

OTIENO, Michael Ochieng'

ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Doctoral School of Education
otienom@student.elte.hu
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5712-4109>

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Exploring the predictors of disability citizenship

Abstract

This planned qualitative study aims to explore the lived experiences of Kenyan university students with disabilities, with a focus on their citizenship in education. Citizenship is an inclusionary social institution which categorizes societal membership and relationship between the individual and the society. Thus, a citizen is an agent with a capacity to make individual choices and participate in decision-making processes of the society. The elements of citizenship considered in this study are the students' security, autonomy, and influence. Theoretical sampling will be used to obtain participants for the study. The study will adopt the Grounded Theory approach, and semi-structured life-course interviews will be used to generate qualitative data from the participants. Data analysis will be by qualitative content analysis. The expectation of the study is to use the findings to seek for appropriate mitigation strategies that would improve the performance and transition rates of learners with disabilities across all levels of education in Kenya.

Keywords: Active Citizenship in Education, Students with Disabilities, Security, Autonomy, Influence, Participation.

Exploring the predictors of disability citizenship

1. Introduction

Citizenship is a status bestowed on people who are considered full members of a society (Halvorsen et al., 2018). As such, citizens are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992). Accordingly, citizenship is regarded as an inclusionary social institution that determines societal membership as well as contractual relationship between the individual citizen and the society (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992).

In this study, citizenship in education is likened to inclusive education, which is a way of addressing the learning needs of all children, with a specific focus on those who are marginalized and excluded, such as those with disabilities (Magyar et al., 2020). Citizenship education therefore brings to the forefront education's institutional function of creating an informed electorate in a holistic and interdisciplinary way, cutting across all subject areas, integrating many skills and competences that benefit all students throughout their lives as individuals, community members, and professionals (Halvorsen et al., 2018).

Research evidence shows that scholars rarely examine in a systematic and comprehensive way the conditions that hamper or enable people with disabilities to exercise active citizenship, with most studies completely ignoring the issues related to active disability citizenship (Halvorsen et al., 2018). Ajodhia-Andrews (2016) observes that research on lived experiences of people with disabilities has largely examined factors that make lives of people with disabilities special or unique. This implies that research literature about the mechanisms and processes influencing the opportunities for active citizenship is still limited despite the fact that the opportunities for full and effective membership of society are increasingly becoming more noticeable at the national and international policy agendas (Halvorsen et al., 2018).

Access to higher education is important for persons with disabilities because of its role in development of life skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for gainful employment and participation in the activities of the societies where they live (Butalanyi et al., 2020). As such, expanded opportunities to higher education for persons with disabilities significantly contribute to their improved quality of life and social justice in terms of political power (Wayne, 2004) and upward intergenerational mobility (Bourdieu, 1973; Coleman, 1968). However, the Kenyan government's focus has been on basic education, with policies that address the educational needs of learners with disabilities at postsecondary levels of education remaining limited (Kiru, 2019).

According to Butalanyi et al. (2020), less than 1% of learners with disabilities are enrolled in higher education in Kenya. The finding is corroborated by Elder and Foley's (2015) study which reported low transition rates of learners with disabilities in Kenya by indicating that out of 37% of children with disabilities who receive some form of inclusive primary education, only 9% proceed to secondary education and a mere 2% access university education. These findings indicate that disability still occupies a lower profile in Kenya's higher education. Moreover, Kenya has over 50 tribes occupying varied geographical locations, speaking different indigenous languages, and displaying different cultural, social, and economic practices. Thus, there are broad variations in lived experiences among persons with disabilities across the country.

The present study conceptualises disability using the 2001 ICF model, hence, the term *disability* describes impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions of an individual (World Health Organisation, 2002). As such, the study supports the idea that disability is an experience that develops out of the interaction between an individual with a functional limitation and the social and physical environment in which we live (Schalk, 2022). Consequently, the study adopts a qualitative approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of how university students with disabilities experience citizenship, with a focus on their security, autonomy and influence.

Security through public or redistributive measures enables people with disabilities to effectively use social rights meant to protect them against major life risks and contingencies such as poverty, illness, and violence (Halvorsen et al., 2018). Lister (1997) defines autonomy as the ability to determine the conditions of one's life and to pursue one's life projects. According to Boyle (2008), being autonomous is to have the ability to make informed choices about what should be done and how to do it. The concept of autonomy or freedom, thus, put forward a vision for the people with disabilities to be empowered by the availability and exercising of choice (Morris, 2005). Through redistributive and regulatory measures, being autonomous allows persons with disabilities to decide for themselves what is valuable, define their needs, make their own choices, and pursue the life they have reasons to value (Halvorsen et al., 2018). Morris (2005) asserts that a need for support to make a choice does not mean that someone cannot experience autonomy, since the action to be taken must be decided by the individual with a disability.

Influence, as a lens of citizenship, entails participating in discussions and decisions affecting one's own life and society at large (Halvorsen et al., 2018). For people with disabilities, meaningful participation involves being included in mainstream society and participating in family, community, and national life (Morris, 2005). Meaningful participation both requires and gives expression to self-determination (Morris, 2005). Participation is not only an important element of citizenship but also a form of contribution to fulfilling the responsibilities of citizenship (Morris, 2005). Meaningful participation at school helps cultivate students' autonomy, life-skills, and personal talents and strengths (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008).

The common element in the dimensions of active citizenship considered in this study is whether the society and public policies enhance or prevent people with disabilities' sense of their own agency, that is, their ability to act, participate and take charge of their own lives. While treating security, autonomy, and influence as analytically distinct dimensions of citizenship, in practice they seem to overlap and mutually support each other. The understanding of active citizenship considered in this study agrees with UNCRPD, 2006, articles 1 and 3, which calls for full and effective participation of people with disabilities on an equal basis with others in the society (United Nations, 2006).

The study will draw international and regional understandings to enhance the understanding of the Kenyan (local) context. This perspective is informed by the fact that the present study sits philosophically within the discipline of disability studies, which is a multidisciplinary field steered by global perspectives of disability, learning from other contexts and cultures, and intersected by the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities (Society for Disability Studies, n.d.). The epistemological belief of constructivism-interpretivism will be used to explore multiple meaning constructions of the students' experiences of citizenship in education.

The study aims to address two research questions:

- i. To what extent do Kenyan university students with disabilities experience and exercise active citizenship within the framework of their security, autonomy, and influence?
- ii. What conditions hamper or enhance security, autonomy, and security of Kenyan university students with disabilities?

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. Examine how the university students with disabilities perceive their autonomy and how their current and previous learning experiences have influenced their current state of autonomy.
- ii. Find out how university students with disabilities view their level of participation in and contribution to university activities and how their participation has been influenced by their current and previous learning institutions.
- iii. Explore the social protection university students with disabilities receive in support of their education.
- iv. Identify the conditions that hamper or enhance the security, autonomy, and participation of Kenyan university students with disabilities.

2. Problem statement and relevance

An intimate scrutiny of the performance and transition rates of learners with disabilities from the basic education up to university level in Kenya reveals the following facts. Firstly, a significant proportion of learners with disabilities either have never attended school or dropped out of school (KISE, 2018; Opini, 2012).

Secondly, research evidence shows a statistically significant difference between enrolment in primary schools and secondary schools (KISE, 2018), indicating that the transition rate of learners with disabilities from primary schools to secondary schools is low. Further, the performance of candidates with disabilities in Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examination has not been good, for example, in 2022 KCPE examinations, 52.79% of candidates with disabilities scored below 200 marks out of the possible 500 marks compared to 24.01% of their non-disabled peers (Njeru, 2022). This could imply that more than half of the candidates with disabilities who sat for the 2022 KCPE examinations were likely to miss out on secondary school enrolment. However, if they get enrolled, they are likely to be accepted in lowly ranked sub-county secondary schools, thereby worsening their situation.

Thirdly, the transition rate of students with disabilities from secondary schools to universities in Kenya is quite low, with data for 2022 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination results putting the transition rate at 9.26% compared to 19.79% of students without disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2023). This implies that 90.74% of learners with disabilities who miss out on university admission could either proceed to middle level colleges or drop out of education altogether. Learners with disabilities who fail to acquire a university education miss out on opportunities which could significantly improve their lives both socially and economically (Stephenson & Yorke, 1998), thus, denying them opportunities for acquiring skills and competences that are important for their autonomy, participation, and contribution in the society.

The persistent low performance and transition rates of learners with disabilities point to the overwhelming setbacks facing the implementation of educational policies for learners with disabilities in Kenya. This situation attempts to portray already implemented recommendations by previous researchers as not helping in uplifting the educational experiences of learners with disabilities. Previous studies have focused on education policies (Karanja et al., 2021), teacher characteristics (Carew et al., 2019; Gathumbi et al., 2015; Kiru, 2019), student-teacher ratio and facilities for

teaching and learning (Abuya & Githinji, 2021; Butalanyi et al., 2020; Gathumbi et al., 2015; Kochung, 2011; Maiwa & Ng'eno, 2017; Ngui, 2019; Oyugi, 2011).

In relation to teacher characteristics and student-teacher ratio, the government and school boards of management employ new teachers and organise in-service training for teachers to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to handle learners with disabilities (KISE, 2018), but the performance is still low and transition rates are not promising. In relation to resources, the government continues to facilitate schools by providing money for improving teaching and learning facilities (KISE, 2018; Kiru, 2019; Opini, 2012), but the educational experiences of learners with disabilities have not improved much. Moreover, the government's greater focus has been on primary education, with policies that address the educational needs of learners with disabilities at secondary and postsecondary levels of education remaining limited (Kiru, 2019), an indication that disability still occupies a lower profile in Kenya's higher education. Little has been done from the learners' perspective, with lived educational experiences as narrated by learners with disabilities largely missing from the available literature.

The study has a potential contribution to learners, teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum developers, and parents and guardians of learners with disabilities. The teachers may utilize the findings to develop suitable instructional methods and design their classes in a way that may help improve the participation of students with disabilities. The study findings may help the students recognize the importance of their involvement in school and class activities to ensure effective achievement of autonomy and better learning outcomes. Teacher trainers may be able to use the findings of the research in improving teacher training practices that would be appropriate in enhancing autonomy and participation of learners with disabilities. The results may also be useful to curriculum developers in Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development and curriculum developers in various universities in Kenya, so that they can design the curriculum that motivates learning and captures the diverse needs of learners, including those with disabilities. Parents and guardians of learners with disabilities may use the findings as guidelines for the provision of necessary support to children with disabilities. The study may also contribute to theory and the world of knowledge.

3. Theoretical framework

The study will be informed by two theories: Structuration Theory and Capability Theory. *Structuration Theory* (Giddens, 1986; O'Reilly, 2012; Stones, 2005) is a meta-theory of social ontology explaining how we can understand the social world and its elements. O'Reilly (2012) and Stones' (2005) structuration theory builds on Giddens' (1986) study which highlights the role of social practices in the linking of agency and structures by perceiving social practices as both producing and being produced by social structures. Giddens (1986) argues that individual action, with human agency at its core, is informed by the expectations and rules of the structure, which are then reproduced by the individual. As such, structuration theory seeks to examine how social structures are represented and replicated in human interaction.



To broaden the conceptualisation of how agency-structure dynamics enable or prevent the active citizenship of people with disabilities, this study adopts the *Capability approach of conversion processes* (Sen, 1992, 2002). The ability to convert resources into capabilities differ across individuals because individual experiences of access to capability inputs and exposure to conversion factors differ (Sen, 2006).

The conversion processes will help the study in understanding why active citizenship may not be realised in circumstances that seem to support change, as well as why change may happen in situations that do not seem to support achievement of active citizenship. The idea of conversion processes can therefore be used to understand the diversity among persons with disabilities and the conditions that need to be put in place to enable people with disabilities to exercise active citizenship.

This study is not only interested in how conversion factors influence the achievement of effective freedom (security, autonomy, and influence), but also in the extent to which people with disabilities exercise active agency, including their capacity to modify their conditions for exercising active citizenship.

4. Planned research methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study will employ the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2006) approach to generate qualitative data from participants. Qualitative research is based on the observations and interpretations of people's perception of events in a natural setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). According to Creswell (1998), qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore social problems.

The aim of qualitative research is to uncover how people make sense of what is happening to them and around them, hence it provides a better way of understanding people's experiences from their own perspectives and frames of reference (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As such, through qualitative research we can make sense of how people construct the world around them (Flick, 2009).

In this study, a qualitative approach will be used to voice the experiences of people whose voices are rarely heard, people who are oppressed and discriminated against in the society. Accordingly, it is expected that the qualitative approach will provide a platform for the Kenyan university students with disabilities to share their experiences and perspectives that they may have not had an opportunity to voice.

Glaser (2008) defines Grounded Theory as a general inductive research method aimed at a systematic generation of new theory from data and at presenting the processes going on in the field of study. By developing a theory, researchers seek to understand the problem situation as experienced by participants and how they deal with their problems (Glaser, 2008). Accordingly, the Grounded Theory approach is an appropriate way to study human behaviours on sensitive topics including those in different cultural contexts (Wolcott, 1980).



4.2. Area of Study

The study will be conducted among Kenyan university students with disabilities. Kenya is a country located in East Africa, bordering Ethiopia to the north, Tanzania to the south, Somalia to the east, Uganda to the west, South Sudan to the north-west and having a coastline with the Indian ocean to the south-east (Kenya maps, n.d.). Kenya has a diverse population of over 50 million people, with over 50 ethnic groups. Economically, Kenya is categorised as a lower middle-income country with a gross domestic product of \$63 billion (World Bank, 2015).

The participants will be drawn from four universities, namely Kenyatta University, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Maseno University, and Rongo University. The universities are purposively selected to represent a continuum of experiences ranging from one of the oldest universities (Kenyatta) to the youngest ones (e.g., Rongo).

4.3. Target population and sampling

A target population is the total group of individuals from which the sample might be drawn (McLeod, 2014). This study will be conducted among Kenyan university students with disabilities. The students will be drawn from Kenyatta University, Maseno University, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, and Rongo University.

The inclusion criteria are that the participant must be:

- i. A university student for at least one semester.
- ii. A person living with a disability, the dimension being the extent to which the student experiences disabling barriers to full and effective participation in the university activities, and not just the medical diagnosis. The study will largely rely on whether the student considers himself or herself as having a disability and/or is seen by others as having a disability.

The exclusion criteria:

- i. Students with severe hearing difficulties. Their inclusion would make the task of collecting data more challenging since hiring sign language interpreters may not be possible within the available budget.
- ii. Students with severe intellectual disabilities, who in most cases are unlikely to transition to university education.
- iii. Students who have been at the university for less than one semester.

Sampling procedure means selecting a given number of respondents from representatives of a defined population (Mwangi, 2016). According to Khan (2014), sampling is a method of deducing information about a whole population instead of measuring every unit of the population.

In this study, the initial research sample of participants will be selected by a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. The subsequent samples will then be selected through theoretical sampling. As such, the initial participants will be recruited through the participating universities. The interviewees will, in turn, suggest

other participants until the new participants fail to provide new data. According to Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), convenience sampling is recruiting whomever the researcher has access to from the target population, while snowball sampling means starting with a convenience sample of a few research participants and asking them to select others who, in turn, are also asked to suggest more research participants.

Theoretical sampling entails choosing research participants who have information related to one's research (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Glaser and Strauss (2006) described theoretical sampling as a process of data collection for generating theory whereby the researcher collects, codes, and analyses data and decides what data to collect next to develop the emerging theory. According to Charmaz (2014), theoretical sampling is a purposeful sampling that develops according to the categories a researcher develops from analysis based on theoretical concerns.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the sample size is representative of the whole population, while Mannay (2010) defines sample size as a small portion drawn from a target population intended to lead to statistical estimates of the attributes of the whole population.

In this study, the sample size will be decided by theoretical saturation, that is, until participants fail to provide new data that expand or refine the developing theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

4.4. Research instruments

The study adopts a life-course perspective to collect qualitative data from the respondents. The life-course approach is a sequence of socially defined events and roles that an individual puts into practice over time (Giele & Elder, 1998). Hagestad and Neugarten (1985) describe life-course as important events that people experience over time, including their education, work, employment, marriage, parenthood, and retirement.

The life-course approach is important because it helps explain how active citizenship of people with disabilities evolve over time, with a focus on how disability-related policies impinge on the timing of life events, what level and type of education people with disabilities are able to achieve and whether they manage to achieve paid work, live in the community and participate in political decision-making processes (Halvorsen et al., 2018). As Mayer and Schoepflin (1989) observe, the major focus of life-course is on individual agency and the conditions that can be conceptualised and measured at the individual level.

The study adopts semi-structured life-course interviews with the participants (Halvorsen et al., 2018). As Brannen and Nilsen (2011) explain, life-course interviews not only allow a person to tell past and present life experiences but also provide one with an opportunity to express future expectations. As such, the life-course interviews allow for collection of data on the interviewee's knowledge, aspirations, self-perceptions, and their experiences with enabling and disabling social structures over the life-course.



4.5. *Trustworthiness, reflexivity and reflection on own perspectives*

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, the study will employ naturalistic research methods: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers who follow an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm place a strong emphasis on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as indicators of trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Reflexivity and reflection on my own perspectives will be used to ensure both credibility and confirmability. As a method and theory characteristic, reflexivity implies taking account of the method and theory, the effect of the personality and the presence of the researcher on what is being investigated (Hobson, 2004). Self-reflexivity therefore accounts for both aspects of the producer and the product of knowledge, the situation of the individual researcher, and the researcher's relation with collective theory (Hobson, 2004).

In research, the subject and object are inseparable and together constitute a meaning (Gadamer, 2004). All experiences are interpretive, as such, bias is inevitable and forms a basic element of knowledge practices (Gadamer, 2004). As for Taylor (1989), bias means value-laden, hence biased knowledge is directed by values and interpretive contexts. Consequently, bias and value should not be eliminated but should be made as explicit and transparent as possible before, during, and after research so that their potential impact can be understood (Gadamer, 2004; Jones, 2001). Clegg and Slife (2008) emphasise that values are integral to the meanings and use of any study results, hence should be taken explicitly into account at every stage of social science research.

Considering the research questions and objectives, this research sits philosophically within an interpretivist epistemological position. My interest in the views of participants and their experiences indicates my focus on the personal meanings they may construct about their experiences in school.

As I endeavour to remain neutral, I believe that my existing work as a teacher and as a person with a disability will colour how I make sense of the participants' experiences. Thus, I am drawn to a more interpretivist approach because I want to be transparent about my own influence on the research, as well as prioritising the interpretations of the participants. Interpretivist approaches emphasise both the participants' and the investigators' interpretations of the phenomenon under study (Richie et al., 2014). As such, meanings are situated within social and cultural contexts, and the researchers own meanings influence the research process (Clegg & Slife, 2008).

4.6. *Data collection procedures and analysis*

The ethical permit to conduct the research will be obtained from ELTE BGGYK. A permit to conduct the study in Kenya will be obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Additional authorizations to conduct the study will be obtained from the participating universities: Kenyatta, Maseno, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, and Rongo

University. Upon obtaining the consents, data collection will be conducted in two phases between January 2025 and October 2025.

In phase one the participants will be engaged in an online/phone interview that will take about 15 minutes and will involve introduction and familiarization with the would-be respondents and seeking their permission to participate in the study. If the participant agrees to participate in the study, a date for phase two of the study will be set. In phase two, the researcher will administer online semi-structured life-course interviews. Each interview will last for approximately 45-60 minutes. All the interviews will be audio-recorded upon seeking consent from the respondents. The procedure for the interviews will be the same for all participants. The researcher will assure the respondents of the confidentiality of the information they will provide.

Data analysis involves scrutinizing the acquired information and making inferences (Goyal, 2013). In this study, data will be analysed using content analysis. The data analysis will start as soon as the first bit of data is collected, and will involve open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2014; Packer-Muti, 2016).

4.7. Ethical considerations and limitations

Ethical considerations are an important aspect of this research because qualitative research approaches often intrude into participants' lives (Punch, 1998). Thus, Neuman (2013) asserted that it is the moral and professional obligation of the individual researcher to be ethical even when research participants are unaware or unconcerned about ethics.

In this study, the first step will be to seek research permission from the relevant agencies. Ethical standards will be upheld during the research process as the principles of confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent will be applied. The rights and respect for the privacy of the respondents will be upheld. The aim of the research will be explained to the participants and their consent to participate in the study will be sought before the actual study. In addition, to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, all interview data will be coded, and a separate list will be created to indicate survey numbers that correspond to the interviewees. The list will be kept separate from the survey data. The researcher will deal honestly with respondents and will assure them that there is no risk involved if they participate in the study.

The study may not be accessible to persons with severe intellectual disabilities, who in most cases are unlikely to transition to university education. Students with severe hearing difficulties will not be included in the study since hiring sign language interpreters may not be possible within the available budget. In a broader perspective, the study will be inaccessible to persons with disabilities who could not get enrolled in university education.

Some respondents may not be free to participate in the study for fear of being victimized, or may wonder whether the study will benefit them in any way. However, the aim of the study will be explained to the participants and their consent to participate in the study will be sought.



5. Conclusion

Persons with disabilities emphasise the value of their contribution to the economic and social life, as seen when they make the case for anti-discrimination and for the resources required for a reasonable quality of life (Morris, 2005). Accordingly, people with disabilities make contributions to the social good as volunteers, parents, and as family and community members, but are often assumed as being unable to undertake such responsibilities (Morris, 2005). It is expected that perspectives of citizenship considered in this study, that is, security, autonomy, and influence, will shed more light on how Kenyan students with disabilities rate their citizenship with regards to educational provisions.

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