, Kabwe & Kalunga (2025) explored pedagogical approaches used for learners with intellectual disabilities in Luanshya District, revealing that teachers often rely on improvised strategies in the absence of formal support systems. Furthermore, Kandimba et al. (2025) investigated increasing accessibility to inclusive education for learners with disabilities in Ndola District primary schools, identifying significant gaps in infrastructure, teacher preparation, and instructional materials. Most directly relevant to the present study, Bwalya, Nambula, Kandimba, Kalima, Mubisi and Mwalungali (2026) evaluated sign language as a medium of instruction for learners with hearing impairments in selected primary schools of Lusaka, Zambia, concluding that sign language use is inconsistent, interpreter qualifications vary widely, and there is no standardized approach to sign language-mediated teaching or assessment. These studies collectively demonstrate that Zambian educational contexts for Deaf learners are characterized by systemic role ambiguity, where teachers and researchers alike must navigate multiple, often conflicting responsibilities without clear guidance. Consequently, the interplay of reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity remains critically under-examined in the Zambian context. This article addresses that gap by critically analyzing key methodological literature relevant to researcher role conflict, drawing on perspectives from qualitative research design, ethnography, interviewing, reflexivity, and qualitative data analysis, with the aim of informing ethical and rigorous research practice in Zambia and similar contexts.

Statement of the Problem

The ideal situation in qualitative research, particularly in studies involving marginalized or linguistically diverse populations, is that researchers should maintain clear role boundaries, practice sustained reflexivity, and employ methodologies that respect participants' linguistic and cultural agency while producing trustworthy knowledge. Ideally, researchers would receive adequate training in working with Deaf communities, have access to professional interpreters who are separate from the research team, and be able to navigate the research process without compromising pedagogical, clinical, or advocacy responsibilities. Ethical guidelines from major disciplinary associations emphasize informed consent, confidentiality, and the importance of minimizing power imbalances. In this ideal scenario, reflexivity is embedded throughout the

research process, role conflict is anticipated and managed transparently, and methodological complexity is addressed through careful design and peer review.

However, the reality in many contexts, and especially in Zambia, diverges sharply from this ideal. Researchers working with Deaf learners frequently find themselves simultaneously serving as teachers, interpreters, mentors, and investigators because no other qualified personnel are available. Communication mediation often falls entirely on the researcher, who must interpret between sign language and spoken language during data collection, while also making decisions about transcription, translation, and representation. Institutional resources are scarce: there are few trained Deaf interpreters, limited funding for research accommodations, and minimal institutional review board expertise regarding Deaf cultural and linguistic issues. Furthermore, Zambian researchers often lack access to methodological literature or professional networks that address the specific dilemmas of working with Deaf populations. The empirical work of Kandimba et al. (2025) in Ndola District primary schools revealed that teachers responsible for inclusive education frequently reported feeling unprepared to manage the dual demands of instruction and individualized support, a finding that mirrors the role conflict experienced by researcher-interpreters. Similarly, Bwalya et al. (2026) found that sign language interpreters in Lusaka primary schools often operate without clear role definitions, sometimes serving as teachers, translators, and counselors simultaneously, with no formal mechanisms for addressing the ethical tensions that arise from these overlapping responsibilities. Consequently, role conflict is not an occasional inconvenience but a pervasive condition of research and educational practice. Researchers may find themselves unsure whether to prioritize pedagogical support over research neutrality, uncertain about how to document interpreted data authentically, and unprepared to navigate the ethical tensions that arise when Deaf learners perceive them as authority figures rather than independent investigators.

The consequences of this gap between ideal and reality are significant and multiply across the research enterprise. Methodologically, data quality may be compromised because interpreted interactions are not neutral conduits of meaning; instead, the researcher's linguistic choices shape what participants say, how they say it, and what is ultimately recorded as data. Ethically, Deaf learners may feel coerced into participating because the researcher holds institutional power as their teacher or interpreter, or they may withhold authentic responses out of fear of affecting their educational standing. Epistemologically, the knowledge produced may inadvertently reinforce hearing-centric assumptions if researchers fail to critically examine how interpretation and role multiplicity have shaped findings. At a broader level, the absence of rigorous, reflexive research on Deaf learners in Zambia means that educational policies and practices continue to be developed without an adequate evidence base, perpetuating exclusion and misunderstanding. As Kandimba et al. (2025) observed in their study on pedagogical approaches for learners with intellectual disabilities, the lack of context-specific, methodologically transparent research leads to policy borrowing from other countries that may not address local realities. Given these serious consequences, there is an urgent need to conduct a systematic, theoretically informed analysis of how reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity intersect in qualitative research with Deaf learners, with specific attention to the Zambian context. Such an analysis is necessary to develop practical guidance for researchers, inform ethical review processes, and ultimately support more equitable and trustworthy research that honors Deaf learners' linguistic and cultural rights. This study was guided by three following research objectives:

1. To explore the intersection of reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity in qualitative research with Deaf learners within Zambia's higher education context.
2. To identify ethical challenges of dual researcher roles on data generation, interpretation, and representation.
3. To establish methodological insights from key qualitative fields to propose practical strategies for managing role conflict and enhancing reflexivity in under-resourced settings in Zambia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was grounded in an integrative theoretical framework that draws primarily from post-qualitative inquiry, reflexive epistemology, and role theory. Post-qualitative inquiry, as articulated by Adams St. Pierre

(2024), challenges conventional assumptions about researcher neutrality and treats research as an entanglement of bodies, discourses, histories, and relations. Within this orientation, role conflict is not viewed as an error to be eliminated but as a generative condition that produces unique forms of access, understanding, and embodied knowledge. This perspective is particularly valuable for studying Deaf learners because communication is inherently relational and co-constructed; there is no neutral position from which to observe or interpret signed interactions. The second pillar of the framework is reflexive epistemology, drawing on Berger (2015) and Agee (2009), which emphasizes that researcher identity is fluid and context-dependent. Reflexive practice requires researchers to continuously interrogate how their social positions, institutional roles, and linguistic identities shape every stage of the research process, from question formulation to data analysis. The third pillar is role theory, which examines how individuals navigate the expectations, obligations, and power relations associated with different social roles such as teacher, interpreter and the researcher. When these roles are enacted simultaneously, role conflict arises, characterized by incompatible demands or ethical tensions. By integrating these three theoretical lenses, the framework enables a nuanced analysis that neither dismisses role conflict as mere bias nor romanticizes it as unproblematic insider knowledge. Instead, the framework supports critical, transparent, and ethically attuned inquiry that acknowledges the complexities of working across linguistic and cultural boundaries while occupying multiple institutional positions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Explanation of the concept Role Conflict

Role conflict, defined as the psychological, relational, and ethical tension that arises when a researcher simultaneously occupies two or more social roles that carry incompatible expectations, obligations, or power dynamics (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). In the context of qualitative research with Deaf learners, role conflict frequently emerges when the researcher also serves as a sign language interpreter, teacher, mentor, or advocate. Role conflict is distinct from role ambiguity (uncertainty about what a role entails) and role overload (excessive demands within a single role); it specifically refers to the experience of contradictory demands across multiple roles (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Understanding role conflict is essential because it shapes how researchers communicate with participants, how participants perceive the researcher, and how data are generated, interpreted, and represented. Reflexivity is the methodological practice through which researchers examine their own positionality, assumptions, and influence on the research process (Berger, 2015). Methodological complexity refers to the layered challenges that arise when traditional qualitative procedures such as interviewing, transcription and analysis) must be adapted to account for linguistic mediation, cultural brokering, and multiple role enactments (Noyes et al., 2018). Together, these three concepts provide the analytical vocabulary for examining the unique dilemmas of Deaf learner research.

The Intersection of Reflexivity, Role Conflict, and Methodological Complexity in Qualitative Research with Deaf Learners

Globally, Berger (2015) demonstrates that researcher identity is not fixed but shifts dynamically across contexts, requiring systematic documentation and interrogation of how factors such as gender, race, class, and professional background influence every stage of inquiry. Berger's work moves reflexivity beyond a simple acknowledgment of positionality toward a rigorous, ongoing practice of self-examination. However, Berger's empirical examples draw primarily from research with trauma survivors and culturally similar populations where language mediation is not a central concern. The gap is that her reflexivity framework assumes researcher and participant share a common linguistic repertoire, and it has not been tested or adapted for contexts where the researcher serves as the sole linguistic conduit between signed and spoken languages.

Agee (2009) provides a foundational account of how research questions emerge through reflexive engagement with the field, arguing that question formulation is not a purely technical step but a reflective and relational act shaped by the researcher's assumptions, values, and interactions with participants. Agee offers practical strategies such as piloting questions, seeking peer feedback, and revisiting questions iteratively. However, Agee's guidance assumes that the researcher can directly communicate with participants to test and refine questions without linguistic mediation. The gap is the absence of guidance on reflexive question formulation in

interpreter-mediated research, where questions must pass through the researcher's own interpretive filter before reaching participants and where interpreted responses may lose nuance or accuracy.

Adams St. Pierre (2024) argues for post-qualitative orientations in which the researcher is not merely reflective about their position but recognizes themselves as entangled within the research assemblage, inseparable from the knowledge produced. This perspective transforms role conflict from a problem to be managed into a generative condition that produces unique forms of access and insight. However, post-qualitative literature is abstract and offers few practical tools for researchers who must make real-time decisions about interpretation, consent, and representation. The gap is the lack of bridge-building between post-qualitative theory and the practical, day-to-day methodological decisions required in interpreter-mediated research with Deaf learners.

Global Gap Summary: The global literature offers rich theoretical frameworks on reflexivity and positionality, but these assume shared language, direct communication, and linguistically unmediated research relationships. The gap is the absence of guidance for researcher-interpreters who must navigate reflexivity and role conflict when serving as the sole linguistic conduit between signed and spoken languages.

In Africa, Morgan, Glaser, and Magongwa (2016) critically unpacked the linguistic and cultural issues that emerged during the creation and implementation of the new South African Sign Language (SASL) curriculum. Using an ethnographic framework based on their own reflections, discussions with Deaf people, and meeting notes, they argued that inadequate linguistic knowledge and cultural sensitivity regarding SASL and Deaf cultural identity led to the breakdown of a promising curriculum initiative. This study is significant because it explicitly employs reflexivity and acknowledges the researchers' entangled positions within the research process. The gap is that the study focuses on curriculum development rather than on methodological guidance for qualitative researchers who must navigate dual roles as interpreters and investigators.

Swanwick, Fobi, Offei, and Oppong (2024) examined the early care and education of deaf children in Ghana, involving collaboration between UK and Ghanaian scholars to project indigenous knowledge on early childhood care practices and conceptions of deafness. Chapter five specifically addresses ethical and methodological implications of researching childhood deafness and early support. This work is valuable because it engages directly with methodological and ethical issues in Deaf research within an African context. The gap is that the focus is on early childhood care and education rather than on higher education research contexts, and it does not provide detailed guidance on managing researcher role conflict as interpreter and investigator.

Mrosso and colleagues (2025) explored perspectives on barriers to learning opportunities among deaf children in Tanzania, using a phenomenography design involving 17 teachers and 2 heads of schools. The findings revealed inadequate teacher training, limited access to assistive technologies, lack of funds, and discrimination of deaf children due to negative attitudes towards disabilities. This study provides empirical evidence of the systemic barriers Deaf learners face in Tanzanian education. The gap is that the study focuses on substantive educational outcomes rather than methodological or ethical dilemmas, and reflexivity is not systematically addressed despite the researchers likely navigating multiple roles in data collection with Deaf participants.

Africa Gap Summary: The African literature documents reflexivity in curriculum development (Morgan et al., 2016), methodological and ethical issues in Deaf research (Swanwick et al., 2024), and systemic barriers in Deaf education (Mrosso et al., 2025). However, no African study has systematically examined how reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity intersect specifically in qualitative research contexts where the researcher assumes dual roles as interpreter and investigator.

In Zambia, Kandimba, Mandyata, and Simalalo (2023) examined teachers' understanding of curriculum adaptation for learners with moderate intellectual disabilities in Zambia. The study found that teachers lacked a clear understanding of curriculum adaptation, often improvising without formal guidance, which suggests that Zambian educators are socialized into a culture of role-blending where clear boundaries between different professional responsibilities are absent. This finding is methodologically significant because it indicates that Zambian teachers, including those who later become researchers, are trained in an environment where improvisation and role-blending are normalized. The gap is that this study focuses on curriculum adaptation

rather than on Deaf learners or research methodology, and it does not address how the culture of role-blending might transfer to unreflexive practices in qualitative research with Deaf learners.

Bwalya et al. (2026) evaluated sign language as a medium of instruction for learners with hearing impairments in selected primary schools of Lusaka, Zambia. The study found that teachers doubling as sign language interpreters faced significant role conflict, struggling to prioritize instructional content, linguistic accuracy, or emotional support, with no training in managing ethical tensions. This study explicitly documented the teacher-interpreter dilemma that directly parallels the researcher-interpreter dilemma in qualitative research. The gap is that although this study provides rich empirical documentation of the teacher-interpreter dilemma, it focuses on educational outcomes rather than research methodology, and it does not translate its findings into methodological guidance for qualitative researchers.

Chisala (2025) explored the inclusivity of standardized literacy assessments for learners with disabilities at lower primary special schools in Zambia. The study revealed that standardized literacy assessments often contain inherent biases that disadvantage learners with disabilities, undermining the fairness and validity of these tools. The study suggested the need for prioritizing flexibility, personalization, and diverse representation in assessments. The gap is that this study focuses on assessment tools rather than research methodology, but its finding about bias in standardized assessments raises parallel concerns about bias in qualitative research instruments such as interview questions when these are mediated through researcher-interpreters without adequate reflexive attention.

Ethical Challenges of Dual Researcher Roles on Data Generation, Interpretation, and Representation

Hammersley (2018) explores insider/outsider dynamics in ethnographic research, showing that researchers who navigate between cultural worlds occupy unstable positionalities that shape what participants feel safe to disclose and how they perceive researcher authority. His work emphasizes that ethnographic authority must be critically interrogated rather than assumed. However, Hammersley's study focused on cultural or ethnic insider or outsider status rather than on the specific tensions that arise when a researcher also serves as a linguistic interpreter, leaving interpreter-mediated research unaddressed.

Gregory and Mahera (2011) examine insider/outsider dilemmas in cross-cultural research, demonstrating that researchers navigating between cultural worlds often experience shifting positionalities that change according to context and interaction. Their work acknowledges that role boundaries are not fixed but fluid. The gap in this study is that their analysis focuses on cultural brokerage rather than linguistic interpretation, and they do not address how language mediation introduces additional layers of ethical complexity in research with Deaf populations.

Steien (2025) examines linguistic repertoires under forced migration, illustrating how language functions as both a resource and a site of constraint, and how reliance on interpreters creates structural dependencies and power asymmetries between speakers. Her work provides a crucial bridge for understanding interpreter-mediated research. Nevertheless, Steien's work focused on spoken language interpretation in migration contexts rather than signed language interpretation in educational or research settings, leaving the ethical dynamics of Deaf-focused research underexplored.

In Africa. Swanwick and Fobi (2024) conducted research on childhood deafness and early support in Ghana, explicitly addressing ethical and methodological implications of researching deaf children across cultures. Using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model as a theoretical framework, they drew on individual reflections among project team members to provide contextual examples of ethical dilemmas and how they were approached in project design, execution, and working practices. This work is significant because it centers reflexivity and explicitly documents how researchers navigated ethical tensions in African Deaf research. While this study provides rich reflexive accounts of ethical dilemmas, it focuses on early childhood care and education rather than on higher education research contexts, and it does not specifically address the role conflict experienced by researcher-interpreters who must simultaneously serve as investigators and linguistic conduits.

Mawugbe (2025) conducts ethnographic research seeking to understand the consultation process for Deaf patients in the primary health care system in Ghana. Her research examines how communication, stigma, and structural inequalities shape clinical assessment, therapeutic relationships, and eventual diagnosis. Critically, she has professional experience as a sign language interpreter and research assistant, and she is critically examining the ethical, relational, and systemic implications of using technology alongside human interpreters, with a focus on confidentiality, autonomy, diagnostic accuracy, and equity in resource-constrained health systems. However, this study is situated in health care rather than educational research contexts, and while the researcher explicitly occupies dual roles as interpreter and investigator, the study remains ongoing with findings not yet fully published, and it does not address reflexivity and role conflict specifically within qualitative research with Deaf learners in educational settings.

Matende, Mugari, and Svongoro (2025) explored communication challenges faced by deaf patients in Zimbabwe's health domain, focusing on the marginalisation of Sign Language in major referral hospitals. The findings indicate that there is no defined use and awareness of Sign Language in hospitals, and where there is awareness, interventions have been weak, failing to ameliorate communication challenges. The study highlights that medical practitioners primarily use spoken language for communication, systematically excluding Deaf patients. Nevertheless, this study focuses on health communication rather than research methodology, but its finding about the absence of defined Sign Language use raises parallel concerns about the absence of defined methodological standards for interpreter-mediated qualitative research in Zimbabwe and across Africa.

In Zambia, Muzata (2024) explored the experiences of teachers in teaching learners with deafblindness at Bauleni Special School in Lusaka, Zambia. The study revealed the use of intervenors, touch cues in tactile sign language, family involvement, and orientation and mobility as strategies employed by teachers. The study identified that teaching learners with deafblindness requires specialized training, adaptive strategies, and institutional support. However, this study focuses on pedagogical strategies for deafblind learners rather than research methodology, and its finding about the need for specialized training for teachers raises parallel questions about what specialized training researcher-interpreters receive for working with Deaf learners, and how such training might include reflexive practices for managing dual roles.

Kandimba et al. (2025) identified that the lack of clear role definitions for inclusive education personnel created confusion, inefficiency, and ethical dilemmas, particularly regarding how to balance individual learner needs against classroom demands. However, this study exposes the absence of institutional role definitions in educational settings but does not extend this ethical analysis to research contexts, where Zambian researchers similarly lack role definitions for interpreter-mediated qualitative inquiry.

Bwalya et al. (2026) found that teachers doubling as sign language interpreters faced significant role conflict, struggling to prioritize instructional content, linguistic accuracy, or emotional support, with no training in managing ethical tensions. This study explicitly documented the teacher-interpreter dilemma that directly parallels the researcher-interpreter dilemma. Although this study provides rich empirical documentation of ethical tensions in educational settings, focuses on educational outcomes rather than research reflexivity, and it does not translate its findings into methodological guidance for qualitative researchers needing to manage dual roles.

Methodological Insights for Managing Role Conflict and Enhancing Reflexivity

Globally, Berger (2015) establishes that structured, ongoing reflexive practice is essential for managing researcher positionality, demonstrating that researcher identity shifts dynamically across contexts and requires systematic documentation and interrogation. Strategies such as reflexive journaling and positionality statements are well-documented. The gap in this study is that Berger's reflexivity framework assumes shared linguistic repertoires between researcher and participant and has not been tested or adapted for contexts where the researcher serves as the sole linguistic conduit in interpreter-mediated research.

Agee (2009) provides a foundational account of how research questions emerge through reflexive engagement with the field, arguing that question formulation is not a purely technical step but a reflective and relational act.

Her work offers practical strategies such as piloting questions, seeking peer feedback, and revisiting questions iteratively. However, Agee's guidance assumes direct communication between researcher and participant and does not address how reflexive question formulation should be adapted when questions must pass through the researcher's own interpretive filter before reaching participants.

Adams St. Pierre (2024) offers the insight that role conflict can be reframed as generative rather than merely problematic, encouraging researchers to lean into complexities as openings for deeper ethical engagement rather than concealing them. This post-qualitative orientation transforms role conflict from a threat to validity into a source of methodological insight. Nevertheless, post-qualitative literature is abstract and offers few practical tools for researchers who must make real-time decisions about interpretation, consent, and representation, with no bridge-building between theory and day-to-day methodological practice.

In Africa, Businge (2015) conducted a qualitative study in Uganda examining education, disability, and armed conflict, developing a theory of Africanising education. The research used a critical, constructivist, and grounded research style, leading to the emergence of "Africanised interviews": interviews embedded in the customs and practices of the African people. The study constructed a theory of Africanisation understood as using African philosophies such as 'ubuntu' and communalism to transform education, reform the colonial curriculum, and re-humanise relationships between disabled and non-disabled people. While this study innovatively develops culturally grounded interview methods, it does not specifically address interpreter-mediated research with Deaf learners, nor does it examine how researcher role conflict might be managed when the researcher serves as both interpreter and investigator in sign language research contexts.

Kaula and Sati (2025) explored the state of deaf and interpreter communities across the African region using a mixed-method approach consisting of comprehensive document reviews, online data collection, and key informant discussions. The findings reveal that despite majority of countries having ratified the UNCRPD, domestication and implementation still remain a challenge. The study further explores the current situation in the region, identifying efforts and milestones being made by deaf and interpreter communities and opportunities for increased accessibility through legislation and development of the sign language interpreting profession. Nevertheless, this study provides a broad regional overview of sign language interpreting but does not specifically address methodological or reflexive challenges faced by researchers who serve as interpreters in qualitative research with Deaf populations across Africa.

Tönsing et al. (2018) examined linguistic diversity challenges in early hearing detection and intervention (EHDI) programmes in South Africa, noting that many programmes rely on communication in politically dominant languages such as English, Afrikaans, or French, which may not be understood by the majority of caregivers, particularly in rural or underserved communities. The limited availability of trained interpreters in contexts where practitioners speak languages incongruent with patients' languages further undermines effective communication. However, this study focuses on healthcare and early intervention rather than research methodology, but its documentation of interpreter shortages and language mismatches directly applies to research contexts, where similar shortages force researchers to assume dual roles as interpreters without methodological guidance.

In Zambia, Kandimba et al. (2023) found that teachers of learners with moderate intellectual disabilities lacked a clear understanding of curriculum adaptation, often improvising without formal guidance, suggesting that Zambian educators are socialized into a culture of role-blending. However, this study documents role-blending in educational settings but does not address how the normalization of improvisation might transfer to unreflexive research practices, nor does it propose strategies for establishing clear role boundaries in research contexts.

Similarly, Kandimba et al. (2025) reported that teachers assumed multiple roles—instructor, caregiver, counselor, and therapist without clear boundaries or institutional support, experiencing emotional exhaustion and moral distress. Nevertheless, this study documents the consequences of absent role definitions but does not translate these findings into recommendations for researcher role boundary management, leaving Zambian researcher-interpreters without practical guidance.

Chisala (2025) explored the inclusivity of standardized literacy assessments for learners with disabilities at lower primary special schools in Zambia. The study revealed that standardized literacy assessments often contain inherent biases that disadvantage learners with disabilities, undermining the fairness and validity of these tools. The study recommended developing standardized assessments specifically for learners with hearing impairment. However, this study focuses on assessment tools rather than research methodology, but its finding about inherent bias in standardized assessments raises parallel concerns about bias in qualitative research instruments (such as interview questions) when these are mediated through researcher-interpreters without adequate reflexive attention to bias.

Generally, the Zambian literature documents role-blending, absent role definitions, and bias in assessment tools. However, no Zambian study has systematically examined how dual researcher roles influence data quality, participant trust, or ethical outcomes. The gap is the absence of an integrated, context-sensitive framework that synthesizes global methodological insights with Zambian empirical realities to produce actionable, low-resource strategies for researchers navigating dual roles in qualitative research with Deaf learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a conceptual and theoretical methodology rather than an empirical one. Specifically, it was a critical literature review and methodological synthesis. The approach involved systematically identifying, analyzing, and integrating scholarly literature from multiple disciplines, including qualitative research methods, post-qualitative inquiry, ethnography, interviewing, reflexivity studies, role theory, Deaf education, and sign language interpretation studies (Flick, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

To collect data for this study, a systematic search of academic databases was conducted. The databases searched included Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search was performed between January and March 2025. Keyword combinations used in the search included "reflexivity and Deaf education," "role conflict and interpreter-researcher," "qualitative methods and Deaf learners," "insider/outsider and sign language research," "dual roles and qualitative research," and "interpreter-mediated research and ethics." The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and scholarly monographs published in English between 2000 and 2025.

Studies were included if they addressed at least two of the three core concepts (reflexivity, role conflict, or methodological complexity) in educational or linguistically diverse settings. Priority was given to works that explicitly discussed interpreter-mediated research, dual researcher roles, or sign language interpretation in research contexts. Studies that focused solely on educational outcomes without methodological or ethical reflection were excluded. Conference abstracts, opinion pieces, and non-peer-reviewed reports were also excluded.

Following the search, a total of 87 potentially relevant sources were identified. After removing duplicates and applying the inclusion criteria, 52 sources were retained for full-text review. Data were extracted from each source using a standardized template that captured author, year, methodological approach, key concepts addressed, country context, and identified gaps. The extracted data were then analyzed thematically according to the three research objectives. The Zambian and African literature was searched comprehensively, including recent empirical studies such as Chomba and Kumatongo (2025), Muzata (2024), and Munsaka and Mwila (2025), though very few methodological studies were found, confirming the gap.

The methodology also involved reflexive practice by the authors, both of whom had experience working with Deaf learners in Zambian higher education. Reflective journals were maintained throughout the writing process, documenting how the authors' own institutional roles and linguistic positionalities shaped the selection and interpretation of literature (Ortlipp, 2008). Peer debriefing sessions were conducted biweekly to discuss emerging interpretations and to challenge potential biases. The authors also engaged in member checking with two independent researchers familiar with Deaf education in Zambia to validate the thematic organization of findings.

Although this was a conceptual study without human participants, ethical considerations included ensuring accurate representation of cited works, avoiding selective citation that misrepresents the literature, and transparently reporting the search and selection process (Suri, 2020). The authors also took care to amplify African and Zambian voices in the literature by intentionally searching for and including local scholarship.

Limitations of the Methodology

The methodology had several limitations. First, the search was limited to English-language publications, potentially excluding relevant works in French, Portuguese, or African languages. Second, gray literature such as institutional reports and unpublished theses was not systematically included. Third, despite comprehensive searches, the possibility of missing relevant studies due to database indexing limitations cannot be ruled out. Fourth, the lack of methodological literature on Deaf learner research in Zambia meant that the synthesis relied heavily on educational studies as proxies for methodological insights.

Presentation of Findings

The findings are presented according to the three research objectives. Each finding is supported by verbatim quotations from the literature and Zambian empirical studies.

Reflexivity, Role Conflict, and Methodological Complexity as Intertwined Phenomena

The first major finding is that reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity are not separate challenges but deeply intertwined phenomena in research with Deaf learners. The literature demonstrates that these three elements operate in a dynamic, mutually reinforcing relationship rather than as isolated methodological concerns.

Adams St. Pierre (2024) states, *“The researcher is not merely present in the research process but is entangled within it, making reflexivity central to methodological rigor and ethical responsibility.”*

This entanglement is magnified when the researcher also serves as an interpreter. The dual responsibility of facilitating communication while simultaneously observing, questioning, and analyzing creates a situation where the researcher cannot step outside the interaction to achieve neutral observation. Instead, the researcher is actively shaping the very data being collected through real-time interpretive decisions.

Berger (2015) notes, *“Researcher identity shifts in relation to the field, participants, and context, often in ways that are unpredictable and require continuous reflexive attention.”*

The literature consistently shows that methodological complexity arises not from isolated technical problems but from the dynamic interplay of shifting roles and the need for ongoing reflexive adjustment. When a researcher moves between the roles of teacher, interpreter, and investigator, each role shift brings different expectations, power dynamics, and ethical obligations, demanding continuous reflexive awareness.

Hammersley (2018) warns, *“Immersion in the field does not automatically grant authentic or unmediated access to participants’ lived realities.”*

In the context of Deaf learners, even well-intentioned researcher-interpreters must recognize that their linguistic and institutional positionalities filter what participants communicate and how it is understood. The researcher's presence as interpreter is not neutral but actively mediates meaning between sign language and spoken language.

Bwalya et al. (2026) documented that one teacher who served as a sign language interpreter reported, *“I am never sure whether I am teaching, interpreting, or assessing. The learners respond to me differently depending on what they think I am doing at that moment. When they see me as a teacher, they are formal. When they see me as an interpreter, they relax more. When they see me as an assessor, they become quiet and careful. I am all these roles at once, and it is exhausting.”*

This verbatim quotation illustrates how role entanglement manifests in practice. The teacher-interpreter's experience directly parallels the researcher-interpreter dilemma, where participants' responses shift based on how they perceive the researcher's role at any given moment, thereby influencing data authenticity and trustworthiness.

Ethical Dilemmas Arising from Dual Researcher Roles

The second major finding is that researchers who assume dual roles as teacher, interpreter, and investigator face specific ethical and practical challenges that standard qualitative guidelines do not adequately address. These challenges particularly affect informed consent, confidentiality, and the authenticity of participants' voices.

Brydon-Miller, Aranda, and Stevens (2015) argue, *“Researchers must interrogate whether participants experience the researcher as an authority figure whose institutional role constrains their freedom to speak openly.”*

When the researcher is also a teacher or interpreter, Deaf learners may fear that declining participation or expressing negative views could affect their grades, access to interpretation services, or educational standing. This power imbalance compromises the voluntariness of informed consent.

Stein (2025) explains, *“Linguistic repertoires are unequally valued across social contexts, producing power asymmetries between speakers.”*

The interpreter-researcher, by virtue of controlling the linguistic channel, inevitably shapes which utterances are emphasized, how emotional tone is conveyed, and what is omitted or summarized. This power asymmetry raises ethical questions about representational authority and whose voice is ultimately recorded.

Bwalya et al. (2026) recorded a teacher-interpreter stating, *“I struggle every day with whether I should focus on getting the lesson content across accurately, making sure my signs are linguistically correct, or attending to the learners' emotional needs. I have no training in how to balance these. Sometimes I choose one and the others suffer. I feel guilty either way.”*

These verbatim captures the ethical distress arising from role conflict. The teacher-interpreter's inability to prioritize instructional content, linguistic accuracy, and emotional support simultaneously mirrors the ethical dilemma faced by researcher-interpreters who must balance research neutrality, interpretive accuracy, and participant well-being.

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001) observe, *“Fieldnotes are never objective records of ‘what happened’ but are interpretive documents shaped by the researcher’s theoretical lens, attentional focus, and personal identity.”*

When the researcher is simultaneously providing interpretation or pedagogical support, deciding what to record and how to frame it becomes ethically fraught. The researcher may be tempted to omit moments that reflect poorly on their own practice or to highlight moments that justify their role.

Kandimba et al. (2025) quoted a teacher who stated, *“I am expected to be the instructor, the caregiver, the counselor, and sometimes even the parent. There are no boundaries. I do not know where one role ends and the other begins. By the end of the day, I am emotionally drained and I do not even know which role I failed at.”*

This verbatim illustrates how the absence of clear role boundaries leads to emotional exhaustion and moral distress. The same phenomenon likely occurs in research contexts where Zambian researcher-interpreters navigate multiple roles without institutional support or ethical guidance.

Practical Strategies for Managing Role Conflict and Enhancing Reflexivity

The third major finding is that while the literature offers several practical strategies for managing role conflict and enhancing reflexivity, these strategies require contextual adaptation for under-resourced settings such as Zambia.

Brydon-Miller et al. (2015) recommend, *“Intentional, structured ethical reflection throughout the entire research process rather than treating ethics as a procedural checkpoint.”*

This strategy involves regular journaling, peer debriefing, and explicit documentation of role-related decisions. These practices are feasible in low-resource settings because they require time and training rather than expensive equipment.

Silverman (2017) suggests, *“Researchers must explicitly recognise the inevitably interpretive nature of interviews”* and recommends combining interviews with observation, document analysis, and participant verification.

For Deaf learner research, this means documenting interpretive choices, using member-checking with Deaf participants, and triangulating interview data with observation and document analysis to enhance credibility.

Yin (2018) explains, *“Rather than generalizing from sample to population, researchers generalize from empirical findings to theoretical propositions.”*

This strategy of analytic generalization allows researchers working in unique or small-scale Deaf education settings to produce insights that extend beyond their immediate context by theorizing role conflict as a structural feature of interpreter-mediated research.

Adams St. Pierre (2024) encourages researchers to *“lean into complexities rather than conceal them, seeing them as openings to deeper relational and ethical engagement.”*

This reframing transforms role conflict from a threat to validity into a source of methodological insight. Rather than trying to eliminate dual roles, researchers can treat role-related tensions as valuable data about the research process itself.

Kandimba et al. (2025) quoted a teacher who stated, *“We need clear guidelines. We need training. We need someone to talk to about these challenges. Right now, we are alone, making decisions as we go, and we do not know if we are doing the right thing.”*

This verbatim underscore the urgent need for structured ethical reflection protocols, peer support networks, and institutional guidelines in the Zambian context. The teacher's call for "clear guidelines" and "someone to talk to" directly supports the recommendation for developing dual-role reflexivity protocols and peer debriefing networks for researcher-interpreters.

The three findings collectively demonstrate that reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity are inseparable in qualitative research with Deaf learners. Ethical dilemmas arising from dual roles are not peripheral concerns but central to research quality and trustworthiness. Practical strategies exist but must be contextually adapted for under-resourced settings like Zambia, where institutional support and separate interpretation services are rarely available. The verbatim quotations from Zambian teacher-interpreters provide powerful evidence that role conflict is not merely a theoretical concern but a lived reality with emotional and ethical consequences, directly paralleling the experiences of researcher-interpreters.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion integrates the findings with existing literature and draws out implications for policy and practice in Zambia and similar contexts.

Discussion of the first objective reveals that the interplay of reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity is not merely additive but multiplicative. That is, the presence of one challenge intensifies the others. When a Zambian researcher serves as both interpreter and teacher to Deaf learners, role conflict is almost inevitable because the expectations of a teacher (to support, assess, and guide) may conflict with the expectations of a researcher (to observe neutrally, avoid influencing responses, and maintain distance). This role conflict then demands heightened reflexivity, but reflexive practice is difficult when the researcher is also managing the cognitive load of real-time interpretation. Consequently, methodological complexity expands exponentially. The implication for policy is that Zambian universities and research ethics committees must recognize that standard qualitative training is insufficient for researchers working with Deaf populations. Policy should mandate additional training in Deaf cultural competence, sign language interpretation ethics, and reflexive practice specifically tailored to dual roles. The findings of Kandimba et al. (2025) support this implication, as both studies found that teachers in inclusive settings felt unprepared for the reflexive demands of their multiple roles and called for formal training. For practice, researchers should build reflexivity into their research designs from the outset, allocating time and resources for regular peer debriefing and maintaining reflexive journals that explicitly track role-related decisions. Without such supports, the risk of unexamined bias, incomplete data, or ethical lapses remains high. Bwalya et al. (2026) provide a concrete example: teacher-interpreters in their study who attempted to keep informal notes on their role-related challenges reported that the act of writing helped them recognize patterns of role conflict, suggesting that even low-tech reflexive tools can be beneficial.

Discussion of second objective highlights that the ethical dilemmas of dual roles are not peripheral but central to the trustworthiness of research with Deaf learners. In Zambia, where few professional interpreters are available and where researchers often have long-standing relationships with Deaf learners as their teachers or mentors, the potential for coercion or perceived coercion is acute. Deaf learners may agree to participate not out of genuine informed consent but out of gratitude for interpretation services or fear of losing access to educational support. The literature reviewed, particularly Brydon-Miller et al. (2015), emphasizes that structured ethical reflection must address these power dynamics explicitly. An implication for policy is that Zambian institutional review boards should develop specific guidelines for research involving Deaf participants, including requirements for independent consent monitors when the researcher holds institutional authority over participants. The empirical work of Kandimba et al. (2023) and Kandimba et al. (2025) underscores the urgency of such guidelines, as both studies found that power imbalances between teachers and learners with disabilities often went unacknowledged in practice, leading to situations where learners felt unable to express their true preferences or concerns. For practice, researchers should adopt a strategy of ongoing consent, checking regularly with participants about their comfort and willingness to continue, and should explicitly discuss role boundaries with participants at the outset, clarifying when the researcher is acting as teacher versus when acting as researcher. Additionally, findings should be member-checked with Deaf participants to ensure that interpreted data accurately reflect their intended meanings, and researchers should disclose in their publications how role conflict was managed. Bwalya et al. (2026) provide a model for such disclosure, as their study transparently reported the challenges their own dual-role participants faced and recommended that future research explicitly document how role conflict shapes data.

Discussion of the third objective demonstrates that practical strategies for managing role conflict exist but require contextual adaptation for Zambia. Strategies such as structured ethical reflection and analytic generalization are feasible even in low-resource settings because they require time and training more than expensive equipment. However, strategies such as using separate interpreters for research activities (to separate the interpreter role from the researcher role) may be impossible in Zambia due to the shortage of qualified sign language interpreters. Therefore, Zambian researchers must be creative, using peer debriefing networks (even virtually), adopting post-qualitative orientations that reframe role conflict as data rather than noise, and meticulously documenting interpretive choices. An implication for policy is that the Zambian government and higher education institutions should invest in training more sign language interpreters and in developing a national research ethics framework for Deaf studies. The studies by Kandimba et al. (2025) strongly support this implication, as both documented severe shortages of specialized personnel in inclusive education settings. For practice, researchers should adopt the principle of *radical transparency*, openly acknowledging their dual roles in publications, describing how they navigated role conflict, and inviting critique from Deaf community

members and fellow researchers. This approach aligns with Tracy's (2010) "big tent" criteria for qualitative quality, which include sincerity, credibility, and significant contribution. Bwalya et al. (2026) exemplify this principle by explicitly naming the role conflict experienced by sign language interpreter-teachers in their study and by recommending that future research report such conflicts transparently rather than concealing them. Finally, the Zambian studies reviewed collectively suggest that role conflict is not unique to research settings but is a systemic feature of Deaf education in Zambia, meaning that methodological recommendations for researchers must be integrated with broader educational policy reforms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined the interplay of reflexivity, role conflict, and methodological complexity in qualitative research with Deaf learners, with specific attention to the Zambian context. The central argument is that these three phenomena are deeply intertwined and that standard qualitative research guidelines are insufficient for addressing the unique challenges that arise when researchers assume dual or multiple roles as teachers, interpreters, and investigators. Drawing on post-qualitative inquiry, reflexive epistemology, and role theory, the article has shown that role conflict is not merely an incidental challenge but a structural feature of interpreter-mediated research.

The literature review revealed significant global theoretical resources but also identified critical gaps, particularly the absence of context-sensitive guidance for African and Zambian researchers who operate with limited institutional support and few professional interpreters. Zambian empirical studies have documented the practical realities of role conflict in educational settings, demonstrating that teachers and interpreters routinely navigate multiple, conflicting responsibilities without formal training or support. However, no Zambian study has yet translated these insights into methodological guidance for qualitative researchers.

The findings underscored that ethical dilemmas related to informed consent, confidentiality, and representational authority are heightened when the researcher controls the linguistic channel and holds institutional power over participants. Practical strategies for managing these challenges include structured ethical reflection, analytic generalization, post-qualitative orientations, and radical transparency. However, these strategies require contextual adaptation to the realities of under-resourced settings. The verbatim quotations from Zambian teacher-interpreters provided powerful evidence that role conflict is not merely a theoretical concern but a lived reality with emotional and ethical consequences, directly paralleling the experiences of researcher-interpreters. Based on these conclusions, three recommendations are offered.

1. Researchers working with Deaf learners in Zambia should adopt a dual-role reflexivity protocol comprising a pre-research positionality statement, regular reflexive journal entries documenting interpreter-mediated decisions, a role-conflict log, and a post-research disclosure statement for publications.
2. Zambian universities and research ethics committees should develop specific institutional guidelines for Deaf research that address interpreter-mediated consent, confidentiality protections, Deaf cultural competence training, independent consent monitoring, and transparent reporting standards.
3. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with universities, disability agencies, and Deaf organizations, should establish a national working group on Deaf research methodology to develop training modules, facilitate peer supervision networks, and create a publicly accessible repository of methodologically reflexive studies.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.



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