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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Influence of School Environment on Learning Outcomes of Students with Mobility Impairment in Public Secondary Schools in Sengerema District, Mwanza-Tanzania

^aDickson Shitungulu, ^bDaniel Onyango, ^bFrank Mwamakula

^a Kisaba Primary School, Buchosa District, Mwanza, Tanzania.

^b Department of Education Foundations, St. Augustine University of Tanzania.

Corresponding Author

Dickson Shitungulu, Email: dicksonshitungulu400@gmail.com

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All authors contributed equally to this research.

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the influence of school environment on learning outcomes of students with mobility impairment in public secondary schools in Sengerema District, Mwanza-Tanzania. The study used the Classical Liberal Theory of Equal Opportunity which was developed by Sherman and Wood (1982). This study employed a mixed research approach and an exploratory sequential design. Data were gathered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to the sample of 165 selected through purposive, stratified, and simple random sampling methods. Reliability of instruments were ensured through expert reviews and the split-half method, achieving a reliability coefficient of 0.9. Data analysis involved SPSS version 26 for quantitative responses and thematic analysis for qualitative data. The study found that many inclusive public secondary schools in Sengerema District face significant challenges in supporting students with mobility impairment due to poor infrastructure, inadequate teaching materials, limited support services, and insufficient teacher training. While some efforts have been made to foster inclusive school environments, gaps in funding, awareness, and administrative prioritization continue to hinder full participation and academic success for these students. The study concluded that school environment significantly influences the learning experiences of students with mobility impairments, and without comprehensive improvements, true inclusivity remains unattainable. The study recommended that the government and education stakeholders should invest in accessible infrastructure, continuous teacher training, and support services to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Keywords: School environment; learning outcomes; students with mobility impairment

INTRODUCTION

Globally, inclusive education has been widely promoted through frameworks which advocate for equal access and participation for all learners regardless of their abilities (UNESCO, 2021). These policies emphasize the need for accessible infrastructure, inclusive teaching practices, and a supportive school environment. In countries like the United States, Spain,

and Canada, inclusive education policies are enforced through legal frameworks that guarantee customized support and physical access for students with disabilities (Tümekaya & Miller, 2020; Triviño-Amigo et al., 2022). Despite such progress, implementation gaps remain, especially in adapting the physical environment, which significantly affects students with mobility impairments.

In developing nations, inclusive education policies often exist, but their practical implementation is hindered by infrastructural challenges and limited teacher preparedness. In Indonesia, laws such as Law No. 20/2003 support inclusive education, yet schools often lack accessible buildings and trained staff (Sari et al., 2022; Susilawati et al., 2023). Similarly, in Malaysia, despite the use of Universal Design for Learning and differentiated instruction, learners with mobility impairments remain underserved due to insufficient assistive technology and teacher training (Rogahang et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024). These conditions demonstrate that without an enabling school environment including accessible classrooms and inclusive pedagogy students with mobility challenges are unlikely to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

Across Africa, the shift toward inclusive education is ongoing, but progress is slowed by underfunding, cultural perceptions of disability, and inadequate infrastructure. In Cameroon, although disability rights are recognized by law, poor monitoring leads to exclusionary practices in schools (Mkong, 2024). Nigeria's legal commitment to inclusive education has increased enrollment of students with disabilities, but most schools remain physically inaccessible and lack trained staff, directly limiting academic achievement and participation (Madume & Accra-Jaja, 2023; Orlunga & Alikor, 2023). These structural and attitudinal barriers restrict learners' ability to engage fully in both academic and co-curricular activities, underscoring the need for improved school environments.

In East Africa, Kenya has made legislative strides toward inclusive education; however, many schools lack ramps, adapted toilets, and mobility-friendly classrooms (Ungaya, 2023; Ileri et al., 2020). These environmental inadequacies are compounded by teachers' lack of training in inclusive practices. As a result, students with mobility impairments face emotional distress, limited social interaction, and reduced academic performance. The physical school environment directly influences learners' sense of belonging and their capacity to thrive in mainstream education. Without tailored infrastructure and accessible learning spaces, inclusive education remains a policy on paper rather than a lived reality.

Tanzania has promoted inclusive education since the early 1990s, particularly through the Education and Training Policy (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2014; 2021). However, the actual enrollment of learners with disabilities in secondary

schools remains alarmingly low at just 0.48% (UNESCO, 2020a). In rural areas, accessibility challenges are more pronounced, with schools lacking ramps, adapted desks, or inclusive transportation (Losioki & Ngowoko, 2024). These deficits create an exclusionary environment that limits students with mobility impairments from participating fully in academic and extracurricular programs. The failure to align policy with infrastructural development has led to disparities in educational outcomes for this group of learners (Katikiro & Mhagama, 2022).

In Sengerema District, the physical and social school environment continues to pose major challenges to students with mobility impairments. Many public secondary schools lack ramps, accessible toilets, or assistive devices, limiting these students' ability to navigate learning spaces and participate in classroom activities. Furthermore, societal attitudes and insufficient teacher training exacerbate exclusion, especially in subjects that require physical engagement such as Physical Education. These barriers negatively influence students' academic performance, attendance, and confidence. Thus, while inclusive education is recognized nationally, its implementation in districts like Sengerema remains limited by infrastructural, policy, and cultural constraints calling for urgent attention to school environment improvements (Losioki & Ngowoko, 2024). Therefore, this study evaluated the influence of school environment on learning outcomes of students with mobility impairment in public secondary schools in Sengerema District, Mwanza-Tanzania.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Review

The study used the Classical Liberal Theory of Equal Opportunity which was developed by Sherman and Wood (1982). The theory argues that all individuals, regardless of their background or disabilities, should have equal access to education and the opportunity to succeed based on merit and ability. The theory promotes the removal of systemic barriers and supports inclusive educational systems that provide appropriate resources and support for all learners, including those with mobility impairments (Hanlu, 2022; Thompson, 2017). Its emphasis on fairness, meritocracy, and individual potential is highly relevant to the learning outcomes of students with mobility impairments in public secondary schools in Sengerema District, where physical inaccessibility and lack of supportive environments often hinder these learners' academic

participation and achievement. Applying this theory in Sengerema would involve creating physically accessible schools and inclusive teaching practices that enable all students to compete and succeed equally, fostering both personal growth and societal progress.

Empirical Literature Review

Role of School Environment in Enhancing Students' Learning to Students with Mobility Impairment

Studies from various countries highlight key factors influencing the success of inclusive education for learners with disabilities, particularly regarding school environment and leadership. In Australia, Page et al. (2024) found that innovative learning environments, when inclusively and flexibly designed, promote a sense of belonging and academic engagement for students with disabilities across material, pedagogical, and relational aspects. The study emphasized the need for schools to prioritize inclusive designs that enhance both social and academic experiences, though it noted a lack of detailed quantitative data to support its findings. Similarly, in China, Wang et al. (2024) demonstrated that principal transformational leadership positively influences inclusive teaching behavior through the development of teachers' role identity and efficacy. However, the study called for more clarity on which specific leadership behaviors effectively support inclusive practices.

In Africa, the studies explored various local contexts. In Nigeria, Chinasa and Adeyinka (2024) showed that inclusive classrooms positively impacted academic performance of students with learning disabilities, though challenges such as limited assistive technologies and inaccessible infrastructure persisted. In Kenya, Makewa and Mutie (2019) reported that although inclusive practices were being implemented in public primary schools, inadequate resources and poorly adapted physical environments limited their effectiveness. Teachers struggled with using inclusive strategies effectively due to these constraints, pointing to the need for practical interventions in resource provision and infrastructure improvement.

In Tanzania, Revelian and Tibategeza (2022) emphasized the role of school culture in implementing inclusive education, finding that positive, supportive environments fostered better inclusion. Their study in Karagwe District called for in-service training for school leaders to help them build inclusive school cultures. Together, these studies underscore that successful inclusive education depends not only on policy but also

on the physical environment, school leadership, available resources, and teacher preparedness all of which are especially relevant to improving learning outcomes for students with mobility impairments in Sengerema District and similar contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed research approach and an exploratory sequential design, the study began with quantitative data collection followed by qualitative insights, offering a comprehensive understanding of the challenges. Data were gathered through questionnaires for teachers and semi-structured interviews with DEOs, WEOs, and school heads. The target population included 1,636 individuals, with a sample of 165 selected through purposive, stratified, and simple random sampling methods. Validity and reliability of instruments were ensured through expert reviews and the split-half method, achieving a reliability coefficient of 0.9. A pilot study was conducted in one school to refine tools. Data analysis involved SPSS version 26 for quantitative responses and thematic analysis for qualitative data. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and adherence to APA 7th edition referencing, were strictly observed to ensure integrity, transparency, and credibility throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Role of School Environment in Enhancing Students' Learning to Students with Mobility Impairment

The study aimed to evaluate the role school environment in enhancing students' learning with mobility impairment in public inclusive secondary schools. The goal was to understand what role the school environment plays in enhancing students with mobility impairment learn. Teachers were given questionnaires to respond to, and heads of schools, WEOs, and DEO were interviewed to provide information concerning the objective. Therefore, the responses concerning the roles of the school environment are presented in Table 1.

Physical Environment of the School

According to the results, 24.8% (35 teachers) agreed and 17.7% (25) strongly agreed that the physical environment of the school is good for students with mobility impairments. On the other hand, 32.6% (46) disagreed, and 10.6% (15) strongly disagreed. Meanwhile, 14.2% (20) were neutral. This shows that

while some teachers believe the school environment supports students with mobility impairment, a larger group thinks the opposite. Many schools may still lack proper buildings, paths, and classroom designs for students with disabilities. If the environment is not easy to access, students may feel discouraged from attending school or participating fully in learning activities. In addition, one of the interviewees said:

In our school, we have tried to make things better by putting ramps and making doors wider. But we still do not have enough money to build proper toilets and paths for students with mobility impairment. Because of this, some students find it hard to move around. We are trying, but more needs to be done (HT2, June 2025).

Table 1. Teachers' response on the role of school environment in enhancing students' learning to students with mobility impairment (n=141)

Statement	SD		D		N		A		SA	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
The physical environment of the school is conducive to learning for students with mobility impairment.	15	10.6	46	32.6	20	14.2	35	24.8	25	17.7
The school atmosphere promotes inclusivity and encourages students with mobility impairments to participate actively in classroom activities.	7	5	20	14.2	47	33.3	56	39.7	11	7.8
Teachers in the school adapt their teaching methods to suit the learning needs of students	12	8.5	32	22.7	42	29.8	29	20.6	26	18.4
The school facilities are well-equipped to accommodate students with mobility impairment.	13	9.2	26	18.4	37	26.2	40	28.4	25	17.7
The school environment provides a supportive social atmosphere for students, fostering their emotional well-being.	10	7.1	32	22.7	27	19.1	60	42.6	12	8.5
There are sufficient school support services to help students succeed academically.	31	22	30	21.3	29	20.6	45	31.9	6	4.3
The school administration prioritizes the needs of students in terms of both physical accessibility and academic support.	19	13.5	29	20.6	24	17	55	39	14	9.9

Key: SD-strongly disagree, D-disagree, N- neutral, A- agree, SA- strongly agree

Source: Field Data (2025)

This means that even though the school is trying to help, the changes are not enough. Students with mobility impairment still face problems moving around, which can make them feel left out or stop them from learning well. More support and better buildings are needed. Supporting this view, Page et al. (2024) found that well-designed, innovative learning environments foster a sense of belonging for students with disabilities

across material, pedagogical, and relational domains, ultimately enhancing both their social integration and academic success. Likewise, another interviewee added:

Our school is not well prepared for students with disabilities. We sometimes ask other students to help them move around, but this is not a good long-term solution. The classrooms and school yard are hard to move through. We

need help from the government or donors to fix this (HT1, June 2025).

This shows that the school depends on others to help students with impairments, which is not fair or reliable. The buildings are not made for everyone, so students with physical challenges may feel uncomfortable or left out. Big changes are needed to make the school better for all students. These statements reveal that despite efforts like installing ramps and widening doors, schools still lack sufficient resources to create fully accessible environments, such as proper toilets and pathways, which limit mobility and inclusion for students with mobility impairments. This reliance on temporary solutions, like asking other students for assistance, underscores the need for more sustainable support from the government or donors. Page et al. (2024) indicated that well-designed inclusive learning environments promote a sense of belonging across material, pedagogical, and relational aspects, enhancing both social and academic outcomes for students with disabilities. In contrast, while Page et al. advocate for prioritized investment in inclusive and flexible school designs to foster better academic and social experiences, the schools in the interviews are still struggling to achieve these standards due to limited funding and support. This gap emphasizes the urgent need for practical action to transform schools into truly inclusive, ve environments.

Inclusive and Encouraging School Atmosphere

A majority of teachers, 39.7% (56), agreed and 7.8% (11) strongly agreed that the school atmosphere promotes inclusivity and encourages participation. 33.3% (47) were neutral, while only 14.2% (20) disagreed and 5% (7) strongly disagreed. This shows that many schools are making efforts to create a welcoming atmosphere for all students, including those with mobility impairments. However, the high number of neutral responses may mean that some students still face challenges or that the efforts are not consistent across all schools. The interview conducted to one of the respondents revealed:

We try to make all students feel welcome, including those with disabilities. Teachers are encouraged to involve every student in class and school activities. We also talk to students about respecting and helping one another. But we still need more training and support to do better (HT4, June 2025).

This implies the school is working to be inclusive, but teachers may not have enough skills or support to fully

help all students. Without more training, some students with disabilities might still feel left out or less involved in learning and social activities. This reflects the classical liberal theory of equal opportunity, which emphasizes that all students should have an equal chance to participate and succeed, but achieving this requires adequately trained teachers and sufficient support. Without ongoing professional development, schools may struggle to provide the truly inclusive environment needed to ensure students with disabilities are fully included academically and socially. As Long'ore et al. (2023) observed, many schools face significant gaps in teacher preparation for special needs education, and without structured, ongoing professional development, schools will continue to fall short of creating truly inclusive environments that support both the academic progress and social inclusion of students with disabilities. Furthermore, another interviewee added:

The school is friendly to most students, but sometimes students with disabilities do not join group work or games because they feel different. We try to include them, but some teachers and students are not sure how to help. We need more awareness and better planning (HT5, June 2025).

This shows that even if the school is trying to be inclusive, students with disabilities may still feel left out. Teachers and other students may not know how to support them. More training and awareness can help make sure everyone feels fully included and supported. In contrast, Chinasa and Adeyinka (2024) revealed that participation in inclusive classrooms generally had a positive effect on academic performance, although the impact varied among students. Teachers and students expressed mostly positive attitudes toward inclusion, with satisfactory use of strategies such as differentiated instruction and co-teaching. This highlights that while efforts toward inclusion are important, they must be accompanied by adequate training and awareness to ensure all students, especially those with disabilities, feel genuinely supported and included. In contrast to schools still struggling with inclusion, evidence shows that when inclusive practices are effectively implemented, they can positively impact academic performance and foster more positive attitudes among teachers and students.

Adaptation of Teaching Methods

Only 20.6% (29) agreed and 18.4% (26) strongly agreed that teachers adapt their teaching to suit students with mobility impairment. A total of 22.7% (32)

disagreed and 8.5% (12) strongly disagreed, while 29.8% (42) were neutral. This result shows that although some teachers are trying to adjust their methods, many may not have the training or resources to do so effectively. This can make it hard for students with disabilities to understand lessons or keep up with their classmates. Besides, one of the respondents said:

Many teachers want to help students with mobility impairment, but have not been trained on how to change their teaching methods. Some classrooms are also crowded, making it hard to give special attention. We need to provide more training and teaching tools to support these learners (W2, July 2025)

This means that even though teachers are willing to help, they may not know how to teach in ways that support students with disabilities. Without proper training and materials, students with mobility challenges may fall behind. Giving teachers better skills and resources can improve learning for everyone. As supported by Makwa and Mutie (2019), teachers utilized instructional strategies, assessment, and engaged learners despite most schools lacking sufficient resources for effective management of students with special needs. Therefore, improving resources and adapting the environment should be done because it is important for better academic achievement among students. This aligns with the classical liberal theory of equal opportunity, which asserts that all learners should have equal access to quality education, regardless of their mobility abilities. To uphold this principle, teachers must be equipped with the necessary training and resources to create an environment where students with disabilities can learn effectively and achieve their full potential.

Facilities to Accommodate Students with Disabilities

A total of 28.4% (40) agreed and 17.7% (25) strongly agreed that the facilities are well-equipped for students with disabilities. However, 18.4% (26) disagreed, 9.2% (13) strongly disagreed, and 26.2% (37) were neutral. This suggests that some progress has been made in improving school facilities, but many schools still lack proper equipment or furniture, such as wide desks, ramps, or accessible toilets. This can limit learning and comfort for students with disabilities. Meanwhile, the interview provides:

In our district, a few schools have managed to introduce basic facilities such as ramps, wider doors, and special desks to support students

with mobility impairment. However, the majority of schools still lack proper infrastructure, including accessible toilets, smooth walkways, and furniture designed for learners with mobility challenges. The main problem is limited funding and a lack of detailed planning. More support from the government and development partners is needed to improve the situation (D1, July 2025).

This illustrates that although there have been small improvements in some schools, most still do not have enough facilities to properly support students with disabilities. Without accessible structures and equipment, these students may struggle to move around, sit comfortably, or use toilets with ease. This can lower their self-confidence, reduce participation in class activities, and even discourage regular school attendance. There is a need for urgent investment and long-term planning to ensure inclusivity in all schools. This aligns with the findings of Ngonyani et al. (2024), which revealed that while accessibility had a positive but statistically insignificant effect on academic achievement, the adequacy and quality of resources had a significantly positive impact. This suggests that beyond improving infrastructure, sustained investment in high-quality, functional resources is essential to enhancing academic outcomes and achieving true inclusivity.

Supportive Social Environment

Most teachers agreed that the school environment supports the emotional well-being of students with mobility impairments, with 42.6% (60) agreeing and 8.5% (12) strongly agreeing. About 22.7% (32) disagreed, 7.1% (10) strongly disagreed, and 19.1% (27) were neutral. These results are encouraging because they show that many students with mobility impairments feel accepted and supported by peers and teachers. A supportive social environment helps students build confidence and enjoy school life. Also, the interview responses show:

In our school, we have created a culture where students are taught to respect and support each other regardless of their abilities. Teachers work hard to make students with mobility impairment feel included in class and social activities. We also encourage peer support and group work. While there are still a few challenges, especially from new students, overall, the school community has become more caring and inclusive over time (HT5, June

2025).

This demonstrates that deliberate efforts to build a respectful and caring environment can make a big difference in the lives of students with disabilities. When teachers and peers are supportive, students feel emotionally safe and are more likely to participate actively in school life. However, continuous awareness programs and mentorship are needed to maintain this positive culture, especially as new students join the school. A consistent effort ensures lasting emotional well-being for all learners. Similarly, Revelian and Tibategeza (2022) indicated that school culture significantly influences the successful implementation of inclusive education. The study recommends that school heads receive in-service training on the importance of cultivating a positive school culture to enhance educational effectiveness. Another interviewee said:

I have visited several schools, and many are making good progress in creating friendly and inclusive environments. Students with mobility impairment are generally treated with kindness and are involved in school activities. However, in a few cases, I noticed some students still experience isolation or teasing. This shows the importance of regular guidance and counseling programs to help all students understand and support each other better (W3, July 2025).

This response highlights that while most schools are supportive, there are still gaps that need to be addressed. A few students with disabilities may still feel left out or face negative behavior from others. This can affect their emotional well-being and school performance. To maintain a truly supportive environment, schools should introduce regular counseling, teacher training, and student awareness programs. These efforts help promote empathy and reduce discrimination, making the school a better place for everyone. This aligns with the Classical Liberal Theory of Equal Opportunity (1982), which emphasizes that all students should have an equal chance to thrive in a supportive and non-discriminatory environment. For this to be realized, emotional and social barriers such as isolation and teasing must be addressed through structured interventions like counseling, teacher training, and student awareness programs, ensuring that every learner, including those with mobility impairments, can participate fully and confidently in school life.

Availability of School-Based Support Services

Only 31.9% (45) agreed and 4.3% (6) strongly agreed that there are enough support services like counselors and special education teachers. A large number, 22% (31) strongly disagreed, and 21.3% (30) disagreed, felt otherwise, while 20.6% (29) were neutral. This result points to a serious shortage of professional support for students with disabilities. Without services like counseling or learning support, these students may struggle with academic or emotional challenges, which may cause them to drop out or perform poorly. Similarly, one of the respondents added:

Our school, like many others in the area, does not have enough trained professionals, such as counselors or special education teachers. We do our best with the staff we have, but it is difficult to meet the needs of students with disabilities without proper support services. Sometimes, we rely on regular teachers to handle complex cases, which can be overwhelming for them. We need more trained personnel to assist these learners (HT1, June 2025).

This shows a clear gap in the availability of essential school-based support services. When professional support, such as counseling and special education services, is missing, students with disabilities may not receive the help they need to succeed academically and emotionally. This lack of support can lead to frustration, low performance, and even school dropout. Providing trained professionals in every school is critical to ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all students. This replicates the classical liberal theory of equal opportunity (1982), which holds that all students should have equal access to the tools and support needed to succeed in education. Without professional support services like counseling and special education, students with disabilities are denied the foundational resources required to compete on equal terms, reinforcing inequality and limiting their educational and life outcomes.

Prioritization by School Administration

More than half of the teachers had a positive view: 39% (55) agreed and 9.9% (14) strongly agreed that school administrations prioritize the needs of students with mobility impairments. Still, 20.6% (29) disagreed, 13.5% (19) strongly disagreed, and 17% (24) remained neutral. While some school leaders are trying to give attention to accessibility and learning support, others may not be doing enough. Without clear leadership and planning, it is difficult for schools to create a truly

inclusive learning environment. These findings show a divided perception among teachers regarding how well school administrations prioritize the needs of students with mobility impairments. While a majority expressed a positive view, a significant portion either disagreed or remained neutral, indicating inconsistencies in leadership commitment to inclusion. This connects with Wang et al. (2024), whose study revealed that principal transformational leadership positively influences teachers' inclusive teaching behaviors by strengthening their inclusive role identity and teaching efficacy. Without clear and committed leadership, schools may struggle to foster the professional identity and confidence teachers need to implement inclusive practices, making it difficult to achieve a truly inclusive learning environment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that the school environment plays a pivotal role in shaping the learning experiences of students with mobility impairments in inclusive public secondary schools. While there have been efforts to improve physical accessibility through measures such as ramps and widened doorways, significant infrastructural gaps remain, limiting full participation and independent mobility for these students. Moreover, the social and emotional dimensions of the school environment such as fostering a respectful, inclusive atmosphere and providing consistent emotional support are equally important for promoting student engagement and self-confidence. However, inconsistent teacher training, limited awareness of inclusive practices, and a shortage of support services continue to hinder the development of truly inclusive settings. The study emphasizes that sustainable inclusion requires a holistic approach, encompassing infrastructural investment, comprehensive staff training, and the establishment of supportive policies and school culture. Without addressing these interconnected challenges, students with mobility impairments will continue to face barriers that undermine their academic progress and social integration. This underscores the urgent need for coordinated efforts among school administrators, policymakers, and development partners to build genuinely inclusive educational environments.

The implications of these findings are significant for both educational policy and classroom practice. First, there is an urgent need for government bodies and development partners to prioritize funding and long-

term planning for upgrading school infrastructure to meet universal accessibility standards. Such improvements are essential for removing the physical barriers that limit mobility and participation for students with mobility impairments. Second, teacher training programs must be expanded and embedded into professional development structures to ensure that educators are equipped with the skills and resources needed to manage inclusive classrooms effectively. This includes training in inclusive pedagogy, the use of assistive technologies, and strategies for supporting learners with diverse mobility needs. Also, schools must implement robust support systems, including counseling services, special education units, and peer mentoring programs, to address the academic and emotional needs of students with mobility impairments. Finally, cultivating a school culture of respect, acceptance, and meaningful participation requires the implementation of inclusive policies, regular awareness campaigns, and mentorship initiatives to promote understanding and empathy in the school community. These measures are essential in advancing equal opportunity and social justice in education, enabling students with mobility impairments to become confident, active members of society.

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