



The Teacher Competence Question and Learning Possibilities of Children with Special Needs in Uganda

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Abstract: *The academic success of children with disabilities remains a critical concern in achieving inclusive and equitable quality education worldwide. Teacher competence in Special Needs Education (SNE) plays a pivotal role in facilitating effective learning experiences and improving educational outcomes for learners with disabilities. This study examined the influence of teacher competence in Special Needs Education on the academic success of children with disabilities in Mukono District, Uganda. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data were collected from teachers, head teachers, Special Needs Education coordinators, and learners through structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Findings indicated that teachers with specialized knowledge and skills in Special Needs Education were more effective in adapting instructional materials, implementing inclusive pedagogical strategies, and supporting learners with diverse educational needs. Children with disabilities taught by more competent teachers demonstrated higher academic achievement, improved classroom participation, better attendance, and greater learning engagement. The study concludes that teacher competence is a key determinant of academic success among children with disabilities and recommends strengthening pre-service and in-service teacher education, expanding continuous professional development programmes, and increasing investment in inclusive education resources and assistive technologies.*

Keywords: *teacher competence, Special needs education, Inclusive education, Academic success, Children with disabilities, Mukono District*

How to cite this work (APA):

Mbuga, S. (2026). The Teacher Competence Question and Learning Possibilities of Children with Special Needs in Uganda. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, 10(3), 392 – 399. <https://doi.org/10.59765/jlkd5>

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a global educational priority aimed at ensuring that all learners, regardless of disability, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, have equitable access to quality education. The principle of inclusion is embedded within Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all

(UNESCO, 2020). Inclusive education seeks not merely to increase school enrolment but also to ensure meaningful participation, equitable learning opportunities, and successful educational outcomes for every learner (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

Globally, increasing attention has been devoted to strengthening inclusive education systems through policy reforms, teacher preparation, curriculum adaptation, and

improved school infrastructure. Nevertheless, children with disabilities continue to experience lower educational attainment than their peers because of barriers such as inadequate instructional support, inaccessible learning environments, limited assistive technologies, and insufficient teacher preparedness (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2018; UNICEF, 2020). Research consistently identifies teacher competence as one of the strongest school-based determinants of learner achievement within inclusive classrooms (Forlin, 2022; Angrist & Lavy, 2001).

Recent Ugandan research published in the *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education (JRIIE)* similarly indicates that teacher-learner educational interventions are associated with improved academic performance and reduced classroom exclusion among children with disabilities (Ahereza et al., 2026). Furthermore, related assessments point to a shortage of structured training pathways for teachers, prompting calls for a comprehensive National Teacher Policy that would standardize entry into the profession, continuous professional development (CPD), and codes of conduct (Budget Monitoring and Accountability Unit [BMAU], 2018).

In Uganda, the Government has adopted policies promoting inclusive education through the Ministry of Education and Sports' Guidelines for Inclusive Education and broader educational reforms aimed at expanding access for learners with disabilities (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2019). Despite these policy initiatives, implementation gaps remain evident across many mainstream schools. Studies have reported shortages of trained Special Needs Education teachers, inadequate instructional materials, limited assistive technologies, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient professional development opportunities for teachers (Ojok & Wormnæs, 2013; UNICEF, 2020; Schools2030, 2024).

Teacher competence in Special Needs Education extends beyond mastery of subject content to encompass specialized knowledge, pedagogical skills, positive attitudes, professional values, classroom management, curriculum differentiation, learner assessment, collaborative practice, and effective use of assistive technologies (Engelbrecht, 2013; Meese, 2022; Lucena-Rodríguez et al., 2025). Competent teachers are able to identify learners' diverse educational needs, modify instructional methods, adapt curricula, differentiate classroom activities, and create inclusive learning environments that promote learner participation and academic achievement (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Meyer et al., 2014).

Social Cognitive Theory holds that teachers' beliefs in their own professional capabilities influence instructional effectiveness and learner outcomes (Bandura, 1986). Similarly, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory underscores the importance of responsive instructional support, scaffolding, and collaborative learning in promoting

children's cognitive development, particularly among learners requiring additional educational support (Vygotsky, 1978). Together, these perspectives suggest that teacher competence is fundamental to successful inclusive education.

Mukono District has experienced increasing enrolment of children with disabilities in mainstream primary schools, reflecting national efforts to promote educational inclusion. However, concerns remain regarding teachers' preparedness to address the diverse learning needs of these learners. Previous Ugandan studies have documented challenges relating to teacher attitudes, limited professional preparation, inadequate instructional resources, and inconsistent implementation of inclusive education practices (Ojok & Wormnæs, 2013; Muhamad & Rajab, 2025). Such challenges may negatively affect the academic success and educational participation of children with disabilities.

Although previous research has examined inclusive education implementation in Uganda, limited empirical evidence specifically investigates how teacher competence influences the academic success of children with disabilities in Mukono District. Addressing this gap is essential for informing teacher education, educational policy, and school-based interventions aimed at improving inclusive education outcomes. This study therefore examined the influence of teacher competence in Special Needs Education on the academic success of children with disabilities in Mukono District, Uganda.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Competence in Special Needs Education

Teacher competence refers to the professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, attitudes, values, and instructional abilities that enable teachers to facilitate effective learning among learners with diverse educational needs (Engelbrecht, 2013; Meese, 2022). Within Special Needs Education (SNE), competence extends beyond mastery of subject content to include disability awareness, curriculum differentiation, classroom management, learner assessment, behaviour support, collaborative practice, and effective use of assistive technologies (Meyer et al., 2014; Randiki, 2020; Lucena-Rodríguez et al., 2025). Peer-reviewed studies suggest that teachers' baseline competence strongly shapes student progress, and that without structured training, teachers struggle to establish effective social-emotional support in inclusive classrooms (Victor & Otieno, 2025). Inclusive education literature consistently identifies teacher competence as one of the strongest determinants of successful inclusive education implementation (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow & Miles, 2008; UNESCO, 2020).

However, teacher education systems in many contexts

continue to over-emphasize rigid grade-level curricula rather than how children learn or how different impairments interact with the learning environment (International Disability Alliance [IDA], 2020). Meaningful reform requires that pre-service and in-service training focus on student-centred practice, treat disability as a natural facet of human diversity, and equip general education staff to manage multiple forms of learner diversity at once (IDA, 2020). In Uganda, teacher preparedness for inclusive education remains uneven despite national policy commitments. Ojok and Wormnæs (2013) found that although many teachers expressed positive attitudes toward inclusion, limited professional preparation constrained their ability to teach learners with intellectual disabilities effectively. Muhamad and Rajab (2025) similarly found that inadequate teacher preparation remains a major barrier to implementing inclusive education policy in Central Uganda. This is compounded by the persistence of formalistic, teacher-centred pedagogies across Sub-Saharan Africa (Schweisfurth, 2011; African Community-Based Rehabilitation Network [AFRI-CAN], 2017). While rigid, non-adaptive teaching styles remain common in many contexts (Miyazaki, 2016), emerging models in East Africa show that blending teacher-led structures with peer-learning groups and collaborative learning can support more effective classrooms in collectivist school settings (Hardman et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2017; AFRI-CAN, 2017).

2.2 Academic Success of Children with Disabilities

Academic success refers to the extent to which learners achieve intended educational outcomes through academic performance, classroom participation, school attendance, progression, acquisition of knowledge and skills, learner engagement, and successful completion of educational programmes (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). Within inclusive settings, academic success also encompasses equitable participation, social inclusion, learner confidence, and opportunities for independent learning. Children with disabilities frequently encounter multiple barriers that limit their academic achievement, including inaccessible school infrastructure, inadequate instructional materials, insufficient assistive technologies, overcrowded classrooms, negative societal attitudes, and inadequate teacher competence (Jewell, 2019; UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Curriculum differentiation and learner-centred instruction have emerged as important strategies for improving academic success among learners with disabilities. Differentiated instructional approaches have been found to significantly improve learner engagement and academic participation among children with disabilities in Ugandan schools [citation pending author verification — see note]. Etsey (2019) reported that the availability and effective use of teaching and learning materials positively influenced learner achievement, while Randiki (2020) emphasized the role of assistive technologies in supporting educational

participation and independent learning. Related JRIIE-based research on teacher-learner interventions similarly reports improved learner outcomes where teachers implement specific classroom accommodations, though resource shortages in rural areas continue to limit these interventions (Ahereza et al., 2026).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided primarily by Inclusive Education Theory, which advocates educational systems capable of responding to learner diversity by removing barriers to participation and learning (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow & Miles, 2008). The theory holds that educational success depends not on learners adapting to existing school systems, but on schools adapting their instructional practices, curricula, assessment procedures, and learning environments to accommodate all learners.

The study is further informed by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which holds that learning occurs through social interaction, guided instruction, and scaffolding within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). For learners with disabilities, effective teacher support and differentiated instruction facilitate cognitive development and meaningful participation in classroom learning.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a further conceptual foundation, advocating flexible instructional methods and multiple means of engagement, representation, and learner expression to accommodate learner diversity (Meyer et al., 2014). Incorporating UDL principles into pre-service and in-service training helps teachers build instruction around student strengths rather than relying primarily on remediation (IDA, 2020).

2.4 Research Gap

Although considerable research has examined inclusive education implementation in Uganda, limited empirical evidence specifically investigates the relationship between teacher competence in Special Needs Education and the academic success of children with disabilities in Mukono District. This study contributes context-specific evidence to inform educational policy and teacher professional development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This concurrent mixed-methods design was selected to allow triangulation of data sources, providing a more complete understanding of how teacher competence relates to learner outcomes in mainstream schools.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The study was conducted across 14 inclusive primary schools in Mukono District, Uganda. The target population included classroom teachers, head teachers, institutional Special Needs Education (SNE) coordinators, and children with diverse disabilities. The total sample size comprised 168 participants, including 120 classroom teachers, 14 head teachers, 14 institutional SNE coordinators, and 20 learners with diverse disabilities selected for qualitative tracking. Stratified random sampling was used to group teachers based on their professional training status, supplemented by simple random sampling within strata to reduce selection bias. Out of 120 distributed questionnaires, 114 fully completed forms were returned, yielding a response rate of 95%.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires distributed to teaching staff. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured key informant interviews with administrative personnel, classroom observations, and document analysis of school records and instructional materials.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) and inferential statistics (correlation and linear regression analysis) to examine the relationship between teacher competence and the academic success of children with disabilities. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, involving familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, introductory letters were obtained from Victoria University, Kampala, and presented to the Mukono District Education Office and participating head teachers to secure permission to conduct the study. Questionnaires were self-administered to teachers on-site and collected on the same day where possible, while key informant interviews were scheduled at times convenient

to respondents and audio-recorded with permission. Classroom observations and document analysis were carried out over a period of eight weeks in March–April 2026. Two research assistants trained in the study instruments supported data collection to ensure consistency across schools.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Victoria University, Kampala. Additional permission was sought from the Mukono District Education Office and from the administration of each participating school. All participants gave informed consent before taking part, and were briefed on the purpose of the study, their right to decline or withdraw at any stage without penalty, and the confidentiality of their responses. Where learners with disabilities were involved, assent was sought from the learners themselves in addition to consent from parents/guardians and head teachers acting in loco parentis. No names or other identifying information were recorded on questionnaires or interview transcripts; schools and respondents are referred to using anonymised codes in all study records and outputs.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings show substantial differences in day-to-day instructional practice between teachers with formal training or certification in Special Needs Education and those without specialized preparation. Within the sample, 42 teachers held formal qualifications or certifications in SNE, while 72 teachers lacked specialized institutional preparation. On a 5-point Likert scale evaluating instructional delivery, teachers with specialized competencies demonstrated significantly higher professional competence (Mean = 4.25, SD = 0.48) compared to their non-specialized peers (Mean = 2.80, SD = 0.61). Specialized teachers showed a greater capacity to differentiate instruction, adapt teaching and learning materials, modify assessments to match learners' needs, use learner-centred instructional approaches, provide individualized support, and foster inclusive classroom participation.

Table 1: Comparison of Teachers’ Instructional Competence by SNE Training Status

Teacher Group	n	Mean (Instructional Competence)	SD
SNE-trained/certified teachers	42	4.25	0.48
Non-specialized teachers	72	2.80	0.61

Note: Instructional competence rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate stronger self-/observer-rated

instructional competence.

Inferential analysis showed a strong, positive, and statistically significant association between teachers' level of professional competence and the academic success of children with disabilities ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 114$). Learners taught by more competent teachers showed higher academic achievement, more consistent classroom participation, better attendance, higher rates of assignment completion, and greater engagement. Linear regression

analysis indicated that teacher competence is a significant predictor of academic outcomes ($\beta = 0.68$, $t = 9.82$, $p < 0.001$), with the model yielding an adjusted R^2 of 0.456. This demonstrates that 45.6% of the variance in the academic success of learners with disabilities in Mukono District is explained by the professional competence level of their teachers.

Table 2: Linear Regression of Academic Success on Teacher Competence

Model Variable	Unstandardize d B	Std. Error	Standardized β	t-value	p-value
(Constant)	1.124	0.241	—	4.664	< 0.001
Teacher Competence	0.682	0.069	0.680	9.821	< 0.001

Note: $R = 0.680$; $R^2 = 0.462$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.456$; $F(1, 112) = 96.45$, $p < 0.001$

The qualitative data also identified persistent institutional barriers to implementation. Participants uniformly raised the lack of in-service training opportunities, a shortage of specialized instructional materials, limited functional assistive technologies, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate financial allocation. These systemic constraints appeared prominently in 12 out of the 14 key informant interviews (85.7%) conducted with school administrators and coordinators.

Discussion

These findings reinforce the role that teacher competence plays in shaping educational outcomes for children with disabilities. Teachers with specialized knowledge showed a stronger capacity to deliver differentiated instruction, build supportive learning environments, and respond to diverse learner needs with pedagogical flexibility. This is consistent with international and Ugandan scholarship indicating that the depth of a teacher's professional preparation is closely tied to learner participation and academic achievement in inclusive classrooms (Forlin, 2022; Ahereza et al., 2026). These findings also point to the importance of sustained continuous professional development to keep pace with evolving inclusive education practice.

At the same time, the study points to structural barriers that limit teacher effectiveness regardless of individual competence. Without adequate instructional tools, assistive technologies, manageable teacher-to-student ratios, and institutional support, even well-prepared teachers face real difficulty translating their training into consistent

classroom outcomes. As BMAU (2018) national assessments note, teacher effectiveness is closely tied to regional support services; without a functioning multi-stakeholder support system for teachers, learners, and parents, the goals of inclusive education policy are unlikely to be fully realized.

Institutional success also depends on school leadership that is genuinely committed to inclusive education (IDA, 2020). Teachers require support, motivation, and guidance from school leaders who understand the practical challenges of inclusive classrooms (IDA, 2020). Related JRIIE research on quality assurance in special needs education similarly finds that supervisory strategies such as collaborative lesson planning and ongoing instructional review support better outcomes for learners with special needs, though their consistent use is limited by low professional development budgets (Chiligati & Laiser, 2025).

The strength of the association found in this study ($r = 0.68$) is broadly consistent with Ojok and Wormnæs (2013), who similarly linked limited teacher preparation to constrained support for learners with intellectual disabilities in rural Uganda, and with Meese (2022), whose identification of core special-education competencies supports the view that specialized preparation, rather than general teaching experience alone, drives effective practice. It also converges with international evidence such as Angrist and Lavy (2001), who found that structured teacher training produced measurable, if comparatively modest, gains in general education settings; the larger association observed here may reflect the more acute baseline gap in specialized

SNE preparation in this context, where only 35% of sampled teachers (42 of 120) held formal SNE qualifications. The findings diverge somewhat from Ainscow and Miles (2008), who caution that teacher competence alone is insufficient without systemic reform of assessment, curricula, and school leadership; the present study supports this qualification, since the qualitative data point to structural and resource barriers that persisted even where individual teacher competence was high.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the cross-sectional design captures teacher competence and learner outcomes at a single point in time and cannot establish causal direction between the two. Second, the study was conducted within a single district (Mukono), which may limit the generalizability of findings to other parts of Uganda with different resource levels or school contexts. Third, data collected through self-administered questionnaires and interviews may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly where teachers or head teachers report on their own competence or practice. Future research using longitudinal designs and a broader, multi-district sample would help confirm and extend these findings.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Teacher competence in Special Needs Education is a critical factor in the academic success of children with disabilities in mainstream schools in Mukono District. Specialized professional knowledge enables teachers to implement inclusive pedagogical practices that support improvements in academic achievement, classroom participation, school attendance, and student engagement. Improving the quality of inclusive education, and meeting global commitments to equitable lifelong learning, depends substantially on the professional capacity of the classroom teacher. The systematic development of teacher competence should therefore be treated as a national educational priority.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy and institutional interventions are recommended:

1. The Government, through its regulatory bodies, should strengthen pre-service teacher education by integrating comprehensive Special Needs Education content into all foundational teacher preparation programmes, with mandatory baseline competencies for all graduating teachers. Teacher preparation should explicitly incorporate the principles of Universal Design for

Learning (UDL) and individualized instructional design (IDA, 2020).

2. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) should accelerate the operationalization of a unified National Teacher Policy to standardize entry into the profession, guide recruitment, ensure high-quality pre-service training, and enforce continuous professional development (CPD) frameworks focused on inclusive education (BMAU, 2018).
3. Mainstream inclusive schools should be provisioned with adequate instructional materials and assistive technologies to support learners with a range of physical or cognitive disabilities.
4. The Ministry of Education and Sports should strengthen field-level monitoring, supervision, and technical support to ensure consistent implementation of inclusive education guidelines.
5. Specialized SNE personnel should be recruited at scale and deployed to inclusive hubs to address instructional gaps and support general education staff. This should be accompanied by active recruitment of individuals with disabilities into teacher education programmes, with reasonable accommodations, so they can serve as professional role models within the education system (IDA, 2020).
6. The Government should introduce a dedicated, ring-fenced budget allocation for inclusive education operations and for adapting existing primary school infrastructure.

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