

The Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Higher Learning Institutions: To What Extent Are They Socially Included?

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Abstract

Social inclusion is vital for students with disabilities as it significantly affects their academic progress and overall well-being in terms of collaborative learning and self-esteem. This study gives insights to Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) on the importance of accommodating the social needs of students with disabilities, which consequently determines their learning needs and academic achievements. The study employed a mixed-methods research approach, with a convergent parallel design to collect data from 76 respondents. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data in two higher learning institutions. The findings revealed that students with disabilities were socially engaged in various aspects of teaching and learning processes, as established by this study. The results of the means revealed slight differences between genders (Males; $M=43.9574$, $SD=4.75009$ and Females; $M=42.4138$, $SD=5.57108$) in social engagement, although statistically, no significant differences were observed when the hypothesis was tested to determine social engagement in learning between male and female students ($p>0.05$). The study concludes that although students with disabilities are highly socially engaged in teaching and learning processes, these students are engaged differently according to the means established and comments made by informants. The study recommends that higher learning institutions should encourage peer social support and engage both students with disabilities equally in classrooms to ensure that students with disabilities realize their academic and social potential.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, students with disabilities, social engagement, teaching and learning, higher learning institutions*

INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion to children with disabilities is important and is a many-sided concept. In the context of education setting, social inclusion pre-determines the absence of marginalisation and stigmatisation in the process of learning to persons with disabilities (Le Boutillier & Croucher, 2010). In this case, social inclusion entails active interaction with peers in learning, participation in academic activities such as group work, classroom presentation activities, and access to quality inclusive practices in the classroom. Social inclusion, therefore, forms the basis for overall well-being and is a significant factor of becoming a valued and contributing member in learning for students with disabilities (M[^]asse *et.al.*, 2012; Murray & Greenberg, 2006).

Studies have indicated that access to education of children with disabilities has met many challenges such as low enrolment and high dropout due to unfriendly learning environment which are grouped in the lens of social exclusion (Dutta *et al.*, 2009; Mpofu & Wilson, 2004). The challenges are more pronounced in Higher Learning Institutions than lower levels of education due to high demand of education concentration. Challenges in HLIs that emanate from social exclusion include scarce accessibility of higher education institutions, poor academic support, negative social attitudes, social isolation, as well as low financial support from the government and society; and lecturers' attitudes and self-efficacy (Foreman *et al.*, 2001; Jung, 2003; Johnson, 2006; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Mpofu & Wilson, 2004; Shaw, 2023).

Researches indicate that positive support from faculty determines smooth progression of students with disabilities in education (Jung, 2003; Johnson, 2006; Rao, 2004;). Such support comprises the institution's positive attitudes toward students with disabilities, consciousness on the students' needs, and understanding towards reasonable provision of accommodation services to the students (Barazandeh, 2005; Kraska, 2003). Studies have shown conflicting results of students with disabilities with regard to academic achievement. For example, some studies have shown that students with disabilities perform average and dropout from some courses compared with their counterparts (Foreman *et al.*, 2001; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Other studies, however, have reported frustrations, failure, isolation and poor coping mechanisms of students

with disabilities in their studies in inclusive institutions (Shevlin, Kenny & McNeela, 2004; Willett, 2002).

Claiborn *et al.* (2010) underscore that social inclusion plays a significant role in the retention of students with disabilities in studies. Such social inclusion aspects include; peer acceptance, positive attitude of the institution towards students with disabilities and accommodation in teaching and learning (Claiborn, et. al., 2010). The study conducted by Yusof *et al.* (2019) in Malaysia Higher Education revealed that students with disabilities indicated that social inclusion comprised provision of support services as facilitation in learning, access in learning facilities, creating awareness about the needs of students with disabilities, thus ensuring disabled-friendly facilities and implementing specific policies to address issues concerning disabilities.

Recent study conducted in Japanese Higher Learning Institutions to students with disabilities indicate that social inclusion in HLIs is thwarted by low expertise in special needs education in which instructors fail to provide adequate communication channels, lack of collaboration and poor instructions. Likewise, the study revealed that the faculty was unable to adapt the teaching strategies which catered for personal learning needs of students. It was also revealed that there were inclusion management gaps in terms of recognising the needs of students with invisible disabilities which could facilitate the provision of accommodations and management services (Dyliaeva, Rothman, & Ghotbi, 2024).

Presently, in Tanzania, there has been a growing number of students with disabilities being enrolled in Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) (Mgumba & Kija, 2023; Semunyu & Rushashu, 2023; Philip, 2024). However, studies conducted in Tanzania indicate that students with disabilities in HLIs face challenges of lacking sign language interpreters and assistive devices such as hearing aids for children with hearing impairment, lack of braille machines and other audio and visual materials for those with visual impairment; which in turn, create communication barriers to students' peers and instructors, consequently, leading to social exclusion (Mwaipopo, *et al.*, 2011). Further, shortage of skilled teachers and specialists who are committed to managing academic and administrative duties has also been documented (Kisanga, 2020; Mgumba & Kija, 2023).

Although there are number of studies which have been conducted to assess the provision of education to students with disabilities in HLIs in Tanzania (Kisanga, 2019, 2020; Mgumba, 2018; Mwaipopo, *et al.*, 2011; Philip & Juma, 2023; Semunyu & Rushashu, 2023), those studies have dealt with small area of study. Moreover, studies in Tanzania have only been limited to a group of students with disabilities which cannot provide comprehensive information of their learning experiences in HLIs. Realising that research lacuna, this study intended to assess social inclusion of students with disabilities in learning and specifically examine their social interactions when learning with students without disabilities in higher learning institutions. It was hypothesized that: *there is no statistically significant difference in social interaction between male and female students with disabilities in higher learning institutions.*

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Theory

This study was guided by the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Theory promulgated by Meyer and Rose (2000). The UDL theory centres on the diversity of learning environment in which a learner interacts with. The UDL theory emanates from early civil rights advocacy and special education legislation which underscore the right of all students to have free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Hitchcock et al., 2005) in the process of learning.

The theory forges a link between a learner's learning needs and the educational environment that supports participation, access, and progress for learning (Meyer & Rose, 2000; Rose & Meyer, 2002). The UDL theory is an instructional theoretical framework which is entrenched in neuroscience and cognitive psychology. Viewed from the educational perspective; the theory draws attention to flexibility and inclusivity, thus ensuring that instructional aims, materials and methods are accessible by all, including learners with disabilities (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). UDL theory advocates the learning styles that address the learning needs of a wide range of learners and not for a particular group of persons (Brokop, 2008; CAST, 2018).

The UDL theory is relevant to this study as it gives insights on the appropriate learning environment which all learners including those with disability should be exposed and supported in order to access quality education with equity. With regard to HLIs where many lecturers are not

trained to handle diverse learning needs, the institutions should create conducive environment for all students to learn. This situation calls for audio-visual materials, online resources and flexible learning environment to accommodate diverse learning needs (Creed et al., 2005; Meyer et al. 2014). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles encourage the availability of multi-modal means of representation, expression, and active engagement during teaching which provide students with different avenues to access information and be actively involved in learning activities (Meyer et al., 2016). Further, the UDL theory was deemed pertinent to this study as it advocates for inclusive pedagogy where all learners regardless of their physical, social and psychological limitation have to learn. Thus, Higher Learning Institutions should empower lecturers in inclusive pedagogical skills in order to enable all learners access education by accommodating diverse learning needs. For example, lecturers can prepare notes and provide them to students in different formats such as; audio, text, and visual to support students with dyslexia, hearing impairments, or learning disabilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed mixed research approach with convergent parallel design. The aim was to get data that would inform policies, guidelines prepared in HLIs and other educational stakeholders in order to make informed decision when planning the day-to-day curriculum activities and other related teaching and learning aspects. During data collection, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and analysed separately. While in report writing, the results were integrated to complement each other. Two universities were studied to determine the levels of social engagement of students with disabilities in learning with other students. Besides, gender as one of the issues in today's education was also tested to determine the social engagement level across genders, that is males and females. The aim of doing this was to find out whether there were significant differences between males and females in terms of social interaction in learning with other students.

The sample size of 76 respondents was considered through the use of simple random sampling from the given target population of 143 students with disabilities across the two higher learning institutions. Later on, purposive sampling was employed to get informants who could give views on the social interaction status of students with disabilities in

learning with other students. Thus, 5 students amongst the 76 students with disabilities were included in the study for interview purposes.

Questionnaires and semi structured interview guide were used to get data from the 76 respondents. The Likert scale with 5 statements of strongly agree=5, agree=4, neutral=3, disagree=2 and strongly disagree=1 was used in the study to examine the experiences of students with disabilities on social interaction in learning with other students in inclusive classes. The questionnaire set by the researchers had 10 items for measuring social interaction of students with disabilities. The researchers administered the questionnaire to the sampled students with disabilities. In order to triangulate the data, semi structured interview guide was used to the 5 sampled students with disabilities to get their opinion and experiences on social support they had received from their peers in learning at the classroom.

Prior to the actual data collection, the instruments for data collection were validated by the researchers' colleagues and expert review in order to determine the relevance of the study, objective, hypothesis set, language used and accuracy of the questions set in both questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide. Reliability of the study and its instruments were also checked whereby internal consistency was determined by using the Cronbach's alpha. The results obtained was $(\alpha) = 0.890$, which is suitable.

Both quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide were analysed in order to determine the social interaction of students with disabilities in learning with other students. The data obtained from the field were coded and entered into the computer for running descriptive data. Statistical Package Software for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 was used to obtain the quantitative data that could be used in testing the hypothesis established in the study. Means, standard deviation, percentages and frequencies were used to analyse the data. Furthermore, Independent sample T-test with confidence level of 95% and significance level of 0.05 was also used in the study to determine the statistical significance differences of social interaction across gender. The analysed quantitative data were presented in frequency distribution table. Qualitative data were analysed thematically and presented in quotation forms.

Before data collection, the study followed ethical clearance procedures. Permission was obtained from HLIs through an official ethical clearance letter. To ensure privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, respondents were provided with an informed consent form. This form included four sections: an introduction to the researchers, the research purpose, a confidentiality statement, and a consent section requiring signatures from both researchers and participants. This process enabled the respondents to confidently complete questionnaires and participate in interviews.

RESULTS

The results of this study were established based on the objective and the tested hypothesis. The themes and sub-themes emerged from the objective, which states to *explore the social interaction of students with disabilities in learning with other students*. The tested hypothesis formulated states to *determine the statistical significance of differences in social learning support across genders*.

Demographic Characteristics

In order to determine the relevance of the study, demographic characteristics of the studied sample were obtained. Table 1 shows various demographic characteristics.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Students with Disabilities

Demographic Characteristics (n=76)	Item	Type of Ownership	Frequency	Percent
Name of the University	A	Private	22	28.9
	B	Public	54	71.1
Gender	Male		47	61.8
	Female		29	38.2

Source: Field Data (May, 2024).

In Table 1, the findings reveal that both male (61.8%) and female (38.2%) students with disabilities were involved in the study. This shows that a large number of students with disabilities were males compared to females. The number of female students between the two universities is shown to be less regardless of the universities' intention to provide equal chances of enrolling both male and female students. This reflects that a large number of students who are enrolled at the universities are males

When it comes to disability, there is likelihood of observing fewer females.

Social Interaction of Students with Disabilities in Learning with Other Students (Peer Support)

Despite their physical condition, students with physical disabilities are supposed to interact with their peers in different learning activities. Their interactions not only benefit students with disabilities, but also normal students. There is mutual support from each other as they live in a diverse environment with multiple needs. In order to explore the social interaction with other students in learning, Table 2 reveals the findings.

Table 2
Social Interaction of Students with Disabilities in Learning with Other Students ($\mu=4.33$)

Statements	Mean (μ)	Std Deviation	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel accepted by other students in my class.	4.45	.641	0	0	6(7.9%)	30 (39.5%)	40 (52.6%)
I have positive interactions with students without disabilities	4.32	.734	0	0	12(15.8%)	28(36.8%)	36 (47.4%)
I feel included during group activities.	4.24	.831	0	2(2.6%)	13(17.1%)	26 (34.2%)	35 (46.1%)
I receive support from my peers in my learning journey.	4.39	.850	2 (2.6%)	1(1.3%)	3(3.9%)	29(38.2%)	41 (53.9%)
I have opportunities to collaborate with other students.	4.53	.553	0	0	2 (2.6%)	32(42.1%)	42(55.3%)
I experience a sense of belonging in my classroom.	4.25	.695	0	2 (2.6%)	5(6.6%)	41(53.9%)	28 (36.8%)
I am able to participate in social events with other students.	4.33	.681	0	1 (1.3%)	6(7.9%)	36(47.4%)	33(43.4%)
I am comfortable asking for help from my classmates.	4.34	.809	0	4(5.3%)	4(5.3%)	30(39.5%)	38(50.0%)
I am treated with respect by my peers.	4.33	.641	0	1(1.3%)	4(5.3%)	40(52.6%)	31(40.8%)
I feel that my opinions and ideas are valued by other students.	4.20	.783	0	3(3.9%)	8(10.5%)	36(47.4%)	29(38.2%)

Source: Field Data (May, 2024).

Table 2 shows the findings on the social interaction of students with disabilities in learning with other students. The findings revealed that there was maximum engagement of students in learning almost across all variables. However, 3 (3.9%) out of 76 students showed to be not comfortable with the support they were receiving from their peers during the academic journey. 3 (3.9%) out of 76 students also felt that their opinions and ideas were not valued by their colleagues and 1 (1.3%) out of 76 students showed not to have been treated with respect by their peers. Although the number of students who showed lack of comfortability with the social interaction, they were receiving from their peers was small, this should not be neglected. This is because; all students are required to be engaged equally in all spheres of social interaction during the teaching and learning processes. Scholars Monteverde *et al.* (2023): Gresham, Sugai and Horner (2001) demonstrate that when students with disabilities are isolated from their peers, their social skills in both the academic and everyday situations are hindered. This indicates the important role of social interaction for students with disabilities in learning situations.

In responding to the interview on the peer support received, one student had this to say:

.....well, I receive some social support in learning, but when I need more, some of my fellow students do not show cooperation. Whenever this happens, I feel so bad! Therefore, I sometimes wish to have an individual who could be permanent in assisting me in all social and academic issues (Interview with the third-year students with visual impairment, May 2024).

In a similar vein, another student with a hearing impairment commented that:

In fact, social support to me seems to be difficult to get. I have tried several times to share with my friends how I feel about their support during teaching and learning in the class, but very few care; the majority neglect me! This is contrary to where I was studying in my advanced level of education. I think social mobilisation and awareness to all students on individuals with disabilities should be encouraged during the orientation week (Interview with the first student with hearing impairment, May, 2024).

From these two quotes, the study establishes that some students had been left aside during the teaching and learning processes in the aspect of social engagement. As emphasised in the National Strategies for Inclusive

Education-2022-2026 framework (URT, 2021). The framework rests on the provision of holistic education (URT, 2021) with five key values which include: collaboration, rights to non-discriminatory education, respect to diversity, equity and access to quality education. Therefore, lecturers are required to encourage and promote social interaction in the classroom situation which in turn may enhance peer interaction at times of teaching and learning processes. Studies show that, peer support and interaction have significant, positive impacts on the lives of students with disabilities (Carter & Hughes, 2005). These students, when supported by their peers and others, they will be capable of refining their social skills, engage in learning activities and have adaptive behaviours (McCurdy & Cole, 2014). Furthermore, social interaction with peers promotes permanent life-changing ways (Shippy, 2015). Therefore, from these studies, one underscores the importance of social engagement of all students in HLIs as revealed by this study.

Significant Differences in Social Learning Support Across Genders

The study aimed to test the hypothesis to determine whether there was a significant difference in social learning support across genders. Tables 3 and 4 reveal the results as follows:

Table 3:

Significant Differences in Social Learning Support Across Genders (n=76)

Group Statistics (n=76)					
Statement	Gender:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT	Male	47	43.9574	4.75009	.69287
	Female	29	42.4138	5.57108	1.03452

Source: Field Data (May, 2024).

Based on Table 3, the findings show that higher social engagement in learning was observed within males ($\mu=43.96$, $s\delta=4.75$) unlikely their female counterparts ($\mu=42.41$, $s\delta=5.57$). This might be due to the nature of the given activities and groupings, self-efficacy of a student in performing the given activities, gender socialisation and interactive social level between the members of the family and society where the students belong and the developmental factors during childhood (Mursita, et al, 2018). Besides, it is important to note that the level and nature of social interaction between males and females in HLIs may vary depending on the specific institution, culture, and the individual experiences and

preferences of the students. This study was conducted in two HLIs which varied in terms of ownership whereby one was under private ownership (Religious affiliation) and the other is public owned (publicly owned). Therefore, the nature of social interaction in learning may not be similar. This is why the study findings show that more social interactions in learning were found on male than female respondents although their mean groups were not statistically significant as revealed in Table 4 of this study.

Table 4
Gender and Social Interaction of Students with Disabilities in Learning with Other Students (n=76)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
Statement		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Social Engagement of students with disabilities in learning	Equal variances assumed	.369	1.288	.202	74	1.544	1.199	1.1987	-.845	3.932
	Equal variances not assumed		1.240	.221	52.34	1.544	1.245	1.2451	-.954	4.042

Source: Field Data (May, 2024).

An independent sample T-test was conducted to determine whether there was significant difference in social interaction of students with disabilities in learning with other students whether males or females. The results in Table 4 indicate a not significant difference between male ($\mu=43.9574$, $s\delta=4.75009$) and female students with disabilities ($\mu=42.4138$, $s\delta=5.57108$), [$t(74)=0.202$, $p=0.229>0.05$]. The 95% confidence interval of the difference between means ranged from [-0.845 to 3.932] and did not indicate a statistical difference between the means of the sample. Consequently, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference between the sample means ($t > 0.05$). Thus, the observed findings clearly show that male and female students with disability in HLIs possess no significant differences on the above-mentioned variables. The findings of this study are in agreement with Kumar et al (2016) and Bebetos et al. (2014), who found that female students and their male peers were responsive and collaborative towards students with disabilities. Therefore, it is essential to emphasise the importance of social interaction among students, both with and without disabilities, as this helps improve their ability to adjust to learning and prepares them for future life as revealed by this study.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that although students with disabilities are highly socially engaged in teaching and learning processes, these students are engaged differently. All students with disabilities regardless of their sex have the right to participate in the learning process. Based on the findings, this study recommends that academic institutions are required to actively promote peer social support among students by creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Additionally, institutions should ensure that students with disabilities are equally engaged in classroom activities, discussions, and learning opportunities. By fostering inclusivity and participation, these students can fully demonstrate their abilities, thus enhancing their academic performance, and develop essential social and cognitive skills. This approach not only benefits students with disabilities but also contributes to a more diverse and enriched learning experience for all students in academic institutions.

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