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How Can Children in the Mara Region, Tanzania, Be Successfully Integrated into Inclusive Educational Programs Despite Significant Structural and Organizational Challenges?

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Abstract

This paper explores the integration of children into inclusive educational programs in the Mara Region of Tanzania, despite considerable structural and organizational challenges. The central research question is: How can children in the Mara Region be successfully integrated into inclusive educational programs? To address this question, a qualitative case study approach was employed. Data were collected through questionnaires and observations across five educational institutions to identify both success factors and obstacles in the implementation of inclusive education. The findings indicate that major challenges include limited financial and material resources, inadequate teacher training, and persistent societal prejudices. Conversely, key success factors comprise targeted pedagogical support, active parental involvement, and pragmatic adaptations of instructional practices to local conditions. These insights underscore the urgent need for structural reforms within Tanzania's education system. The study recommends enhancing teacher education, expanding accessible infrastructure, and increasing public awareness of the value and principles of inclusive education.

1. Introduction

Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, published his influential book *Education for Self-Reliance* in 1967, which profoundly shaped the country's education system (Fouéré, 2015). He championed universal access to education, challenging the colonial legacy that had limited formal education and instilled colonial values. Nyerere's vision aimed to restore self-determination to the local population. His philosophy continues to influence Tanzania's education system today, although there remains considerable room for further development (Fouéré, 2015).

Tanzania has made legal and policy commitments to advancing inclusive education. The *Persons with Disability Act* (PWD Act) (Tanzania, 2010) and the *Education Sector Development Plan 2025/26–2029/30* (ESDP) (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2025) both articulate clear political intentions to improve educational access for children with special needs. However, the country continues to face significant challenges in implementing these initiatives due to structural, organizational, and societal barriers.

According to the *Demographic and Health Survey and Malaria Indicator Survey* (TDHS-MIS) 2022, approximately 8% of the Tanzanian population aged five and older has a functional limitation (Ministry of Health [MoH] et al., 2022). This prevalence is especially high in rural areas, reaching 15% in the Mara Region—underscoring the critical importance of inclusive education in that area (United Republic of Tanzania, 2016). Moreover, data indicate that approximately 64.6% of the 3,450,986 people with disabilities aged five and above are literate, with a significant disparity between urban (81.3%) and rural (58.7%) literacy rates.

Since 2019, a collaborative partnership has existed between the Department of Special Education for Behavioral Disorders and Autism at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich (LMU) and the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). This partnership seeks to reduce educational barriers for disadvantaged children and to develop sustainable, long-term solutions for inclusive education (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, n.d.).

Building on this partnership, the present study addresses a central research question: *How can children in the Mara Region, Tanzania, be successfully integrated into inclusive educational programs despite significant structural and organizational challenges?*

The study investigates the barriers to inclusive education in the Mara Region through five case studies, focusing on infrastructural deficits, societal attitudes, and the lack of support systems. It also presents practical, context-sensitive solutions aimed at improving inclusive education in the region.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, centered on five school-based case studies. Data collection combined qualitative and quantitative methods: questionnaires with both open- and closed-ended questions were administered to teachers and school principals, and classroom practices were documented using standardized observation protocols. Additionally, relevant policy documents and national education guidelines were reviewed to identify systemic challenges and potential areas for reform. These findings form the basis for targeted policy and pedagogical recommendations.

The paper is structured as follows: Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework for inclusive education, drawing on international definitions and guidelines. Chapter 3 analyzes the national policy context and prevailing societal attitudes toward inclusion in Tanzania. Chapter 4 details the research methodology. Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings from the five case studies. Chapter 6 discusses the findings in light of the initial hypotheses and derives key implications for inclusive education in Tanzania. Chapter 7 concludes the paper with a summary of key insights and practical recommendations for future research and policy development.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Definition and Goals of Inclusive Education

So far, there is no universally accepted definition of the term 'inclusion,' as it is highly multifaceted. This section aims to clarify the concept and distinguish it from related terms. While the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) calls for inclusion not only in educational settings but also within the community (Article 19; Federal Government Commissioner for Matters relating to Persons with Disabilities, 2018), this paper focuses primarily on educational inclusion.

According to Article 30b of the Bavarian Education Act (2000), the goal of school development is to promote inclusive education and common learning opportunities tailored to individual needs. It is the school's responsibility to provide appropriate support and adapt its structures accordingly. In practice, inclusive education in schools means joint teaching and upbringing of all children, despite their heterogeneity, individual learning requirements, or special needs.

Although most schools are still far from implementing high-quality inclusive education, the goal remains to minimize discrimination and maximize participation through equitable social interaction (Hasselhorn & Maaz, 2015, as cited in Mähler & Hasselhorn, 2021). The Global Education Monitoring Report 2020 emphasizes that exclusion "can lead to irrelevant learning objectives, stereotyping in textbooks, discrimination in the allocation of resources and assessment of performance, tolerance of violence, and neglect of needs" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 11). Inclusion thus aims to prevent these negative consequences.

The term 'inclusion' is distinct from 'integration,' which implies the physical presence of students with disabilities in the same school but not necessarily in the same educational experience. Integration often involves separation, whereas inclusion emphasizes full participation and individualized learning (Hasselhorn & Maaz, 2015, as cited in Mähler & Hasselhorn, 2021).

UNESCO (2020) argues that inclusive education positively affects various aspects of child development, including learning outcomes, social skills, emotional well-being, and classroom integration. Mähler and Hasselhorn (2021) stress the importance of balancing societal and individual perspectives. Dismantling special education institutions without addressing individual support needs is inadequate. Conversely, focusing solely on individualized education risks perpetuating segregated systems. According to Farrell (2013, as cited in Hasselhorn & Mähler, 2021), four key elements define successful inclusive education: presence, acceptance, participation, and learning outcomes. Physical attendance alone does not fulfill the criteria of inclusion.

2.2 International Guidelines

2.2.1 The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD)

The UN CRPD is an international treaty adopted in 2006 to protect the rights of persons with disabilities in all areas of life. Core principles include non-discrimination, respect for human dignity, equal opportunities, and full participation in society. Article 24 of the convention specifically addresses the right to education without discrimination or exclusion and with equal opportunities. By signing the treaty, countries like Tanzania committed themselves to establishing an inclusive, lifelong learning system. This includes fostering personal development, creativity, and awareness of human rights through supportive measures tailored to each child's needs. The CRPD also emphasizes the development of social skills and a supportive environment. Well-trained teachers, individualized support programs, and access to lifelong learning are essential for achieving these goals (Federal Government Commissioner for Matters relating to Persons with Disabilities, 2018).

2.2.2 The Salamanca Statement

The Salamanca Statement was adopted at the 1994 UNESCO World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain, and remains one of the most important international frameworks for promoting inclusive education. More than 300 participants from 92 countries took part. Its central message is that education systems should adapt to children—not the other way around. The statement emphasizes the roles of teachers, school leaders, parents, communities, and policymakers. It calls for welcoming learning environments and the recognition of diversity. Guidelines promote individualized support, differentiated curricula, flexible teaching methods and materials, and collaboration between schools and health, labor, and social services. Raising public awareness through media, targeted information, and role models is encouraged to combat prejudice. Training in inclusive teaching methods is considered essential. The Salamanca Statement highlights that inclusive education requires pedagogical, structural, and societal transformation (UNESCO, 1994).

2.2.3 Education 2030 Framework for Action

In 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030, addressing poverty, inequality, and climate change (United Nations, 2023). Tanzania has committed to these goals and integrated them into various development plans. According to the UN (2019), Tanzania is already making significant progress in about half of the goals.

Goal 4 is particularly relevant here: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations, n.d.). Progress on this goal remains slow, with learning outcomes in some regions stagnating or declining. Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, faces challenges including a lack of teachers, high pupil-teacher ratios, and inadequate teacher training. Infrastructure deficits and a lack of materials also hinder educational access (United Nations, n.d.). Of the available \$602.4 million allocated to the SDGs, only 5% is designated for Goal 4 in Tanzania (United Nations Tanzania, 2025). Ten specific targets under Goal 4 include

equal access to education for persons with disabilities, barrier-free infrastructure, and an increase in qualified teachers (United Nations, n.d.).

2.3 Behavioral Disorders

The International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps (ICIDH) by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1980) defines disabilities as limitations in the ability to perform activities in a typical manner due to impairments. These limitations can be temporary or permanent, reversible or irreversible, and may affect fundamental life activities such as personal care or mobility. Disabilities can result from physical or sensory impairments as well as psychological reactions.

Behavioral disorders refer to behavioral and emotional patterns that are perceived as deviant or problematic within a social context and are often linked to specific learning histories or unfavorable pedagogical situations. Unlike mental illnesses, behavioral disorders do not necessarily involve psychopathology or subjective suffering. Instead, they can often be positively influenced or unlearned through targeted educational and social interventions. These behaviors can manifest in various domains: social behavior, emotional regulation, academic performance, interactions with objects, physical behavior, and self-injurious or disruptive actions (Theunissen, 2016).

In Tanzania, the term 'behavioral disorders' is not yet widely used. In special education training programs, the focus is more often on autism (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2023). Even the National Strategy for Inclusive Education does not mention the term behavioral disorders (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017; 2021). Survey responses in this research also demonstrate that this concept remains relatively unknown in Tanzanian educational discourse.

3. Context

3.1 The Tanzanian Education System

The Tanzanian education system begins with one year of pre-primary education, which not all students attend. At the age of six, children enter a six-year primary cycle. This is followed automatically by secondary education, which is divided into two levels: a four-year lower secondary and a two-year upper secondary level. Students may obtain the Certificate of Secondary Education Examination or the Advanced Certificate of Secondary Education Examination.

To achieve quality learning outcomes, approximately 7,000 new teachers should be trained annually for primary education alone by 2030. However, due to relatively low salaries, the teaching profession is not particularly attractive (United Republic of Tanzania & Nombo, 2025).

In Tanzania, teacher training for special education takes two years and includes both theoretical and practical components. Of the 1,890 training hours, only 70 hours are dedicated to inclusive education, whereas 420 hours focus on teaching and learning methods in special education (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2023). This imbalance leads to uncertainty among teachers in dealing with heterogeneous student groups. Traditional frontal teaching and choral responses offer teachers a degree of control, especially in the absence of specific expertise and adequate training. However, this can hinder student engagement (Jornitz, 2015).

Training content varies according to type of disability. For example, reading and writing skills are emphasized for students with visual or hearing impairments, while behavioral modification and communication are prioritized for students with autism or intellectual disabilities (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2023). This may suggest that instruction for the latter groups focuses more on social and practical competencies than academic skills.

The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report highlights that building inclusive education systems is essential for creating inclusive societies. However, it also emphasizes that exclusion remains a significant issue, especially for students with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). Without adequate infrastructure and support systems, educational equity cannot be achieved (UNICEF Tanzania, 2021).

In Tanzania, funding for inclusive education is limited. Teacher education receives only about 0.6% of the national education budget, which undermines quality (United Republic of Tanzania & Nombo, 2025). The Education 2030 Framework for Action by UNESCO recommends allocating 4–6% of a country's GDP and 15–20% of its public spending to education. In 2020, Tanzania spent only 3.2% of its GDP on education—well below international standards (WKO, n.d.). The estimated total cost for implementing the ESDP from 2025/26 to 2029/30 is 39.2 trillion Tanzanian shillings (United Republic of Tanzania & Nombo, 2025).

3.2 Legal Frameworks and Educational Policies

3.2.1 Persons with Disability Act

The Persons with Disability Act (PWD Act), passed in Tanzania in 2010, regulates access to healthcare, social support, barrier-free infrastructure, rehabilitation, education, vocational training, and labor protections for people with disabilities. The law aims to create an inclusive and supportive society by recognizing diversity and eliminating barriers to participation.

The Act defines disability as limitations to participation in social life due to physical, mental, or social factors. Article 4 outlines core principles such as respect for human dignity, freedom of choice, independence, non-discrimination, and full and effective inclusion in all aspects of life (Tanzania, 2010, p. 10).

Article 7 addresses the elimination of stereotypes and prejudice, while Article 27 emphasizes equal rights to education, including access to public and private schools and the provision of support services in regular schools.

3.2.2 National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE)

The NSIE 2018–2021 defined learners with special educational needs as: overage learners, those with gaps in education, children living far from school (over 7 km), children with disabilities, children from nomadic communities, working children, orphans and social orphans, refugees, children affected by emergencies, and those living in extreme poverty (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017, p. 12). The term 'disability' was not explicitly defined.

Its four objectives included expanding pre-primary education for all five-year-olds, ensuring access to quality education, preventing dropouts, and promoting equal opportunities.

The revised NSIE 2021/22–2025/26 expands these categories to include: learners from nomadic or semi-nomadic families, out-of-school children, refugee children, working children, children with chronic illnesses, orphans, learners with specific learning difficulties, gifted and talented students, children living in extreme poverty, those living far from school, and children in conflict with the law. Learners with disabilities are distinguished as having visible or invisible impairments. The strategy emphasizes the need for support services, individualized teaching methods, and materials (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2021).

A force field analysis identified political will, policy support, and cooperation with NGOs as driving forces for implementation. Barriers include the absence of legal basis for inclusive education, lack of teacher training, discrimination, financial limitations, poverty, and infrastructure deficits. The NSIE aims to promote access and participation through awareness-raising, policy reform, infrastructure improvements, and mobilization of resources.

3.2.3 Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2025/26–2029/30

The ESDP 2025/26–2029/30 highlights ongoing challenges such as low enrollment of children with disabilities in primary school, mainly due to the lack of accessible infrastructure (e.g., ramps). Overcrowded classrooms—averaging 57 students per teacher (Base Table Tanzania, 2022)—and insufficient resources hinder individualization and support for children with learning difficulties. Negative societal attitudes also persist.

A key goal of the ESDP is to strengthen the provision of appropriate teaching materials, assistive devices, and infrastructure to ensure quality inclusive education (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2025, p. 36). Specific targets include a student-to-book ratio of 2:1 and increasing the enrollment rate of children with disabilities to 14.2% by 2030. In 2020, the Mara Region had 126 children with albinism, 69 with autism, and 860 with intellectual disabilities enrolled in primary school (Tanzania Ministry of State, Regional Administration and Local Government, 2020).

3.3 Societal and Cultural Attitudes

In 2012, there were approximately 200,000 people with albinism in Tanzania. This group is especially vulnerable due to myths and superstitions surrounding their appearance. For instance, some believe that people with albinism are cursed by God or spirits. Dangerous myths include the belief that intercourse with a person with albinism can cure HIV or that their body parts possess magical powers. As a result, individuals with albinism have been victims of mutilation, murder, sexual violence, and trafficking of body parts on the illegal market (German Institute for Human Rights, n.d.). UNICEF Germany (2023) reported that people with albinism in Tanzania have an average life expectancy of around 30 years. The organization calls for public education campaigns to reduce discrimination. Even if children with disabilities are included in education, societal non-acceptance can reinforce exclusion and deepen marginalization (UNESCO, 2020).

Disabilities are often viewed metaphorically in Tanzania, used to teach moral lessons or interpreted as divine punishment or ancestral curses (Keiner, 2011; Kisanji, 1995). These perceptions contribute to social isolation (Keiner, 2011). Research has shown mixed views: some people with disabilities report feeling integrated, while others describe stigmatization and exclusion (Kuper et al., 2016). Misconceptions about the causes of disability are widespread. Parents often love and accept their children but may hide them from society, limiting access to support services.

UNICEF Tanzania (2021) notes that misconceptions about the learning potential of children with disabilities persist. This results in limited academic promotion and low school enrollment (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2025). Economic challenges and high costs of participation also hinder access. However, societal attitudes are gradually improving due to awareness campaigns, especially those involving religious and traditional leaders. These efforts are helping to shift previously negative beliefs toward a more appreciative and supportive view of disability (UNICEF Tanzania, 2021).

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Hypotheses

To examine the main challenges and success factors of inclusive education in Tanzania's Mara Region, two overarching hypotheses with several subpoints were developed. The first hypothesis (H1) assumes that structural, organizational, and societal barriers significantly hinder the integration of children with special educational needs. These barriers manifest in three key areas: lack of financial and material resources (H1a), insufficient special education training for teachers (H1b), and societal prejudices and lack of acceptance (H1c).

The second hypothesis (H2) posits that the success of inclusive education depends on three main factors: specialized support structures and adapted teaching methods (H2a), active parental involvement (H2b), and targeted awareness campaigns in collaboration with local communities (H2c). These hypotheses shaped both data collection and analysis.

4.2 Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods (Schreier & Odağ, 2020), within the framework of field research (Breidenstein et al., 2020). To enhance validity, a triangulation approach was used, incorporating multiple perspectives and data sources.

Methodological triangulation involved collecting qualitative data through open-ended questions and classroom observations, and quantitative data through closed-ended questionnaires (Flick, 2011). While the qualitative data provided deeper insights into school conditions and challenges, the quantitative data enabled the identification of generalizable patterns. Additionally, data source triangulation was applied by including information from different schools, teachers, and principals. This minimized bias and integrated diverse views on inclusive education in Tanzania. The case study design allowed for in-depth exploration of inclusion-related challenges and success factors (Flick, 2011).

4.3 Sample

The sample consisted of school leaders and teachers from five educational institutions in the Mara Region, all of which have experience or active involvement in inclusive education. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation of both mainstream and specialized settings. Some schools were selected based on existing institutional partnerships (e.g., Lake Victoria Disability Center, Mwembeni Primary School), while others were included due to their distinct profiles in inclusive practices (e.g., Mwisenge School).

The table below summarizes the number and roles of participants at each institution:

School / Institution	School Leaders	Teachers	Selection Criteria
Mwembeni Primary School	2	12	Existing partnership
Iringo Primary School	0	5	Regular public school with reported inclusion needs
Nyabange Primary School	0	7	Known for community-based inclusion efforts
Mwisenge School for the Deaf	0	10	Specialized school with unique inclusive model
Lake Victoria Disability Center	1	9	Existing partnership and specialized approach

Table 1.: Sample

Participants included both general education teachers and those with training in special education, all of whom work directly with children with disabilities. This diversity ensures a broader understanding of inclusive education practices across different school types and institutional contexts.

4.4 Data Collection Instruments

4.4.1 Questionnaires

Standardized questionnaires with open and closed questions were developed to assess teachers' and principals' perspectives on inclusive education. The teacher questionnaire focused on their training, challenges in teaching, and collaboration with parents and administrators. The principal questionnaire addressed institutional conditions and resources.

Initially written in English, the questionnaires were later translated into Swahili due to comprehension issues. Despite broad distribution, few were returned, possibly due to limited interest or capacity. Notably, some schools submitted highly similar responses, suggesting that questionnaires may have been completed collectively or with assistance, possibly reducing authenticity.

4.4.2 Observation Sheets

In addition to questionnaires, standardized observation sheets were used to analyze inclusive practices in the schools. These covered infrastructure, instructional design, social integration, and support systems. At Mwembeni School in particular, some aspects of the daily school routine appeared staged, which could affect the authenticity of observations.

Researchers were consistently accompanied by staff, which may have influenced the behavior of teachers and students. In several cases, teaching methods and classroom dynamics changed noticeably in the presence of observers.

5. Results

This chapter presents the results of the school case studies. The focus is on the analysis of pedagogical practices, infrastructure, teacher training, and barriers and success factors in inclusive education.

The analysis combines observational data with insights from questionnaires and informal interviews. Emphasis is placed on both the challenges and opportunities observed at each institution.

5.1 Mwembeni Primary School

Mwembeni Primary School in the Mara Region stands out as a notable example of inclusive education practice in Tanzania. With a total enrollment of 472 students—155 of whom have special educational needs (SEN)—the school demonstrates a clear commitment to inclusion. The gender distribution is relatively balanced, with 260 boys and 212 girls. With 15 teachers, the average class size of approximately 33 students presents a challenge for individualized instruction.

Three special education teachers manage three dedicated SEN classrooms, accommodating children with a range of disabilities, including hearing, intellectual, and physical impairments. Notably, one class comprises nine children with hearing impairments, and three inclusive classes integrate an additional eight children with disabilities.

The school has adopted a three-tiered approach to inclusion. The first tier focuses on life skills such as hygiene and environmental cleanliness. The second emphasizes autonomy and responsibility, with students participating in cleaning the school grounds and classrooms. Only in the third tier are core academic skills (reading, writing, arithmetic) introduced, before children transition into mainstream classrooms. This phased strategy aims to reduce overload and facilitate smoother integration.

Complementing the academic program, Mwembeni implements practical, needs-based learning experiences, including a school garden designed to promote responsibility, autonomy, and self-efficacy. The SEN daily schedule includes cleaning activities, a communal breakfast, and instruction until early afternoon.

However, the school faces several significant challenges. Frequent cancellations of special education classes compromise learning continuity, leaving children to engage in unstructured play. A major issue in inclusive classrooms is the lack of sign language proficiency among teachers—only five have been trained in sign language. Consequently, students with hearing impairments often depend on peers for interpretation, limiting equitable access to instruction.

Further difficulties include a reliance on frontal teaching methods and a severe shortage of teaching materials; in some cases, five students share a single textbook. Interviews with staff revealed an urgent need for additional teaching resources, visual aids, sign language interpreters, and teacher training. There is also a strong call for enhanced parental involvement.

Key Needs Identified

- **Internal support needs:** Teaching and learning materials, well-trained and specialized teachers, visual supports, and sign language interpreters.
- **External support needs:** Transport infrastructure, financial support, and instructional resources.
- **Infrastructure improvements:** Larger classrooms, improved physical conditions, and accessible learning environments.
- **Teacher suggestions:** Parental awareness campaigns, hearing aids, tools for special education, and professional development in disability-specific pedagogy.

Despite active parental engagement—including regular meetings and home visits—discriminatory attitudes persist within the broader community. Students with disabilities often face social exclusion during recess and report instances of teasing. Teachers rated external community support as moderate, with internal collaborations with parents more positively evaluated.

While Mwembeni Primary School shows strong foundational efforts toward inclusive education, sustained progress will require structural investments, capacity-building among teachers, and greater involvement of both the community and governmental stakeholders.

Overall, Mwembeni Primary School demonstrates that inclusive education is possible even under challenging conditions, provided there is strong leadership, commitment, and collaboration.

5.2 Nyabange Primary School Nyabange Primary School: Structural Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Nyabange Primary School in the Mara Region presents a striking contrast to Mwembeni Primary School in terms of implementing inclusive education. The school accommodates an extremely high number of students (1,722 in total), including 913 boys and 809 girls, yet only has 11 classrooms for grades 1 through 7. This results in extremely large class sizes—for example, a first-grade class with 220 students is supervised by only two teachers. Such overcrowding poses a significant barrier to any form of individualized support, particularly for children with special needs.

There are no classrooms specifically designated for these children. Instead, all students with special educational needs have been transferred to another school. This indicates that inclusion at Nyabange may not result from a deliberate integration strategy but rather from a lack of alternatives. Reports also revealed frequent instances of corporal punishment administered by the school administration.

According to the teachers, the school's major challenges stem from a severe lack of resources. There is a shortage of essential teaching and learning materials, and teachers are insufficiently trained—particularly in special education. Many of the teachers have not received any training in supporting children with learning difficulties or disabilities. During the field study, only one teacher could speak English, while the others had to complete the questionnaire in Swahili, which likely impeded communication and comprehension. This situation stands in clear contrast to that of Mwembeni School, where greater investment has been made in inclusive education.

This lack of professional preparation is a critical factor significantly impairing the quality of inclusive efforts. Another observable issue is the poor classroom infrastructure. Many students were observed sitting on the floor due to a shortage of desks. In some cases, four children had to share one bench, significantly hampering the learning environment. Furthermore, one in three students did not possess an exercise book, making it impossible for them to take notes during lessons, and placing them at a severe disadvantage in their educational development.

The current situation at Nyabange Primary School underscores the urgent need for improved learning conditions. In order to provide children with adequate education, substantial investment

in infrastructure is necessary, including the construction of additional classrooms to reduce overcrowding and enable more personalized instruction.

Respondent Reported Challenge

Person 1	“Learning and teaching material”
Person 2	“Lack of teaching material”
Person 3	“No teacher training for children with special needs”
Person 4	“Too many children in one classroom”
Person 5	“Not enough teaching material”
Person 6	“There aren’t enough teaching materials for them”
Person 7	“They require more time and attention, which is hard to give”

Table 2.: Main challenges faced by teachers at Nyabange School in including children with special needs. Source: own data, 2024.

Interestingly, compared to Mwembeni Primary School, community support for inclusive education is perceived to be significantly lower at Nyabange. This lack of societal engagement may further exacerbate the already difficult situation regarding inclusive efforts. A key priority must therefore be comprehensive teacher training in the field of special education. Such training would not only benefit children with learning difficulties or behavioral challenges, but also enhance the overall quality of teaching. In addition, urgent provision of educational materials and school equipment is necessary. Currently, teachers lack basic instructional tools such as notebooks, books, and writing utensils, severely limiting the students’ learning progress.

External support—whether from government programs or international aid organizations—could help improve the educational environment at Nyabange Primary School. Such assistance would be vital to ensuring that all children, regardless of their individual abilities or circumstances, have a fair chance at quality education.

The shortage of qualified teachers and the low level of teacher education further complicate the situation. Most teachers at Nyabange possess only a certificate-level qualification, underscoring the need for professional development programs to address both pedagogical and inclusive competencies.

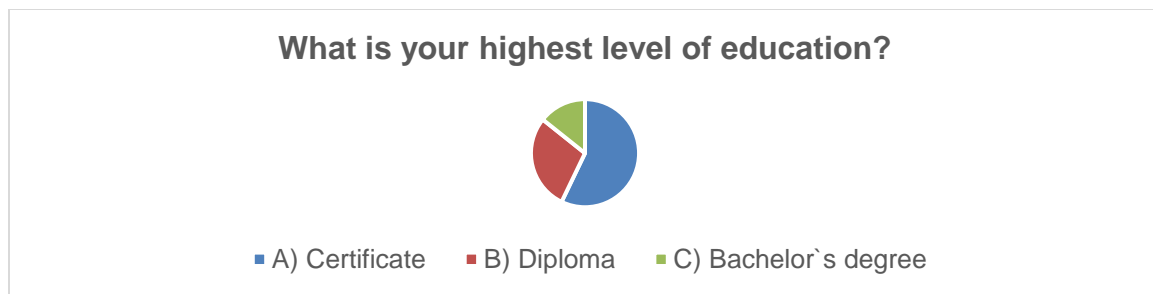


Figure 1.: Educational qualifications of teachers at Nyabange School. Source: own data, 2024.

Once again, compared to Mwembeni Primary School, the perceived support for inclusive education from the community is substantially lower at Nyabange, as illustrated in Figure 2. This could further aggravate the already strained conditions for inclusion efforts. Nyabange Primary School thus serves as a powerful example of the structural and resource-related challenges many schools in Tanzania face when trying to implement inclusive education.

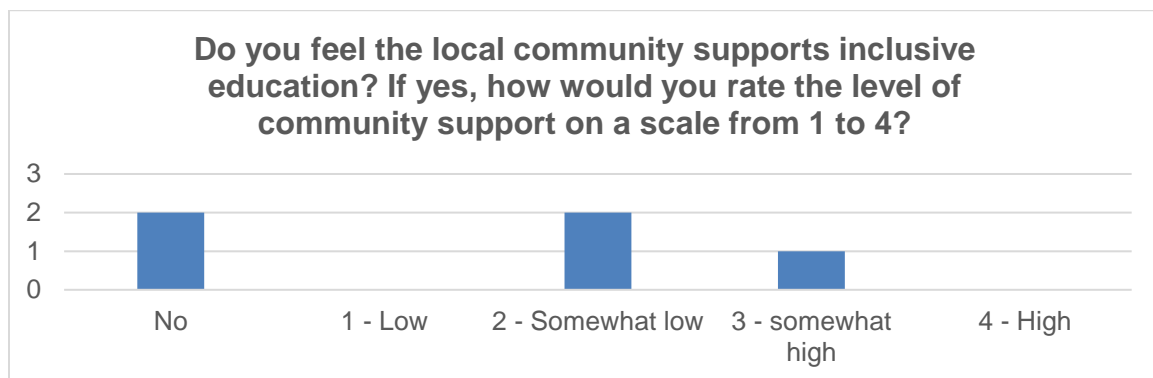


Figure 2.: Teachers' assessment at Nyabange School regarding support for inclusive education by the local community. Source: Own illustration based on survey data, [2024].

5.3 Mwisenge Primary School B: A Special Case in Inclusive Education

Mwisenge Primary School B holds a distinctive position among the schools studied—not only due to its historical connection to Julius Nyerere but also because of its relatively strong infrastructure and proactive commitment to supporting children with disabilities, particularly children with albinism.

In 2018, the school's historical importance led to government funding to modernize its infrastructure. Since 2019, this support has significantly improved both the physical structure and the educational resources of the school. Its good reputation has attracted well-qualified teachers from across the country, further encouraged by the possibility of free on-campus accommodation. Notably, one teacher with albinism works at the school and teaches children who also live with albinism, serving as an empowering role model.

Currently, 126 children with disabilities attend Mwisenge Primary School B, including a significant number of children with albinism who are housed and educated on campus. Six teachers also live

on school grounds to provide round-the-clock support. Since 1978, a dedicated class for blind students has existed, also located and maintained on campus.

The school receives government subsidies specifically to support the education and care of children with disabilities, particularly children with albinism and blindness. This support includes not only teaching materials but also food and other basic necessities. Numerous donation plaques on campus also indicate the importance of private contributions. For blind students, the government provides additional funding, resulting in excellent classroom infrastructure. The blind resource room is well equipped with tactile picture books, books in Braille, two magnification devices for children with visual impairments, and individual Braille typewriters for each student.

Although Mwisenge appears to be significantly better resourced than other schools in the region, this is paradoxically cited as a central reason for the challenges in achieving true inclusion. Table 3 outlines the main barriers to inclusion identified by teachers, including a lack of teaching materials suitable for both children with and without disabilities, overcrowded classrooms, difficulties reading from the chalkboard (especially for children with albinism), challenges using Braille, limited time for children with disabilities, lack of appropriate equipment, and peer rejection.

	What are the biggest challenges you face in including children with special needs in your classroom?
Person 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „Shortege of teaching materials“
Person 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „Shourtage of teaching and learning materials which can be used for both children with disability and for those who are normal“
Person 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „Lack of teaching and learning materials and equipments“ • „Large number of pupils in the class“
Person 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „The biggest challenges I have in including children with special needs in the class is where some of them failed to read on blackboard especially ablinos in the school, they are not able to read from distance and this is the challenge“
Person 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „Reading brail“
Person 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „Too many children in one classroom and no time for the disabled children“
Person 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „Some of them can’t see the blackboard, so they can’t understand the lesson“
Person 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „Some other pupils don’t like them“
Person 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „Lack oft teaching and learning materials“ • „Large number of student sin the class“
Person 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • „lack of adequate equipment due to the relevant requirements“

Table 3.: Main challenges faced by teachers at Mwisenge Primary School B in including children with special needs. Source: own data, 2024.

While the special materials do help support learning in segregated settings, they appear to be underutilized in inclusive classrooms. Observations suggest that some children with disabilities may remain socially isolated despite being present in mainstream classrooms.

The school also operates a garden where bananas and cabbage are cultivated. The produce is used to feed the students or sold to generate additional income. This project provides students with practical learning opportunities and fosters a sense of responsibility.

Most teachers believe that parents are not heavily involved in inclusive education, and the same applies to the broader community. Figure 3 shows that parental involvement is perceived to be quite low.

Similarly, Figure 4 indicates that the support from the local community for inclusive education is also perceived as weak.

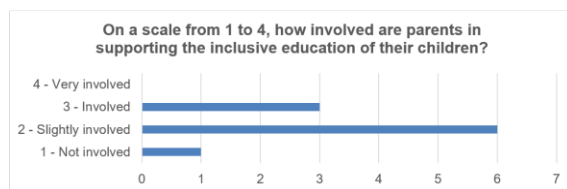


Figure 3.: Teacher perception of parental involvement in supporting inclusive education at Mwisenge Primary School B. Source: Author's own data, 2024

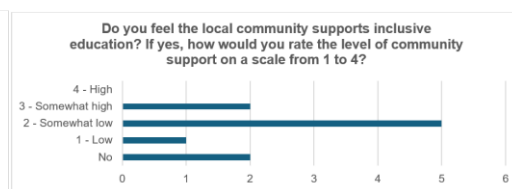


Figure 4.: Teacher perception of local community support for inclusive education at Mwisenge Primary School B. Source: Author's own data, 2024.

Despite its good facilities and strong commitment to supporting children with disabilities, Mwisenge Primary School B continues to face challenges in the implementation of full inclusion. The available resources do not always seem to be optimally used to ensure equal participation of all children. Inadequate parental engagement and limited community support remain further obstacles.

Nonetheless, Mwisenge Primary School B stands as a positive example of a school that not only provides education but also offers protection for vulnerable children. Thanks to ongoing support from the state, donations, and committed teachers, the school serves as a model for the care and empowerment of children with disabilities.

5.4 Lake Victoria Disability Center (LVDC)

The LVDC differs from the primary schools previously examined, as it is a secondary school/college—a vocational institution where both non-disabled and disabled youth can pursue vocational training. The language of instruction is predominantly English, and the training offered includes areas such as IT, carpentry, metalwork, plumbing, tailoring, chemical laboratory work, and electrical engineering. In addition to the practical training sessions, general education is provided in subjects such as English, Life Skills, and Mathematics.

The school boasts very good infrastructure, including sufficient classrooms, appealing class sizes, a computer lab, projectors, external workshop buildings, a kitchen, cafeteria, surveillance cameras,

and tools. Upon completion of their training, students have the opportunity to attend a "mid-college" and subsequently pursue further academic studies.

A particular strength of the LVDC is its commitment to deaf learners. There is a sign language club where students and teachers can practice signing, a practice reinforced by the presence of a deaf teacher at the school.

One respondent highlighted teacher training as a key factor for successful inclusive education at the LVDC. The opinion of another participant, highlighting that modern tools, materials, and equipment that address the needs of all learners are considered very helpful for improving inclusion.

At LVDC, teachers reported using a range of methods to support the inclusion of children with behavioral challenges. Notably, this was the only school where alternative teaching strategies and group work were explicitly mentioned. These methods include sitting and communicating directly with learners, applying the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) approach—characterized by clear expectations, positive reinforcement, and consistent feedback—, adapting techniques to the degree of disability, using participatory teaching methods to ensure equal opportunities, grouping students by level of understanding and disability, simplifying instructions and breaking tasks into manageable steps, maintaining a calm classroom atmosphere with small rewards, and encouraging peer learning through group work.

At LVDC, teachers identified negative social attitudes and a lack of resources as the most significant barriers to successful inclusive education at their school.

Support from the local community is perceived as relatively low. To improve parental involvement in inclusive education, several suggestions were made. These include raising awareness about the importance of inclusive education, offering parent education and workshops, creating parent networks, strengthening communication channels, organizing meetings with parents, increasing public awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities, involving community leaders, reducing class sizes, providing more internal and external training for teachers, informing parents about the benefits of inclusion, involving churches and community leaders, promoting joint activities between schools and parents, and establishing parent groups.

The LVDC is also active in the community, offering, for example, free repairs of mobility aids for young children with physical impairments and producing affordable assistive devices. Thus, the LVDC represents an important educational institution for youth with and without disabilities, with strong infrastructure and a commitment to inclusion. Nevertheless, challenges remain in terms of societal attitudes and resource availability. The variety of teaching methods employed and the commitment to deaf learners are positive highlights of this case study.

5.5 Iringo B Primary School

Iringo B Primary School in Musoma is an educational institution currently serving 250 students, 117 boys and 133 girls. Notably, only one girl with a disability is enrolled. The school has not implemented a comprehensive inclusion policy, which is evident in various aspects of its operation.

Located near the city center and adjacent to Mwembeni Primary School, Iringo B Primary School faces significant infrastructural challenges compared to its neighboring institution. The school buildings are heavily worn and damaged, with numerous broken windows and frequent electricity outages. Furthermore, the availability of teaching materials is very limited, meaning that many students rarely have access to exercise books or textbooks. These deficiencies have a direct negative impact on learning conditions and severely limit the pedagogical possibilities.

Teachers reported several key challenges they face in including children with special needs in their classrooms. These include slower comprehension and the need for more time to learn, difficulties in delivering instruction, students arriving late to school and missing lessons, a lack of appropriate books for children with special needs, overcrowded classrooms that make it difficult to focus on individual learners, and the impossibility of dedicating all their time to one student.

Teachers have identified several improvements and resources needed to enhance inclusive education. Their responses include defining and maintaining inclusivity standards, adapting and modifying curriculum content and teaching materials, and creating an inclusive environment through appropriate classroom design. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of providing materials such as books, securing financial resources for case studies and tracking student progress, constructing better classrooms with sufficient space, increasing teacher training to support students with special needs, and ensuring access to additional materials, particularly books tailored for children with special needs.

Support from the local community is perceived as relatively low. The most significant barriers to inclusive education identified by the teachers include a lack of resources and large class sizes.

Across all schools surveyed, the availability of resources for inclusive education is generally considered inadequate. This is also true for Iringo B Primary School.

In terms of community support for inclusive education, the overall assessment by teachers across the surveyed schools suggests that such support is rather limited, a view shared by the staff at Iringo B Primary School.

Iringo B Primary School thus faces considerable challenges in implementing inclusive education, primarily due to inadequate infrastructure, a lack of teaching materials, and overcrowded classrooms. The absence of a comprehensive inclusion strategy and the very low number of students with disabilities indicate that inclusion is not yet a priority. The teachers' responses highlight the urgent need for resources and professional development in order to meet the needs of all learners. The school's proximity to the better-equipped Mwembeni Primary School may offer a promising starting point for collaboration and mutual learning.

6. Discussion

The results of this study highlight both structural challenges and promising approaches to inclusive education in Tanzania's Mara Region. The two hypotheses developed at the beginning are largely supported by the findings.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) is confirmed by numerous observations and survey responses. Structural barriers—such as a lack of teaching materials and inaccessible buildings—were evident in several of the schools visited. In many cases, these were accompanied by organizational challenges, including insufficient teacher training and the absence of clear institutional strategies for inclusion. While overcrowded classrooms posed a serious limitation in most primary schools, this was not the case at the Lake Victoria Disability Center (LVDC), which benefits from smaller class sizes and a more favorable student-teacher ratio. Societal attitudes also play a significant role: stigmatization and misconceptions about disability persist, influencing the treatment and educational opportunities of children with special needs.

The second hypothesis (H2) concerning the success factors of inclusive education was only partially confirmed. Schools with specialized support structures and differentiated teaching methods (H2a) did indeed achieve better outcomes, particularly through practical approaches such as school gardening projects or hands-on instruction. However, these were isolated cases. Overcrowded classrooms and high student-teacher ratios in most schools made individualized support nearly impossible. The importance of parental involvement (H2b) was strongly confirmed. Schools that implemented systematic parental counseling and conducted regular home visits reported significantly better learning outcomes and more stable school attendance among children with special needs. In contrast, awareness-raising campaigns (H2c) showed only limited impact.

The study clearly demonstrates that successful inclusion in the Mara Region is possible despite significant structural barriers, provided that certain conditions are met. Key success factors include targeted support through practical, differentiated teaching methods; systematic involvement of parents in the educational process; and the dedication of motivated teachers who develop creative solutions despite limited resources. However, major challenges remain. The chronic shortage of financial and material resources, insufficient professional training of teachers in special education, and persistent societal prejudices continue to impede the widespread implementation of inclusive education. Particularly problematic is the combination of overcrowded classrooms and a lack of specialized support, which makes individualized instruction for children with special needs nearly impossible in most schools.

The findings suggest that sustainable inclusive education in the region can only be achieved through a multi-level approach. This requires urgent improvements in resources, ongoing teacher training in special education, and broader public awareness and sensitization initiatives. Some schools demonstrate that progress is possible even under difficult conditions, provided that favorable factors are actively supported. School-to-school exchange and mutual assistance can play a key role in this regard, as can the involvement of the wider community. Looking forward, it would be

especially important to investigate how isolated positive practices can be systematically transferred to other schools.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

This study explored the status of inclusive education in the Mara Region of Tanzania, focusing on structural conditions, teacher qualifications, social perceptions, and promising practices. The findings confirm that inclusive education remains a complex and multifaceted challenge. Although political strategies and legal frameworks exist, implementation is hindered by resource limitations, lack of awareness, and insufficient teacher training.

However, the research also reveals strong commitment from school leaders and teaching staff, as well as openness to further development and international exchange. The involvement of NGOs and institutions such as the Lake Victoria Disability Center illustrates the potential of cross-sector collaboration and community-based approaches.

Inclusive education is a long-term goal that requires holistic reform and must address not only physical and pedagogical barriers but also societal and cultural ones. Sustainable change will depend on the ability of policymakers, educators, and civil society to work together, respecting local realities and supporting inclusive education as a human right.

Future research could include longitudinal studies to examine the effects of inclusive practices over time and the role of international cooperation in promoting inclusive education. It is also essential to ensure that the voices of children and their families are included in both research and policy-making processes.

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