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Research Article

Proposed Training Program on Competency Needs and Challenges of Inclusion Assistants in Abu Dhabi

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the competency needs and challenges faced by Inclusion Assistants (IAs) supporting Students of Determination (SODs) in Abu Dhabi schools to inform the development of a tailored training program. Using a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design, data were collected via surveys and interviews from 100 IAs. Findings indicate most IAs (aged 26–29) lack formal training and advanced qualifications. Competency was rated highest in disability understanding (3.86), lesson plan modification (3.81), and empathy (3.83), but collaboration with teachers (2.84), communication (3.08), and assistive technology use (3.04–3.26) require improvement. Key professional development barriers include irrelevant content (3.91), poor applicability (3.93), and limited access (3.83). The study highlights the need for a context-specific training program to enhance collaboration, emotional intelligence, and technological skills, aiming to empower IAs and improve inclusive education outcomes for SODs in Abu Dhabi.

Keywords: Competency Needs, Challenges, Inclusion assistants

Background

Inclusive education—ensuring that all students, including those with special educational needs, have equal access to quality education—has become a central focus in many education systems worldwide. A key component of successful inclusive education is the presence of inclusion assistants: support personnel who work closely with students with special needs to help them integrate into mainstream classrooms. These assistants provide tailored academic and emotional support, helping bridge the gap between students' unique needs and the general classroom environment.

However, many countries continue to face significant challenges in ensuring that inclusion assistants are well-prepared for their roles. Globally, there is a lack of standardized training programs and certification systems, leading to wide variation in the skills and effectiveness of inclusion assistants. As a result, many are unable to fully meet the diverse and complex needs of the students they support (OECD, 2024).

Inclusion assistants are expected to master a wide range of competencies—from understanding various disabilities and managing behavior, to adapting instruction and fostering

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positive communication. Yet, in many contexts, especially in low-resource settings, inclusion assistants receive limited training and support. In addition to skill gaps, they often face heavy workloads, limited resources, and persistent societal stigma around disability, all of which hinder their ability to provide high-quality support (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024).

While these challenges are global, the Abu Dhabi charter school system presents its own distinct context. Charter schools in Abu Dhabi are tasked with fostering inclusive, multicultural learning environments and are required to accommodate students of determination (a term used in the UAE for students with disabilities). In this setting, the role of inclusion assistants becomes even more critical—not only in terms of educational support, but also in navigating cultural expectations, diverse languages, and local policy frameworks (Global Education Supplies and Solutions, 2025).

Despite the growing emphasis on inclusive education in Abu Dhabi, there remains limited research on the specific competency needs of inclusion assistants working in the region. Without such knowledge, it is difficult to design effective training programs or support systems tailored to their real-world challenges.

This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the demographic profiles, perceived competency needs, and challenges faced by inclusion assistants in Abu Dhabi charter schools. Based on these findings, the study proposes a targeted training program to enhance the capacity of inclusion assistants to support inclusive education effectively.

Methods

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in the study, including the research design, population and sampling techniques, instruments used, data gathering procedures, statistical treatments, and ethical considerations. The aim was to ensure the study's validity, reliability, and contextual relevance in exploring the competency needs and challenges of inclusion assistants in Abu Dhabi charter schools.

Quantitative Method

This study utilized a descriptive quantitative approach to gather data on the demographic profile and perceived competency needs of inclusion assistants in Abu Dhabi charter schools. A total of 100 inclusion assistants from 10 schools participated, selected through convenience sampling based on availability and willingness as approved by school administrators. Data were collected using a self-constructed and validated questionnaire, consisting of three parts: demographic information, competency needs, and challenges encountered. Content and face validity were ensured through expert review, and the instrument's reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha, with values of 0.70 and above deemed acceptable. The data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Weighted mean interpretations followed a non-linear scale to reflect natural clustering of responses and accurately prioritize areas for intervention.

Qualitative Method

To complement the quantitative findings, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 inclusion assistants, selected based on data saturation—the point at which no new themes emerged. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and virtually, guided by a 12-item question framework designed to elicit detailed responses about challenges faced in developing the competencies required for inclusive education. The interview data were manually transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, where emerging themes and subthemes were identified to deepen the understanding of contextual issues not captured through the survey. This qualitative component enriched the overall analysis by providing personal insights and practical examples that supported or expanded upon the quantitative results.

Result and Discussion

This chapter presents, analyzes and interprets all the gathered data to answer the research questions.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Inclusion Assistants (N = 100)

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage
Age	26–27	48	48%
	28–29	33	33%
	30–31	8	8%
	32–33	6	6%
	34–35	5	5%
Sex	Male	14	14%
	Female	86	86%
Years in Service	2–3 years	22	22%
	4–5 years	60	60%
	6–7 years	18	18%
Educational Attainment	College Graduate	100	100%
	Master's/Doctorate	0	0%
Relevant Trainings Attended	None/N/A	80	80%
	"I Forgot"	18	18%
	International Conference on Special Needs Education (2023)	2	2%

The demographic data from 100 Inclusion Assistant respondents in Abu Dhabi reveals that the majority are young professionals, with 81% aged between 26 and 29, indicating a youthful workforce in inclusive education. A striking 86% are female, reflecting global trends in care-oriented education sectors. Most respondents (60%) have 4–5 years of experience, suggesting a moderately seasoned group still in early to mid-career stages. All participants are college graduates, yet none have

pursued advanced degrees, highlighting a potential gap in academic progression. Notably, 80% reported no relevant training, while 18% could not recall past trainings and only 2% had attended a recognized international conference. This data underscores a pressing need for structured and accessible professional development opportunities tailored to the context of inclusion, particularly given the limited training exposure despite years of service.

Table 2. Existing Competency Needs and Challenges of Inclusion Assistants in Abu Dhabi Charter Schools

Category	Top Priority Area	Mean	Label
Knowledge Areas	Knowledge of laws, policies, and regulations related to inclusive education	3.88	High Need
	Understanding of various types of disabilities and learning difficulties	3.86	High Need
Practical Skills	Ability to modify lesson plans and instructional materials	3.81	High Need
	Understanding of students' strengths, interests, and areas for growth	3.79	High Need
Interpersonal Abilities	Awareness of cultural diversity and its impact on learning	3.92	High Need
	Ability to empathize with students' emotions and experiences	3.83	High Need
Challenges Faced	Skills learned in training are not always applicable in daily work	3.93	Very Problematic

Category	Top Priority Area	Mean	Label
	Relevance of current training programs to inclusion assistant roles	3.91	Very Problematic

The data reveals that inclusion assistants in Abu Dhabi charter schools face critical competency needs primarily in understanding relevant laws and regulations, as well as in-depth knowledge of various disabilities. Practically, they require stronger skills in modifying lesson plans and recognizing individual student strengths to effectively support diverse learners. Interpersonally, cultural awareness and empathy stand out as top priorities, reflecting

the diverse student population they serve. Concurrently, the greatest challenges revolve around the disconnect between training and daily work—training content often lacks direct applicability, and existing programs do not fully address their roles. These gaps highlight the urgent need for more relevant, practical, and culturally responsive professional development to empower inclusion assistants and improve inclusive education outcomes.

Table 3. Proposed Training Program

Item	Details
Proponent	Chrizza Mae Colorado
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Title	Comprehensive Training for Inclusion Assistants: Enhancing Competencies in Inclusive Education
Theme	Building Effective Competencies for Supporting Diverse Learners in Inclusive Education
Rationale	Equip inclusion assistants with legal knowledge, disability awareness, practical skills, behavior management, cultural sensitivity, and ongoing support to effectively assist diverse learners.
Objectives	1. Enhance awareness of inclusive laws2. Develop practical instructional skills3. Strengthen collaboration4. Improve cultural sensitivity5. Manage behavior6. Promote professional growth
Target Participants	50 Inclusion Assistants (10 male, 40 female)
Delivery Mode	Virtual (Zoom)
Implementation Dates	August 21, 23, 24, 2025
Key Training Topics	- Inclusive Education Laws and Policies- Adapting Instruction- Managing Behaviors & Peer Interaction- Cultural Sensitivity and Empathy- Assistive Technology- IEP Development and Implementation
Certification	Softcopy Certificate upon successful completion

Conclusion

The profile of inclusion assistants, mainly young, moderately experienced females lacking advanced training, underscores the urgent need for targeted professional development and more diverse recruitment policies. While they show strong knowledge and practical skills in supporting Students with Determination (SODs), there are clear gaps in communication, collaboration, assistive technology use, and social-emotional support that require focused training and hands-on practice.

Additionally, despite high cultural sensitivity, enhancing interpersonal skills and ensuring accessible, relevant professional development remain critical for improving inclusion assistants' effectiveness in diverse, inclusive classrooms.

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Lastly, the researcher acknowledges all authors and researchers whose works were referenced in this study. Their contributions laid the foundation and context upon which this research was built.

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