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Parental Involvement in the Education of Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Inclusive Primary Schools in Tanzania: A Case of Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School, Dar es Salaam

by

Mariana Makuu

Senior Lecturer, PhD

Department of Sociology and Social Work, The Open University of Tanzania
Tanzania

E-mail: mariana.makuu@out.ac.tz

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Abstract

Mutual partnerships between school staff and parents of children with disabilities are essential for establishing robust frameworks of inclusive education. This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine the practices, perceptions, and structural barriers shaping parental involvement in the education of learners with intellectual disabilities at Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School in Dar es Salaam—a historically significant site as the first institution in Tanzania to practice integration and a current model inclusive center for national policy implementation. Guided by an abductive thematic analysis, the study utilizes and critically interrogates Epstein's (2019) Spheres of Influence framework within a Sub-Saharan urban ecosystem. Using multi-stage purposive sampling via institutional gatekeepers, a final sample of 30 participants was recruited: 22 parents (4 male, 18 female), 4 special education teachers, and 4 administrators. Data collection involved institutional document analysis (school policies, meeting minutes, and involvement records) triangulated against 14 individual semi-structured interviews and two distinct focus group discussions conducted in Kiswahili. The findings reveal highly adaptive, context-driven strategies where parents—predominantly mothers—exert significant personal agency, investing massive “invisible labor” into home-school supervision and pioneering informal, oral face-to-face communication pathways that bypass rigid, Western-centric written protocols. Furthermore, the emergence of the parent-led “Uhuru Mama Collective” demonstrates how traditional school volunteering can be revolutionized into a potent mechanism for collective economic coping, mental health preservation, and public advocacy to dismantle local animistic stigmas. However, these localized successes are continuously undermined by severe macro-structural walls, including chronic state underfunding, intense situational time poverty, and systemic economic vulnerability. The study underscores the critical need to transition from symbolic models of inclusion to structural ones by formalizing micro-collectives, embedding parental experiential expertise into Individualized Education Plans, and anchoring inclusive schools within wider social protection nets.

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Introduction

The global education landscape has fundamentally transformed toward inclusive education—a paradigm built on the conviction that every child, regardless of ability, disability, or background, has an inherent right to learn alongside their peers in mainstream settings (UNESCO, 2020). This shift demands a systemic restructuring of educational environments to genuinely accommodate varied educational requirements (Ainscow, 2020). The overarching aim is to enable every learner to participate meaningfully, thrive academically, and develop a strong sense of belonging. This imperative is enshrined in international agreements like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations, 2016), which legally obliges nations to establish inclusive education systems, framing inclusion as a human rights issue.

For children with intellectual disabilities (IDs), embracing inclusive education marks a significant departure from historical practices where they were often marginalized or denied formal schooling (Schalock et al., 2021). Inclusive primary schools are designed to dismantle these barriers, offering environments where children with IDs benefit from adapted curricula, tailored teaching, and crucial peer interaction, thereby supporting their individualized educational experiences (UNICEF, 2023). This approach fosters their cognitive and social growth and actively combats societal stigmas, cultivating greater acceptance of neurodiversity.

The success of this transformative endeavor, especially for children with intellectual disabilities, is inextricably linked to active and meaningful parental engagement (Epstein, 2019). Parents are unparalleled advocates, possessing intimate knowledge of their child's strengths and challenges. Empirical research consistently links robust parental involvement to improved outcomes for students with IDs, including higher academic achievement and enhanced social competence (Kushwaha & Ahmad, 2024). Their engagement bridges the gap between home and school, ensuring learning continuity, reinforcing educational goals, and providing essential emotional support for a child's achievement (Turnbull et al., 2022). Studies have shown that when parents of children with IDs actively participate in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process and provide home-based support, their children demonstrate

greater progress toward individualized goals (Alnefaie & Alzahrani, 2024; Sevilla, 2024). When parents participate, they become co-educators and collaborators, contributing to a more effective educational experience.

Global approaches to inclusion and parental participation are deeply influenced by regional contexts. In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legally mandates inclusive education and emphasizes parental participation (Epstein, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). However, empirical studies tracking parental collaboration within inclusive educational environments document a persistent “asymmetry” during planning phases. These studies revealed that parents are frequently positioned as passive objects of evaluation rather than active, expert contributors to their child’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Empirical reviews underscore that many parents feel that their deep insights are undervalued by school professionals, leaving them feeling disempowered or pushed into ancillary roles during decision-making processes (Koskela & Sinkkonen, 2025).

Europe presents a mixed picture, with highly inclusive systems in some Nordic countries contrasting with more segregated models elsewhere (Kiuppis, 2024). Parental involvement is generally vital, though differing views on roles and cultural variations can pose challenges (Cologon, 2022; Paseka & Byrne, 2019). In Asia and Africa, common barriers cited in empirical research include limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and persistent societal stigmas, which restrict effective parental engagement (Janse van Rensburg & Clasquin-Johnson, 2023; Sharma et al., 2018). These regional nuances highlight that despite strong global commitments, inclusive education and meaningful parental involvement are profoundly shaped by local factors, demanding context-specific research.

Tanzania exemplifies this global ambition within a unique local context. The nation has shown commendable progress in policy development, aligning with international commitments through the Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 2014 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2014) and the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010 (United Republic of Tanzania, 2010). These frameworks signify a policy environment that is theoretically supportive of inclusive practices in schools (Opini & Onditi, 2016). However, the critical challenge lies in the translation of policy into

practice. Despite increased enrolment, the practical implementation of inclusive education in Tanzanian primary schools, particularly for children with intellectual disabilities, continues to face numerous challenges.

These challenges are often multifaceted, encompassing socio-cultural, economic, and systemic barriers. Stigma surrounding intellectual disability often hinders parental involvement, causing deep societal exclusion and a distinct reluctance among caregivers to engage with public primary school systems (Makuu et al., 2023; Mapunda et al., 2017). Economic constraints like severe time poverty, high hidden or direct financial strains, and limited community support structures—particularly for mothers—also pose significant obstacles to sustained participation and learning support (Raknes et al., 2024; Shukia & Marobo, 2023). Furthermore, systemic inadequacies continue to disempower parents; these include a severe lack of comprehensive teacher professional development regarding inclusive practices and disability management in mainstream classrooms (Kumburu, 2024), an acute shortage of specialized resource materials or accessible infrastructure (Vågenes et al., 2023), and fragile, uncooperative communication channels between the school and the home (Edward & Ndiujye, 2023).

Although the Tanzanian context has received some scholarly attention concerning inclusive education (Opini & Onditi, 2016), the existing literature is largely broad, often addressing general systemic issues across all disabilities. A critical knowledge gap remains in the specific area of parental involvement for children with intellectual disabilities—a group that faces unique educational challenges and intense socio-cultural stigma. Current research remains heavily focused on policy and resource issues, yet it lacks the necessary depth to capture lived experiences. There is still no detailed, context-specific insight into the actual practices of parental involvement or the unique barriers encountered within a high-profile government inclusive primary school in Dar es Salaam. This study addresses this gap by employing a focused, single-case methodology to capture the lived realities and nuanced dynamics of parent–teacher collaboration at Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School, thereby providing context-specific insights that are currently absent from the scholarly discourse.

This study focuses specifically on Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School in Dar es Salaam, treating it not merely as a typical urban school but as a special case for exploring the local interpretation of national inclusive education policies. Several distinct characteristics distinguish this school from other government-run institutions in Tanzania: Uhuru Mchanganyiko holds a unique place in Tanzanian history as the first school in the country to pioneer the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms—a mission that began in the 1960s. This long-standing institutional culture of “Mchanganyiko” (mixing/inclusion) provides a mature context for studying parent–teacher dynamics that does not exist in more recently converted inclusive schools.

Unlike many inclusive schools that may only cater to one type of impairment, Uhuru Mchanganyiko is a high-profile “hub” that hosts multiple specialized units—including those for visual impairments, hearing impairments, and intellectual disabilities—alongside the regular student body. This complexity creates a unique socio-cultural environment where parents of children with intellectual disabilities must navigate a system that is simultaneously mainstream and highly specialized. Located in a major urban center, the school is frequently utilized by the government and international organizations as a pilot site for inclusive initiatives. It is characterized by a higher-than-average concentration of specialized teachers and external oversight.

Its status as a high-profile school in the commercial capital means it is often the first to receive new policy directives. Studying this school as a special case allows for an examination of the “best-case scenario” of policy implementation; if barriers to parental involvement exist here, they are likely to be even more pronounced in less-resourced rural schools. By focusing on this specific, characteristic-rich case, the research moves beyond generalities to capture the lived realities of parents within Tanzania’s most established inclusive setting. This depth allows for the identification of specific practices and concrete barriers that are deeply embedded in the school’s unique structural and historical fabric.

The purpose of this study was to examine the practices of parental involvement in the education of children with intellectual disabilities within an inclusive government primary school, focusing on the parent–school partnership. The specific objective of

this study was to explore the perceptions of the parents, teachers, and administrators regarding parents' involvement in the education of their children with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, the study examined the barriers hindering parental involvement.

Conceptual Contextualization and Key Definitions

To establish clear boundaries for this qualitative case study, three core concepts are defined in relation to the operational landscape of Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School:

- **Intellectual Disability (ID):** Moving beyond a purely medical deficit model, ID is defined as a significant limitation in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. At Uhuru Mchanganyiko, it is treated as a dynamic status where a child's disability is experienced and managed based on the availability—or absence—of specialized infrastructure, tactile learning aids, and individualized teacher attention.
- **Inclusive Education (“Mchanganyiko”):** Rather than a static administrative placement, inclusion is defined as a continuous process of systemic restructuring and pedagogical adaptation. It is evaluated across two tracks: Structural Inclusion (the co-existence of specialized units alongside mainstream classrooms) and Social-Pedagogical Inclusion (the deliberate creation of shared social spaces and unstructured interactions between children with ID and their typically developing peers).
- **Parental Involvement:** Defined as a multidimensional, reciprocal partnership where parents act as active co-educators rather than passive recipients of school directives. Its depth, directionality, and power dynamics are analyzed through the six operational categories of Epstein's (2019) framework across both school-based and home-based environments.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Epstein's (2019) Framework of Six Types of Parental Involvement—a multi-dimensional model emphasizing that effective educational outcomes and student well-being are produced by overlapping spheres of influence across school, family, and community partnerships. Epstein outlines six interrelated dimensions of involvement that educational institutions can intentionally cultivate. This framework provides a comprehensive lens through which to decode the diverse, non-traditional ways in which parents contribute to their children's schooling.

In inclusive educational environments, this theoretical perspective is particularly vital. Children with intellectual disabilities present complex cognitive, communicative, and adaptive profiles that require highly coordinated, continuous support across home, classroom, and community boundaries. Epstein's framework moves past reductionist definitions of parental involvement—such as merely attending school meetings or paying fees—and instead treats the parent–teacher–administrator triad as an interdependent ecological system.

Operationalizing the Six Dimensions for Intellectual Disability

To effectively guide the evaluation of an inclusive government primary school within the Tanzanian context, the six dimensions of Epstein's model are conceptualized through the specialized requirements and localized adaptations of learners with intellectual disabilities:

- **Type 1: Parenting:** This dimension focuses on supporting families to establish home conditions, domestic routines, and behavioral strategies that nurture a child's cognitive and social development. For families of children with intellectual disabilities, this goes beyond basic care; it involves managing specialized communication approaches, independent living skills training, and behavior management techniques that directly mirror and reinforce classroom-based interventions (Turnbull et al., 2022). In this context, it highlights the “invisible labor” of caregivers—predominantly mothers—who act as informal educators to maintain learning continuity at home.

- **Type 2: Communicating:** This dimension highlights the design and execution of clear, accessible, and multi-directional communication channels between the school and home. In special needs education, effective communication must move beyond generic notices or rigid formal structures. It requires continuous, reciprocal, and relational exchanges regarding the child's health status, immediate behavioral shifts, and daily well-being, often utilizing flexible, face-to-face interaction methods to build mutual trust (Epstein, 2019).
- **Type 3: Volunteering:** This involves the organization and recruitment of parental time, labor, and unique skills to support the school's operational tracks. In an inclusive setting, parental volunteering frequently extends beyond traditional administrative tasks or classroom assistance. It encompasses collective, non-traditional forms of communal labor, such as participating in school-supported vocational projects or extending parental solidarity into social and communal matters within the wider school community (Epstein, 2019).
- **Type 4: Learning at Home:** This dimension concerns equipping families with targeted pedagogical strategies and accessible ideas to extend learning past formal school hours. For children with intellectual disabilities, this involves practical reinforcement from family members to support core academic and life skills—such as reading literacy and basic mathematics—ensuring that the home environment functions as a direct, active extension of the classroom setting (Guerra et al., 2025).
- **Type 5: Decision-Making:** This dimension emphasizes the inclusion of parents as genuine partners in institutional governance, educational path-setting, and school policy design. Because parents are the primary experts on their children's functional abilities, their active voice is a structural prerequisite for advocating for institutional accommodations, influencing school management choices, and driving the acquisition of specialized educational resources and facilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

- **Type 6: Collaborating with the Community:** This dimension involves the school functioning as an institutional space or clearing house that links families to external community-based services, cooperative resources, and civic networks. For families navigating the intersection of economic vulnerability and intellectual disabilities, this collaboration manifests in community-driven initiatives and parent-led collectives that provide vital economic relief, mutual emotional peer support, and nutritional security for the children (Epstein, 2019).

Operationalizing Epstein's Model: Thematic Interpretation Matrix

To transition Epstein's framework from a static, descriptive taxonomy into an active diagnostic instrument, this study operationalized the six dimensions directly into its thematic analysis architecture. During data analysis, the framework was not utilized as a rigid template to force initial coding; rather, it was deployed as a diagnostic grid during final theme synthesis to interpret the localized practices discovered at Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School.

The matrix below illustrates how these broad conceptual dimensions were translated into concrete empirical indicators during fieldwork and how they directly guided the interpretation of your data:

Epstein's Dimension	Localized Operational Definition	Empirical Indicators (Drawn Directly from Results)	Analytical Application (Mapping to Final Themes)
1. Parenting	How the school's ongoing communication reshapes and guides the "invisible labor" and domestic care routines managed by mothers at home.	• Mothers acting as informal educators at home. • Following a structured home learning schedule. • Utilizing daily progress updates from teachers to guide home care.	Interprets how continuous domestic supervision establishes learning continuity, feeding into: Integrated Home-School Supervision.
2. Communicating	The use of frequent, informal, and relational face-to-face dialogues that serve as immediate, real-time wellness checks.	• Brief, meaningful face-to-face dialogue. • Morning drop-offs and afternoon pick-ups used as "triage" moments. • Real-time sharing of health/behavioral alerts (e.g., catching malaria early).	Evaluates how informal, relational check-ins build trust more effectively than formal letters, decoding: Proactive Dialogue and Immediate Interaction.
3. Volunteering	Parents dedicating time and communal labor to school-supported initiatives that extend beyond conventional, administrative school activities.	• Mothers gathering daily in an on-campus room provided by management. • Committing time to vocational handicraft production. • Expanding parental presence into staff social matters (e.g., attending staff funerals).	Decodes non-traditional communal labor and collective solidarity, directly interpreting: The Uhuru Mama Collective: Empowerment through Vocational Collaboration.
4. Learning at Home	The direct reinforcement of classroom goals (such as reading and basic mathematics) through active family support after school hours.	• Active reinforcement of reading and mathematics outside school. • Direct improvement and tracking of the child's academic progress. • Parents acting as a continuous extension of the classroom.	Tracks how information shared by teachers directly shapes home teaching practices, integrated into: Integrated Home-School Supervision.

Epstein's Dimension	Localized Operational Definition	Empirical Indicators (Drawn Directly from Results)	Analytical Application (Mapping to Final Themes)
5. Decision-Making	The transformation of parent roles from passive recipients of information to active contributors who influence institutional management.	• Parents openly sharing specific challenges directly with school management. • Parent advocacy acting as a primary driver to secure new facilities and resources. • Utilizing management's "open-door policy" to influence child-centered decisions.	Critically maps parent voice and advocacy as a structural driver of policy and resource acquisition, illuminating: Parental Agency in School Governance.
6. Collaborating with Community	The formation of community-driven, collective spaces to address the economic, nutritional, and emotional vulnerabilities of ID caregiving.	• Collective vocational training and handicraft production to generate funds. • Group peer-support to reduce maternal emotional stress. • Leveraging collective funds to ensure children have access to nutritious food.	Contextualizes how structural gaps and funding challenges drive community-based survival and solidarity networks, directly interpreting: The Uhuru Mama Collective and Structural/Situational Barriers.

Framework-Driven Analysis of Barriers

Analytically, this framework does not assume that these six dimensions of partnership manifest seamlessly; instead, it functions as a critical diagnostic vacuum indicator to pinpoint exact points of relational, structural, or systemic failure within the inclusive school ecosystem. By evaluating your empirical data through these specific conceptual nodes, the analysis moves away from vague generalizations about educational challenges and maps out precisely how macro-level forces disrupt specific interactions between parents, teachers, and administrators.

The framework guides the interpretation of these systemic disruptions across two primary intersecting dimensions:

- **Economic Deprivation and “Time Poverty” as a Structural Disruptor:** The framework analyzes severe poverty not merely as a background variable but as a direct threat to the execution of Type 3 (Volunteering) and Type 4 (Learning at Home). When primary caregivers—predominantly mothers—must

dedicate their extended daily hours to informal market trade to ensure household survival, they face intense time constraints. This structural reality deprives them of the capacity to volunteer in classrooms or purchase materials for home learning. Yet, as interpreted through the lens of Type 6 (Collaborating with Community), this barrier also explains the emergence of the *Uhuru Mama Collective*, where parents creatively turned to community-driven vocational collaboration to directly mitigate economic stress and unlock their capacity for school engagement.

- **Socio-Cultural Stigma as a Relational Disruptor:** Deeply entrenched social myths and discrimination surrounding intellectual disabilities in Tanzania (UNICEF Tanzania, 2021) are tracked by how they actively stifle Type 1 (Parenting) and Type 5 (Decision-Making). Fear of community judgment often forces families into defensive postures of domestic concealment, making them hesitant to seek parenting guidance or step into visible advocacy roles on formal governance bodies like the School Committee. The framework highlights how informal communication practices—such as the “Informal Daily Check-in”—act as essential, culturally responsive tools to dismantle this stigma, building the relational trust required to draw isolated parents into active school alignment.

By deploying Epstein’s framework as an integrated interpretive engine rather than a static classification list, this study systematically decodes your qualitative findings. It uncovers the precise structural barriers, institutional gaps, and resilient parental innovations that define the daily realities of inclusive education at Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore parental involvement in the education of children with intellectual disabilities at Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The case study approach was chosen to provide a holistic and contextualized understanding of experiences within a school that is

historically significant as the first institution in Tanzania to practice integration and currently serves as a model inclusive center for national policy implementation.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling in a multi-stage process. With permission from the Head Teacher and Special Education Coordinator, the researcher accessed the school register to identify parents of children diagnosed with intellectual disabilities and teachers assigned to special needs units. The Special Education Coordinator acted as a gatekeeper, introducing the study to potential participants to build trust. Interested individuals then met with the researcher, who explained the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality protocols. Parents were eligible if they had a child with an intellectual disability enrolled for at least one academic year, teachers if they had a minimum of two years' experience teaching children with intellectual disabilities, and administrators if they held a leadership role in special education.

The final sample comprised 30 participants: 22 parents (4 male, 18 female), 4 teachers (1 male, 3 female), and 4 administrators (2 male, 2 female). Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with all 4 administrators, all 4 teachers, and 6 parents, each lasting 45–60 minutes. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held, one with 4 teachers and another with 6 parents, each lasting about 90 minutes, to capture collective dynamics and shared experiences.

All interviews and FGDs were conducted in Kiswahili, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. To ensure translation accuracy, transcripts were reviewed by a bilingual colleague and selected excerpts were back-translated. Document analysis included school policies, meeting minutes, and parental involvement records, which were used to triangulate interview and FGD data and to identify institutional practices and gaps.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing themes,

defining/naming themes, and producing the report. To eliminate methodological ambiguity, the study operationalized a hybrid approach to analysis, balancing inductive and deductive logic throughout the coding and categorization phases.

During Phase 2 (Coding) and Phase 3 (Generating Categories), transcripts were first analyzed inductively through line-by-line open coding to capture localized, emergent phenomena directly from the participants' words, such as specific Swahili cultural terms regarding disability stigma and distinct economic barriers. Concurrently, document corpus data—including school policies and parent–teacher meeting minutes—were coded alongside the transcripts. These initial inductive codes and document segments were then iteratively mapped onto a deductive analytical grid derived from Epstein's (2019) six typologies of parental involvement. This abductive movement between the empirical data and the theoretical framework ensured that the resulting themes remained deeply data-driven while being systematically structured through a recognized institutional lens. For example, participant grievances regarding a lack of school-based governance roles were directly cross-referenced and integrated into the final themes alongside meeting minutes that verified minimal parent representation.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was maintained through rigorous qualitative quality indicators. Credibility was achieved through data source triangulation (interviews, FGDs, and institutional documents) and member checking, where participants reviewed summaries of the preliminary findings to verify interpretive accuracy. Transferability was enhanced by providing a dense, thick description of Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School's historical legacy, urban institutional context, and detailed participant demographics. Dependability was secured through a clear audit trail, including a chronological research log documenting all methodological adjustments, updates to the semi-structured guides, and contextual reflections recorded immediately after each session. Lastly, confirmability was maintained through active reflexivity; the author explicitly documented her positionality as an academic researcher and external observer to the school community, continuously examining how her professional background could influence data interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional and ethical protocols were strictly prioritized. Administrative clearance was obtained from relevant authorities, and informed consent was secured from every participant prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality and psychological safety, all interviews and FGDs were conducted in private rooms within the special education units. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to pause, skip questions, or withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Data security was maintained by storing audio recordings on a password-protected external drive, anonymizing all written transcripts to protect participant identities, and securing physical field notes in a locked cabinet accessible solely to me.

Results

The abductive thematic analysis of individual interviews, focus group discussions, and institutional documents yielded five interconnected themes. Moving away from a rigid taxonomy, these findings capture the dynamic, context-specific realities of Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School. The data reveal how local cultural adaptations and severe structural constraints actively reshape the overlapping spheres of school, family, and community influence.

Theme 1: Learning at Home and the “Invisible Labor” of Home-School Supervision

Reflecting the core tenets of Epstein’s *Learning at Home* dimension, educational involvement at Uhuru Mchanganyiko extends deeply into the domestic sphere, functioning as a deliberate pedagogical extension of the special education units. However, institutional document analysis reveals a critical structural pattern: official parental involvement records from 2024 to 2026 show that over 80% of school-targeted signatures and meeting attendees were female. This structural trend is vividly reflected in the empirical data, which demonstrates that this domestic extension relies almost exclusively on the “invisible labor” of mothers acting as informal co-educators.

Rather than viewing home care as separate from school, mothers continuously translate daily school indicators into structured, home-based interventions. As Parent 2 (Mother) detailed:

I make sure my child is supervised at all times, ensuring he follows the learning schedule at home. The daily updates from school help me understand where he needs extra support. This has made big changes in my son's school progress and now he has been moved to the upper class.

Special education teachers strongly corroborated this home-based reinforcement, noting that targeted familial supervision directly accelerates classroom outcomes.

Teacher 1 observed:

We have noted positive changes in recent years related to the academic progress of children with intellectual disabilities. Children have improved their reading ability and they manage to solve some mathematic problems, which is due to support they receive from their families after school.

School administration recognized that this active extension of learning depends entirely on a functional, bidirectional loop where institutional data directly alter domestic parenting choices. This relational loop bridges the home–school boundary, as Administrator 3 noted:

The school encourages mothers to actively supervise and support children at home based on their daily progress reports. The progress of these children highlights a strong home–school connection where information shared by teachers directly influences parenting practices, fostering a supportive environment conducive to the children's overall development.

Theme 2: Culturally Responsive Communicating via “Informal Daily Check-ins”

When analyzed through the lens of *Communicating*, the data uncover a highly localized, oral communication infrastructure that bypasses rigid, formal written notices or scheduled bi-annual assemblies. Parents and teachers have organically repurposed morning drop-offs and afternoon pick-ups into real-time, face-to-face “triage” spaces. In the socio-cultural landscape of Dar es Salaam, this informality is not an administrative failure; it is a responsive adaptation that builds immediate relational trust. Parent 3 shared a critical example of how this immediate, relational communication loop directly safeguarded her child's health:

I speak with my child's teacher every day during drop-off and pick-up. One day, the teacher mentioned that my daughter was unusually silent and withdrawn. I took her to the dispensary, and she was diagnosed with malaria and treated. Without that conversation, I might not have realized something was wrong so quickly.

Teachers uniformly lauded this proactive, daily contact approach as an effective mechanism for building solidarity and keeping parents closely tied to classroom activities. Teacher 3 stated:

Parents are very proactive in seeking updates. We often have brief but meaningful discussions during drop-off and pick-up, ensuring they stay informed about their child's learning and well-being. Effective communication has brought parents, teachers and children closer together.

From an administrative perspective, these organic check-ins serve to solidify institutional relationships over time, converting routine transit moments into meaningful collaborative spaces. This baseline of mutual trust was validated by Administrator 1:

Parents are very proactive in seeking updates. Brief but meaningful discussions during drop-off and pick-up keep them informed about their child's progress. Over time, this communication has strengthened relationships between parents, teachers, and children.

Theme 3: The Uhuru Mama Collective as Collective, Vocational Volunteering

Evaluating the data against the intersection of *Volunteering* and *Collaborating with the Community* reveals that parental involvement expands far beyond conventional, school-mandated tasks like cleaning classrooms; it has evolved into an organized, collective form of socio-economic empowerment: the Uhuru Mama Collective (UMC). Initiated within a designated campus room provided by school management, the UMC operates as a localized vocational training, peer support, and advocacy hub.

To preserve the focus group dynamics, the following transcript excerpt highlights how the mothers collectively reflect, build consensus, and co-construct the meaning of this group space, demonstrating that the UMC functions as an emotional and financial shield against isolation:

Parent 3 (during the FGD):

Through the Uhuru Mama Collective, we not only support our children's education but also ensure they have access to nutritious food. This initiative has strengthened our bond as mothers and it has given us a shared purpose. The collective has built our confidence and reduces emotional stress compared to when we had nothing to do to generate funds.

Parent 6 (nodding, building immediately on the point):

Yes, because sitting alone at home with a child with intellectual disabilities makes you feel completely isolated by the community. But in this room, we talk, we weave, and we realize we share the same struggles.

Parent 2 (interjecting to add a governance perspective):

Exactly! And because we are working together in a room provided by the school, we are no longer just desperate individual mothers. This handicraft project has given us a collective voice when we need to approach the school management.

Teachers noted that this innovative form of community-based volunteering has deeply altered the social fabric of the school, integrating parents into the broader institutional community in unprecedented ways. Teacher 4 explained:

The parents' participation in the handicraft project is truly commendable. It strengthens their connection with the school, cultivates a supportive community, and offers vital assistance for the children's well-being. Additionally, their involvement now extends to social matters, such as attending staff members' funerals—something that was not previously observed.

Theme 4: Parental Agency and Decision-Making Governance

The empirical data show a distinct level of parental agency regarding school policies, mapping onto the *Decision-Making* dimension. Rather than operating as passive consumers of educational directives, parents demonstrated significant confidence in their capacity to actively access, communicate with, and influence school leadership. An audit of the school's 2025 parent–teacher meeting logs corroborates this, documenting consistent parental presence and specific action items raised by mothers regarding unit resource allocation. Parent 5 highlighted this sense of structural proximity:

We feel close to the school management and can share challenges facing our children directly with them. This makes us feel that our voice is heard in addressing issues that affect our children's education.

School administrators confirmed that organized parental advocacy is not viewed as an intrusion but rather as the primary institutional lever used to secure resources from external ministerial bodies. Administrator 2 noted that parent-led demands directly drive the acquisition of specialized facilities for the intellectual disability units, demonstrating that parental agency is a structural prerequisite for institutional resource mobilization.

Theme 5: Structural and Situational Barriers to the Spheres of Influence

Despite the high levels of personal agency and commitment demonstrated by the participants, their capacity to sustain involvement across these overlapping spheres is continuously disrupted by severe macro-economic realities and systemic friction. An examination of the school's strategic planning documents highlights this fragility, showing a complete absence of a dedicated state budget line for specialized intellectual disability vocational materials, leaving parent-led initiatives entirely dependent on self-generated funds.

Administrator 2 explicitly noted how these economic realities compromise the long-term sustainability of the parents' most innovative volunteering initiatives:

Parents are deeply committed to collective projects like the handicraft project. Their initiative and dedication ensure that children receive additional support beyond the classroom, reinforcing a shared purpose. Unfortunately, sustaining funding for parent-led initiatives remains a challenge. Although their commitment is strong, ensuring long-term financial stability for these projects requires additional planning and external support.

Furthermore, the daily logistical friction required to maintain intensive, face-to-face communication channels often collides with the survival needs of low-income urban families. This tension between high motivation and intense time poverty was captured during the focus group discussion, where participants co-constructed the daily barriers they face:

Parent 5:

The school management is very approachable, and we feel comfortable sharing our concerns. Their open-door policy makes us feel heard and valued in decisions affecting our children. However, balancing daily pick-up and drop-off with other responsibilities can be challenging. While we want to be involved, sometimes time constraints make it difficult to participate fully.

Parent 1 (agreeing, adding situational nuance):

That is the real problem. If I spend two hours traveling here for a brief drop-off check-in, those are two hours I am not at my market stall. If I do not sell, my family does not eat, so the school connection is always fighting with our survival.

Discussion

The empirical findings demonstrate that parental involvement at Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School operates as a highly adaptive, context-driven ecosystem that both intersects with and actively reconfigures Epstein's (2019)

Spheres of Influence framework. By examining these dynamics within an urban Tanzanian inclusive context, this study reveals how systemic socio-economic friction and deep-seated cultural realities reshape universal typologies into localized strategies for survival and advocacy.

The pervasive “invisible labor” of home-school supervision observed in this study directly exemplifies Epstein’s Type 4 (Learning at Home) typology, while exposing its heavily gendered architecture in Sub-Saharan Africa. The reality that domestic spaces are deliberately operationalized as physical extensions of the special education classroom aligns with Eleftheriadou and Vlachou’s (2023) documentation of mothers as the primary anchors of disability care. However, within the socio-economic landscape of Dar es Salaam, this home-based reinforcement is not merely supplementary; it is a critical compensatory mechanism for overstretched institutional resources. This echoes Oranga et al. (2022), who observed that East African parents must provide intense behavioral and pedagogical management at home to make classroom learning viable. By actively translating daily school indicators into structured home schedules, these mothers validate Gitonga’s (2023) assertion that localized parenting practices constitute the most decisive variable in early specialized educational outcomes. Furthermore, the structured loop of using daily feedback to calibrate home support exemplifies Van Voorhis et al.’s (2013) argument that targeted home–school communication maximizes child development, particularly when managing intellectual disabilities.

A critical theoretical departure from Epstein’s framework emerges within Type 2 (Communicating). Although Epstein (2019) traditionally emphasizes formalized, institutionalized school-to-home channels (such as written notices, report cards, and scheduled conferences), the reality at Uhuru Mchanganyiko is that informal, oral, and immediate interactions are far more effective. The “Informal Daily Check-in” acts as a real-time, face-to-face “triage” space that accommodates the fluid realities of a low-income urban environment. This hyper-frequent interaction mirrors Li and Burke’s (2023) insistence that caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities require continuous, low-friction dialogue to monitor acute behavioral and medical shifts.

Henderson and Mapp's (2002) work remains seminal in demonstrating how informal, trust-based conversations dismantle institutional hierarchies, and more recent scholarship has reinforced and updated these insights. Moilanen et al. (2026) show that practitioners' communication skills are central to effective child and family social work, directly shaping outcomes in contexts of vulnerability. Similarly, Heino et al. (2025) emphasize that trust-building between professionals, children, and parents is not peripheral but foundational, enabling resilience and safeguarding even in strained protection environments. Together, these studies affirm that informality rooted in relational trust is a structural strength, not a weakness, in safeguarding vulnerable children.

The emergence of the Uhuru Mama Collective (UMC) redefines the traditional boundaries of Epstein's Type 3 (Volunteering) and Type 6 (Collaborating with the Community). In Western iterations, school volunteering often manifests as peripheral, task-oriented assistance (e.g., decorating classrooms or chaperoning events). In contrast, the UMC represents a radical, self-sustaining model of collective economic and psychological coping. By utilizing institutional space to launch vocational handicraft production, the collective directly counters the systemic economic vulnerability and profound emotional isolation that defines parenting a child with ID in Tanzania. This structural evolution aligns with Raknes et al.'s (2024) observation that parent-led vocational frameworks inside schools generate dual-stream economic and emotional benefits.

It further instantiates Mncube's (2019) argument that communal socio-economic initiatives foster a deep sense of democratic belonging among historically marginalized families. Crucially, the UMC elevates volunteering into a vehicle for public advocacy. The public display and sale of mother-made crafts do not merely generate funds; they project parental agency into the community, directly dismantling local animistic stigmas and superstitious myths that frame children with IDs as divine curses or passive "burdens." Instead, they are repositioned as valued, capable "producers."

Finally, the tension surrounding parental agency highlights the complex fractures within Epstein's Type 5 (Decision-Making). Although Tanzanian parents demonstrate

remarkable personal agency and high confidence in navigating informal micro-decisions—freely accessing school leadership through an open-door policy—their transition into formal institutional governance remains severely constrained. This structural wall supports Jukes et al. (2022), who identified that severe situational barriers, macro-economic instability, and systemic underfunding continuously choke parental efficacy in formal educational spaces. At Uhuru Mchanganyiko, parents are highly effective at mobilizing micro-level advocacy to help administrators secure specialized infrastructure from external ministries. Yet, as school leadership notes, the long-term financial stability of these very initiatives remains fragile without state-backed resource allocation. To bridge this gap, as argued by Musengamana (2023), inclusive educational ecosystems must design communication and governance strategies that are simultaneously structured enough to guarantee parental legal protections and flexible enough to accommodate the survival schedules of low-income urban workers.

Implications and Future Directions

To translate these insights into sustainable practice, inclusive education policy must move away from treating parental involvement as a generic, secondary checkbox. The success of learners with intellectual disabilities depends on cultivating a seamless experience across the home–school boundary—a principle first emphasized by Yazıcıoğlu and Sümer Dodur (2023) and Deepa and Antony (2024). More recent scholarship confirms that this boundary remains critical for inclusion and learning outcomes. Masondo and Mabaso (2025) argue that effective home–school partnerships are a “missing ingredient” in achieving inclusive education for learners with severe intellectual disabilities, noting that many parents lack awareness of their collaborative role.

Similarly, Ahmad and colleagues (2023) demonstrate that teacher–family collaboration in home-based learning is essential for fostering independence and development among children with moderate intellectual disabilities. Together, these studies reinforce that continuity across home and school environments is not simply supportive but foundational, ensuring that learners with intellectual disabilities receive consistent guidance, emotional support, and structured learning opportunities

(Anderson et al., 2024; Saini et al., 2025). The realization of this requires a deliberate pivot from investing solely in physical infrastructure to actively building relational infrastructure (Swart et al., 2002).

- **Epistemic Recognition in IEP Development:** School practices must formally acknowledge and institutionalize the highly specialized, context-driven behavioral and communication knowledge that parents possess. This experiential expertise should be structurally embedded as a mandatory baseline in the formulation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), rather than relying solely on clinical or standardized teacher assessments.
- **Formalization of Micro-Collectives:** Educational policymakers should explicitly recognize and financially buffer informal, parent-led networks like the Uhuru Mama Collective. Rather than treating these groups as peripheral, ad-hoc bodies, they should be integrated into national inclusive education strategies as recognized hubs for community-based vocational rehabilitation and local stigma reduction.
- **Cross-Sectoral Resource Linkages:** Because the trade-offs between daily economic survival and school engagement are acute for low-income families, schools must serve as entry points to wider social protection nets. Alliances must be forged with local health dispensaries, municipal social welfare offices, and civil society organizations to provide holistic medical and financial relief, thereby reducing the situational barriers that restrict parental presence.

Conclusion

This study of parental involvement at Uhuru Mchanganyiko Primary School provides a critical window into the operational realities of inclusive special education within urban Tanzania. The findings demonstrate that parents—predominantly mothers—are not passive beneficiaries of educational services but are active co-educators who invest massive, often invisible, domestic labor (Type 4) and pioneer highly effective, relational communication pathways (Type 2) to sustain their children’s learning. Furthermore, innovations like the Uhuru Mama Collective demonstrate how traditional

school volunteering can be revolutionized into a potent mechanism for socio-economic empowerment, mental health preservation, and community advocacy.

However, the study also highlights that high personal agency and deep familial commitment are continuously undermined by macro-structural walls, including chronic financial instability, extreme poverty, and persistent social stigma. If Tanzania is to fulfill its progressive policy mandates for special education, the state must transition from a symbolic model of inclusion to a structural one.

This requires building a resilient, fully funded ecosystem where families, schools, and communities share authentic, institutionalized responsibility. Only by actively mitigating economic vulnerabilities and dismantling social stigma through reciprocal, state-supported partnerships can children with intellectual disabilities achieve genuine educational equity, social participation, and long-term empowerment.

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