

Essential Competencies for Educators to Effectively Teach in Inclusive Education Environments: A Case Study of Thabo Mofutsanyana District

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ABSTRACT This study explores the competencies educators need to effectively teach in inclusive settings within South Africa's Thabo Mofutsanyana District. The study sought to explore educators' understanding of inclusive teaching practices, to identify the essential competencies required by educators for effectively teaching in inclusive education environments, and to propose strategies for enhancing the competencies of inclusive education educators. Using Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory as a framework, the study emphasises the connection between educators' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in creating inclusive environments. Grounded on a qualitative research approach and assuming a multiple case study design, the study gathered data through interviews and document analysis, showing that while educators understand inclusivity principles, they still face challenges in applying them effectively. Important competencies include understanding of diverse learning needs, use of sign language communication, braille machine operation, and technology-integrated pedagogy. In conclusion, continuous capacity-building initiatives are essential for empowering inclusive education educators to remain effective.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education refers to a comprehensive approach designed to create educational conditions where all learners, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, can interact fully and gain recognition as valued members of the school community (Shikwambana and Fourie 2023). This concept encompasses both an educational system and an operational framework designed to eliminate discriminative practices (Kumari et al. 2024). Inclusive education seeks to promote equality and social justice as fundamental human rights (Chirowamhangu 2024). In spite of notable progress made globally, the implementation of inclusive education, particularly at primary and secondary levels, continues to encounter hurdles (Shikwambana and Fourie 2023). In South Africa, initiatives like the South African Schools Act (1996) and Education White Paper 6 (2001) lay a foundation for equitable access to

quality education for all learners, irrespective of their learning barriers (Kumari et al. 2024).

The effectiveness of an inclusive education system is heavily dependent on the presence of skilled educators who possess the necessary knowledge, abilities, and attitudes suited to an environment characterised by diverse learner abilities and educational needs (Kumari et al. 2024). To meet the demands of inclusive education, educators must develop competencies that align with the specific special education needs present in their classrooms. However, a significant challenge in inclusive education remains the lack of clarity regarding the precise set of competencies educators need to perform their roles effectively in such settings. Research in South Africa and other regions indicates that many educators feel inadequately prepared and lack the essential skills to effectively handle learners with special education needs (LSEN) (Shikwambana and Fourie 2023). For instance, findings from South Africa's Amathole District reveal that educators' inability to identify LSEN and tailor curricula, along with their struggles in applying effective teaching and assessment strategies, has led to compromised academic outcomes for these learners, who scored only

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28 percent in languages and 30 percent in mathematics in Grade 6 (Toyin et al. 2020). This emphasises a significant need to clearly define the competencies that educators need to successfully navigate inclusive classroom environments and further devise ways to ensure educators are capacitated accordingly.

Learners in inclusive education environments often present a range of special education needs that require tailored intervention to ensure equitable access to education. These needs may include physical disabilities, sensory impairments (such as hearing or visual impairments), intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, emotional and behavioural challenges, and learning disabilities like dyslexia or dyscalculia (Sumbane et al. 2023). Additionally, students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds or those experiencing socio-economic challenges and displaced children may also need differentiated instruction and support to thrive academically and socially (UNESCO 2020). Effective inclusive education requires addressing these needs through individualised education plans (IEPs), assistive technologies, and collaboration among teachers, families, and specialists to create supportive learning environments (Kumari et al. 2024). Inclusive education fosters participation and achievement for all learners by recognising and responding to these diverse needs. This study sought to identify the competencies required by educators to effectively teach in inclusive environments within the Thabo Mofutsanyana District, subsequently seeking to develop strategies that enhance their ability to manage inclusive classrooms and ensure improved learner outcomes.

Objectives

The study was guided by several key objectives, including examining educators' understanding of inclusive teaching practices, identifying the essential competencies required for effectively teaching in inclusive education environments, and proposing strategies to enhance these competencies.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

of Cognitive Development (SCT). This theory posits that learning occurs as a social activity, essentially rooted in interactions within one's cultural and societal context (Vygotsky 1978 as cited in Yusof 2021). A pivotal element of this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which illustrates that learners are seen as apprentices, gaining knowledge and skills through guided interactions with the more knowledgeable others (Yusof 2021).

This framework is most suitable for this study, as it emphasises the vital role educators play in shaping effective teaching and learning environments, particularly for learners with special educational needs (LSEN). According to this theory, educators, acting as "more knowledgeable others," are responsible for promoting supportive and enabling environments for LSEN. They facilitate cognitive growth by providing structured learning activities and tailor-made interventions (Durojaiye 1976 as cited in Phiri 2021).

Moreover, SCT highlights the necessity of ongoing professional development and collaboration, including support from the Department of Education and other relevant stakeholders, which directly influences educators' capabilities to address the diverse needs of their students. This theoretical framework underlines the interconnectedness of educators' competencies, social interactions, and the inclusive learning environment, thus providing a solid basis for investigating the essential competencies educators encounter and require in implementing inclusive education.

Literature Review

Educators' Understanding of Inclusive Education

Educators are central to implementing inclusive education, and therefore, their understanding of the concept is crucial. Research indicates that many educators have varying interpretations of what inclusive education means, which can impact their attitudes and practices in the classroom. According to Ainscow (2020), inclusive education involves creating a learning environment where all learners, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, feel valued and recognised. However, some educators associate in-

clusive education solely with accommodating learners with disabilities, thereby overlooking other aspects of diversity such as cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic differences (Shikwambana and Fourie 2023). This limited understanding often results in fragmented or superficial implementation of inclusive practices, which weakens the larger goals of equity and inclusion.

It has been argued that educators' understanding of inclusive teaching is often influenced by the training they receive and the policies that guide their practices. In South Africa, the Education White Paper 6 (2001) emphasises the importance of overcoming barriers to learning through differentiated instruction and curriculum adaptation. However, many educators say that their pre-service and in-service training does not fully prepare them for the complexities of inclusive classrooms (Kumari et al. 2024). For example, teachers often lack practical skills on how to adapt teaching methods, use assistive technologies, or handle diverse learning needs (Sumbane et al. 2023). As a result, their limited knowledge of inclusive education not only impacts their confidence but also limits their ability to foster equitable learning environments (Kumari et al. 2024).

Moreover, educators' perceptions and attitudes toward inclusive teaching play a significant role in shaping their practices. Research by Chirowamhangu (2024) found that educators who perceive inclusive teaching as an added burden are less likely to embrace it wholeheartedly. This perception is often linked to a lack of understanding about how inclusive practices benefit all learners, not just those with special needs (Shikwambana and Fourie 2023). On the other hand, educators who view inclusivity as a means of promoting social justice and equity are more likely to adopt innovative teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of their students (Sumbane et al. 2023). Developing a comprehensive understanding of inclusive teaching through targeted professional development and ongoing support is, therefore, essential for empowering educators to implement best practices in inclusive education.

Essential Competencies Required by Educators for Effectively Teaching in Inclusive Education Environments

Shikwambana and Fourie (2023) define competence as a set of knowledge, skills, and atti-

tudes necessary to perform essential job functions within a specific work environment. The inclusive education landscape demands for educators who are equipped with specific knowledge, skills and attitudes essential for handling learners with a wide range of abilities and characteristics. The success of educators in inclusive settings heavily relies on their ability to manage this diversity effectively (Sumbane et al. 2023). However, many educators express concerns about including LSEN in regular classrooms due to feelings of inadequacy and lack of preparedness.

Effective teaching in inclusive education environments requires educators to possess comprehensive knowledge encompassing diverse aspects of learner needs. This includes a deep understanding of learning disorders such as dyslexia, ADHD, and autism spectrum disorders, along with strategies to address these challenges through individualised education plans (IEPs) and evidence-based interventions (Kumari et al. 2024). Teachers should also be familiar with learning styles and preferences, enabling them to employ differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to accommodate diverse cognitive and emotional needs of learners (Chirowamhangu 2024). Additionally, knowledge of physical and sensory disabilities, such as mobility impairments, hearing loss, and visual impairments, is critical for implementing appropriate support mechanisms, such as assistive technologies and adaptive teaching methods (UNESCO 2020). Teachers must also understand learners' rights, including their right to equitable access to quality education, participation in decision-making processes, and protection from discrimination as outlined in international frameworks like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006). This comprehensive knowledge base enables teachers to create inclusive, supportive, and rights-respecting learning environments for all students.

Educators' attitudes play a critical role in their ability to effectively implement inclusive education. Attitude refers to an individual's disposition towards others and situations, including their beliefs, emotions, and behaviours regarding inclusive practices (Chirowamhangu 2024). Research highlights that beyond knowledge and

skills, educators must embody specific values and maintain positive attitudes to succeed in inclusive settings (Sumbane et al. 2023). These include openness to diversity, empathy, patience and a commitment to equity and fairness. A positive attitude towards learners with special educational needs (LSEN) is strongly correlated with educators' self-efficacy and competence in fostering an inclusive, supportive learning environment (Shikwambana and Fourie 2023). Understanding educators' perspectives on inclusive education is essential, as their attitudes can either enhance or hinder the effectiveness of inclusion processes.

Skills are a critical component for educators to productively manage inclusive education classroom settings. To create an environment that accommodates all learners, educators must develop classroom management skills, including enhancing an accessible and inclusive environment, managing learners' behaviour, and fostering positive social interactions (Chirowamhangu 2024). Additionally, specific technical skills are vital, such as the operation of a braille machine for visually impaired learners and the ability to communicate using sign language for learners with hearing impairments (UNESCO 2020). Positive discipline skills, effective communication skills, and counselling skills are also essential for building secure relationships with learners with special educational needs and supporting their academic and emotional growth. Bridging skills gaps through targeted professional development enables educators to implement effective teaching strategies, utilise assistive technologies, and foster an inclusive classroom environment where every learner can thrive.

Strategies Aimed at Enhancing Competencies of Educators in Inclusive Education Settings

Enhancing educators' competencies in inclusive education requires targeted and continuous professional development initiatives. Equipping educators with practical skills and knowledge to address the diverse needs of learners with special education needs is of critical importance. One effective strategy is providing structured professional development workshops focused on inclusive teaching practices. Accord-

ing to Shikwambana and Fourie (2023), these workshops should include training in curriculum differentiation, classroom management, and the use of assistive technology. Providing training to educators on how to adapt lesson plans and assessments to accommodate learners with visual or hearing impairments can significantly improve inclusivity in classrooms. In South Africa, the Education White Paper 6 (2001) advocates for such capacity-building initiatives, emphasising that professional development is critical for promoting inclusive learning environments.

Co-teaching and collaboration among educators are also essential strategies for enhancing competencies in inclusive education. Co-teaching involves subject teachers working alongside special education teachers to plan, deliver, and evaluate lessons tailored to the unique needs of diverse learners. Kumari et al. (2024) highlight that co-teaching not only enables knowledge-sharing among educators but also allows them to observe and adopt effective inclusive practices. Implementing co-teaching models could bridge the skills gap by fostering a collaborative approach to addressing learners' barriers to learning. Additionally, teamwork among educators, school management, and support staff can create a unified effort to promote inclusion. Studies suggest that collaborative environments improve educators' confidence and capacity to manage diverse classrooms (Sumbane et al. 2023).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have also been identified as a promising mechanism for empowering educators in inclusive education settings. PLCs provide a platform for educators to engage in collective learning, share experiences, and develop innovative teaching strategies. According to Shikwambana and Fourie (2023), participation in PLCs enhances educators' understanding of inclusive education by fostering a culture of continuous professional growth. In the context of the Thabo Mofutsanyana District, establishing PLCs could support educators in addressing challenges such as managing large classrooms, using assistive devices, and accommodating LSEN. Furthermore, PLCs encourage peer mentoring, where experienced educators guide less experienced colleagues in implementing inclusive practices. By fostering collaboration, building practical skills,

and offering ongoing support, these strategies can significantly enhance the competencies of educators in inclusive education settings.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative research approach. The interpretive paradigm centres on understanding how individuals generate meaning within their social contexts, making it particularly appropriate for investigating educators' subjective experiences and viewpoints (Antwi and Hamza 2015). The qualitative approach facilitated a thorough examination of participants' lived experiences, with data gathered in their natural environments to enhance authenticity and credibility (Rossman and Rallis 2019). A multiple case study design was adopted, paving the way for gathering of data from three mainstream public schools. This design was selected for its descriptive and comprehensive nature, enabling a holistic understanding of how educators perceive the essential competencies required in inclusive classrooms (Choongwa 2018).

The study employed purposive sampling to select 12 participants, which included three principals, three members of the School-Based Support Team (SBST), three members of the School Governing Body (SGB), and three officials from the District-Based Support Team (DBST), all of whom had expertise in inclusive education. Data collection involved conducting in-depth interviews to gather rich qualitative data, alongside document analysis to validate and triangulate the findings. Open-ended questions were posed during interviews to encourage participants to freely express their experiences, while relevant policy documents, such as the Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) and various school-level policies, were scrutinised to provide context for the findings.

Data analysis followed Creswell's (2012) six-step process, which included transcription, coding, and thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes. To ensure the study's trustworthiness, it adhered to the principles of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability through triangulation, detailed descriptions, and the maintenance of audit trails. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confi-

dentiality, and anonymity, were diligently upheld to protect the rights and privacy of participants throughout the research process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Educators' Understanding of Inclusive Teaching

The study initially sought to establish participants' understanding of what is meant by the term 'inclusive education'. Participants defined it as education that includes everyone, with non-disabled and people living with disabilities (including LSEN) learning together in mainstream schools. An SBST committee member remarked, *"Inclusive education is education for learners with learning barriers, for example, learners with physical disabilities and learners who cannot read or write, being taught with normal learners in a regular classroom (Educator 1)."*

Another perspective was highlighted by Educator 3, who defined it as, *"Inclusive education means that all learners with different abilities are taught in one classroom."*

Responses provided by participants show a sufficient understanding of inclusive education. These perspectives align with Kumari et al. (2024), who argued that inclusive education involves moving learners with disabilities from institutions to community settings, from special schools and resource rooms or classes to mainstream classes. Literature indicates that inclusive education was introduced after prioritising the dignity and integrity of LSEN within society's existing social, health, education, and labour systems.

Inclusive education is a concept that allows LSEN to be placed in and receive instruction in regular classes and taught by regular educators (Shikwambana and Fourie 2023). According to Shikwambana and Fourie (2023), the goal of inclusion in education is to restructure and reform the school so that all children can participate in all the social and educational opportunities offered in a school. It was therefore essential to engage in conversations with participants, understanding that inclusive education is broad-based, encompassing both learners with barriers and those without barriers to learning in a regular classroom. Inclusive education promotes the idea of equal opportunity for all learners,

where educational provisions should ensure that everyone is included regardless of differences or difficulties. Educators working within this context therefore need to possess broad-based competencies that span beyond that of an ordinary classroom practitioner.

Essential Competencies Required by Educators for Effectively Teaching in Inclusive Education Environments

The study revealed that educators possess a sufficient understanding of the competencies required of inclusive education educators. Their views highlighted the nature of attitudes, knowledge, and skills required in fostering an inclusive classroom environment. As noted by Kumari et al. (2024), competencies such as knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) enable educators to effectively function in inclusive education settings, leading to improved learner outcomes. These competencies, when well-developed and utilised, determine how effectively educators can engage diverse learners in mainstream classrooms (Shikwambana and Fourie 2023). The findings underscored the interplay between these three components and their collective role in ensuring that inclusive education is effectively implemented.

Knowledge Required by Educators

Participants stressed that understanding learner diversity and recognising individual learning needs are vital for effective teaching in inclusive education settings. Educators must possess knowledge on various learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, ADHD, hearing impairments, and vision impairments, in order to provide adequate support. Principal 3 noted, *“For educators to be effective in the mainstream, it is important to have an understanding about different types of learner disabilities so as to accommodate them in a normal classroom.”* Additionally, participants emphasised the importance of understanding different learning styles, including visual, auditory and kinesthetic, to effectively tailor lessons. Educators also require knowledge of differentiated instructional approaches and lesson planning to meet diverse learner needs. As supported by Kumari et al.

(2024), such knowledge enables educators to design effective, inclusive lessons that maximise learners’ participation and engagement. Educators who lack these critical knowledge aspects tend to do injustice to LSEN, as they fail to create conducive learning environments for them. Educator training institutions therefore, need to integrate these concepts into their training curricular.

Skills Required by Educators

Participants highlighted skills such as sign language communication, braille operation and computer literacy as essential for effectively addressing the needs of learners with hearing impairments, visual impairments, or dyslexia. Principal 1 emphasised, *“Schools need educators who can interpret sign language alphabets and teach using sign language,”* a finding consistent with Kumari et al. (2024) who argued that educators must adapt teaching to meet the diverse needs of learners, including those with sensory impairments. Similarly, the ability to use technology effectively was seen as vital, with participants noting that digital tools enhance engagement and individualisation of lessons for learners with special needs. This aligns with Sanchez et al. (2024), who emphasized that computer literacy is essential for driving innovation in education, and Kumari et al. (2024), who underscored the transformative role of technology in teaching. Notably, educators did not emphasise key skills such as adaptability in instructional methods, employing diverse assessment strategies, fostering cooperative learning among students, and managing students with behavioural challenges in inclusive settings (Sanchez et al. 2024). Integrating participants’ perspectives with insights from the literature is crucial for providing a comprehensive understanding of the skills educators need to effectively manage inclusive classrooms.

Attitudes Required by Educators

The findings demonstrated that educators’ attitudes, such as patience, empathy, passion and respect, are pivotal to the success of inclusive education, a view that is widely supported in the literature. Principal 3 stated, *“Educators need to be patient with diverse learners be-*

cause they take time to learn as their learning ability differs,” a sentiment echoed by Chirowamhangu (2024), who noted that patience creates a supportive environment where learners feel valued. Similarly, participants highlighted the importance of empathy, with Educator 2 remarking, *“We must have empathy for these learners as most of them are born that way.”* This is in sync with Kumari et al. (2024), who emphasised that empathy helps educators understand and embrace learners’ differences, fostering inclusion. Respect was also a recurring theme, with District Official 3 reminding that educators act *“in loco parentis”*, a role requiring them to treat learners with dignity. This finding reverberates with Chirowamhangu (2024), who argued that respect for learners is a cornerstone of inclusive pedagogy. Overall, a competent inclusive education practitioner is one who possesses a well-rounded combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, enabling them to effectively address the diverse needs of learners, foster an inclusive environment, and promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Strategies Aimed at Enhancing Competencies of Educators in Inclusive Education Settings

The findings highlight the critical need for targeted training to enhance educators’ skills in managing inclusive classrooms. Many educators face challenges in supporting learners with visual and hearing impairments (LVIs and LHIs) due to limited experience with tools like braille machines and sign language. Principal 1 observed, *“Educators struggle a lot to deliver an effective lesson using sign language”*, while Principal 2 noted, *“In my school, educators struggle a lot in operating braille machines.”* Additionally, District Official 1 emphasised the importance of lesson plans that cater to all learners, regardless of their barriers to learning. Research supports this need, with studies indicating that professional training workshops effectively equip educators with the skills and adaptability required to meet diverse learner needs (Kumari et al. 2024). Such workshops can empower educators to effectively engage learners with special education needs, enhancing their preparedness and confidence (Sanchez et al. 2024).

Co-teaching emerged as another valuable strategy for enhancing educator capacity in in-

clusive education environments. This collaborative approach involves subject teachers and special education teachers working together to plan, deliver, and evaluate lessons. Participants noted that observing and learning from colleagues during co-teaching sessions could enhance teaching practices. Principal 2 remarked, *“Educators need to be capacitated to operate braille machines to effectively engage LVIs, and that can be done through co-teaching.”* Research corroborates this view, highlighting co-teaching methods such as station teaching, parallel teaching, and team teaching as effective ways to share responsibilities and facilitate peer learning (Chirowamhangu 2024). Co-teaching not only fosters professional growth and job satisfaction but also benefits learners, especially those with special education needs, by providing tailored instructional support that boosts their academic performance and self-confidence (Kumari et al. 2024).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were also identified as a key mechanism for fostering collaboration and continuous professional development among educators. Educator 1 stated, *“Educators must also be capacitated to use digital devices in their classrooms through PLCs because educators learn best when they are sharing knowledge.”* PLCs create a platform for collective learning, where educators and school administrators can work together to enhance their skills and improve learner outcomes (Kumari et al. 2024). Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of PLCs in improving teaching practices, fostering stronger relationships among educators, and cultivating a shared sense of responsibility for professional growth (Chirowamhangu 2024). By promoting a culture of continuous inquiry and development, PLCs can strengthen educator effectiveness and contribute positively to learner performance.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the successful implementation of inclusive education relies heavily on the integration of educators’ knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA). Educators must have a strong understanding of learner diversity, including learning disabilities and styles, and be skilled in strategies such as differentiated in-

struction, the use of assistive technologies, and tools like braille machines and sign language. Additionally, fostering positive attitudes, such as empathy, patience, respect and passion, is critical for creating inclusive and supportive learning environments. The findings emphasise the importance of professional development through training workshops, co-teaching, and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to enhance educators' capacity and adaptability. These insights align with existing literature, highlighting the need for continuous learning and collaboration among educators to ensure equitable access to education for all learners and to improve their academic and social outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended conducting regular professional development workshops to equip educators with skills in assistive technologies and inclusive teaching strategies. It emphasised encouraging co-teaching practices to promote collaboration between general and special education teachers. Additionally, the establishment of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) was proposed to facilitate continuous professional development and knowledge sharing among educators. Comprehensive training on learner diversity was also recommended to enable educators to effectively address individual learning needs. Lastly, the study highlighted the importance of promoting empathy, patience and respect among educators to foster supportive and inclusive classrooms.

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