Towards Schools for All: Examining the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Tanzanian Primary Schools

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Abstract
This paper is based on a qualitative case study design, guided by the social model of disability and Child-Friendly School Model to investigate the implementation of inclusive education in selected primary schools in Kinondoni district. The main argument of the study was that although it is over 25 years since Tanzania ratified the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action to move towards inclusive approaches, the majority of learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are not yet enrolled in school and even those who are sent to school do not remain in school. The study intended to illuminate the reasons behind this situation. Purposive sampling was used to select 60 participants including 44 special education teachers from eight inclusive schools (3 from five government schools and 10 from three private schools), three school owners, and 12 parents of learners with learners with SEN.Through observation and interviews with school owners, parents and teachers, data was analysed thematically revealing that mainstreaming learners with learners with SEN into formal schooling was not a simple trouble-free operation. Rather, it is a complex phenomenon that poses pedagogical challenges. Each child has unique educational needs given the type and severity of the disability. The degree of success entails a number of factors including availability of specialized teachers, adequate funding, variety of support services and conducive school infrastructure which are not readily available in a developing country context like Tanzania. The study calls for multisectoral approach and a shared commitment among policymakers, and all education stakeholders to make inclusive education work.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, Special Education Needs, Disability, primary schools*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a central principle in global education policy, grounded in the recognition of education as a fundamental human

right and a key driver of social and economic development. Since the adoption of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in 1994, the concept of inclusive education has become a global agenda to serve all children particularly those with special educational needs. Informed by the principle of inclusion, the catchword for inclusive education, has been "schools for all" implying that schools should be institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs. Hence importantly and positively contributing to the agenda for achieving Education for All. This commitment is reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2020). Following the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action countries worldwide have committed themselves to restructuring education systems to accommodate all learners, including learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN), within mainstream schools.

In this study, the term learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) refers to learners who require additional educational support, adaptations, specialised teaching, assistive resources or related services to participate and learn effectively in school. SEN is therefore used as an educational term that focuses on the additional support required by a learner, while disability refers more specifically to a physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental or other impairment that may interact with environmental and institutional barriers to participation. The two terms are related but are not used interchangeably in this paper: a learner with a disability may have SEN, but SEN should not automatically be understood as synonymous with disability. Unless referring specifically to disability status or a particular impairment, the manuscript uses learners with SEN as the principal term.

Understanding Inclusion and related approaches

According to UNICEF (2011) there have, traditionally, been three broad approaches to the education of learners with disabilities and SEN which help to create a thorough understanding of inclusive education. These are segregation, integration and inclusion. Segregation is an approach in which children are classified according to their impairment and allocated a special school designed to respond to that particular impairment; These schools have specially designed form of instruction to cater for the unique needs and abilities of learners with special educational needs. One of the primary benefits of special education is the provision of customized instruction tailored to meet the unique needs of each student. Special

education teachers are trained to develop individualized education programs (IEPs) that specify measurable goals and objectives for each student. In Tanzania, special schools have boarding facilities and the first special school was established at Buigiri in Dodoma in 1960 for blind boys.

The second approach is integration, where learners with disabilities are placed in the mainstream system, often in special classes, as long as they can accommodate its demands and fit in with its environment. Unlike in the segregation approach where learners with disability and SEN attend special designed schools, the integration approach allows learners with special educational needs to attend regular schools but are usually taught in a separate special unit or class (URT, 2004).

The third approach which is also the focus of this paper is inclusion where there is recognition of a need to transform the cultures, policies and practices in school to accommodate the differing needs of individual children, and an obligation to remove the barriers that impede that possibility. It promotes the education of all children in the same school and classroom environment, without discriminating them by disability or other special needs. The classroom is seen as a place where all children, despite their special educational needs, have the right to belong, talk, walk, work and share together. It requires that all children, including learners with learners with disabilities, not only have access to schooling within their own community, but that they are provided with appropriate learning opportunities to achieve their full potential. Its approach is underpinned by an understanding that all children should have equivalent and systematic learning opportunities in a wide range of school and additional educational settings, despite the differences that might exist.

According to Frederickson and Cline (2009), it is sometimes very difficult to draw a clear-cut line between inclusive education and integrated approaches, although they are theoretically different. While integration as observed by Jardinez & Natividad (2024) is about making a limited number of additional arrangements for individual pupils with SEN in schools, inclusion on the other hand implies the introduction of a more radical set of changes through which schools restructure themselves so as to be able to embrace all children in one roof without the need for additional support.

It is within this context that Inclusive Education as defined in the Salamanca Statement entails “recognition of the need to work towards

"schools for all" - institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs." Inclusive education begins with the premise that all learners have unique characteristics, interests, abilities and particular learning needs and, further, that learners with special education needs must have equal access to and receive individual accommodation in the general education system.

In this case inclusion implies transition from separate, segregated learning environments for persons with disabilities reflected in the "special education" approach, to schooling in the general education system. Effective transitions from special education approaches to inclusive education requires careful planning and structural changes to ensure that learners with disabilities are not placed within the regular or mainstream school system without the appropriate accommodation and supports that ensure an inclusive learning environment

Development of inclusive education in Tanzania

Provision of educational opportunities for learners with SEN has a long history in Tanzania even before the movement into inclusive education approach. It can be traced back to the 1950s when special schools were established by European missionaries to meet students' needs with disabilities and special educational needs (Possi & Milinga 2017). By that time, the school system was based on the medical model where children were categorised according to their disabilities and allocated to school designed to respond to that particular disability. Tracing the development of special education in Tanzania, Tungaraza (1994) indicated that the Anglican Church opened the first school for learners with visual impairment at Bugiri in Dodoma in 1950 followed by Furaha and Irente special primary schools for students with visual impairment by the Swedish Free Mission and Lutheran Churches respectively. In 1963, the Roman Catholic Church opened the first school for deaf children. The Salvation Army introduced services for those with physical disabilities in 1967 (Karakoski & Ström, 2005). At that time, the government had not ventured into special needs education. Consequently, quite a large number of learners with learners with disabilities were left at home due to ignorance, stigma, and superstitions attached to causes of disability and the disability conditions. In 1963 the government joined efforts with the European missionaries in providing special needs education. Uhuru Primary School in Dar es Salaam was opened as an integrated school for learners with visual impairment. With this breakthrough more integrated schools were established.

In line with the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action and Special Needs Education in 1994 which called for countries worldwide to move towards inclusive approaches, Tanzania started to implement inclusive education in 1997. Concurrent with the decision to move towards inclusion, Tanzania also developed a National Policy on Disability in 2004 (United Republic of Tanzania (URT, 2004) to provide guidelines and to set parameters for service delivery. The policy acknowledged that education was a key to the development of learners with disabilities' potential and that they should be given priority. It states:

> *The government, in collaboration with stakeholders, shall provide a conducive environment for inclusive education that takes care of the special needs of disabled children* (URT, 2004, p16)

Since then, the government has been making effort to broaden educational opportunities for learners with learners with disabilities and marginalized groups so as to realise their full potential. Inclusive education has been formally embraced through policy reforms aligned with national and international commitments. These policy reforms include for example, the Education and Training Policy 2014 (2023 edition), the Education Sector Development Programme (2016/17–2020/21,) the National Strategy for Inclusive Education 2021/22-25/2026, Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4). (MoST 2023, MoEST 2017, URT 2022)

The problem and rationalisation for the study

More than two decades after Tanzania's ratification of the Salamanca Statement, inclusive education remains unevenly implemented in primary schools (Wakuru, Kisanga & Vuzo 2020); Samwel, Pembe & Basela (2025). Although national policies promote schooling for all children, many learners with SEN are either not enrolled in mainstream schools or fail to complete primary education (Bhalalusesa, 2023). This persistence of exclusion raises critical questions about the effectiveness of current implementation strategies. Recent Tanzanian studies continue to document challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education. Research in public primary schools in Njombe Town Council identified constraints relating to teaching and learning materials, school infrastructure, funding, teacher preparation and curriculum responsiveness (Mkamwembe & Mrema, 2024). Other studies have examined teachers' experiences of supporting learners with disabilities and the conditions of learning environments in inclusive primary schools

(Samwel et al., 2025; Mkonongwa & Mwalongo, 2025). These studies contribute to understanding the practical difficulties schools encounter. They also indicate the importance of examining inclusion in relation to the organisational and social conditions within which teaching and learning take place. International evidence similarly emphasises that exclusion can persist when policies are not accompanied by appropriate financing, accessible environments, responsive curricula, teacher support and meaningful engagement with families and communities (UNESCO, 2020).

Despite growing international and national commitments to inclusive education, further contextualised investigation is needed into how different stakeholders understand and experience inclusion within Tanzanian primary school settings. Understanding how teachers, parents, and school owners interpret and enact inclusive education is critical for explaining the gap that often exists between policy commitments and classroom realities. Without such contextualised insights, policy interventions risk overlooking the practical realities that shape inclusion on the ground. This study therefore addressed the problem of the persistent gap between inclusive education policy commitments and their practical realisation in Tanzanian primary schools.

Purpose of the study and rationale

This study examined the implementation of inclusive education in eight selected primary schools in Kinondoni district in Tanzania comprising government and private schools and from the perspectives of the key players on the ground i.e teachers, parents and school owners. The study was guided by three research questions:

Research Questions

i) How do teachers, parents, and school owners in selected primary schools understand inclusive education?
ii) What practices are used to include learners with SEN in mainstream classrooms?
iii) What contextual challenges prohibit effective implementation of inclusive education in these schools?

Theoretical Framework

This study examines implementation of inclusive education at school level to see if schools are really moving towards Schools for all. Therefore, it was guided by the Child-friendly School-(CFS) Model

developed by UNICEF (2012) and informed by the Social Model of Disability. The social model directs attention towards environmental, institutional and attitudinal barriers that restricts participation of persons with disabilities, rather than locating the explanation for exclusion solely within an individual's impairment (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). The Child-Friendly School Model, in turn, provides a framework for considering the relationships between children's readiness, school readiness and family readiness, as well as the conditions that support children's participation and learning (UNICEF, 2012). Read together, these perspectives provide a basis for examining both the barriers that schools and wider social arrangements create and the conditions required for schools and families to support diverse learners.

According to this model readiness for implementation of inclusive education is defined by three interlinked dimensions: ready children; ready schools; and ready families. The model assumes that when children and families are prepared for school and schools are prepared for them, children are more likely to enrol in school on time and stay until they complete primary school. The "ready children" dimension focuses on children's learning and development. It refers to what children should know and be able to do in order to enter school ready and eager to learn. The 'ready schools' dimension focuses on the school environment. It includes practices that: a) foster and support a smooth transition for children to primary school and beyond; and b) promote learning for all children. Concerning learners with disabilities, ready schools adopt inclusive approaches as opposed to exclusionary educational practices and discriminatory attitudes. For individual schools - the introduction of an inclusive educational environment which addresses the culture, policies and practices of the school to ensure that the basic conditions exist in which all children can participate and learn. On the other hand, the "ready families" dimension focuses on parental attitudes and involvement in their children's early learning, development, and transition to school. Parents have to send all their children to school, and supporting them both in their education, and in helping ensure that schools comply with the principles of an inclusive approach. In this case parents' educational goals, beliefs, attitudes and commitment are considered crucial for school success. Parental commitment to ensuring timely enrolment for young children is important.

According to this model, all three dimensions of school readiness are important and must work together to ensure that the implementation and

transition time for the child, family, and school system is smooth. Interlinked, they support each other in building competencies and facilitating smooth implementation of inclusive education.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of inclusive education implementation within its real-life context. Case study research is particularly appropriate when the phenomenon under investigation is closely intertwined with its context and cannot be meaningfully separated for analysis (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, qualitative case study designs allow for the use of multiple data sources, enabling a rich and nuanced understanding of practices, experiences, and interactions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This approach has been widely applied in inclusive education research to explore the layered and context-specific nature of inclusion in educational settings (Shrestha & Bhattarai, 2022).

The study was conducted in selected primary schools in Dar es Salaam (Kinondoni District), an urban area characterised by diverse school populations and varying levels of educational resources. The selection of Dar es Salaam was based on the fact that it was historically the first region in pioneering the implementation of inclusive education in the country and continues to play a significant role in the country's inclusive education agenda. The region has consistently enrolled a relatively large number of learners with SEN in mainstream primary schools and accommodates numerous schools implementing inclusive education programmes. Recent education statistics published by the Ministry of Education through the Education Sector Management Information System (ESMIS) indicate that learners with disabilities remain predominantly enrolled in primary education, with regional data available for monitoring inclusion across all regions, including Dar es Salaam (URT, 2024).

Purposive sampling was used to select inclusive schools that enrolled learners with SEN. Five government schools from 16 inclusive schools in Kinondoni district and three private schools were selected basing on having relatively large numbers of learners with SEN and representing majority of disability categories identified in the schools. These were Visual impairment, hearing impairment, Low vision, Slow learners, Mental retardation, Hearing loss, Cerebral palsy, Physical disability, Albinism, Autism, Deaf-Mute and Deaf-Blind. Participants included 44

special education teachers (34 from the public primary schools and 10 from the 3 private schools), 3 private school owners (who were selected as key informants from private primary schools that had established inclusive education practices, enrolled relatively large numbers of learners with SEN, and collectively represented a broad range of disability types), and 12 parents of learners with learners with SEN representing majority of disability categories found at the schools. all of them were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in inclusive education practices. The parents had children in the schools that participated on the study.

This study was conducted in inclusive primary schools because they included learners with and without disabilities and learners requiring additional educational support. The participating schools represented a range of educational needs and disability categories, including visual and hearing impairments, physical disabilities, autism, albinism and other learning and developmental needs. The term *learners with SEN* is used in this study to refer to learners requiring additional educational support, while *disability* is used when referring specifically to disability categories or disability-related barriers. This also implies that even the profile of teachers is also divided into two categories. The first category is composed of teachers who teach normal classes as per official primary school curriculum and those who handles special classes for learners with SEN. Both categories of teachers were recruited on the basis of their academic merit i.e. trained as primary school teachers.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with parents and school owners to capture perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to inclusive education. Focus group discussion was conducted to teachers to get insight of their perception of inclusive education and practices are used to include learners with SEN in mainstream classrooms. Together with these methods of data collection, classroom and school observations was also employed to document teaching practices, learner participation, and the physical learning environment. The combination of interviews and observations enabled triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings. Data saturation was considered throughout the data collection process across the groups. Saturation was reached when successive interviews began to generate similar information and no substantially new themes, categories, or explanations relevant to the research questions were emerging.

Data were analysed thematically following qualitative analysis procedures. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020). Thematic analysis is an appropriate method of analysis for seeking to understand experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set. Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns, themes, and relationships relevant to inclusive education implementation. Analysis was iterative, allowing emerging insights to inform subsequent interpretation. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of perspectives from teachers, parents, and school owners. Credibility was strengthened by comparing accounts across participant groups, while dependability and confirmability were supported through systematic documentation of data collection and analysis. A detailed description of the study context and participants was provided to support transferability.

Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to the required ethical principles throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, research permits were obtained from the office of the Vice Chancellor of the Open University of Tanzania who introduced the research to the Regional Administrative Secretaries of Dar es Salaam region thereafter to District Administrative Secretaries of the Kinondoni district which were selected for the study. The researcher was then introduced to the District Special Educational officers who finally introduced her to the head teachers of inclusive schools and the special educational teachers found in those inclusive schools within the two selected regions for study. . Participation in the study was voluntary and all participants were given clear information of the purpose, means of data collection and security of the data in the study. Informed consent was sought from the participants before data collection. Confidentiality and Anonymity of participants was maintained throughout the research process and the use of pseud names during data presentation. All audio recording of the interviews, transcripts and research data were securely stored in password- protected devises.

Limitations and Scope of the Study

This study was conducted in a limited number of inclusive primary schools within one urban district in Tanzania; therefore, the findings should be interpreted within this context and should not be assumed to represent all Tanzanian primary schools, particularly those in rural settings. The study also relied primarily on the perspectives of teachers, school owners and parents and did not directly capture learners' experiences. As a qualitative case study, the study was intended to

provide contextual insights into the implementation of inclusive education rather than to estimate the prevalence or scale of the challenges identified. The recommendations should therefore be understood as context-informed areas for strengthening inclusive education rather than as universally applicable prescriptions.

FINDINGS: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are organised around three major themes derived from the thematic analysis: (1) stakeholder understandings of inclusive education, (2) school-level practices supporting learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and (3) contextual challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education. These themes correspond to the study's research questions and provide insight into how inclusive education is interpreted and enacted in selected primary schools in Kinondoni District.

Parents and teachers understanding of inclusive education

According to Fullan (1991), there are countless variables potentially influencing whether a change programme gets started and implemented in a successful way. One of the key variables is clarity and utility of an innovation as perceived by the key actors in the implementation process. In this case implementation of inclusive education requires an understanding of inclusion as an approach to allowing access to education for all children. Therefore, this study explored from the potential key actors (parents and teachers) whether or not they had a clear understanding of what inclusive education meant for them and the roles they were expected to play to make its operationalisation successful.

Through interviews with the parents, it became obvious that although all parents had one aspect in common: (all had learners with learners with disabilities and SEN) they were not homogeneous. They were varied in terms of their age, educational background, socio economic status as well as in knowledge and awareness about disability generally and learners with learners with SEN in particular. The differences in their demographical characteristics influenced the way they conceived the concept of inclusive education, the choice of inclusive school for their children whether government or non-government school and the way they engage themselves in the implementation process. Generally, the parents who participated in this study could be categorised into two parts.

The first part consisted of parents who were aware of the presence of inclusive schools and had deliberatively sent their learners with disability and SEN to these schools. This group of parents were literate with education levels ranging from primary to university level. They had formal employment although others were self-employed. They perceived inclusive education as an initiative to promote provision of education to all children regardless of their condition in the same school without discrimination. Such parents viewed inclusive education from a human rights perspective that having a disability does not make someone less a human being. Although, they expressed their disappointment to have such a child in a family they inclined to the religious model and fully accepted this as a will of God. They were very positive to do whatever it took to ensure good welfare for the child. These parents were making an extra effort to explore, find out and prove if the school was really able to accommodate their child. They even try to find out how their child could learn, what facilities he/she may need to support his/her learning and if the school has available teachers who could teach a child with SEN. One parent had this to say:

> *"I have really been making effort to ensure that my child is placed in a suitable inclusive school. I began with Al Muntazir primary school because it admits learners with learners with SEN of various types. Recently, I met a friend who directed me to this school. I was informed that this school is better because they teach learners with learners with SEN adaptive behaviours and life skills apart from academic oriented subjects alone which my child with autism spectrum disorder cannot comprehend."* P3

These parents also appreciated government initiative to allow learners with SEN to be enrolled in inclusive schools because the traditional arrangement of secreting these children into a special boarding school was psychologically disturbing for parents. In addition, these special schools were very few and located far from home.

> *"I am thankful to the government that I can now send my son to a nearby school and that he has been accepted. I was wondering how his educational journey would unfold because there were no schools around here that accepted learners with disabilities. It was emotionally painful just thinking that I had to send my son far away to a school that could accept him; given the nature of his disability, I knew it was tough—who would look after him? So, I am grateful because these schools give our children the opportunity to learn closer to home and feel accepted in the community.*"P1

Apart from these parents, there was another category of parents who viewed inclusive education as government effort to ensure that even learners with disabilities are not left at home. But they are given an opportunity to be sent to schools same as other children without disability. Majority of these parents had their learners with SEN in government primary schools where education was free like for other children. These parents were grateful for this government initiative to introduce inclusive education in selected ordinary schools and viewed this as a way of creating space and time for them to perform other activities. With inclusive schools within their communities, parents had peaceful mind since they trusted inclusive schools as safe places where their learners with disabilities would be looked at and protected until when is time to get them back home. One mother with an autistic child had this to say:

> *"We are really thankful to the school and of course the teachers. They stay with children up to the afternoon. At least I can now move around during this time and go to Ilala market to buy food items like tomatoes and vegetables at cheap price for my small business (genge). I normally go there very early in the morning before my husband leaves home. Since we got this child life has not been the same"* P2

From the quotation above it seems sending such children to an inclusive school was a golden fortune for them even if it was half day. At least during the time when these children were at school the parents were able to engage in other productive activities. Very few parents viewed inclusive education as an opportunity for the learners with learners with disabilities particularly those with neurocognitive disorders to learn something relevant and useful.

It was interesting to note that none of the parents even those highly educated could distinguish between inclusive education from integration. They did not know that going to the same school does not necessarily mean learning together with non-disabled children in the same classroom. Although, inclusive education supports the idea that every child can learn and thrive when provided with appropriate accommodations, teaching methods and resources this was not always the case. Sometimes learners with SEN were separated and put into a special room to get access to specialised teachers and individualised services according to their learning difficulty. Findings from this study revealed that parents of learners with SEN in non-government schools were given a tour around the school environment and the rooms where their children will be

learning, very few parents (if any) in government schools were aware that being in the same school did not entail learning in the same classroom.

A notable observation was that there was also another category of parents who were wondering why the government was advocating for inclusion while it was obvious that such children were unable to learn and catch up in class like other able children. These parents had lost hope and they perceived sending a child especially those with severe cognitive impairments or profound multiple disabilities as a worthless investment without any promising added value for the future of the child.

> *"I am still surprised by this idea of including our learners with disabilities in the same schools…look at my daughter she needs special care not just at home even at school-her disability is severe! Honestly, I do not understand why the Government would insist on inclusive education for learners with special education needs. My daughter is struggling as she is yet she has to keep up with other learners and I am wondering if this initiative will bear fruits"*

From this perspective, inclusion was largely viewed as an issue of access to school for learners with disabilities and SEN. What they were going to do in the schools was left to be a responsibility of the teachers. These findings suggest that while inclusive education is broadly supported among stakeholders, its interpretation remains largely focused on physical access to schooling and for majority parents this was not necessarily translated into a pedagogical framework emphasising participation, learning outcomes and systemic adaptation.

With regard to teachers, some differences in understanding what is entailed by inclusive education was noticed. Teachers viewed inclusion in a broader context than parents. They frequently described inclusion as providing opportunities for learners with Special Educational Needs to attend the same schools but not necessarily being mainstreamed in regular classrooms. When asked in a focused group discussion they responded that:

> *"Well, for us teachers, inclusive education means that ensuring all children especially the ones with special education needs and disabilities have same access to the schools, classrooms like other students. They are given equal opportunities but sometimes due to nature and severity of their disabilities we are required to give specialised support"*

Learners with intellectual and neurocognitive disorders like extreme autism or down syndrome were placed in a separate special class and only interact with other children during break time. Those whose disability did not affect them to learn like learners with physical disability, mild autism, albino, partial hearing impairment and moderate loss of vision were admitted in normal regular classroom and were taught together with other children in regular classrooms by regular teachers. Therefore, for teachers, inclusion was viewed as government directive to admit all learners with SEN in mainstream regular schools This supports Frederickson and Cline (2009), observation that it is sometimes very difficult to draw a clear-cut line between inclusive education and integrated approaches, although they are theoretically different.

It is important to note that while head teachers in government schools were just instructed to enrol learners with SEN in their schools, in non-government it was different. In the three schools visited for this study, school owners had to apply for permission to be registered as an inclusive school hence able to admit learners with SEN. These schools had to be checked by school quality assurers to ensure that they had the necessary facilities and resources for learners with SEN before they were recommended for permission for registration.

School-Level Practices and the Role of Inclusive Pedagogy

As observed by UNICEF (2012) inclusion requires teachers to accept the responsibility for creating schools in which all children can learn and feel they belong. In this task, teachers are crucial because of the central role they play in promoting participation and reducing underachievement, particularly with children who might be perceived as having difficulties in learning. This study observed that teachers have big pedagogical roles to play. Their role begins with identification and location of all learners with disabilities before they are able to categorise them into two main groups i.e., those with disabilities but who can be integrated in normal classrooms, learn with other children and taught by regular teachers and those with learning difficulties who have to be placed in special classes.

According to the teachers during the first few days these children are oriented to the school environment and the concentration is on teaching them adaptive behaviours. These are skills necessary for day-to-day life that individuals should be able to perform at a certain age. Such skills include greetings, cleaning oneself, washing hands before and after eating, dressing, toileting, self-feeding, interacting with others, and taking

care of oneself. Learners with special needs are most likely to delay in these areas even if non-disabled children might also be delayed because of reasons beyond disability. Unlike children without disabilities and those with disabilities that do not affect learning, learners with SEN are not placed in grade one and expected to proceed with next grades. Rather they are categorized in levels starting with level one then level two up to level four. Basic skills of reading, writing and counting are not the main focus. These skills are not taught until when they have mastered the adaptive behaviours.

Many teachers indicated that they had received little formal preparation for teaching learners with diverse needs. Therefore, they were using several informal strategies to support learners with SEN. These included providing additional explanations, offering individual attention, and adjusting classroom activities to accommodate learners' needs. The teachers reported further that for those learners with SEN who were placed in ordinary classroom, peer support was encouraged. Classmates were encouraged to assist learners with SEN during classroom tasks. One teacher from government school had this to say:

> *"Sometimes other pupils help their classmates who have difficulties in reading or writing. This helps them to participate in class activities."*

These strategies were often developed through teachers' own experiences rather than formal training in inclusive pedagogy. Actually, the classroom strategies identified in the study demonstrated teachers' willingness to accommodate learner diversity despite limited formal training.

This situation highlights an important tension identified in the literature: inclusive education policies often place significant expectations on teachers without providing sufficient professional preparation or resources (Forlin, 2010). As a result, inclusive practices may depend heavily on the individual initiative and commitment of teachers rather than on structured institutional support.

While teachers demonstrate commitment to supporting learners with SEN through a range of informal strategies, the reliance on individual initiative raises important questions about the broader institutional context within which inclusive education is implemented. Understanding why such practices remain largely improvised requires examining how inclusive education policies are interpreted and enacted at the school level.

From an analytical perspective, these practices reflect elements of inclusive pedagogy, which emphasises teaching approaches that respond to learner diversity within mainstream classrooms (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). For example, the use of peer support and differentiated attention suggests that teachers are attempting to create opportunities for participation for learners with varying needs.

However, the findings also indicate that many of these practices are informal and improvised, rather than systematically supported through teacher training or institutional frameworks. Teachers frequently reported relying on personal experience and experimentation when supporting learners with SEN.

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Overall, the study has noted that successful performance and therefore a smooth transition from home as well as settlement and retention into inclusive school for learners with learners with SEN was not easy. It entails team work of personnel with different profession and expertise such as medical practitioners, educational psychologists, speech therapist, an occupational therapist, and para professionals to mention a few. Even other ordinary teachers in the inclusive school setting in ordinary classes are supposed to be part of the team. While, this is the ideal practice the same was not evident in this study and in Tanzania. Generally, this study has established that some ordinary teachers perceived integration of learners with SEN as an extra work-load. In almost all the schools visited the special education teachers were very few, were working single handily and were expected to be specialists of all learning difficulties for the learners with SEN and those with disabilities who were integrated in inclusive classrooms. The saying that "*one size fits all*" seemed to apply although it was not practical. The fact that learners with SEN were not homogeneous meant that each child was unique with unique special need that calls for unique individualised support and assistance.

Apart from teachers, school leadership was also found to play an important role in facilitating inclusive practices. As once observed by

Fullan (1991) effective implementation of an education innovation owes much to the kind of leadership and support provided by officials of the central administration. The head's actions serve to legitimate whether a change is to be taken seriously and to support teachers psychologically and with resources. In some schools, leaders supported inclusion by encouraging other ordinary teachers for the regular classrooms to collaborate with special education teachers and share strategies for supporting learners with SEN. This was mainly evident in private inclusive schools where school owners sometimes played a direct role in promoting inclusive education by creating awareness among the teaching staff and even parents. However, the extent of leadership support varied across schools, and some teachers indicated that they received limited institutional guidance on implementing inclusive education.

Contextual Challenges influencing the implementation of inclusive education

Despite efforts made by the parents, schools and teachers to make inclusive education work, several challenges that affect the effective implementation of inclusive education were reported.

Lack of motivation and self- knowledge about inclusive education

One of the main factors deduced from the analysis of the findings was parents' lack of motivation and inspiration to educate a child with SEN. This was largely psychological and personal to the parents themselves. From the interview with parents, it was observed that actually parents go through a cycle of shock and grief for the unknown future of their learners with disabilities once the diagnosis of disability for their children is confirmed. They begin a journey that takes them into a life that is often filled with strong emotions, mixed feelings and difficult choices. This in turn affects their morale to enrol their children in school particularly those with severe and profound disability. Apart from lack of inspiration some parents were also unwilling to enrol their learners with disabilities because of lack of knowledge and awareness about the cause of disability in children as well as available opportunities and the benefits children will get if they participate in inclusive schools. They did not know that given support and proper intervention, such children would overcome isolation, learn to interact with other children and slowly learn some pedagogical basic skills even if it would be at a slow pace.

The nature and severity of the child's disability

The nature and severity of the child's disability was pointed out by parents as another reason why they failed to comply with government's call and directive to send learners with disabilities to school. During field research for example the researcher met two parents with children who had profound multiple disabilities. The first parent had a son with half of the body (right hand side) paralysed and was unable to move and talk well. The second one had a child who was dragging his bottoms to move around within the family compound and it was very difficult for such children to move out of the homestead to school. The parent had this to say:

> *I thank the government for the effort to provide inclusive schools for learners with disabilities like mine…but look at my son, there is nothing much that can be done. Just look at him he cannot move easily, if he wants to move someone has to be there to assist, even to hold something is a challenge because one side is already paralysed; I am not sure if he will be able to hold a pen…*

From the quotation above one can easily see how complex the situation was for this child to be integrated in an inclusive school let alone inclusive classroom.

Financial constraints

Another issue emanating from the participants' accounts is the influence of parents' socio-economic status on their engagement in preparing learners with SEN to start schooling and remain in school. Although, it was not evident from the findings that only parents from poor families had learners with disabilities, the fact remains that it was indeed expensive to raise a child with disability. Similarly, the costs involved in preparing and enabling a child of SEN to start and remain in school was also very high compared to a normal and able child. The risky factors and degree of financial difficulty were more prevalent for economically disadvantaged families with less income. Throughout this study, it noted that parents stressed about the emotional costs and described the processes by which their families had to adjust to the needs of the child.

Although, primary education has always been fee-free in Tanzania (at least at theoretical level), there are still some hidden costs that parents of learners with disabilities and SEN have to bear (see Dachi, 2000). Parents are still required to pay for uniforms, books, materials and other levies (Bii & Taylor, 2013). These costs are often out of reach for many families

in low-income families. Studies about poverty and disability show that the added costs of meeting the healthcare, rehabilitation and other needs of learners with SEN can overburden family resources. Learners with albinism for example who have little or no pigment in their hair, skin and eyes; thus, visually impaired, are extremely sensitive to the damaging effect of the sun on their skin. They are highly susceptible to developing skin lesions that have both cosmetic and health complications, with a high risk of developing skin cancers. Parents need money to enable them purchase tubes of special cream and wide hats to adequately protect these children from the sun. To be able to go to school and learn, they need to put on special glasses which are equally expensive. Some parents with learners with physical disability and motor problems expressed concern about lack of suitable equipment, such as wheelchairs and/or clutches. Even when clutches and wheelchairs were available, the challenges of navigating unmade roads and a limited transport system were evident. All these are extra costs to be shouldered by parents with SEN children.

Lack of specialized knowledge in every type of disability

It was further learned from the focused group discussion by all teachers who participated in this study that there was limited training in inclusive education and teacher training and preparation for special education teachers was general with only three streams of specialization: visual, hearing and intellectual impairment. However, deployment to inclusive schools was not according to areas of specialization. So, when these teachers report to inclusive schools, they do not just find learners with the type of disabilities that they have been trained in. Rather, they find a variety of types of disabilities in one single classroom. And it is the expectation of the fellow teachers, parents and even the community at large that just because they have been trained as special educational teachers then they are equipped to handle and teach all kinds of learners with disabilities

Learners with SEN and disabilities are not homogeneous. They differ in the nature and severity. The special educational teachers come across learners with different types of disabilities and severity while at school. The way they are handled is unique and specific to each child. Some children require very specialised support services such as assessment, therapy, and professional guidance. Teachers indicated that access to such services was often limited, making it difficult to identify and support learners with specific needs.

Apart from critical shortage of specialized teachers, lack of resources to make inclusion possible was also established in this study. Mobilising and convincing parents to enrol learners with SEN in school was one stage but schools must also be ready to ensure that the necessary and required resources are in place. As observed in the findings of this study this includes for example wheel chairs for learners with mobility challenges, tubes of special cream for learners with albinism, rehabilitation aids and devices, diapers food and accommodation for children staying very far from the earmarked inclusive school and cannot commute to school every day. In addition, some school buildings were not designed to accommodate learners with physical disabilities, creating barriers to participation. As a result, schools were often required to manage inclusive education with minimal external support.

These findings are not unique to the areas involved in this study. They are accompanied by a large number of other studies in Tanzania (Mapunda et al., 2017) and even elsewhere around the world. Studies in India (Limaye, 2016) and Uganda (Moyi, 2012) for example, have all established some issues more or less similar to the findings of this study that affect implementation of inclusive education.

Furthermore, the ordinary teachers have negative perception that what the special educational teachers teach are not important as compared to what they are teaching as they use different methodologies. Even their curriculum is different especially for learners with intellectual impairment and down syndrome who do not follow the normal formal curriculum. Even in terms of workload, the special education teachers were perceived as having very light work load compared with other ordinary teachers with a class size of seventy to eight children in class. In one of the FGD, a teacher remarked:

> *"These children need patience when teaching them and as a teacher you to have apply special methodologies that are very interactive to get their attention; like playing with them. So, we are seeing as if we are just playing with the children but in actual sense we are teaching them in the process"*

The debate about boarding special schools versus inclusive schools for all

The challenge of handling learners with severe and profound multiple disabilities together with the problem of distance and transport logistics

brough in the idea of going back to the traditional approach of establishing special schools. This idea is indeed debatable especially in the context of inclusive education. In Singapore for example, learners with more severe SEN and who require intensive specialised support in the long-term were accommodated in special schools since their learning needs can be better supported there. Such support may include accommodation, modification, or other remediation (Lim et al., 2022). Findings of this study point to the same direction. Apart from getting time to perform other productive activities, it was evident from findings that parents also felt a relief because they were now assured that their children would be safe (for the case of learners with albinism) and will get food, accommodation and medical care for those in need. However, studies have also observed that special boarding schools have their limitations. Apart from being expensive as observed by Possi (2006), children lack integration and are not exposed to a wide range of influences. In a special boarding school learners with SEN may only learn and interact with peers with special needs. Apart from that they continue to be stigmatized as being different from non-disabled children. In this present study there were also other parents who were very protective and did not want to part with their learners with disability because they did not trust that teachers could provide the same care and love they were giving to their children. A balanced perspective as observed by Hanssen & Erina (2022) in Russia, would be provision of education for learners with SEN in an inclusive school context rather than purely special boarding school where children live in isolation from their families and are excluded from their peers. UNESCO (2021) stresses that a successful move towards inclusion presupposes parental involvement in their children's learning. Nonetheless, in situations where learners with SEN have also profound and severe disability that demands team work of parents, teachers and different professionals with different and expertise, then an inclusive school with boarding facilities is more practical.

CONCLUSION

Drawing from the findings of this study one may conclusively say that implementation of inclusive education is not a trouble-free operation. Rather it is a complex phenomenon which, as observed in this study poses pedagogical challenges and concern among parents, teachers the general public hence requiring careful attention. While teachers, parents and school leaders generally support the idea of inclusive education, implementation remains uneven due to limited training among classroom teachers, inadequate resources, and weak support systems (Mohammed &

Almasi, 2024). From the perspective of the social model of disability, inclusion requires the removal of structural and institutional barriers that prevent learners from fully participating in education (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). The emphasis on enrolment observed in this study suggests that inclusive education is still largely interpreted through a placement-oriented approach, rather than a broader transformation of teaching practices and learning environments. Taken together, as once observed by Panda and Meher (2023) in India, these findings highlight that the challenges of inclusive education implementation cannot be understood solely at the level of classroom practice. Instead, they point to the need for broader policy and development responses that address systemic barriers affecting schools' capacity to support diverse learners.

Consistent with what was observed in literature (Sarton & Smith, 2018), this study can be conclusively established that inclusion was not a simple one-size fits all solution which can be implemented in schools. Tanzania started to implement inclusive education in 1997 as a way to legally comply with the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action which had instructed that Schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic impairments or other conditions. Within the inclusive model, the assumption was that the focus would be on the child's right to equal education without discrimination and the school's responsibility to accept them, to provide appropriate facilities and support to meet each child's unique educational need. However, this study has proved differently. It has been seen from the findings that the learners with SEN were not homogeneous and some of the learning difficulties were not easily identifiable. Even within one type of disability the levels and magnitude of the disability were different ranging from mild, moderate to extreme and severe profound disability. In a situation where special education teachers are not readily available and parents do not have self-knowledge about this condition, more such children are therefore likely to remain at home without access to education. This has also been observed in the current National Inclusive Strategy (URT, 2022) that without customised support those with certain disabilities may find it extremely difficult to attend and remain in school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and conclusion, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education in Tanzanian primary schools.

The need for strengthening tailor-made in-service training through weekend seminars

There is enough evidence from the study that provision of quality academic guidance and support to ensure successful learning for learners with SEN were hampered by lack of suitably qualified teaching staff. Few teachers possessed the necessary capacities needed to operate in inclusive setting. Even those few teachers had limited formal training to cater for all varieties of learners' SEN. Most teachers were operating in an unfamiliar role using their informal pedagogical experiences. Therefore, there is need for Head teachers of inclusive schools to institute in their schedules end of week seminars for other ordinary teachers without professional training in special education. In a way this a convenient cost-effective approach since professionally trained teachers can form a good resource team to share their work experiences, and orient other members of staff on how to handle and support learners with SEN in inclusive setting.

Strengthening Community Awareness and Parental Engagement

Community attitudes toward disability can influence the success of inclusive education initiatives. Awareness programmes should be developed to address stigma and promote positive attitudes toward learners with disabilities. In addition, schools should continue to strengthen partnerships with parents in supporting the education of learners with SEN.

Enhancing Inter-Sectoral Collaboration

Effective implementation of inclusive education requires stronger collaboration between the education sector and other sectors such as health and social welfare. Improved coordination can facilitate early identification, assessment, and provision of support services for learners with Special Educational Needs.

The need for government support to facilitate School-Level Implementation

Policy makers should recognise that inclusive education is implemented within complex school contexts. Providing schools with practical guidelines, institutional support mechanisms, and adequate funding can help bridge the gap between policy commitments and classroom practice. Further to inclusive education requires adequate teaching and learning materials, assistive devices, and accessible school environments. The government especially at local authorities should continue to mobilise

education stakeholders to prioritise investment in inclusive infrastructure and resources that enable learners with disabilities to participate fully in school activities.

Establishment of inclusive schools with boarding facilities

Presently, not every primary school is an inclusive school. The few which are available are located in selected areas and may not be easily reachable to every child with SEN. The situation is even more difficult for learners with severe, profound and multiple disability. There is a need therefore, for the government to consider establishing at least one comprehensive inclusive school with boarding facilities in every region. Such inclusive boarding school will assist learners with SEN who stay very far from the existing inclusive schools to access education nearby children without disabilities and SEN to be day scholars.

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