



The Role of Teacher Training in Enhancing Social-Emotional Learning in Inclusive Classrooms: Evidence from Primary Schools in Kongwa District, Tanzania

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Abstract: *The effectiveness of inclusive education relies significantly on teachers' ability to foster social-emotional learning (SEL) among pupils with diverse needs. This paper investigates how teacher training influences the implementation of SEL practices in inclusive primary school settings in Kongwa District, Tanzania. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews with teachers and head teachers, focus group discussions with pupils, and classroom observations. The findings reveal that teachers with prior training in inclusive education and SEL displayed greater confidence in employing participatory methods, creating emotionally safe environments, and managing classroom diversity. However, gaps in professional development and limited exposure to SEL frameworks constrained consistent practice. These findings recommend the need for targeted teacher training as a catalyst for effective SEL integration in inclusive classrooms.*

Keywords: *Conflict Resolution; Differentiated Instruction; Inclusive Education; Participatory Teaching; Peer Collaboration; Primary Schools; Social-Emotional Competencies; Social-Emotional Learning (SEL).*

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education aims to ensure that every child, regardless of ability or background, has equitable access to quality learning opportunities. Central to this goal is the development of social-emotional competencies skills essential for self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship-building. Teachers are key agents in promoting SEL, yet their capacity to do so is significantly influenced by their training and professional development. In low-resource settings such as Tanzania, where inclusive practices are still evolving, understanding the role of teacher training in SEL delivery is critical to informing educational policy and practice.

In Europe, inclusive education has been strongly shaped by legislative frameworks such as the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education guidelines, which emphasize both equity and participation. Many European countries, such as Finland and Italy, have embedded SEL in their national curricula, supported by comprehensive teacher preparation programs that integrate inclusive pedagogies and social-emotional learning principles.

However, disparities still exist between Western and Eastern Europe, with the latter often facing challenges related to funding, teacher shortages, and inadequate resources for effective implementation. Integrations gaps, the European model demonstrates that when governments invest in teacher training and systemic support, SEL

integration in inclusive classrooms can be both effective and sustainable.

In the United States and other parts of the Americas, SEL has gained significant policy recognition, particularly through frameworks such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). School systems in states like Illinois, New York, and California have adopted SEL standards alongside inclusive education mandates, equipping teachers with specific tools for fostering positive classroom climates. In Latin America, countries such as Chile and Brazil are increasingly adopting SEL-focused teacher training, though implementation often faces obstacles due to socio-economic inequalities and political instability. Overall, the Americas highlight the potential of clear policy frameworks combined with professional development to enhance both inclusivity and emotional literacy in schools.

Across Africa, inclusive education policies are gradually expanding, but teacher preparedness for SEL remains inconsistent. South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana have made notable strides in integrating SEL elements into teacher training, though limited resources, large class sizes, and cultural perceptions of disability continue to hinder progress. In Tanzania, the government's commitment to inclusive education is reflected in policies such as the Education and Training Policy (2014) and the Inclusive Education Strategy (2009–2017). However, many teachers enter the profession without sufficient training in SEL strategies, and professional development opportunities are often scarce. This gap makes it challenging to effectively address the diverse emotional and social needs of learners, underscoring the urgency of strengthening teacher training as a foundation for advancing inclusive education in the country.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although Tanzania's National Strategy for Inclusive Education (2021–2025) emphasizes the importance of teacher preparedness in fostering inclusive classrooms, a significant number of educators, particularly in rural districts lack adequate training in implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices. This limitation means that many pupils, especially those with disabilities or from marginalized backgrounds, are not receiving the emotional and social support necessary for their holistic growth.

The government has introduced several initiatives, including curriculum revisions that incorporate life skills education, guidelines for inclusive classroom management, and targeted teacher training programs through teacher colleges. These initiatives signal a strong commitment to inclusive education and the integration of SEL. However,

they have not been consistently implemented nationwide, and professional development opportunities are often irregular, brief, or theory-focused without sufficient practical application. This gap between policy and practice is most visible in rural areas such as Kongwa District, where teachers face large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and minimal access to specialized training. Consequently, SEL integration remains inconsistent, leaving pupils without the skills needed for effective communication, empathy, and problem-solving. This study addresses this gap by investigating how teacher training influences the delivery of SEL in inclusive primary school classrooms in Kongwa District.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Literature Review

A UNESCO (2022) cross-country study found that nations embedding SEL into teacher training such as Finland, Singapore, and Australia—reported improved classroom climates, reduced behavioral issues, and higher student cooperation. Regular in-service SEL training and teacher learning networks were key to these successes, indicating that sustained professional development is essential for impact. Where, the Americas, Larios and Zetlin (2023) observed in the United States that teachers with formal SEL training demonstrated more empathetic and inclusive approaches to managing student behavior, fostering collaboration, and promoting emotional literacy. In Brazil for example, Silva et al. (2021) reported that SEL-integrated pedagogy in inclusive classrooms significantly improved academic performance and peer acceptance among learners with disabilities, although socio-economic inequalities still posed challenges.

In Uganda, Mugisha (2021) found that SEL-focused professional development enhanced teachers' ability to create safe, supportive, and responsive classrooms, improving student engagement and peer relationships. However, sustainability was undermined by resource limitations and insufficient follow-up training. In Tanzania, Revelian and Tibategeza (2022) noted that many Tanzanian teachers, particularly in rural settings, remain unexposed to structured SEL frameworks, limiting their ability to integrate emotional learning into daily lessons. Mrema (2024) emphasized that although inclusive education policies exist, they are rarely supported by practical SEL training during pre-service education, leaving teachers underprepared to meet the diverse socio-emotional needs of learners.

2.2 Theoretical Review

This study is guided by Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, both of which emphasize the social nature of learning. Bandura's theory assumes that individuals acquire behaviors, values, and emotional responses through observation, imitation, and modeling. Its strength lies in showing how teachers, as key role models, can shape pupils' emotional and social skills by demonstrating empathy, cooperation, and self-regulation. Vygotsky's theory, on the other hand, posits that learning occurs within the "Zone of Proximal Development" through guided interaction with more knowledgeable others. It underscores the importance of collaboration, dialogue, and scaffolding in fostering both cognitive and emotional growth. In the context of inclusive classrooms, these theories collectively highlight the importance of teacher-facilitated modeling and peer interaction in promoting SEL.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory further enriches this framework by situating SEL within interconnected layers of influence, from the immediate classroom environment to broader cultural and policy contexts. Its core assumption is that a learner's development is shaped by interactions across multiple systems, the microsystem (classroom), mesosystem (school-community relationships), exosystem (policy), and macrosystem (societal values). The theory's strength lies in recognizing that teacher practices alone cannot fully account for SEL outcomes without supportive institutional and societal structures. For Tanzania's inclusive education context, this means that effective SEL delivery depends not only on teacher training but also on the alignment of policies, resources, and community attitudes to create a holistic support system for learners.

2.3 The Objective of the paper

This paper aimed to investigate how teacher training influences the implementation of SEL practices in inclusive primary school settings in Kongwa District, Tanzania.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative study adopted an exploratory case study design, which was well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena in their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). The exploratory case study approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the nature of pupils' social-emotional

competencies within inclusive classrooms in Kongwa District. This design enabled the researcher to gather rich, descriptive data from multiple sources, including interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document reviews. The study was conducted in three public primary schools in Kongwa District.

3.2 Sampling and Sample Size

This study employed purposive sampling to identify participants who were directly involved in the implementation of inclusive education and Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Purposive sampling was appropriate because it allowed the selection of individuals with rich knowledge and practical experience in inclusive classroom practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The sample comprised nine participants: six class teachers and three head teachers from three inclusive primary schools in Kongwa District. In addition, six classroom sessions were observed to capture lived classroom dynamics. This sample size was considered adequate because qualitative research emphasizes depth of information rather than breadth, and smaller samples can provide sufficient insights when data are collected from multiple sources (Patton, 2015).

3.3 Data Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six class teachers and three head teachers and classroom observations in six classrooms. Thematic analysis was used following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the University, Dodoma Region Authority, Kongwa District Education Office and the head teachers of the selected schools. All participants were briefed about the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from teachers and head teachers, while verbal assent was sought from pupils during focus group discussions, with the approval of school authorities.

To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and observation notes. Data was stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers. Ethical guidelines for conducting educational research, as outlined by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011), were adhered to,

ensuring respect, beneficence, and justice in all interactions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Improved Social Emotional Learning Competence

Teachers who had undergone training in inclusive education and SEL demonstrated a stronger command of strategies such as emotional check-ins, peer mediation, and differentiated instruction. Classroom observations showed that these teachers greeted pupils warmly, incorporated emotional vocabulary into lessons, and monitored group dynamics to ensure inclusion. In contrast, untrained teachers were more likely to react to misbehavior with punitive measures, and their classrooms showed lower engagement and collaboration.

One head teacher explained:

“Trained teachers are more confident in handling emotional outbursts or behavioral challenges. They use dialogue rather than punishment, which calms the situation faster.” (Interview with a head teacher in school C, April 2025).

A class teacher explained:

“Without the training, I wouldn’t know how to handle a pupil with anxiety or who withdraws during group work. Training taught me to recognize the signs early and respond before the problem grows.” (Interview with a teacher in school A, April 2025).

This means that, the in-service training helps teachers in handling their classes. These findings echo CASEL (2020), which positions professional learning as a cornerstone of SEL integration, and align with Jones and Kahn (2022), who found that trained teachers exhibit greater adaptability and responsiveness in diverse classrooms.

4.2 Creation of emotionally safe classrooms

The finding in this paper indicated that the teachers training helps in the creation of emotionally safe classrooms, where pupils felt valued and supported. Observation notes indicated that trained teachers used inclusive seating arrangements, encouraged peer compliments, and intervened constructively during conflicts. Pupils were

more willing to share personal experiences and seek help in such environments. During interviews:

A head teacher of school B emphasized:

“When the classroom feels safe, pupils open up. They tell the teacher when something is wrong at home or in the playground, and that helps us respond better.” (Interview with a head teacher in school B, April 2025).

A trained teacher added:

“I learned to create routines that make pupils feel secure, like morning greetings and check-ins. It’s simple but powerful in building trust.” (Interview with a teacher in school A, April 2025).

The quotes and the observed behaviors during classes revealed the importance of teacher training in the inclusive schools. These results mirror Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2021), who reported that emotionally supportive classrooms enhance student engagement, and Graham et al. (2023), who highlighted that emotional safety fosters stronger peer relationships in inclusive settings.

4.3 Improve adaptation and differentiation

The paper disclosed that teachers with SEL training were more adept at tailoring instruction to meet varied learner needs, using visual aids, simplified instructions, and cooperative tasks. Observation records showed that such adaptations helped reduce frustration for pupils with learning difficulties and increased participation among shy or anxious students. This was also evident during interviews with teachers and head teachers.

One teacher explained:

“If I notice a pupil struggling to keep up, I adjust the activity without making them feel singled out. Training taught me to think on my feet.” (Interview with a teacher in school C, April 2025).

A head teacher from school A observed:

“Differentiation used to mean just giving extra work to fast learners. Now, trained teachers modify lessons so everyone can participate meaningfully.” (Interview with a head teacher in school A, April 2025).

This means that the teachers who were trained in emotional learning were able to use situational and environmentally appropriate techniques in classrooms. The findings correspond with Tomlinson (2021), who asserts that differentiated instruction enhances equity in diverse classrooms, and aligns with UNESCO (2022), which links teacher adaptation skills to better SEL outcomes in inclusive education contexts.

4.4 Geared peer relationships and collaborative learning

The finding discovered that SEL-trained teachers actively fostered cooperative learning, pairing pupils strategically to encourage peer support and empathy. Observation data showed that pupils in these classrooms helped each other more frequently and resolved disputes with minimal teacher intervention.

A teacher from school B explained:

“I teach pupils to use words like ‘I feel’ instead of blaming each other. It’s amazing how quickly they start solving their own disagreements.” (Interview with a teacher in school B, April 2025).

A head teacher from school C spearheaded the view:

“In trained teachers’ classes, pupils form strong bonds. They look out for each other, even outside the classroom.” (Interview with a head teacher in school C, April 2025).

The quotes from respondents stress the importance of social and collaborative skills developed by teachers through trainings in facilitating learning of SEL in inclusive schools. The findings are consistent with Wentzel (2020), who found that structured peer collaboration improves conflict resolution skills, and align with Silva et al. (2021), who observed that SEL-based cooperative learning enhances empathy in inclusive classrooms.

4.5 Policy Alignment and Resource Gaps

Moreover, the findings from this paper revealed that, while national policies such as Tanzania’s *Education and Training Policy* (ETP, 2023) emphasize SEL integration, there is lack of resources and uneven training access hinders implementation. During classroom observations it was indicated that even trained teachers struggled when lacking teaching aid or support staff. This policy-practice gap limits the scalability of successful strategies observed in some classrooms.

A head teacher from school C explained:

“Policies look good on paper, but without enough training sessions and resources, teachers can’t apply what’s expected.” (Interview with a head teacher in school C, April 2025).

A teacher from school B had stressed the limited resources:

“I have the skills from training, but without visual aids or time for small group work, it’s hard to put everything into practice.” (Interview with a head teacher in school C, April 2025).

The quotes indicate that respondents were anxious about implementing the policies on inclusive classrooms without enough training and resources to support it. These findings are supported by that of Oduor (2022), who documented resource shortages as a barrier to SEL in Kenyan schools, and align with Mrema (2024), who emphasized that without adequate implementation support, Tanzanian inclusive education policies remain aspirational rather than practical.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that teacher training is a decisive factor in the successful integration of SEL within inclusive classrooms. Teachers equipped with relevant knowledge and skills create emotionally safe environments, adapt instruction for diverse learners, and promote positive peer relationships. These practices directly contribute to pupils’ emotional resilience, empathy, and collaboration skills. However, inconsistencies in training access, coupled with resource shortages, limit the full realization of policy goals. Addressing these gaps requires sustained investment in professional development and the provision of adequate teaching resources to ensure that SEL practices are effectively embedded in Tanzania’s inclusive education system.

5.2 Recommendations

From the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Ministry of Education should scale up in-service SEL training for both general and special education teachers.
2. The government should ensure that Pre-service teacher education programs should integrate SEL

as a core module aligned with inclusive education principles.

3. Heads of schools should ensure that, Continuous professional development should include mentorship and coaching to support the implementation of SEL in real classrooms.
4. Further research should investigate the long-term impact of SEL training on pupil outcomes in different regions of Tanzania.

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