

The Role of Teachers in Enhancing Inclusive Education: A Case Study of Primary Schools in Zanzibar

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Abstract

The study aimed to investigate the role of teachers in promoting inclusive education in primary schools in Zanzibar. Using a case study design to gain in-depth insights, the study employed a qualitative research approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 45 respondents selected through purposive and convenience sampling techniques. FGDs included primary school students from various classes, contributing diverse perspectives on inclusivity. The study was guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), which provided a framework for understanding how teachers facilitate inclusive learning environments that support students with disabilities. The findings indicated that primary school teachers in Zanzibar possessed a positive attitude toward inclusive education and demonstrated awareness of its principles. However, the study also identified several challenges hindering effective implementation. These included a lack of appropriate equipment for learners with disabilities, insufficient teaching and learning resources, and inadequate infrastructure. These limitations significantly constrained teachers' ability to deliver inclusive instruction. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the government increase funding allocations to promote inclusive education, invest in adequate teaching and learning materials, and improve school infrastructure to support the diverse needs of all learners.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, Primary school teachers, perception, awareness*

Introduction

The importance of inclusive education has been underscored by several international declarations and conventions, including the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) (Dass, 2022; Mariga *et al.*, 2014). These global frameworks advocate for the right of every child to receive education in an inclusive environment, emphasising the necessity of well-trained teachers, effective pedagogical strategies, and adequate educational resources (Chinhara & Kuyayama, 2024; Shuali *et al.*, 2020). Inclusive education is defined as an approach that ensures every child, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or ability, feels valued, respected, and safe. It fosters a learning environment where students can embrace their unique identities and succeed academically and personally (Zabeli, 2020). This form of education prioritises students' presence in school, active participation in classroom activities, and long-term educational outcomes (Possi & Milinga, 2017; UNESCO, 2017).

Primary education, also called elementary education, is the first stage of formal education, coming after preschool/kindergarten and before secondary school (González-Moreira *et al.*, 2021; O'Kane, 2016). It takes place in primary schools or elementary levels. It provides students with fundamental skills in reading, writing and mathematics, as well as core areas of knowledge and personal development. Primary education usually begins at about age 5 to 7 years and ends at about 11 to 13 (Ökmen *et al.*, 2020). In Tanzania, primary education typically begins at the age of six and continues until the age of twelve (URT, 2023; 2014). This stage of education is widely recognised as the cornerstone of national development. At the primary level, children acquire foundational skills essential for life, work, and active citizenship (O'Kane, 2016). Primary education is crucial in empowering children and youth, promoting their health and well-being, and breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty. It also contributes to broader national outcomes by fostering economic growth and social cohesion. As Shevchenko (2020) noted, primary education supports not only academic learning but also children's social and emotional development. Therefore, it is the essential groundwork for all future learning within the formal education system.

To enhance effective inclusive education for primary schools, primary school teachers are a critical aspect to the successful adoption of inclusive education since they dedicate themselves and their talents to ensuring that it becomes a reality for each student that they have the privilege of serving (UNESCO, 2017; Zabeli *et al.*, 2020). Teachers are critical in establishing inclusive classrooms that accommodate individual differences and promote student tolerance and mutual understanding. To support diverse learning styles and needs, they employ a range of instructional methodologies,

including differentiated instruction (Xue *et al.*, 2023; Ferreira, 2022). These approaches enable educators to tailor their teaching to all students' abilities, interests, and learning preferences. Moreover, teachers often engage in advocacy and leadership roles within their schools, helping to transform inclusive education from a theoretical concept into a practical and lived reality. Their active involvement in shaping inclusive policies and practices is essential to creating equitable learning environments for all learners. Furthermore, teachers provide essential forms of emotional and social support, relationship building, and building a sense of community among students (Woodcock, 2022). So, their involvement has a significant impact on the academic performance of students at the primary level.

Some studies have revealed the roles of primary school teachers in enhancing inclusive education in most developed nations like America, the United Kingdom, and South Africa. The findings inform us that most teachers play a crucial role in inclusive education by creating supportive learning environments, differentiating instruction, and advocating for all students, including those with diverse needs (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024; Romero *et al.*, 2021; Soyege, 2020; Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). Furthermore, the results indicated that inclusive education is widely regarded as a desirable and beneficial practice. Teachers have made deliberate efforts to ensure that all learners, including those with disabilities, are accommodated within regular classrooms where they are shown love, care, and acceptance. The findings also underscore the importance of teachers' capacity to implement inclusive education effectively. In light of this, the study recommends integrating inclusive education into pre-service and in-service teacher training programs to equip educators with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020; Soyege, 2020).

Teachers in developing countries such as Nigeria, Malawi, Kenya, and Uganda play a pivotal role in advancing inclusive education in primary schools. They adapt their teaching strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs and foster inclusive classroom environments by cultivating a culture of acceptance and reducing stigma through awareness and sensitisation efforts (Le Fanu *et al.*, 2022; Mugisha, 2022). Additionally, teachers collaborate with parents, caregivers, and specialists to support learners with disabilities and other special needs. They also advocate for essential resources, including accessible learning materials and appropriate infrastructure, which are critical for the effective implementation of inclusive education. However, their effectiveness depends on adequate training, government support, and access to inclusive education policies and resources (Le Fanu *et al.*, 2022; Mugisha, 2022).

Despite ongoing efforts to promote inclusive education, several barriers hinder its effective implementation in Nigeria, Malawi, Kenya, and Uganda. Key challenges include inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of trained teachers, and limited educational resources, particularly in rural areas (Zabeli *et al.*, 2020). In addition to these institutional constraints, socio-cultural barriers also persist. These include deep-rooted stigma and discriminatory attitudes toward children with disabilities and other marginalised groups, which further restrict their access to education (Mugisha, 2022). While support from international organisations such as UNICEF and the World Bank has contributed to progress in this area, significant gaps remain. As Le Fanu *et al.* (2022) highlight, greater investment and comprehensive systemic reforms are essential to achieving truly equitable and inclusive learning environments for all children in these countries. In Tanzania, some studies have indicated that primary school teachers implement inclusive teaching and learning strategies, such as creating accessible learning environments, adapting instructional methods to meet diverse student needs, and engaging parents and communities in the educational process (Zubeda, 2020; Maphie, 2023). However, challenges such as inadequate teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, and a general lack of teacher training in inclusive practices have been identified as major obstacles to effective implementation (Maphie, 2023).

In the context of Zanzibar, much of the existing research has focused on teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward inclusive education. These studies have revealed widespread misconceptions and limited understanding of inclusive education among teachers (Hamad, 2015; Juma & Lehtomäki, 2015). Moreover, negative attitudes toward learners with special needs continue to persist among some educators, further hindering progress in inclusive education (Hamad, 2015). Despite this, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding primary school teachers' specific actions and strategies to enhance inclusive education in Zanzibar. The present study aims to address this gap by investigating the role of teachers in fostering inclusive practices within primary school settings in the region.

Given the identified gaps in existing research, particularly the lack of studies exploring what primary school teachers actively do to promote inclusive education in Zanzibar, this study investigated the role of schools in enhancing inclusive education in Zanzibar's primary schools. Specifically, the study aimed to assess the level of awareness among primary school teachers regarding inclusive education and to examine how inclusive education is being implemented within these schools. These objectives

respond directly to the limited understanding, persistent misconceptions, and attitudinal barriers revealed in prior studies and seek to provide practical insights into how inclusive practices are enacted on the ground.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT). The SCT accentuates the significant role of social interaction, culture, and language in cognitive development (Abtahi, 2017). Vygotsky argues that interaction with knowledgeable others is required for a learner to develop cognitive abilities. The knowledgeable others are the ones who have higher skills than a child or a learner. These include parents, teachers, and peers (Berk, 1994).

Another aspect of SCT is the Zone of Proximal Development. (ZPD). The ZPD is concerned with how learners can perform a task independently and what they can do with guidance and support from teachers or parents. The central argument in ZPD is that learners should initially be allowed to engage with tasks independently, allowing them to explore and develop their skills autonomously. Support from teachers or parents should be provided only when necessary, enabling the learners to take ownership of their learning process. In this context, learners must be presented with appropriately challenging activities that promote growth. Assistance from teachers should then be offered selectively to help learners overcome difficulties and succeed. This approach aligns with constructivist and sociocultural learning theories, emphasising the importance of guided learning within a learner's zone of proximal development. (Hausfather, 1996). Vygotsky's SCT emphasises the importance of scaffolding in learning. Scaffolding entails the conditions supporting the child's learning to move from what they already know to new knowledge and abilities. This role is done by a teacher or a parent (Eun, 2010).

The Sociocultural Theory (SCT) is highly relevant to this study as it emphasises the critical role of teachers in facilitating inclusive classrooms. According to SCT, learning is a social process, and teachers play a key role in supporting students by scaffolding their learning experiences. In inclusive settings, this means providing individualised support that meets the diverse learning needs of all students and ensuring meaningful engagement with the curriculum. Teachers can achieve this by employing various inclusive strategies, such as visual aids, encouraging peer support, integrating adaptive technologies, and applying differentiated instruction. These approaches help create an environment where all learners, regardless of ability, can actively participate in the learning process and reach their full potential.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilising a case study design. A case study is appropriate for collecting in-depth information about a specific phenomenon within its real-life context (Crowe *et al.*, 2011; Stake, 2010). According to Yin (2018), a case study design is particularly relevant when the research seeks to answer questions such as "when," "how," "why," and "what" regarding the issue under investigation. In this study, the case study approach was suitable for examining the role of teachers in enhancing inclusive education in Zanzibar's primary schools.

A combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques was applied for the sampling procedures. Convenience sampling was used to select 30 pupils from five primary schools, allowing access to participants who could provide the necessary data. In parallel, purposive sampling was employed to select five head teachers, five school counsellors, and 15 classroom teachers across the same schools. These participants were chosen based on their roles and experience implementing inclusive education practices.

Data collection methods included focus group discussions and interviews, both of which facilitated the generation of rich, qualitative data regarding the role of teachers in fostering inclusive practices. In addition, the study employed observation to capture information in a naturalistic setting. Observations focused on the physical infrastructure of schools, the availability and use of educational materials, instructional approaches, and the interactions between teachers and pupils during classroom instruction.

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). These steps included familiarisation with the data, transcription, generation of initial codes, identification and clustering of themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, producing a report that interprets the findings about the emerging themes.

Results

This study examined the role of schools in promoting inclusive education in Zanzibar primary schools. The study was guided by two objectives: to assess the awareness and perceptions of primary school teachers in Zanzibar of inclusive education and to examine the implementation of inclusive education in Zanzibar's primary schools. Based on these objectives, data analysis generated different themes, as can be elaborated in the subsequent sections below.

Awareness of Primary School Teachers in Zanzibar of Inclusive Education

In relation to this objective, data collected through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed that head teachers, school counsellors, class teachers, and pupils demonstrated an adequate understanding of inclusive education. Participants articulated the importance of accommodating learners with diverse needs and highlighted various inclusive practices implemented within their schools. Pupils with disabilities were reported to receive substantial support, including extended time during examinations, the use of adapted instructional materials, access to counselling services, and opportunities for social skills development. Notably, pupils themselves actively contributed to fostering inclusivity by offering academic support and peer collaboration to classmates with disabilities. During FGD, one of the pupils noted:

In inclusive education, pupils without disabilities study, eat, and play together with other pupils with disabilities without regard to their backgrounds and abilities (P.1)

Furthermore, another pupil added:

Discrimination has no chance in our class. Since every student cooperates with each other for class works as well as extra-curricular activities (P.2)

These first-hand accounts underscore the existence of a positive school culture where acceptance, mutual respect, and collaborative learning are prioritized. Such a culture not only benefits students with disabilities but also enhances social cohesion and empathy among all learners. The findings reinforce the idea that inclusive education is most effective when embraced collectively by educators, students, and the wider school community.

Similarly, during observation in school A, the researchers noted that teachers were very close to the pupils and the pupils were helping each other during classroom learning and extra-curriculum activities such as cleaning of school compounds and watering flowers. The results showed that teachers were knowledgeable about inclusive education, as indicated by their reference to the Zanzibar Education Policy of 2006. This policy allows children with disabilities to attend local schools and receive quality education alongside their non-disabled peers.

During the interview, teacher 1 said: “I am aware that the 2006 Zanzibar education policy mentioned the issue of inclusive education. (T.1).” The head teachers demonstrated a thorough comprehension of the inclusive education demands. According to them, this type of education requires that all pupils should have equal access to learning opportunities in classrooms, irrespective of their backgrounds, abilities, or disabilities. Despite common

misconceptions, inclusive education is not limited to accommodating pupils with visible disabilities such as those who are deaf, visually impaired, or physically handicapped. Rather, it encompasses a broader commitment to providing equal learning opportunities for all pupils, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, or socio-cultural backgrounds. During the interview, one head of school said:

Many people mistakenly believe that inclusive education involves the participation of pupils with disabilities, such as deaf, dumb, visually impaired, and handicapped, where discrimination may prevail. However, inclusive education is a form of education that ensures equal opportunities for all pupils, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, or backgrounds, to learn and engage in educational activities (HoS. 4).

This perspective reflects a deeper understanding of the principles of inclusion and demonstrates a shift away from deficit-based thinking. The positive attitudes and comprehensive understanding of inclusive education exhibited by head teachers, classroom teachers, school counsellors, and pupils provide strong evidence that the efforts made by the government and international organizations are yielding promising outcomes. These findings suggest that advocacy, policy initiatives, and awareness campaigns are effectively contributing to the cultivation of inclusive values within Zanzibar's primary education system.

Implementation of Inclusive Education in Primary Schools in Zanzibar

Head teachers, school counsellors, and classroom teachers affirmed that their schools provided a secure and structured learning environment for all pupils, including those with disabilities—an essential factor in facilitating the successful implementation of inclusive education. By fostering a supportive classroom atmosphere, teachers encouraged collaborative learning, allowing pupils to work in groups and support one another. This cooperative learning environment helped promote social inclusion and academic engagement among all students. During an interview, one of the school heads commented:

My school does a good job of implementing inclusive education. The school has a teacher who underwent inclusive education training, effectively supervising inclusive education. There are equal opportunities available to every pupil. Other teachers also used to incorporate the idea of inclusive education into their lessons as part of our school's efforts to raise pupils' awareness (HoS3).

These insights highlight the commitment of school leadership and staff to embedding inclusive practices into the school culture. In terms of physical infrastructure, researchers observed that many schools had made efforts to improve the learning environment, such as by providing separate, clean, and

safe toilet facilities for boys and girls, which offered adequate privacy. Such infrastructure considerations contribute to the overall sense of dignity and safety, which are crucial components of an inclusive educational setting.

Discussion

This study examined participants' awareness and implementation of inclusive education in primary schools in Zanzibar. The findings revealed several key insights. Firstly, many participants demonstrated a strong awareness of inclusive education. Many head teachers and school counsellors understood the concept clearly and comprehensively. For these participants, inclusive education was defined as ensuring equal learning opportunities for all pupils, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, or socio-cultural backgrounds. They emphasized that inclusive education involves creating enabling environments that support participation and learning for every child.

Classroom teachers also demonstrated familiarity with inclusive education principles. Many referenced the Zanzibar Education Policy 2006, which advocates for including pupils with disabilities in mainstream schools where they can access quality education alongside their peers. This level of awareness among teachers and administrator's contrasts with the findings of Revelian and Tibategeza (2022), who reported that many teachers in Tanzania lack awareness and understanding of inclusive education principles.

Regarding practical implementation, the study found that teachers actively accommodated the learning needs of pupils with disabilities. This was achieved through various support strategies, including allowing extra time during examinations, adapting instructional materials, and offering counselling and social skills training. These efforts reflect a commitment to fostering equitable and inclusive learning environments. The findings align with previous research by UNESCO (2017) and Zabeli *et al.* (2020), which emphasize the critical role of teachers in advancing inclusive practices within schools.

Correspondingly, Xue *et al.* (2023) and Ferreira (2022) emphasize the role of teachers in applying methodologies which cater for the learning styles of children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Regarding implementing inclusive education, findings indicated that schools accommodated pupils with disabilities well. In addition, many schools effectively collaborated with parents, community members, and local government officials, such as Shehas, to ensure equal opportunity for pupils with disabilities and their counterparts without impairments. These results concur with that of Ummah *et al.* (2024), who observed a positive relationship between

inclusive education with school administrators, teachers, pupils, friends at home, school friends, relatives, parents of regular children, neighbours, special guidance teachers, and parents of pupils with disabilities yielded positive results in the implementation of inclusive education.

However, the findings by Bakari and Paul (2022) revealed that in some schools, parents and other community members had limited involvement in the implementation of inclusive education. This lack of community engagement presents a barrier to creating a fully supportive and inclusive learning environment. Despite this, the present study found that nearly half of the schools included in the research had head teachers who had received training in inclusive education. These head teachers demonstrated positive attitudes toward implementing inclusive practices, which significantly contributed to successfully integrating pupils with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. These findings are consistent with the study by Krohn-Nydal (2008), who reported that teachers who had undergone training in inclusive education expressed greater satisfaction and enthusiasm in supporting learners with disabilities. Professional development plays a crucial role in shaping educators' perceptions and practices, enhancing inclusive education's effectiveness.

Furthermore, findings showed that the teachers were highly committed to promoting diversity by implementing inclusive pedagogy in their classroom sessions through group discussions, songs, games, sports drafts, question-and-answer methods, and quizzes, which incorporate pupils with disabilities. This suggests that schools provide a conducive atmosphere for pupils with disabilities. These findings concur with Pushpa *et al.* (2018), who found that many teachers used drawing, peer tutoring, small group exercises, role plays, storytelling, question and answer, and locally available and low-cost materials to enhance teaching and learning.

On the other hand, a few teachers reported challenges in integrating inclusive education practices during classroom instruction. These difficulties were often attributed to limited training and a lack of exposure to teaching methods suited for inclusive classroom environments. This finding is consistent with Shalbayeva *et al.* (2021), who observed that some teachers had insufficient professional development to implement inclusive education effectively and lacked access to appropriate pedagogical strategies tailored to diverse learning needs. Despite these challenges, the study also found that many school counsellors, teachers, and family members expressed positive attitudes toward pupils with disabilities. This collective goodwill contributed to more inclusive and supportive school environments. These findings align with those of Omar (2015) and Krohn-Nydal (2008), which

revealed that in certain school contexts, there was a strong exchange of ideas and effective communication among peers, as well as between teachers and learners with disabilities. Such interactions foster a culture of inclusion and play a critical role in the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Conclusion

The study investigated the current state of inclusive education in primary schools in Zanzibar. Findings revealed that many educators, particularly head teachers, demonstrated a positive understanding of inclusive education and its importance in ensuring equal learning opportunities for all pupils. However, despite this awareness, several factors continued to hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. These included inadequate infrastructure, limited compliance with disability rights standards, and a lack of teacher preparedness for inclusive classroom instruction. While some schools had made commendable progress in accommodating learners with disabilities, persistent challenges remained, such as insufficient teacher training, difficulty integrating inclusive practices into everyday teaching, unsafe physical environments, resource shortages, and limited staffing. In light of these findings, the study recommends that the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar allocate adequate resources to improve school infrastructure, ensuring full accessibility and accommodation for pupils with disabilities. This includes constructing accessible ramps, pathways, and facilities that comply with universal design standards, thus enabling all pupils to engage fully in school activities.

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