Teacher Key Competencies for Inclusive Education: Tapping Pragmatic Realities of Zimbabwean Special Needs Education Teachers

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Abstract
This study examined the teaching competencies perceived by special needs education teachers to be essential for inclusive education. Entrenched in inclusive pedagogy, this descriptive study draws on a sample of 24 special needs education primary school teachers purposively drawn from Midlands educational province of Zimbabwe. Throughout the analysis of data, a constant comparative approach of the organization of data with continual adjustment was used. The study found that participants perceived screening and assessment, differentiation of instruction, classroom and behavior management, and collaboration to be key competencies required of teachers for inclusive education. Pre-service and in-service training of teachers in these key competencies could facilitate successful and effective implementation of inclusive education through equipping them to respond to child diversity. This study could serve as a baseline for future research on key competencies of teachers for inclusive education.

Keywords
inclusive education, primary schools, regular classrooms, teacher competencies, Zimbabwe

Introduction
In alignment with the global movement, Zimbabwe actively shifted from exclusive to inclusive education in 1994 (Chakuchichi, 2013; Majoko, 2017; Mus engi & Chireshe, 2012). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) influenced this paradigm shift the world over (Chhabra, Srivastava, & Srivastava, 2010; Lynch, McCall, Douglas, McLinden & Bayo, 2015; Mandina, 2012). It reaffirmed the right to education of every individual as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and renewed the pledge made by the World Conference on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990), to ensure that right for all irrespective of individual differences (Ballard, 2012; Donnelly & Watkins, 2011; Majoko, 2017). Consistent with several other countries, Zimbabwe is in pursuit of the realization of meaningful educational outcomes and the transformation of all school graduates, including those with disabilities, into productive citizens (Chireshe, 2013; Majoko, 2005; Mushoriwa & Gasva, 2008).

The impetus of the inclusive education movement has been focused on enhancing the competency of teachers to provide appropriate instruction for children both with and without special needs in regular classrooms in Zimbabwe (Mandina, 2012; Mpopu, Kasayira, Mhaka, Chireshe, & Maunganidze, 2007; Mugweni & Dakwa, 2013). This implies an expectation that children with disabilities should be able to access educational opportunities similar to those available to their typically developing peers. Such a vision is entrenched in the framework of outcomes-based education (Chireshe, 2013; Deluca, Tramonta, & Kett, 2013; Munjanganja & Machawira, 2015). Thus, teachers are required to provide appropriate teaching and learning to these children in regular classrooms, within the community of their counterparts without developmental delays (Mandina, 2012; Mpopu & Shumba, 2012; Mutepf a, Mpopu, & Chataika, 2007).

Policy for Special and Inclusive Education and Training of Teachers in Zimbabwe
In Zimbabwe, several policies and legislation mandate inclusive education (Majoko, 2013; Mpopu & Shumba, 2012;...
Musengi & Chireshe, 2012). These include the Education Act of Zimbabwe of 1987 as revised in 2006, the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Number 20 of 2013 Section 75, the Disabled Persons Act of Zimbabwe of 1996, and recommended practice circulars including the Secretary’s Circular Number 2 of 2000 and the Director’s Circular Number 7 of 2005 (Chireshe, 2011; Majoko, 2017; Mugweni & Dakwa, 2013). These policies and legislation are in compliance with civil rights movements as enshrined in international human rights instruments (Chireshe, 2011; Majoko, 2018; Mpofu et al., 2007). Such instruments include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Chakuchichi, 2013; Majoko, 2016; Mpofu & Shumba, 2012; United Nations, 2006).

In collaboration with the Government of Zimbabwe, national and international donor agencies, including the Flemish Association for Development and Technical Assistance, pool financial, time, human, technological, and material resources for inclusive education (Munjanganja & Machawira, 2015; Mushoriwa & Muzembe, 2011; Mutepfà et al., 2007). The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development of Zimbabwe, in consultation and partnership with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Zimbabwe, ensures pre-service and in-service training of teachers in regular and special needs education (Chakuchichi, 2013; Deluca et al., 2013; Mushoriwa & Gasva, 2008).

The Department of Teacher Education of the University of Zimbabwe, in consultation and partnership with the Department of Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education of Zimbabwe and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Zimbabwe, provides strategic support toward such pre-service and in-service training of teachers in regular and special needs education (Chireshe, 2011; Mpofu et al., 2007; Mushoriwa & Muzembe, 2011). The University of Zimbabwe and its 18 associate teachers training colleges provide pre-service and in-service training to teachers in regular and special needs education (Chakuchichi, 2013; Munjanganja & Machawira, 2015; Majoko, 2016). The training focuses on various categories of special needs including intellectual impairments, the gifted and talented, behavioral and emotional disorders, visual impairments, physical disabilities, and hearing impairments, and on instructional strategies to support these children in regular and special education schools (Majoko, 2005; Mandina, 2012; Mugweni & Dakwa, 2013).

Eleven of the 12 primary school teachers training colleges and six universities provide part-time and full-time pre-service and in-service training of teachers in regular and special needs education at degree and diploma levels (Munjanganja & Machawira, 2015). The Department of Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education of Zimbabwe provides various programs and services to facilitate access, participation, acceptance, and achievement of all children in quality regular education (Majoko, 2018; Mugweni & Dakwa, 2013; Mutepfà et al., 2007). These programs and services include needs-driven expansion of educational provision and staff development of national, provincial, and district education officers and also school heads and teachers (Munjanganja & Machawira, 2015; Musengi & Chireshe, 2012; Mutepfà et al., 2007). These measures are earmarked to ensure that teachers are equipped with the competency to provide effective teaching and learning in special and regular schools (Majoko, 2016; Mpofu & Shumba, 2012; Mushoriwa & Gasva, 2008). This study sought to examine the teaching competencies that special needs education teachers perceive to be essential for inclusive education.

The success of inclusive education depends on adequate knowledge and skills of teachers (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Florian, 2012; Naicker, 2009). Whereas it is easier for policy makers to promote inclusive education, the mere passage and enforcement of policy is not a guarantee of success (Forlin, 2010; Kisanji & Saanane, 2009; Odom, Buyssse, & Soukakou, 2011). This is because teachers need more than just positive attitudes in the translation of policy into practice (Blanton, Pugach, & Florian, 2011; Hornby, 2010; Pantic & Wubbels, 2010). Teachers also need the competencies to adapt teaching and learning to meet the needs of all children (Agbenyega & Deku, 2011; Alhassan, 2012; Das, Gichuru, & Singh, 2013). Studies in several countries reveal that instruction in inclusive settings is inadequate and usually does not meet the needs of diverse children with special needs (Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Mastroppieri & Scruggs, 2010; Selvi, 2010).

Limited competencies of teachers, as a result of a lack of training on effective adaptive teaching strategies, is among the factors responsible for such failure (Mukhopadayay, Moloswa, & Moswela, 2009; Philpott, Furey, & Penney, 2010; Selvi, 2010). For instance, Kuyini and Desai (2007, 2008) revealed, in their investigation of 20 inclusive classrooms, that 46% of teachers had limited knowledge of inclusive education and up to 58% of the 220 teachers had not trained in special and inclusive education. These researchers also established that several teachers utilized very few adaptive teaching strategies in their delivery of lessons in regular classrooms. Agbenyega and Deku (2011) revealed similar findings and suggested that children with special needs are not likely to benefit from the teaching and learning opportunities offered in regular classrooms. The findings about inadequate training of teachers on inclusive education and the provision of instruction in classrooms show the necessity for examining the competencies that teachers require to meet the needs of children.

Whereas there is considerable consensus about the strategies that support effective learning in inclusive classrooms, there are differences in what teachers in various contexts consider essential competencies to successfully and effectively support children with special needs (Ballard, 2012;
Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013; Mastropieri & Scruiggs, 2010). Similarly, researchers reveal that competent teachers simultaneously translate theory into practice and consider the learner population and the sociocultural contexts in which teaching and learning take place (Florian, 2009; Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Lynch, McCall, Douglas, McLinden, & Bayo, 2011). This emphasizes the premise that contextual variations, with differing educational framing factors, result in diverse perceptions of teachers regarding the competencies they consider to be essential for inclusive teaching and learning (Blanton et al., 2011; Forlin, 2010; Kisanji & Saanane, 2009). This is because framing factors set limits but also open possibilities (Kim & Rouse, 2011; Majoko, 2017; Oliver & Reschly, 2010). Consequently, teachers who serve in the unique sociocultural and education system of Zimbabwe may hold different ideas regarding the essential competencies that teachers need to be effective teachers in inclusive classrooms. Exploring the perceptions of these teachers could result in the development of more focused inclusive competency training for teachers. Studies furthermore show that self-perceptions of competence impact, either directly or indirectly, or mediate the relationship between providing training and practitioners’ utilization of newly acquired skills and knowledge (Alhassan, 2012; Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Philpott et al., 2010).

**Competencies of Teachers for Inclusive Education**

Since the worldwide paradigm shift from exclusive to inclusive education, the roles and responsibilities of regular education teachers have undergone a drastic change (Agbenyega & Deku, 2011; Alhassan, 2012; Hornby, 2010; Naicker, 2009). Teachers are required to simultaneously meet the needs of typically developing children and those of their peers with special needs in regular classrooms (Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, & Hudson, 2013; Berry, 2010; Forlin & Sin, 2010; Kim & Rouse, 2011). Consequently, inclusive education requires a unique set of competencies from teachers which was traditionally not in their repertoire (Blanton et al., 2011; Chireshe, 2013; Oliver & Reschly, 2010). Several researchers (e.g., Agbenyega & Deku, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Forlin, 2010; Vaught & Bos, 2012; Westwood, 2008) and peak-bodies that are involved in the education of children with special needs (e.g., The Council for Exceptional Children [CEC]) express some key competencies that are needed for effective instruction of children with special needs to benefit from education in regular classrooms. Such competencies include the knowledge and skills of teaching strategies and approaches that meet the needs of all children in regular classrooms (Ainscow & Goldrick, 2010; Florian, 2009; Forlin & Sin, 2010; Hornby, 2010). These skills enable teachers to plan flexible instruction and to recognize the reality of differences between and in children, while yet being able to adapt learning goals, content, and the environment to the needs of individuals and the whole class (Agbenyega & Deku, 2011; Ainscow & Goldrick, 2010; Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010).

Consistent with this premise of pedagogical competencies, a common core of minimum fundamental knowledge and skills for entry into professional practice was developed and validated by the CEC. These standards, which the CEC modified in 2012, include learner development and individual learning differences, learning environments, curricular content knowledge, assessment, instructional planning and strategies, professional learning and practice, and collaboration. Regular teachers require a certain level of proficiency in the skills in the CEC common core, although these skills may not be important for them (Kuyini, Yeboah, Das, Alhassan, & Mangope, 2016). Similarly, other researchers reveal that important skills for teachers in inclusive classrooms include peer tutoring, cooperative learning, curricular modification and adaptation, mastery learning, and applied behavior Analysis, the use of classroom aids, instructional technology, and support for children using other children (Mastropieri & Scruiggs, 2010; Oliver & Reschly, 2010; Philpott et al., 2010). Studies also show that regular teachers need to utilize instructional strategies, such as individualized and adaptive instruction and activity-based learning, to facilitate teaching and learning of children with special needs (Apelgren & Gieretz, 2010; Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Majoko, 2005).

Other researchers indicate that teachers need competencies in professional knowledge, assessment, instructional techniques, and behavior management to include children with disabilities in regular classrooms (Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013; He & Cooper, 2011; Majoko, 2016). Teachers furthermore need skills in instructional strategies, such as differentiated instruction, multilevel instruction, collaborative skills, coteaching, and activity-based learning, to include children with special needs in regular classrooms (Apelgren & Gieretz, 2010; Sledge & Pazez, 2013). Strategies such as cooperative learning and peer tutoring have been found to result in improved child outcomes. For instance, peer tutoring has been established to increase opportunities to respond, enhance activity comprehension and minimize problem behaviors (Marchand-Martella & Martella, 2002), and improve child on-task behavior, mathematics performance, reading performance, and social interactions of children with disabilities in regular classrooms (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2000). Cooperative learning strategies have been established to improve intergroup relations, enhance learning, develop problem-solving skills, and improve social and academic skills of children with special needs in regular classrooms (Jenkins, Antil, Wayne, & Vadasy, 2003; Salend, 2001). With respect to improvement of social skills because of cooperative learning interactions, research showed increased frequency, duration, and quality of social interactions among children with disabilities (Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2003).
Collaboration is also a key competency for teachers in inclusive education (Forlin & Sin, 2010; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010; Naicker, 2009). Teachers require, among other aptitudes, competence in collaboration that can harness their own problem-solving and creative thinking as they share ideas with peers, because children with special learning needs require a diversity of teaching approaches (Berry, 2010; Donnelly & Watkins, 2011; Flecha & Soler, 2013; Florian, 2012). Other researchers indicate that teaching and learning require effective teaching strategies that deviate from the individualized planning frame, which is associated with separate special education teaching, to an instruction that adapts learning goals and content, as well as learning environment, through an engagement with the entire class and by simultaneously recognizing differences of and in children (Ainscow & Goldrick, 2010; Allday et al., 2013; Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012; Pantic, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

The present study is entrenched in inclusive pedagogy, which advocates for the replacement of systems, procedures, and assumptions in schooling that are premised on ideas of “most and some” by new ways of thinking and working in support of all (Florian, 2009; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Reform of teacher education is fundamental to this process (Forlin, 2010; Pantic & Wubbels, 2010). Teacher educators not only need to examine the attitudes of their students toward diversity and its accommodation but also to undertake “self-study and internal evaluations to better understand their capacity to infuse diversity issues throughout the curriculum” (Brisk et al., 2002, p. 7, as cited in Kuyini et al., 2016). To this end, three concepts associated with the development of inclusive practices inform inclusive pedagogy. These are (a) the comprehension that the challenge of inclusive practice is to respect and respond to human differences in ways that include children in instead of excluding them from what is ordinarily available to others in the daily life of the regular classroom. Such a comprehension is manifested when (b) the teacher works to extend what is ordinarily available to all, in opposition to doing something “additional” or “different” from that which is available to others. This is a complicated pedagogical undertaking that relies on (c) a shift in thinking about teaching and learning from that which works for the majority of children along with something “additional” or “different” for those who experience difficulties, to the support of lessons and learning opportunities that enable all children to participate in regular classroom life (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Linklater, 2010; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Pantic & Florian, 2015). This subtle but profound shift in thinking about teaching constitutes inclusive pedagogy.

The interrelationship of the foregoing three concepts can be practically expressed as the interaction of teachers “knowing,” “doing,” and “believing” (Rouse, 2008). This practical expression maps onto the conceptualization of professional learning as the apprenticeship of the head (knowledge), hand (skill or doing), and heart (attitudes and beliefs). Replacement of a “deterministic” view of ability with “transformability” also underpins inclusive pedagogy. This entails seeing how difficulties children experience in learning can be reconsidered as dilemmas for teaching instead of problems with children (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012; Florian & Rouse, 2009; Pantic, 2015). This new way of understanding teaching and learning can lead to new ways of working with others (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Forlin, 2010; Pantic & Florian, 2015). Inclusive education in Zimbabwean regular primary school classrooms requires teachers to account for the diversity of children as an essential component of child development in any conceptualization of learning (knowing). Teachers are expected to believe and be convinced that they are qualified and capable of teaching all children (believing) and adopt innovative strategies of working in collaboration with other stakeholders (doing) (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Rationale

Because teachers are integral in the success or otherwise of inclusive education, their perceptions about the key competencies needed for it warrant research (Agbenyega & Deku, 2011; Majoko, 2016; Selvi, 2010). It is fundamental for policy makers in Zimbabwe and other parts of the world to be attentive to lessons learnt from other countries as they are establishing the foundation for inclusive education. In spite of the adoption of inclusive education policies in both the developing and developed countries, variations characterize the implementation of these policies, not exclusively between continents, but also within continents, states, countries, provinces, districts, circuits, and schools. This is specifically true in Zimbabwe in which there are remarkable differences between mine, farm, growth points, resettlement, rural, peri-urban, and urban areas and educational provinces with remarkably higher per capita incomes in comparison to those where the majority of people live far below the poverty datum line.

Studies continuously reveal that research on competencies of teachers for inclusive education is integral in informing responsive interventions for enhancing their pre-service and in-service training (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Forlin, 2010; Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Majoko, 2016). Consequently, the pursuit of inclusive education in Zimbabwe and worldwide, coupled with remarkably increasing numbers of primary school children with disabilities educated in regular classrooms, makes it imperative to explore strategies to optimize the competencies of regular teachers to implement it. Because teacher training for inclusive education is a relatively recent fundamental educational innovation in Zimbabwe and internationally, soliciting regular teachers’ perceptions regarding key competencies for it is fundamental. A study with a
This study was carried out in selected regular primary schools in Midlands educational province. These schools use English as medium of instruction although local languages, namely, Shona and Ndebele, are sometimes used in teaching and learning for ease of understanding. Midlands educational province constitutes primary schools in the urban, semi-urban, and rural settings of Shurugwi, Mberengwa, Gweru, Gokwe North, Gokwe South, Zvishavane, Chirumhanzu, and Kwekwe districts (Munjanganja & Machawira, 2015).

Sampling
Midlands educational province comprises 673 public regular primary schools (Munjanganja & Machawira, 2015). A sample of public regular primary schools was purposively selected from those that were inclusive of children with disabilities to address the focus of this study. A sample of 24 public primary schools, purposively selected from urban, semi-urban, and rural settings of the respective districts in Midlands educational province, participated in this study. Teachers were recruited through contacts with Midlands provincial education offices. Information letters were distributed to contacts in the designated institutions. Upon the head teachers’ approval of the execution of the study, the researcher distributed information letters to teachers who were perceived to meet the inclusion criteria below. Teachers who were interested in taking part in the study contacted the researcher to organize a convenient time to be individually interviewed. One teacher was purposively drawn from each of the urban, semi-urban, and rural settings of the respective districts in Midlands educational province to aid transferability of findings.

To ascertain eligibility for participation in the study and to schedule interview time, individual teachers were screened over the telephone. The inclusion criteria for the teachers comprised at least a primary school teachers’ diploma; a bachelor’s degree in special needs/special education/inclusive education; teaching experience of 5 years in regular primary school classrooms, including a child/children with disabilities; currently teaching in a public regular primary school classroom that includes a child/children with disabilities in Midlands educational province; and informed consent to participate. The sample constituted 24 primary school teachers (18 males, 6 females), three teachers per grade from Early Childhood Development class to Grade 7. Each one of them taught a regular class that had a maximum of forty-one 5- to 12-year-old children without assistant teachers. These classes were inclusive of children with at least at three of the following disabilities: seizures, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning disabilities, visual impairment, physical disabilities, hearing impairment, and emotional/behavioral disabilities. These children had low to medium level of support needs as diagnosed by the Department of School Psychological Services and Special Needs Education of Zimbabwe as revealed in teachers’ record books. The Department of School Psychological Services and Special Needs Education of Zimbabwe provided the contact information of the schools.

Method
This study utilized interpretive qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research methodology enabled the researcher to solicit detailed data from a small group of informants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2009; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The use of qualitative research methodology was also influenced by the researcher’s focus, concern with process instead of outcome, descriptive nature of the data, essential concern with meaning, and inductive analysis of data (Grbich, 2007; Pierce, 2008; Silverman, 2009). Ethical approval to execute this study was sought and secured from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Zimbabwe, Midlands provincial education offices and head teachers of participating primary schools. These parties were provided with a brief, clear, concise and precise research profile to secure the permission needed to conduct this study.

Research Question 1: What are the teaching competencies special educational needs teachers in Midlands educational province of Zimbabwe perceive as key for inclusive education?

Research Settings
Zimbabwean schools are grouped into 10 educational provinces (Munjanganja & Machawira, 2015; Majoko, 2017). This study was carried out in selected regular primary schools, its educational province, comprises 673 public regular primary schools (Munjanganja & Machawira, 2015). A sample of public regular primary schools was purposively selected from those that were inclusive of children with disabilities to address the focus of this study. A sample of 24 public primary schools, purposively selected from urban, semi-urban, and rural settings of the respective districts in Midlands educational province, participated in this study. Teachers were recruited through contacts with Midlands provincial education offices. Information letters were distributed to contacts in the designated institutions. Upon the head teachers’ approval of the execution of the study, the researcher distributed information letters to teachers who were perceived to meet the inclusion criteria below. Teachers who were interested in taking part in the study contacted the researcher to organize a convenient time to be individually interviewed. One teacher was purposively drawn from each of the urban, semi-urban, and rural settings of the respective districts in Midlands educational province to aid transferability of findings.

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Services and Special Needs Education of Zimbabwe provide in-service training on inclusive education to these teachers. The teachers also attend at least one staff development session of inclusive education per term at their schools. They further invite resource persons to provide staff development on topics in inclusive education that they perceive to be challenging in their management of daily teaching and learning in regular classrooms. All the participants had 3-year primary school teachers’ diplomas which constituted theory of education, a main subject, professional studies, and teaching practice. Inclusive education was infused in disciplines of theory of education and professional studies, in particular psychology of education and subject didactics. Participants had trained in categories of disabilities, behavior management, classroom management, collaboration, curriculum differentiation, national and international policies and legislation on inclusive education, and curriculum management in inclusive education. The overall philosophy underpinning their inclusive education training was “quality education for all.”

All participants had also obtained a Bachelor of Education (Special Needs Education) Degree. This was a 2-year program offered to in-service teachers who had at least a 3-year mainstream primary school teachers’ diploma from any of the associated teachers colleges of the University of Zimbabwe. These participants had trained in components of inclusive education that included sports and recreation for persons with disabilities; learning disabilities and behavior disorders; assessment issues in special needs education; visual and hearing impairment; introduction to disability and special needs education; psychological and sociological foundations of special needs education; comparative special needs education; guidance and counseling issues in special needs education; mental retardation; physical, motor, and health-related disabilities; stakeholders of special needs education; rehabilitation and transition of children and youth with disabilities, and curriculum management in special needs education. Quality education for all children including those with disabilities underpinned their special needs education training. Participants’ teaching experience ranged from 7 to 15 years and they were aged between 31 and 58 years. Theoretical saturation, which occurred when no relevant or new data emerged, regarding a category and categories were well developed with respect to their properties, dimensions, and variations and determined the adequacy of the sample (Cohen et al., 2007; Silverman, 2009).

Procedure

Prior to the execution of the study, the researcher sought and secured ethical approval from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Zimbabwe, Midlands Provincial Education offices, and head teachers of participating public regular primary schools. Thereafter, the researcher sought and secured informed consent from the teachers before beginning the individual interviews. An individual interview is a fundamental instrument for the qualitative researcher because it allows participants to express their perceptions and opinions about a phenomenon being investigated using their own words (Cohen et al., 2007; Pierce, 2008; Silverman, 2009). The interview protocol for this study constituted open-ended, semi-structured questions that explored teachers’ perceptions regarding key competencies for successful inclusive education. The individual interview questions that were structured around the research question of the study included the following:

- How long have you been teaching children with disabilities in regular classrooms? (This was a probe for demographic details including teaching qualifications and number of years taught).
- How can teachers best serve children with disabilities in their regular classroom?
- What key knowledge and skills do teachers need to successfully include children with disabilities in regular classrooms?
- What resources do teachers need for the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classrooms?
- What else, if anything, would you like to add that we did not talk about regarding key competencies teachers need to successfully include children with disabilities in regular classrooms?

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim with the consent of the individual participants. Audiotaping enables a researcher to collect data accurately (Creswell, 2009; Silverman, 2009). Audiotaping also enables the researcher to attend to the participants while interviewing them (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). All the interviews were executed in English in participants’ classrooms after school hours with their voluntary participation and without any compensation. Despite the organization and structure during interviews, as a result of the use of the interview guide, flexibility was ensured through the interviewer’s context-specific questioning of issues raised by the interviewees. The individual interviews were executed between November 2016 and August 2017, each lasting on average 75 min.

Data Analysis

Upon its completion, each tape-recorded individual interview was transcribed verbatim. Individual interviews were read many times and coded individually by the researcher and two critical readers who are experts in qualitative data analysis. Cross-case analysis was subsequently executed for all individual interviews. Pattern coding was conducted in alignment with the suggestion of Miles and Huberman (1994). In pattern coding, the researcher and the two critical readers reviewed the interview transcripts and cross-checked the emerging themes from each individual interview while
identifying emerging patterns grounded in collective consensus (Pierce, 2008). Contrasting or negative cases and frequencies of themes were attended to during the process of coding (Grbich, 2007). Emerging themes were subsequently organized around the research question of the study. Within and across case analyses, the researcher and the critical readers endeavored to understand how teachers explained and contextualized their narratives. This facilitated the examination of required key teacher competencies for inclusive education from a diversity of personal experiences and perspectives.

Data were member checked to establish rigor and trustworthiness in the findings (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2009; Silverman, 2009). This was achieved by giving interview transcripts to individual interview participants who read the transcription of the interview to validate its content and the meanings derived from it. Analysis of data was a reciprocal process among the researcher and the two critical readers. The critical readers were presented with the whole set of analysis documents to examine its credibility.

Findings

Through analysis of data, four themes emerged, namely, screening and assessment, differentiation of instruction, classroom and behavior management, and collaboration.

Screening and Assessment

All participants (100%) revealed that teacher competency in screening and assessment of children with diverse unique needs is key for inclusive education. These procedures were perceived to accumulate knowledge and information about the unique needs of children to underpin their inclusive teaching and learning. Designing and administration of diagnostic tests was revealed to be an important competency of teachers for inclusive education. This was felt to facilitate the identification of and responsive interventions for children with diverse unique needs. Dzvinyu expressed,

Teachers educate pupils at risk of diverse unique needs and intervene on those identified. They need positive attitudes and competency to identify and intervene on pupils with diverse unique needs based on their characteristics. This includes developing and administering diagnostic tests to screen and assess pupils with diverse unique needs due to age, culture, language, ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, poverty and other factors.

Teacher competency in screening and identification of children with diverse unique needs arising from various individual and systemic factors was reported to be essential for inclusive education. It was perceived to have the possibility to inform them on pedagogical methods, strategies, and content to use to meet the individual needs of children with diverse unique needs for early intervention. Gwayi articulated,

To avoid missed interventions, cumulative educational deficits and negative psycho-social impact, educators require competencies to screen and identify educands with various categories of unique needs. Educators must have competencies to identify characteristics of diverse categories of unique needs . . . including abilities, language, disabilities and gender as well as the teaching methods and strategies, subject matter and learning objectives to meet the specific needs in ordinary pedagogical settings.

Competency of teachers in special education referral and assessment procedures was also reported to be important for inclusive education. This was seen to aid teachers’ identification of children who require differentiated instruction and intensive instruction, respectively, to afford them teaching and learning that meet their individual needs in the community of the regular classrooms. Mubhemhe argued,

Inclusive teaching and learning demands teachers to differentiate between learners with educational disabilities and learners in need of intensive instruction or differentiated instruction. This calls for competency of teachers in the processes of special education including referral and assessment procedures to deliver teaching and learning that responds to the individuality of learners in mainstream classrooms.

Differentiation of Instruction

Most participants (96%) reported that teacher competency in differentiation of instruction is key for inclusive education. Through this competency, teachers were viewed to facilitate exposure to and assessment on the regular school curriculum of all children. Participants indicated that competency of teachers in curriculum adaptation was essential for inclusive education. It was viewed to enable teachers to tailor the regular school curriculum content to the different levels of cognitive development of individual children. Huku stated,

Although children with and without developmental delays in mainstream settings function at different cognitive levels, they are taught the same ordinary education curriculum. Teachers must have the competency to adapt teaching and learning content to the individual level of cognitive functioning of these children to ensure their success. Children who function at representational stage of cognitive development can be taught using semi-concrete objects. Children who function at concrete stage of cognitive development can be taught using concrete objects.

Use of diverse teaching methods, strategies, and techniques was revealed to be an important competency for teachers in inclusive education. This was believed to enable them to meet the learning needs of individual children. Mombe expressed,
Inclusive education teaches a regular curriculum to both learners with and without developmental challenges such as those with impairments and the gifted. This requires teacher competencies to adapt this curriculum to meet the individual needs of pupils. Pupils with learning disabilities may require teacher competency in task analysis and scaffolding while pupils who are gifted may require teacher competencies in problem-solving and experimenting.

Competency of teachers in adaptation and modification of assessments was revealed as fundamental for inclusive education. This was viewed to facilitate their adaptation and modification of assessment to be accessible to children with disabilities. Nehoreka argued,

Assessment of learners with disabilities in ordinary settings requires special adaptations and modifications. Learners with low vision need assessment tasks that are written in large print while those who use Perkins Braille need extra time in writing assessment tasks.

**Classroom and behavior Management**

All participants (100%) reported that competency of teachers in classroom and behavior management is fundamental for inclusive education. It was seen to aid their nurturance of child-friendly pedagogical environments. Establishing factors that contribute to the manifestation of behavioral challenges among children with and at risk of disabilities was revealed to be a fundamental competency for teachers in inclusive education. This was felt to inform their provision of responsive interventions to individual children. Shana pointed out,

Learners with or at risk of disabilities can present challenging behaviour in regular settings. Teachers need competencies to establish behavioural, systemic, psychodynamic, cognitive and biological factors that trigger challenging behaviour among these learners to inform interventions in pursuit of the success of inclusive education in such settings.

Competency of teachers in the use of diverse behavioral and psychodynamic strategies and approaches in managing the behavior of children was reported to be important for inclusive education. This was felt to support their creation of an enabling inclusive teaching and learning environment for children. Gwiti articulated,

In mainstream classrooms, teachers need to be competent in applying behaviour management strategies that are responsive to the behavioural challenges presented by individual learners with and without unique needs. These include behavioural strategies, particularly operant conditioning and classical conditioning, and systemic strategies which target the behaviour of learners within systems including the community and the family. Teachers also need to be competent in using psychodynamic approaches. These strategies can assist in nurturance of safe and secure educational settings for effective teaching and learners of learners.

Teacher competency in evaluating the impact of behavior management strategies on children was revealed to be fundamental for inclusive education. It was perceived to facilitate their diagnostic and prescriptive management of the behavior of children and the ultimate implementation of proactive behavior management strategies instead of reactive behavior management strategies. Bende expressed,

Effective management of the behaviour of educands with and without developmental challenges in regular classrooms requires teachers to work diagnostically and prescriptively. This demands their competency in evaluating the impact of specific learner-focused, classroom based and schoolwide behaviour management strategies to use proactive rather than reactive behaviour management strategies. Such can include accommodating specific behaviour of educands with developmental challenges which does not interfere with inclusive teaching and learning.

Participants expressed that adaptation of the educational environment to the individuality of children with disabilities is a key competency of teachers for inclusive education. Through such adaptation, teachers were believed to be able to create classroom environments that are friendly to children with diverse disabilities for inclusive teaching and learning. Tsenzi expressed,

Educands with developmental challenges optimally learn in adapted pedagogical environments. To realise effective inclusive teaching and learning in regular classrooms, educators must have competencies to adapt pedagogical environments to the individual interests and characteristics of these educands. Such include adaptation of seating arrangements to eliminate distractions for educands with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and pasting visual schedules on walls and desks for easy transition of educands with Autism Spectrum Disorder from one activity to another.

**Collaboration**

All participants (100%) reported that collaboration is an essential competency for teachers for inclusive education. This was seen to facilitate their working with and through other stakeholders to pool support and assistance to meet the individual needs of all children. Consulting and partnering with parents was indicated to be a fundamental competency for teachers for inclusive education. This was believed to enable teachers to synchronize home and school interventions for successful management of the behavior of children through working in liaison with parents. Bete articulated,

Teachers need the competencies to tap from parents the educational, cognitive and behavioural interventions that are effective for their children. This synchronises home and school interventions resulting in effective and efficient management of the behaviour of children in mainstream classrooms.
Teacher competency in collaborating with their neighborhood school community stakeholders, child-services government ministries, health professionals, education specialists, and social services specialists was revealed to be key for inclusive education. It was seen to facilitate their working with these multidisciplinary team members to promote the holistic development of all children. Hove articulated,

Teachers require the competency to collaborate with diverse stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, community leaders, individuals, families, social workers, nurses, educational psychologists and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary education to support the social, educational and career development of all learners in ordinary school settings.

Formal and informal collaboration with each other in sharing positive attitudes and expertise was revealed to be an important competency for teachers for inclusive education. The platforms and opportunities thus provided for them to exchange positive attitudes and inclusive pedagogy were seen to facilitate their provision of responsive interventions to children. Ngwena stated,

Teacher competency in sharing positive dispositions, knowledge, understandings and skills to respond to the individual difficulties and circumstances of all pupils in regular classrooms is indispensable in inclusive education. They must be competent to engage with each other in formal and informal sessions, including conferences, workshops, staff development sessions and tea and lunch breaks, on strategies and content for inclusive teaching and learning in regular classrooms.

It was revealed that collaborating with national and international nonprofit and for-profit stakeholder individuals, organizations, and institutions is an essential competency for teachers for inclusive education. This was felt to enable teachers to pool human, physical, material, technological, time, and financial resources from these stakeholders for inclusive teaching and learning. Mbudzi expressed,

Teachers require competencies to consult and partner with national and international business individuals, donors, agencies, companies, communities, parents, political parties, churches, universities and schools to source finance, time, materials and resources, staff and technology. These include assistive devices, disability friendly classrooms, toilets, playgrounds, furniture and textbooks, which are needed to provide inclusive teaching and learning in ordinary classrooms.

**Discussion**

Embedded within inclusive pedagogy, this study utilized qualitative research methodology to examine the teaching competencies Zimbabwean teachers perceived as key for inclusive education. Participants felt that competency of teachers in screening and assessment, including designing and administration of diagnostic tests to identify children with diverse unique needs, and responsive interventions are essential for inclusive education. This finding aligns with previous research which established that the common core minimum knowledge and skills for entry of teachers into professional practice in special education include assessment (CEC, 2012). Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to account for difference as a fundamental aspect of human development in any conceptualization of learning (knowing) (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Forlin, 2010; Kim & Rouse, 2011).

It was perceived that identification of the characteristics of children with diverse categories of unique needs arising from various individual and systemic factors and the resultant responsive interventions are fundamental competencies for teachers for inclusive education. This finding stands in contradiction to inclusive pedagogy which requires a shift in focus from children with unique needs arising from disabilities to all children in regular classrooms (Florian & Rouse, 2009; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Mushoriwa & Gasva, 2008). Similarly, previous studies demonstrate that inclusive education entails quality teaching and learning for all while acknowledging and respecting diversity and the diverse interests, characteristics, abilities, learning expectations, and needs of the children in their communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion (Allday et al., 2013; Ballard, 2012; Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012). It emerged from this study that the sociocultural competency of teachers to establish the needs of children that arise from their contexts is important for inclusive education. Consistent evidence reveals that respect for local, cultural, and individual diversity is a core concept in the process of inclusive education (Blanton et al., 2011; Florian, 2009; Majoko, 2013). Similarly, inclusive pedagogy is embedded in shared agreement among diverse stakeholders around the basic organization and functioning of a specific school, society, and culture (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Florian & Rouse, 2009).

Participants reported that competency of teachers in the process of special education, including referral and assessment procedures to differentiate between children with educational disabilities and those in need of intensive instruction or differentiated instruction, is important for inclusive education. Inconsistent evidence shows that, to meet the needs of all children in regular classrooms, teaching and learning require effective teaching strategies which depart from the individualized planning frame (associated with segregated special education teaching) to an instruction that adapts learning goals and content setting through an engagement with the entire class (Ainscow & Goldrick, 2010; Hornby, 2010; Odom et al., 2011). Similarly, inclusive pedagogy rejects “bell-curve” thinking and notions of fixed ability that
underpin the structure of schooling (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

This study revealed that the competency to adapt the pedagogical content of the regular school curriculum to the level of cognitive functioning of individual children with and without unique needs is fundamental for teachers for inclusive education. This finding contradicts inclusive pedagogy which is embedded in quality education for all children in the community of the regular classroom irrespective of their individual difficulties and circumstances (Ballard, 2012; Majoko, 2016; Pantic & Wubbels, 2010). The finding implies teachers’ consideration of cognitive development psychology in their management of inclusive teaching and learning.

Adapting the regular school curriculum to the respective needs of children with and without disabilities was felt by the participants to be an essential competency for teachers for inclusive education. This finding is also inconsistent with inclusive pedagogy which requires a shift in teaching and learning from an approach that works for “most” children existing alongside something “additional” or “different” for those (some) who experience difficulties, toward one that involves the development of a rich learning community characterized by learning that is adequately made available for “everyone” so that all children are able to participate in regular classroom life (Florian, 2012; Pantic & Florian, 2015).

Similarly, previous research demonstrates that inclusive education entails effective learning of all children in the community of the regular classrooms irrespective of their individuality (Chhabra et al., 2010; Flecha & Soler, 2013; Florian, 2009).

It was felt that teacher competency in adapting and modifying assessments to the unique needs of children with disabilities is essential for inclusive education. This finding is inconsistent with previous research which demonstrates that inclusive education requires competency of teachers in assessing children with developmental challenges in the community of their typically developing peers in regular classrooms (Das et al., 2013). Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to respect as well as respond to human differences in ways that include children, instead of excluding them from what is ordinarily available in the daily life of the regular school curriculum (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Linklater, 2010).

Competency of teachers in adapting teaching methods, strategies, and techniques to the needs of individual children to allow for their abilities or disabilities was believed to be important for inclusive education. This finding aligns with previous studies which show that teacher competency in diverse teaching methods, including cooperative learning, peer tutoring, mastery learning, and applied behavior analysis, is essential in inclusive education (Philpott et al., 2010). Similarly, previous studies reveal that teachers need competency in different teaching strategies such as multilevel instruction, differentiated instruction, activity-based learning, and individualized instruction to facilitate learning of all children in regular classrooms (Apelgren & Giertz, 2010; Sledge & Pazey, 2013). In the same vein, past research demonstrates that teachers require competency in different instructional strategies to meet the needs of all children in regular classrooms (Alhassan, 2012; Allday et al., 2013; Chireshe, 2013). Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to seek and try out new ways of working to support the learning of all children (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Forlin, 2010; Pantic, 2015) and using a diversity of grouping strategies to support the learning of everyone rather than depending on ability grouping to separate “able” from “less able” children (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Participants perceived competency of teachers in adapting regular classroom environments to the individual interests and characteristics of children with disabilities to be important for inclusive education. Inconsistent evidence demonstrates that teachers need competency in the learning environment to nurture conditions conducive for all children to progress (Florian & Rouse, 2009; Forlin, 2010; Hornby, 2010). Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to extend the teaching and learning environment that is available to everyone in the community of the regular classroom and school (Florian et al., 2010; Forlin & Sin, 2010; Pantic & Wubbels, 2010).

Establishing child-related and systemic factors that contribute to behavioral challenges among children with or at risk of disabilities for informed interventions was revealed to be an essential competency for teachers for inclusive education. Consistent evidence shows that teachers need competency in classroom management to facilitate academic engagement and prosocial behavior of children while eliminating disruptions of the regular classroom (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010; Odom et al., 2011; Oliver & Reschly, 2010). Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to view difficulties in learning as professional challenges rather than deficits in children.

It was felt that teacher competency in diverse behavioral and psychodynamic strategies and approaches to responding to the behavioral challenges presented by children is essential for inclusive education. Consistent evidence indicates that teachers require competency in behavior management to use strategies that meet the needs of individual children in regular classrooms (Allday et al., 2013; Flecha & Soler, 2013; Majoko, 2013). Competency of teachers in evaluation of the impact of behavior management strategies on children to work diagnostically and prescriptively for proactive rather than reactive behavior management was seen to be important for inclusive education. Similarly, past research shows that teachers need to recognize the reality of differences of and in children to meet their needs in inclusive settings (Ainscow & Goldrick, 2010).

Participants reported that teacher competency in collaboration to secure the support of parents for effective interventions for their children and for synchronization of home and school interventions for successful management of the
behavior of these children is key for inclusive education. Consistent evidence reveals that collaboration is a key competency for teachers in inclusive education (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010). Inclusive pedagogy, similarly, requires collaborative actions to address issues that need actions beyond the classroom and substantive engagement of families in decisions about education (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Rouse, 2009; Pantic & Florian, 2015). In the same vein, past studies show that teachers require competency to work with diverse families because the home environment is critical for the success or otherwise of inclusive education (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012; Blanton et al., 2011; Majoko, 2018).

The study revealed that the competency of teachers to collaborate with community stakeholders, government ministries, and professionals to garner their support in facilitating the holistic development of children is fundamental for inclusive education. Inclusive pedagogy is, similarly, entrenched in teacher engagement in professional and social networks to contribute to greater social justice (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Majoko, 2016). In the same vein, previous studies show that teachers need competency in collaboration to harness their own creative thinking and problem-solving strategies as they share ideas with peers, because all children, including those with unique needs, require a diversity of teaching approaches to meet their individual needs in inclusive education (Berry, 2010; Blanton et al., 2011; Deluca et al., 2013). It was believed that competency of teachers to formally and informally collaborate with their peer teachers to share positive attitudes and expertise is essential for inclusive education. Similarly, commitment of teachers to continuing professional development, as a strategy to develop more inclusive practice, underpins inclusive pedagogy (Pantic, 2015).

Competency of teachers in collaboration with national and international nonprofit and profit-taking stakeholders to pool resources was felt to be fundamental for inclusive education. Inclusive pedagogy, similarly, requires teachers to work with and through other adults who respect the dignity of children as full members of the community of the classroom (Florian, 2012). Previous studies also show that teachers need the competency to collaborate with other stakeholders to eliminate individual and systematic barriers to inclusive education (Berry, 2010; Chireshe, 2013; Forlin & Sin, 2010).

**Implications**

The study examined Zimbabwean teachers’ perceived key competencies for inclusive education. Overall, teachers exhibited professional grounding in inclusive education. Capitalization on the professional grounding of teachers in inclusive education of teacher education institutions could facilitate the successful and effective implementation of inclusive education. However, the failure of teacher education institutions to equip teachers with competencies to replace the systems, procedures, and assumptions in school education that are entrenched in ideas of “most” and “some” by new ways of thinking and working in support of all children could result in impoverished inclusive teaching and learning in regular classrooms. Based on the perceptions of the participants regarding differentiating between children with educational disabilities and those requiring intensive instruction or differentiated instruction, teacher education institutions could equip pre-service and in-service teachers with competencies to respond to human diversity in ways that include children in rather than excluding them from what is ordinarily available to others in the daily life of the regular classrooms.

Premised on the perceptions of participants of using different teaching strategies, methods, and techniques for typically developing children and those with unique needs, respectively, teacher education institutions could equip pre-service and in-service teachers with competencies to shift their thinking about teaching and learning from a focus on “that which works for ‘most’ children along with something ‘additional’ or ‘different’ for those who experience difficulties,” to the cultivation of lessons and learning opportunities that facilitate access, participation, acceptance, and achievement of all children in regular classroom life. Based on the perceptions of participants of teaching children different content based on their individual level of cognitive functioning, teacher education institutions could equip pre-service and in-service teachers with competencies to shift their focus from what children cannot do to what children can do. Premised on the perceptions of participants of adapting regular classroom environments to the unique needs of children with disabilities, teacher education institutions could foster competencies in pre-service and in-service teachers to establish and reinforce regular classroom environments that meet the unique needs, interests, and characteristics of children both with and without disabilities. Because participants expressed the indispensability of the social-cultural contexts in inclusive teaching and learning in regular classrooms, teacher education institutions could infuse sociocultural issues in pre-service and in-service training of teachers.

Gleaning from the expression of the participants of the diverse categories of unique needs among children which stem from individual and systemic factors, teacher education institutions could develop in pre-service and in-service teachers the competencies to meet the individual needs of diverse children in the context of the regular classrooms. As participants exhibited overall professional grounding in inclusive education because they had pre-service training in regular school teaching coupled with in-service training in special needs education, teacher education institutions could synchronize pre-service and in-service training of teachers to enhance their competencies in inclusive education. Teacher education institutions could also scale up pre-service and in-service training of
teachers for inclusive education. Teacher education institutions could base pre-service and in-service training on the needs of teachers in inclusive education to enhance their competencies for its successful and effective practice in regular classrooms. Based on the influence of special needs education training on the perceptions of teachers on the competencies needed for inclusive education, the government could mandate pre-service and in-service training of teachers on these competencies.

Research limitations and Future Research

Participants for this study were purposively sampled from one educational province of Zimbabwe. Because inclusive education is implemented in all the provinces, the perceptions of teachers regarding the competencies needed for inclusive education need to be explored from a nationally representative sample for transferability of findings. Participants were volunteers whose choice to take part may have been impacted by negative or positive practices, perspectives, and experiences in inclusive education, which may have potentially influenced their perceptions. The transferability of findings from this study to inclusive primary schools in Zimbabwe is consequently unknown. This study also excluded the perceptions of other stakeholders, including head teachers, therapists, educational psychologists, parents, and social workers regarding the competencies teachers need for inclusive education. Consequently, it cannot be established whether the perceptions of these stakeholders are consistent with those of the teachers. Future studies could examine the perceptions of head teachers, parents, therapists, social workers, and children regarding the competencies teachers need for inclusive education in order to solicit diverse practices, experiences, and perspectives that could inform its implementation.

This study examined key competencies teachers need for inclusive education, yet other variables, including attitudes and the availability of support, could also be influential. Future research could explore the influence of pre-service and in-service training content, process, environment, and assessment on the competencies of teachers in inclusive education. Because this study revealed the importance of pre-service and in-service training of teachers in successful and effective inclusive education, future studies could examine and propose models of pre-service and in-service training of teachers for inclusive education that co-opt other components, including attitudes, apart from competencies. Future studies could also explore and propose successful and effective models of pre-service and in-service training of teachers for inclusive education.

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Ethical Approval

The ethical approval to carry out this study was sought and secured from the Head Office of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Zimbabwe, Midlands Provincial Education Office, head teachers of regular primary schools, and participating teachers prior to its execution.

Informed Consent

Participants were provided with the research profile of this study and were afforded the option of nonparticipation or participation and were also guaranteed a right to withdraw from the study at any time if they wished.

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