

# RETHINKING THE IMPERATIVE OF TEACHERS' COMPETENCES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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## **Abstract**

Education is integral in any nation's march to development. This makes teacher education and lived experiences of teachers something to be taken seriously. Teacher Professional Development (TPD) should focus more on the well-being of the teacher in inclusive educational settings. It is imperative that teachers are equipped not only with the necessary knowledge and skills but also with the emotional resilience and support to navigate the complexities of inclusive education. This holistic approach to teacher professional development can lead to more effective and inclusive educational practices in schools. Inclusive education demands that teachers be equipped with a variety of competencies that allow them to cater to students or learners with diverse abilities, backgrounds, and needs. However, the conventional comprehensions of teachers' competencies, abilities that are largely defined in terms of technical and pedagogical skills, fail to capture the complex lived experiences of educators in inclusive settings. This paper employs a phenomenological approach to rethink teachers' competencies by exploring the subjective, emotional, and ethical dimensions of teaching in inclusive classrooms. It unveils how proficiency or competence is not merely a laid-down, predefined skill but a dynamic, evolving process shaped by real-life interactions, challenges, and personal growth. Overall, this paper calls for a reform in teacher education programs advocating for the inclusion of reflective practices where the teacher puts a premium on assisting him/herself by developing the skill to cogitate on his/her teaching and learning experiences, thoughts, and practices; and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to meet the demands of inclusive education.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education, phenomenology, teachers' competence

## **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusive education as a nascent operational term in academic and professional practice in special needs education is unavoidable in this post-modern world (Ofoegbu & Umeadi, 2022). Inclusive education undoubtedly has really become a global priority, aimed at ensuring that all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, or social abilities, have access to equitable learning opportunities. They have the right to enjoy the value education brings, which is a process of imparting knowledge to someone, particularly in school or higher education. It is the knowledge, skills, and comprehension that one gets from going to school, college, and university (Ofoegbu, 2017). Inclusive promotes the integration of students with disabilities, special educational needs, and other marginalized groups into mainstream classrooms. Teacher professional development plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of inclusive education practices within school systems worldwide. Silam also maintains that teacher professional development plays a critical role in driving positive outcomes in inclusive

education by empowering educators with the knowledge and skills needed to create inclusive and supportive learning environments that benefit all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities (Silam, 2024). As inclusive education develops, teachers are increasingly expected to handle a divergent range of learners, which requires a rethinking of the competencies they must possess in order to function in school environments.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS' COMPETENCES**

In 1944, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) described inclusive education (IE) as a practice aimed at acknowledging and responding to the diverse needs of all learners. This effort involves contributions to learning, cultures, and communities, while also striving to reduce marginalization within the education system. Inclusive education isn't just about making changes to content and methods; it's about fundamentally reshaping approaches to ensure that every child, regardless of their circumstances, receives an education that's their right (UNICEF & UNICEF, 2003, as cited in Hina, Tarique& Jameel, 2025). The effectiveness of inclusive education hinges on teachers' ability to foster environments that are supportive, adaptable, and accessible. This educational model is essential for making quality education available to all students, no matter their backgrounds or abilities. However, many traditional definitions of teacher competencies—focused primarily on pedagogy, classroom management, and subject expertise—fall short when it comes to addressing the unique challenges that arise in inclusive classrooms. These challenges can include catering to students with diverse learning needs, navigating institutional barriers, and managing the emotional demands that come with fostering inclusion.

## **PHENOMENOLOGY IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

Phenomenology explores the fundamental structures of consciousness by examining experiences through a first-person lens. Central to this exploration is the concept of intentionality, which refers to the way experiences are directed toward specific objects or phenomena (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2003, Ofoegbu & Anyanwu 2016). Within the context of educational research, phenomenology serves as a crucial methodology for investigating the lived experiences of educators. It provides a deeper understanding of their perceptions regarding their roles, the obstacles they encounter, and their paths toward professional development. This research approach often reveals the emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions of teaching that conventional competency frameworks frequently neglect. By employing a phenomenological perspective in the study of inclusive education, researchers can gain valuable insights into how teachers navigate the intricacies of inclusion, thereby facilitating a reflective examination of their professional identities and teaching practices

## **Philosophical Foundations of Phenomenology**

Phenomenology, drawing from the insights of thinkers like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, dives into the essence of lived experiences and the significance that individuals assign to their everyday interactions. It highlights the concept of intentionality, which suggests that our consciousness is always aimed at something specific. This approach invites us to deeply explore how people perceive and make sense of the world around them. Husserl (1913) says phenomenology is the science of the structure of subjective experience or consciousness...It is the systematic and rigorous examination of conscious experience or perception, without making assumptions or presuppositions or presuppositions about the nature of reality. Heidegger, drawing from Husserl's assertion, phenomenology is the letting-be-seen of the things themselves, in opposition to all constructive and speculative thought...It is the attempt to let the things themselves be seen, without any preconceptions. Phenomenology, as a philosophical methodology, provides a significant framework for understanding the experiences of individuals within inclusive education contexts. By exploring these phenomenological principles and foundations, we can enhance our comprehension of people's experiences in inclusive education and strive to create more supportive and inviting learning environments

## **Applying Phenomenology to the Teachers' competencies**

When we look at teachers' competences in inclusive education through a phenomenological lens, we can really dig into what goes on inside their minds as they work with diverse students. It highlights how they see their own effectiveness, manage emotional hurdles, and adjust their teaching methods based on the interactions happening in their classrooms. Instead of thinking of competence as just a fixed skill set, phenomenology shows us that it's actually a dynamic and evolving concept influenced by their day-to-day experiences. Emotional Intelligence is a key factor in creating a positive and inclusive classroom environment (Goleman, 1995, p.34) Teachers with high emotional Intelligence are better able to manage their own emotions and those of their students, creating a more positive and inclusive learning environment (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Culturally competent teachers are able to understand and appreciate the diverse and supportive learning environment

Educators frequently convey that competence encompasses more than merely possessing a collection of technical abilities; it represents a dynamic form of knowledge that evolves through continuous engagement with their students. Numerous teachers emphasize how they gain insights from their students, adapting their instructional methods to align with the distinct dynamics of the classroom and the specific requirements of each learner.

## **TEACHERS' COMPETENCE IN THE LIGHT OF PHENOMENOLOGY**

### **Reinterpreting Competence**

This paper significantly challenges, in the light of phenomenology, conventional notions of competence by emphasizing that it is not merely a fixed attribute but rather a dynamic quality that develops over time through experience. The competencies of teachers are not immutable; they are consistently shaped by their interactions with students, their emotional responses, and the ethical dilemmas they encounter in the classroom.

## **Implications for Teacher Education**

Teacher education programs must evolve beyond the mere instruction of technical skills. It is essential to incorporate reflective practices and training focused on emotional resilience. In the realm of professional development for inclusive education, it is crucial to establish environments where educators can exchange their experiences, contemplate the challenges they encounter, and devise adaptable strategies to address these issues

## **Policy Implications**

Educational policies must prioritize robust support for inclusive education. This entails the establishment of smaller class sizes, guaranteeing access to specialized personnel, and providing resources that accommodate various learning styles. Additionally, it is essential for these policies to recognize the emotional and ethical dimensions of teaching within inclusive settings, which involves creating support systems for educators.

## **The need for adopting the Phenomenological approach to Teachers' Competencies**

While traditional frameworks like classroom management, subject mastery, teaching strategies, and media play a crucial role in enhancing teaching and learning, they often miss out on the personal, lived experiences of teachers. In the realm of inclusive education, the spotlight is usually on the learner, particularly those with special needs. The National Policy on Education emphasizes the importance of including children and youth with special needs in regular schools (National Policy on Education, 2008). The goal of inclusive education is to ensure that every student has access to learning by catering to their diverse needs, including those with unique requirements (Buenaño-Barreno, 2024) as noted in (Navas-Bonilla, Guerra-Arango, Oriedo-Guado & Murillo-Noviega, 2025).

This approach is grounded in several key principles, one of which is that the inherent worth of every individual in our society isn't determined by their abilities or accomplishments; rather, those with disabilities or special educational needs should be welcomed into the educational environment (Shmeleva and Litovchenko, 2022) as referenced in (Navas-Bonilla, Guerra-Arango, Oriedo-Guado & Murillo-Noviega, 2025). Adopting a phenomenological approach, which aims to grasp individuals' experiences from their own viewpoints, can shed light on the intricate realities of teaching in inclusive settings. By delving into the emotional and cognitive journeys of teachers, we can develop a richer understanding of what it truly means to be "competent" in the context of inclusive education.

Furthermore, adopting a phenomenological approach can shed light on the real experiences of teachers working in inclusive education environments. This method focuses on grasping the meaning and structure of conscious experiences (Husserl, 1970). In the realm of inclusive education, such an approach can reveal the competencies teachers need to nurture in order to assist diverse learners effectively.

## COMPETENCES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Ainscow (2012) affirms the essence of teacher education in promoting inclusive education. He argues that teachers need to develop the skills and knowledge to support diverse learners. Florian (2014) emphasizes the imperativeness for teachers to have indebt understanding of inclusive education. She maintains that teachers need to move above a deficit model of disability and focus more on creating inclusive learning environment. Teachers need to create supportive and inclusive learning environment that encourages socio-emotional learning (Mittler, 2013) Furthermore, Norwich (2013) pointed out the tensions and dilemmas teachers are confronted in implementing inclusive education. He argues that teachers need to navigate these tensions and dilemmas in order to create inclusive learning atmosphere

Numerous studies have pinpointed the specific competencies that teachers should develop for inclusive education. For instance, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012) outlined several key competencies:

1. **Valuing diversity:** Educators must appreciate diversity and acknowledge both the strengths and challenges faced by various learners.
2. **Creating inclusive learning environments:** Teachers should strive to foster inclusive settings that encourage participation and engagement from all students.
3. **Using differentiated instruction:** It's crucial for teachers to implement differentiated instruction to cater to the varied needs of their learners.

In summary, the significance of teachers' competencies in the realm of inclusive education is immense. A phenomenological approach can offer valuable insights into the experiences of teachers in inclusive settings and help identify the skills they need to develop to effectively support diverse learners.

## CONCLUSION

This paper advocates for a reevaluation of the concept of teacher competence in inclusive education, approached from a phenomenological perspective. By focusing on the lived experiences of educators, we can gain a deeper understanding of how their competence is shaped by authentic interactions, the emotional labor they engage in, and the ethical dilemmas they encounter. It is essential for teacher education programs and policies to adapt to this complexity by providing ongoing support and opportunities for reflection, thereby enabling teachers to thrive in inclusive classroom settings.

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