Original Research

Barriers to Inclusive Education for Learners with Moderate Intellectual Impairment: Multiple Stakeholder Perspectives from Zanzibar Primary Schools

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Abstract

The educational systems of many countries, including Zanzibar, are moving toward accepting learners with moderate intellectual impairment (LWMII) alongside their peers. This qualitative case study investigated inclusion barriers faced by learners with moderate intellectual impairment LWMII in Zanzibar primary schools. The research focused on three key areas: practical barriers encountered in educational settings, attitudinal barriers hindering inclusion, and existing policy barriers that impact educational access and participation for LWMII in Zanzibar's primary education system. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 45 participants, including teachers, learners, parents, school administrators, and education officers from two purposefully selected primary schools. Inductive thematic analysis revealed several barriers. Practice barriers included a shortage of skilled teachers, large class sizes, and a lack of in-service training. Teachers' negative attitude barriers lead to segregation. Policy barriers included the absence of inclusive education frameworks and curriculum guidelines for teaching LWMII. The study suggests that all educators should undergo training to instruct LWMII. Additionally, vocational training centers need to hire a sufficient number of specialists with diverse expertise. Finally, schools throughout Zanzibar must be equipped with adequate resources and facilities that enable them to enroll and teach LWMII.

Keywords: inclusion education; learner; primary school; moderate intellectual impairment; mainstream classroom; attitude; policy; practical barrier; Tanzania; qualitative analysis

Introduction

Globally, many educational systems are moving towards including LWMII in regular classrooms alongside their peers (Kurowski et al., 2022), yet teacher support for implementing inclusive practices is limited. Educational inclusion is firmly established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the 1990 World Declaration for Education for All (United Nations, 1990). On the same path, the 1990 Jomtien Conference discussed both education for all and equal rights to education for persons with disabilities (Mosalag & Bakker, 2020). This right is also emphasized by many international conferences, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), and the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2016). These international frameworks have established the foundation for understanding inclusive education as a multidimensional concept with several key components.

Educational inclusion is multidimensional, including three key dimensions (Nilsen, 2010): physical/organizational (placement in mainstream settings), academic/cultural (adapting content while creating fellowship), and social (sense of belonging and cohesion). Mitchell (2008) maintains that successful inclusion depends on several factors, including adapting curriculum and assessment techniques. These changes must consider the educational needs of all learners, regardless of their disability. Additionally, Mitchell highlights the importance of strong leadership, collaboration between educators and

families, and a focus on creating a welcoming and accessible learning environment for all learners as critical elements for effective inclusion.

When educational systems require inclusive learning, they must be mindful that LWMII often face challenges compared to peers without disabilities (Garcia-Carrion et al., 2018). In fact, literature indicates that the overall completion rate of LWMII in elementary education is very low in primary schools (Garcia-Carrion et al., 2018; Yusuph & Hussein, 2022). Several factors contribute to these outcomes. First, many teachers lack awareness and training on how to teach LWMII within mainstream classrooms (Svendby, 2020). Furthermore, inclusive teachers often do not receive adequate support from their schools, while rigid educational policies of some regions often create additional implementation barriers rather than solutions (Svendby, 2020). These restrictive policies do not provide guidance on how to teach and assess LWMII alongside their peers, resulting in educational underachievement (Ncube & Sedibe, 2022). Research also highlights negative attitudes among primary school teachers as an obstacle preventing LWMII from accessing quality education in mainstream classrooms. Some teachers maintain the misconception that LWMII cannot learn alongside their peers or reach their potential. Such attitudes can lead teachers to ignore LWMII or use harsh punishment, like corporal punishment, ultimately preventing these learners from achieving their educational goals (Okyere et al., 2019). This study aims to extend the research by (1) investigating practical barriers faced by LWMII in Zanzibar primary schools, (2) examining teachers' attitudes toward LWMII in Zanzibar primary schools, and (3) investigating policy barriers faced by school administrators and teachers of LWMII in Zanzibar primary schools.

Inclusive Education in Tanzania

To contextualize this study, it is important to understand how inclusive education has evolved both broadly in Tanzania and specifically in Zanzibar. Following various United Nations declarations such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the United Republic of Tanzania introduced a series of programs promoting quality education including the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP I and II; Tungaraza, 2014). The government aimed to expand enrollment and increase access to quality primary education for all children. For instance, the PEDP sought to ensure all children from various backgrounds, including orphans, children from remote areas, and those with disabilities, including moderate intellectual impairment, had access to quality primary education. Consequently, Tanzania offered various special schools for learners with disabilities including Makalala Integrated Primary School (Iringa Region), Rutengano School (Mbeya Region), Longido Integrated Primary School (Arusha Region) and Misungwi Integrated Primary School (Mwanza Region; Tungaraza, 2018).

Zanzibar's Education System

Zanzibar follows a 2-7-4-2 formal education system (2 years of pre-primary, 7 years of primary education, 4 years of lower secondary and 2 years of upper secondary). The first 13 years, which make up the basic education level, are fee free, and compulsory. In 2021, Zanzibar's primary education expanded from 6 to 7 years to align with the Tanzanian system. Schooling in pre-primary starts at age four, while the official age of entry to primary Standard 1 is 6 years old. Kiswahili is the instructional language until Standard 4, transitioning to English in Standard 5. After abolishing school fees (2015 for pre/primary, 2018 for secondary), government schools now accommodate over 467,000 learners, including approximately 1.7% of pre/primary and 3.8% of secondary learners with disabilities (World Bank, 2022). Unfortunately, the school infrastructure has not kept up with the increase in enrollment. Approximately 44% of primary schools operate double or triple shifts, with rates exceeding 70% in districts such as Kaskazini B, Mjini, and Magharibi A. Some primary schools typically have over 100 learners per classroom, significantly exceeding the national standard of 45 (World Bank, 2022).

Inclusive Education in Zanzibar

While mainland Tanzania developed initiatives, Zanzibar implemented its own approach to inclusive education that reflected both shared national priorities and its unique circumstances. Zanzibar's government and other educational stakeholders made different efforts to promote quality education for children with special educational needs. According to Juma (2018), special education units for learners with disabilities were first integrated into some general education schools in 1991. In the Zanzibar context, a special unit refers to a classroom or a set of facilities in a regular school that is set aside

Table 1. Number of teachers and learners with moderate intellectual impairment at special units.

Units	Learners			Teachers		
	Females	Males	Total	Female	Males	Total
Kisiwandui	5	7	12	2	-	2
Pandani	5	7	12	1	-	1
Jang'ombe	11	19	30	3	1	4
Michakaini	11	13	24	2	-	2
Mwanakwerekwe E	9	9	18	3	-	3
Muembemakumbi	8	23	31	3	-	3
Total	**49**	**78**	**127**	**14**	**1**	**15**

Source: Data from the field.

for special education services. Within these special units, learners with severe disabilities or challenges can receive support and teaching within a smaller group with a specially trained teacher who can adapt activities to learners' individual needs (Juma & Mussa, 2024). Some teachers working in the special units have been trained, mostly in Mainland Tanzania and Uganda. Before 2006, the special education units addressed learners with special needs. In 2004, only five primary schools in Zanzibar offered classes for children with special education needs, including Pandani, Muembe Makumbi, Kisiwandui, Jang'ombe, and Mwanakwerekwe F. Zanzibar schools sought to enroll all learners, regardless of their disability, including LWMII (RGoZ, 2006). However, some special units within primary schools enroll LWMII with the intent to transition them into the mainstream school. Such units are located at the following schools: Kisiwandui, Mwanakwerekwe E, Jang'ombe, Muembemakumbi, Michakaini and Pandani (Juma & Mussa, 2024). Table 1 shows the number of LWMII and their teachers at the units.

When learners are enrolled in special units in Zanzibar schools, they conduct all learning activities within these units and do not interact with learners in mainstream classrooms for academic purposes. However, according to Juma and Mussa (2024) , there are interactions between learners from the special units and their peers from mainstream classrooms before and during morning assembly and break times. Therefore, the Zanzibar inclusive education model appears to have gradually shifted from a moderate to a universalist perspective. Cigman (2007) described the inclusive moderate perspective as one that includes the use of special schools or special units for children who need them, while the universalist perspective, on the other hand, views the use of special schools or special units as incompatible with the policy of full inclusion. While there is a broad consensus that the core principle of inclusive education is providing all children with the opportunity to learn together in inclusive schools free from discrimination or segregation, Zanzibar has adopted a different approach. The Zanzibar inclusive education model is not one of 'full inclusion'; rather, it is what Hornby (2014, 2015, 2021) describes as inclusive special education. Hornby (2014, p.8) refers to inclusive special education, where most children are in mainstream classrooms and a small number are in special classes or units within or attached to the school.

Zanzibar, like many developing countries, faces significant challenges in implementing inclusive education, particularly for LWMII. These challenges include inadequate teacher training, limited resources, negative societal attitudes, and weak policy enforcement (Ali, 2019). This situation is similar to that in Uganda, Nigeria, and Nepal, where general education teachers often lack the competencies to manage inclusive classrooms (UNESCO, 2020).

In the current study, inclusive education is conceptualized as a continuous process of identifying and removing barriers to the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners regardless of their differences (Juma & Lehtomäki, 2016). UNESCO (1994) insists that all learners must be educated together regardless of their differences, such as language, culture, ability or disability:

> The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of their difficulties or differences. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their learners, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use, and partnerships with their communities. (UNESCO, 1994, p.11, Salamanca Framework for Action)

Researchers showed that LWMII face various challenges in achieving their goals. It is claimed that they face difficulties in achieving appropriate educational outcomes, and the completion rate in elementary education is very low (Garcia-Carrion

Table 2. Distribution of study participants used during data collection.

Respondents	IELS		Teacher Resource Center		ZIE		School A		School B		**Total**
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Officers	1	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	**4**
Head teachers								1		1	**2**
Teachers	-	-	-	-			1	5	2	4	**12**
Parents	-	-	-	-			2	5	2	6	**15**
LWMII	-	-	-	-			1	5	1	5	**12**
Total	**1**	**1**	**0**	**1**		**1**	**4**	**16**	**5**	**16**	**45**

Source: Data from the field; M=Male; F=Female; ZIE, Zanzibar Institute of Education; IELS, Inclusive Education and Life Skills; LWMII, learners with moderate intellectual impairment.

et al., 2018; Yusuph & Hussein, 2022). So far, little is scientifically known about barriers that prevent LWMII from getting quality education in mainstream classrooms in Zanzibar primary schools. Malinen et al. (2013) argued that similar barriers to inclusion have been identified across various countries; the complexity of each single barrier must be examined within the environment in which it is experienced, as the impact on implementation may be context-specific. Thus, this paper explored the barriers to inclusion faced by LWMII at selected primary schools in Zanzibar. The findings of this research are valuable for policymakers and educational stakeholders, as they provide evidence-based insights that can inform reforms in inclusive education practices for LWMII. Given these identified gaps in understanding barriers to inclusion in the Zanzibar context, this study used a qualitative approach to investigate the barriers experienced by key stakeholders in the inclusive education system.

Methods

Research Design

Researchers employed a qualitative approach grounded in constructivist paradigm principles (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2016). To ensure diverse and comprehensive perspectives, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with teachers, parents of LWMII, school administrators, and educational officers. They analyzed all collected data using a systematic thematic content analysis (Saldaña, 2016).

Participants

For this study, researchers purposefully selected two schools (School A and School B) that served LWMII. Using convenience sampling techniques, the research team recruited a total of 12 teachers (nine females and three males) who teach LWMII in mainstream classrooms. The researchers conducted FGDs with 15 learners' parents, seven (7) for School A and eight (8) for School B. Additionally, 12 LWMII, six from each school (ten females and two males), participated in the study. To capture administrative perspectives, the research team interviewed two head teachers (one from each school), a female officer from the Teacher Resource Centre, one officer from the Zanzibar Institute of Education and two officers from the Inclusive Education and Life Skills (IELS) Unit (one male and one female). Table 2 shows the distribution of study participants used during data collection.

Procedures

Researchers collected data through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders in the inclusive education system following the systematic approach outlined by Hobson and Townsend (2010). Interviews included two headmistresses from primary schools A and B, as well as officers from the IELS Unit and the Kiembesamaki Teacher Center. The researchers conducted all interviews using semi-structured questions in the Kiswahili language to ensure that respondents felt comfortable expressing themselves freely. Additionally, researchers interviewed teachers, learners, assistant headmistresses, and learners' parents at the respective schools. Officers were interviewed at their offices.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 to 45 minutes, and the interview schedule consisted of ten questions. These questions aimed to explore barriers to including LWMII at selected primary schools. Questions one through four sought detailed information about experiences in dealing with LWMII and the roles of the officers and school heads in pro-

moting inclusion and learning outcomes. Questions five and six aimed to explore how the education curriculum addressed the needs of LWMII, including teaching strategies and assessment models in mainstream classrooms. Finally, questions seven through ten explored barriers to including LWMII at selected primary schools in Zanzibar.

Additionally, researchers conducted FGDs with teachers, learners, and parents. The FGDs utilized questions similar to those in the interview schedule to gather diverse perspectives. Participants provided verbal consent for the tape-recording of data and agreed to its use for academic presentation and publication. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality, including avoiding using participants' names and masking school names by using letters, such as Primary School A and B, to protect the identities of individuals and institutions. Researchers obtained approval to collect from the revolutionary government of Zanzibar via the State University of Zanzibar. Participants received clear information about the study's purpose and were assured of confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity.

Researchers ensured validity and reliability by employing triangulation, member checking, and inter-rater reliability during the coding process. These measures significantly enhanced the methodological rigour of the research. Triangulation involved cross-referencing interview and FGD data with insights gleaned from key national instruments, such as the Zanzibar Education Policy and the Zanzibar Policy for People with Disabilities. Furthermore, during the data analysis phase, researchers used field notes to compare observations from interviews and FGDs systematically. Researchers collaboratively addressed discrepancies in interpretation through discussions, aligning analyses by referring to the field notes to ensure consistency and reliability.

Researchers incorporated insights from national and international documents supporting inclusive education to strengthen the triangulation process. These documents included the Zanzibar Education Policy (RGoZ, 2006), Zanzibar Policy for People with Disabilities, Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), and the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (United Nations, 2016). These resources provided valuable perspectives that enriched our interpretation and analysis of the FGD and interview data.

Data Analysis

The researchers conducted a qualitative inductive thematic analysis of the interview and FGD data, using Braun and Clarke 's (2006) six-step guidelines: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) identifying themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Following Saldaña (2016) recommendations for extracting key themes, the researchers reviewed and compared their field notes and listened to the tape-recorded data multiple times to familiarise themselves with the material. Relevant sections from the recorded interviews and FGDs were transcribed, and the researchers coded the data using various Microsoft Word processing tools, including font colour, text highlighting, italics, bolding, and shading. By grouping similar codes, the researchers created categories and subcategories based on emerging patterns, and constantly reviewed and revised themes generated from these categories. For instance, codes such as "how to teach learners with intellectual impairment in mainstreamed classrooms", "some schools lack teachers equipped to instruct learners with intellectual impairment", "I don't recall any in-service training on teaching learners with intellectual impairment", and "teachers rely on lecture methods instead of teaching aids" fell under the category of "Pedagogical Practices". After reviewing categories with shared underlying meanings, the researchers identified the theme "Practice Barriers". The discussion section presents key findings and assertions derived from this analysis.

In the current study, the researchers ensured trustworthiness by addressing credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Credibility was strengthened by using direct quotes from respondents to maintain authenticity. Dependability ensured consistency through strict adherence to research procedures, preservation of transcriptions and notes for future verification, and the use of triangulation with interviews and FGDs. The researchers compared interview and FGD data with field notes recorded during and after fieldwork. Then, the researchers systematically shared, compared, and discussed key points noted in their notebooks. Conformability minimised bias by incorporating direct quotations, triangulation, and careful consideration of non-verbal communication and emotions to enhance objectivity. Researchers established transferability by comparing multiple data sources and providing descriptions, offering detailed insights into the achievements, barriers, and prospects of LWMII. Additionally, researchers organised a one-day feedback meeting with the study participants to validate the study findings. During this meeting, participants received a summary of the findings and recommendations.

Ethical Considerations

The current study obtained approval from the Second Vice President's Office in Zanzibar. The researchers ensured the confidentiality of the study by not disclosing the real names of respondents or their schools. The researchers coded respondents, such as IELS1 up to IELS2, for officers of the IELS Unit. TCIA is for officers from inclusive teachers' advisors, and JAH, JTI, JPI & JS1 up to JT6, JP7 & JS6 are for School A. KAH, KT1, KP1 & KS1 up to KT6, KP8 & KS6 are for School B. Additionally, the researchers provided consent forms to all respondents to confirm their participation.

Results

This study aimed to investigate the barriers faced by LWMII in Zanzibar's mainstream primary schools. Through a systematic analysis of data collected from semi-structured interviews and FGDs with teachers, parents, officers from the IELS Unit, and inclusive teacher advisors, three categories of barriers emerged. (1) Practice barriers, which include instructional and resource challenges; (2) Attitude barriers, which reflect negative perceptions and discriminatory behaviours; and (3) Policy barriers, which involve gaps in educational frameworks and implementation guidelines. These interconnected categories collectively impede the successful inclusion of LWMII in Zanzibar's primary education system.

Practice Barriers

Practice barriers were the most significant barriers hindering inclusion at the selected primary schools in Zanzibar. Through FGD and interviews with stakeholders, the study revealed that there was a shortage of skilled teachers, a lack of in-service training for teachers, a lack of use of learning and teaching materials, a large number of learners per class and the use of corporal punishment. One student furiously claimed, " I do not send my books to the teachers because I am not able to read and write since the teachers isolate me at the lesson while they are teaching". (JS3)

One teacher argued:

> The main barrier to inclusive education is how to teach learners with intellectual impairment in mainstream classrooms. We don't have the skills to teach and assess them. They need special additional skills to teach and assess them in mainstreaming classrooms. (KT4)

Another respondent argued that:

> I don't know the statistics of how many teachers are skilled in how to deal with learners with intellectual impairment, but you can find some schools not have any teacher who can teach learners with intellectual impairment within mainstream classrooms. (TCIA)

Furthermore, the data showed that a lack of in-service training contributed to the shortage of skilled teachers, particularly in teaching LWMII. One respondent claimed as follows:

> I don't remember getting in-service training. I have 20 years at this school. I got in-service training on how to teach some learners with additional educational needs, such as learners with vision impairment and physical disability, but I don't remember any in-service training about how to teach learners with intellectual impairment. (KT2)

Additionally, one participant noted that training was only provided during the initial launch of the inclusion program's pilot phase, which involved a small number of teachers. These trained educators were subsequently reassigned to different schools, and no further training was offered afterwards. One respondent claimed:

> In-service training based on how to teach learners with intellectual impairment within mainstream classrooms was given to only a few teachers during the pilot period. They were about nine (9) teachers out of 56 who got such in-service training, and most of them were later transferred to other schools, as the tendency of the Ministry of Education to transfer teachers from one school to another after a certain period of time. (JAH)

Furthermore, data showed that most teachers in inclusive classrooms were not using learning and teaching materials specifically for LWMII, due to a lack of knowledge. One respondent claimed:

> Frankly speaking, teachers do not use teaching aids; they use lecture methods as they did at university. Learners with intellectual impairment need more teaching aids to understand the lessons. These learners can learn better by seeing and doing. (IELS2)

Another interviewee said:

> Learners with intellectual impairment need interaction with their teachers, asking questions, holding discussions with their peers, but for our teachers, this does not happen, just the teacher stays in front of the classroom and teaches. (IELS2)

Consequently, some LWMII could not read and write because their teachers did not involve them in the lessons. One student claimed:

> Teachers do not teach me in such a way that I don't know how to read and write. If the teachers gave me classwork, I would not do it and not send the book to the teachers. (JS5)

Data shows that some teachers could not interact with their learners in the lessons because of large inclusive classes. One respondent claimed:

> We have large classes at our schools. We have about 200 learners per class. Therefore, teachers are not able to teach properly all learners and cannot involve all learners in the lesson, especially those learners with intellectual impairment. (TCIA)

In addition, some teachers said that it is impossible to teach LWMII with a high number of learners in the classroom. One respondent said:

> It is impossible to help learners with intellectual impairment in the mainstreaming classrooms of 97 learners per class. Learners with intellectual impairment need special techniques to enable them to understand the lesson within the mainstreaming classrooms. (KT4)

Attitude barriers

The data shows that a negative attitude exists against the LWMII at selected inclusive primary schools in Zanzibar. The data from the respondents shows that there is a negative attitude among teachers, which resulted in segregation, discrimination, and the use of corporal punishment against LWMII. The officer said:

> There are some teachers who have negative attitudes toward inclusion of learners with intellectual impairment. They don't believe these learners can learn alongside their peers and can achieve both social and academic achievement depending on their potential ability. (TCIA)

Some parents of the learners witnessed the negative attitudes of some teachers. One parent furiously claimed:

> Some teachers have negative attitudes toward our children. For example, one day my son said to his teacher why don't you give me homework? Teacher replayed "don't disturb me". This is very sad, but also it shows how some teachers have negative attitudes towards our children. (JP1)

Also, one student said:

> Teachers chase me away at the lesson if I come to school late, even if I givethem (teachers) reasons of being late. (KS4)

In addition, the study reveals that teachers' negative attitudes led to segregation and discrimination against LWMII at selected inclusive primary schools. Moreover, negative attitudes among learners led to bullying at schools. Some respondents argued that some learners without special educational needs neglected those LWMII, especially when teachers asked the questions in the class. One teacher claimed:

> Learners with intellectual impairment are being laughed at some times by their classmate in the classroom especially when teacher is asked them to answer some question. This situation made them to be very shy and sad. (JT6)

About the same point, one student claimed:

> My classmate laughing at me when teacher ask me to answer the question, so I fell very shy. Accidentally teacher do nothing to those student. (KS2)

Additionally, data shows that negative attitudes of teachers resulted in the use of corporal punishment on LWMII. One learner with moderate intellectual impairment furiously claimed:

> Teachers use corporal punishment to punish me innocently. He mixes me with others while I'm not involved. This is because other learners in the classroom made noises while I am silent. (JSI)

One parent adds:

> These children do not like corporal punishment. If you beat them, you become an enemy to them. One day one teacher here told me that "your child does not want to talk to me", I replayed that you beat my child. Yes, "she beats me". My daughter shouted. (KP1)

Policy Barriers

Stakeholder responses indicate that Zanzibar's educational policy does not clearly address the inclusiveness issues, especially for LWMII. This situation presents rigid curriculum standards, a teacher training gap, inflexible assessment tools, and a lack of accommodations for LWMII. Interviews with IELS officers, head teachers, and inclusive teacher advisors, and FGD with teachers revealed that it does not ensure equal and quality education for all learners at primary schools, especially for learners with moderate intellectual disabilities. The IELS officer said:

> Currently, Zanzibar education policy does not guide teachers on how learners with intellectual impairment are taught within mainstreaming classrooms. (IELS2)

The above statement corresponds with a teacher claiming that:

> I just teach the way I know because I have not been trained on how to teach learners with intellectual impairment alongside with their peers within the classroom. I usually teach normally and most of time I see them stayed quit even I to talk to them. So, I leave them because I don't know how to do. (JT4)

The absence of an inclusive education policy creates an inconducive environment for schoolteachers on how to teach and assess LWMII. One respondent claimed:

> Frankly, because of education policy does not address the issues of inclusivity, yet there is no curriculum which guides teachers on how to teach and assess learners with intellectual impairment within the mainstreaming schools. (KT2)

Another respondent emphasized by said:

> The educational policy does not specify how to assess learners with intellectual impairment. As a result, each teacher uses their own method of assessment and sometimes they are assessed the same way regular learners, which is mistake because, in some cases they cannot be assessed using standard exams. (JT1)

Moreover, data shows that policy barriers bring rigid curriculum standards that have negative impacts on LWMII, especially in inclusive settings, whereby flexibility is crucial.

One respondent claimed:

> The curriculum is too fixed.it does not give us room to slow down or use different methods for children who need more time. We are expected to cover too much content in short time, and learner with intellectual impairment often get left behind. (JT3)

In the same point another respondent said:

> There is pressure to teach to the tests and exams not to the child. That makes it hard to adopt lessons for those who learn differently especially learners with intellectual impairment. I wish we had more flexibility in planning so we could include every child meaningfully or completely but curriculum does not support that it is just insists to teach the tests or exams. (KT4)

Discussion

Our investigation identified three distinct yet interconnected categories of barriers: practical barriers, attitude barriers, and policy barriers that prevented the inclusion of LWMII in Zanzibar mainstreaming classrooms. These barriers impact everything from how schools operate to classroom culture and social acceptance.

Findings indicated that practice barriers had common hindrances to inclusive education, including a shortage of skilled teachers, lack of in-service training for teachers, lack of use of learning and teaching materials, large number of learners per class, and use of corporal punishment. These obstacles led to low-quality and unequal provision of education to LWMII in mainstream classrooms. Cosman (2018) and Salum (2021) supported these ideas by arguing that teachers who are untrained in inclusive education often struggle to adopt teaching methods for LWMII and have difficulty implementing individualized instruction and effective behavior support, which are essential for LWMII. Schalock et al. (2010) assert that

children with moderate intellectual impairment need extraordinary support to participate in activities that involve typical human functioning. Large classes can exacerbate inclusive education by limiting the amount of individual attention each student receives. When teachers are responsible for many learners, they often cannot provide the one-on-one support that learners with LWMII need to understand and engage with the material (Hassanein, 2016). These situations can lead learners to feeling left behind or isolated in the learning process, as teachers may prioritize the needs of more independent learners.

Moreover, the study found that negative attitudes are the most pervasive challenges to inclusive education for LWMII in Zanzibar primary schools. Additional studies support this by showing how negative attitudes from teachers, peers, and family members can lead to discrimination, isolation, and low expectations, impacting the learners' confidence and performance (Sharma et al., 2012). Teachers, for example, may lack understanding or experience in working with LWMII, leading them to believe that these learners are less capable of achieving academic success (Miles & Singal, 2010). Additionally, cultural beliefs can also perpetuate negative attitudes. Some community members view it as a misfortune or curse, leading to stigma and social exclusion. This stigma may be internalized by LWMII, negatively affecting their self-esteem and motivation (Jansen-Van, 2020). This cultural perception can discourage parents from enrolling their children in schools due to fears of discrimination or ostracism (Alsolami & Vaughan, 2023) depicted that teachers with negative perceptions might assume that LWMII cannot achieve at the same level as their peers, leading to less challenging academic tasks and limited engagement in classroom activities. This attitude often results in a less supportive learning environment, where LWMII feel marginalized or undervalued. Negative attitudes are further reinforced by a lack of institutional support, such as inadequate resources and large class sizes, which make inclusive teaching more demanding. Teachers overwhelmed by these challenges may feel resentful or unwilling to adapt their practices, which can affect learners' self-esteem and academic performance. Research suggests that improving teachers' training and fostering a positive school culture toward inclusivity can help mitigate negative attitudes and improve student outcomes (Taub & Foster, 2017).

Furthermore, the study identified policy barriers in Zanzibar's education policy, which did not address the issue of inclusivity in education by overlooking the educational needs of LWMII. These include a lack of assessment accommodations for LWMII, which results in lower test scores that do not reflect actual ability and missed opportunities for appropriate academic support or enrichment. Additionally, the study found the absence of individualized plans (IEPs). IEPs are an essential tool in identifying, planning for, and supporting the unique learning needs of LWMII. Therefore, teachers lack formal guidance on how to adopt curriculum and teaching strategies, learners receive generic instruction that cannot address their specific strengths and challenges, and learning goals are not tailored to individual needs, leading to minimal academic progress. Some studies argued that many educational systems still lack robust, well-defined educational policies that support the full inclusion of LWMII. Without specific policies advocating for their needs, these learners can face marginalization and reduced access to the general system of education settings (Forlin, 2010). The ideas are also supported by UNESCO (2020), which said that many countries have overarching inclusive education policies, but have failed to address the unique educational needs of LWMII. Therefore, educators struggle to implement effective strategies to help LWMII. Additionally, Mpofu and Shumba (2012) found that strict education policies result in an irrelevant education curriculum for LWMII, as they limit learners' access to meaningful learning opportunities in addition to making them miss out on critical opportunities to develop essential skills for independent living and social inclusion.

Finally, researchers observed that despite some efforts made by the government related to inclusive education in Zanzibar, cultural beliefs and negative stakeholder attitudes remain a significant barrier to inclusive education for learners with disabilities. An interview of IELS reports that there is a tendency for some parents to live with the knowledge that their children with disabilities are an embarrassment to their families, especially to the LWMII. Teachers report that disability acceptance remains limited in Zanzibar, where disabilities are often viewed as curses. When a child is born with disabilities, mothers typically face blame, are sometimes accused of conflicts with elders, and are punished. As Kapinga and Hyera (2015) noted, many Zanzibari communities continue to interpret disabilities through traditional beliefs, attributing them to witchcraft, curses, or ancestral punishment. These perspectives generate stigma, fear, and shame, leading families to conceal children with disabilities or avoid school enrollment. This exclusion denies learners their fundamental rights to education and social integration. These cultural beliefs significantly impede inclusive education by perpetuating discrimination that violates disabled learners' basic educational rights. While Zanzibar has progressed toward Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), significant obstacles to inclusive education threaten its achievement, particularly for LWMII. Research reveals that harmful cultural beliefs, policy inadequacies, insufficient teacher training, and negative attitudes toward intellectu-

ally impaired learners undermine inclusive education efforts. Achieving SDG 4 in Zanzibar requires more than integrated classrooms. It necessitates transforming societal attitudes, enhancing teacher preparation and training, implementing comprehensive inclusive education policies, and improving school infrastructure. Without addressing these persistent barriers, inclusive and equitable education will remain unattainable by 2030 for many primary school learners, especially those with moderate intellectual impairment. These findings have significant implications for both educational practice and future research directions in the Zanzibar context.

Implications for Further Research

The current study revealed three main barriers preventing the inclusion of LWMII at selected primary schools in Zanzibar. The findings have important implications for future research on improving inclusive education for learners with disabilities, especially LWMII. The Revolutionary government of Zanzibar began implementing inclusive education in 2004; however, barriers that affect many LWMII persist. Therefore, the study allows other researchers to discuss the effectiveness of inclusive education in Zanzibar education by suggesting strategies to overcome those barriers. We recommended that the Zanzibar government establish more special units at all primary schools. Creating an inclusivity education policy and lastly providing in-service training to all teachers on how to teach LWMII alongside their peers.

Limitations

Researchers encountered communication barriers during data collection with some participants, specifically LWMII. Some learners have difficulties in understanding questions, expressing themselves clearly or engaging in FGD and interviews. To address this, researchers used simple and clear language, provided more time to think and respond, avoiding pressure to answer quickly, and collaborated with special education teachers who understand LWMII. Another limitation was that the study did not capture the full range of experiences across all special units, as it focused only on only two units. The participant group exhibited a gender imbalance, with 34 females and only 10 males. Furthermore, the study lacked observational data, relying solely on FGDs and face-to-face interviews, whereas observation could have provided more in-depth insights.

Conclusion

The data revealed that practice and attitude barriers are the primary barriers, as teachers' instructional approaches remain largely less inclusive, limiting effective support for LWMII. Zanzibar's education reforms emphasize inclusive education, making it crucial to enhance support for LWMII. These learners require specialized teaching approaches, skilled educators, and adequate learning materials to thrive. However, many struggle to complete primary education due to schools lacking the capacity to meet their needs, leading to high dropout rates. To address this, the government should prioritize frequent in-service training for all teachers, equipping them with the skills to teach learners with disabilities effectively. Special units play a vital role in preparing LWMII for mainstream classrooms, yet the present study has shown that Zanzibar has only nine special units, primarily in urban areas. Expanding these units across more schools with qualified teachers would improve accessibility and inclusion. Additionally, school administrators must foster an inclusive school culture by implementing policies that promote diversity, organizing awareness workshops, and engaging parents to reduce stigma. Teachers should adopt flexible assessment methods, such as oral tests, portfolios, and performance tasks, to accommodate diverse learning needs. Lesson plans should incorporate visual aids, hands-on activities, simplified language, and repetition to enhance comprehension. By integrating these reforms, Zanzibar can create a more inclusive education system that empowers LWMII and ensures their successful integration into mainstream classrooms.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, ASB; methodology, ASB; software, SJ; validation, ASB and SJ; formal analysis, ASB; investigation, ASB; resources, ASB; data curation, SJ; writing—original draft preparation, ASB; writing—review and editing, ASB; visualization, SJ; supervision, SJ; project administration, SJ; funding acquisition, ASB. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Availability of Data and Materials

Not Applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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