



Uncovering cultural regularities underpinning the pedagogy of learners with disabilities



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Background: Fear of disability tends to influence teachers' pedagogical practices in early childhood education in Ghana. Deeply rooted in socio-cultural beliefs, this fear hinders inclusive education and perpetuates exclusionary practices.

Aim: This article explores the fear of disability within Ghanaian early childhood education, as an instance of Ghanaian and West African cultural practices manifesting in and through teachers' classroom activities, which constrain the effective learning and development of learners with disabilities.

Setting: The research was conducted with teachers from seven early childhood education centres in Accra, Ghana.

Method: We applied focus group interviews, integrating a local conversational approach to enhance the effectiveness of our Vygotsky-inspired authentic questioning method. Using an approach that embodies respect, mutual acknowledgement, and affirmation of each other's humanity, the first author was able to uncover the profound cultural meanings of the teachers' practices, which would otherwise have been difficult to reveal through a rigid application of formal methods.

Results: The findings promote cultural contingency of methods as tools for uncovering the dynamic structure of cultural processes, such as fear of disability, that underpin complex social practices of the pedagogy of learners with disabilities.

Conclusion: The article provides an analysis of the data and the process through which data was produced, leading to the uncovering of the underlying culturally situated regulatory processes vis-à-vis the teachers' relationship with learners with disabilities.

Contribution: The paper contributes to the application of informal methods of inquiry, informed by both theory and practice in cultural psychology and education.

Keywords: fear of disability; learners with disabilities; early childhood education; inclusive education; teachers; cultural-historical activity theory; Ghana; United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNSDG4).

Introduction

The fear of disability is a common problem within Ghanaian society, and the problem permeates schooling, especially the schooling practices related to learning and children with disabilities (Agbenyega 2006; Opoku et al. 2017). This fear often results from a lack of understanding and demonisation of disabilities (Koszela 2013). The increasing number of young children with disabilities has contributed to the growing awareness of their needs and rights (Halfon et al. 2012). For example, 8% of Ghana's population of over 30 million experience disabilities, with the female population having a higher (8.8%) incidence than the male population (6.7%) and rural communities having more cases (9.5%) compared with urban (6.5%) (Ghana Statistical Service 2021). The growing awareness of disability contributed to the adoption of the *Inclusive Education (IE) Policy* and an implementation plan (2015–2019) for mainstream schooling for learners with disabilities (Ministry of Education 2015).

As a social development project, IE is promoted as part of Ghana's free compulsory universal education programme. In line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations 2015), the IE policy promotes access and participation in schooling for all learners. Consequently, the policy requires schools to transform their culture and pedagogies to enrol and retain all learners, including those with mild to moderate disabilities (Abdulai 2016). However, IE implementation

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has been severely challenged in Ghana because of controversies over IE approaches, inadequate teaching and learning resources, inadequate teacher training in inclusive pedagogy and poor infrastructural developments (Opoku et al. 2017). Axiologically, the challenges further lie at the root of cultural constructions that use power, privilege and dominance to discriminate against differently abled persons in communities. For example, studies suggest that teachers' pedagogical practices towards learners with disabilities tend to be either sympathetic and overly protective, or this dominates and limits interactions with learners with disabilities, discouraging healthy interactions (Agbenyega & Deku 2011; Naami & Mort 2023). The basis for teachers' attitudes towards learners with disabilities is elucidated in what Amponsah-Tawiah (2018) constructs as cultural entrapment:

Within an activity, the events that occur and the consequences [that] the participant experiences can qualitatively change the participant's goals and motives for participation, the environment, and the activity itself; the activity performed holds cultural formations with its structure and individuals who find themselves as participants of any cultural formation process find it binding on them; therefore, failure to adhere to this cultural norm is seen as despicable. (p. 82)

Amponsah-Tawiah's (2018) elucidation of cultural entrapment has consequences for teachers' willingness to deviate from cultural norms to adopt strategies that transform school and classroom practices to accommodate learners with disabilities. Cultural entrapment explains how, to escape being seen as deviants, people follow established norms that are culturally binding on them, even if they contradict their professional beliefs and practices (Hopwood & Gottschalk 2022). Accordingly, Hopwood and Gottschalk (2022) argue that escaping entrapment in teachers' professional practice requires more than seeking help to re-enact hidden motives in their actions and ways that such motives can be transformed to address the conditions that entrap the teachers. This notion of cultural entrapment is crucial to understanding subtle but powerful nuances in the social construction of disability (Pothier 1992) and its influences on the pedagogy of learners with disabilities (Pothier 1992):

The social construction of disability refers to how an able-bodied conception of disability magnifies its consequences. The social construction of disability assesses and deals with disability from an able-bodied perspective. It includes erroneous assumptions about the capacity to perform from an able-bodied frame of reference. It encompasses the failure to make possible or accept different ways of doing things. It reflects a preoccupation with 'normalcy' that excludes the disabled person. (p. 78527)

Cultural and religious frameworks provide diverse interpretations of disabilities that suggest either a cultural receptiveness or disdain towards aspects of disability based on communities' established norms, behaviour and moral considerations (Allotey & Reidpath 2001; Azumi, Asante & Dickson 2018; Denham et al. 2010). The differences in the

interpretations of disabilities might have emerged from the communities' social and geographical conditions. For example, Voigt (2024) argues that communities evolve in their social norms to respond to shifting geographical conditions such as pathogen prevalence. This discourse contributes to the complexity of cultural attitudes towards disability across communities, even for those within the same region, revealing a spectrum of veneration and respect in one community and stigma, exclusion and discrimination towards disabilities in the other. For example, the Asantes of Ghana regarded children with disabilities with respect, taught them trades and, where possible, gave them noble roles suited to their abilities (Kissi 2020). Yet, communities in the Kassena-Nankana District demonised children with disabilities and eliminated them (Allotey & Reidpath 2001). The discourses on disability demonstrate how specific connections to the unseen world are translated into communal norms and interpreted to guide attitudes and behaviour towards persons with disabilities. Such discourses reinforce the assertion that communities' beliefs and practices are subject to their unique experiences (Bunning et al. 2017). The negative interpretations tend to create fear towards disability in communities.

As a product of culture, the fear of disability impacts classroom practice and constrains effective and successful early childhood education practice. The fear of disability serves as a cultural artefact in the psychological processes of teachers that dictates culturally derived social behaviour that exists among learners with disabilities and teachers within a school community. In this context, teachers adhere to culturally prescribed norms in their interactions with learners with disabilities for fear of being punished by the unseen spirit world if they act otherwise. Thus, the particular social situation of learning and development arises, albeit with negative outcomes, from how teachers extend disability norms to their classrooms. This has consequences for the quality of learning experiences that the teachers enacted for learners with disabilities as they create distancing, for example, and limit opportunities for learners with disabilities to develop a sense of belongingness and to engage with abstract concepts beyond the concrete everyday activities and stigma they experience. When learners feel unwelcome in their classrooms, resistance to instruction becomes apparent. All these happen under the surface and constitute processes that may confound methods that are appropriately geared towards the understanding of complex, dynamical processes of culture and history.

Ghanaian teachers' culturally situated fear of disability

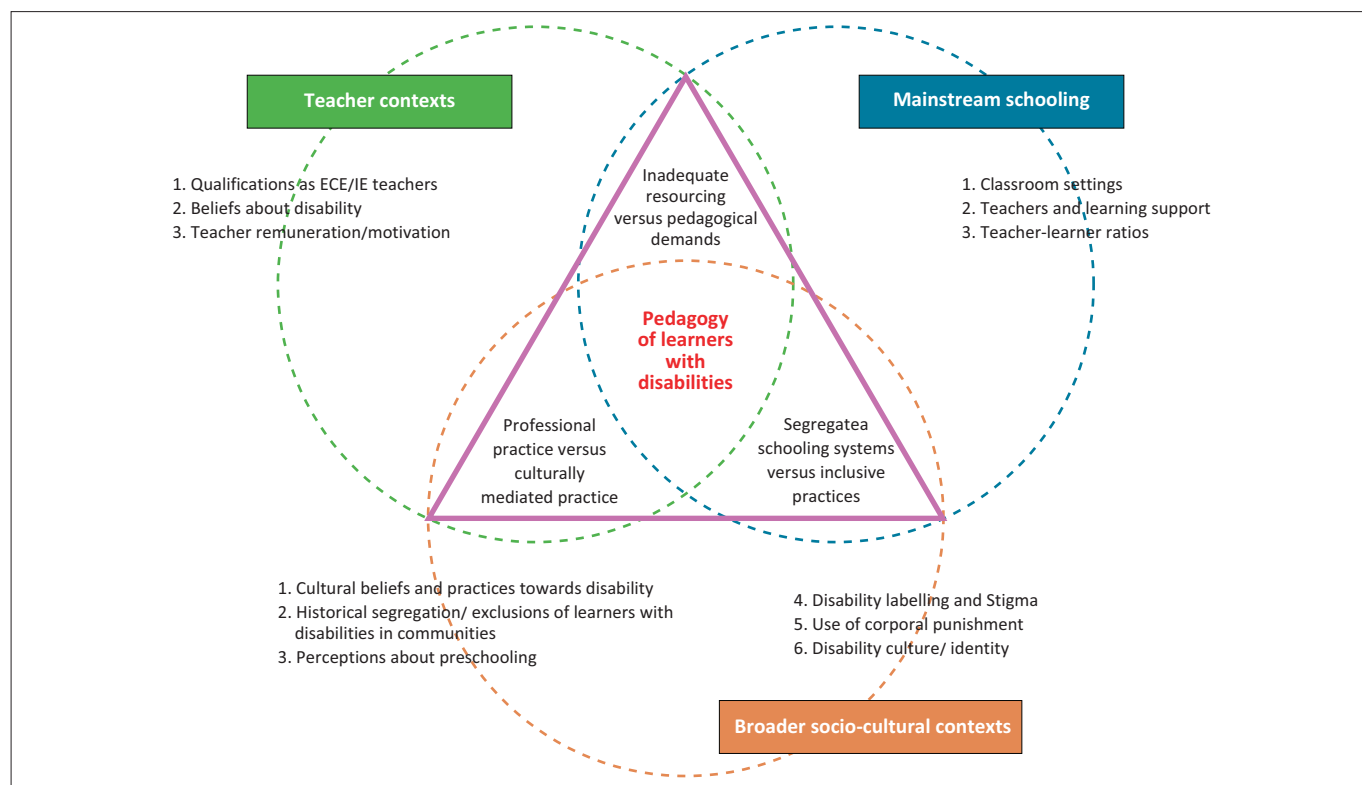
We define *fear* as a psychosocial concept owing to its roots in cultural, historical and socio-economic contexts. The literature highlights the multiple dimensions and connections of fear in social interactions between individuals with disabilities and non-disabled others (Adolphs 2013; Agbenyega 2003, 2006; Barclay 2017).

Following this insight, *fear of disability* is understood as a complex, multimodal emotional state that arises in response to perceived threats, compelling individuals to adopt protective behaviour when encountering persons with disabilities. This perspective aligns with the African understanding that individuals with disabilities possess unique strengths; this contrasts with Eurocentric views that often equate disability with weakness (Barclay 2017). Barclay (2017) explains that Eurocentric views about disability are rooted in the medical model that projects disability as a deficiency or impairment, emphasising individual limitations in contributing to society.

The notion of disability as weakness is shaped by a somatocentric epistemology that arises from the prioritisation of individualism, industrialisation and production as core pillars of Eurocentric cultures; in this context, individuals with disabilities are marginalised and considered weak because of their inability to contribute to the priority areas of those societies (Barclay 2017). Thus, fear of disability stems from ableist ideologies, power relations and societal hierarchical norms that link disability to failure and frame persons with disabilities as inferior and threats to societal order. They are seen as incapable of exercising power and control over non-disabled individuals (Babik & Gardner 2021; Barclay 2017). This Eurocentric episteme on disability is contrasted by the spiritual worldviews of many African cultures, such as believing in life after death, reincarnation, where the spirits of dead people return to their communities, and the existence of a metaphysical world where spirits, ancestors and gods live (Barclay 2017).

Barclay elucidates that the human body is not always the primary basis for social identity in most African cultures, but its spiritual and communal aspects hold greater significance. This belief of Africans, transmitted through their culture, dictates the complex nature of interactions that ensue between persons with disabilities and non-disabled persons in communities.

Fear can also arise from teachers' inability to meet the needs of learners owing to individual and institutional constraints. For example, persistent challenges stemming from inadequate schooling resources and negative cultural perceptions of disability and the schooling of learners with disabilities can psychologically promote and justify substandard pedagogical practices for learners with disabilities on the surface of things but create contradictions in teachers' psychological processes beneath the surface. Another example relates to the introduction of new schooling and pedagogical tools, such as inclusive education and preschool curriculum, into unreformed schooling systems that potentially change the system of activity within schooling contexts (see Engeström 2000, 2011). In the literature, we identified three contradictions, presented in Figure 1, that tend to shape teachers' psychological processes: (1) teachers' professional beliefs about disability versus their culturally mediated beliefs towards disability (Agbenyega 2003, 2006; Naami & Mort 2023), (2) inadequate teaching and learning materials and learner support systems versus demands for specialised pedagogical practices for learners with disabilities (Alhassan & Abosi 2017; Opoku et al. 2017) and (3) teachers' traditional pedagogies designed to segregate regular learners



Source: Adapted from Engeström, Y., 2000, 'Activity theory as a framework for analyzing and redesigning work', *Ergonomics* 43(7), 960–974. <https://doi.org/10.1080/001401300409143>, activity system triangle

FIGURE 1: Conceptualised contradictions in the mainstream early childhood education system.

from those with special needs versus demands for holistic pedagogy for all learners, regardless of their condition and social situation (Akongyam et al. 2023; Akyeampong 2017).

These contradictions appear on one side as barriers that potentially generate fear about implementing inclusive education. But, most importantly, they also appear as concepts that can be transformed into tools for uncovering and intervening in cultural artefacts in teachers' psychological processes that are harmful to the learning and development of learners with disabilities.

The cultural context of fear within Ghanaian society

While Ghana occupies a relatively small landmass in the Western part of Africa, it has over 80 languages and ethnic groups (Anson-Yevu 1988). Similar to other African cultures, the spectrum of tolerance for disability across ethnic groups in Ghana has historically ranged from veneration to ethnic cleansing. For example, the past attitudes of the Ga people of Accra, the southern part of Ghana, varied from pampering to reverence, reflecting a belief in the supernatural essence of people with disabilities (Kissi 2020). Consequently, the actions towards such people in these communities were seen to be less harsh. In other cultures, children with severe disabilities were either ostracised at birth or restricted to the confines of their family houses. They were denied access to communal activities, while older ones were excluded from leadership positions in communities, as evidenced by the de-stooling of chiefs who became severely ill (Allotey & Reidpath 2001; Azumi et al. 2018; Denham et al. 2010; Kissi 2020). Within these communities, children with disabilities were perceived as spirits who enter the world, live short lives and bring misfortunes and shame to families and communities before returning to the spirit world (Allotey & Reidpath 2001; Azumi et al. 2018; Denham et al. 2010). Although the practice is considered barbaric in the post-modern era, Allotey and Reidpath (2001) and Denham et al. (2010) argue that the practice of killing spirit children, and its associated discourses, do not constitute significant community infanticide since the verbal autopsies do not provide accurate evidence of the practice in its signification to the survival of communities.

The seemingly contradictory discourses across Ghana on disability, from veneration to carnage, emerge from their connections to and notions about the influences of the other (spirit) world in their material worlds. These discourses demonstrate how specific connections to the unseen world are translated into communal norms and interpreted to guide attitudes and behaviour towards persons with disabilities, reinforcing an assertion that communities' beliefs and practices are subject to their unique experiences. More importantly, the discourses provide a means to unravel hidden artefacts in people's psychological processes regarding disability and the development of children with disabilities. These psychological processes are shaped by their particular cultural context. The particular histories and practices of

communities towards disability in Ghana have shaped how individuals construct and act on disability. The transmission of psychological processes from the collective to the individual within communities is elucidated in Vygotsky (1978).

Vygotsky elucidated that the development of specific human psychological processes is predicated on the nature of artefacts embedded in the social-communicative practices of communities. Within the context of disability, cultural beliefs and practices are often transmitted as psychological artefacts to inform community members' actions towards disability and the schooling of learners with disabilities. In this line of reasoning, Kozulin (2003) writes, 'Psychological tools are symbolic artefacts that, when internalised, help individuals master their functions of perception, memory, attention, and volition' (Kozulin 2003:15–16). Kozulin links the development of psychological processes to symbolic concepts embedded in community activities and contexts that inform an individual's behaviour when internalised. In essence, the discourses surrounding disability in communities shape the institutionalisation of disability and the psychological processes of social actors towards disability.

Aim and research question

Our goal in the present article is to provide an approach to uncovering the cultural regularities of teachers' fear of disability in the pedagogy of learners with disabilities in a way that is theory informed, systematic and culturally sensitive. We achieved this aim by asking what cultural regularities underpin the pedagogy of learners with disabilities within Ghanaian Early Childhood Education.

Research methods and design

Research design

The paper is inspired by Vygotsky's (1978) concept of 'theory-methods'. The concept is premised on the view of the method as both *process* and *product*, which addresses the problem of how to understand teachers' meanings as something that can never be accessed directly, owing to the specific nature of psychological processes and the contingency of cultural and historical processes. As a result, both the process and product characteristics of the method require the ingenuity of the researchers, including their indispensable grounding on relevant theoretical and methodological advances in the field. We systematically explored the psychological processes of teachers using appropriate culturally sensitive tools, such as fireside conversational group discussions, to understand and uncover hidden disability discourses within the cultural context in which they occur. We finally applied the principle of double stimulation (Sannino 2015) as a process and product of investigating and intervening in culturally derived constraints on learning and development.

The data used for this paper were pulled from a qualitative, cross-sectional doctoral study that was conducted in Ghana. The original study focused on the narratives of kindergarten teachers in a dynamic community undergoing rapid development. The community was rapidly developing from a predominantly rural to an urban settlement for working-class populations. It was therefore deemed sustainable to explore the regularities of cultural beliefs about disability in its schooling, which was also rapidly changing in its approach and scope to integrate inclusion. The study further focused on early childhood education because it is deemed to be the entry point for all children and thus presents a strong case for providing interventions that remove barriers to learning in children (Sims & Brettig 2018).

Data collection method

The approach to uncovering regularities of the pedagogy was systematic and culturally sensitive. Vygotsky's cultural-historical activity theory provided a framework, through the principle of double stimulation, as a process and product of investigating and intervening culturally derived constraints in learning and development, such as the fear of disability. In this line of reasoning, Muthivhi (2011:32) elucidates that 'cultural concepts in psychological processes should be linked to the specific cultural context of their manifestations'. This is important for understanding and analysing the complexity of the cultural processes of schooling and pedagogy, and given that culturally derived constraints to the pedagogy of learners with disabilities are often hidden in psychological processes and cannot be directly observed, a culturally sensitive approach to uncovering, and possibly intervening in, these cultural phenomena was recommended.

Focus group discussions were used to gather data for the study. These comprised 18 teachers from seven public schools in communities of the Ga-East Municipality of Accra, Ghana. These communities developed rapidly from predominantly rural into peri-urban settlements and therefore provide the case for investigating the inner psychological processes of teachers about disability discourses and schooling alongside the rapidly changing contexts of the communities. The focus groups were structured to mimic community fireside group conversations and storytelling, where adults gather after a day's work to engage with one another and discuss matters of importance to them. This approach was utilised in Luria's (1976:21–22) research expedition to Uzbekistan in 1929 and narrated by Proctor (2013) as follows:

Luria claimed that he did not want the psychologist's questions to interrupt habitual activities but to make the experimental situation as natural as possible. He was suspicious of standardised tests and of introducing elements alien to people's normal environments. As such, conversations took place in the relaxed atmosphere of the tea house. (pp. 47–48)

Luria's cultural research methods contrasted with those of Koffka, who accompanied him. Koffka conducted his

research using a positivist approach associated with standardised testing (Proctor 2013):

Luria developed experiments based on objects and examples drawn from his subjects' immediate surroundings, concluding that environmental factors ... had a marked impact on psychological processes. Koffka, on the other hand, employed a range of standardised tests used in European experiments. (p. 48)

Luria's work proved that the methods of research into people's psychological processes must be culturally sensitive. In the present study, we were sensitive to the resistance that the 'gatekeeping' officials posed to our request to conduct the study in their schools. The officials indicated that we could not observe the teachers and the children with disabilities directly in their classrooms. We initially suspected that the teachers could not fully express themselves when we engaged within school hours and at their schools. This was because they were overwhelmed with large classes and activities that made it difficult for us to engage. But more importantly, we inferred that they feared being punished for sharing information that was deemed to be sensitive regarding how the inclusive education policy was implemented. Our suspicion stemmed from the approval conditions given that we could not observe the learners with disabilities or developmental challenges in their classrooms and that the teachers were not inclusive education teachers. One of the teachers initially declined when we asked to record our conversations with her, citing that her boss had warned her not to speak with journalists and get into trouble. For this reason, we revised our method of investigation. We employed concepts of belongingness and communal conversations, such as patience, caring, solidarity and unity of common purpose, to foster a sense of community and trust with the hope that veiled issues in community and schooling practices would be brought to the fore and discussed.

We then decided to proceed with the study by engaging the teachers in group discussions outside their schools on weekends. We initially sought the teachers' consent before inviting them to the group discussions. We then asked for their consent at each stage of the discussions. We understood that hidden psychological processes regarding disability could be subjective and reflect individualised cultural and political views that might not reflect the views and actions of the broader community of teachers (Ratner 1997). Ratner argues that these subjective psychological processes must be subjected to a systematic, objective analysis to validate them as those emerging from the broader social group or macro-level. To avoid projecting individualistic political views as postulates of culture and social behaviour towards disability and learners with disabilities, as Ratner warns, we employed focus group discussions as an interviewing method and an embodiment of interdependence where concepts and experiences were validated by the group: those individual views that were validated by the group were considered 'immature'. However, we followed up with individual

teacher interviews to understand and clarify their contextual meanings.

The initial set of questions we had prepared based on the theoretical concepts advanced through CHAT and the literature on disability discourse in Ghana paved the way for more in-depth group discussions. It helped the participants to relax, as at that point they began to have a fair idea of the study's focus. For the second phase of the discussions, the participants were split into two groups and engaged in separate rooms using probing questions and statements that we had gathered from the first session. This was done to ensure that each teacher contributed to the discussions. We succeeded with this approach as the teachers felt at ease and expressed their views and experiences with learners with disabilities in their classrooms in a manner that exposed their collective views on disability and its manifestation in schooling. This culturally sensitive approach reflects van der Veer's (2007) commentary on the Vygotsky-Luria data-gathering tradition:

Much care was taken to develop problems and questions that would seem meaningful to the participants; many problems were presented in the familiar format of 'riddles' and discussed in friendly group conversations; recording of the answers was done unobtrusively; the prepared tasks were only introduced when the atmosphere seemed right. (p. 99)

This approach proved to be successful and provided affordances to explore the teachers' psychological processes on disability and the schooling of learners with disabilities. We could not have achieved this feat if we had used positivistic standardised tests, which, according to Vygotsky (1978:85), only reveal the actual developed mental abilities and their functioning but neglect the iterative points of maturation in psychological processes and, at the same time, the opportunities to expose and intervene regarding concepts that are forming and yet to mature. Thus, a more rigorous approach that was theoretically situated and contextually relevant was required, bearing in mind that hidden psychological processes regarding disability could not be uncovered directly using formalist positivist methods and tools. Hence, the investigation followed a systematic, objective process of uncovering the histories and experiences of the teachers regarding disability and its manifestations in the pedagogy of children with disability. At the same time, it served as a means of analysing and interpreting the experiences within a particular cultural context of disability and schooling, constituting the product of the entire investigation. Akin to this is Vygotsky's concept of double stimulation (Sannino 2015).

The notion of double stimulation has been advanced as a method, theory method and principle of cultural-historical activity theory to indirectly trace inner psychological processes using artificial tools of investigation (Muthivhi 2011; Sannino 2015). To Sannino (2015), there are:

Two types of stimuli [first, the initial problematic situation and, second, the use of an auxiliary artefact as a sign to decide the problematic situation] serve the purpose of objectifying inner psychological processes to trace the development of higher mental functions and reveal their structure. (p. 3)

This was important for our present study as we sought to understand how cultural narratives and practices on disability shape teachers' psychological processes and their actions towards learners with disabilities.

We used structured questions and probing in social groups as interviewing tools to help the participants situate and make meaning of negative discourses on disability as a problematic social situation of learning and development of learners with disabilities (Blunden 2021:9–10; Vygotsky 1993). We followed up participants' responses with probing questions that, by answering them, revealed their inner psychological processes and motives regarding disability and their relationships to broader social norms. We continued until the teachers began to question those motives and, at the same time, make suggestions on what they could do about the problematic situation. This method of double stimulation was deemed appropriate for revealing hidden motives and contradictions in pedagogical practices that could not be observed through a direct means of inquiry (Vygotsky 1978):

The method of double stimulation serves to make visible internal and unobservable psychological processes. Triggered by an initial problematic situation or first stimulus, a second stimulus is an artefact that has become a sign, i.e. a traceable link between the outside world and inner psychological functioning. The use of second stimuli makes, therefore, accessible processes that remain hidden when external resources are not mobilised. In this sense, double stimulation is a method of objectification of inner psychological processes. (Sannino 2015:3)

To Muthivhi (2011), these artificial tools or second stimuli can meaningfully reveal psychological processes when they are culturally sensitive and informed by the theory that undergirds the research enterprise. We incorporated this understanding into the gathering and interpreting of the data beyond the direct observation of predefined variables and concepts. The data collection method was not merely seen as a systematic application of principles and techniques but as an evolving means of inquisition and reflection informed by the theoretical framework (Radford & Sabena 2015). With this understanding, tenets in the teachers' narratives were reconstructed during and after interviews and presented as vignettes or short case stories (Mayisela 2017). This was done to assist the teachers to reflect on their practices and to 'artificially provoke a process of psychological development' in their cultural, material and historical perceptions about disability and schooling of learners with disabilities (Vygotsky 1978:61). The data analysis was process oriented and formed part of the data collection process as it involved continuously generating, interpreting and validating themes with the teachers as a social group.

Data analysis

The method of thematic analysis was used to analyse and present relevant data for the paper. Table 1 provides themes and excerpts of the narratives provided by the teachers that were used for the analysis.

Ethical considerations

Before the study, the first author applied for ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria (EDU181/21). Further approval was sought in Ghana from the Ga-East District Office of the Ghana Education Service (GES/GEM/3/16/151) and the Headteachers of seven public kindergarten schools in the Ga-East District. All the teachers gave their consent to participate in the study after the first author had discussed the scope of the research and its implications with them. Subsequently, consent was sought at each preceding stage of the data collection process to ensure that the teachers were not coerced into providing sensitive information about their engagements with children with disabilities.

Results

Characteristics of the participants

Eighteen kindergarten teachers from seven public kindergartens in the Ga-East Municipal in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana participated in the study. The mean age of the teachers was 35 years (ranging from 27 to 50). On average, the teachers had been teaching at the kindergarten (KG) level for 6 years. Three teachers were trained in early childhood education, while the remaining 15 were trained in general basic education. At the time of the study, none of the teachers had been formally trained or received special or inclusive education certification. However, they had attended some workshops on the implementation of inclusive education. Sixteen out of the 18 teachers had taught previously at the basic education level (Primary 1–Junior High School 3). The average years of teaching experience of the teachers was 13 (the minimum was 4 years and the maximum was 30 years).

All the kindergarten teachers were female. This was not surprising, as early childhood education as a profession – owing to its caring and nurturing aspects – is dominated by female teachers (Mashiya 2014). Mashiya argues that the underrepresentation of male teachers in early childhood education is derived from culturally assigned gender roles in communities that construct and mediate early childhood education as a women's profession. This perception is framed within a cross-cultural notion of masculinity and feminism, which prescribe gender ideologies and expectations. Only three of the participants were trained in early childhood education. The reason for having few trained early childhood teachers could be a result of the late introduction of early childhood education as a standalone programme in teacher training colleges and other tertiary institutions (Frimpong 2020). Further, two of the teachers

TABLE 1: Themes for analysis.

Themes	Teachers' narratives
Emergence of fear of disability	'Thank you. Do you think what teachers believe about disabilities affects the way they support learners with disabilities?' (Researcher)
	'We all agree, but it depends on the level of disability that will make the teacher draw back or go forward.' (Participant 1)
	'Okay. Can you give us an example?' (Researcher)
Fear as a psychological constraint	'For some disabilities, children are so aggressive that they can easily attack. So, with this child, you have to be careful dealing with that child in the classroom, a way to tame the child before you go in for ... Some of them bring out saliva and, at times, put fingers in their mouth, and they will be touching you. So, if you do not want to smell, you will ask them to return and do those things.' (Participant 1)
	'I also think that the level of disability and then the kind of environment or the materials available, if there is no material available to help that child, I think it is better to leave it that way than to worsen things for the child, yes.' (Participant 4)
	'Well, from what she was saying, when I had my first child, I used to have a special child in my class; it was even in the village [outsirt of Accra], and for her, she even has water coming out from her mouth, when she is writing, she shakes, she cannot even write. People told me that I should not get closer to her because I might give birth to such a child, but I gave birth to a normal child; I was afraid, however. When she comes close to me, I sometimes dismiss her, but later on, I realise that she is not the one who is giving me the child; it is God who is giving me this child, so why should I dismiss her? So, I stopped it, and when I gave birth, I gave birth to a normal baby, yes. When I was pregnant with this one, my husband would just put the television off whenever I was watching television, and he saw such things. For me, I do not believe that when you look at those children, you will give birth to such a child. I do not believe it, but people do believe in those things.' (Participant 2)
Need for training in inclusive education	'Yes, I will say yes. For instance, a teacher who is pregnant. Growing up, I was told that when erm, like the children who drip from the mouth, when you get close to such a child, and you are pregnant, you are likely to give birth to a child like that, and you do not think anybody would want to give birth to such children willingly. So, if a female teacher is pregnant, lalai [meaning, never], she would not want to draw such a child closer. So, it will affect the support she will give the child.' (Participant 2)
	'Nodded their heads in agreement.' (All participants)
	'Sometimes, parents feel when they tell you this is the problem with their child, we might not accept the child in the school.' (Participant 6)
Emergence of teachers' fear of disability	'The homes they are coming from. Maybe their parents think that the child is a liability to them, they will ignore this child and give more attention to the normal ones.' (Participant 7)
	'I'd like to know if you have been trained or given some training regarding inclusive education since implementing the inclusive education policy in your schools.' (Researcher)
	'No.' (All participants)
	'Since its inception in 2015?' (Researcher)
	'No.' (Participant 1)
Emergence of teachers' fear of disability	'I have not been officially informed [trained]. Maybe the head [teacher] has.' (Participant 2)
	'No, please, but I have done some training in early childhood education. That is the only information I have.' (Participant 3)
	'You must educate us because some people think such children drool [and] you can become like them when their saliva touches you. Some have that mentality.' (Participant 2)

had been demoted from higher levels to preschool or kindergarten level as punishment for misconduct. Fifteen out of the 18 teachers were basic education teachers who sought transfer from their former schools and had to settle for kindergarten because there were limited vacancies at the basic education level.

Emergence of teachers' fear of disability

Fear of disability manifested when the teachers encountered learners with disabilities, particularly those with more pronounced disabilities, in their classrooms. They feared the children with disabilities would attack them or put saliva on them. The fear associated with learners with disabilities derives from culturally preserved

discourses on disability in the teachers' psychological processes. The fear was thus more evident when there was a risk that a pregnant woman would come into contact with a learner with disability. Consequently, the teachers maintained a distance from learners with more pronounced disabilities. More importantly, fear of disability appeared to be hidden in the teachers' beliefs about disability, resulting in the teachers keeping a distance or completely avoiding any physical contact with learners with disabilities in their classrooms.

The teachers justified their actions towards people with disabilities using culturally mediated notions of disability. Hence, their proscriptions of disability as burdensome and contagious stem from their communities' discourses on disability that perhaps have been preserved through a culture of fear of disability. The reasons given by the teachers differed phenotypically from those documented about the practices of communities of the Kasena-Nankana District in Ghana. However, their genetic structures remain unchanged, highlighting a discourse that disregards established social norms about disability and attracts punishments. For example, the Kasena-Nankana communities focused on sexual taboos and violation of social norms as conditions for attracting children with disabilities as punishments from the spirit world (Allotey & Reidpath 2001; Azumi et al. 2018; Denham et al. 2010). Similarly, the teachers' beliefs align with historically preserved disability discourse that forbids pregnant women from engaging with children with disabilities for fear of attracting misfortunes to their families and reproducing spirit children. Nonetheless, the strongly-held beliefs about disability were changing as they emerged in a teacher's narrative that she no longer believes in the dominant myths about disability. This assertion provides critical psychological artefacts for transforming beliefs and behaviour towards children with disabilities and their schooling.

Fear as a constraint in teachers' psychological processes

Within schools, teachers' psychological processes towards disability remained culture dependent, as observed in the present study, where teachers were engaged in a fireside conversational setting to understand their beliefs and discourses on disability and the nature of pedagogy enacted for students with disabilities and developmental delays. Thus, fear appears to drive negative attitudes in teachers towards disability, such as disability distancing, learner neglect and excessive use of corporal punishment. In this line of reasoning, fear of disability appears to have consequences for interactions between the teacher and her learner(s) with disabilities in the classroom. Thus, fear of disability mediates teachers' psychological processes regarding culturally acceptable norms about disability and disability engagements. For example, narratives from the teachers in the present study show that they maintained a distance from learners with visible

impairments such as drooling (ptyalism), seizures or hyperactivity for fear of giving birth to children with similar conditions or being attacked by those with more aggressive behaviour.

More so, teachers' motive for eliciting specific attitudes and practices in their engagements derives from a culture of fear that projects disability as contagious, burdensome and a purveyor of misfortune (Allotey & Reidpath 2001; Azumi et al. 2018; Denham et al. 2010). The teachers act out their fear by distancing themselves or using corporal punishment in their instruction. Corporal punishment refers to the use of physical force, such as caning, pinching, slapping and hitting, with the motive to cause physical pain, not injury, to correct or control a child's behaviour. Although corporal punishment is seen as a cultural tool for child discipline across Africa, emerging evidence suggests that it is a strong risk factor associated with multiple poor outcomes for young children (Dickson et al. 2024). Consequently, the learners internalise the teacher's actions by becoming disinterested in classroom activities.

Discussion

The article provides insights into the cultural and institutional conditions that shape the learning and development of children with disabilities in early childhood education. The article underscores the significant contradictions that arise when remnants of dated beliefs are not adequately identified and addressed as part of the development of inclusive education. The fundamental construction of disability among teachers as something to be feared stems from community-based beliefs that have historically evolved but persist. These beliefs continue to shape teachers' psychological processes regarding disability. Fear of disability is seen here as a powerful cultural mediational artefact for transmitting negative beliefs about disability within communities.

The teachers' narratives revealed tensions in their understanding and practice of fostering positive learning outcomes in the learners. The analysis showed that because they were not adequately trained in inclusive pedagogy, the teachers relied on existing notions about disability to resolve tensions in their practice. These notions about disability were, however, flavoured with culturally mediated beliefs. These beliefs discriminate and place limitations on the schooling and learning of learners with disabilities; the notions, therefore, exacerbate the problem. Given this, changing teaching methods – from traditional forms often characterised by teacher-power dynamics to ones that encouraged flexible, democratic learning contexts and followed learners' interests – were insufficient to sustain positive transformation in the teachers' pedagogical approaches. At best, the transformations were superfluous and did not alter the teachers' established notions about disability.

The impact of the fear of learners with disability on teachers' practice and learners' learning and development

Fear underpins and guides the 'type of social relations, attitudes, and behaviour that ought to exist between individuals who live together in a community' (Gyekye 1996:35–36). Similarly, fear shapes teachers' roles in preserving culturally sanctioned norms about disability and what could happen to them if they behaved otherwise. In this case, the fear of disability defines the particular social situation of learning and development that arises when a teacher engages learners with disabilities by altering the learners' relationship with the world and their interactions with others (Vygotsky 1983:102). Accordingly, Gindis (1995) elucidates that what ensues tends to limit opportunities for the learners to engage with instruction beyond concrete concepts, the nature of assistance accessible and ultimately, impede their learning and development.

In essence, teachers' fear surrounding disability structures the social situation of learners with disabilities, setting a glass ceiling on the educational experiences of learners with disabilities. Thus, the fear of disability, as a culturally mediated artefact in teachers' psychological processes regarding disability, has consequences for the nature of pedagogical practices and interactions that teachers enact for learners with disabilities. The analysis shows complex interactions between the genetic mediation of fear of disability in the social situation of learners with disabilities within schooling. When fear is internalised, it creates resistance to learning in the learner. The notion of externalisation/internalisation of fear of disability and its linkage to learning resistance is elucidated in Arieviditch and Stetsenko (2000) using the ideas of Gal'perin and Vygotsky. Arieviditch and Stetsenko examined the relationships between specific instructional tools and cognitive development. The authors alluded to the notion that school instruction provides critical culturally evolving tools that, when internalised, mediate the learning process and shape cognition. Accordingly, the present study argues that the instructional environment created through teachers' action of distancing and the use of corporal punishment resulting from their internalised fear of disability can transform and develop resistance to learning in the learner. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that a poorly delivered learning environment induced by negative teacher cultural factors provides little or no transformative cognitive tools to learners with disability.

Resistance to learning arises when there is a clash between conflicts internalised by the learner in the classroom and their communities, resulting from their impairments. Gindis (1995) elucidated Vygotsky's idea of the social construction of disabilities as a primary barrier to access and participation of learners with disabilities. He argues that impairment is not subjectively perceived as a defect and deviance until it appears and is transmitted as such in the social world. Culturally mediated perception emerges in beliefs about

disability. It alters the learner's ability to interact naturally in the world and with people, creating conflicts in the learner, 'those conflicts which arise for such a child upon entering the world' (Vygotsky 1993:102), cited in Gindis (1995). When such conflicts are resolved, the learners will be ready to learn new things presented to them. In our case, negative attitudes towards the learners further deepened the conflicts and created resistance to learning. When learning is blocked in this way, it is argued that the teacher has reached their potential in mediating learning and requires support (Gindis 1995). Thus, resistance to learning can emerge as a contradictory motive to teachers' culturally mediated beliefs about disabilities and negative practices towards learners with disabilities in their classrooms.

Transforming Teachers' beliefs towards disability

The findings further suggest that teachers' strong-held beliefs about disability and children with disabilities were changing. The changing behaviour of the teachers was informed by her belief in God and the aftermath of her encounter with a learner with disability when she was pregnant. The changes were not widespread, but they demonstrated developments in teachers' psychological processes regarding disabilities; these seemingly subtle changes present contradictory contexts for transforming the pedagogy of learners with disabilities. More specifically, the emergence of a conflicting belief system to those of the dominant culture regarding disability provides critical opportunities for intervening in the psychological processes of teachers towards disability and the pedagogy for learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

The opportunities to transform the social and learning conditions of learners with disabilities can be leveraged through specialised teacher training programmes (pre-service and in-service training). The evidence of strongly held beliefs about disability and negative practices towards learners with disabilities reveals a lack of adequate training in inclusive education for teachers. As outlined earlier, none of the teachers were trained in inclusive education. With little or no training to expose and deal with culturally mediated notions about disability, the fear of disability seems to have mediated teacher-learner interactions and, as a result, forced the teachers to distance themselves from the learners and provided little learning support to them in their classrooms. Therefore, providing specialised training for teachers in inclusive education to create safe spaces and engage the teachers to reflect, discuss and seek contextually relevant ways to transform their beliefs and perceptions about disability and the learning development of children with disabilities is required.

Implications for practice

The article emphasises the importance of specialised in-service training that encourages teachers to critically reflect on the limitations of their culturally mediated beliefs and practices. Concurrently, this in-service training should help

teachers develop culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate psychological and material tools to overcome the limitations of fear associated with disability. This could enhance quality, inclusive learning opportunities for learners with disabilities in their classrooms.

Furthermore, fostering an environment that equips teachers with critical tools to enhance their pedagogical practices is critical to counter the transference of fear of disability. Professional development should focus on effective teaching strategies and emphasise the necessity for transformative ideologies on disability. Such an approach has the potential to empower teachers to engage more effectively with learners, adapting their instructional methods to be more inclusive and responsive to the distinct needs of students. This discourse encompasses re-evaluating teachers' in-service and pre-service programmes, integrating principles of inclusive education at all academic levels and actively involving teachers in dialogues surrounding disability and learning. By expanding our framework to include not only learners but also teachers and the systemic structures that entrap them, we can pave the way for more equitable and enriching pedagogical environments for learners with disabilities.

Conclusion

The present study illuminates the pivotal role that culturally derived psychological processes related to disability continue to play in shaping teachers' pedagogical practices towards learners with disabilities. The study highlights how historically constructed beliefs about disabilities in communities continue to capture teachers' minds, create fear of disability and hinder the development of new pedagogical tools and processes necessary for transforming early childhood education classrooms into inclusive settings for learners with disabilities. It further provides an approach to investigating tenets of psychological processes that are theoretically informed and culturally sensitive.

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Authors' contributions

D.K.K. and A.E.M., both conceived the presented idea. D.K.K. developed the theoretical framework and collected and analysed the data. A.E.M supervised the data collection and analytical methods. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available in this article.

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