

Ubuntu and Mental Wellness: Promoting Holistic Health Education for Special Needs Learners (SNLS) in African Schools

Ubuntu, an African philosophy, emphasizes interconnectedness, mutual respect, and collective identity within communities. The essence of Ubuntu is encapsulated in the phrase "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," which translates to "a person is a person through other persons," originating from the Nguni Bantu languages.¹ This philosophy asserts that an individual's humanity is intricately tied to their relationships with others, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and mutual care.² In education, Ubuntu promotes an inclusive approach, viewing the educational system as a communal effort aimed at the holistic development of all learners, particularly those with special needs. By creating an environment where every child is valued and supported, Ubuntu directly challenges the marginalization often experienced by special needs learners (SNLs).

This philosophy aligns with the broader objectives of holistic health education, which focuses on addressing physical, mental, and emotional well-being within a nurturing and inclusive community.³ The significance of Ubuntu in African schools is particularly profound in promoting the mental wellness of SNLs, providing a robust framework for inclusive education that acknowledges and celebrates diverse needs. Through the lens of Ubuntu, schools can cultivate environments that empower every learner, helping them to thrive and develop a sense of belonging.

This paper explores an inclusive education system that integrates both proximal and distal environmental structures to support the mental wellness and development of children with disabilities.⁴ It aims to demonstrate how African schools can foster holistic health education and mental well-being, addressing the unique challenges SNLs face by promoting supportive and inclusive learning environments.

Ubuntu Philosophy in Education

Ubuntu, which translates to humanness, is a transnational pre-colonial philosophy shared by the Bantu people of Sub-Saharan Africa. Historically, the Bantu people hold the values of Ubuntu in high regard, emphasizing collective solidarity over individualism through phrases like, "*I am because we are; we are because I am*". *Bantu* means "people," emphasizing a culture of love, compassion, and respect for fellow humans. Ubuntu is fundamentally based on principles of sharing, cooperation, group cohesion, communication, and communitarianism.⁵

Colonialism significantly impacted these values, leading to the devaluation of community knowledge and practices through the imposition of Western education, which promoted individualism at the expense of communal living. Consequently, the introduction of ableist ideologies marginalized individuals with disabilities, as Western educational frameworks often embraced segregated education models. The Ubuntu philosophy, emphasizing community and solidarity, presents an alternative to these colonial legacies and aligns with the fundamental belief that individual wellness is connected to the community's collective well-being.

Role of Ubuntu in Promoting Community, Empathy, and Mutual Care

When juxtaposed with disability studies, the Ubuntu philosophy can positively affect the lives of individuals with disabilities.⁶ The underlying principles of Ubuntu foster a sense of community and humanness that encompasses mental well-being and health, paving a hopeful path for SNLs facing discrimination and stigma.⁷ SNLs often encounter unequal access to healthcare, education, employment, and transportation, primarily due to exclusion from societal structures.

Historically, Christian missionaries and charitable organizations initiated the provision of special education in Africa in the nineteenth century.⁸ However, this approach

has often led to the segregation of SNLs, diminishing the collective identity and community values that Ubuntu emphasizes. By fostering a culturally relevant classroom space, African communities can remove the colonial legacy's detrimental impact on education, enabling SNLs to receive holistic health education and mental wellness support alongside their peers.⁹

Mental Wellness and Special Needs Learners

Mental wellness is often defined interchangeably with mental health and refers to a person's ability to cope with life's challenges while recognizing and valuing their potential.¹⁰ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental wellness encompasses the collective abilities to learn, work, and contribute to one's community.¹¹ Stress factors stemming from social and environmental systems can interfere with these abilities, leading to mental health issues, including depression and anxiety.¹²

Research indicates that individuals with disabilities are particularly susceptible to mental wellness challenges, as they often encounter barriers in various aspects of their daily lives, such as mobility, hearing, vision, concentration, memory, and decision-making.¹³ Mental wellness is multidimensional, incorporating spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, psychological, and social aspects.¹⁴ These dimensions are interconnected and play a crucial role in the overall psychological well-being of SNLs, influencing their relationships, autonomy, and capacity to navigate complex environments.¹⁵

Due to their vulnerabilities, SNLs often experience mental stress in educational settings. Many factors contribute to this stress, including learning barriers, delayed recognition of needs, and challenges associated with early identification.¹⁶ The Ubuntu philosophy emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and highlights the importance of community support for personal growth and well-being. This holistic approach acknowledges that mental wellness is rooted in the social and cultural contexts surrounding learners.¹⁷

However, SNLs often struggle to access community support due to the stigma surrounding their disabilities.¹⁸ The Ubuntu philosophy encourages educators to adopt a compassionate approach to support the mental wellness of SNLs, recognizing their unique strengths and working collaboratively with families and communities to create nurturing environments.¹⁹ By fostering inclusive learning spaces, educators can help SNLs develop a sense of belonging and resilience, which is essential for their overall mental wellness.²⁰

Challenges Faced by SNLs in Maintaining Mental Wellness

SNLs encounter unique challenges in maintaining mental wellness, primarily arising from social, educational, and systemic barriers. A significant issue is the pervasive stigma associated with disabilities, often leading to social isolation and exclusion.²¹ Many communities misunderstand disabilities, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that heighten feelings of alienation for SNLs, ultimately impacting their self-esteem and mental health.²² Educational environments often exacerbate these challenges, with inadequate accommodations and a lack of support from teachers leading to frustration and alienation.²³ Many schools in low-resource settings lack essential materials, such as specialized learning aids, which are critical for the success of SNLs.²⁴ This absence of support can result in heightened anxiety as SNLs strive to keep pace with their peers in unsuitable environments.²⁵

Physical barriers also significantly affect the mental wellness of SNLs. Many face mobility or sensory challenges, making navigating school settings independently difficult.²⁶ This can lead to feelings of helplessness and dependence, ultimately harming their emotional and psychological wellness. Peer relationships are vital for SNLs, yet social stigmas and bullying hinder their ability to form friendships, leading to further isolation. Social exclusion is a significant stressor for individuals with disabilities, contributing to increased rates of depression and anxiety.²⁷

Holistic Health Education

Definition and Principles

Holistic education encompasses various perspectives on core principles and practices, emphasizing a comprehensive approach to nurturing individuals. Florêncio-Wain²⁸ defines it as a "paradigmatic stance," highlighting the importance of creating learning environments that address the needs of the whole individual. Similarly, Miller²⁹ characterizes holistic education as an approach fostering intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual development. This paradigm underscores the interconnectedness of these dimensions, suggesting that addressing only academic needs is insufficient.

Holistic education extends beyond traditional academic achievement to foster critical thinking, creativity, empathy, resilience, and purpose. Schools can create environments that nurture lifelong learners by promoting a balanced educational approach that incorporates attention to nutrition, mental health, and physical well-being. This educational philosophy encourages individuals to pursue personal excellence and embrace the richness of life.³⁰ Therefore, holistic education aims to prepare students to navigate life's complexities, enabling them to take ownership of their knowledge and become informed, engaged members of society.

Importance for Special Needs Learners (SNLs)

The stresses faced by special needs learners necessitate an educational approach focused on their health and mental well-being. Holistic health education offers a framework to manage the multiple dimensions of learners' well-being within the educational environment, recognizing the interdependence of education and health.³¹ By integrating holistic health principles, schools can foster both academic achievement and the overall well-being of learners, particularly those with special needs.

Holistic health education has several key components, including physical health, mental health, emotional resilience, and social well-being. These components are interrelated, and each contributes to overall health. Physical health involves promoting active lifestyles, proper nutrition, and health awareness, while mental health emphasizes resilience, emotional intelligence, and coping strategies.³² Emotional wellness focuses on self-awareness, empathy, and forming and maintaining healthy relationships.

Benefits of Holistic Health Education

Research supports the benefits of holistic health education, showing improved academic performance, reduced absenteeism, and enhanced social and emotional skills among students.³³ This approach benefits SNLs, providing a supportive framework to address their unique challenges and promote overall development.³⁴ Schools can create nurturing, inclusive environments by integrating mental, emotional, and physical wellness into educational practices.

Schools must go beyond traditional academic instruction to align with the principles of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness and communal well-being. Activities and curricula that promote wellness, such as mindfulness programs and social-emotional learning (SEL), should be integrated into the educational framework.³⁵ The Ubuntu-inspired approach allows educators to create inclusive environments focused on every learner's well-being, particularly those with special needs. This contributes to a more equitable society by addressing systemic barriers marginalizing these learners.³⁶ Based on the definitions discussed above, holistic education seeks to develop all areas of learning that will allow students to take ownership of their knowledge and become informed and engaged members of society within and beyond the academic environment. See the diagram below.

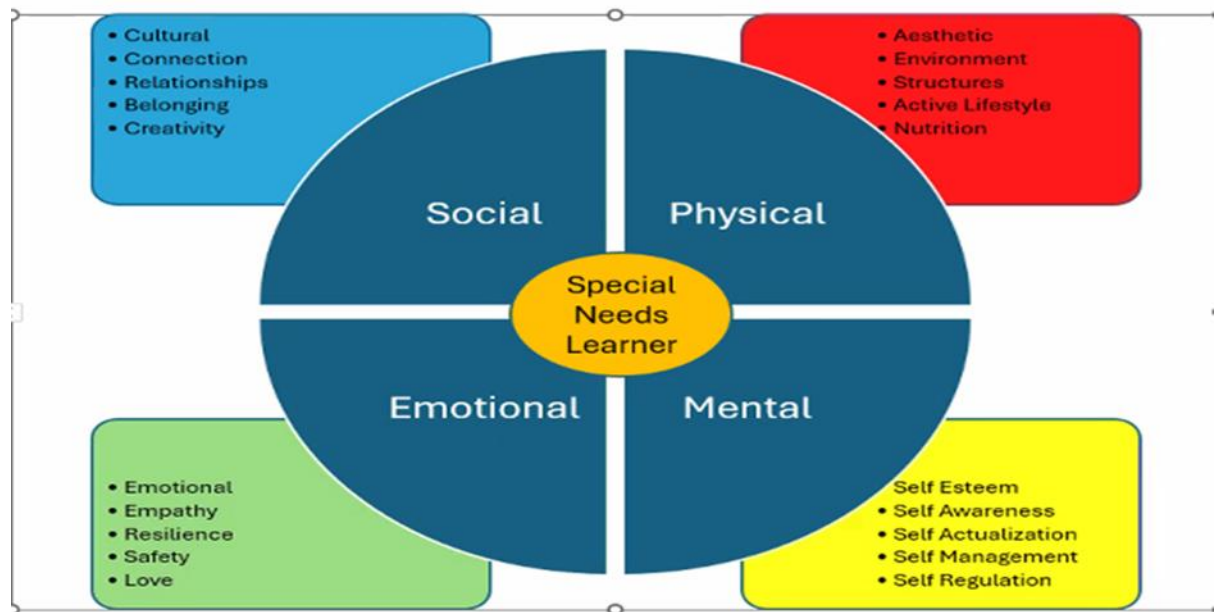


Figure 1. Features of Holistic Health Education

Inclusive Education Frameworks

Inclusive education has emerged as a critical educational framework aiming to remove barriers and improve outcomes for students with special needs and learning disabilities (SNL).³⁷ This framework allows SNLs to learn alongside their peers in regular classrooms. The dominant discourse emphasizes respect for learners' well-being, dignity, and ability to contribute to society while embracing diverse backgrounds.³⁸ Several pedagogical approaches promote inclusive and equitable access to education and foster acceptance among learners.³⁹ Loreman identifies several vital pedagogical approaches within the inclusive education framework:

- **Socio-emotional learning** focuses on creating safe, valued, and inclusive environments.
- **Inclusive pedagogy:** emphasizes universal design for learning to address diverse needs.

- **Systems and structures** support the comprehensive understanding necessary for the effective implementation of inclusive education.

These approaches aim to enhance SNL's socio-emotional development and well-being within inclusive school environments.

Impact of Inclusive Education on Students with Special Needs and Learning Disabilities

Literature indicates that inclusive education positively impacts SNLs. For instance, it promotes social inclusion and peer acceptance. A meta-analysis by Oh-Young and Filler⁴⁰ found that students with disabilities in inclusive settings engage more socially with peers without disabilities than those in segregated settings. Additionally, some studies report improved academic outcomes for SNLs in inclusive environments. A longitudinal study by Dessemontet⁴¹ found that students with intellectual disabilities made more literacy progress in inclusive classrooms than in special schools.

Furthermore, inclusive education positively impacts SNLs' self-concept and self-esteem. Szumski and Karwowski⁴² found that students with mild intellectual disabilities in inclusive settings had higher self-concept scores than those in segregated settings. Graham⁴³ emphasize the importance of individualized teaching models within inclusive education, suggesting that effective instructional design should meet each learner's needs. Teachers must understand curriculum content and learner diversity to effectively guide teaching, pedagogy, and assessment.

However, ongoing debates challenge the notion of inclusivity in many educational contexts, particularly in Africa. Some researchers argue that despite various approaches, inclusive education remains exclusive in many countries.⁴⁴ Others contend that teachers must critically examine instructional methods through inclusive pedagogy, extending beyond differentiated instruction to meet SNLs' needs.⁴⁵ Marschall⁴⁶ highlights the necessity of creating genuinely inclusive environments rather than focusing solely on teacher training.

The lack of early identification and intervention for mental health issues among SNLs compounds their difficulties. Many are not recognized as having special needs until later in their educational journeys, resulting in delayed or inadequate support.⁴⁷ This lack of timely intervention can lead to poor academic performance and emotional difficulties, exacerbating their mental health struggles.⁴⁸ Family and community support is crucial for the mental wellness of SNLs, yet this support can often be inconsistent. Families may lack the resources or knowledge to support their child's mental and emotional well-being,⁴⁹ leaving SNLs vulnerable to mental health issues in unsupportive educational or social environments.

Challenges and Recommendations

Despite various perspectives, models, and frameworks emphasizing inclusive education, significant challenges persist, particularly for special needs learners (SNLs) in many African countries. Inclusive education aims to promote the well-being of all learners, ensuring equitable and supportive education for every individual, regardless of their background or needs. However, there remains a substantial gap in the effective implementation of inclusive practices, especially regarding their impact on SNLs.⁵⁰ These gaps can lead to poor academic achievement and mental health challenges within inclusive school environments.

SNLs face substantial challenges that hinder their adaptation to inclusive settings and negatively impact their overall well-being. Factors contributing to these challenges include inadequate teacher training in special needs and inclusive education, a lack of teaching resources, insufficient parental support, and the occupational stress experienced by teachers.⁵¹ These elements contribute to negative attitudes and limited understanding of SNLs among educators, which can further exacerbate the challenges faced by these learners.

Carpenter⁵² advocates for implementing emotional resilience systems within inclusive schools to address these issues. Establishing a well-being team dedicated to monitoring and

supporting the mental health of SNLs and others facing similar challenges can create a more supportive and effective learning environment. Such initiatives could enhance SNLs' overall well-being, enabling them to thrive within inclusive settings.

Strategies for Improvement

Several strategies have been proposed to address the challenges faced by SNLs and maximize the benefits of inclusive education. Florian and Camedda⁵³ emphasize the importance of improving pre-service and in-service teacher training programs to prepare educators for inclusive classrooms. Providing teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge is essential for fostering an inclusive environment that benefits all learners.

Fuchs and Fuchs,⁵⁴ and Fuchs et al.⁵⁵ advocate for multi-tiered support systems that provide increasingly intensive interventions for students struggling in inclusive settings. This approach can ensure that SNLs receive the appropriate level of support tailored to their specific needs, enhancing their chances for success. Collaboration between general and special education teachers is crucial for the success of inclusive education. Friend et al.⁵⁶ emphasizes the importance of nurturing this collaboration, as it allows educators to share expertise, resources, and strategies that benefit SNLs. Meyer et al.⁵⁷ suggest adopting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to create flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learner needs.

Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

Understanding SNLs' challenges requires examining the ecological factors influencing their access to education, health services, and family support. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework provides valuable insight into how environmental factors affect SNLs' health and well-being.⁵⁸ This framework emphasizes the interplay between individuals and their surroundings, highlighting the importance of relationships and interactions within various systems.

The unique characteristics of Africa, with its diverse cultures, languages, and educational systems, necessitate a tailored approach to understanding and improving the well-being of SNLs. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being, emphasizing that health is more than just the absence of disease.⁵⁹ This definition underscores the importance of addressing the comprehensive needs of SNLs in the context of their daily lives.

Bronfenbrenner's revised theory incorporates the "bio" aspect, focusing on the individual and their health and mental well-being concerning environmental interactions. This perspective can be juxtaposed with the Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of community and interconnectedness. By understanding how various structures within the environment influence SNLs' sense of belonging, educators can work towards fostering inclusive environments that combat exclusion and segregation.

The Biopsychosocial Model

The biopsychosocial model (BPS) introduced by the WHO in 2002 provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between individual health conditions and social factors.⁶⁰ This model emphasizes that disability is not solely an individual issue but also involves environmental and personal factors that inhibit or facilitate an individual's ability to function in society. The BPS model supports a holistic view of health, encompassing social, mental, and biological well-being.

Understanding SNLs' challenges requires analyzing how environmental and personal factors influence their functioning. The interplay of these factors can significantly affect SNLs' mental health and overall well-being, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support systems that consider the diverse needs of these learners.

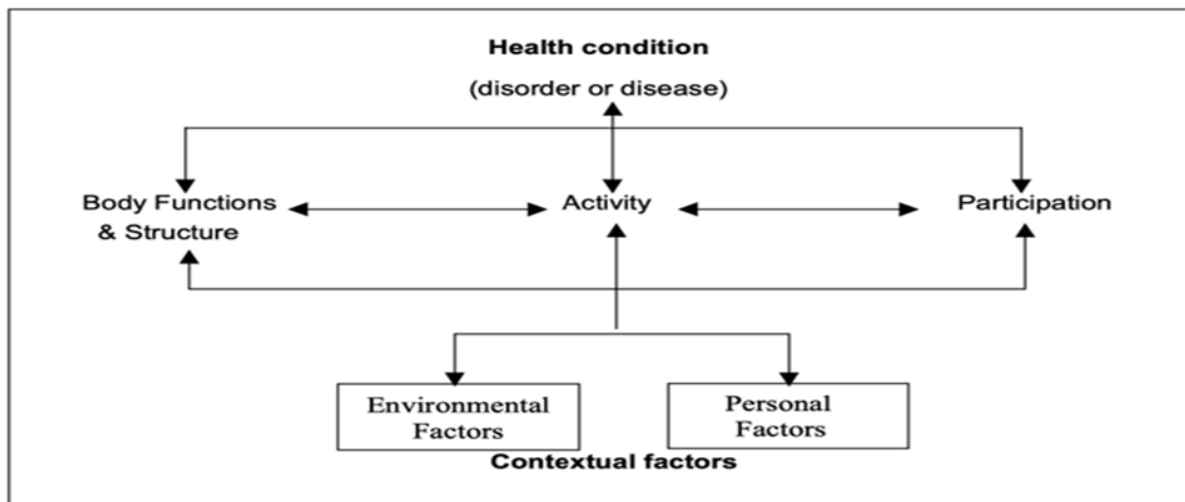


Figure 2. The biopsychosocial model of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)⁶¹

Challenges and Recommendations in Implementing Inclusive Education

The philosophy of inclusive education is centered on promoting the well-being of all learners, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and needs. It ensures that every student, including those with special needs (SNLs), receives equitable and supportive education. However, significant gaps persist in implementing inclusive education in many African countries, particularly regarding its impact on SNLs. Research indicates that the effects of inclusive education practices on teaching, learning outcomes, attitudes, and the well-being of SNLs are insufficiently addressed, resulting in poor academic achievement and mental health challenges.⁶² Furthermore, many SNLs face substantial challenges within inclusive schools that hinder their adaptation to the learning environment and negatively affect their overall well-being, exacerbating their existing disabilities.⁶³

Factors Contributing to Challenges

Several factors contribute to the challenges faced by SNLs in inclusive settings. These include inadequate teacher training in special needs and inclusive education, a shortage of teaching and learning resources, a lack of parental support for educators, and the occupational stress experienced by teachers.⁶⁴ These challenges foster negative attitudes and limited

understanding of SNLs among educators. In response, Carpenter⁶⁵ recommends that schools practicing inclusive education implement emotional resilience systems for SNLs and establish well-being teams to monitor and support their mental health. Such initiatives aim to enhance the overall well-being of SNLs and foster more supportive and effective learning environments.

Strategies for Improvement

Previous studies have identified several strategies to maximize the benefits of inclusive education for SNLs. Florian and Camedda⁶⁶ suggest improving pre-service and in-service teacher training programs to prepare educators for inclusive classrooms better. Fuchs et al.⁶⁷ advocate for multi-tiered support systems that provide increasingly intensive interventions for students struggling in inclusive settings. Friend et al.⁶⁸ emphasize the importance of collaboration between general and special education teachers and specialists. Meyer et al.⁶⁹ argue that adopting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles can create flexible learning environments accommodating diverse learner needs. Finally, Sailor et al.⁷⁰ report that implementing school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) creates a positive and supportive school climate for all students, including SNLs.

Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

Understanding the challenges faced by SNLs requires an examination of their broader context. The birthplace of a child with a disability significantly influences their access to education, health services, funding, and family care. These disparities are particularly pronounced in Africa, with its fifty-two countries characterized by diverse cultures, languages, and educational systems. Studying these disparities is crucial for improving the health and education of SNLs.

Health and mental education play a pivotal role in the lives of SNLs. As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2022, health encompasses complete physical,

mental, and social well-being. This definition highlights the importance of understanding and improving the overall well-being of SNLs, including their abilities to cope with everyday life stresses. This paper aims to shed light on the unique challenges SNLs face in Africa and explore potential solutions to improve their well-being and contribution to the community.

Bronfenbrenner's⁷¹ bioecological framework of development, alongside the Ubuntu philosophy, elucidates the relationships between SNLs and the various structures within their environment, highlighting their impact on health and well-being. Bronfenbrenner's model emphasizes the interplay between individuals and their surroundings, illustrating how the complex relationships within their environment influence the health and mental well-being of SNLs.

Proximal and Distal Relationships

Bronfenbrenner's⁷² framework categorizes relationships as proximal (direct interactions) or distal (indirect influences). The microsystem comprises the immediate relationships SNLs have within their homes, communities, and schools. Within the microsystem, SNLs may interact with multiple structures that can change with their needs and age. The exosystem and mesosystem describe the interactions between various structures in the microsystem, such as the relationships between parents and teachers or between parents and therapists.

The macrosystem encompasses broader societal structures, including government agencies, political and cultural influences, and educational policies. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory comprehensively explains how SNLs experience their environments and how these interactions shape their development and well-being.

Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

This paper employs narrative inquiry, a qualitative methodology that uses storytelling to explore the experiences of SNLs. According to Clandinin and Connelly,⁷³ narrative inquiry

provides insights into how individuals experience the world and share their realities.

Anokwuru⁷⁴ suggests that narrative inquiry is a valuable approach to understanding human lives, allowing participants to share their experiences regarding health and mental well-being.

The authors chose six SNL participants to provide insights into their feelings about their health and the structures in their environment that support their well-being. Purposeful sampling was employed to highlight the participants' lived experiences and capture the complexities of their relationships and environments.⁷⁵

Ethical Considerations

The authors aimed to listen sensitively to the participants' narratives, ensuring that they created a respectful and welcoming space for sharing stories related to health and mental well-being. Meyer and Fels⁷⁶ emphasize the importance of listening attentively to participants, allowing researchers to create thoughtful spaces for the unspeakable experiences that may lie between transcriptions and conversations.

Findings and Discussion

The six SNL participants shared their stories on various topics, including education, employment, and mental well-being. All participants attended inclusive schools; however, four had to transition to segregated educational settings where only students with similar disabilities received education. Common complaints included limited access to places of interest due to their disabilities.

One participant with congenital glaucoma expressed the challenges of navigating their environment independently, relying on their younger brother as a chaperone. Another participant shared their struggles in school, leading their parents to change schools frequently in search of a better fit. This participant described feeling alienated in a "pull-out" classroom, negatively impacting their mental well-being.

The participants offered recommendations to improve mental well-being. One suggested reducing punitive measures in classrooms, emphasizing that harsh discipline worsened their state of being rather than helping them. They advocated for teachers to engage in compassionate conversations to foster an inclusive environment.

Another participant noted that having a disability often required them to work harder to succeed academically. This added stress was compounded by their parents' pursuit of a "cure" for their disability, which delayed their access to education and resources.

Impact of Ubuntu Philosophy on SNLs

The Ubuntu philosophy emphasizes inclusiveness, community relationships, and shared responsibility, significantly influencing education and the experiences of SNLs. Odari⁷⁷ argues that Ubuntu is essential for creating a society focused on people. Collins-Warfield⁷⁸ posits that when teachers embody Ubuntu, they foster supportive environments where all students receive attention and care. The Ubuntu philosophy underscores that healthy learning environments must prioritize the safety and dignity of all community members. It emphasizes the importance of relationships, care, and respect in education. By empowering SNLs and treating all learners with compassion, educators can create atmospheres that inspire and motivate students to excel.

Ubuntu principles align closely with the tenets of inclusive education, allowing all learners to showcase their abilities. Makoelle⁷⁹ notes that Ubuntu counters the exclusionary practices of segregated schooling that were common during the African colonial period. Instead, it advocates for inclusivity, benefiting SNLs while promoting empathy and acceptance among their peers. Educators who embrace the Ubuntu philosophy can create supportive learning environments where SNLs feel valued and accepted. Ubuntu's relational aspects also provide individualized attention and support to SNLs, fostering strong, positive relationships characterized by compassion and understanding.

A core principle of Ubuntu is to treat all individuals with respect, which profoundly impacts the inclusion of SNLs in classrooms. Ubuntu values communication, self-expression, equity, and acceptance, allowing SNLs to voice their needs and desires through various mediums. These values encourage partnerships among families, schools, and communities, fostering trust and creating supportive environments where all learners, especially SNLs, can thrive. Ubuntu's emphasis on shared responsibility highlights the importance of involving extended family and community members in the upbringing of children, further enhancing the social aspects of learning. Lorenzo⁸⁰ affirms that Ubuntu promotes interdependence rather than dependence, emphasizing community efforts over individual ones.

Challenges and Barriers

Implementing holistic health education, particularly for Special Needs Learners (SNLs), faces several significant challenges. One of the primary barriers is the need for more resources and infrastructure to support a holistic approach. Many schools, particularly in low-resource settings, lack the physical and material resources to implement programs that address students' physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being.⁸¹ For example, specialized learning aids, adequate facilities for physical activities, and access to mental health professionals are often scarce in these environments. This scarcity creates a significant gap between the ideals of holistic health education and the realities of its implementation.

Additionally, integrating holistic health education into existing curricula often encounters resistance due to entrenched educational practices and policies. Traditional education systems tend to prioritize academic achievement over the development of other aspects of the learner, such as mental and emotional well-being.⁸² This focus on academic outcomes can marginalize efforts to incorporate holistic approaches, as they may be perceived as secondary to the primary goal of academic instruction. Furthermore, the lack of teacher training in holistic health education presents another significant barrier. Many

educators may need the necessary skills or knowledge to effectively integrate holistic principles into their teaching practices.⁸³ This gap in professional development can hinder the successful implementation of holistic health education, as teachers are crucial to fostering environments that support the well-being of all learners, including SNLs.

Stigma and discrimination against individuals with disabilities are pervasive issues that significantly hinder the implementation of holistic health education. In many African communities, disabilities are often misunderstood and surrounded by negative stereotypes, which can lead to the marginalization and exclusion of SNLs within educational settings.⁸⁴ This stigma not only affects the social interactions and peer relationships of SNLs but also impacts the attitudes and behaviors of educators, administrators, and policymakers, who may unconsciously perpetuate discriminatory practices. For instance, negative societal attitudes towards disabilities can influence the allocation of resources, with SNLs often receiving less support than their peers without disabilities.⁸⁵

Systemic issues further exacerbate these challenges. The educational system in many countries is often not designed to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners, particularly those with disabilities.⁸⁶ This systemic lack of inclusivity can manifest in various ways, such as inadequate funding for special education programs, a shortage of trained special education teachers, and a curriculum that does not reflect the needs of SNLs. Moreover, the broader social and economic structures in place often do not provide sufficient support for families of SNLs, who may struggle to advocate for their children's needs in an environment that is not inherently inclusive.⁸⁷

Stigma and systemic discrimination also create a feedback loop that further entrenches barriers to holistic health education. The marginalization of SNLs affects their ability to thrive within educational settings, which can lead to poor academic outcomes and increased mental health challenges.⁸⁸ These outcomes reinforce negative stereotypes about

the capabilities of individuals with disabilities, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and marginalization. Breaking the cycle of marginalization requires the African educational system to address the underlying systemic issues and actively work to dismantle the stigma associated with disabilities. Therefore, a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, families, and communities, is required to create an inclusive educational system that values the well-being of all learners.

Recommendations

Parents, neighbors, peers, educators, extended family, and government policies interconnect and play a significant role directly or indirectly in the child's life and development. In Africa, the arrival of a newborn calls for the celebration of life. However, when the child is diagnosed with a disability, it not only becomes a cause of concern for the immediate family but the usual support from the extended family also begins to disintegrate due to the stigma prevalent at the societal level—invariably, transcending to a limited budgetary allocation by the government in the health, housing and educational sectors to support people with disabilities. Sontag⁸⁹ stated that "Bronfenbrenner's ecological model uniquely supports the understanding of human development as a joint function of environmental influences, such as parents, neighbors, teachers, and the child's characteristics. These enduring interactions between the child with a disability and these structures within and beyond their immediate contexts change over time because of the child's peculiarities.

The Ubuntu philosophy can reverse global challenges such as poor infrastructure, funding allocation, and teachers' inability to push for a holistic education curriculum experienced by SNLs in inclusive school settings. In response to these issues, Degener⁹⁰ asserts that society should appreciate the value and self-worth of SNLs and individuals with disabilities.

Therefore, SNLs viewed from the Ubuntu lens are treated as humans with the same value as everyone else, and not from the Western individualized perspective introduced by colonialism. Engaging parents and teachers in the learning journey of their children with disabilities will improve their mental well-being. Christensen⁹¹ alludes to the idea that teachers are closest to the child's learning needs, which occurs in the classroom. Therefore, it fosters a collaborative space between the child, parents, and school. Finally, implementing government policies embracing the Ubuntu philosophy will significantly influence decisions about budgetary allocation, funding, curriculum planning, professional development, and family support networks for SNLs and members of their families.

Conclusion

Promoting holistic health education for Special Needs Learners in African schools through the lens of Ubuntu offers a culturally appropriate and practical approach to enhancing mental wellness. By integrating the principles of interconnectedness, empathy, and communal support into educational practices, schools can create nurturing environments where SNLs thrive. Embracing Ubuntu in health education supports the mental wellness of SNLs and strengthens the communal bonds vital for all students' well-being. As African schools continue to evolve, incorporating Ubuntu philosophy into holistic health education promises and instils hope for a more inclusive and supportive future for special needs learners.

Incorporating the Ubuntu philosophy into educational frameworks presents a powerful approach to fostering inclusivity, particularly for children with disabilities. This study underscores Ubuntu's capacity to enhance interconnectedness, reduce stigma, and promote holistic development, making it a transformative tool for inclusive education. By integrating Ubuntu principles into curricula, educator training, and resource allocation,

educational systems can better serve all learners, cultivating environments that are empathetic, supportive, and respectful of diversity.

Furthermore, Ubuntu's adaptability across cultural contexts offers promising implications for global education. It advocates for solidarity and shared responsibility in addressing the needs of marginalized communities. As such, applying Ubuntu in education not only enriches the learning experience for students with disabilities but also holds the potential to inspire more inclusive practices worldwide, offering a hopeful vision for the future of education.

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