

Exploring parents' perception of out-of-school children with physical disabilities in public primary schools: A case of Geita District, Tanzania

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ISSN: 2243-7703
Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 20 February 2026

Available Online: 24 March 2026

Revised: 20 March 2026

DOI: 10.5861/ijrse.2026.26084

Accepted: 23 March 2026

Abstract

In the 21st century, access to education has been widely recognized as a fundamental human right for children with physical disabilities due to the various international conventions that campaigned for education matters for these children. This study explores the parent's perception of the out-of-school children with physical disabilities in Geita District, Tanzania. This study employed a qualitative research approach, using a case study design for collecting in-depth information. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews from 47 participants and analyzed thematically. Purposive sampling was used to sample the participants, including education officials, local government leaders, head teachers, and parents of children with physical disabilities. The findings revealed that parents hold both positive and negative perceptions. The negative parental perceptions included viewing children with disabilities as academically incapable, feeling ashamed of having a child with a disability, perceiving them as overly dependent, and perceived these children as they frequently ill and problematic. Moreover, some government officials hold positive perceptions, belied that children with physical disabilities could succeed in education if adequately supported. The study concludes that inclusive education policies have not fully reached the community level and recommends community awareness, parental engagement, teacher training, assistive resources, and strengthened policy implementation to bridge the gap between policy and practice within the community.

Keywords: parental perceptions, out-of-school children, physical disabilities, inclusive education, access to education

Exploring parents' perception of out-of-school children with physical disabilities in public primary schools: A case of Geita District, Tanzania

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, access to education as a fundamental human right for all children, including children with physical disabilities, has been well recognized (UNICEF, 2007). This stems from the widespread signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in almost all countries in the world, which all campaign for equal access to education for all, including those with physical disabilities, without discrimination (United Nations, 1989). Similarly, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2006) prohibits the removal of children from any educational opportunities due to disability status (Limaye, 2016). The ratification of international conventions has evidently played a memorable role in promoting access to and enrolment of children with physical disabilities globally (Citaristi, 2022). However, despite these achievements and many nations' commitment to different international agreements and conventions, many children with physical disabilities remain excluded from formal schooling (Kanter, 2017). The reasons for their outright exclusion are segregation, discrimination and neglect, which they sometimes encounter within the mainstream schools (Kanter, 2017; Limaye, 2016; Fang, Cerna-Turoff, Zhang, Lachman & Barlow, 2022).

According to the World Health Organization (2011), physical disability refers to impairments in body structure or function, such as limitations in mobility or physical functioning, which, in interaction with environmental and social barriers, restrict an individual's full participation in daily life activities. Multiple disabilities refer to a condition where a child has two or more impairments, such as a combination of physical, sensory, or cognitive limitations, which create more complex challenges than a single disability (World Health Organization, 2011). Physical disabilities can take several forms that affect a child's ability to participate in education and daily activities. In the context of this study, these include mobility impairments, which limit movement and may require wheelchairs or crutches; hearing impairments, which reduce the ability to perceive sounds and communicate effectively; visual impairments, which affect sight and learning; and multiple disabilities, where a child experiences a combination of physical, sensory, or cognitive limitations. These conditions often necessitate assistive devices, specialized support, and inclusive teaching strategies to ensure effective participation in learning and school activities (World Health Organization, 2011).

Beyond exclusion from schooling, globally, children with physical disabilities experience a high burden of all forms of violence and discrimination despite advances in awareness to some extent, which truly limits their educational participation (Fang et al., 2022). According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2015) and Fang et al. (2022), about 32 out of every 100 children with physical disabilities have experienced some form of violence and discrimination as well as negligence. Children with physical disabilities are more than twice as likely to face violence and discrimination compared to children without disabilities during schooling (Fang et al., 2022). The treatment of children with physical disabilities often differs significantly from that of children without disabilities, frequently resulting in feelings of neglect, rejection, and social isolation (Nsanjabera et al., 2025). In some cases, parents may neglect these children and deny them the opportunity to develop and thrive like their peers (Nsanjabera et al., 2025).

The out of school for children with physical disabilities is the global phenomena, in India, for instance, these children still do not attend primary school due to a disability (Johansson & Samson, 2021). The data indicate that about 75% to 78.64% of children with physical disabilities estimated three-fourths of those aged five years are excluded from the education system (Kanungo & Nath, 2023). Furthermore, the United Kingdom has been a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) since 2006 and ratified it in 2009, committing to eliminate discrimination and ensure inclusive education for children with physical disabilities (Abreu, 2022; Schiemer & Schiemer, 2017). However, despite the effort, children with physical

disabilities are still facing challenges in accessing primary education (Brown, 2022). The United Kingdom is currently experiencing exclusion for children with physical disabilities; instead, parents educate them at home (Brown, 2022).

Educational achievement and access for disabled children are still low in the Sub-Saharan African countries, specifically in rural areas; there are clear discrepancies in educational attainment between children with physical disabilities and those without physical disabilities (Montes & Swindle, 2021; Ande & Mezmur, 2023). The school and parents often seem to have insufficient resources to accommodate and support children with physical disabilities to access education as their peers; this leads to higher numbers of children with physical disabilities leaving the formal education system earlier than their non-disabled classmates (Montes & Swindle, 2021; Fang, Cerna-Turoff, Zhang, Lu, Lachman, & Barlow, 2022). Children with physical disabilities are bullied and excluded from activities at school, which limits educational attainment (United States Agency for International Development, 2020; Jesina, Baloun, Kudlacek, Dolezalova, & Badura, 2022).

The efforts to understand the status of persons with disabilities, including children with physical disabilities, in Sub-Saharan Africa have increased in recent years, particularly through regional studies using standardized tools such as the Washington Group Short Set (WG-SS) of disability questions. A notable study by Montes and Swindle (2021), titled *Who is Disabled in Sub-Saharan Africa*, was conducted in ten countries, such as Botswana, Lesotho, Gabon, Namibia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, between 2015 and 2017. The study revealed that Gabon, Lesotho, and Swaziland had the highest reported rates of persons with disabilities. However, the data indicated that across all ten countries, children with physical disabilities were significantly under-enrolled in the education system compared to their non-disabled peers (Montes & Swindle 2021).

In Tanzania, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which recognized education as a fundamental human right for all children, had been accepted a long time ago after independence (UNESCO, 2018). Tanzania has also signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which seeks to ensure equal access to education for all children (Thompson, 2017). Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, also signed in Tanzania, codifies the rights of children with physical disabilities to access education without discrimination (United Republic of Tanzania, 2018). The signing of all these international conventions or agreements requires the Tanzanian government to commit to inclusive education provision (Makuu, Ng'ondi, & Sæbjørnsen, 2023). To implement the international agreement, the United Republic of Tanzania developed national strategies for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2006) and the National Strategy for Inclusive School (2018-2021) in 2018 with the goal of establishing a fair inclusive education system for all children with disabilities (URT, 2018). Furthermore, Education and Training Policy, 2014 revised version of the 2023 is largely set at the national level by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, continue to implement fee-free primary education for all school-age children, regardless of disability or ability, under Circular 5 issued on November 27, 2015 (MoEST, 2016).

Despite the government's efforts, the situation remains difficult for children with physical disabilities to access primary education (Kambuga, 2022). According to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST, 2018), over two million primary school-aged children with physical disabilities in Tanzania remain out of school. In the same year, the Ministry reported that out of 362,847 children with disabilities aged 4 to 14, approximately 15.5% were denied admission to schools due to their disabilities (Tanzania Country Report, 2018). The disparity in access to education between children with and without disabilities remains significant. Children without disabilities are favored at a rate of about 97.6%, compared to only 2.4% for children with physical disabilities annually (Kambuga, 2022). Moreover, children with physical disabilities continue to face widespread discrimination and exclusion, making them more vulnerable to being out of school. Cultural beliefs and social stigma contributed to this exclusion, with some parents hiding children with disabilities due to perceptions that they were a curse (MoEST, 2018; Kambuga, 2022). Prevailing community attitudes equate disability with inability, further discouraging school attendance among these children (Tanzania Country Report, 2018). Grounded in these

realities, this study aims to explore parents' perceptions of out-of-school children with physical disabilities in mainstream public primary schools in Geita District, Tanzania. The goal was to address the existing perception gap and contributes to the enhancement of inclusive education policy and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Perception Gaps in the Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies in Tanzania*

Tanzania has actively implemented inclusive education through committing to different policies, strategic plans and legal frameworks aimed at ensuring access to education for all children, including children with physical disabilities. This commitment is evident in the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008 and the implementation of policies like the Special Needs Education Policy and the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (2018–2021). In addition, the commitment is evidently in the education and training policy of the 2014 version of 2023 that emphasised the need for equity and quality education for all, regardless of physical or mental ability. Moreover, the fee-free education circular of 2015 that campaigned to access education without school fees for all children translated the Tanzania commitment in implementing inclusive education.

Many scholars have affirmed that inclusive policies, laws, and guidelines have not yet achieved the intended outcomes at the school and community levels as they were intended (Mifsud, 2024), although there is an acknowledgement that they were prepared in a participatory manner through representation from the grassroots to the national level (Kyambo, Basela, Pembe, & Deluca, 2022). In the real Tanzanian context, discrimination against children with physical disabilities in community and school settings is still not yet fully addressed by existing legal inclusive frameworks and policies (Nyimbi & Kajiru, 2024). In addition, although Tanzania Mainland has enacted several legal instruments aimed at prohibiting discrimination, their effectiveness in addressing the rights of children with physical disabilities remains limited. For instance, the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010 explicitly discourages discrimination; Section 5 of the Law of the Child Act (CAP 13 R.E. 2019) prohibits discrimination against children; and Section 8 of the same Act guarantees equal educational opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities. However, despite these legal frameworks, there is no enforcement of these antidiscrimination provisions (United Nations, 2020). Children with physical disabilities are unable to pursue education and opportunities due to stigma and discrimination (United Nations, 2020). These gaps imply that, meanwhile the policy frameworks are still in operation in the real context, their impact is minimal for many children living with physical disabilities. Consequently, the policy has not yet uncovered how families, specifically parents, perceive the out-of-school phenomena to their children.

2.2 *Theoretical Literatures Review*

This study of exploring Parents' Perceptions of Out-of-School Children with Physical Disabilities in Public Primary Schools was guided by the Social Model of Disability, which was developed by Mike Oliver in the early 1980s (Oliver, 1983). This model emphasises that disability arises from societal barriers, rather than a medical condition faced by an individual (Oliver, 2018). The model suggests that if societies were set up and constructed in a way that was accessible for people with disabilities, those individuals would not be restricted from full participation in the world around them (Oliver, 2013). The social model of disability views the origins of disability as the societal mental attitudes and physical structures of society, rather than a medical condition faced by an individual. Further, the model emphasises that individual limitations are not the cause of disability; rather, it is society's failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure that the needs of disabled people are taken into account in societal organisation (Oliver, 2018). According to Oliver (1983) social model of disability has four key tenets which are:

- ✧ Disability is socially constructed; this articulates that it arises from societal barriers rather than individual impairments.

- ✧ Removing environmental and societal barriers: it implies that physical, institutional, and attitudinal obstacles should be eliminated.
- ✧ Distinction between impairment and disability means impairment is a medical condition, while disability results from societal exclusion.
- ✧ Emphasis on rights and inclusion, it indicates that people with disabilities should have equal access, participation, and opportunities in society

2.3 Relevance of Social Model of disability theory to this Study

The relevance of this model to the study was derived from its four key tenets: disability is perceived as socially constructed barriers in accessing primary education for children with physical disabilities, such as discriminatory attitudes. These prevent these children from enrolling and attending school. Further, removing the societal barriers implies the need to eliminate attitudinal obstacles that limit access to education. Similarly, the distinction between impairment and disability reinforces the idea that while physical impairments exist, exclusion from education results from societal failures rather than the impairment itself. Finally, the emphasis on rights and inclusion aligns with the need to ensure equal access to education for children with physical disabilities, thus promoting their full participation and integration into the school system.

3. Methodology

This study utilised a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach was used in this study to gain in-depth understanding of how parents perceive their experience, attitudes, and behaviours and how they respond to their out-of-school children with physical disabilities (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2017). The approach enabled the researcher to gather thick description from parents's experiences in the natural settings on the topic investigated (Brodsky, Buckingham, Scheibler, & Mannarini, 2016). The case study design was adapted in this study to facilitate an in-depth examination of the real-life practices of the parents' perspectives toward the out-of-school children with physical disabilities, allowing better understanding of the topic by answering the how and why questions (Lucas, Fleming, & Bhosale, 2018).

The study was conducted in Tanzania's Geita District because the area has one of the highest rates of out-of-school children with physical disabilities. In the district, physical disability is the leading cause of non-enrollment, with about 45% of children with disabilities not attending primary school (Rahindi, 2021; URT, 2018). These children face multiple barriers, including inaccessible school infrastructure, lack of assistive devices, social stigma, and limited support from trained teachers. Despite Tanzania's inclusive education policies, such challenges continue to restrict access to education for children with physical disabilities, making Geita District a critical area for understanding parental perceptions and improving educational inclusion.

The sample size of this study was 47 participants from 10 wards in the Geita district, including the 1 district education officer, 3 ward education officers, 3 ward executive officers, and 10 village executive officers. Additionally, it involved 10 village chairpersons, 15 parents of children with physical disabilities, and 5 head teachers. Samples were obtained from purposive sampling. The rationale behind selecting these participants was rooted in their executive roles in overseeing education management at the district, ward, and village levels and in schools, respectively. During the data collection, the idea of data saturation guided the study, whereby the smaller sample size was selected to priorities depth over breadth, enabling the researcher to collect rich, detailed data and thoroughly explore the participants' experiences, perspectives, and behaviors. Moreover, the focus was context-specific understanding rather than generalizability, making a smaller sample appropriate for capturing unique insights related to the topic.

This study used a semi-structured interview to gather qualitative information on the District Education Officers, Ward Education Officers, Ward Executive Officers, and the village chairperson, as well as from head

teachers. The rationale for using a semi-structured interview with the government officials was to obtain detailed information due to their daily executive roles and experiences in overseeing education management in their area of authority, as noted by Taherdoost (2021). In contrast, a semi-structured interview gathered qualitative data from parents of children with physical disabilities in order to examine their understanding of out-of-school children with physical disabilities and the obstacles they were facing. The interview session lasted up to 30 to 40 minutes, was recorded with the participants' approval and was conducted in the Kiswahili language to enhance understanding of the research topic.

However, despite the study was qualitative in nature, a simple summary table was used to enhance clarity and support interpretation. The table presents the frequency and percentage of the participants who responded to the key perceptions through interviews. The methodological approach accepted in qualitative research when employed to reinforce rather than replace thematic findings, as supported by Creswell and Poth (2016, p. 192), who stated that even though qualitative research emphasizes words rather than numbers, counting can occur to identify patterns and themes, while Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) supported that qualitative studies may incorporate descriptive summaries of tables to reinforce thematic findings without compromising the depth of analysis. Furthermore, Namey et al. (2008) highlighted that the use of tables is a useful tool to organize data patterns and compare responses across different groups of participants; even simple frequencies can increase the transparency of the findings in a qualitative study. Therefore, in line with these methodological perspectives, the inclusion of a summary table with frequencies and percentages in this study serves to improve clarity of the findings while maintaining the depth and richness of the qualitative analysis. The study followed Stuckey's (2015) six steps: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report. Steps were adopted to support thematic analysis.

The trustworthiness of the study was adhered by minimizing bias during data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings. This was achieved through four key strategies: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced by involving participants holding various government positions, thereby increasing the accuracy and reliability of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Dependability was established through expert appraisal of the research process to ensure transparency, consistency, and validity of the procedures and outcomes (Ahmed, 2024). The study employed interview guide checklists to pre-test the research instruments and ensure alignment with the research objectives. Transferability was supported through the inclusion of a diverse sample, allowing for broader applicability of the findings (Cohen et al., 2017). Lastly, confirmability was maintained by conducting independent analyses based on participants' actual responses, utilizing audio recordings and interview transcripts to ensure the findings were grounded in the data (Creswell, 2018).

The research ethics issues that were addressed in this study were ensured by asking for a clearance letter before the beginning of data collection in the study region. Getting a letter of clearance from the Open University of Tanzania aimed at introducing the researcher to the various places or authorities where the study was conducted. The study valued voluntary participation, in which the respondents were encouraged rather than forced to participate in the study. Further, the participants were fully informed of the purpose, procedures (such as audio recording), and repercussions of their participation before collecting the data. The question items took into account cultural considerations. Furthermore, confidentiality, honesty, openness, and accountability were taken seriously during data collection, with respondents' data provided from the source kept confidential for research reasons only.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Parents' Perceptions about Out-Of-School Children with Physical Disabilities

The study intended to explore parents' perceptions about out-of-school children with physical disabilities from various stakeholders to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The data were collected through semi-

structured interviews which were conducted with parents with children with physical disabilities (PCPDs), head teachers (HTs), and local government leaders such as Ward Education Officers (WEOs), Ward Executive Officers (W-ExOs), and Village Chairpersons (VCPs). The results indicated that parents had negative perceptions towards primary education access for children with physical disabilities, while the government officials had positive perceptions. Specifically, the findings revealed that parents still held the belief that children with physical disabilities could not succeed in education, parents felt ashamed about their disabled children and were hiding them at home due to this belief, and still believed they were dependent and problematic to others due to their frequent sickness. Interestingly, some government officials and teachers held positive attitudes toward disability, as summarized in Table 1 here below.

Table 1
Parental Perceptions on Barriers to School Enrolment (N = 47)

Proposition	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Parents believe children with multiple physical disabilities are not accepted in primary schools	21	45%
Parents believe children with physical disabilities cannot succeed academically	12	26%
Parents feel ashamed to send children with physical disabilities to school	8	17%
Parents do perceive children with physical disabilities are always dependent on others	6	13%
Total	47	100%

Source, Filed Data (2025)

4.2 Parental Fear of School acceptance and Rejection

A belief that children with multiple physical disabilities may not be accepted in the school among the parents was still persistent and caused the out-of-school situation for children with physical disabilities. The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that 21 out of 47 (45%) of the parents reported that children with complicated physical disabilities may not be accepted in the primary school education system. This finding implies that the parents still held negative opinions about the educational acceptance of children with multiple physical disabilities. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the main worry of parents was not about the educational competence of children with multiple physical disabilities but fear of rejection of their disabled children in primary school. These findings are similar to UNICEF (2021), which reported that children with multiple disabilities typically face additional barriers that put them at a higher risk of experiencing less than optimal educational trajectories. However, these findings contrast with those by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989, that recognise the right of every child to education. One parent with children with multiple physical disabilities shared.

If a child cannot see, hear, or walk, what benefit would they get from going to school? They won't hear what is taught; they can't see or write anything. How can they be accepted in school? It is better for them to stay at home, as taking those to school would only bring them suffering.

On the same regard, the Ward Education Officer also shared adding that

Based on my experience of managing education practices, parents still hold that children with multiple physical disabilities cannot be accepted in primary school education. For example, they believe that their children can't see, hear, or move easily, and this limits their ability to participate fully in the educational matters"

Similarly, a Village Chairperson highlighted that

Many people in our village, specifically parents with children with multiple physical disabilities, believe that taking these children to school is a waste of time, since even teachers in school will not accept them. This is due to the notion they have that these children cannot follow lessons, write, or participate like other children.

The comments from the participants as highlighted in the above quotes indicate that parents of children with multiple physical disabilities still held the fear that their children would be rejected from the primary schools. Based on what was noted in the study, these beliefs stemmed from the nature of disabilities, whereby parents had the broader lack of confidence in the inclusivity of the education system and revealed how such fears and assumptions can discourage parents from enrolling their children, even when policies promoting inclusive education exist.

4.3 Parents Believe Children with Physical Disabilities Cannot Succeed Academically

The results in Table 1 indicated that 12 out of 47 (26%) of the parents acknowledged that children with physical disabilities cannot succeed in primary school education, while 21 (45%) did not support this perception, suggesting that challenges in accessing education may be linked to factors other than parental attitudes or to limited awareness of how such perceptions influence access. These findings imply the persistence of negative beliefs among some parents, where non-disabled children are perceived as more academically capable than their peers with disabilities, thereby hindering inclusive education efforts. This finding is consistent with recent evidence from the World Health Organization (2022) and UNICEF (2021), which highlight that negative parental attitudes and societal stigma continue to restrict educational opportunities for children with disabilities, particularly in developing countries. However, these findings contradict the principles of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), which advocates for inclusive education and equal opportunities for all learners, as well as Tanzania's National Strategy for Inclusive Education (2018-2021), which aims to ensure equitable access to education for children with disabilities. During a qualitative semi-structured interview, two parents expressed their opinions, stating

Even when children with disabilities are enrolled in school, they sometimes gain very little from the learning process, which is perceived as a waste of time and limited family resources. The respondent further questioned the value of schooling for children with severe disabilities, such as those who are blind, unable to walk, unable to use their hands, or unable to hear, wondering what such children would realistically achieve in a school setting (Semi-structured interview with a parent from Ward A, 2025).

In the similar way another parents added

These children are unable to write; they cannot understand what the teacher is teaching; their instructions cannot be heard. These children cannot succeed in the primary education system; what else are they doing? They would be better off staying at home and playing with their peers (Semi-structured interview with a parent from Ward C, 2025).

Similarly, the Ward Education Officer shared the same observations by saying

In most cases, parents of children with disabilities still have negative perceptions towards their disabled children. For example, when trying to talk to a parent and ask, why are these children still at home? Why are they not yet sent to school? The probably negative response may be, what purpose would schooling serve? They are incapable of achieving anything, not even academic success (Semi-structured interview with a parent from Ward Education Officer from Ward D, 2025).

Participants also indicate that some parents and education stakeholders perceive children with disabilities, especially those with severe impairments, as incapable of learning or benefiting from schooling, which leads to low expectations and their exclusion from education. In relation to the social model of disability, the findings reflect key components of the theory, particularly negative societal attitudes, stigma, and institutional barriers. As emphasized by the World Health Organization and UNICEF, disability is not caused by the impairment itself but by these external barriers. In this case, the belief that such children cannot succeed shows how attitudes and the lack of inclusive support systems, such as appropriate teaching methods and resources, limit their participation in

education rather than their actual abilities. Furthermore, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issue, the study sought to examine the ways in which children with physical disabilities are perceived as unable to succeed within the education system. The findings revealed that parents held diverse perceptions, as presented below.

4.4 Children with Physical Disabilities Are Perceived as Slow Learners

During the interview, one of the school HTs reported that many parents held the belief that children with physical disabilities were often considered slow learners compared to their peers without disabilities. This resulted from the challenges these children were facing in performing academic tasks, thus making the parents not trust their abilities in learning, specifically for children who had low vision and hearing impairment. These findings imply that children with physical disabilities were struggling to master the curriculum contents due to the challenges they were facing in performing academic tasks. This study is in line with Dell'Anna, Pellegrini, Ianes, and Vivanet (2022) who argued that inadequate educational facilities, lack of assistive technology devices, and insufficient curriculum adaptations contribute to the difficulties these children encounter in performing academic tasks. This finding also is in line with Adjei, Osei, Edusei, and Nakua (2024), who assert that many students with disabilities struggle with one or more aspects of cognitive processing, including challenges with memory, attention, and the generation, selection, monitoring, and implementation of the learning strategies. During the interview, the head teacher shared

Parents often believe that children with physical disabilities cannot succeed in primary education, perceiving them as slow learners. This belief is reinforced by what they consider to be poor academic progress, which further weakens their confidence in these children's ability to benefit from schooling (Semi-structured interview with head teacher from the school D, June, 2025).

The participant's quotes from the interview indicated that the parental beliefs and low expectations can significantly limit the educational opportunities of children with physical disabilities. Perceiving these children as slow learners and focusing on their perceived academic shortcomings, parents may provide less support, reduce encouragement, or even prevent full participation in school, which can hinder learning outcomes and reinforce cycles of exclusion. The finding reflects the social model of disability perspective that disability is socially constructed through negative attitudes, stigma, and barriers rather than inherent impairments. Parents' perceptions act as social barriers that limit children's educational participation, illustrating the model's principle that societal structures and beliefs, not the disability itself, create disadvantage.

4.5 Irregular School Attendance Due to Disabilities Challenges

The finding of the study indicated that parents and some teachers believed that these children could not succeed in primary education since they were unable to attend school consistently throughout the year due to the challenges they were facing. For example, children with mobility impairments who lacked wheelchairs were often struggling to attend school consistently due to the economic factors of parents covering transport costs; hence, the persistence of this issue was making parents believe that they could not succeed in primary education since they lacked teacher's lessons. The findings imply that the physically disabled children's poor academic performance was not due to their disabilities but due to their truancy caused by health problems, lack of support by the school, and lack of transport for them. This finding aligns Whitley, Pegg, and Ozturk (2025) that poor academic performance for children with physical disabilities is attributed to the external factors that limit their access to school. These factors are such as buildings, roads, transportation, and other indoor and outdoor facilities, including schools, housing, medical facilities, and workplaces.

During the interview, one of the school head teachers offering inclusive education said

I have two children with mobility impairments in my school; unfortunately, it lacks the wheelchair, their attendance record is not good, and getting to school every day is just too difficult. I feel this makes it impossible for them to succeed in education (Semi-structured interview with head teacher

from the school E, June, 2025).

4.6 Unequal Treatment by Teachers

One parent of a child with physical disabilities reported that children with physical disabilities were treated unequally during classroom sessions compared to their peers without disabilities. For example, teachers gave less attention to these children, and they were excluded from group activities and class discussions either because of physical limitations or because teachers assumed they could not participate effectively. Such practices reinforced parents' beliefs that their children could not succeed in the education system, as even teachers appeared to hold low expectations and demonstrated discriminatory behavior. This finding aligns with Lindner, Schwab, Emara, and Avramidis (2023), who argued that negative attitudes and concerns among teachers regarding inclusive education often prevail, especially when educators feel they lack sufficient time, resources, and training to address the diverse needs of all learners in a single classroom. However, these findings contradict key current policy frameworks, including the Tanzania Inclusive Education Policy (2022), which emphasizes the right of all children to equitable access to quality education and requires that teachers provide appropriate support and participation opportunities for learners with disabilities. On this issue, one parent remarked:

Teachers themselves neglected these children during the school. I always ask my children if even the teacher asks her questions during the session, but she often says yes, but not effectively supervising me like others when I make a mistake (Semi-structured interview with head teacher from the school A, June, 2025).

4.7 Lack of Role Models

During the interview, one head teacher reported that parents perceived that children with physical disabilities could not succeed in education since in their community there were few or no children with physical disabilities who had achieved satisfactory academic outcomes. Due to this real example, within their context, it presented the persistence of this negative view on these disabled children accessing primary education. The findings align with Hilton and Savanta (2025), who suggested that a lack of visible role models in the workplace is a major barrier to seeking employment for people with disabilities. Although based on employment settings, Hilton and Savanta (2025) highlighted how a lack of visible role models discourages individuals with disabilities from pursuing goals a pattern mirrored in parental fears in this study. On this, one of the head teachers had this to say:

Sometimes parents believe that children with physical disabilities cannot succeed in education since there are few or no successful disabled children in education in our environment. Even those few, who manage to complete primary education, end up with poor results (Semi-structured interview with head teacher from the school A, June, 2025).

All these comments from the head teachers and parents of children with physical disabilities inform us that the perception of parents that physically disabled children cannot succeed in primary education were a result of the persistent numbers of factors that negatively affect the rate of children with physical disabilities in accessing primary education.

4.8 Perception of Being Ashamed Within the Society

One of the most prominent perceptions preventing primary education access to children with physical disabilities was revealed to be that parents were feeling ashamed of their disabled children. The results presented in Table 1 indicated that 8(17%) of the parents expressed that parents were feeling ashamed and thus preventing children with physical disabilities from school. The findings imply that most parents still perceived disabilities as a curse or disgrace of the family. Due to this, they were denying the right of these children to access education by hiding them at home. This finding is also presented by Odongo (2018) who highlights the negative perceptions in society regarding the children with disabilities thus, creating feelings of shame among families who may be

keeping their child with a disability away from public view. This belief made the disabled children hidden at home not be enrolled in school. This finding contrast with Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which promotes the right of children with physical disabilities to access education without discrimination. During the interviews, one parent remarked:

Although the government and non-governmental organizations strongly encourage us to send our children with physical disabilities to school, society often laughs and mocks us for doing so. The societal view that children with physical disabilities are incapable of learning contributes to feelings of shame. We fear that if they fail, it will bring even greater shame to our families (Semi-structured interview with Parent June, 2025).

On the same matter, the village chair persons from three villages noted that

Child with a disability is a source of shame and a curse for the family. This leads to the hiding of children with physical disabilities, which is a serious problem and prevents them from being sent to school, as parents claim they are protecting the family's honor.

These comments from the qualitative finding which indicate fear of being ashamed as a part of social stigma still prevented children with physical disabilities from accessing primary education. To have children with physical disabilities was a family disgrace, and the fear of public ridicule gave a room to education inaccessibility of children with disabilities.

4.9 Children with Physical Disabilities Are Always Dependent On Others

The findings of the study affirmed that 6 out of 47 participants reported that children with physical disabilities were viewed in the school settings as the dependent ones, who were always dependent on others for both academic and social support. This suggests that due to the disabilities associated with challenges, some parents and teachers still believed that these children could not stand alone academically and in other social matters, hence encouraging discrimination against these children and denying them of full support. These findings align with Lei, X. and Kantor, (2025) who viewed children with disabilities as less able and therefore offer them fewer participation opportunities or are reluctant to allow these students to learn or play independently. This finding contrasts with both global and national policies for inclusive education, specifically the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 Quality Education (United Nations, 2015): SDG 4 and Tanzania's National Strategy on Inclusive Education (2009–2017). These policies emphasize equal participation and autonomy for children with disabilities in learning environments. For example, two head teachers shared the same view during the interview session:

A child with a disability lacks one or more body organs, like hand(s) or limb(s), does not speak or hear, and is not as capable as a normal child, thus making them to be dependent on the normal children within the school in both social life and academic (Semi-structured interview with head teacher from the school B, June, 2025).

4.10 Children with Physical Disabilities Perceived as Sick and Problematic

The finding of the study also suggested that children with physical disabilities, especially with multiple related disabilities, were viewed by teachers as the ones who were frequently attacked by sickness and needed care from other children within the school context something that seemed to be an inconvenience to others. This implies that the complicated disabilities made these children to be viewed as the ones who were always attacked by frequent diseases, which affected their learning outcomes. This finding is related to Fujino, Matsumoto, and Mieno (2024), who reported that children with multiple disabilities attacked by several diseases required intensive or continuous health care according to the level of severity.

On this regard, one of the head teachers remarked: "A child with multiple disabilities, based on my experience of hosting them, is sick at all times; she/he needs medication for their survival"

(Semi-structured interview with head teacher from the school C, June, 2025).

Another head teacher reported that

Based on my experience, children with physical disabilities often face frequent health issues. This affects their attendance and participation in school activities, thus making it challenging to effectively support their learning (Semi-structured interview with head teacher from the school A, June, 2025).

4.11 Positive Parental Perception on the Success of Children with Physical Disabilities

In contrast, the findings revealed that some parents and government officials had positive perspectives that children with disabilities could perform well in educational activities if the school environment would be supportive with trained teachers and appropriate learning materials and devices. The findings aligning with Bogai's (2023) study, which revealed that the society had both negative and positive views all directed at the education accessibility for children with disabilities. Also with those of Junaidi and Dewantoro's (2020) study which revealed that most parents accepted their children's disabilities and believed that having a disability is part of God's plan and that despite their disability, those children could succeed in education like those children without disabilities. On this regard, three parents noted

Children with disabilities are like all children without disabilities, when they are taught properly they can achieve like others. Since it's only one or two of their body organs that are affected and not their minds, their abilities of thinking and reasoning are the same like the other children without disabilities. Therefore, if they will be sent to school and the government makes a friendly learning environment for them in schools, I am sure they will do well and meet their goals like any other children (Semi-structured interview with parent, June, 2025)..

The government officials, like the ward and village executive officers in one ward and head teachers, both noted that physically disabled children could not succeed in the education system when the school settings did not accommodate them, but if it would be a supportive environment, they would succeed.

On the same matter, one head teacher added that

I am not hesitant to include children with disabilities in my class because I believe they can still learn, even if they don't master things as quickly as other children without any disability (Semi-structured interview with head teacher From school E, June, 2025).

Three village chairpersons (VPs) shared the following:

It is only just parents who fear these children with physical disabilities. However, they are like others; their inabilities depend on their disability types. For example, children with mental impairment are those vulnerable to not succeeding in the education system, but children with other disabilities can succeed and achieve better in the education system (Semi-structured interview with, village chairpersons from Village A, June, 2025).

Based on the findings, despite the fact that negative perceptions about the educational success of children with physical disabilities persisted among many parents, positive attitudes emerged, as evidenced by some parents, government officials, and the head teachers thus indicating hope to some parents on the educational achievements for their disabled children.

Implication of the Study - Based on the findings of the study, negative parental perceptions of the capabilities and acceptance of physically disabled people in public primary schools were still the factor that influenced the exclusion of these children in the primary education system. The findings affirmed that this perception, compounded by social stigma, fear of rejection, lack of role models, and infrastructural barriers, intensifies

educational exclusion. The insights from the study indicated that inclusive education policies in Tanzania have not fully penetrated the community level, specifically in rural areas, where cultural beliefs and socioeconomic constraints still determine the parental decision-making. Thus findings indicated the gap between policy intentions and community practices that it need to be addressed.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that parental perceptions have a great role in determining the access of primary school education for physically disabled children. The perception that children are incapable of academic achievement or are likely to face rejection in school settings contributes to their exclusion. Moreover, the findings concluded that contributing factors for out-of-school children with physical disabilities included irregular school attendance due to lack of mobility aids, negative experiences within school settings such as unequal treatment by teachers, and a lack of positive role models with disabilities in the community. However, the study found the emerging of positive attitudes among some parents and education stakeholders, who acknowledged that with proper support, children with disabilities can succeed in education system like their peers.

Recommendations for Further Action - Basing on the implications and conclusion of the study the following recommendation had been made

- The study recommended that there should be community awareness campaigns among the parents. The local government authority, in collaboration with private sectors such as NGOs and media platforms, should create and implement community-based programs to remove societal stigma and correct misconceptions about the abilities of children with physical disabilities.
- The study recommends for Parental involvement in education whereby the school and local education stakeholders, such as education offices, should initiate regular dialogues with parents of children with disabilities to educate them on inclusive education policies, children's rights, and support systems available. This could help reduce fear, shame, and misunderstanding.
- The Ministry of Education should provide ongoing professional development for teachers to strengthen their skills in inclusive teaching methods and classroom differentiation, ensuring that children with disabilities are effectively supported and not marginalized. In addition, the provision of assistive devices through donor and government agencies should be given priority to equipping schools with assistive technologies, such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, and learning materials, to facilitate access and participation for children with physical disabilities.
- Since the findings presented the policy gap practices at the community level, the study recommends strengthening inclusive policy implementation, whereby the government should monitor and evaluate the actual implementation of inclusive policy in the community settings so as to uncover the negative perception among the parents.

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