



Issues, Problems and Challenges of Enhancing Social Functioning among Children with Cognitive Disabilities in Tanzania: A Theoretical Review

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to provide a theoretical and empirical perspective related to the issues, problems and challenges of enhancing social functioning among children with cognitive disability in Tanzania. Specifically, the study reviews three theories, namely empowerment, inclusive and ecological with a view of finding the challenges associated with the enhancement of children with cognitive disability. The study is a literature review based on survey from books, scholarly articles and other relevant sources seeking explanations on the enhancement of social functioning among children with cognitive disability. The reviewed literature were summarized, analysed, and synthesized. The findings reveal that, the theories used in social work practice have diverse and different foci of analysis and intervention. This is largely because addressing a social problem there

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are many variables and uncertainties in social work practice. Because of that, there is no one single objective “reality” in social theory and practice. Secondly, whereas theories such as the ecological describes the influence of different subsystems in the changing individual behaviour, other behaviours such as discrimination and social exclusion among people with disabilities do not seem to change. The study further reveals that the assumptions of the inclusive theory of developing positive social relationships (e.g. friendships and acquisition of social skills) have not been successful because of existence negative attitudes among societal members which are influenced by false beliefs about people with cognitive disability. The study concludes that, whereas the theories help social workers to understand complex human behaviour and social environment which influence their clients’ lives and the nature of social problems, there are no theories which help in understanding African realities. The study observes that, negative social environment and attitudinal change have a negative impact in facilitating positive behavioural change in as far as enhancing social functioning among children with cognitive disability. The study recommends that more research be conducted to address the existing prohibiting factors. It is further recommended that concerted be made among different actors including policy interventions to raise awareness of local communities.

Keywords: Social functioning; children with cognitive disability; inclusive environment; ecological systems theory; social skills social interactions; interpersonal relationships; emotional needs; and self-belief.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Social functioning is a key to the understanding what social work is all about. As a concept, social functioning entails the ability of an individual to engage effectively in social roles as well as interaction, within their own self, their immediate social environment, and the society at large to maintain interpersonal relationship to engage in work and conduct everyday activities independently” [1]

The main task of social work profession is to enhance social functioning through i) restorative ii) preventive ii) developmental function¹ [2,3]. In particular, enhancement focuses on the well-being and helps clients to meet basic and complex needs of the vulnerable, marginalized and people living in poverty [4]. The profession deals with building the ability of individuals to perform their social roles within their own self, their immediate social environment, and the society at large. As a profession, social work enjoys the expertise from other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, human biology, political science, health, community development, law, and economics, in its endeavour to enhance social functioning [5]

¹ Restorative refers to curative, remedial and rehabilitative, while preventive entails early discovery, control and elimination of conditions or situations which may have harmful effect on social functioning.

(Gomes, 2022). Social workers engage with client systems, conduct assessments, and develop interventions with a view of addressing social problems, and hence facilitating social change. Whereas, at a micro level, social workers enhance individuals, and small groups, at macro level, it entails working with communities and fostering change on a larger scale through social policy, programmes and management of social services in the organizations. According to Gray [6], “Social workers are people who care about people, who want to make things better, who want to relieve suffering and who want their work to make a difference”.

Despite the noble role of relieving sufferings and making a difference in the quality of lives of vulnerable groups, the level of social functioning among the children with cognitive disability has not been improving in many developing countries, including Tanzania. This paper attempts to provide a theoretical analysis and the challenges involved in enhancing social functioning among children with cognitive disability in Tanzania. The paper is divided into six main parts, namely the introduction, research methodology, the need for enhancing social functioning among children with disability, and theoretical review of different approaches aimed at enhancing social functioning. The last part is the conclusion and recommendations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was a literature review based survey from books, scholarly articles and other relevant source seeking explanations on the enhancement of social functioning among children with cognitive disability. The references were obtained from literature-based research which served as the basis of data retrieval. The literature reviewed included policies and legal documents, published and unpublished research reports and articles related to disability and social functioning. The reviewed literature were summarized, analysed, synthesized to find out the strengths and weaknesses of social work theories to come up with explanations that can be used to revisit the existing strategies for purposes of improving the social functioning skills among children with cognitive disability. The review helped to compare and contrast the sources of information which were consulted and critically evaluated by indicating how each source contributed to the understanding of social functioning approaches by providing a better understanding of complex human behaviours and social environment which influence clients quality of social lives.

3. WHY ENHANCE SOCIAL FUNCTIONING OF THE CHILDREN WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITY?

Children with cognitive disability are children who experience the limitations in mental functioning skills; a factor which makes it more difficult for them to perform certain activities and interact with the world around them [7]. Limitations such as low level communication skills, social and self-care skills among others, limit the level of the performance in their normal life activities as well as affecting their learning capacity and the levels of socialization process, confidence, and self-determination [8]. Apart from the above limitations, children with cognitive disability further suffer from intellectual functioning (*e.g. communicating, learning, problem solving*) and adaptive behaviour (*e.g. everyday social skills, routines, and hygiene*). The children levels of social functioning are largely affected by their slow mental development among other factors [9]. Other factors limiting the children's functioning include i) low level of communication ii) language development iii) difficulty in understanding social norms and values iv) slowness in participating in

social life areas v) limited engagement in daily social activities including difficulty in performing household activities v) difficulty in understanding social norms and values, and vii) emotional instability (Gallagher & Couture, 2019).

The above limitation influences the level of vulnerability of children with cognitive disability. The level of social maladjustment may be related to the severity cognitive impairments, occurring of psychiatric conditions or the difference in behavioural phenotypes associated with specific aetiologies. These limitations affect a child personality in terms of levels of confidence, self-esteem and dignity, social and psychological status within their families, communities and social environment which in turn affect their social interactions. The above shortcomings underline the need for different kinds of support. Depending on the level of severity of disability, the above limitations call for social support services² which include psychosocial, psychotherapy and provision of social skills to improve children's social functioning and social well-being.

In view of the above, social functioning is basically responsible with a person's ability to engage effectively in social interactions, maintain interpersonal relationships, engage in work and conduct everyday activities independently. For this to happen, social functions aims at meeting basic needs of an individual including physical aspects, personal fulfilments, emotional needs and self-belief (Mason & Cox, 2015). This goes hand in hand with developing social skills which allow communicating, relating to and connecting with other people. This is vital because it allows a situation of establishing friendships and navigating one through his or her life with a better degree of satisfaction [10]. It should be noted that above all, it is through socialization process at different levels that allows development of personality development to

² Psychotherapy (sometimes referred to psychological therapy) is the use of psychological methods, particularly when based on regular personal interaction, to help a person change behaviour, increase happiness, and overcome problems. Psychotherapy aims to improve an individual's well-being and mental health, to resolve or mitigate troublesome behaviours, beliefs, compulsions, thoughts, or emotions, and to improve relationships and social skills

take place and hence develop the individual qualities and self-realization in the real life [11]. It is within this context that, we are tempted to argue with the right set of social skills that it is much easier for children with disability to make friends, share with their peers and cooperate in different social environments. In other words, a well-developed set of social skills lead to improve the cognitive abilities and better mental health [12-18]. The most celebrated view of developing relationships with children with disability is to build relationships around shared interests. This applies not only to children with disabilities but also to children without disabilities.

4. THEORETICAL APPROACHES

There different explanations and approaches in as far as explaining how social functioning among the vulnerable groups can be strengthened. Scholars like Kishore and Seshadri [19], Kong [20] and Kasari and Mandell (2019), among others, provide different explanations on how social functioning could be strengthened among different vulnerable groups in many communities in Tanzania. For the purposes of this paper, three main theories, namely the empowerment, ecological and social disability theory are taken as the sample to reflect the existing approaches to enhancing social functioning. These theories are elaborated in details below.

4.1 Empowerment Theory

“Being empowered is not a static condition but rather a dynamic and cyclical one. Human individual and social systems are in perpetual motion, either ‘getting better’ or ‘getting worse’ at any given moment. Empowerment indicates a simpatico state in which one's perception of self-efficacy and essential value is mirrored in and accentuated by social relationships and the larger environment. Empowerment is a confluence of the individual, the interpersonal, and the socio-political where the experience of power in each sphere continually replenishes the others”. (Kleppe et al., 2021, p.112).

Empowerment is a broad concept which generally entails acquisition of the degree of autonomy and self-determination among the

vulnerable groups. This may be through different intervention methods which aim at building autonomy and control in their lives. The concept of empowerment is therefore central to social work much as it is rooted in social justice which revolves around fairness, equality and self-determination which support control of their lives hence making the marginalized people stronger and confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights. Empowerment, as action, refers to both the process of self-empowerment and to professional support of people, which enables them to overcome their sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, and to recognize and use their resources [21,22]. Social workers strive to empower individuals to overcome their challenges; some of which include discrimination, marginalization, emotional trauma resulting from different social circumstances. It also aims at empowering groups and communities using advocating for policies that promote greater social justice and equity. It is for this reason that empowerment theory in social work involves using intervention methods to guide people towards achieving a sense of control. People may feel helpless in their lives for any number of reasons, hence empowerment theory focuses on how to help the marginalized people at individual, group and community levels gain the personal, interpersonal and political power to improve their lives [23-27]. The theory also seeks to challenge systems that prevent or hinder people from having their needs met. The empowerment method focuses on the achievement of goals and change of systems by utilizing available strengths, resilience, and resources. By focusing on competence rather than deficits in individual or social functioning, the empowerment theory supports resourcefulness and the development of skills to remove social barriers for individuals and communities [28-33].

Mwamwaja [34] and Mwereke [35] have attempted to define the concept to imply taking control of groups, communities and individuals and circumstances, to exercise power and to achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives. As a theory, empowerment assumes that:

1. Individuals, groups and communities need to be developed to gain control of their circumstances and achieve their own

- goals, thereby work towards helping themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives.
- II. Every individual, regardless of different social background, has the right to be developed and enjoy available community resources.
 - III. Education is seen as the engine of empowerment, equality and right to access resources.
 - IV. The disadvantaged and marginalized groups of people need to be enabled and supported to overcome their social and physical obstacles, safeguard their rights, and enhance their social skills to control their lives.
 - V. Increased control helps the needy to achieve their goals and aspirations, improve their esteem, build up their ability to act on their own and hence maximize the quality of their lives [36].

The theory attempts to understand human problems in the context of social, political, and economic environments (Karan, 2013). The theory situates human problems in a person-in-environment perspective, not only recognizing the interdependence and mutual influence of individuals and communities, but also proposing that successful interventions to human problems occur at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and community levels simultaneously. As argued by Kassah [10], empowerment to individuals primarily helps individuals to develop psychological self-efficacy or coping skills to adjust to the existing social environment. From the above perspective, it can as well be argued that, the empowerment is a broad concept based on existing social needs and problem-solving model that includes definition of strengths and problem identification, goal setting and role taking. According to Herrera and Ferrer (2022), the theory attempts to build capacity of individuals not only to gaining power, improvement of self-esteem and taking over control of their destiny, but also to gain greater access to social resources to realize their full potential. The theory, therefore, is geared towards empowering disadvantaged and vulnerable groups whose final results lead to changes in behaviour as well as increased social power of deprived individuals, groups or communities [37,38] (Woolfson & Durkin, 2020).

The first strength is that the empowerment theory is a social process that assists individuals in gaining control and fostering power over their own lives and environment [39,40]. The theory is embedded in the NASW Code of Ethics' preamble, and implied in values such as the dignity and worth of all people and the idea of self-determination. As a result, the theory promotes self-efficacy, consciousness, personal responsibility, dual perspective, and a reduction in self-blame [41]. The other strengths in this theory include the consistency with social work values and ethics, addressing oppression, discrimination and marginalization on a political and clinical scale, and it is in line with the person in environment perspective. Furthermore, the theory lies on the recognition of the need to empower different people given their knowledge and skills gaps. Because of that, it emphasizes the importance of needs assessment in order to fill the existing skills gap. The theory further emphasizes the human capacity for resilience, courage, thriving, and ingenuity, and it champions the rights of individuals and communities to form and achieve their own goals [42].

The weakness of the empowerment theory is that, whereas the theory focuses more on the achievement of goals and change of systems by utilizing available strengths, resilience, and resources, it relies on one's strengths and dedication towards the realization of a common goal. The theory fails to recognize not only different levels of strengths among different individuals but also different psychosocial factors which affect the empowerment initiatives [43-45]. Whereas, for example, the aim of empowerment is to build capacities of individuals, people with disability are viewed differently in various societies. According to the study by Rwegoshora et al. [42], people with disability are subjected to attitudinal barriers including prejudice and low level expectations and fear. Negative attitude on disability affect several aspects on the lives of people with cognitive disabilities such as low level accessibility to education, limiting the levels of interactions with other members of the communities and hence low level of participation in social and economic activity. According to the African child policy forum [46], the empowerment efforts are largely affected by stigma, discrimination, exclusion and violence as well as other forms of abuses. The general picture which emerges from the above

discussions is that, many cases of negative beliefs which hinder the empowerment process revolves around the type of impairment and prejudices are often in the case of psychosocial disabilities.

4.2 Inclusive Theory

“In every country, some groups confront barriers that prevent them from fully participating in political, economic, and social life. These groups may be excluded not only through legal systems, land, and labour markets, but also discriminatory or stigmatizing attitudes, beliefs, or perceptions. Disadvantage is often based on social identity, which may be across dimensions of disability, gender, age, ethnicity, among other factors. This kind of social exclusion robs individuals of dignity, security, and the opportunity to lead a better life.” (World Bank, 2017, p.34).

The above quotation is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals which advocate for social inclusion as a means to achieve an inclusive society that entails respect for human rights, cultural diversity and democratic governance and upholds the principles of equality and equity (Ndiaye, 2020). It is a process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society, improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity. In as far as education is concerned; it entails the process of strengthening the capacity of education system to reach out to all learners as a strategy to achieve education for all.

In view of the above framework, inclusive theory revolves around social experiences, a situation whereby all people in a society from all backgrounds feel both valued and included. This means, a society where differences among members of the society are respected; access existing social services and their basic needs are met in an effort to make them live a dignified life. A socially inclusive, is a society where all people are recognised and accepted and have a sense of belonging. In many countries, different categories of people experience exclusion because of social, cultural, political, economic, religious, gender, age, and disabilities. Stokes [47] argues that, the inclusive theory assumes that: i) Everyone needs social support, respect and recognition ii) inclusiveness is a human right

issue e.g. the right of children to education iii) there is a need of change of mind set which includes restructuring cultures, policies and practices to respond to diversity in ways that value everyone equally iv) inclusiveness is based on values of tolerance and respect for difference v) knowledge of all (learners) without any discrimination vi) build targeted capacity to enable effective participation and vii) ensure equity principles to share the opportunities for development.

In African countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Gambia and Tanzania [48] withhold strong negative traditional cultural beliefs that placing people with disability and children with cognitive disability in particular are at a risk of being stigmatized, discriminated, and labelled according to the nature of their disabilities. According to Tungaraza [49] in his study on violence, this kind of discrimination is often caused by misunderstanding and negative beliefs concerning children with cognitive behaviour. For example, such children are considered as the societal burden, useless and incapable. Available evidence reveals that children with cognitive disability have been experiencing social challenges including unfair practices like stereotype, prejudice, marginalization and being locked in houses. Such practices deprive them self-confidence, a sense of belonging, causing them psychological torture and stigmatization. Because of that, such children find it difficult to walk or play freely much as some parents and caregivers restrict their children to play with others or go to school alone like other regular children [50]. As a result, some of the parents or close relatives feel a sense of insecurity of these children and therefore do escort them to school and other public places. From this perspective, perhaps Carter [3] has a point when he argues:

Nowadays although parents are no longer likely to abandon children with cognitive disability., but experience shows that parents and community members are still reluctant to provide even essential equipment and services for these children.

In Tanzania the inclusive education was introduced in the mid-1990s with a view of enhancing social function human rights and dignity especially children with disabilities who were regarded as vulnerable [51,52]. At this juncture, inclusive education was meant to

restructure the learning environments to accommodate diversity, that is, children with varying needs, capabilities and styles of learning. The programme was further aimed at helping individuals to recognize, promote and appreciate their unique abilities (Beasley et al., 2013). For this programme to be successful, barriers within learning environments were to be minimized or eliminated in order to accommodate a diversity of learners, provide children with equal opportunities to co-exist and learn together in the same educational environments based on the values of non-discrimination. These initiatives were not only guided by the principle of valuing diversity and providing appropriate and timely support (Karan, 2013); they were also guided by social work ethical principle which emphasize service provision for each individual, non-judgmental attitude to individuals and acceptance.

As already alluded above, education is and continues to be a basic need to every human being which in a long run assures life sustainability. The government, therefore, has an obligation of providing educational services to each citizen without any discrimination either to normal children or children with special needs. It is for this reason that inclusive education provides an equal opportunity to all children to be part of their community and develop a sense of belonging and become better prepared for life in the community as children today and future adults. Such a situation provides people of all cultural orientations to freely express themselves, for example, giving their own opinions, fully participate in social activities and feel safe from abuse, harassment or unfair criticism. Other benefits comprise inclusion for children with (or without) disabilities are friendship skills, peer models, problem solving skills, positive self-image, and respect for others. This can trickle down to their families as well, teaching parents and families to be more accepting of differences.

The strength of the theory is that, it acknowledges that everybody is an individual and unique. It further appreciates that each individual has the right to develop his or her capacity. It is on this basis, inclusiveness ensures development of social skills needed for individual's daily lives. The other strength of the theory is that, inclusivity enables children to be part of their communities and develop a sense of belonging. The weakness of theory is that, it

takes vulnerable groups with moderate feature who can easily be accommodated and cope with the existing circumstances. The vulnerable groups with severe disability are not well considered. The other weakness is that the inclusive environment is largely affected by the existence of negative cultural beliefs which are not favourable to inclusivity in communities, families and even to peer groups because of long time built belief on people with disabilities. The existing literature from a study by Mwereke (2017) reveals that some of the children who experience discrimination from their fellow children and teachers are more likely to have a negative attitude about attending the school and encouraging lower academic motivation as well as performance. This may lead to a risk of dropping out of the school.

4.3 Ecological System Theory

The ecological systems theory was developed by Bronfenbrenner [53] by explaining the interconnectedness and interdependence which exist within organisms and their environment.

The theory assumes that, individuals do not operate in isolation rather they are influenced by physical, social and cultural environment in which they live and interact. The cultural aspect of the environment involves values, norms, beliefs, and language that shape the individual's views, mind-set, perspectives, and expectations [54]. Social environments include the interactions with friends and family, social family, social and community networks, such as colleagues or through membership or involvement with organizations or the community, and the societal structures, norms and values that shape the way in which the environment operates [50].

In as far as a child is concerned, the theory explains how the inherent qualities of children and their environments interact to influence how they grow and develop. As already highlighted above, the theory emphasizes the importance of children studying in multiple environments if one is to attempt to understand their development. The theory purports that, children typically find themselves surrounded by various ecosystems, from the most intimate home ecological system to the larger school system, and then to the most expansive system which include society and culture. Each of these

ecological systems inevitably interacts with and influences each other in all aspects of the children's lives.

4.3.1 Micro system

The theory suggests that the micro system is the smallest and most immediate environment in which children live. As such, the micro system comprises the family, school or day-care, peer group and the community environment of the children. Interactions within the micro system typically involve personal relationships with family members, peers, neighbours, classmates, teachers and caregivers. How these groups interact with the children affects how they grow. Similarly, how children react to people in their micro system, influence their behaviour. For this matter, nurturing and more supportive interactions and relationships understandably foster the way children's social behaviour develop.

4.3.2 Ecosystem

The meso system encompasses the interaction of different microsystems which children find themselves in. This involves linkages between families, schools, peer groups and community. Other subsystems include religious institutions, community based organizations, professional organization which have an impact on social functioning of the targeted group. According to the theory, if parents are actively involved in the friendships of their child, for example, they will invite their child's friends over to their families from time to time and spend time with them, then the child's development is affected positively through harmony and like-mindedness. However, if parents dislike their child's peers and openly criticize them, then a child experiences disequilibrium and conflicting emotions, which will likely lead to negative development.

4.3.3 Macro system

The macro system is the largest and most distant collection of people and places to the children that still have significant influences on them. This ecological system is composed of the children's cultural patterns and values, specifically their dominant beliefs and opinions in a given geographical, as well as political and economic systems.

By using ecological systems, Bronfenbrenner has been able to demonstrate the diversity and influences on children's development. Awareness of the contexts that children are in can sensitize us to variations in the way children may act in different settings. For example, a child who frequently bullies smaller children at school may portray the role of a terrified victim at home. Due to these variations, adults who are concerned with the care of a particular child should pay close attention to his/her behaviour in different settings, as well as to the quality and type of connections that exist between these settings.

The strength of this theory can be viewed at different levels. At one level, the theory highlights the importance of individual differences in child development. This has influenced how we view and assist a child who experiences barriers to learning. This means that holistic supportive systems can be developed guided by overarching theory but that show appreciation for a child's unique circumstances. At another level, the theory integrates multiple influences on child development and provides a holistic framework from which to understand child development. There is an acknowledgment of the shared responsibility that we all have regarding the development of children and the creation of support systems that nurture optimal development. Last but not least, the theory recognizes the roles of different subsystems at different levels to offer social support and the role they play in influencing people's behaviour. This helps the study in terms of ways which could be used by different actors to influence social functioning of children with cognitive disability. The main weakness of the theory is that, it assumes all variables have some equality on the impact and control over the environment conditions. This is not the case as some variables are bound to have a greater impact and degree of control when compared to other variables. The theory further assumes that there is coordination between different variables or subsystems work harmoniously to bring about the expected results. At another level, whereas the theory acknowledges the existence of different cultural values, norms and beliefs, that shape the individual's and community perspectives [49], the theory fails to explain how such cultural tendencies can be dealt with when safeguarding people who

are socially or culturally excluded from the community.

From the above review, it has become increasingly clear that, social function covers wider areas related to the improvement of quality of life of the people. Some of these areas include psychological empowerment playing a critical role in changing people's mind set, promoting intrapersonal (accepted control and self-effectiveness, motivation for control, accepted competence and mastery), knowledge and skill acquisition, interactive (understanding of community), behavioural components and political among others. These areas help to increase social skills, confidence, control, autonomy, and self-trust the variables which enable clients to act within their own authority. The picture which emerges from the above theories is that, all theories complement each other in terms of increasing the level of understanding the concept of social functioning. In a nut shell, one notices that the empowerment theory helps us to understand how enhancing social functioning is a process, which helps individuals to gain influence and control over their lives. On the other hand, inclusive theory emphasizes the process of improving the terms on which individuals, families and other groups take part in society by improving their ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity. Furthermore, the theory provides a greater understanding of social functioning based on inclusivity philosophy which helps the excluded groups to gain greater access to education, employment and economic opportunities. The gained benefits help to stimulate the sense of self determination, recognition and self-esteem. The ecological theory helps to understand how social workers and other stakeholders explain why people (i.e. individuals, families, groups and communities) behave as they do, to better understand how the environment affects and shapes their behaviour, to guide their interventions, and to predict what is likely to be the result of a particular social work intervention.

5. CHALLENGES OF ENHANCING SOCIAL FUNCTION AMONG CHILDREN WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITY

There are several challenges which face the children with cognitive disability. Some of these challenges include the following:

5.1 Mismatch between the Theory and Practice

The relationship between theory and practice is conceived in the way that knowledge is internally connected to practice. Theory and practice influence each other. Changes in practice precipitate a need to re-conceptualize theory. Practice is influenced by contextual factors such as agency policy and clientele. It becomes difficult to explain certain phenomenon if it does not correspondingly match with the existing realities on the ground. Taking the ecological theory as an example, we have noted limited research examining the meso systems; mainly the interactions between different subsystems, that is, in the neighbourhoods and the family of the child (Walker & Thompson, 2018). Reading the theory is not clear to what extent these systems can reinforce each other and shape the child's behaviour. The situation is more complex when it comes to shaping or assisting the children with cognitive disability. Because of that, the theory fails to evaluate all components or subsystems empirically in a social environment. This is largely because the model/theory requires extensive scope of ecological details with which to build up meaning that everything in someone's environment needs to be taken into account. Furthermore, the model does not give insight into how much an effect the subsystem has over another. This makes it difficult for families to uncover which aspect of the model they can focus more on to make a change in their environment or personal actions. Implementation of the social ecological model into communities can be difficult because of cost. For example, it is difficult to deal with discrimination and stigma issues when engaging with children with cognitive disability. This can be largely because changing the society members' mind-set may be difficult. This is likely to be due to lack of motivations for change in an environment.

In the course of discussing the relationship between theory and practice, the effect of context on that relationship was not seriously considered. There is a tendency to assume that the application of theory to practice is context-free [37,38,55]. However, there are contextual factors that can influence the applicability of the theory. Such factors are clients, the social work agency, and the individual worker's competence. The constructs of theory concerning clients'

behaviour, problem definition, and the definition of social function are socially and culturally defined (Patel et al., 2016). Because the factors differ from context to context, if neglected, there will be problems in the application of theory.

5.2 Negative Attitudes towards Persons with Disabilities

Negative perceptions lead to lack of opportunities and work, low self-esteem, and isolation, and consequently stigmatization, marginalization, and recurring negative health outcomes that prolong the discomfort of PWDs and also creating a substantial social burden. However, since many people in our societies tend to view disability with different negative implications, there has been a desire to avoid whatever is associated with evil and this has affected people's attitudes towards people with disabilities, simply because it is erroneously associated with evil. These mere misconceptions have produced negative attitudes that stem from lack of proper understanding of disability and how they affect functioning. For instance, some religious leaders indicate that persons with disabilities, especially those with mental disabilities, are possessed by evil spirits. These religious leaders subject people with disabilities to mental and physical pain as a means of exorcising the spirits. Regrettably, the inaccurate presentation of disability negatively affects some persons with disabilities. In most cases, they tend to see themselves and accept their fate as inferior and a burden to society. Thus, the inaccurate cultural values on disability as presented by the culture to which they belong, dominate their understanding of disability; whether cognitive, visual, physical speech, sensory or a combination of these. For instance, the message that a child with disability receives about himself or herself from his environment determines, to a large extent, his feelings about who he is, what he can do and how he should behave. In the same way, the inaccurate presentation of disability negatively influences how the people in that cultural set up interact with persons with disabilities. The resultant attitudes include pity, fear, uneasiness, guilt, sympathy and respect. These negative perceptions of disability relegate persons with disabilities to the background, thereby making them the largest oppressed minority in society. Such attitudinal barriers, stigma and

Stereotypes of thinking have persistently led to the inaccurate presentation of disability. In turn, this affects the relationship between persons with disabilities and the non-disabled people.

It is within this context, whereby the implementation of an inclusion theory suffers from the negative social environment which negatively affects their social functioning. The existing literature for example reveals that, in African countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Gambia and Tanzania [56] there is strong negative traditional cultural beliefs that place people with disability and children with cognitive disability in particular risk of being stigmatized, discriminated, and labelled for the nature of their disabilities. According to Tungaraza [49], this kind of discrimination is often caused by misunderstanding and negative beliefs concerning children with cognitive behaviour. For example, such children are considered as the societal burden, useless and incapable. Available evidence reveals that children with cognitive disability have been experiencing social challenges including unfair practices like stereotype, prejudice, marginalization and being locked in houses. These practices deprive them self-confidence, and a sense of belonging leading to psychological torture and stigmatization. One of the parents with a child with disability who was consulted by Rwegoshora et al. [42] was quoted saying:

All of us are susceptible to being disabled at any point in our lives. So we need to love each other whether we have a disability or not. This is what I tell my child to raise her spirit because sometimes she feels a bit down.

The above quotation is a reflection of the inner feeling of a child with disability. Because of that such children find it difficult to walk or play freely much as some parents and caregivers restrict them to play with others or go to school alone like other non-disabled children (Herrera, 2022). As if this is not enough, some of the parents or close relatives feel a sense of insecurity of these children and therefore do escort them to school and other public places. To this end, perhaps Sicora, [22] has a point when he argues:

Nowadays although parents are no longer likely to abandon children with cognitive disability, but experience shows that parents and community members are still reluctant to

provide even essential equipment and services for these children.

Despite the above observations, there have been various efforts to provide social protection as well as curbing the negativity tendency against people with disabilities. Some of these efforts are reflected not only at the global and regional level but also at the national level as evidenced in the Table 1. However, these efforts have seemed not to have produced a significant achievement in terms of enhancing the social functioning of people with disabilities in particular the children with cognitive disability.

As already highlighted above, the major problem has always been and continues to be the way societies perceive the concept of disability. Perception of disability is an important construct affecting not only the well-being of individuals with disabilities, but also the moral compass of the society. The available evidence reveals that, whereas various institutions create a conducive environment (e.g. creation of inclusive environment), the children with cognitive disability are not always accepted by their communities and within their peers, hence disempowering them and leading to their social exclusion and isolation. Sefotho (2019), Muzata [21] Mwamwaja, [34] and Passmore and Hughes [36] share the same view by arguing that across cultures, children with disabilities encounter negative attitudes, namely bullying, social exclusion, and isolation. Socially excluded children suffer from unsatisfying peer relationships, low self-esteem, and lack of achievement motivation, which affect their social functioning in various aspects of their life

5.3 Invisibility

Lack of data and statistics on disability and in particular children with cognitive disability contribute to invisibility of people with disabilities. This presents an obstacle to achieving the required social functioning (i.e. planning and implementation of various programmes) which aim at improving their quality of life. The prevalent rate of disability among children and young people in Tanzania as per HBS2017/18 indicate that children within the age ranging from 5-24 the survey revealed that the prevalence of rate of 2-3 per cent is for Tanzania mainland and 1.8 per cent for Zanzibar. The same source indicates that there is approximately 600,000 children and young persons living with disabilities in Tanzania. More specifically, the data from the household budget survey of 2019/2020 reveal the statistics by categories of cognitive disability as indicated in Table 2.

The picture which emerges from Table 2 is that, on average (i.e. 1.4%) represent the proportion of children with cognitive children in Tanzania. The numerical status puts the children with cognitive disability on the disadvantaged position because they are marginalized at different levels from the micro, meso and macro (i.e. family, community, and other institutional levels). A marginalized child is confined to the lower or peripheral edge of the society and such a child is denied involvement in mainstream of economic, cultural and social activities. Furthermore, the marginalization syndrome restricts the children life style as those marginalized become more isolated from peer influences, poor social integration and they become less likely to engage in risk behaviours.

Table 1. Global, regional and national effort to protect people with disability

Level of Initiatives	Tools
Global initiatives	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) Convention of the Elimination of Domestic violence Against Women (CEDAW)
Regional human rights	African Charter on Human and People's Rights African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child Protocol of African Charter on Human Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol)
National framework	The Law of the Child Act cap 13 R.E 2019 Persons With Disability Act 2010

Source: Convention of the Rights of the Child 1989

Table 2. Types of cognitive disability as per 2019/20 household budget survey in Tanzania

SN	Type of cognitive disability	Estimated Number
1.	Children with difficulty in remembering	1.7%
2.	Children with difficulty in communication	1.2%
3.	Children with difficulty in self-care	1.2%
4.	Average	1.4%

Source: URT (2020)

Similarly, they may take fewer changes to participate in social activities and to form friendships and relationships. At another level the marginalization is reflected in terms allocation of limited resource (e.g. human, financial and material) to support children in inclusive environment in schools and communities.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper has attempted to review theories explaining how social functioning could be enhanced. However, the review has indicated the challenge encountered by social workers in the application of social work theories by observing that, theories used in social work are diverse and have different focus of analysis and intervention. There are some scholars who think of the need for social work to require a systematic body of social work theory, to unify social work theories and develop an integrated model for social work practice. This cannot work because there are many variables and uncertainties in social work practice. There is no one single objective "reality" in social theory and social work practice. Practice, therefore, cannot be fully understood by just one model.

The study has also noted that social functioning is not only a function of social workers alone, it requires a concerted effort from different stakeholders like the parents, the neighbouring community members, politicians, psychotherapist, psychologists, and economists among others. However, the efforts to enhance the social functioning of children with disabilities is confronted by one major challenge, that is, social and cultural attitudes and assumptions about people with impairments that explain, justify and perpetuate prejudice, discrimination, stigma and exclusion in society. The other challenge is lack of a meaningful intervention between the social work, fieldwork, practitioners and researchers in higher learning institution to find out a theory which informs the practice in

an attempt to overcome the social environmental hostility among the people with disabilities. Lack of participation of different stakeholders and professionals, lack of political and relevant legal framework to protect the rights of people with disability, and lack of collaboration between different subsystems within the communities social functioning of children with cognitive disability will remain a non-starter. From the review made, it has become increasingly clear that negative social environment is largely responsible factor in enhancing the social functions of these children. The study recommends that any meaningful solution must be directed at societal change, that is, societal mind sent rather than individual adjustment and rehabilitation.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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