

Academic and social support services for learners with disabilities in Tanzania secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

Academic and social support systems for inclusive education are of paramount importance in ensuring access to education opportunities for learners with disabilities. However, evidence shows that learners with disabilities continue to face challenges in receiving adequate social and academic support within the mainstream schools. This study examined academic and social support services for teaching and learning among learners with disabilities in the mainstream classrooms in secondary schools. The study employed a qualitative approach and systematic literature review. A narrative synthesis approach was used to synthesize findings from different studies. The study used publications from 2016 – 2026 and Bioecological theory to explain the influence of social ecological disabilities. Findings indicate that social support from peers, parents and school administrators contributes positively to learners' inclusion, self-esteem, and well-being. Findings showed further that academic support services to learners with disabilities such as the provision of special pedagogical support including differentiated instruction, the usage of different learning materials were effective and useful in teaching and learning among such learners. The study argues for strengthening academic and social support systems and improvement of inclusive learning environments. Therefore, study concludes that both academic support and social support are crucial for creating an inclusive learning environment for learners with disabilities. The government of Tanzania through the Ministry of Education Science and Technology should ensure that inclusive education in schools and monitoring of National Inclusive Education Strategy are implemented at all levels. Moreover, in –service training for professional development on inclusive education should be emphasized among regular teachers.

Keywords: Academic Support, Inclusive Education, Social Support, Secondary Schools, Tanzania

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusion in education is important in ensuring access, participation and learning outcomes among disadvantaged individuals including those with disabilities (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2016). Inclusion in education also emphasizes the creation of inclusive environment that meets and addresses various needs of all individuals (Senit et. al., 2022). Meaningful inclusion requires strong educational support that ensures relevant and effective learning outcomes and opportunities for all. Inclusion also requires social support that ensures emotional resilience, peer interaction and belonging. Moreover, the inclusion of children with disabilities is emphasized in all aspects of life including education, economic growth equality and health. However, despite all these initiatives children with disabilities experience high level of discrimination compared to their peers without disabilities. Children with disabilities experience exclusion and inequalities of opportunities including access to education (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations International Children Fund [UNICEF], 2022). Thus, educational and social support systems should aim to meet the needs and to promote success for all learners.

Learners with disabilities engage with school socially, emotionally and academically in different ways. However, such learners perform poorly academically and have low motivation in teaching and learning compared to learners without disabilities. Accordingly, such learners require support to enable them to function in the mainstream classrooms (Maphie, 2024). Therefore, the provision of special pedagogical support is considered important for learners with disabilities. Also, their engagement is most successful when they feel accepted by class mates and friends, because this makes them feel that their classmates care about them and are selflessly willing to help them in classroom related tasks and activities (Nilsen, 2020).

Social support services ensure the attainment of emotional well-being, behavioural adjustment and peer engagement. Hence, the provision of social support to children with disabilities is reflected in self-esteem, emotional, instrumental and informational support to students with disabilities. Also, social support for children with disabilities can be provided formally by professionals and informally by family members and friends. Social support provides

positive experiences and reduces negative reactions and stress among children with disabilities. Thus, such support helps learners with disabilities to participate in teaching and learning (Lu et. al., 2021; Dickinson et. al., 2023).

The Incheon Declaration of Education 2030 and Framework for Action focused on the implementation of sustainable Development goal 4 which targeted to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Thus, the 2030 Agenda goals and strategies focus also on marginalized people seeking an increase of inclusiveness (UNESCO, 2016; UN 2006). Likewise, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasizes the inclusion of persons with disabilities (UN, 2006). However, recent data show that persons with disabilities face discrimination at 28 per cent compared to the 17 per cent faced by persons without disabilities. Moreover, inequalities continued to limit human potentials and persons with disabilities to remain underserved in various sectors including education (UN, 2025).

The Government of Tanzania promotes and guides the provision of quality education and ensures access to education to all children in the disadvantaged groups including learners with disabilities (URT, 1977; 2014; 2022). Also, the Government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009 and Persons with Disability Act, 2010 which aimed to provide rights to health care, social support, accessibility, rehabilitation, education, communication and employment to young people with disability (UNICEF, 2021). Moreover, the National Strategy for Inclusive Education provides guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education in schools which targeted learners with disabilities. In addition, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology provided an In - School Screening and Identification guidelines manual that targeted to help teachers and other staff to evaluate students and to guide the development of individualized Education plans (URT, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). Likewise, the Inclusive Education Policy of 2019 emphasized the development of Education Support and Resources Assessment Centres (ESRAC's). These centres aimed to improve early assessment and identification of children with special needs (URT, 2022). Hence, there is commitment in ensuring that all learners at all levels of education are supported in the teaching and learning process.

Tanzania population living with disability accounts for 2.6 per cent of the total population. Also, 1.3 and 1.4 per cent of male and female students respectively of 16,120 students, who were enrolled in secondary school in 2022, had disability. This showed that the percentage of students with disabilities is slightly higher among female students (NBS & OCGS, 2022). Recent empirical evidence has shown that among the challenges encountered by learners with disabilities in schools include environmental and infrastructure, the shortage of assistive devices, inadequate teacher training in special education and attitudinal and social changes (Losioki & Ngowoko, 2024; Nyimbi & Kajiru, 2024; Braun, 2022). Also, studies emphasized the importance of social support services and highlighted gaps in the provision of social support services in Tanzania (Swai et al., 2024; Maphie, 2024). However, no systematic review has addressed academic support and social support services for learners with disabilities in secondary schools to inform policy and practice. The current study examined academic and social support provided to learners with disabilities in secondary schools. The disabilities that were mainly focused in this study included physical disability, developmental disability, hearing and visual impairment and learning disabilities. The study is significant as it informs policies that targeted to address inequalities in education. The study also sought to promote and ensure social inclusion through strengthening the provision of social support among learners with disabilities. The study findings will therefore help education planers and practitioners to make informed decisions in strengthening academic and social support systems and improve inclusive learning environments.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Inclusive education aims to ensure that learners with disabilities have equal access to opportunities including social and academic participation. This study focused on academic and social support provided to learners with disabilities in secondary schools. Even though the study examined evidence from different countries greater focus is on studies conducted in Tanzania and other African countries to ensure that the context is relevant to Tanzania education and school settings. Studies involved in the review were published between 2016 and 2026. The review excluded studies based mainly on context, population, time, and thematic area.

Despite the existence of policies on the promotion of inclusive education, evidence from the literature show that learners with disabilities continue to face challenges in receiving adequate social and academic support within the mainstream schools (Braun 2022; Nyimbi & Kajiru, 2024; Maphie, 2024). These challenges included limited access to specialized learning materials, insufficient teachers trained in inclusive practices, inadequate assistive technologies, peer discriminations, social isolation and limited parental and family involvement (Maphie, 2024; Losioki & Ngowoko, 2024). Furthermore, evidence shows that the usage of assistive devices for teaching and learning among persons with disabilities is still at low, at less than 2 per cent except for persons with albinism, which is 20 per cent (NBS & OCGS, 2025).

Even though different studies have addressed academic and social support for learners with disabilities in secondary schools, most of them focused on these aspects separately and on specific disabilities and educational

levels. Moreover, previous studies have established the significance of social support systems (Maphie, 2024). However, limited studies examined the combined role of academic and social support services provided to learners with disabilities. Likewise, few studies explored how these support systems affect learner's inclusion in secondary schools. The current study sought to address these gaps by examining the academic and social support among learners with disabilities in secondary schools to establish evidence that can help to inform policy and practice. Therefore, support systems explained in these studies provide evidence for guiding educators, schools administrators, policy makers and other stakeholders in strengthening inclusive education practices (Braun, 2022; Nyimbi & Kajiru, 2024).

1.2 Research Objectives

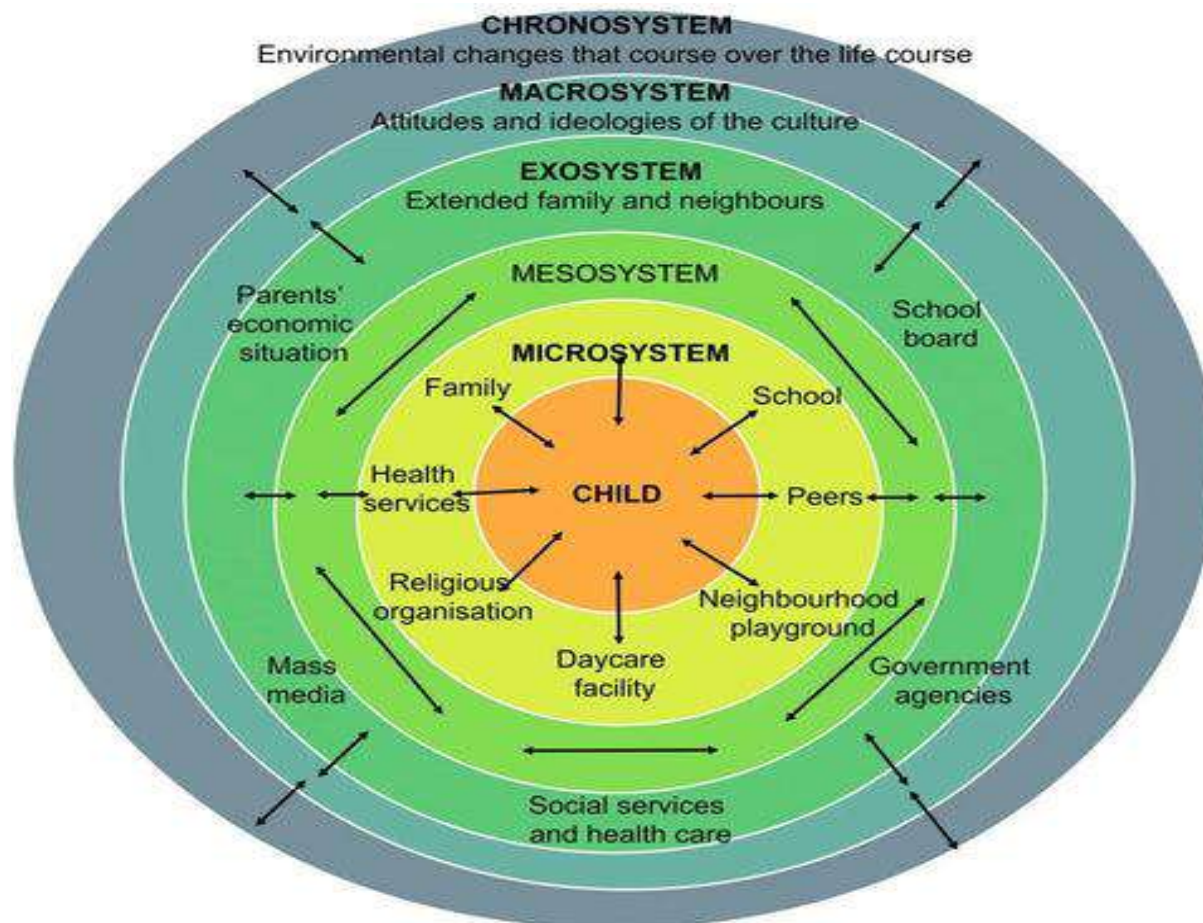
- i. What social support services are provided to learners with disabilities in secondary schools?
- ii. What academic support services are provided to learners with disabilities in secondary schools?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study was guided by Bioecological theory, which focuses on the environment interactions, and relationships within the ecosystem that can affect individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The theory has been used in this study to explain how different systems can influence academic and social support for learners with disabilities in secondary schools. The theory focuses on four key elements: first, the core proximal process that drive development. In Tanzanian context, proximal process is influenced by cultural values within the family and the community. This is reflected in the interactions with parents, teachers, peers and community members. According to Bronfenbrenner (Ibid) these interactions are the primary mechanisms that shape human development and can provide opportunities for social, moral, emotional and cognitive development. Second, individual characteristics of a person can also influence the process. For example, having any type of disability may limit interactions within the social systems. Likewise, individual's motivation and behaviour that allow engagement and interaction in the environment are considered important. These include confidence, self-control and resilience. Third, the context of environmental systems in which development takes place contributes to development and changes that continuously influence other systems. This is attributed by the interactions and relationships within and across the systems. The fourth element is time, which is considered as a temporal aspect of development reflecting on an individual life and history (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Bronfenbrenner theory has been used to explain a learner's interaction in different systems within the context of the study. The microsystem which is the learner's immediate environment include parents, peer relationships, teachers' pedagogical instructions and support, school administration and support given to learners with disabilities. Mesosystem involves interactions between learner's immediate environment including parents and teachers' collaborations and how such collaborations improve the provision of academic and social support. Exosystem represents the environment that indirectly affect learners including availability of teaching and learning resources, teachers' professional development, funding and school leadership. Moreover, the macro system captures broader aspects that can influence the provision of academic and social support services including policies such as national disability policy, inclusive education policy, education policy, and cultural beliefs about disability and other societal aspects. Moreover, the Chronosystem reflects changes that can take place over time including policy reforms, the improvement of inclusive education facilities, infrastructures and educational technologies and learning resources. Figure 1 shows details of Bronfenbrenner systems.

**Figure 1***Bronfenbrenner systems*Source: www.sticksandstoneseducation.com.au

Thus, the Bronfenbrenner theory emphasizes context and development outcomes of a person and considerations that the processes can vary and affect individuals in different ways. It also explains the reciprocal process, individuals and their wider environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Therefore, the theory guides the study in the analysis of academic and social support systems for inclusive education that can influence learners within the ecological systems. It also guides in explaining how teachers, peers and parents can maintain communication and support through their interactions and in building the relationships that shape the learners' development. It further guides the provision of social support in classrooms, the school environment and the community at large. Moreover, the theory also informs collaboration among teachers that targeted on sharing experiences and ensuring positive development in inclusive education context.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Conceptualization of Key Concepts

Disability and Inclusion: Disability refers to the loss or limitation of opportunities of taking part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical, mental and social factors (United Republic of Tanzania, 2004). In this study, persons with disabilities refer to children with long-term physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments which limit their full participation in society. Also, inclusion in education refers to access, participation and opportunities in teaching and learning outcomes for all learners. Thus, it allows participation, access to information, support services, friendship, safety and health. It is argued that, higher levels of belonging and perceived social inclusion lower levels of loneliness (Senit et al., 2022). Social inclusion in this study therefore refers to feelings of connectedness and a sense of belonging which represent human motivations.

Social Support and Social Skills: The provision of social skills and support promotes positive interactions with others. It allows children to interact frequently with peers and teachers. Social skills are behaviours that encourage positive interaction with others and help learners in their personal growth and social involvement. Social skills include social interactions, communication and interpersonal skills (Bordini et al., 2020). Moreover, social support refers to

the assistance a learner receives from other individuals that make him or her to believe that he/she is cared, loved and belongs to a network of communication and interactions with others. This study focused on different types of social support experienced and provided to learners with disabilities in Tanzania. These included instrumental, emotional, informational and appraisal support that were reported in other studies conducted in Tanzania (Swai et al., 2024). Also, academic support focuses on pedagogical assistant provided to students who have various needs and experience difficulties in educational context. It also includes teaching methods, educational services and school materials given to students (Kisanga & Kisanga, 2020).

2.2.2 Social Support for Learners with Disabilities

Social support has greater association with learners' engagement: It enhances their social and emotional supports in learning. It develops confidence, friendship, and independence and allows learners to perceive themselves as competent and endowed with skills required in teaching and learning. However, learners with disabilities experience limited sense of belonging in the mainstream schools and in inclusive classrooms (Woolfson, 2025, Maphie, 2024). Various key stakeholders including teachers, school administrators, parents and families, and peers play an important role in addressing social, emotional and personal development of children with disabilities. They all share their observations, expertise and knowledge.

Teacher's Roles and Support for Learners with Disabilities: Teachers are expected to ensure a supportive relationship that helps to develop social skills. Social skills and relationships development requires good peer interactions. Teachers have the ability of creating safe and positive environment for social inclusion. They can enable children with disabilities (visually impaired, deaf blindness and sensory disabilities) to feel valued and secure and to develop good relationships with their classmates (Liu et. al., 2020). Teachers play a crucial role in creating and ensuring positive peer structures for the enhancement of inclusion. This helps to reduce stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities in inclusive environment. Teachers' commitment and self-efficacy lead to increased emotional well-being and social inclusion among learners with disabilities (Hove & Phasha, 2024; Eren et al., 2025; Woolfson, 2025).

Administrative and School Support to Learners with Disabilities: Support from the government is provided directly to schools where services for learners with special needs are coordinated. These include payment of tuition fees, the provision of assistive devices and other support services such as braille, wheelchairs, white canes, sound amplifiers, lenses, and sunscreen lotions (Maphie, 2024). As scholars argue, attitudes and skills of school leaders and educators can influence the experiences of inclusion and exclusion of learners with disabilities. Thus, school authorities that allow and create positive learning environment can significantly promote social inclusion and ensure the provision of social and academic support to learners with disabilities. Moreover, positive learning environment encourages inclusive culture and practices including decision making and commitment to the implementation of inclusive education (Ujeh & Munongi, 2026).

Likewise, a school environment that allows empathy and positive attitudes can help to address stigma related actions and attitudes and ensure that all students need a community that fosters their development, social and emotional development (Hove & Phasha, 2024; Tomlinson & Javis, 2023). A supportive school environment facilitates participation of children with disabilities through social interaction with children without disabilities. Participation helps them to develop social, emotional and intellectual skills. Hence, a positive social environment increases a sense of belonging and social participation and enhances a sense of emotional support among children with disabilities (Woolfson, 2025).

Peer Support and Collaboration for Social Skills Development: Peers play a key role in creating a good social environment, which can allow positive acceptance for children with disabilities. Peer support the development, communication skills and the formation of interpersonal relationship. These contribute to strengthening of children emotional well-being. Peer support and collaboration increase satisfaction and promote social engagement among children with disabilities as scholars argue; peer interaction encourages students' engagement and self-efficacy (Eren et. al., 2025).

Peers can influence learners' development and coping ability to new contexts and environments and interactions with other individuals. They also help in social connections, problem solving, and in enhancing confidence and active participation in school and other community environment. Peers encourage a sense of belonging which involves learners' connection with other individuals in their community and building friendships and networks that support them. Moreover, belonging contributes to positive mental health outcomes and reduces the feeling of loneliness. Belonging therefore, enhances self-advocacy and self-determination skills which are of great importance for effective learning (Nandrup et. al., 2025).

Parents and Family Roles in Social Support Provision: Families play an important role in the provision of social support to their children. As scholars argue, parents understand challenges and preferences of their children. Therefore, parents can provide relevant support as they work together with teachers and other professionals to ensure

useful support is provided. This helps to develop confidence and independence among learners in schools (Odongo, 2018). Family support helps to understand emotional needs of children and support the participation of children in inclusive classes. As scholars argue, emotional well-being is developed with social-connectedness through supportive networks including parents and peers. These networks encourage positive – emotional experiences and well- being of children with disabilities (Lu, et al., 2021).

However, cultural barriers can limit the participation of parents and families in the provision of social support to their children. Parents and families tend to disengage themselves from key issues such as inadequate planning for their children (Mwila & Mgonja, 2024; Ujeh & Munongi, 2026). Hence, sharing of information and effective communications among children require active involvement of children and their families in ensuring positive outcomes. Moreover, financial constraints faced by families also contribute to academic problems experienced by learners with disabilities. Families do not afford the provision of assistive devices and specialized therapies, thus, limiting learners with disabilities from effective participation in teaching and learning and educational outcomes (Vianney & Olivier, 2022).

2.2.3 Academic Support Services for Learners with Disabilities

Academic support services provided to learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms enable them to achieve their full academic and social potential. The services include relevant teaching and learning strategies, learning resources and assistive technologies (Kisanga & Kisanga, 2020). Teaching and Learning Strategies: Teaching and learning strategies for learners with disabilities involve the following; first, differentiated instruction or individualized instruction. This involves the preparation of contents to meet different learning needs. The second is the assistive technology which involves integrating tools such as speech-to-text software, audio books, screen readers, specialized communication devices to help students to access reading and writing materials. Hence, learners with disabilities can be assisted using relevant tools depending on their needs. The third is accommodation and modification of the assessment which involves adjusting the testing environment or assignment expectations without changing the core curriculum (for example extra time on examination and conducive testing rooms). The fourth includes targeted interventions, which are structured in institutional time outside the general classroom setting, and the involvement of special education teachers focusing on specific areas of learners' needs (Tomlinson & Javis, 2023). Therefore, a need for personalized student-centred support for learners with disabilities is emphasized for their effective inclusion in the mainstream education setting.

Various teaching strategies are emphasized for supporting learners with disabilities. For example, studies found that students with developmental disabilities experience serious problems that require changes in teaching and learning and adherence to the implementation of inclusive education in schools. Hence, learners can perform well when appropriate teachers help them in mainstream education settings (Leifler, 2020). Moreover, increased teachers readiness to adjust learning environment was reported, however, there are still barriers in the provision of academic support for learners with disabilities: These include inadequate support from teachers, inadequate training among teachers which suggest inadequate skills in differentiating instruction and competence in handling learners with disabilities in the mainstream classrooms. Therefore, capacity building for teachers through professional development on teaching strategies related to inclusive education are emphasised among general education teachers (Leifler, 2020).

Learning Resources and Pedagogies for Inclusive Education: Learning resources and materials for learners with disabilities include accessible instructional materials and the provision of special pedagogical support to learners with disabilities in the mainstream classrooms. These include differentiated instruction, assistive technologies and Universal personalized Design for Learning (UDL) (Genc & Kocdar, 2020). Differentiated instruction allows the modification of teaching methods, curriculum, teaching and learning and resources. Moreover, differentiated instruction emphasizes the consideration of individual differences in terms of abilities and interests. Hence, differentiated instruction accommodates learning needs of different groups of learners with special needs. Another inclusive instructional design for teaching and learning for learners with disabilities is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This is a broader pedagogical approach that supports diverse learning preferences and increases the engagement of all learners in teaching and learning processes. It also allows the representation, action and expression and the engagement that target different needs of all learners. Hence, UDL fosters participation and inclusion of learners with disabilities (CAST, 2024; Matre et al., 2024), allows the acquisition of knowledge and information through different ways and thus allows flexibility in the engagement in teaching and learning based on learners' interests. UDL also allows the usage of different kinds of learning materials such as texts, audios and videos according to learning preferences and special needs of learners in an inclusive classroom (Matre et al., 2024).

Furthermore, coaching and mentoring approach was also reported as useful specifically for building teachers' capacity on inclusive education practices and learning strategies. This strategy uses one –to – one coaching which allows learning that aims to impart knowledge and skills for the management of inclusive education classrooms (Liu, et al., 2020). Moreover, assistive technologies have demonstrated to have considerable potentials for supporting

academic participation among learners with learning disabilities. For example, the usage of text-to-speech and speech-to-text systems allowed students with reading problems to access academic content through auditory channels (Wood et. al., 2018). Likewise, speech-to-text technologies enable written expression by reducing transcription barriers that use to limit students' ability of producing good written text materials. It is argued that learning environment that relies primarily on text-based communication, and limited feedback tend to increase learning challenges experienced by students with specific learning disabilities (Matre et al., 2024). Moreover, assistive technologies involve the investment in the use of different technologies including screen readers, voice recognition software, and adaptive keyboards. The access to these tools help students to engage in teaching and learning and ensures improvement in educational performance and learning outcomes (Wood et. al., 2018). Thus, learning environments, which are designed based on inclusive pedagogical principles, supported by assistive technologies, and guided by structured instructional practices can ensure flexible and accessible learning opportunities that support academic participation for learners with specific learning disabilities (Matre et al., 2024).

2.2.4 International and African Studies on Academic and Social Support for Learners with Disabilities

The review covered extensively the literature from international, Africa and Tanzania studies in particular. The literature from international studies focused on inclusive practices with emphasis on evidence based interventions. These studies focused on social support services emphasising peer mentoring, family-school partnerships and social inclusion (Lu, et al., 2021). Also, in academic support services the emphasis was on differentiated instructions, individualised education programmes, learning environment for inclusive education, assistive technology and continuous professional development in inclusive education (Wood et. al., 2018; Matre et al., 2024; Liu et. al., 2020; Leifler et al., 2020; Wells, 2025). Moreover, increased teachers readiness to adjust to teaching and learning environment in inclusive education context was reported. However, inadequate training on inclusive education skills and competence among general education teachers was reported. Studies emphasized continuous professional development and individualized support for learners with disabilities (Leifler et al., 2020; Tomlinson & Javis, 2023).

Studies in Africa and Tanzania in particular focused on social support services provided to learners with disabilities including instrumental, emotional and informational support. Also, teachers, schools leaders, and government play a key role in the provision of social support for learners with disabilities. Likewise, these studies reported parents and family support with the emphasis on parents' communication and interactions with teachers. However, cultural barriers limited parents and families in the provision of social support services. Moreover, peer influence on learners' development and the enhancement of self- confidence were reported among learners with disabilities (Odongo, 2018; Maphie, 2024; Swai et al., 2024; Ujeh & Munongi, 2026). Moreover, academic support services focused on school learning environment and materials and resources for teaching and learning among learners with disabilities. These studies reported school learning environment experiences and barriers in the usage of assistive technology, teachers' training for capacity building and teaching and learning resources (Kisanga & Kisanga, 2020; Mgonja & Mwila, 2024; Losioki & Ngowoko, 2024). Moreover, the implementation of inclusive education policy was found as inadequate due to institutional, financial and capacity limitations (Ujeh & Munongi, 2026; Braun, 2021; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024; Nyimbi & Kajiru, 2024). Hence these studies emphasised on the implementation of inclusive education policies and efforts to overcome barriers to inclusion, access to education and the participation of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

This study employed a qualitative approach and systematic literature review. A narrative synthesis approach was used to synthesize findings from different studies. This approach was preferred for this study as it helped to obtain evidence and data on academic and social support services for learners with disabilities. The approach has four elements that were used in this study to guide the review process. First, theory development which involved the development of review questions and the type of studies to be included. This guided in the inclusion of studies that clearly focus on the provision of academic and social support services among learners with disabilities in secondary schools. Hence, the theory guided in the exclusion of studies that were not relevant in terms of focus area, the objective of the study and participants. The second is developing a preliminary synthesis: This is the initial description of the included studies which was carried out using a textual description, grouping and tabulation. The third element involves the exploration of the relationship within and between studies. This helped to identify factors that can influence results. The fourth element is the assessment of robustness of the synthesis. This involved the review of trustworthiness of the results which was determined by the quality and quantity of the evidence on which the synthesis was built and the methods used (Popay et. al., 2006). The review used PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis) for identification, screening and the selection of the studies.

3.2 Eligibility Criteria

This review focused on studies that investigated academic and social support services among learners with disabilities in secondary schools. The studies were included in this study based on the following criteria:

Time: Publication time being from 2016 - 2026 to ensure that the review reflects support services and pedagogical improvements and innovations in inclusive education especially in the provision of both academic and social support services.

Study design: The study design had to be qualitative or quantitative.

Setting: No limitations on region and country given that they were published in peer-review journals or official government and international organisations' documents.

Themes: The study address social support, academic support and inclusive education

Outcome: Outcome of the study focused on the learners' experiences receiving social support and academic support in secondary school context.

3.3 Data Sources and Search Strategy

Relevant research studies were located and the quality of the content was assessed to determine their usefulness based on predetermined inclusive criteria. Studies were then searched from the main academic data bases including Scopus, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google scholar. Keywords were searched based on key concepts in the study objectives and the research questions. The main concepts are: Inclusive education, academic support, social support, secondary schools, and students with disability. The following search strings were used: ("Inclusive education" OR "inclusive school" OR "school inclusion" OR "inclusive classroom" OR "inclusive practice") AND ("academic support" OR "learning support" OR "education support" OR "instructional support") AND ("social support" OR "peer support" OR "teacher support" OR "belonging" OR "social inclusion") AND ("disability" OR "special educational needs" OR "learning disability" OR "physical disability" OR "intellectual disability").

The chart flow in Figure 2 shows the selection process.

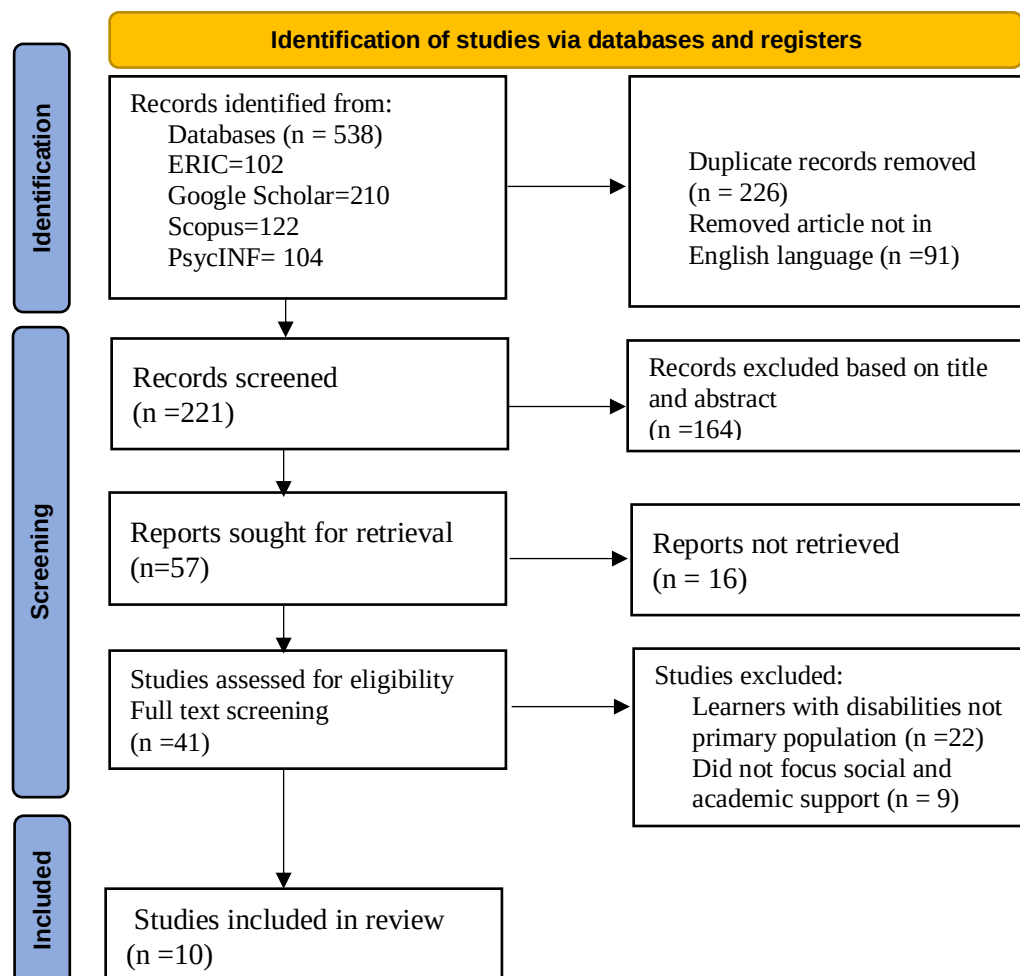


Figure 2
PRISMA Flow Chart

3.4 Exclusion Criteria and Study Selection

Study selection process involved screening and identification of relevant articles for the study. Exclusion criteria involved the following: The articles are duplicates, Learners with disabilities were not the primary study population, and the study did not address social support and/or academic support and inclusive education; the articles are not written in English. Moreover, screening was done in two stages: First, the screening of titles and abstracts. Second the screening of full-text. All included studies were examined in depth. Screening was conducted through examination of titles and abstracts. Eligible studies were reviewed in details. Reasons for exclusion were highlighted. This selection process ensured a clear focus of this study review, and reliable and coherence in reporting findings on academic and social support services for learners with disabilities in secondary schools.

3.5 Quality Assessment of Included Studies

Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MAAT) 2018 was used to assess the quality of the included studies. The tool focused on methodological criteria and it includes five core quality criteria for each of the research design. The tool guided the assessment using specific questions which focused on the following areas: Appropriateness of the research approach, data collection methods, findings adequately derived from data and coherence between data sources, analysis and interpretation (Hong, et. al., 2018).

3.6 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted which involved the following steps: 1). Coding of the findings: This was done systematically from each study. 2). Organising codes into related categories for the development of descriptive themes. 3). Synthesising of themes based on the study objectives (Mc Neilage et al., 2024). Themes were then developed to reflect experiences, barriers and the provision of academic and social support for learners with disabilities.

3.7 Researcher Reflectivity

The researcher recognizes that personal experiences and professional interest in academic and social support services for learners with disabilities may influence the interpretation of this study. Reflective approach was adopted throughout the research process to minimize the influence of the preconceptions (Mc Neilage et al., 2024). This approach enabled the researcher to identify and monitor personal assumptions during data analysis and in the review process. Also, themes were developed from data rather than from predetermined expectations. Hence, measures were taken to minimize the researcher's bias.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The study results are presented in the subsequent sections.

4.1.1 Search Results and Study Selection

A total of 538 potential titles were identified across four data bases (Figure 1). After the removal of 226 duplicates and 91 articles which were not in the English language, 221 articles remained. After title and abstract screening, 164 articles were removed and 57 articles remained. A full text screening was then done and 16 articles were not retrieved from different journals that restricted access to articles. Hence, 41 articles remained and were assessed for eligibility. After the assessment, 31 articles were excluded where 22 articles did not focus on learners with disabilities as a primary population and 9 articles did not focus on academic support or social support for learners with disability. Then 10 articles remained and were included in the study. The chart flow in Figure 2 shows the study selection process in details. Also, Table 1 presents the selected studies.

Table 1
Included Studies

S/n	Authors	Study Focus	Design	Key Findings
1	Dickinson et. al.,(2023)	The importance of social and emotion support in learning	Quantitative	Social support has stronger association with learner enjoyment and achievement.
2	Hove & Phasha (2024)	Support services for learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms	Qualitative	Learners with disabilities receive additional support from the teachers through one-on e tuition, peer support educators and school based teams.
3	Liu, et. al., (2020)	Academic support for students with developmental disability	Qualitative	Teachers have important roles in provision of academic support to students with DDs
4	Samwel (2023)	Promoting disability in school screening, identification and assessment of children with disabilities in Tanzania	Qualitative	In – school screening and identification process was crucial in supporting learning for CWDs at school.
5	Maphie (2024)	Implementation of inclusive education in Tanzania secondary schools	Qualitative	Different support emotional , spiritual, social , material and academic is provided among students with disabilities
6	Mgonja & Mwila(2023)	Support given by special education teachers' o students with special needs in inclusive schools.	Mixed methods	Special education teachers in inclusive schools play a key role in provision of support to learners with special needs including provision of remedial instructions and simplified materials
7	Ujer & Munongi (2026)	Learning disabilities among Learners in secondary schools and experiences in access to quality education	Qualitative	Participants reported positive and negative experiences and support was obtained from teachers and peers
8	Vianney & Olivier (2022)	Inclusive education for physically impaired students and their academic performance.	Quantitative	Teaching and learning barriers affected negatively academic performance of physically impaired learners.
9	Vyrastekova (2021)	Social inclusion of students with special educational needs	Quantitative	School context decreased SEN students' perceived loneliness. Also, social inclusion of SEN students was affected by schools characteristics in all school types.
10	Wells (2025)	Supporting students with disabilities and discrepancies in educational outcomes and comprehensive post- secondary support	Mixed methods	Support both financial and structural collerates with improved outcomes. Also, differences in outcomes between high and low reflect inconsistency that hat amounts to systematic inequity.

Table 1 shows data extracted from the selected studies including; publication date, authors, research objectives, study design, data collection and study results.

4.1.2 Characteristics of the Selected Studies

The selected studies were published between 2016 and 2026 and were conducted in developed and developing countries. The study included older official international documents, government documents, and the theory; these were used for literature review due to their relevance to the study. Study designs for qualitative studies were phenomenological, Ground theory, narrative research and case study. Data were collected using individual in depth – interview, Focus Group Discussion and documentary analysis. Study designs for quantitative studies were descriptive and correlational research designs. Data were collect using survey and questionnaires. Mixed methods studies used both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data analysis included thematic analysis, descriptive analysis, phenomenological analysis and ground theory approach.

4.1.3 Study Quality Assessment

A total of 10 studies were appraised. Six studies were qualitative; two studies were quantitative and two studies used mixed methods. Table 2 presents details.

Table 2
Quality Assessment of the Selected Studies

s/n	Authors	Study Design	Criteria				
			1	2	3	4	5
1	Dickinson et al., (2023)	Quantitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Hove & Phasha (2024)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Liu et. al., (2020)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	(Samwel (2023)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Maphie(2024)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Mgonja & Mwila(2023)	Mixed methods	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	Ujeh & Munongi(2026)	Qualitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	Vianney & Oliver(2022)	Quantitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	Vyrastekova(2021)	Quantitative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Wells M.B (2025)	Mixed methods	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Qualitative assessment Criteria			Quantitative assessment Criteria				
The qualitative approach appropriate			1. Sampling strategy				
Data collection methods address research questions			2. Sample representativeness				
Findings adequately derive from the data			3. Measure validity				
Interpretation supported by the data			4. Risk of non-response bias				
Coherence between data sources, analysis and interpretation			5. Appropriate statistical analysis				

Based on the assessment criteria the selected studies had good quality. This suggests that the selected studies were relevant to the present study. Moreover, from the literature review and the study objectives the study focused on two main themes: Academic support services for learners with disabilities and social support services for learners with disabilities, which are presented in the following subsections.

4.1.4 Academic Support Services for Learners with Disabilities

Findings have shown that the academic support provided to learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms in USA enabled them to achieve their academic and social potentials (Wells, 2025). Also, various strategies were used to support learners with disabilities in classrooms. Moreover, this study shows that learners with visual impairment and learners with other disabilities have limited opportunities to learn, do motor skills and to perform different activities in class. Moreover, studies conducted in Tanzania show that teachers were found to play an important role in supporting and ensuring learning and development of learners with special needs. They provide support on the usage of hearing aids and learning sign language depending on students' impairment level. Also, special education teachers play a key role in the provision of support to learners with special needs including the provision of remedial instruction and the promotion of cooperation and simplified materials.

Studies conducted in Tanzania show further that parents' participation in ensuring academic and social support for learners with disabilities is important. Parents are regarded as key actors in ensuring the provision of academic support, which is required for their children. However, parents were reported to have been contributing to delays of referrals of learners with disabilities who require the assessment and placement in relevant special schools. Tanzania studies also highlighted challenges experienced in the provision of academic and social support services; these include the shortage of teachers trained in special education and inadequate resources. Moreover, teachers lack practical support and sustained professional development, which are required for the application of screening and identification tools.

Moreover, a study conducted in China reported intensified workload of the complexity of tasks that limit teachers' effective implementation of academic support. Most classroom teachers provided academic support to students by adjusting and modifying the course design, educational objectives, teaching content, and teaching strategies. In addition, teachers provided limited or no support to students' academic development. Even though there are commitments towards inclusive education, academic support services remain inadequate in practice. Moreover, studies show the gaps between policy and implementation, which is evident in developing countries where school had inadequate personnel, accessible infrastructure and specialized learning materials and resources. Literature shows that

enrolling learners with disabilities in the mainstream classroom requires appropriate teaching strategies, academic support for effective and quality teaching for learning delivery.

4.1.5 Social Support for Learners with Disabilities in Secondary Schools

Findings from a study conducted in Australia show that the provision of social support is important and helpful to learners with disabilities. Thus, stronger social competencies are encouraged and developed through social interactions and opportunities provided in the learning environment. Moreover, it was revealed that the promotion of a positive peer interaction and social participation can increase emotional wellbeing of children with disabilities. Findings show further that teachers in Tanzania play an important role in guiding students to initiate and monitor their interaction. They also facilitate learners' interactions by allowing and encouraging interactive moments among students. This helps to develop positive behaviour between students with and those without disabilities.

Moreover, a study conducted in South Africa revealed that learners with learning disabilities experience profound emotional and psychological distress within the mainstream school environment. Moreover, students' experiences of social rejection and stigma reduced their sense of belonging and self-worth. Furthermore, guided by Bioecological theory, findings show that at microsystem level, teachers, peers and family members were the primary sources of social and emotional support. Also, the mesosystem shows the importance of collaboration between teachers, school and parents at home. These can influence learners' social interactions and experiences. Moreover, the exosystem involved school leadership and the availability of resources.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Academic Support Services for Learners with Disabilities

Academic support enables learners to participate confidently and effectively in various school activities. The provision of support facilitates learner's participation in teaching and learning process in school. It also helps in addressing learners social and academic problems. Therefore, teachers ensure that learners feel valuable by creating and allowing a sensitive environment (Mwillla & Mgonja, 2024). Moreover, engaging parents in the screening of the children with disabilities through the assessment and school placement has enabled parents to understand the ability of their children and their role in supporting children to realise their educational potentials. Thus, the collaboration of parents and teachers in the provision of academic and social support for learners with disabilities including awareness of learners' needs for psychological assessment was emphasizing (Samwel, 2023).

Studies also emphasized the provision of professional training and creation of supportive educational environment. Hence, collaborations among teachers and parents involvement was considered important in integrating students with special needs in general education (Liu et al., 2021). It is further argued that secondary schools teachers had insufficient training in special and inclusive education. Hence, they may experience challenges in managing inclusive classrooms effectively. Moreover, in-service training was emphasized for equipping regular teachers with basic knowledge on teaching students with disabilities (Mwillla & Mgonja, 2024; Samwel, 2023). Hence, limited training for teacher and the lack of trained personnel suggest existing barriers in the exosystem. Also, limited teacher support suggests weakness in microsystem level. Studies also reported inadequate basic assistive devices including wheelchairs, braille machines and hearing aids. This suggests that the availability of assistive devices and friendly school environment was a barrier to inclusive schools. Also, weaknesses in the implementation of inclusive education were reported (Mwillla & Mgonja, 2024).

Equally important the study was guided by Bioecological theory. The theory emphasized the holistic approach in the provision of social and academic support in consideration of the environment and interactions within the social systems. The theory focused on learners with disabilities and their participation in teaching and learning in mainstream classrooms. Hence, according to Bronfenbrenner, findings suggest that there are issues at the macro system that may affect provision of academic support services for learners with disabilities.

4.2.2 Social Support for Learners with Disabilities in Secondary Schools

It can be argued that social skills can lead to peer social support among children with disabilities. These skills ensure independence, and social inclusion. They also increase self-esteem as individuals feel valued and engaged (Dickinson, 2023). Hence, inadequate or the lack of social skills and support can limit effective development of interactions among students with disabilities and this can also limit their inclusion in various interactive activities in school, at home and community environment. As scholars emphasize, effective inclusion requires connectedness and a sense of belonging. Moreover, social and emotional – well-being are reflected in children's self-esteem, self-confidence, effective engagement and interaction skills. Thus, findings suggest that learners with learning disabilities tend to feel excluded thus making them experience a reduced self-esteem (Vyrastekova, 2021; Maphie, 2024; Ujeh & Munongi, 2026). Moreover, the social systems can determine the support provided to learners with disabilities in mainstream schools. Furthermore, it can be argued that the microsystem can play a key role in addressing societal

attitudes towards learners with disabilities. Likewise, the theory propounds that support services can change over time due to the improvement and availability of social support services (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the academic and social support provided to learners with disabilities in secondary schools. Findings indicated that social support from peers, parents and school administrators contributes positively to learners' inclusion, self-esteem, and well-being. Furthermore, findings have shown that the special pedagogical support to learners with disabilities including differentiated instruction, the usage of different learning materials that allow flexibility in the engagement in teaching and learning, coaching and mentoring and the usage of assistive technologies and devices were effective and useful in teaching and learning among learners with disabilities.

Moreover, the study concludes that both social and academic support are crucial for creating an inclusive learning environment for learners with disabilities. Also, different stakeholders including parents, teachers, schools management and other educational stakeholders play an important role in ensuring that learners with disabilities receive adequate support that enable them to achieve their learning goals in the mainstream classrooms and succeed academically and socially. The study conclusion also aligns with the principles of Bioecological theory which focuses on learners' development which is shaped by interactions between an individual and different system and other contexts in the environment. Hence, supportive interactions from family, peers, the school and the community help to improve outcomes for learners with disabilities.

Moreover, feasibility of the provision of academic and social support services in secondary schools is evident due to available basic inclusive structures and support from the school leadership, the Government through Educational officials at ward, district, regional and national levels. However, successful implementation can be limited by the availability of funds, shortage of trained special education teachers and inadequate teaching and learning materials and assistive technology. The government and schools may minimize the challenges by engaging relevant educational stakeholders in order to strengthen support for learners with disabilities and to ensure long-term provision of the services. Hence, the study underscores the feasibility of support strategies and their practical application in secondary school settings in Tanzania.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings strengthening academic and social support systems requires a coordinated effort among the Government, schools, and educational stakeholders. Therefore, this study recommends the following for ensuring effective provision of both academic and social support among learners with disabilities in the mainstream classrooms.

First, the Government of Tanzania through the Ministry of Education Science and Technology should ensure that inclusive education in schools and monitoring of National Inclusive Education Strategy at national, regional and district levels are implemented. Second, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology in collaboration with educational stakeholders should allocate funds for teaching and learning materials for inclusive education. Third, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology in collaboration with schools should strengthen and emphasize the in-service training for professional development among teachers. Fourth, schools should maintain collaboration with parents so as to ensure consistent communication between parents and schools authority through parents meetings.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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