

Teachers' Understandings of Disability and Barriers to Disability-Inclusive Pre-Primary Education

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Abstract

Though there is a good amount of research on inclusive education in Tanzania, there has been less attention to the teachers' views on the concept of disability and barriers in the provision of inclusive pre-primary education. This study, therefore, was undertaken to explore how teachers view the concept of disability and barriers to disability-inclusive pre-primary education. This qualitative multiple case study used individual interviews and focus group discussions with teachers to collect data from four sampled schools that enrolled children in Tanzania, predominantly within Kagera Region. The study involved a sample of 26 participants, of whom 11 were female and 15 were male. The collected data through 15 individual interviews and four focus group discussions were subjected to thematic analysis procedures. Findings show that teachers understand the concept of disability differently: disability as a tragedy, disability as a societal problem, disability as a spiritual issue, disability as anger of ancestors, and disability as an ability-disability continuum. The identified barriers to disability-inclusive pre-primary education included: poverty; attitudes, stigma, and discrimination; inadequate teaching resources; inadequate infrastructure; and teachers and their practices. These barriers impact the transformation of pre-primary education into more inclusive education. The combined initiatives and efforts of various stakeholders to combat obstacles to promote inclusion in pre-primary education remain critical.

Keywords: *Disability, barriers, inclusion, pre-primary education*

Introduction

Research evidence shows that all children, especially children with disabilities, benefit from inclusive pre-primary education (Dombrowski *et al.*, 2022; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2019). For children with disabilities, inclusive pre-primary sets foundational academic competence; it enables them to acquire socio-cultural skills to enable them to create and live in an inclusive community; it facilitates early identification of disability; and it offers the chance for interventions at an early age (Dombrowski *et al.*, 2022; UNICEF, 2019). However, a significant percentage of children with

disabilities in early childhood are “denied access to essential health, nutrition, education and early childhood development services, and to adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)” (UNICEF, 2022a, p. 1). The report on children with disabilities by UNICEF (2022b) revealed the following:

- i) Twenty-five per cent of children with disabilities are less likely to access early stimulation and responsive care.
- ii) Twenty-five per cent of children with disabilities are less likely to enrol in early childhood education.
- iii) Forty-two per cent of children with disabilities are less likely to be competent in basic numeracy and reading skills.
- iv) Forty-nine percent of children with disabilities are more likely to have never attended school.

Disability is a common phenomenon in the global population, and any human being can acquire it at any age. Disability is a global concern. The World Report on Disability (WHO & World Bank, 2011) presents a global estimate of about a billion people with disabilities, of whom about 93 million to 150 million are children with disabilities worldwide. The most recent estimate of children with disabilities by UNICEF (2022b) indicates about 240 million children with disabilities in the age range of zero to 17 years worldwide. These children require an education system that embraces diversity and inclusion, and guarantees opportunities to access education and wellbeing. Inclusive education is a vital strategy to embrace diversity and inclusion as well as achieve education for all (UNICEF, 2022b).

Global legal framework of inclusive education

Within a global legal framework, inclusion of children with disabilities in education and other social services to attain their potential is enshrined, inter alia, in: (i) the Salamanca Statement by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1994; (ii) the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) enacted by the United Nations (UN) in 2006; and (iii) the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 4 (SDG4) on education endorsed by the UN in 2015. All these legal frameworks proclaim the obligation of promoting inclusive education for all children.

The Salamanca Statement, published by UNESCO in 1994, has been a foundation for introducing and promoting inclusive education globally. The Statement requires countries to embrace education for children with disabilities within regular schools with an inclusive orientation. In so doing, the Statement endorses an inclusive orientation system to educate children with disabilities in regular school without considering their disability or other conditions. It stipulates:

regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix).

This key message, as suggested in the quotation, implies the impetus towards an inclusive orientation within schools.

Another impetus for establishing an inclusive education system is provided by the UNCRPD (UN, 2006). It is well stated in Article 24(1) that the goals of inclusive education should be to:

- i) develop and foster human potential and promote self-worth, respect for diversity, and dignity;
- ii) help children with disabilities reach their full potential in terms of personality, talents, and creativity; and
- iii) enable children with disabilities to engage fully in a free and inclusive society.

For exercising complete inclusive education, Article 24 of UNCRPD emphasises non-exclusion of children with disabilities, reasonable accommodation of the learner's needs, and effective individualised support (Article 24[2]). For teachers, the Article compels nations to take the necessary steps to hire and attract qualified teachers who should be knowledgeable in Braille and/or sign language (Article 24[4]). This suggests that teachers must be adequately educated and well-trained if they are to support all students in inclusive settings appropriately.

Notably, SDG4 affirms the value of “inclusive and quality equitable education” at all levels of education (UN, 2015, p. 17). When working towards reaching SDG4: “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2015, p. 17), the countries are obliged to ensure inclusive education systems. The SDG4 emphasises the provision of inclusive education that should include “early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education” (Target 4.2). For teaching and learning environment, Target 4.a provides to “build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.” The message is that learning environments should be safe and disability-sensitive, non-violent, and inclusive for all. This implies that schools must create safe, healthy, inclusive, and adequately resourced environments with accessible facilities for effective teaching and learning.

Pre-primary education

Pre-primary education is a crucial part of early childhood development, which encompasses all the initiatives and policies needed to promote children's healthy growth from birth to age eight, including protection, health, nutrition, early learning opportunities, and responsive care (Britto, 2017). Pre-primary programs often take a comprehensive approach to exposing young children to structured learning outside of the home, to promote their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Research evidence shows that all children, especially children with disabilities, benefit from pre-primary education. Inclusive preprimary education enables children with disabilities to gain the foundational skills they need to succeed in life, benefit from the school system, and go on to contribute to society as a whole (Dombrowski *et al.*, 2022; UNICEF, 2019). The skills include phonological awareness, pre-numeracy, social and emotional intelligence, physical aptitude, and other skills needed by children for early schooling and starting primary education.

Target 4.2 of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) requires countries to provide a year of “free and compulsory quality pre-primary education” for all children. Tanzania acknowledges the prominence of pre-primary education, echoed by policy provisions in the Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 2014 version 2023 and its predecessor ETP of 1995. Pre-primary education is part of the formal education system, and it is compulsory and provided without fees in public schools within one year for children aged five years (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2023). One of the main goals of pre-primary education is to identify children with disabilities and provide them with the necessary support and accommodations (URT, 2023).

Since they adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), Tanzania has made commitments to the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-primary education. For example, through MoEST, the country has developed Education Support and Resource Assessment Centres (ESRACs) (URT, 2017) to promote:

- i) early special needs identification and evaluation;
- ii) care and assistance for children with low vision and albinism;
- iii) teaching the 3Rs to blind or deaf children; and
- iv) teaching children who have autism and intellectual disabilities.

The country has also advanced much in the diagnosis, identification, and evaluation of children with disabilities, as well as improved provisions for children with disabilities through ESRAC. Among other things, ESRAC's efforts have assisted in locating, assessing, and enrolling students with disabilities in inclusive educational settings in recent years (URT, 2021). As

stated in the ETP of 2014 version 2023, inclusive education for children with disabilities has improved in pre-primary education. For example, enrollment of children with disabilities has increased in pre-primary education by 31.8% from 4,171 (2,502 boys; 1,669 girls) students in 2016 to 6,120 (3,575 boys; 2,545 girls) students in 2022. (URT, 2023).

Paradigms of disability

Disability studies provide several frameworks or viewpoints for understanding impairments and disability, such as social, medical, theological, or African belief systems. These three paradigms are crucial in this study to explore teachers' understanding of disability and barriers to inclusive pre-primary education. The medical paradigm of disability sees a child with disability as broken. This paradigm essentially conceptualises disability as "a consequence of some 'deviation' from 'normal' body functioning... an underlying physical abnormality" (Berghs *et al.*, 2016, p. 26). Therefore, a child with disability needs medication in order to return to normalcy (Berghs *et al.*, 2016; Jackson, 2018). The medical paradigm can spark ableist attitudes, defined as discriminatory beliefs and behaviours that a child with disability is inferior to a child without disability (Cologon, 2013). This, in schools, can lead to the usage of statements of deficit or abnormality. Consequently, children with disabilities can be excluded from the regular school system and the focus is on special needs and special education methods.

In contrast, the social paradigm views disability as a response to personal tragedy (Berghs *et al.*, 2016). To the social paradigm, disability is an experience of social oppression and disadvantage (Berghs *et al.*, 2016; Lawson & Beckett, 2020). The social paradigm was extended into the social relational paradigm (Thomas, 2007; Cologon & Thomas, 2014). Within a social relational paradigm of disability, disablement is thought to arise through barriers to doing, barriers to being, and impairment effects. Barriers to doing are socially imposed economic or environmental restrictions that limit or impede participation (Cologon & Thomas, 2014). Barriers to being are defined as inappropriate, harmful statements or acts that negatively affect an individual's sense of self-worth or well-being (Cologon & Thomas, 2014). "Impairment effects are the direct and unavoidable impacts that impairments (physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional) have on individuals' embodied functioning in the social world. Impairments and impairment effects are always bio-social and culturally constructed in character and may occur at any stage in the life course" (Thomas, 2010, p. 37).

Apart from those western-based paradigms of disability, "some African beliefs promote the stigmatisation and marginalisation of people with disabilities through exclusion and depiction of them as objects of pity or

ridicule and as victims of evil forces” (Ndlovu, 2016, p. 29). These beliefs depict disability as deviant. Consequently, practitioners and educators can be influenced by these beliefs to understand the child’s disability in their day-to-day educational activities. In contrast, sometimes, African spiritualism celebrates disability, and a person with disability is considered normal (Ojok & Musenze, 2019). By portraying people with disabilities as complete human beings, traditional African beliefs are said to imbue "empathetic moral and ethical teaching aimed at protecting and empowering those living with disabilities" (Ndlovu, 2016, p. 29). This implies that African spiritualism can influence how people, especially educators, view and understand children’s disabilities positively in their day-to-day lives.

Teachers for inclusive education

Teachers are an essential input for assuring quality, inclusive pre-primary education. Article 24 of the UNCRPD acknowledges the importance of skilled teachers in providing high-quality inclusive education. Specifically, Article 24(4) of UNCRPD compels nations to take the necessary steps to hire and attract qualified educators. Teachers should be knowledgeable in Braille and/or sign language. Nothing less than all students receiving instruction from qualified teachers. Teachers need to possess core values and competence to approach diversity among learners with disabilities, and develop and sustain inclusive practice. Four core values have been identified in research on teacher education for inclusive education: “valuing learner diversity, supporting all learners, working with others, and continuing personal professional development” (Watkins & Donnelly, 2014, p. 84; Hick *et al.*, 2019, pp. 22-23).

Teachers must have pedagogical skills to apply inclusive pedagogy, which is described as a teaching and learning approach where a teacher responds to learners’ diversity to ensure the inclusion of all learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Beaton, 2018). An inclusive pedagogical approach requires the following three norms:

shifting the focus from one that is concerned with only those individuals who have been identified as having ‘additional needs’ to the learning of all children in the community of the classroom; rejecting deterministic beliefs about ability as being fixed and the associated idea that the presence of some will hold back the progress of others; and seeing difficulties in learning as professional challenges for teachers, rather than deficits in learners, that encourage the development of new ways of working (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011, pp. 818-819).

The study

In this study, the views on the concept of disability and barriers to inclusive pre-primary education are shared by 26 teachers from four primary schools

(two with inclusive practices and two with special units). Their experiences and views about disability and barriers to inclusive education were explored. Since understandings of disability evolve over time, the views presented in this paper are subject to change. However, they shed light on how teachers see disability, their own experiences with it, and the obstacles that prevent children with disabilities from accessing inclusive pre-primary education. The following two research questions were addressed in this paper:

- i) How do teachers understand the concept of disability?
- ii) What are teachers' views on the barriers that restrict children with disabilities from accessing inclusive pre-primary education?

Methodology

Research approach

This study used a case study approach to explore in depth teachers' understandings of disability and barriers that prevent inclusive pre-primary education by teachers working with learners' disabilities. A case study, according to Yin (2009), is used to examine contemporary events in the context of their actual lives. This multisite case study explored how teachers in the real context of four primary schools understand the concept of disability and the barriers that limit children with disabilities from accessing inclusive pre-primary. The study used a collective design (combining findings across schools and participants).

Location and participants

The population were teachers in primary schools that enrolled children with disabilities and resided in rural settings in Tanzania, predominantly within Kagera Region. Four schools were purposefully selected to include children with disabilities in pre-primary education. These schools were named S1, S2, S3, and S4. Two schools (S1 and S2) had the special unit integrated into primary schools, while the other two schools (S3 and S4) had children with disabilities attending regular classes.

Following the purposive sampling technique, a sample of 26 participants from these four schools was formed based on a saturation strategy. Of 26 participants, 11 were female and 15 were male. Participants were subject teachers teaching in schools that enrolled children with disabilities. Female participants' ages ranged between 35 and 47 years, and male participants' ages were between 35 and 50 years. All participants were teachers. Teachers in schools that enrolled children with disabilities were involved in this study, with the assumption that such teachers are in the best position to provide experiences and situations of disability and barriers to education for children with disabilities.

Data collection

A researcher collected data through 15 individual interviews and four focus group discussions in four sampled schools. All participants provided informed consent for interviews and focus group discussions. Each interview session with teachers took between 40 and 50 minutes. During the focus group discussions, the researcher introduced the topic, led the discussions, kept participants on topic, and prompted follow-up questions. There were four focus group discussions (one from each school). Each focus group discussion lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. Each focus group discussion comprised four to six participants.

With the consent of each participant, the researcher audio-recorded each session of individual interviews and focus group discussions. The researcher conducted both individual interviews and focus group discussions in Kiswahili, and with the aid of an English language expert, the researcher translated them verbatim.

All individual interviews and focus group discussion sessions occurred in a private meeting room at each school. In both individual interviews and focus group discussions, the participants responded to two questions:

- i) How would you define disability?
- ii) In your view, what are the barriers that limit children with disabilities from accessing pre-primary education?

Data analysis

A researcher asked the participants questions relating to disability and barriers to pre-primary education. Teachers' responses to the following questions: "How would you define disability?" and "What are barriers for inclusive pre-primary education?" were analysed. Data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All interview transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated manually and grouped into meaningful categories. Through an iterative process, categories were clustered into broader themes that captured patterns in participants' perceptions and experiences. To foster deep familiarity and immersion, the researcher reviewed participants' verbatim expressions repeatedly several times. Constant comparison made it possible to identify patterns and repetitions in the data that eventually formed themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The researcher looked for similarities and differences, and the repeating ideas that fit together were categorised to form themes. Table 1 summarises qualitative data analyses. Then, the researcher related themes to the social, medical, theological, or African belief systems of disability and

barriers to pre-primary education, combining to create an inductive and deductive analysis process.

Table 1: Summary of qualitative data analyses

Research Question	Main Themes	Subthemes
How would you define disability?	Understanding of Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability as a tragedy • Disability as a spiritual issue • Disability as anger of ancestors • Disability as an ability-disability continuum
What are the barriers to inclusive pre-primary education?	Barriers to Inclusive Pre-Primary Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • Attitudes, stigma, and discrimination • Inadequate teaching resources • Inadequate infrastructure • Teachers and their practices

Source: Field Data

Ethical issues

The researcher observed the clearance logistics of the research. The researcher sought the participants' consent to take part in the study. The participants provided their informed consent and agreed to participate in interviews as well as in focus group discussions. The researcher explained the goal and advantages of the study, as well as the measures to be followed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. For confidentiality and anonymity purposes, the researcher omitted the identities of the participants and the schools in the final research report.

Findings

The findings from data analysis in this study have been presented around the two predominant themes of understanding disability and barriers to inclusive pre-primary education. Table 1 summarises these themes and subthemes.

Understanding of disability

Participants varied cultural, societal, and spiritual perceptions of disability reflected varying perspectives on its definition and causes. This central theme included comments of participants on their understanding of disability. It consisted of five subthemes: disability as a tragedy, disability as a societal problem, disability as a spiritual issue, disability as anger of ancestors, and disability as an ability-disability continuum.

Disability as a tragedy

In this study, some teachers viewed disability as a tragedy, believing that it results from defects that represent ableism and medical perspectives on

disability. They labelled students with disabilities as unable, perpetually ill, deviant, or abnormal, and reliant on others. The teachers' direct quotations that follow illustrate their views on disability: *"a child with a disability does not speak or hear and lacks one or more body organs, such as a hand or limb"; "in my opinion, a child with a disability is not as competent as a child without a disability"; "a child with a disability depends on one or more normal individuals"; "a child with a disability requires medication to survive; they are sick all the time"; "a child with a disability experiences illness throughout their entire life."* These teachers perceived disability as a personal issue or shortfall that required medical intervention in the form of medicines and treatment methods.

Disability as a societal problem

Notably, a few teachers acknowledged disability as a societal problem, placing it within the social paradigm of disability. Teachers made the case that if the classroom was equipped with qualified teachers, age-appropriate teaching resources and technology, students with disabilities could do well in educational activities. The following are statements from teachers: *"a child can participate in school activities provided the learning environment is supportive of impairments"; "disability is not inability"; "a child is disabled when the school environment does not accommodate their impairment(s)."* These comments demonstrated the teachers' beliefs that inclusive environments might be used to educate students with disabilities if the classroom's process and structure were supportive.

When it came to helping students with disabilities, teachers who possessed social thinking felt at ease. The teachers' opinions on supporting children with disabilities are demonstrated by the statements that follow: *"having children with disabilities in my class is rewarding"; "I can help children with disabilities, so I feel comfortable helping and including them"; "I think children with disabilities can learn something in their lives, so I don't worry about including them in my class"; "including children with disabilities in my class with other children doesn't hurt anything."* These teachers felt that it hurt to see students with disabilities placed in separate classrooms and not given any opportunities to learn in an inclusive setting.

Disability as a spiritual issue

A few teachers possessed optimistic outlooks and acknowledged children with disabilities as divine gifts and desires. The teachers contended that children with disabilities required the same care and education as non-disabled children. Those teachers said that since God is all-knowing, no one can dispute His plans. Example of quotes from teachers: *"God wanted these children to be born, even though they weren't expected to"; "we acknowledge*

them as the will of God"; "God created them just as He created us, therefore we must love and care for them."

Disability as anger of ancestors

Only one teacher discussed the long-held customs that *"sometimes, disability is associated with anger of ancestors for bad behaviour in families."* Many teachers had little to say about witchcraft or curses about disability. When they were probed about traditional beliefs on disability, many of them said that traditional beliefs are outdated in the presence of Christian religious beliefs.

Disability as ability–disability continuum

One teacher viewed disability as a continuum between ability and disability. The teacher stated that *"no one is either capable or entirely incapable."* This implies that there is nobody completely able or completely disabled.

Barriers to inclusive pre-primary education

In order to effectively implement disability-inclusive pre-primary education, participants highlighted several structural, attitudinal, and resource-related hurdles. Subthemes within this main theme included: poverty; attitudes, stigma, and discrimination; inadequate teaching resources; inadequate infrastructure; and teachers and practices.

Poverty

The findings revealed that the pervasive poverty among parents prevented their children with disabilities from attending pre-primary school. Teachers connected poverty to an inability of parents to find employment and insufficient funds. The teachers reported that parents could not afford the price of rehabilitative treatments or assistive devices like wheelchairs and walkers. Teachers were saddened that parents could not afford to provide their children with a comfortable life and education. On this, for example, one teacher remarked that *"parents don't have money to afford the cost of wheelchairs for their children."* Another teacher stated that *"many parents in this district are poor, so they cannot afford to support their children with disabilities in terms of education and medical services."* It was apparent that parents were unable to provide for other physiological needs like clothing and nutrition (food) due to poverty.

Attitudes, stigma, and discrimination

In this study, all teachers stated that they were providing support to children with disabilities who were at-risk in society. Harmful attitudes, stigma, and discrimination against people with disabilities continued in communities, despite the fact that they were drastically declining. On this, some teachers

had the following to say: *"Some peers without disabilities ridicule youngsters with disabilities when they move around. We watch out for them to make sure that they are not bothered or teased"; "some people think that children with disabilities should be kept apart from society and placed somewhere else because they are abnormal and strange to live with others"; "some people in this area disvalue children with disabilities, and they use abusive names in a dehumanizing way."* These claims implied that there were unfavourable social norms regarding children with disabilities. Teachers reported that in this case, parents of children with disabilities found it difficult to provide their children with the necessary support and education.

Inadequate teaching resources

All teachers mentioned the inadequacy of teaching resources as one of the main obstacles to including children with disabilities in pre-primary education. The teachers were concerned that there were insufficient teaching materials to provide teaching that included students with disabilities. These teaching materials included braille books and teaching tools like braille machines, charts, maps, hearing aids, graphics for deaf learners, sign language dictionaries, and sign language alphabets. One teacher stated the following: *"We don't have enough teaching and learning materials like charts, maps, hearing aids, pictures for deaf learners, Braille machines, and sign language dictionaries."*

Inadequate infrastructure

Teachers disclosed that the infrastructure of the school was not suitable for helping students with impairments. Basic classroom furniture, including desks, tables, and chairs, was found to be inadequate, and some of the items that were present were unsuitable to support children with disabilities. Teachers expressed that the schools lacked adequate facilities for children with disabilities, for example, special toilets, ramps, and spacious doors for wheelchairs.

Teachers and their practices

Teachers expressed that there was an inadequacy of teachers to support and teach children with disabilities in inclusive pre-primary education. Teachers in this study argued that a lack of knowledge about inclusive education and disability was impeding efforts to provide pre-primary education in an inclusive setting. Teachers felt that they lacked the knowledge to help or support children with disabilities. One teacher expressed the following:

... even if they teach children with disabilities, teachers who are not trained in inclusive education do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to support them. For example, teachers in this school seem to lack knowledge

and proficiency in sign language and braille. They cannot support deaf children or those with visual impairment.

This study also revealed that due to their perception that children with disabilities were disruptive and incapable of learning, teachers hesitated to include them in regular classes. They believed that children with disabilities and those without disabilities were like two parallel lines that could never meet. One teacher said, "I can assure you that, for children with disabilities, learning in an inclusive classroom is a challenge because sometimes you may concentrate on those without disabilities." Another teacher added, "Some teachers dump children with disabilities without any reasonable support." Therefore, with an understanding of disability as medical, teachers are unlikely to teach and support such children in schools.

Discussion

It was apparent that the teachers in this study viewed disability as a tragedy, believing that it results from defects that represent ableism and medical perspectives on disability. These teachers believed that students with impairments were defective and presented a challenge. The research evidence shows that medical paradigm conceptions of disability are based on physical impairments brought on by illness or injury that call for medical intervention to return an individual to health or normalcy (Berghs *et al.*, 2016; Jackson, 2018). According to Cologon (2013), the medical paradigm perspective on disability gives rise to ableism, which is the belief that an individual with a disability is less valuable than someone without one. This belief implies discriminatory attitudes. Significantly, these medical paradigm perspectives on disability impact teachers' use of terms like deficit or abnormal, as well as their emphasis on special needs and special education methods, all of which may result in the exclusion of students with disabilities from the regular school system.

Teachers in this study also had a deeper understanding of disability in the social paradigm of disability. These teachers believed that children with disabilities were unable to receive quality care and inclusive pre-primary education because of societal structures, attitudes, and other barriers within society. They saw society as dysfunctional. These teachers demonstrated the ability to differentiate between a person's impairment and their sickness. These findings are consistent with other findings in the literature (Rerief & Letšosa, 2018; Lawson & Beckett, 2020) that disability is linked to societal discrepancies. However, teachers with social paradigm thinking did not downplay the possibility that certain diseases could have incapacitating effects or downplay the need for professional doctors to treat a range of illnesses (Rerief & Letšosa, 2018).

It was found that there were teachers who saw disability as a spiritual issue and acknowledged that all children are divine gifts. The teachers contended that children with disabilities require the same attention as peers without disabilities. Such children are accepted because of the impact of Christian theological ideas that all children are gifts from God. These findings are in line with those of Stone-MacDonald (2012b), who found that people's religious views and values toward disability, which Muslims and Christians share, suggest that people view children with impairments as a blessing from God. This means that the parents of such children should consider themselves fortunate.

In this study, there was less information regarding witchcraft or curses on disability. Notably, teachers in this study paid less attention to the African belief paradigm of disability. Elsewhere in Tanzania, Stone-MacDonald (2012a; 2012b) found that although some native people still go to local healers to address the signs of children's impairments. People's views about Christianity or Islam discourage people from discussing curses or witchcraft and consider these practices to be relics from the past (Stone-MacDonald, 2012b). While there was minimal discussion of curses or witchcraft in relation to disability in this study, some people in other parts of Tanzania felt that having a child with an impairment was a sign of witchcraft (Cosmas, 2018).

In this study, barriers to inclusive pre-primary education included poverty, attitudes, stigma, and discrimination; inadequate teaching resources; inadequate infrastructure; and teachers' practices. These findings are consistent with the social paradigm and its extension, the social relational paradigm of disability, which focuses on resolving the obstacles to participation of children with disabilities due to different aspects of the social structure. Key ideas in Thomas' social relational paradigm of disability are barriers to doing and being (Cologon & Thomas, 2014; Thomas, 2010). Barriers to doing are socially imposed environmental restrictions that limit or impede participation (Cologon & Thomas, 2014). Teachers in this study expressed barriers to doing so, such as inadequate furniture, inadequate educational facilities, and inadequate classrooms and toilets, which limited children with disabilities from receiving an inclusive pre-primary education. Similarly, literature evidence in Tanzania indicates that infrastructural barriers and a lack of necessary assistive resources obstruct the provision of inclusive education (Mapunda *et al.*, 2017; Thompson, 2017; William *et al.*, 2024).

Barriers to being are inappropriate, harmful, or aggressive behaviours that prevent children with disabilities from accessing inclusive preprimary

education and interactions at the individual, as well as at the institutional or systemic level (Cologon & Thomas, 2014). This study found that obstacles to the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-primary education included ableist thinking, harmful and discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards children with disabilities, as well as the absence of appropriate support to promote inclusive education. This suggests that it is challenging to achieve inclusive pre-primary education in the school, where discriminatory attitudes and behaviours and ableist thinking exist. These findings are consistent with the literature in Tanzania that the education of children with disabilities is hampered by negative attitudinal and discriminatory behaviours (Mapunda *et al.*, 2017; Thompson, 2017).

Therefore, one way to support inclusive practice is to remove obstacles to doing and being. Dismantling ableist thinking is crucial because it involves discriminatory beliefs and behaviours stemming from the idea that a child with disability is somehow less important than a person with disability. As stated clearly by Cologon (2019, p. 3), *"to be inclusive means recognising that education needs to be open and responsive to the vast range of 'differences' among humans and directly and actively rejecting common myths of 'normal'."* The universal design for learning, which incorporates every child's needs into educational processes, must be adopted (Spratt & Florian, 2015).

Despite Article 24(4) of the UNCRPD emphasising that teachers must be properly educated and well-trained for inclusive education, this study found that many teachers lacked training in inclusive education and were not knowledgeable in Braille and/or sign language. Unqualified teachers teach children with disabilities. The study also found that the provision of inclusive pre-primary education was hampered by teachers' attitudes and everyday practices. Similarly, in other research elsewhere in Tanzania, research evidence shows that children with disabilities are not well supported, segregated by unqualified teachers who hold unfavourable attitudes about disability (William *et al.*, 2024; Mapunda *et al.*, 2017). This implies the need for continuous professional development for all teachers on inclusive education to equip them with competencies of inclusive learning and teaching.

Conclusions

In the 21st century, there has been a significant increase in awareness of inclusive education of children with disabilities worldwide, backed up by international agreements such as the Salamanca Statement, UNCRPD, and SDG4. These international agreements, signed by the Government of Tanzania, articulate that children with disabilities should have access to an

inclusive education as their fundamental right. The Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) provided the impetus for inclusive education. The declaration claims that an inclusive school combats prejudice and segregation, fosters open communities, and helps in the growth of an inclusive society. The declaration acknowledges that children differ from one another and that every individual has unique physical, socioemotional, and learning requirements. This means that rather than concentrating on a child's deficit, teaching and learning should address each child's unique learning needs.

Notably, UNCRPD establishes that children with disabilities should access an inclusive education as their right, which will develop their “*personality, talents, and creativity [and] their mental and physical abilities*” (UN, 2006, p. 16). Article 24 contains clauses for employing qualified and competent teachers with skills in braille and/or sign language, the provision of accessible educational materials, and awareness training on disability. Therefore, nations like Tanzania must guarantee the equitable provision of inclusive education for all, employ qualified and competent teachers, and create awareness of disability.

Target 4.2 of SDG4 (UN, 2015) ensures access to "quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education" for all children. Therefore, countries like Tanzania should guarantee quality, inclusive pre-primary education for all. Responding to Target 4.5, Tanzania should guarantee that children with disabilities have access to “inclusive, equitable, quality education and lifelong learning opportunities.” Referring to target 4.a of SDG4, Tanzania should also construct and renovate educational facilities to meet the needs of children with disabilities and offer secure, non-violent, and accessible school environments.

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