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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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## **Educating Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Schools: Results from Two Schools in Tanzania**

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### **Abstract**

The quest for equal access, participation and success in education for persons with disabilities is paramount in today's global education context, and Tanzania is no exception. Since the ages of "denial" to "full inclusion", educating students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms has had been responded differently by teachers and students alike across countries. Confronted by different challenges in their education, students with disabilities are to devise mechanisms to excel in such restrictive learning environments. Informed by interpretive research traditions with 59 purposefully selected participants, this paper explores challenges that students with disabilities are faced with and coping strategies used by these students in their schooling in two inclusive secondary schools in Tanzania. The findings indicate that, students with disabilities are faced with challenges which are teacher and environment-related. Consequently, the students with disabilities use complaints, assistance seeking, self-initiatives, isolation and despair, and assertiveness to cope with the challenges. The study concludes that; educational stakeholders should work collaboratively in order to lessen the impact of the restrictive nature of learning environments for students with disabilities. The paper recommends on improved teacher preparation and continued professional development in order to cater for the learning needs of students with disabilities in inclusive schools.

**Keywords:** Coping Strategies, Disabilities, Inclusion, Inclusive Education, Tanzania.

### **Introduction**

Historically, education for people with disabilities has had gone through a number of landmarks as implicated in the global development of special education. This development, according to Terzi (2010), involved three main phases: segregation, integration and inclusion. The development of special education is suggestive that people with disabilities were at first not regarded for education, hence had no access to it as opposed to their counterparts without disabilities. The trend is also indicative that, with time people with disabilities were then educated

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in separate schools before later being integrated in regular schools, the construct that is closely related to the current practice of education globally acknowledged as ideal: inclusive education.

The move from ignoring to full inclusion of learners with disabilities in accessing education has had been influenced by various international statements and frameworks advocating for Education for All (EFA). EFA movement is concerned with ensuring access to (at least) basic education for all individuals (United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2001) irrespective of their polarized physical, cognitive, social and/or economic characteristics. EFA is grounded in human rights perspective, and that education plays a decisive role for individual and national development (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2011). Principally, the principles of anti-discrimination, equity, social justice and basic human rights advocate for children with disabilities to enjoy similar access to education as other children in inclusive schools (UNESCO, 1994).

Indeed, the commitment to EFA is envisaged in the second Millennium Development Goal [MDG] which concerns with the need for all children to complete their primary education by 2015 (Miles, & Singal, 2010). That is why EFA initiatives are premised on the need to equalize education access especially for the marginalized individuals such as those with disabilities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2006, for example, calls for states to ensure equal access to education and lifelong learning of all people. In this regard, deployment of appropriate materials and instructional strategies in order to facilitate full participation of persons with disabilities in education and in society as a whole becomes a paramount aspect of inclusive education.

Tanzania, like many other developing countries, has positive responses to the EFA demands. These responses can be reflected in such documents as *Primary Education Development Plan [2002-2006]*; *Primary Education Development Programme [2007 – 2011]*; *The Primary Education Development Plan*; and *the Secondary Education Development Plan [2004 – 2009]*. Tanzania recognizes that having conducive learning environment for all learners is central to having all children access appropriate education in inclusive settings (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2008). This is because inclusive education approach is considered the best means of creating an education system that is responsive to learner diversity. Also, inclusive education is viewed as a means of ensuring that all learners have the best possible opportunities to learn in the same environment with their peers without disabilities irrespective of their unique educational needs and backgrounds. The justifications for the move towards inclusive schools, among others, are threefold:

*“...the requirement for inclusive schools to educate all children together means that they have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and thus benefit all children; inclusive schools are able to change attitudes to difference by educating all children together and form the basis for a just and non-discriminatory society; and that it is likely to be less costly to establish and maintain schools which educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different types of school specializing in different groups of children”* (UNESCO, 2001, p. 20).

### ***Theoretical Framework supporting the study***

In viewing the practicality of inclusive education, it is worth revisiting the way disability has had been understood, focusing on the medical and social models of disabilities, the capability approach (CA), and the social cognitive theory (SCT). In the first place, the medical model, which is the traditional model of disability has focused on disabled people's impairments and has explained the difficulties they experience in their lives in terms of those impairments (Albert, 2004; Lang, 2001). This situation created unjust treatment to persons with disabilities. Consequently, they initiated movements demanding for the acknowledgement of their rights to full participation in society; this brought the social model of disability into being (UNESCO, 2001). This later model focuses on the role of social environment in excluding people with disabilities from full participation (Albert, 2004; Lang, 2001). In this model, a disability is viewed as a socially created construct that requires social change (Mittra, 2006); resulting from lack of consideration of individual needs of persons with disabilities when planning the environment to participate in different activities in society (Toboso, 2011). Essentially, inclusive education is informed by the social model of disability in understanding educational difficulties for students with special

educational needs (UNESCO, 2001). This entails that, children with disabilities may experience difficulties in the education system resulting from such factors as the kind of curriculum used, accessibility of school buildings, the kind of attitudes peers and teachers have about students with disabilities and teaching strategies used in teaching in such classrooms. This calls for appropriate accommodation practices in order to cater for the learning needs of all students in an inclusive classroom.

The CA as advocated by Amartya Sen and others like Martha Nussbaum is as well a useful framework for understanding disability in the context of special and inclusive education. It is “*a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society*” (Robeyns, 2005; p. 94). The core characteristic of the CA is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be; that is, on their capabilities (Robeyns, 2005). Sen argued that our evaluations and policies should focus on what people are able to do and be, on the quality of their life, and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life that, upon reflection, they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2005).

In the light of models in the study of disability, the CA provides a newer and promising perspective in understanding disability and special educational needs. In this perspective, “*disability is seen as a specific aspect of human diversity emerging from the interlocking of individual with social, environmental and circumstantial factors*” (Terzi, 2010; p. 106). This places persons who have disabilities at a disadvantageous position in their life. Consequently, this disadvantage restricts people’s capabilities in carrying out different tasks freely (Terzi, 2010). Similarly, Bakhshi and Trani (n.d.) underscore that CA “*stresses the interplay between characteristics of the individual and the social groups that he/she belongs to, as well as the institutional factors that may influence or even hinder his/her choices*” (p. 6). This framework of thought, as Terzi (2010) contends, is meant to provide more innovative and helpful means for re-examining special needs education.

The SCT cannot be excluded when examining disability issues in the context of learning; it helps to tap important information for inclusive best practices. The SCT holds that learning occurs in social contexts through observation (Pajares, 2002; Schunk, & Zimmerman, 1998). Referring to the occurrence of learning, the SCT assumes that personal, behavioural, and environmental factors influence one another in a bidirectional, reciprocal fashion. This means that, a person’s on-going functioning is a product of a continuous interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and contextual factors. For instance, classroom learning is shaped by factors within the academic environment, especially the reinforcements experienced by oneself and by others. At the same time, learning is affected by students’ own thoughts and self-beliefs and their interpretation of the classroom context. A similar proposition is that academic and behaviour modelling takes place through four steps: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Lampert, Graves, & Ward, 2012).

This assumption is true of practices in inclusive classrooms where the nature of teaching and learning materials [environmental factors] are likely to affect students’ learning [behavior] being determined by, among others, their perceived self-efficacy [personal factors]. Also, the SCT assumes that people have ability to influence their own behaviour and the environment in a purposeful, goal-directed fashion (Bandura, 2001). That is why Lampert, Graves and Ward (2012) argued that social learning is central to understanding inclusion “*because disabled peers can observe their nondisabled peers and their teachers and then imitate them both academically and behaviorally*” (p. 56).

Linking the SCT to inclusive classroom contexts, students’ interaction with the teaching and learning processes; teaching and learning materials; teachers and among students themselves is dependent upon, but is not limited to, their physical and sensory abilities. This entails that learning by observing is likely to be difficult for students with visual impairment, and experience difficult interacting with physical and social environment; so are students with physical disabilities. Similarly, students with hearing impairment experience difficulties in learning auditory materials and its oral reproduction. This brings the need to explore coping strategies employed by students with such disabilities in getting access to education opportunities in inclusive classrooms.

In recent decades, studies have shown that students have varying learning styles with more preferences in some of these styles than others (Abidin, Rezaee, Abdullah & Singh, 2011; Gilakjani, 2012). Felder and Porter have described some of these varied learning preferences among them

being visual, aural, verbal learners, sensing, kinesthetic, and sequential learners (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Center for Teaching and Learning, 1997). Students' learning styles and preferences are even more critical issues to consider when teaching inclusive classrooms where student diversity is likely to be more complex and demanding teachers' awareness of and commitment to responding students' learning needs and aspirations. This implies that in order to address the learning needs of all learners in an inclusive classroom, crafting the teaching styles cannot be taken for granted, rather requires teachers' competence in employing instructional strategies more flexibly in order to meet the specific learning needs of each learner. In this regard, a differentiated instruction is inevitable when considering effective teaching in inclusive classrooms as it is precisely understood as a process of *"providing instruction that meets the differing needs of all students"* (Gargiulo, 2012, p. 557).

In fact, this is the hardest task that contemporary teachers are to encounter in many countries. Linked to teachers' instructional competence, are students' styles of learning. A student's learning style has to do with the way he or she processes information in order to learn it and then apply the same to immediate and future uses. It is imperative that inclusive pedagogies need to be enhanced and be part and parcel of teacher preparation. The reason for this has been that, most teachers lack the required skills to teach inclusive classrooms; they are not informed about inclusive pedagogy which is believed to a good approach to teaching modern classrooms given their increased complexities (Florian, & Black-Hawkins 2011; Mintz, & Wyse, 2015).

Given the dire need for teachers to appropriate inclusive strategies, Price (2015) using case studies, analysed teacher perspectives of their conceptions of the literacy capability in school settings, special education and mainstream alike, with a view to advancing pedagogies for effective inclusion in Australia. The author believed that, informed by inclusive pedagogy, teachers would be able to nurture and develop the capabilities of learner. In their study, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) found that teachers' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about learners and learning determined their inclusive pedagogies when students faced difficulties with their learning.

Mintz and Wyse (2015) writing about inclusive pedagogy and knowledge in special education in the UK conclude that, the professional development of teachers should be fostered in order to make them best suited for teaching inclusive classrooms. The need for proper teacher training programmes in order to address the challenge of teaching inclusive classroom was also accentuated by Sharma, Simi and Forlin (2015) in the Solomon Islands. To that end, revised teacher training programmes on the Islands, with more practices in employing inclusive strategies during their initial teacher training programmes was important (Sharma et al., 2015). It was believed, by the authors, that this approach would change positively the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards and intention to teach in inclusive classrooms. In their entirety, the fore cited studies emphasize on one major thing: effective teaching in inclusive classrooms requires teacher preparation for inclusion, at least for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***Challenges to the implementation of inclusive education***

There are many challenges to the implementation of inclusive education in many countries as well as in Tanzania. Slee (2013) writes that inclusive education suffers from collective indifference, lack of resources and the challenge of consistency, especially in impoverished communities. According to Slee (2013) inclusive best practices in education are hindered by a lack of well trained teachers; and cultural beliefs and practices which prevent girls from exercising their right to education. Further to that, Slee (2013) also argued that the kind of thinking about inclusive education held by people as translated into their discursive practices and actions also impede clear realization of inclusive education; rendering subtle forms of exclusion instead.

Additionally, Adebayo and Ngwenya (2015) found that a lack of instructional materials and human capital being the leading challenges in the implementation of inclusive education, at least in primary schools in one district of Swaziland. Eunice, Nyangia and Orodho (2015), with their study on challenges facing implementation of inclusive education in public secondary schools in Kenya, found that inadequate and poor physical, teaching and learning resources affected negatively the implementation of inclusive education. The authors also found that teachers lacked the required skills to handle the special needs education curriculum. Further to that, socio-economic and cultural variables were found to be common factors that affected the teaching and learning in schools.



Givon and Court (2010) conducted a longitudinal study in Israeli to identify the core coping strategies among high school students with learning disabilities where it was found that, students used avoidance, rebellion, reconciliation, and determination as coping strategies. Of these strategies, according to the authors, avoidance and rebellion were negative and did not lead to full acceptance and integration of the disability with the self-image. Unlike avoidance and rebellion, reconciliation and determination were constructive leading to adjustment and integration with self-identity (Givon, & Court, 2010). Ambati (2015) conducted a study exploring coping strategies used by students with disabilities in managing social and higher educational experiences in Andhra Pradesh, India. It was found that, in order to manage their experiences, students with disabilities built friendships and positive social relationships, used social support, self-advocacy and participation in extra-curricular activities. Such strategies made students with disabilities participate in various social and academic activities. It was further noticed that some students with disabilities lacked important skills to make and maintain friendships. Though based on mutuality and reciprocity, for those who were able to make positive social relations felt more integrated, and vice versa.

Like in other countries, with the list not complete in itself, there have been marked accessibility barriers; inadequate trained teachers; inadequate teaching and learning materials; negative attitudes towards students with disabilities; and poor infrastructure which have made learning for students with disabilities a problem in Tanzania, especially at the epoch of inclusion. With inherently many challenges to inclusive education in Tanzania, undeniably, the learning for SWDs is restricted a great deal. Given the situation, one would wish to understand what is being done by students with disabilities to withstand the challenges, with the ultimate goal being full participation and success in their schooling; this is the aim of this research. To realize this general aim, two questions were addressed by this study: First, what specific challenges do students with disabilities face as they learn in the two inclusive secondary schools? Second, what strategies do students with disabilities use to cope with such challenges?

## **Methods**

### ***Design***

This study used a qualitative research approach which calls for generation of in-depth opinions and viewpoints directly from respondents. This approach was opted because this study required exploratory responses as could be provided by the target respondents. In this regard, interpretive paradigm informed the present study. This paradigm considers reality as subjective and individually constructed entity, and that a phenomenon is best understood from the participants' perspectives (Scotland, 2012).

Involved in this study were 2 Heads of school, 7 regular teachers, 8 special education teachers, 20 students with disabilities, and 23 students without disabilities, making a sample of 59 participants. Purposive sampling was used to select these participants. Their involvement in this study was based on the following: Heads of school were the immediate and closest implementers of the education policies, and in this regard therefore, the most informed persons on the SWDs' coping strategies in their learning. Regular and special education teachers were selected because they were the ones who interacted with and taught SWDs in inclusive classrooms. They were therefore relevant sources of information sought for by this study.

Similarly, SWDs from Form Three and Form Four were selected because they could provide information pertaining to the challenges and their struggle for education access in inclusive classrooms. Students without disabilities were, as well, selected because they were believed to have constant interaction with their peers with disabilities in their course of learning. It was believed that, these students had knowledge about the learning challenges their peers with disabilities were facing and their respective coping strategies.

### ***Procedure***

Primary data were collected by the researcher through interviews, focus group discussions, and observation.

*Interviews:* An interview is a scheduled set of questions administered through verbal communication in a face to face relationship between a researcher and the respondents (Kothari, 2004). The use of interviews allowed flexibility, as there was an opportunity for the researcher to restructure the questions. In this study, semi-structured personal interview schedules were used to

collect data. The respondents involved in this regard were Heads of school, regular and special education teachers, SWDs and students without disabilities. Sample interview questions include: *'What are typical problems related to teaching and learning that students with disabilities face in inclusive schools like yours?'* (Interview with the Heads of school); and *'How do students with disabilities cope with the daily learning challenges in inclusive schools like this?'* (Interview with regular and special education teachers).

*Focused group discussions (FGDs):* To elicit the required information, FGDs were used in which the interaction of the participants within the group enabled the researcher to get the intended data. FGDs were held with SWDs; where three FGDs consisting of six participants were conducted. Sample FGD questions include: *'Which problems related to teaching and learning do your peers with disabilities experience when they are in the classroom and outside the classroom but within the school?'* (FGD with students without disabilities); and *'What teaching strategies do teachers use in their teaching? Are the strategies appropriate to you? If not, what do you do to make sure that you understand what is being taught?'* (FGD with SWDs).

*Observation:* The researcher used non-participant observation techniques in collecting data. Yin (2011) contends that, observation increases the chance for the researcher to obtain a valid and realistic picture of the phenomenon being studied. Thus the method helped the researcher to have an opportunity to look at what is taking place in the real situation focusing on coping strategies employed by the SWDs in accessing learning opportunities in the inclusive settings. The use of this method was also a means of overcoming barriers to getting direct information from the informants with hearing impairments.

### **Data analysis**

The data for this study were first written in Kiswahili and then translated into English. The use of Kiswahili in data collection was meant to allow for respondents to freely express themselves in a language that is more familiar to them which ensured the collection of relevant data. Thematic analysis as offered by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the data, which takes place through six phases: familiarising with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. In fact, the analysis involved categorizing the data into related themes for detailed descriptions supported by quotations of participants' direct words. In the process, the data were meaningfully classified and cross-checked for errors before finally being presented.

### **Ethical issues**

Observing ethical requirements is important in the whole process of conducting research, especially the one involving human participants. In this study, the researcher adhered to all ethical requirements related to human rights and research in particular. In this regard, the researcher made the use of research clearances which were obtained from the University of Dar es Salaam and Municipal Director's office. Additionally, the respondents were informed beforehand about the purpose of the study and assured with maximum confidentiality of their views and opinions of which have only been used for the purposes of this study. It was also impressed that participation in this study was voluntary and that withdrawal from the research was open to every participant.

### **Trustworthiness of the study**

Trustworthiness is a means of demonstrating scientific merit of the qualitative research process. Preliminarily, the researcher made a thorough discussion with his colleagues regarding the best way to tap the data. Informally, in the course of looking for research permits, the researcher deliberately asked his colleagues and some experts in the area several questions that were intended for the study from which the responses were used to consolidate and make them more appropriate. In fact, the questions were used flexibly during data collection phase. Overall, the researcher adhered to both Burns and Grove's requirements for appraising qualitative research namely; documentation, procedural, and ethical rigour; and credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability criteria (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007).

### **Results**

The findings of this study emerged in two major themes reflecting the research questions. These themes are challenges and coping strategies used by students with disabilities. The theme on the challenges is divided into two sub-themes: teacher-related and environment-related challenges. On the other hand, the theme on the coping strategies is divided into five sub-themes namely, the

use of complaints, seeking assistance, isolation and despair, self-initiatives, and assertiveness. A further presentation of these themes is as follows:

***Theme 1: Typical challenges encountered by students with disabilities in inclusive schools***

This study revealed various challenges with which students with disabilities were faced in the studied inclusive secondary schools in their daily school life. The challenges included:

*Sub-theme 1: Teacher-related challenges*

The study found that there were few special education teachers; consequently, regular teachers who were many used to teach the students with special educational needs. This made students with disabilities to be excluded in the teaching and learning processes rendering their poor academic performance. A lack of specific skills to teach inclusive schools among regular teachers made some of them even forget that their classes had some students with disabilities, and that they ought to adjust their teaching to meet the diverse needs of learners. The narratives from one of the teachers are worth noting:

*“... you know, most of the teachers in this school don’t have background in special education. This makes them fail to consider the students with disabilities when they teach, their teaching is done as if the classes don’t have students who require special attention, they forget about this. This makes the students with special needs get the feel of being ignored by such teachers. Well..., off course, even if we have not been trained in special education to such an extent, we need to learn how to consider our students with disabilities in our classrooms, I guess...”* [Interview, Regular Education Teacher].

*Sub-theme 2: Environment-related challenges*

Physical and social environment alike were found to be restrictive for students with special educational needs to learn. The learning environment was characterized by inappropriate teaching and learning materials used by teachers coupled with a lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials to meet diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, the respondents informed about the presence of poor school infrastructures and facilities which hindered learning for students with disabilities.

Also, it was found that there was weak peer cooperation between students with disabilities and those without disabilities. In exploring the social environment of students with disabilities, most of the students without disabilities were not willing to assist their peers with disabilities. Instead, those who had minor cases of disabilities took a lead in supporting their peers with severe cases of disabilities; a kind of *birds of a feather flock together*. Overall, in one of the interviews with the special education teacher, such problems have been contributing to making the learning environments not conducive for SWDs as he puts it that:

*“Students with disabilities especially those with VI face many problems in their learning. There is a lack of cooperation between them and their fellow non-disabled ones; sometimes not regarded by their teachers. It becomes difficult when there are drawings presented, and there is lack of sufficient equipment for such students in the classrooms”* [Interview, Special Education Teacher].

Similar to the students with VI, those with HI had problems they experience in their school life. The most reported problem that students with HI experience at school in as far as teaching and learning is concerned is their teachers’ and fellow students’ incompetence in the sign language. This makes them face difficulties in understanding what is being taught.

However, it should be noted that, the physical infrastructure like friendly pavements for students with visual impairments and physical disabilities to move through were observed to exist by the time the research was conducted. This signals the awareness of the educational leaders and administrators, and the government in general about the special needs of SWDs in the schools. Accounting on this, one of the teachers narrated that:

*“...what the government has tried to do, for example in the pavements, unlike the past days, has made these, wooden supports which mark the margins of the way through which they move, not for them to fall into the side ways. These have been made especially for them, so that they can*

*recognize easily where to pass through...even around their dormitories similar signs have been made to allow them to move easily.” [Interview, Regular Education Teacher].*

Similarly, one of the special education teachers in one of the interviews had this to say:

*“...partly they have tried, even yourself if you move through, there are some modifications made, the steps have been reduced; you can see, if you go at the administration block for example, there are some wooden buttresses so that if the students touch them when moving help to signal that they are at the margin of the pavement, thus need to adjust accordingly in their movements.” [Interview, Special Education Teacher].*

### ***Theme 2: Coping strategies that students with disabilities use in accessing education in inclusive schools***

This study examined coping strategies that students with disabilities use in accessing learning opportunities in inclusive schools. A number of strategies were reported by different informants involved in this study as presented subsequently.

#### ***Sub-theme 1: The use of complaints***

While appreciating that students with disabilities face several challenges related to teaching and learning such as being forgotten by some teachers when teaching, one teacher reported that such students were very good at complaining when something wrong was done to them by their teachers and fellow students. Through their complaints some of their problems were worked out as a result.

*“The students with disabilities, especially those with visual impairment, complain much when something wrong happens to them, or is done to them by anybody, and off course, through such complaints on genuine issues, their concerns are communicated to teachers and school administration, and finally settled” [Interview, Regular Education Teacher].*

Additionally, several students without disabilities reported on similar cases, that their peers with disabilities were in most cases complaining, according to students without disabilities, even on trivial issues.

#### ***Sub-theme 2: Seeking assistance from their peers and teachers***

Seeking assistance from their peers was one of the most common strategies that were reported to be used by the SWDs in enabling them cope with the daily learning difficulties. SWDs, more often in their learning reported to have sought assistance from their peers in several instances of their learning. The peers assisted the SWDs in different spheres such as socialization, helping them attend classes and call of nature, and many other support services. Specifically, with the learning support, classmates served several purposes such as reading them the notes so that they write the same in least restrictive formats. For example, in one of the interviews with the SWDs, one of the students with disabilities had this to say:

*“When teachers teach we listen attentively to them and where we don’t understand we ask questions. We don’t write notes in the classes because it’s hard for us to see. What we do is that after class hours we ask our friends to read their notes for us so that we translate them into Braille notes for easy reading” [Interview, Student with Disability].*

Similarly, in one of the FGDs, one of the responding teachers commented that,

*“In order for the blind students to cope up with their learning, they usually have to have their own notes from their fellow students. They ask assistance from their classmates to read for them so that they can write similar notes for their easy reading and learning.” [FGD, Regular Education Teacher].*

As for the students with hearing impairments, the use of friends was observed to be used the most in inclusive classrooms despite the fact that most of the students without disabilities had little knowledge of the sign language. In relation to this, one of the teachers in special education unit from one of the school’s states:



*“Teaching inclusive classes of this type is a bit challenging as not all teachers in this school are conversant with the sign language. This makes them only teach as normal as possible without helping those with hearing impairments in their teaching when in classes. The good thing is that there are some students in inclusive classes who know sign language. What we do is to encourage such students to help their fellows who have hearing impairments, and we encourage all the students to learn the sign language by all means possible. If this is achieved, the students with hearing impairments will be assisted easily by all of their peers.”* [Interview, Special Education Teacher].

The use of peers in assisting them to learn and hence cope with their daily challenges was also made clear when the researcher interviewed one of the heads of school and this was the response:

*“We are happy that there are some students who have been assisting their fellows with disabilities in many activities at this school. This is a good thing and we have been encouraging all students towards this behaviour. Indeed, teachers alone cannot manage to assist all students with disabilities, but their peers are able to supplement the assistance as in most cases they are together.”* [Interview, Head of School].

Apart from seeking assistance from their colleagues without disabilities, it was reported that SWDs were constantly seeking for assistance from teachers in cases where the lessons were not well understood. The assistance sought was mainly in form of remedial teaching after regular class hours. This is vivid when one of teachers in one of interviews with him narrates:

*“Generally, the students with disabilities struggle much in making sure that they learn as their peers. When in classes, the students with visual impairment normally ask questions in areas which they do not understand. Because of insufficient time in the class, after class hours they usually ask their teachers to assist them by re-teaching the lessons for a better coverage and understanding of the lessons as their fellows without disabilities”* [Interview, Regular Education Teacher].

#### *Sub-theme 3: Self-initiatives*

In cases during which there were no teachers specially trained in special needs education, the SWDs were supporting themselves in their learning, especially during assessment times. In this, students from higher classes acted as teachers for the lower class levels whereby they used to examine and mark the assignments and examinations for lower classes. They did this with the help from regular teachers. In regard to this, one of the students with visual impairments during one of the FGDs reported that,

*“When we don’t have teachers who can mark our examinations in the form of Braille we assist among ourselves. Students from higher classes become our teachers who type our examinations, mark and grade them using Perkin Braille. That is what we do during those times!”* [FGD, Student with Disability]

#### *Sub-theme 4: Isolation and despair*

Unrealistically as this may appear, isolation and despair have been taken as one of the initiatives that students with disabilities take in inclusive schools following various learning challenges. Following the interviews conducted to probe coping strategies used by students with disabilities, most of the students without disabilities informed that there were some SWDs who normally isolated themselves. Also, it was reported that there were some students with disabilities who took no action even if they did not understand in the classes when teachers were teaching. In one of the FGDs with students without disabilities, one of the responding students contends:

*“These students with hearing impairment do not like to cooperate with us. Even if you try to direct them on what has been taught, they are very aggressive. They study only when they like, you cannot tell them something related to learning and yet accept. They are cool as such regardless whether they face difficulties in the subjects or not; they ask none for assistance. This makes some of us fail to assist them even if we are in the position to.”* [FGD, Student without Disability].

### *Sub-theme 5: Assertiveness (Aggression)*

In the course of this study, assertiveness was observed and reported by different informants. It was seen that, characteristically, some students with disabilities were blamed for their aggressive behaviours within and outside the classrooms. This is supported by one of the responding regular teacher who holds that

*“...the students with hearing impairments are often very aggressive to both their fellow students and teachers especially when they are identified with particular problem behaviours’ [Interview, Regular Teacher]. Similarly, one of the other responding regular teacher reports that ‘...students with hearing impairments normally isolate themselves from their fellow students due to different problem behaviours.’ [Interview, Regular Teacher].*

However, many responding special education teachers and SWDs appreciated inclusive schooling with the view that by learning inclusively they are supporting each other academically, and more importantly they are not expected to live in isolation after schooling. In this view, inclusive schooling was reported to enhance social acceptance and friendship. This was evident when one of the students with disabilities reports that:

*“I am comfortable to be in inclusive school because we interact with our fellows without disabilities. They assist us in many things and we also assist them....it is better to learn together because in the society we are not living alone. This reduces segregation.” [Interview, Student with Disability].*

This observation is also supported by one of the special education teachers who insisted that ‘It is a good practice to include students with special education needs in regular classrooms because they are not living on an island! They must be involved in normal learning environments although there are challenges...’ [Interview, Special Education Teacher].

### **Discussions**

This study sought to establish challenges faced by SWDs and coping strategies used by these students in inclusive secondary schools. The study found that students with disabilities encounter several challenges in their schooling, replicating the findings of previous studies ([Hakielimu, 2008](#); [Kapinga, 2010](#); [Kayombo, 2010](#); [United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organization, 2015](#); [URT, 2008](#)). The challenges found are, indeed, related to learning environments, students’ expectations and aspirations, the kind of student-student cooperation and attitudes towards SWDs, and teacher characteristics. Specifically, it was found that teachers who could teach students in special needs were very few coupled with inadequate teaching and learning resources which could be helpful for SWDs. The findings are also in agreement with the findings of studies conducted in other countries on similar topic. Such studies include those done by [Adebayo and Ngwenya \(2015\)](#); and [Eunice et al. \(2015\)](#) which on the whole reported on lack of appropriate human resources for inclusive teaching and poor facilities as some of the factors hindering successful implementation of inclusive education.

As the means of ensuring equal access, participation and success in their schooling, SWDs sought assistance from their peers without disabilities and teachers, and sometimes used complaints to communicate their feelings and educational needs. Social support is important in inclusive schools. Also, SWDs took self-initiatives to make sure that they achieve their educational goals, a kind of *self-advocacy* ([Ambati, 2015](#)). In addition, these students were reported to develop assertive behaviours and isolated themselves from their normal peers. These were the coping strategies employed by the SWDs in the studied schools in order to reach their goals: the ‘*functionings*’ and ‘*doings*’ in the capability approach sense ([Robeyns, 2005](#); [Terzi, 2010](#)). The findings of the present study match with what was found by [Givon and Court \(2010\)](#) and [Ambati \(2015\)](#). [Givon and Court \(2010\)](#) reported that there were both negative and constructive strategies that students with learning disabilities used in their course of learning in Israeli.

While the negative strategies hindered acceptance and integration of the disability with the self-image, the constructive strategies led to adjustment and integration with self-identity ([Givon, & Court, 2010](#)). For this reason, strategies like self-initiatives and assistance-seeking from the present study need to be enhanced wisely as they are constructive in nature. In a way, they help to build confidence in students on one hand, and promote social acceptance among students and

teachers on the other. However, students' use of complaints, assertive behaviours and isolation provide destructive cases which need to be reduced through appropriate procedures in order not to intensify the same. It is hoped that if these issues are attended accordingly, the learning atmosphere for all students will be enhanced: a practical realization of inclusive schooling.

In the same vein, Ambati (2015) found that, students with disabilities built friendships and positive social relationships, used social support, self-advocacy and participation in extra-curricular activities in order to run their school life more successfully. In view of the present study, these similar findings imply that SWDs depend much on the support from people around them to succeed in their schooling. While recognizing their efforts, other people should not detach from supporting them. Indeed, such mechanisms at different times served as springboards for SWDs towards achieving their educational needs within inclusive settings with successes and failures though. These findings imply that the teaching strategies and or methods used in teaching inclusive classrooms were not as appropriate as were supposed to be, hence causing more learning difficulties to students with disabilities, especially those with visual and hearing impairments. This is congruent with the study by Kayombo (2010) which investigated teachers' competency in handling pupils with disabilities in inclusive primary schools in Tanzania whose findings were, among others, the presence of insufficient teaching and learning materials coupled with inappropriate teachers' teaching methods.

Parallel to the inferred inappropriate teaching methods leading to unbearable complaints of the SWDs in inclusive schools, the other similar implication is the existence of low expectation of SWDs and negative attitudes of some students without disabilities and teachers towards SWDs. This is obvious when some of the teachers and students saw the need for SWDs to be sent to separate schools thinking that it is the right educational placement for the same. This finding concurs with the findings by Kapinga (2010) who reported that most teachers had negative attitudes towards students with disabilities. It is important underlining that, teachers' attitudes and beliefs about students with disabilities and inclusion are critical for their classroom practices. Shaping them to align with effective practices for inclusion becomes a necessary endeavour both for pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes. All these findings concur with the reviewed literature (e.g. Adebayo, & Ngwenya, 2015; Eunice et al., 2015; Polat, & Kisanji, 2009; Slee, 2013) regarding the philosophy behind inclusive education and challenges in implementing it in different parts of the world and Tanzania in particular. It is apparent that the use of assistance from their peers without disabilities and teachers call for the urgent need of ensuring that the positive relationships among all the groups of students are promoted effectively. The fact is that teaching and learning in inclusive classrooms is not one's own job, rather requires joint efforts of all key actors in inclusive settings in order to make education ends meet.

This understanding suggests that despite the challenges in place regarding inclusive education, the immediate education stakeholders must realize the need to adjust themselves to suit inclusive teaching and learning ethos. Among others, as Kimathi (2010) in her study on the perception of teachers' and students' of the social support for pupils with disabilities in inclusive schools, these findings are in line with the recommended actions of her study that teachers need to adopt teaching strategies that foster interaction among students within inclusive settings as a means of fostering cooperation. This entails that cooperative and peer tutoring are in essence central to teaching inclusive classrooms.

### **Limitations**

In the present study, it was difficult collecting data from some participants especially, those who had hearing impairments and the deaf, as they could not express themselves in a normative way. In such circumstances, with the help of their peers and teachers who knew sign language, the informants were made to write down their responses during FGDs. Respondents who had visual impairments were accessed orally through personal interviews.

### **Conclusions**

SWDs are still studying under challenging environments in Tanzania despite the efforts by the government and other educational stakeholders to foster suitable learning environments for all learners. Under such circumstances, the only option at hand is to jointly face the stumbling blocks to its implementation as consistent with the current study findings. The coping strategies used by

SWDs cannot be taken for granted. Instead, they provide us with pertinent information about education of this population in the umbrella of education for all with many subtle issues taking place in inclusive schools. Unless such issues are addressed vigorously, the call for inclusive education and its actual implementation in the Tanzanian context will not be achieved as hoped, but continue to be an indefinite paper-work process rather than a definitely realized process of social change.

Now, it is imperative to re-illuminate the existing teaching and learning environments inherent in the inclusive educational settings; a process that requires coordinated effort to train teachers with inclusive pedagogies. Alarming, it is well said that effective school and teacher characteristics have been documented to influence positively students' achievement and outcome in inclusive classrooms. This implies that the modern school leadership should work to achieve inclusive practices. Informed by leadership practices with inclusive orientations, such leaders will be able to consider diversity in whatever they plan and institute in their work places. Being role models in this case, other staff will learn from them and ultimately develop a community of practice in inclusive schools.

### **Recommendations**

Given the noticed inadequacies of inclusive learning environments and their ultimate impact on learning to SWDs, there is a need for the regular teachers and students without disabilities to be oriented to sign language. This will enhance understanding of the lessons and ease social interaction among students within inclusive schools. Looking for the future, there is a need for the teacher training institutions, through the government or on their own accord, to revisit their pre-service teacher training programmes and curricula with a view to enhancing important components of empowering teacher trainees with the basic knowledge and skills of inclusive education and the implications to them as future teachers. This could involve the expansion in training teachers specializing in different areas of students' needs and exceptionalities. As a short term strategy, planning for in-service teacher training on effective instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of learners in inclusive classrooms would serve similar purpose; making such settings better places to learn for all persons.

Furthermore, counselling units should be promoted in inclusive schools which will help to promote acceptance of individual differences among and between teachers and students. This could be accompanied by in-school trainings on what it means to have a disability and the importance of valuing one another. This will create an understanding of problem behaviours of students with disabilities and implications these have on other students as they study together with these students.

Future studies should be done in other regions in order to have appropriate generalizations; this will help to have a fuller understanding of the phenomenon in the country. Also, it is recommended that another study should be done to assess the effectiveness of the coping strategies used by students with disabilities in their schooling.

### **Significance of the study**

The study aimed to examine challenges and coping strategies that students with disabilities use in accessing education in inclusive schools. Generally, this study has the following novelties:

First, it provides useful information to education stakeholders, thus enabling them to find appropriate ways of assisting students with disabilities, who for long time, have been excluded from accessing education equitably in inclusive settings. Through this study, peers, teachers, parents, non-governmental organizations and the general public are informed about the initiatives taken by students with disabilities in their school life; and what such strategies entail in including students with disabilities in regular schools. Rethinking about these strategies would help improve the learning environments for students with special educational needs in Tanzania.

Second, this study provides the basis for future research in the area of inclusive education in Tanzania and elsewhere in the world, especially focusing on how students with disabilities can be assisted to be as independent as possible when at school and life after schooling.

Third, it enlightens the international community on practical experiences of students with disabilities from a developing country as we celebrate a good number of years since the inception of



inclusion. The enlightenment will help to draw the attention of interested parties in assisting the students with disabilities in realizing their right to education more successfully.

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