

Myths and Inclusive Education of Children with Disabilities in Universities of Uganda

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ABSTRACT

The current study was carried out in five universities of Uganda to assess the influence of myths on the inclusive education of children with disabilities in universities of Uganda. The quantitative data were collected from 95 lecturers, while qualitative data was collected from ten university students. The study found out that although the government has put in place several mechanisms to promote the education of disabled children, and although the government, civic leaders, religious leaders and non government organisations have done much to educate parents that disabled children are as important as those who are not disabled and should therefore be taken to school, many parents still hold negative stereotypes about children with disabilities. Their inclusive education is poor as regards enrolment in universities, and their interaction with other students is limited. However, their performance in academics is almost the same as that of the other normal students. The study un-covered that although universities are competing for students, many of them do not have conducive environment for students with disabilities. Secondly, the myths of the people in Uganda point to lack of appreciating children with disabilities as they are seen as a punishment and a curse from God, the ancestors and witchcraft. Therefore, myths have a significant influence on the poor inclusive education of children with disabilities in the universities of Uganda. Therefore, there is need for the government, religious leaders, teachers and civic leaders to educate the masses more on the value of educating children with disabilities up to university level since these children are useful to the country and to their families just as those without disabilities are.

Key words: Myths; Inclusive education; Children with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education aims to integrate children of all abilities and backgrounds—regardless of physical or mental disabilities, gender, race, or any other differences—into the same educational environment. This approach ensures that all students learn together in the same schools, receiving equitable treatment. Historically, both formal and informal education systems have advocated for the inclusion of both typical and disabled children in educational settings. Although some disabled children were historically placed in separate special schools, there has been a push towards integrating them into general education environments.

Disability encompasses conditions that hinder a person's ability to perform certain activities or access opportunities equitably within society. Disabilities can be cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, sensory, or a combination of these. For the purposes of this study, disabilities refer to visible physical and mental impairments, such as mobility issues, blindness, and albinism. Disabilities are often categorized into three dimensions: impairment, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.

The objective of educating children with disabilities parallels that of educating all children: to help them achieve their full potential and lead productive, engaged lives within their communities. Children with disabilities frequently need specialized support and services to succeed academically. Unfortunately, in many countries, this support often comes in the form of segregated classrooms or schools, which limits their

interaction with non-disabled peers and restricts their access to the general curriculum. Moving towards inclusive education involves integrating all students into general education settings and providing necessary supports—such as assistive devices, teacher aides, and adapted curricula—to ensure effective participation. This transition demands significant effort, political commitment, and recognition of the broad benefits of inclusive education for all students.

Problem Statement

Uganda, as a signatory to international agreements like the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), is committed to inclusive education for learners with special needs. These agreements affirm the right of all children, including those requiring educational adjustments, to attend school in their communities, receive individualized and child-centered education, and access quality education that is meaningful for everyone.

Despite these commitments, many children with disabilities face barriers to education. For instance, children who use wheelchairs may struggle with inadequate transport and inaccessible classrooms, while those with physical disabilities often lack adapted facilities, such as accessible toilets. Approximately 50% of children with disabilities in low and middle-income countries remain out of school, with significant disparities between genders: only 42% of girls with disabilities complete primary education, compared to 51% of boys (UNICEF). Children with various disabilities are 2.5 times more likely to be excluded from school altogether (UNESCO).

In line with Uganda's Constitution (1995) and legislative frameworks like The Persons with Disabilities Act (2006) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008), the Ministry of Education & Sports has established a department dedicated to special needs and inclusive education. This approach advocates for flexible, learner-centered modifications in curricula, teaching methods, resources, communication, and the learning environment to accommodate individual needs. It aims to remove barriers to participation, fostering opportunities for all children to interact, play, learn, and develop according to their abilities.

Despite the adoption of inclusive education policies by many universities, challenges persist, particularly due to entrenched myths and misconceptions about disabilities. This study explores how these myths impact the education of children with disabilities in Ugandan universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 21st century, there is a global focus on the education of children with disabilities, supported by various international policies and legal frameworks that advocate for inclusive education. Key examples include:

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Adopted in 1989, Article 23 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) specifically addresses the rights of children with disabilities, emphasizing that they should have access to education that supports their full social integration and individual development (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). The Committee on the Rights of the Child further clarified that the aim should be inclusive education rather than segregated systems (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2007).

World Declaration on Education for All

Adopted in 1990 with the backing of UNESCO, UNICEF, and the UN Development Program, this declaration marked a significant step towards global support for inclusive education. Endorsed by 155 countries, it calls for universal primary education and emphasizes the need to provide educational access to all children, including those with disabilities (UNESCO, 1990).

Salamanca Framework for Action

Adopted in 1994 at the World Conference on Special Needs Education, the Salamanca Framework for Action

highlights the importance of integrating children with disabilities into the general education system. It urges governments and the international community to support inclusive education as the most effective approach for educating children with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994).

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Adopted in 2006, the CRPD offers a comprehensive international legal framework for the educational rights of children with disabilities. It requires ratifying countries to ensure inclusive education at all levels, guaranteeing that children with disabilities receive free primary and secondary education without discrimination. The CRPD also specifies requirements such as ensuring school accessibility, providing reasonable accommodations, addressing diverse needs, and offering alternative learning methods as necessary (UN Division for Social Policy and Development: Disability, 2006). The Committee on the CRPD provided further guidance in 2015 through General Comments on the right to inclusive education, detailing the systems and frameworks that should be implemented based on the CRPD.

African Myths and the Education of Disabled Children

Traditional African beliefs have historically influenced attitudes toward disability. Common myths include the notions that disabilities are caused by evil spirits, curses, or witchcraft, and that they can be cured by witchdoctors. These beliefs have led to various negative attitudes, such as the misconception that disabilities are contagious or that they bring bad luck. In some regions, people with albinism were believed to bring wealth to their families but were often hidden away. In the past, albinos were sometimes sacrificed in hopes of gaining wealth. These myths resulted in poor treatment and limited education for children with disabilities, who were often only taught basic hygiene and excluded from more comprehensive education.

With the introduction of Western education by missionaries in Uganda, there was an attempt to change these attitudes, but resistance remained. Some parents and communities continued to view children with disabilities as being connected to ancestral spirits, leading to their exclusion from marriage and formal education. Despite these challenges, myths and attitudes surrounding inclusive education for disabled children have been evolving, but issues persist.

(a) The Impact of Inclusive Education on Students Without Disabilities

According to Hayes and Bulat (2017), extensive research in the U.S. and other affluent countries has shown that inclusive education benefits both students with and without disabilities. Inclusive classrooms foster understanding of diversity and acceptance among all students. Evidence suggests that students, regardless of disability status, achieve better academic results in inclusive settings compared to those in non-inclusive environments. For instance, research has indicated that students without disabilities make notable progress in reading and math when they are educated alongside students with disabilities (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013). A meta-analysis of existing studies found that 81% of outcomes showed either positive or neutral effects on students without disabilities when included in general education classrooms (Kalambouka, Farrell, & Dyson, 2007). This improvement is likely due to the benefits of differentiated learning strategies and accommodations—such as visual aids, manipulatives, and comprehension techniques—that are typical in inclusive classrooms.

(b) The Cost-Effectiveness of Inclusive Education Compared to Special Education Settings

Inclusive education not only supports students with disabilities most effectively but is also more cost-efficient. Over 100 studies have demonstrated that creating separate educational systems—one for the general population and another for students with disabilities—is more expensive and less sustainable than inclusive models (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). Segregated systems incur extra costs related to transportation, infrastructure, and often residential facilities. For instance, a 1999 OECD report estimated that the costs of segregated systems were 7 to 9 times higher than those of inclusive systems (Labon, 1999). Moreover, the financial burden of maintaining segregated schools, which denies students with disabilities access to inclusive education, ultimately represents a significant economic liability.

An international study comparing the costs of exclusion to the benefits of inclusion revealed that exclusion leads to lower employment opportunities and potential earnings, negatively impacting individuals with disabilities, their families, and national economic growth. This study also found that increased education for students with disabilities results in lower crime rates, improved health and family planning, and greater civic engagement (Banks & Polack, 2014). Additionally, the World Bank reported that investing in the education of students with disabilities often yields returns two to three times higher than investing in the education of students without disabilities (Patrinos, 2015). While there are initial expenses in establishing an inclusive education system, the ongoing costs for maintaining such a system are less than those for sustaining separate educational systems for students with disabilities.

(c) Segregated Schools and Classrooms Are More Effective Than Inclusive Schools and Classrooms for Educating Students with Disabilities

No studies conducted since the 1970s have shown students with disabilities who are educated in separate settings (Falvey, 2004) perform better than students in inclusive settings. In fact, the amount of time a student with a disability spends in the general education classroom is positively correlated with higher test scores in math and reading, less disruptive behavior, and increased future employment opportunities. Indeed, this positive correlation has been found in all students with disabilities, regardless of the type of disability or its severity (Wagner et al., 2006). Inclusive education may also have other benefits, including increased community awareness and acceptance. For example, a 14-nation UNESCO study showed that in countries where there were laws requiring inclusion, teachers expressed a more favorable view of inclusion (Bowman, 1986).

Conversely, segregated classrooms or schools perpetuate the misconception that individuals with disabilities are fundamentally different from their nondisabled peers and need to be isolated or separated. This approach can negatively impact both the classroom climate and students' attitudes about diversity and acceptance (Fisher, Sax, Rodifer, & Pumpian, 1999).

As cited in Senzokuhle Doreen Setume (2016), different studies have been carried out in specific African societies to explore cultural explanations of disabilities. The cultural explanations are embedded in the myths that societies hold. These myths then create attitudes that prevail towards people with disabilities. For instance, Adams (1949) carried out a study in the then Northern Rhodesia with a sample of 43 medical students. He explored the attitudes the students and their societies presented on people living with disabilities. The findings of the study revealed that the medical students, though equipped with formal western education, held very strong beliefs about disabilities since 34% of them believed that traditional doctors could prevent diseases and since 33% were of the opinion that traditional medical procedures were superior to scientific methods (Walker & Charles, 1986). Other studies on disabilities (Haihambo & Lightfoot, 2010; Baker et al., 2010) carried very similar connotations on myths on disability. For instance, Haihambo and Lightfoot (2010) carried out a phenomenological study in Namibia using 161 in-depth interviews (including parents of children with disabilities). The study revealed a number of myths that are currently held concerning people with disabilities. For instance, some parents explained the disabilities of their children in myths. For example, when one parent was explaining to her daughter why she was born with albinism, she said she had ...attended a party while pregnant and saw a mother with a baby precariously strapped to her back in a blanket. Fearing the baby was about to fall she went forward to help tighten the blanket she then saw to her fright that the baby had albinism... as a result of this encounter she had given birth to a child with the same condition (Baker et al., 2010). This narrative arises from the myth that if a pregnant woman sees a child with albinism, she will also give birth to a child with the same condition. This therefore reflects that the myths concerning disability are as much a reality today as they were in the past. There is need to understand these myths in order to be able to teach or counsel individuals that are currently faced with disabilities in schools, counseling centers and churches. Baker and colleagues (2010) carried out a study about the myths surrounding people with albinism in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The study found that a number of myths are currently held about people living with albinism. These myths make people with albinism vulnerable to stigmatization as they observed that '... the practical problem encountered by people with albinism is the stigmatization and ostracism they face as a result of the web of myths surrounding the condition' (Baker et al., 2010). For other studies on culture and disability, see Braathen & Ingstaad, 2006. Analysis of literature of the said period covers a number of myths

about disabilities, despite the many years of the presence of Christianity and other world religions, as well as formal education in Africa south of the Sahara. The following is a list of some of the myths that surround different types of disabilities, and they are adopted from: Braathen and Ingstaad 2006; Baker et al., 2010; and Haihambo & Lightfoot, 2010. These aspects of African culture mostly reflect the negative views in relation to cause of a disability.

African myths explain the cause of a disability in ways that may contribute to the low uptake of the provisions that are made for people with disabilities at a policy level. They also stigmatize, especially the mother of a child with a disability eg The mother slept with multiple partners during her pregnancy. The family tried to get rich by using traditional doctors, but failed to carry out the traditional doctors’ instructions to the letter. If twins of the same sex are born to the same mother, one has to be killed; otherwise, misfortune such as disability or death will befall the family. A jealous rival who wanted the husband of the (expectant) mother bewitched the family. The child was bewitched while in the womb. If a child with albinism is born, s/he has to be killed and offered to the ancestors to remove the curse. Therefore, it is important that these myths are studied in order to deconstruct the stereotypes. In the process, this will reduce the stigma that is attached to both individuals with disabilities and their parents. Once the blame is taken away from individuals, there is likelihood that the stigma will be reduced. This will in turn increase the chance of parents taking their children with disabilities to schools and to counseling centers. Over and above this, the likelihood of acceptance and respect to persons with disabilities will ensue. Some myths influence the kind of relationships that the society develops in relation to people with disabilities. Sleeping with Albinos cures AIDS—such a myth has led to many women with the condition being raped. This myth is an extension of the myth that holds that having sex with a virgin can cleanse men of some ailments. This myth explains the occurrence of incest and the raping of children and babies by older men in some African communities. Body parts of persons with albinism make potent charms that can make people rich and successful (Thuku, 2011). This has resulted in the killing and mutilation of this group of people in different parts of Africa. Myths on disability need to form part of any curriculum and counseling programme that is concerned about people with disabilities. This is important as it will empower all the stakeholders interested in the rights of people with disabilities. The different myths will be understood with the aim of explaining those that disadvantage people with disabilities, and dispelling those that perpetuate stereotypes concerning disability (as cited in Senzokuhle Doreen Setume, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross sectional and correlational survey design. The respondents were lecturers and students. The quantitative data were collected from 95 lecturers, while qualitative data was collected from ten university students. Two of these students were disabled while the eight were not.

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Findings

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the Education of disabled students in universities

Statement	Mean	Std
1.Their interaction with other students who have no disabilities		
University students with disabilities interact very well with other pupils who have no disabilities	2.1	0.22
Male University students with disabilities freely interact with female students who have no disabilities	1.9	0.38
University students with disabilities freely hold jokes with other students who have no disabilities	2.4	0.43

University students with disabilities are not insulted by other students who have no disabilities	2.5	0.33
University students with disabilities are not minimised by other students who have no disabilities	2.3	0.5
University students with disabilities do not sit separately in lecture rooms	2.3	0.8
Average mean	2.25	0.4
2.The way they perform compared to other students without disabilities	Mean	Std
University students with disabilities perform in academics the same as those without disabilities do	2.5	0.32
University students with disabilities require special attention as lecturers are teaching in class	2.6	0.11
University students with disabilities require lecturers to go very slow as they are teaching	2.6	0.27
Average mean	2.17	
Grand mean	2.21	

Source: Primary data, 2024.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the education of university students with disabilities in Uganda. Specifically, it addresses the disabled children’s interaction with other pupils who have no disabilities and the performance of the disabled children. Altogether, the education of these children is poor (mean 2.21). all the items were rated low by the respondents (the lecturers who teach these students). For example, the statement “university students with disabilities interact very well with other students who have no disabilities” received a mean of 2.1 which means that children with disabilities tend to find it difficult to interact with other students. They try but the interaction is minimal. Relatedly, Male students with disabilities freely interact with female students who have no disabilities was rated very low with a mean of 1.9 which implies that many girls do not want to associate themselves with disabled men. This is bad as it kills disabled men’s self-esteem.

As for their performance in academics, their lecturers indicated that it is not different from that of other students. The only issue of concern raised was that these students are very few in universities probably because their parents do not want to educate them, holding traditional beliefs that.

Myths on People with disabilities and their Inclusive education and the extent to which people of Uganda take them

Table 2 (a) Descriptive statistics of the Myths on Inclusive education and the extent to which people of Uganda take them

Myths related to children with disabilities	Mean
Many people in Uganda believe that disability is caused by witchcraft	2.78
Many people in Uganda believe that the concoctions made from the body parts of people with albinism make you rich	2.31
Many people in Uganda believe that people with disabilities are not recognised as fully human	2.29
Many people in Uganda believe that Touching a disabled person brings bad luck	2.53

Many people in Uganda believe that you can catch a disability by touching a person with a disability	2.79
Many people in Uganda believe that disability conditions can be cured by witchdoctors	2.81
Many people in Uganda believe that learning difficulties and mental health conditions can be caused by a curse or a wrong doing in the family or by witchcraft	3.56
Many people in Uganda believe that disability and other conditions like Epilepsy are caused by evil spirits	2.88
Average	2.75

Source: Primary data, 2024.

Table 2 (a) shows that there is high mythology surrounding children with disability in Uganda. For example Many people in Uganda believe that disability and other conditions like Epilepsy are caused by evil spirits (mean 2.88); Many people in Uganda believe that learning difficulties and mental health conditions can be caused by a curse or a wrong doing in the family or witchcraft (3.56); Many people in Uganda believe that disability conditions can be cured by witchdoctors (mean 2.81); Many people in Uganda believe that Touching a disabled person brings bad luck (mean 2.53) etc.

On the issue of myths, the oral informants stated that until recently, the people of Uganda strongly believed in witchcraft to the point that many families had family spirits. They thought would help them solve their problems. This was accompanied with myths. Therefore, many times disability was associated with witchcraft and the anger of family spirits which for instance the people of Central Uganda called Amayembe, Empewo Z'ekika, Lubaale, Ebitambo etc. With sensitisation of the masses today however, these myths are declining though they are not yet wiped out. The belief in witchcraft is deep-rooted in the people and many times people take disabled children to witchdoctors hoping to get a solution.

Table 2 (b): Influence of myths on inclusive education of children with disabilities in Universities of Uganda

		Myths	Inclusive education of children with disabilities
Myths	Pearson Correlation	1	.184**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.036
	N	95	95
Inclusive education of children with disabilities	Pearson Correlation	.184**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.047	
	N	95	95

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 (b) reveals that there is strong influence of myths on inclusive education of children with disabilities in Universities of Uganda (sig 0.036). this means that one of the causes of poor inclusive education of students with disabilities in universities are the issues rotating on the myths of the people. This is corroborated with qualitative data.

One respondent for example said, “ *There is a belief among our people that the ancestors can choose a person to serve them as their medium. This person can be disabled by the ancestors so that he or she can serve them without getting involved in other activities. This belief is dangerous as it causes some parents to hide their disabled children and refuse to take them to school arguing that the ancestors do not want these children to study*”

One male oral informant from the Department of Religious Studies reported that in that in his home area of Buruuli where the majority of people are Baruuli, some of them still hold traditional myths that having sex with a disabled girl increases a man’s luck. He said that this misleading myth has negative implications on the education of female children with disabilities. During the in-depth interviews with the respondents, the researcher was informed by this very lecturer that in his home area a certain man was imprisoned for having sex with his sister’s disabled female 20year old girl after a tip off from the concerned neighbours. He was caught red handed in the action in a nearby bush at about 8:00pm and after being arrested, he was asked why he did such a dangerous act. In response, he said, “ *I went to a witchdoctor to help me get riches. He asked me for sh.2,000,000 (million shillings) and i sold my land to get that money. After paying him, he told me that i have to sleep with any disabled girl for atleast ten times in a period of two months, that after doing that, i would get mysterious riches... i have sofar slept five times with this girl after giving her money and threatening her with death in case she tells anybody about it*”

This shows the negative role of myths in disabled children’s education.

Another respondent said, “*Due to the negative traditional myths existing in Uganda about children with disabilities, teaching practices are not sufficiently adapted to the needs of some children with disabilities. For example, teachers use traditional teaching techniques such as verbal repetition and ask students to copy written content from the board, without offering alternative options for children with visual or intellectual disabilities. Teaching materials like textbooks are often inadequate and inaccessible for students who may not be able to see well, for example. Teachers generally have limited or no training in teaching children with disabilities. For instance, they may not think to provide larger font formats placed on the desk directly in front of a student with a visual impairment, and may assume that a child is lazy or has learning difficulties when in fact he or she can’t read the board. This hinders these children’s education*”.

Another interviewee noted that many universities remain inaccessible to students using wheelchairs, for example. Some universities often lack toilets and sanitary facilities adapted to the needs of children with physical or vision impairments. Lecture rooms do not always have enough natural light, which is problematic for children with vision impairments. All this complicates the education of children with disabilities and its roots are in the traditional myths that these people are not all that useful, which is totally false.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study were that there is a significant influence of myths on inclusive education of children with disabilities in universities of Uganda. Disabled children are still perceived as being less valuable than their counterparts who do not have disabilities. This is a challenge not only in Uganda but also in other parts of Africa. Disabled people all over the world are confronted with a range of explanations for disability. These can have an impact on many aspects of their lives. In many African countries a range of beliefs and attitudes underpin these alternative explanations. They include assumptions, misconceptions, traditional or religious beliefs and beliefs about the natural and supernatural worlds. Traditional beliefs about the causes of disability remain prevalent across sub-Saharan Africa. One set of explanations is linked to traditional animism. This carries beliefs that disabilities are punishments for bad deeds, or the result of witchcraft. Christian fatalism holds that disability is God's will. Beliefs are sometimes based on the types of impairment and how or when the disability was acquired. Individuals or groups may hold beliefs that differ from those of wider society. And beliefs can vary across a region or within a country. Socio-economic issues can also affect attitudes towards disability. People with disabilities in rural areas may experience more harmful practices than in urban areas.

Studies about people with disabilities are a worldwide phenomenon (Baker, Lund, Nyathi, & Taylor, 2014). These studies underpin the importance of culture in understanding disability. It has been explained that

‘cultural understanding of disability is important because people are usually limited not by the impairment itself but more from the cultural interpretations of the disability’ (Haihambo & Lightfoot, 2010). Therefore, any meaningful intervention in favor of people with disabilities must take cognizance of the underlying beliefs and myths on disability. The beliefs systems are important because they inform the attitude towards disability. The same attitudes enlighten any policy that may be put in place. In order to implement policies, it is important that those individuals tasked with implementing such policies have attitudes that will facilitate such implementation. Otherwise, any educational and counseling intervention meant for the disabled will be rendered ‘irrelevant’ because they would fail to capture the ‘familiar’ to enable the uptake of new policies because ‘such myths and beliefs have impact on the implementation of disability policies’ (Haihambo & Lightfoot, 2010). That is, if a student has a disability, as a school counselor it will be helpful if you first try to understand how the student has always explained the disability or how he or she understands their ‘own’ condition. It is only from this standpoint that the school counselor can effectively communicate with the learner about their disability.

Conclusion

The study concludes that although the government has put in place several mechanisms to promote the education of disabled children, and although the government, civic leaders, religious leaders and non government organisations have done much to educate parents that disabled children are as important as those who are not disabled and should therefore be taken to school, many parents still hold negative stereotypes about children with special needs. Their inclusive education is poor as regards enrolment in school, their interaction with other pupils who are not disabled, as well as their performance in academics and non academic subjects. These learners score poorly in all these aspects. The study un-covered that the myths of the people in Uganda, point to lack of appreciating children with disabilities as they are seen as a punishment and a curse from God, the ancestors and witchcraft. Therefore, myths have a significant influence on the poor inclusive education of children with disabilities in universities.

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