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Beginning to teach inclusively: An analysis of newly-qualified teacher pedagogy in lower primary classes in Tanzania

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A study of 6 African countries found Tanzanian primary teachers were most inclusive.
- Newly-qualified teachers saw various explanations for their learners' difficulties.
- Teachers had several strategies to help all children learn.
- Lack of teaching materials and little relevant teacher education limit practice.
- Current practice offers hope to develop ways of educating more disabled children.

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive pedagogies to support children with disabilities in low-income countries have been neglected, and viewed as ‘specialised’ or optional within teacher education. In contrast, this paper presents details of practices of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in Tanzania that aim to help all learners to learn even in poorly-resourced schools. It argues that NQTs' positive attitudes and responsibility towards their students can be located in Tanzania's history and their early professional experiences, resulting in an interactionist pedagogy that normalises ‘inclusive’ practices. ‘Learning difficulties’ are relocated from a medical model of disability to a concern with improving teaching and learning for all.

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1. Introduction

In the push to achieve universal access to education around the world equity is held to be central and yet the Education For All Global Monitoring Report highlights disability as ‘one of the most neglected disadvantages’ that children face (UNESCO, 2014a, 2014b, p.3[1]). Including disabled children in education is a significant challenge internationally but one which an increasing number of countries is recognising. For example, by March 2015, 154 countries had ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, thereby committing themselves in Article 24 to ensuring that ‘Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live’ (United Nations, 2006).

Data on how many disabled children there are is, however, generally weak (Croft, 2013), although the World Disability Report estimates prevalence rates among under-fourteens of 5.2% worldwide and 6.4% in Africa (WHO/World Bank, 2011). The Education for All Global Monitoring Report notes that information on how and how much disabled children learn in school is also extremely scarce

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[1] The UNESCO Global Monitoring Report assesses progress towards the inclusion of all children across the world in education. In particular it has monitored progress towards the six education goals for 2015, set at the World Education Forum in 2000 by participants from 164 countries.

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(UNESCO, 2014a, 2014b); the scant information that exists suggests that many disabled children either never attend school or drop-out of school early (Hunt, 2008). The Global Monitoring Report concludes that teachers need support to 'end the learning crisis' for disabled children and others who are disadvantaged in schooling systems. Teachers' training should therefore prepare them to support learners from diverse backgrounds using 'a wide array of strategies' (UNESCO, 2014a, 2014b, p. 239) to help them develop inclusive pedagogy. This paper reports on research with primary school teachers in Tanzania to explore what inclusive pedagogy means to them and how they practice it. It aims to contribute to the debate on how inclusive education can be realized, particularly for disabled children in the many low and middle-income countries where economic resources for education are limited and large numbers of school-age disabled children appear to be out-of-school.

In the social model of disability, disability is viewed as the disadvantage that comes from society's response, or lack of response, to a person's impairment. In contrast, in the medical model of disability, the 'problem' is located within an individual and caused by that person's impairment (Albert, 2004). In other words, disability is defined not as the direct effects of having a visual impairment but rather the additional discrimination that results if, for example, teachers have inappropriately low expectations of a visually-impaired child's ability to learn. More recent debates have defined disability as co-constructed by impairment and context, i.e. as an interaction between disabled people[2] and their ability to function in a particular environment (WHO, 2002). So, while a degree of visual impairment that can be corrected by glasses might not be considered a disability for a schoolchild growing up with access to well-resourced health and education systems, it could constitute disability for a child in a low-income country with no access to suitable glasses. Interactionist perspectives put relatively more emphasis on the direct effects of impairment than is found in most interpretations of the social model and also foreground the diverse and fluctuating nature of disabled people's experiences (Ghai, 2002; Lang, 2007; Shakespeare, 2009). Both the social and the interactionist model of disability, however, leave space for society to counter the severe economic and other disadvantages often associated with impairment, for example, through actively including disabled children in education (Morley & Croft, 2011).

Although action is needed at all levels to create a more inclusive education system, what happens once children have reached classrooms is crucial, and has been neglected until recently (Alexander, 2008; Croft, 2010; Lavia, 2007; Miles & Singal, 2010). For example, a rigorous literature review of what effective pedagogy looks like in low-income countries found that only 27 out of 489 studies included in the broad overview included a specific focus on disability, with only two studies assessed as of sufficiently high quality for inclusion in the in-depth review, again indicating a neglected area both in practice and in research (Westbrook et al., 2013). Writing about Zambia, Chanda (2008) found that negative attitudes towards disabled children and a lack of sensitisation to their needs meant that such students were doubly disadvantaged within classes where there was reliance on whole class and rote-learning together with the backwash effect of pass or fail examinations which controlled access to the next level of schooling (see also Lynch et al., 2011). Similarly, Singal found that teachers from India who did not believe that disabled students should be integrated into mainstream schools created a learning environment in which 'the [disabled] child was a part of the classroom, but stood apart in many ways' (2008, p.1525). Teachers' lack of training or knowledge to deal with heterogeneous groups apart from repetition of material was a further barrier (Adeyemi, 2009; Akyeampong, Pryor, Lussier, & Westbrook, 2012). Conversely, Arbeiter and Hartley (2002) study from Uganda found that positive attitudes in the whole school towards working with disabled students were more important in changing practices than infrastructure, resources, or specialized teaching strategies. Miles (2009) also found it possible to build on teachers' existing knowledge to promote inclusion in Zambian schools. Overall, findings from the in-depth review of 54 of the studies (within the above rigorous literature review) reiterated that when teachers held positive attitudes towards their students in general their overarching teaching strategies became inclusive, such as:

- Giving feedback, paying inclusive and sustained attention to students
- Creating a safe classroom environment
- Drawing on students' backgrounds and experiences

Integral to this inclusivity was the interactive and communicative aim of these strategies, focusing on connecting with all students. The specific practices that teachers then used such as group and pair work, questioning or using teaching and learning materials were more effective because they were embedded within these fundamentally inclusive strategies. The significant finding was therefore not concerned with what practices are effective but *how* and *why* teachers used individual practices, echoing Florian and Black-Hawkins' 2011 research in Scotland whereby what is important is not choice of practice or who it was directed towards, but how teachers used particular practices so that they were relevant for every student. Indeed, the review of the 54 studies suggests that when disability is seen as 'something other', pedagogies that do recognize such student diversity become themselves marginalized outside the mainstream notion of equity and inclusion expressed in the Education for All agenda (where gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status are more usually emphasized). If such 'specialized' pedagogy is additionally seen as difficult to attain rather than being normalized and taking place daily in ordinary, if crowded, classrooms in low income countries, then inclusive pedagogies are rarely researched and rarely included in initial teacher education. Instead, where the teaching of disabled children is taught to student teachers, this is often in separate modules (Croft, 2006; Dart, 2006). If, however, the pedagogy that includes disabled children is largely the pedagogy that helps all children learn (Croft, 2010; 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), as we are arguing in this case study on Tanzania, then policymakers need to look beyond the idea that all that are needed are 'special teachers for special children' (Lewis & Norwich, 2005).[3] There are many arguments in support of the education of disabled children alongside their non-disabled peers for as much as their schooling as

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[2] This paper uses the terms 'disabled children', 'disabled people' etc. as these are used by the UK Disabled People's Council which represents large numbers of disabled people in the country in which it is written. In other contexts 'people with disabilities' is the preferred term, emphasizing that people with impairments are 'people first'.

[3] See Croft, 2013 for a discussion of the extent to which limited specialized pedagogy might be helpful for some groups of children, for example for those with sensory impairments, alongside more general pedagogy that recognizes their individual strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, and their common needs as children like any others. This does not imply however that a special school is the only way of giving children access to specialist teacher knowledge. Specialist teaching has been given after-school and during vacations, by attending a special school for a limited period during a school career, in visits from a peripatetic support teacher, or by attendance at a support unit within a mainstream school.

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