
A Social-Cognitive Model of Teaching Pedagogies to Promote Inclusivity in Zimbabwe

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Abstract. Inclusive education in Zimbabwean foundation phase classrooms faces the critical challenge of addressing the diverse cognitive, social, and cultural needs of young learners. Despite policy commitments, teaching pedagogies often remain standardised and insufficiently responsive to learner variability. This study introduces the Social-Cognitive Inclusion (SCI) model, grounded in constructivist learning theory, which conceptualises learning as an active, socially mediated, and cognitively driven process. The SCI model encompasses social factors, including teacher attitudes, scaffolding, and learner interaction, alongside cognitive factors such as cognitive diversity, metacognitive skills, and the promotion of an inclusive classroom environment. A qualitative research design was employed to explore how foundation phase teachers implement inclusive teaching pedagogies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving twelve purposively selected foundation phase teachers from Hwange District. Thematic analysis was used to examine how teaching pedagogies are applied in contexts characterised by a lack of parental support, limited infrastructure, and inadequate training. Findings reveal that while teachers demonstrate inclusive intent, the teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity often remain inflexible and fail to adequately accommodate learners' cognitive and social differences. The SCI model addresses this gap by offering adaptable strategies aligned with learners' developmental readiness and contextual realities.

Keywords: cognitive and social needs; education; foundation phase classroom; inclusivity; learners, social-cognitive inclusion model; teaching pedagogies

Introduction

Inclusive education is a global priority that demands a fundamental shift in teaching pedagogies, especially in early childhood education, where foundational learning and social development occur. In Zimbabwe, foundation phase classrooms are characterised by diverse learners with varying cognitive, linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015). The diversity enriches the learning environment but also presents significant challenges for teachers who lack adequate knowledge to implement culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate, and inclusive teaching pedagogies (Kozleski, Artiles, & Waitoller, 2013; Kyambo, Basela, Pembe, & Deluca, 2022). In response to these challenges, this article explores teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity in Zimbabwean Foundation Phase classrooms, with a focus on how teachers support diverse learners. A

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qualitative research design was employed, comprising semi-structured interviews with purposively selected Grade 1 and 2 teachers, classroom observations, and document analysis of relevant policies.

In Zimbabwe, the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP 2021-2025) and Practical Inclusive Education Handbook for Primary and Secondary Education (PIEHPSE 2019) express a commitment to inclusive education. However, the implementation of teaching pedagogies to promote inclusivity requires teacher preparedness, institutional support, and adequate resources (Kumar, Zusho, & Bondie, 2018). Challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teacher training, limited inclusive learning materials, and poor access to technology persist (Henry & Namhla, 2020; Zwane & Malale, 2018). While inclusive education policies and training programs exist, a significant gap remains between policy and teaching practice constraints in the classrooms (Chireshe, 2013). Warschauer and Tate (2012) argue that equitable access to technology plays a crucial role in bridging learning gaps and improving content accessibility, while Zhou, Chen, and Chen (2019) highlight that technology use can enhance learner autonomy and engagement. Consequently, many foundation phase teachers resort to traditional, one-size-fits-all teaching methods that do not accommodate the diverse needs of learners, thereby marginalising those who require differentiated support (Beveridge, 2013). The foundation phase refers to the first three years of formal primary education, encompassing grades 1 to 3, and is aimed at developing foundational competencies in literacy, numeracy, and life skills (MoPSE, 2015).

To address the gap, this article introduces the social-cognitive inclusion model designed to support teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity in foundation phase education in Zimbabwe. The SCI model is grounded in constructivist learning theory and draws from the social and cognitive developmental insights of Piaget (1973) and Vygotsky (1978). The article conceptualises learning as an active, socially mediated process that is responsive to the cognitive variability and social context of each learner. The model highlights six connected elements, which fall under two key areas of focus. The first relates to social influences, such as teachers' perceptions, the learning support provided, and peer collaboration. The second addresses cognitive aspects, including learner variability in thinking, self-directed learning, and the creation of an inclusive environment. Each component is rooted in theoretical foundations and is supported by empirical evidence gathered from Zimbabwean foundation phase classrooms. This article presents SCI model as a flexible, context-sensitive tool that teachers can adapt to meet the unique needs of their learners. The model encourages teachers to reflect on and reshape their teaching pedagogical choices based on the realities of their teaching environments. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What teaching pedagogies do teachers use to promote inclusivity among diverse learners?
- (2) What are the challenges faced by teachers in implementing inclusive teaching pedagogies in Zimbabwean Foundation Phase classrooms?

The following sections present a review of relevant literature, a detailed description of the research methods, an analysis of empirical findings, and a discussion of the implications for teacher development and policy in Zimbabwe.

Literature review

Teaching pedagogies to promote inclusivity

Inclusivity in education is a fundamental pillar of modern educational systems and emphasises the importance of providing equitable and supportive learning environments for all learners (Solheim, 2020). Dewsbury and Brame (2019) advocate that fostering an inclusive classroom atmosphere in education entails more than simply following established teaching

pedagogies. It involves carefully selecting educational techniques that support learning and encourage learners' sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Teachers' specific actions and tactics significantly impact learners' perceptions of themselves and their status in the classroom community. Motilal and Fleisch (2020) opine that many teachers working in the foundation phase lack proper training, especially in rural and semi-rural schools, even though they have formal teaching qualifications. The gap in specialised training makes it challenging for them to teach in this crucial early stage of education. Snilstveit, Birte, Philips and Vojkova (2016) argue that structured pedagogical approaches are significant for equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills for effective teaching. The review of the literature suggests that inclusive teaching pedagogies such as differentiated teaching, collaborative learning, and project-based learning positively influence both teaching methods and learners' ability to acquire knowledge effectively. Snilstveit et al. (2016) add that structured pedagogy offers several benefits, such as, firstly, providing teachers with teaching materials and clear guidelines on their effective application, leading to improved teaching pedagogies. Secondly, structured pedagogy supports teachers throughout their careers by consistently providing detailed lesson plans. Thirdly, structured pedagogy includes on-site coaching, which helps teachers continuously improve and reflect on their teaching pedagogies. For example, in the US, structured coaching programmes involving 100 teachers showed significant success, with learners improving by 0.11 standard deviations (World Bank, 2022). The World Bank (2022) points out the increasing recognition of the fact that teachers need support in implementing curricula, especially when it comes to using teaching pedagogies that cater to the diverse needs of learners.

According to Kyambo et al. (2022), inclusivity in education seeks to embrace diversity, address individual learning needs and promote a sense of belonging among learners from various backgrounds. To achieve this goal, I posit that teaching pedagogies play a crucial role in shaping inclusive classrooms where learners can thrive and reach their full potential. Building on previous research, the present study suggests that it is widely acknowledged that no single teaching pedagogy can adequately address all curriculum content, objectives or the diverse needs and learning styles of all learners. Therefore, teaching pedagogies have to be adaptable, and a particular strategy should always be chosen depending on its suitability for the task at hand (Borich, 2016). It has been claimed that in the context of inclusive education, modifications to evidence-based teaching pedagogies may have been preferable to completely novel and unstructured approaches, especially in disciplines like mathematics (Doabler et al., 2016). A key takeaway from this review is that teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity guarantee equal access to education, accommodate various learning preferences, permit individualised teaching, encourage respect and empathy, lead to better learning outcomes, lessen stigma, improve teacher professional development and foster global competency among foundation phase learners (Doabler et al., 2016; Joyce & Weil, 2014). Fostering fair, encouraging and successful learning environments, inclusive pedagogies can serve every learner in the foundation phase classroom. In Zimbabwe's inclusive education policies, including the Practical Inclusive Education Handbook for Primary and Secondary Education (PIEHPSE, 2019) and the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP, 2021–2025), emphasise the importance of learner-friendly, inclusive schools that actively identify and support excluded learners (MoPSE, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). Despite these commitments, these policy documents lack concrete teaching pedagogical strategies tailored to the developmental and cognitive profiles of foundation phase learners and do not explicitly guide how inclusivity should be enacted in classroom practice.

The PIEHPSE advocates for schools to be learner-seeking and learner-centred, yet the ESSP stops short of delineating specific pedagogical approaches to make classrooms truly inclusive. The policy-practice gap is reflected in the literature, which notes that Zimbabwean foundation phase classrooms face challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources,

inadequate teacher training, and inflexible curricula that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive pedagogies (Mandina, 2013; Lunga, Esterhuizen & Koen, 2022).

Challenges in implementing teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity

The Global Monitoring Report on Inclusivity and Education highlights that over 258 million children and young people remain unenrolled in any educational institution, despite significant progress (UNESCO, 2020). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017) opines that there is a consistent trend of poorer learners in economically disadvantaged areas, achieving inferior academic outcomes compared to their richer counterparts. The pattern was observed in both high-income and low-income countries. Furthermore, it was discovered that race, gender and various other characteristics not only interacted with, but also intensified, these deeply rooted economic and spatial disparities (OECD, 2017). Additionally, data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (2019) revealed that over 617 million learners and adolescents failed to reach the minimal standards of proficiency in reading and arithmetic. It is crucial to acknowledge that most learners worldwide do not have access to pre-primary education, a significant shortcoming that hampers their prospects and exacerbates disparities in subsequent education (Milovantseva, Stasulane, & Lopatovska, 2018). Notably, underprivileged individuals received the least amount of high-quality early childhood care and education, even though learners with additional needs are often believed to benefit the most from such interventions. Global learner dropout rates were likewise high (Milovantseva et al., 2018).

Providing equitable learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of their varied backgrounds, talents or identities, is a core goal of modern education (UIS, 2019). The goal can be achieved by encouraging the implementation of teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity and diversity. Iturbe-LaGrave, Sponsler, Paguyo and Alvarez (2018) articulate that the goal of inclusive teaching pedagogies is to foster respect, understanding and appreciation for individual diversity by establishing a fair and encouraging learning environment. However, several obstacles must be overcome by teachers to achieve the goal of creating an inclusive learning environment. In Zimbabwe, continuous professional development and tailored training for foundation phase teachers remain inadequate, significantly constraining their capacity to implement differentiated instruction that meets diverse learner needs (Mtetwa & Ndemo, 2022). Many teachers report infrequent workshops that fail to provide practical, context-specific strategies for inclusive pedagogy (Chireshe, 2013). The lack of sustained, targeted training undermines teachers' confidence and limits their adoption of adaptive teaching methods critical for addressing varied cognitive, social, and cultural learner profiles (Ngwarati & Muchemwa, 2022). Additionally, limited access to assistive devices, specialised learning materials, and resources specifically designed for learners with disabilities further impedes inclusive teaching efforts, especially in rural and under-resourced schools (Chireshe, 2013). The absence of these supports can lead to reliance on standardised teaching approaches that inadequately accommodate learner diversity, thereby affecting educational equity and learner outcomes.

Parental involvement, widely recognised as essential for reinforcing learning and fostering inclusivity, displays considerable variation within Zimbabwe (Magumise, 2017). Socioeconomic challenges and limited parental education often restrict meaningful engagement with schools, reducing parents' capacity to support their children's learning at home or participate actively in school activities (Chireshe, 2013). Malatji, Mavuso, and Malatji (2019) identified the challenge of limited collaboration between schools and communities, which reduces opportunities for social and practical support for teachers. Therefore, fostering school community partnerships can supplement formal training by providing ongoing guidance, practical support, and collaborative learning opportunities, strengthening teachers' ability to implement inclusive practices effectively (Malatji, Mavuso, & Malatji, 2019). Furthermore, cultural perspectives and a lack of awareness regarding special educational needs can result in

low communication between families and teachers, which diminishes early identification and intervention for learners requiring additional support (Ngwarati & Muchemwa, 2022). Successful inclusive education thus depends not only on classroom practices but also on strengthening school–family partnerships through culturally sensitive, accessible engagement strategies that empower parents and caregivers to contribute effectively to their children’s education (UNICEF, 2020). Additionally, technology integration remains an underutilised but potentially transformative tool for inclusive education, with infrastructural deficits and connectivity issues curtailing its deployment in schools (Thuketana, 2021). Addressing these intersecting factors is vital for creating supportive learning environments that advance inclusive education goals in Zimbabwe’s foundation phase classrooms.

Methodology

To understand a subjective human experience or a phenomenon of interest through the minds and eyes of the study participants, the study followed a qualitative research approach within an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted in Hwange District, Matabeleland North Province, Zimbabwe, a region characterised by diverse ethnicities, including Namibian, Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, Dombe, and Nyanja communities. A qualitative descriptive design was adopted to allow an in-depth exploration of teachers’ perspectives and practices. Purposive sampling was employed to select twelve Foundation Phase teachers across six schools (A, B, C, D, E, and F) based on their expertise and willingness to contribute detailed insights (Patton, 2015). The sample size of twelve participants was deemed adequate, as qualitative inquiry prioritises depth over numerical representation. Data collection reached saturation when recurring themes emerged and no new insights were identified across subsequent interviews, indicating that the sample sufficiently captured the diversity of perspectives within the study context (Jassim & Whitford, 2017). Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to articulate their experiences, challenges, and contextual realities in inclusive teaching (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews facilitated a rich, nuanced understanding of how teachers navigate pedagogical demands amid Zimbabwe’s unique educational challenges, which quantitative methods may fail to capture (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

Interview findings, document analysis, and classroom observations were conducted to validate and triangulate the data. Observation notes captured classroom dynamics, teacher–learner interactions, and teaching pedagogies used to promote inclusivity, while document analysis included perusing inclusive education policies. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2019) six-phase thematic framework, beginning with thorough familiarisation through repeated readings of interview transcripts. Initial descriptive coding captured direct statements and actions illustrating teaching pedagogies to promote inclusivity. The descriptive codes were then compared and consolidated into conceptual categories that reflected shared meanings and pedagogical patterns across participants. Coding combined inductive techniques to uncover emergent themes with deductive approaches linking data to existing inclusive pedagogy theories (Javed, Khan, & Naseem, 2023). A clear analytical pathway was maintained from raw data to theory. Initial codes were clustered into categories that evolved into broader themes, representing teachers’ lived experiences. Thematic analysis was employed to code the data, identify patterns, and generate themes related to inclusive pedagogical practices (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Themes were then synthesised to inform the conceptual refinement of the Social-Cognitive Inclusion model. The connection between thematic interpretation and model development was emphasised by showing how themes were translated into the model’s dimensions representing social and cognitive factors. The process ensured that the model’s

dimensions, social influences, and cognitive aspects were empirically grounded in participants' narratives and classroom evidence.

Methodological triangulation was employed to enhance the study's credibility, as findings from interview data were cross-validated with those from document analysis and classroom observation notes (Amankwa, 2016). The triangulation not only improved data validity but also reinforced the interpretive link between emergent themes and the construction of the SCI model. The study adhered to the ethical standards mandated by the University of Pretoria's Code of Ethics for Researchers. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including confidentiality and voluntary participation. Ethical clearance (Ethics clearance number EDU093/23) was obtained prior to data collection, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts to preserve anonymity.

Research results

The study aimed to explore the significance of teaching pedagogies in enhancing inclusivity within foundation phase classrooms in Hwange district. Based on the data collected, the findings were presented under themes, reflecting how teachers understand and implement teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity in their classrooms. Data were gathered from six primary schools in the Hwange District, with a total of twelve foundation phase teachers participating in the study. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

The table 1 below outlines the pseudonyms used and the schools where the participants teach:

Table 1. Participants and the schools

Name of participants	Pseudonyms
Participant 1 from school A	SSI1
Participant 2 from school A	SSI2
Participant 3 from school B	SSI3
Participant 4 from school B	SSI4
Participant 5 from school C	SSI5
Participant 6 from school C	SSI6
Participant 7 from school D	SSI7
Participant 8 from school D	SSI8
Participant 9 from school E	SSI9
Participant 10 from school E	SSI10
Participant 11 from school F	SSI11
Participant 12 from school F	SSI12

Theme 1: Teaching pedagogies to promote inclusivity

Theme one explored the practical classroom strategies employed by participants to foster inclusivity in their classrooms. The present study focused on strategies that foundation phase teachers can use to create welcoming and supportive learning environments where all learners, regardless of their diverse needs and backgrounds, feel valued and included. The intention behind this interview question was to uncover participants' perspectives on strategies and

practices that address the diverse needs of learners, with a focus on creating an inclusive classroom culture. The responses provided valuable insights into how teachers adapt their teaching pedagogies, interact with learners and structure classroom activities to ensure inclusivity. For instance, SSI2 from School A remarked:

“In my experience, implementing inclusive education is more challenging than it may seem. While the intention is good, incorporating interactive activities and adapting teaching methods requires careful planning and a deep understanding of each learner's needs. For example, sometimes I use group discussions, but with 37 learners, I have to work hard to ensure everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts. Some learners are shy and need extra encouragement. Planning these activities to work for all 37 learners takes a lot of effort and understanding”.

Reflecting on the responses, one could argue that implementing teaching pedagogies to promote inclusivity requires proper training and clear guidance to ensure teachers can consistently support all learners effectively. SSI5 expressed frustration over the lack of clear guidance on strategies for inclusive teaching pedagogies, which has led to inadequate support for diverse learners' needs.

SSI5 from School C noted:

“Honestly, I find it challenging to promote inclusivity in the classroom. There's not enough training and resources to make it work. While I try to use different teaching methods, it's hard to meet every learner's needs, I am not trained in implementing teaching methods that cater to learners with diverse needs, and we don't have enough teaching resources. Sometimes, I feel like I'm just doing my best to keep up, but creating an environment where every learner truly feels included is difficult for me”.

The responses from the participants highlighted the challenges associated with strategically implementing teaching pedagogies for inclusive learning environments. The challenges included the lack of clear guidance and resource constraints. Thus, I would argue that addressing these challenges is paramount to promoting successful and sustainable teaching pedagogies to promote inclusivity.

Sub-theme 1: Teachers approaches for addressing learner diversity

The following question was posed: How do you incorporate the diverse needs of learners into your teaching? The intention of asking this question was to understand how teachers design their lessons to accommodate learners' diverse educational, cultural and social contexts and to identify the strategies they use to ensure that all learners can access and benefit from the curriculum. SSI1 from School A explained:

“I use different activities like group work, storytelling and hands-on tasks to ensure all learners are engaged and learning at their own pace”.

Participant SSI7 explained:

“I use different teaching methods in my lessons so that every learner feels represented. I focus on creating a learning environment where each learner's culture, experiences and individual needs are considered. For instance, I ensure that I use various teaching resources that are relevant and familiar to the learners, such as local materials and real-life examples they can relate to. I incorporate visual, auditory, and hands-on activities to support all learning strategies. This strategy helps me ensure that every learner has an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of their challenges”.

Participant SSI11 stated:

“I have an advantage because I grew up in Hwange, so I'm familiar with different languages and cultures. This helps me create an inclusive environment where my learners feel valued for their linguistic backgrounds. For example, I encourage

them to share stories in their native languages. It helps them feel proud of their culture, understanding and respect among their peers. I have observed that using different languages boosts their confidence and encourages them to participate more during class activities. I speak Shona, isiNdebele, Tonga, Nyanja and Nambia, so I try to use all these languages when appropriate, making the classroom feel more welcoming and inclusive”.

The participant expressed the use of incorporating group work, storytelling, and hands-on tasks to engage all learners. Participants stated the use of culturally relevant visuals and real-life examples to make lessons inclusive and relatable for diverse learners. Another participant described how multilingual skills help foster an inclusive classroom where learners feel proud of their linguistic heritage and actively participate.

Theme 2: Challenges in implementing teaching Pedagogies to promote inclusivity

The participants were asked questions to gain insights into the impediments teachers face in implementing teaching pedagogies that foster inclusivity.

SSI6 speculates:

“We don’t have enough teaching materials for learners with learning difficulties such as large print books and tangible resources for those with visual challenges. I feel helpless sometimes because I know Grade 1 learners need extra support, but the resources are not enough”.

Participant SSI7 explained:

“Our school lacks resources that promote inclusivity. We have limited access to updated textbooks and supplementary materials, making it challenging to diversify our teaching methods. The available resources are not culturally relevant, and this affects their effectiveness in our classrooms. Inclusive teaching should consider the cultural context, but the current resources fall short in addressing this aspect”.

The responses highlight significant challenges due to a lack of diverse resources.

The participants were asked whether training programmes had been provided to enhance their ability to implement teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity. Participant SSI3 from School B had this to say:

“The training we received was brief and shallow. It did not address the difficulties we face in our classrooms and no practical solutions were offered. It’s hard to use inclusive teaching ideas without well-detailed information. The training focused more on theory than practical application. I can say the training lacked concrete examples and hands-on activities to show us how to use these ideas in our daily teaching”.

Participant SSI10 from School E stated:

“Honestly, there hasn’t been much in terms of training. We receive occasional memos about inclusive education, but there’s a lack of structured programmes. It’s challenging to implement teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity without proper guidance and enough resources”.

Participant SSI12 expressed her response as follows:

“In fact, I do not know much about teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity because my training has primarily focused on general teaching methods rather than the ones designed for diverse learners. I have not received sufficient training in the various inclusive teaching approaches, making it difficult to fully understand how to meet the diverse needs of all learners in my classroom”.

Reflecting on the quotes, participants highlighted challenges hindering the implementation of teaching pedagogies that enhance inclusivity.

Findings related to parental involvement, teachers expressed challenges in maintaining consistent communication with parents. Some parents, according to the teachers, were unable

to help with homework due to demanding work schedules or illiteracy. Others were simply unresponsive to invitations for meetings or follow-ups.

One teacher speculates:

“One of the most significant challenges I've encountered is the lack of response from some parents when called to discuss their children's problems and progress. Despite our efforts to initiate dialogues, calling them for consultation day to address their child's performance, there are instances where parents don't respond to calls or requests for meetings. It's disheartening because open communication between teachers and parents is crucial for learners' success”.

Moreover, the ESSP and PIEHPSS acknowledged the importance of inclusive education. The documents advocated for the alignment of pre-service training with inclusive pedagogies. However, they failed to offer specific, practical strategies for adapting lesson plans and implementing differentiated teaching. Similarly, school policy documents did not outline clear steps for accommodating diversity or developing Individualised Education Plans (IEPs).

In terms of accessibility, the ESSP identified major infrastructure barriers such as poor roads, lack of electricity, and the absence of disability-friendly facilities. These findings matched classroom observations, where most schools lacked ramps, accessible and inclusive learning spaces. Teaching materials were also scarce, and little evidence existed of adaptations for learners with different needs.

With regard to engagement and learning outcomes, the PIHPSS encouraged participatory learning and flexible lesson planning. The handbook promoted learner agency, stating that learners should contribute to shaping the learning process. However, actual classroom practice, as observed and confirmed through interviews, remained largely teacher-driven with limited learner involvement.

Discussion and conclusions

The discussion explicitly outlines how the analysis moved from descriptive to conceptual levels. During coding, initial descriptive codes were derived directly from participants' statements, capturing concrete actions, perceptions and classroom teaching, as recommended in qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019). The descriptive codes were then compared across transcripts to identify shared meanings, recurring patterns and pedagogical consistencies, following Creswell and Poth's (2018) guidance on constant comparison. Through this comparison, the codes were consolidated into broader conceptual categories that reflected higher-order interpretations of teachers' experiences, consistent with Javed, Khan and Naseem's (2023) description of inductive-deductive thematic development. The conceptual categories formed the basis for the thematic structure, with each theme representing a refined interpretation of how teachers understood and enacted teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity. The themes were subsequently integrated to shape the final model, ensuring that the model's dimensions were anchored in the participants' descriptions of their experiences rather than imposed theoretically (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Theme 1: Teaching pedagogies to promote inclusivity

Participants described using strategies such as group work, storytelling, multilingual teaching, and hands-on activities to bring learners into the centre of the learning process. These approaches reflect what Solheim (2020) describes as the heart of inclusive education: building supportive and equitable spaces where no child feels left behind. Dewsbury and Brame (2019) reminds us that inclusivity is not about simply following a set of teaching routines but about carefully selecting teaching methods that help learners see themselves as capable and important members of the classroom community. Piaget (1973) argued that children construct their knowledge through direct interaction with the world, which explains why practical activities,

dramatisation, and discovery-based tasks are so effective. Vygotsky (1978) added that children learn best when supported within their “zone of proximal development,” where guidance from teachers and peers helps them stretch beyond what they can do alone. The opinions shared by participants during interviews bring these theories to life. The teacher who uses multilingual storytelling to engage all learners, or the one who designs group discussions despite managing many learners, is essentially scaffolding learning in ways that allow every learner to grow. Joyce and Weil (2014) suggest that learning flourishes when it is collaborative, dialogic, and socially meaningful, a reality vividly seen in these classrooms.

Motilal and Fleisch (2020) note that many foundation phase teachers, especially in rural and semi-rural areas, lack specialised training in inclusive education despite holding teaching qualifications. Several participants in this study confirmed this, expressing frustration at the absence of clear guidance and sufficient resources. This echoes Snilstveit et al. (2016), who emphasise the importance of structured pedagogy in giving teachers the practical tools they need, such as detailed lesson plans, adaptable materials, and ongoing coaching. The interviews revealed that teachers face significant challenges that impact their ability to implement teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity.

PIEHPSE (2019) and ESSP (2021–2025) call for learner-friendly and inclusive schools; however, these policies are often short of offering classroom-level teaching strategies tailored to young learners (MoPSE, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). Large class sizes, lack of assistive technologies, and resource shortages leave teachers struggling to translate inclusive ideals into practice (Mandina, 2013; Lunga et al., 2022). The teachers in this study remind us that inclusivity is not achieved by policy statements alone; it is achieved in the everyday interactions where a learner feels seen, supported, and encouraged to learn. Bridging the gap between policy and practice will require not only training and resources but also a recognition of teachers’ lived realities. Doabler et al. (2016) suggest, adaptable, project-based learning and collaborative activities hold promise when they are grounded in the local context and supported consistently.

Theme 2: Challenges in implementing teaching pedagogies to promote inclusivity

The findings reveal that resource shortages are barriers to inclusive pedagogy. Teachers across different schools repeatedly noted the lack of culturally relevant textbooks, assistive technologies, and specialised resources for learners with disabilities. UNESCO (2020) and the OECD (2017) emphasise that disadvantaged learners often face inequities that limit access to quality education. The absence of inclusive resources ultimately perpetuates inequities and prevents teachers from accommodating diverse learning needs.

Training emerged as another critical challenge, with participants revealing that professional development opportunities were either too few or too generic. Participants described training that failed to provide practical strategies for managing diverse learners in overcrowded classrooms. As SSI6 lamented, the training offered “lacked concrete examples and hands-on activities,” leaving teachers ill-equipped to translate theory into practice. The gap between policy-level commitments to inclusivity and the reality of underdeveloped training programmes is stark. Without tailored, sustained professional development that includes exposure to teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity, teachers remain underprepared to respond to the needs of learners.

Parental support also surfaced as a major factor influencing the success of inclusive teaching. Participants described significant challenges in establishing consistent communication with parents. These findings resonate with Magumise (2017) who argue that socioeconomic conditions, cultural perceptions, and limited awareness of special needs often weaken parental involvement. Without strong collaboration between schools and families, early identification and intervention are delayed, limiting the effectiveness of inclusive pedagogy. This indicates a need for culturally sensitive engagement strategies that empower parents and

caregivers to take an active role in their children’s education, despite structural and economic constraints.

ESSP (2021–2025) and PIEHPSE (2019) articulate commitments to inclusivity, yet they fall short of offering clear, classroom-level strategies for teachers. Document analysis revealed that while these policies encourage participatory learning and flexible lesson planning, they do not provide specific frameworks for differentiated teaching. This mirrors observations by Mandina (2013) who argue that teaching in Zimbabwe remains predominantly standardised and teacher-centred, despite the recognition of learner diversity. The disconnect between global frameworks, which emphasise equitable participation and diversity (Chireshe, 2013), and the lived realities of under-resourced, overcrowded classrooms limits progress towards inclusive goals. Addressing these challenges will require systemic investment in resources, consistent teacher training, stronger parental engagement, and clearer pedagogical guidance that translates inclusive ideals into practical classroom strategies.

Proposed Social-Cognitive Inclusion model

The SCI model draws upon Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism and Piaget’s (1973) cognitive development theory to develop a model focused on inclusive teaching. The integration of findings into the SCI model is organised through six interdependent components, organised under two major lenses: social factors and cognitive factors. The social factors lens encompasses teacher attitudes, scaffolding, and social interaction, while the cognitive factors lens includes cognitive diversity, metacognition, and inclusive classroom culture. Below is a diagram that illustrates how these components interrelate to support inclusive teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity.

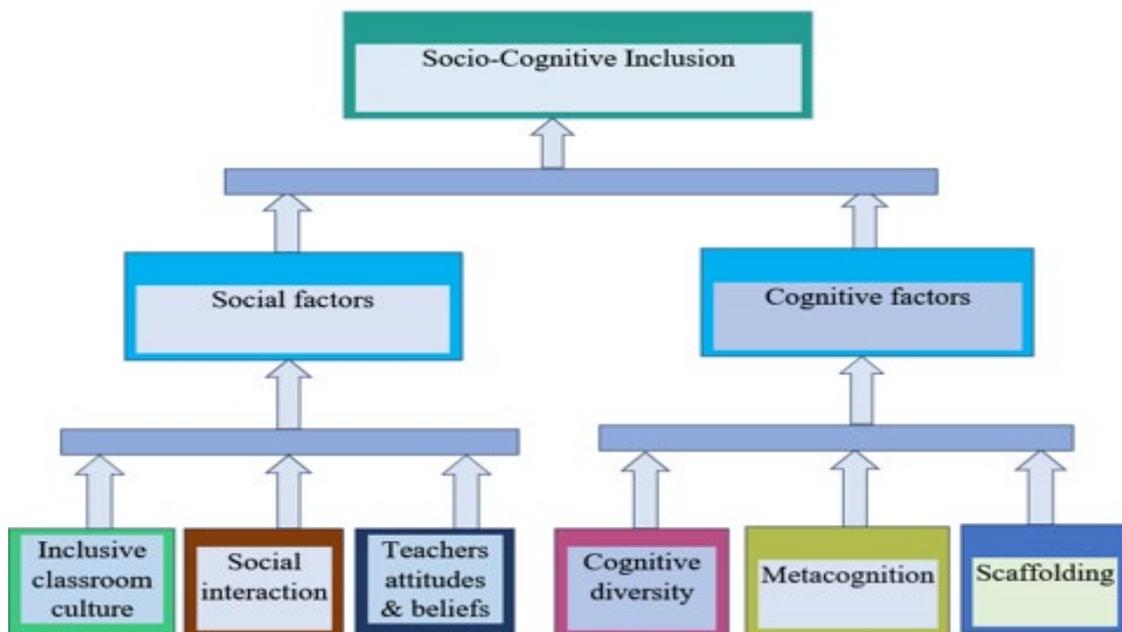


Figure 1 Social-cognitive inclusion model (Mathe, 2025)

The Social-Cognitive Inclusion (SCI) Model emphasises the important role of social factors like interpersonal relationships, cultural context, and collaboration in creating inclusive learning environments. Rooted in Vygotsky’s social constructivism, it highlights cultivating an inclusive classroom culture that respects learners’ diverse cultural backgrounds and actively involves them in shaping norms, fostering social interactions such as peer support and cooperative tasks to enhance engagement, and teacher attitudes, where openness to diversity and a growth mindset are key for adapting teaching methods. However, lack of confidence and

training in supporting learners with learning difficulties points to the need for ongoing professional development. On the cognitive side, the SCI Model addresses learners varied intellectual abilities by promoting differentiated teaching that accommodates cognitive diversity, encouraging metacognition to build learner autonomy, and using structured scaffolding to support learners' development. These strategies are especially needed in large Zimbabwean classrooms with limited resources, where scaffolded group work and peer support can help bridge gaps. Above all, the SCI Model links social and cognitive aspects grounded in constructivist theory, providing a practical, context-sensitive roadmap for teachers in Zimbabwe to implement teaching pedagogies that promote inclusivity. SCI highlights the importance of learner participation, reflective practices, scaffolded learning, and ongoing teacher development to translate inclusivity from policy into daily classroom practice.

Teacher Guide: Application of the SCI model

Guided by the SCI model, teachers are steered to designing lessons that promote inclusivity by preparing lessons that address diverse learner needs and adapting teaching methods based on learners' unique needs. Teachers must begin the lesson by setting clear learning objectives that integrate cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes, ensuring that all learners are meaningfully engaged. Lesson preparation should involve selecting accessible and culturally relevant materials that encourage hands-on participation and allow learners to express understanding in multiple ways. During lesson delivery, teachers apply scaffolding strategies, modelling tasks, provide guided practice, and gradually transfer responsibility to learners. The model encourages collaborative group work to promote peer interaction and shared learning experiences among learners of diverse abilities.

Furthermore, SCI encourages teachers to incorporate questioning techniques that stimulate metacognitive reflection, prompting learners to think about how they learn and what strategies support their understanding.

Above all, the SCI model highlights inclusivity as a dynamic approach in which teachers design learning environments that value diversity as a resource for collective growth and understanding. Teacher education programmes and policy frameworks should embed socially connected and cognitively engaging pedagogical approaches to strengthen inclusive practice and advance teachers' professional competence.

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