Editorial: Transforming teacher education in Sub-Saharan African countries towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030: new opportunities, challenges, problems and prospects

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Editorial on the Research Topic
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The groundbreaking works of Dunn (1968), Deno (1970), Stainback and Stainback (1984), Will (1986), Reynolds et al. (1987) in the 1960s and 80s advocated for dramatic reforms in special education and its relationship with general education have since demonstrated seminal to remarkable progress toward the education of students with disabilities in more inclusive setting (McLeskey, 2007). More predominantly, the ideology of inclusive education has been exported across the globe through the advocacy of the international institutions of global governance in the form of conventions and declarations such as the 1990 UNESCO World Declaration on Education for All, the 1994 UNESCO World Conference on Special Needs Education, the 2000 UNESCO Education for UNESCO (1994) United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities etc.

Underpinned by the principles of social justice and equity as well as the Social and Human Rights models of disability, inclusive education is considered the right of all students with disability with the assumption that general education will change to meet the needs of all students. It is an ongoing process that seeks the fundamental transformation of schools' cultures, policies, and practices such as curricula, assessment, pedagogy, and attitudes to ensure equitable, participatory, and age-appropriate educational experiences for all students (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) entreats countries across the globe to promote equitable access to inclusive, quality, and lifelong educational opportunities for all levels by 2030

([United Nations General Assembly, 2015](#)) with the justification that inclusive education is key to every country's ability to develop and achieve all other Sustainable Development Goals.

All the contributions in this Special Topic iterated that teachers cannot create inclusive settings for all students without the requisite skills, knowledge, positive attitudes and pedagogical capacities in regular classrooms. The focus of this Research Topic is on the state of teacher education and professional development opportunities in Sub-Saharan African countries to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms.

Contents

Following the enactments and subscription to the international conventions and declarations, many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have developed inclusive education policies and taking steps to make it a reality. Several contributions shed light on the influence of international conventions and declarations on the development of inclusive education policies in Sub-Saharan African countries. For instance, studies by Nel et al., Naami and Mort, Nseibo et al., Nketsia et al., and Opoku et al. highlight diversity, participation and human rights as some of the guiding principles of inclusive education in the policies of inclusive education in Ghana and South Africa. The policies underscore the importance of inclusive education in addressing the diverse needs of students and promoting fair access to comprehensive, high-quality, and lifelong educational opportunities at all levels.

Several papers recognize teachers' key role in fostering inclusivity and stress the importance of teacher training. They explore key inclusive education knowledge, skills and competencies that are addressed in teacher education programmes. Nel et al. assess a South African Department of Higher Education and Training project aimed at enhancing inclusive teacher education. Their study of 60 educators and 697 student teachers revealed an insufficient understanding of inclusive education, policies, and strategies. They noted a lack of emphasis on practical experience in the teacher education curriculum, leaving educators ill-prepared to train future inclusive teachers.

Similarly, Nseibo et al. assess the outcomes of the Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion project for in-service teachers in South Africa, aiming to gauge the necessary training for teachers to address the needs of students with disabilities. They echo Nel et al.'s findings, noting deficiencies in formal teacher education programs, such as the Bachelor of Education and Postgraduate Certificate in Education, which lack impairment-specific and inclusive education components. As a result, many pre-service teachers graduate without the necessary skills to teach students with disabilities. Similarly, Opoku et al. examine the self-efficacy of private school teachers regarding inclusive education implementation in Ghana. Their findings reveal that despite lacking confidence in their abilities, some private school teachers instruct students with disabilities. Additionally, they note these teachers have minimal training and few chances for professional development in inclusive education.

In Ghana, Naami and Mort thoroughly analyze the new Four-Year Bachelor of Education curriculum at Ghanaian colleges of education, utilizing analytical perspectives from

Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the social model of disability. They discover shortcomings in addressing disability issues and limited opportunities for student teachers to critically reflect on their values, beliefs, biases, and attitudes toward students with disabilities.

For instance, they criticize a task assigning student teachers to identify barriers to learning, arguing it contradicts the social model of disability, which focuses on societal barriers rather than individual impairments. Similarly, Nel et al. find that responses to the 'barriers to learning' theme primarily focus on individual problems, neglecting systemic, pedagogical, and social factors. These findings align with previous studies highlighting the medical model's dominance in African teacher education curricula (Nketsia et al.). This underscores the importance of adopting a social approach to inclusion, necessitating the transformation of school attitudes, policies, and practices to foster diversity and participation for all students.

Nel et al. critically assess essential skills, knowledge, and traits for inclusive teachers proposed by the Loreman (2010), European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012). Both Nel et al. and Nseibo et al. highlight the need for research on preparing student teachers in inclusive pedagogies like differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning. Accordingly, Nketsia et al. examine how teacher educators in Ghana use differentiated instruction practices in teacher training institutions, revealing lower ratings from pre-service teachers on their perceived usage of such methods.

Addressing the gap between theory and practice is crucial. Four papers highlight the mismatch between theory and practice in inclusive education courses in teacher education programs. Nel et al. find student teachers lack practical skills despite particular emphasis on theoretical knowledge regarding inclusive teaching strategies in the teacher education program. Similarly, Nseibo et al. note theoretical emphasis over practical skills in South African teacher education programs. Naami and Mort criticize Ghana's Four-Year Bachelor of Education degree teacher education curriculum for lacking adequate opportunities for student teachers to reflect on disabilities during teaching practicum. Nketsia et al. find that Ghanaian teacher educators struggle to offer practical guidance on pedagogical strategies, reinforcing the need for fieldwork alongside coursework to help student teachers develop the link between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. They stress the importance of educators modeling effective instructional strategies to enhance understanding and promote positive changes in schools.

Conclusion

The six papers underscore the necessity for reforming the initial teacher education curriculum in Sub-Saharan African nations. Emphasis should be placed on adopting Social and Human Rights models of disability to identify barriers within school cultures, policies, and practices, rather than focusing solely on student characteristics. Furthermore, teacher education programs in the region should integrate inclusive education principles, balancing theoretical concepts with relevant pedagogical practices suitable for inclusive classrooms. Additionally, there is a call

for increased opportunities for student teachers to critically examine their assumptions about diversity, disability, and the role of schools in marginalization and exclusion. Moreover, teacher education institutions should facilitate more professional development opportunities for educators through collaborative learning in communities of practice.

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Conflict of interest

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