



Original Research

Professional competency for inclusive early childhood education among preschool teachers in Ambo town, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Professional competency is essential for inclusive early childhood education. Ethiopian preschool instructors' perceptions of their ability to accommodate different learners are unknown. The attitudes, knowledge, skill, and professional agency (AKSA) framework was used to assess preschool teachers' inclusive early childhood education competency. Preschool instructors in Ambo town were surveyed using a qualitative descriptive design. Data were collected through 14 semi-structured interviews and 11 preschool teacher focus group discussions (FGDs). Data collection continued until saturation, when no new topics emerged. The data were thematically evaluated. Participants in Ambo town had good attitudes regarding inclusion, although they were often conditional and lacked confidence in aiding disabled children. Teachers admitted to knowing little about disability, inclusive education, and assessment. Their teaching style was mostly broad, with little ability to adjust to varied learners. Professional agency was limited since instructors relied on external help and had little authority in inclusive education. The study found preschool teachers' professional ability in inclusive education to be weak in numerous areas. Inclusion in early childhood education requires better teacher training, professional development, and institutional support.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive early childhood education has emerged as a global educational priority to ensure equitable access, participation, and learning opportunities for all children, regardless of disability, developmental differences, socioeconomic background, language, gender, or other forms of diversity. International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) and the

Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) emphasize that inclusive education is both a human right and a fundamental strategy for promoting social justice and educational equity. Increasingly, countries are expected not only to expand access to early childhood education but also to ensure meaningful participation and learning for all children within inclusive settings.

In early childhood settings, inclusion is particularly important because the preschool years mark a critical developmental period when foundations for learning, social participation, communication, and identity formation are developed and strengthened for children with disabilities. Scholars consistently show that high-quality inclusive early childhood programs support children's cognitive, social, emotional, and academic development while fostering positive attitudes toward diversity among children with and without disabilities (Wang et al., 2026). However, the successful implementation of inclusive early childhood education depends significantly on teachers, who serve as the primary facilitators of children's learning experiences.

Preschool teacher professional competency has become a vital concern in inclusive early childhood education research, policy, and practice because teachers play a decisive role in ensuring meaningful participation and learning for diverse learners. Currently, competency frameworks conceptualize inclusive teacher competency as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond subject matter knowledge and instructional skills to include positive attitudes toward diversity, pedagogical knowledge, practical teaching skills, and professional agency (Luo & Li, 2024). These dimensions collectively influence preschool teachers' capacity to identify children's needs, adapt learning experiences, collaborate with families and multidisciplinary professionals, and create inclusive learning environments that support the participation and achievement of all preschoolers.

Although professional competency is widely recognized as fundamental to successful early childhood inclusion, evidence suggests that many preschool teachers still struggle to support diverse learners effectively. Studies have reported persistent challenges related to inadequate understanding of disability, limited knowledge of inclusive pedagogy, insufficient instructional adaptation skills, and constrained opportunities to exercise professional judgment in inclusive classrooms (UNESCO, 2020; Kebede & Phasha,

Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., July–Sep, 2026, 15(3), 56-87 2024). These challenges are particularly noticeable in developing countries, where educational systems often face resource shortages, limited specialist support, and insufficient professional development opportunities.

In Ethiopia, inclusive education has received increasing policy attention through educational reforms and strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing access, participation, and learning outcomes for children with disabilities and other marginalized groups (MoE, 2020). Despite these efforts, implementation challenges remain substantial, particularly in relation to teacher preparation and professional competency (Kebede & Phasha, 2024). The scholars specify that Ethiopian teachers often receive inadequate preparation in inclusive pedagogies, practical classroom adaptations, and disability-related knowledge needed to implement inclusive education effectively.

Nevertheless, the extent to which preschool teachers perceive themselves as professionally competent to implement inclusion remains insufficiently understood. Examining teachers' perspectives matters because professional competency is not only a technical attribute but also a socially constructed, context-dependent phenomenon shaped by educational, cultural, and institutional contexts. Understanding how preschool teachers describe their attitudes, knowledge, skills, and professional agency can provide valuable insights into the strengths and limitations of current inclusive early childhood education efforts and inform strategies for strengthening inclusive early childhood education practices (Kebede & Phasha, 2024).

The AKSA framework views inclusive professional competency as an integrated and interdependent system in which attitude, knowledge, skills, and agency operate together rather than as separate or independent elements. Each dimension plays a distinctive but interconnected role in shaping preschool teachers' ability to implement inclusive education effectively. These four dimensions are mutually reinforcing, meaning the strength of one depends

on the development of the others. For example, a preschool teacher may have strong theoretical knowledge of inclusive practices but still struggle to apply them if they lack supportive attitudes, practical teaching skills, or the confidence and authority to advocate for necessary adjustments. Similarly, positive attitudes alone are insufficient to ensure effective inclusive teaching without adequate knowledge and instructional competence. As a result, inclusive professional competency emerges through the continuous interaction and integration of all four components, enabling educators to respond effectively to diverse learner needs, make ethical and informed decisions, promote participation, and create inclusive and high-quality learning environments (Mu et al., 2015; Kebede & Phasha, 2024). This combined understanding aligns with current competency literature, which emphasizes that professional effectiveness arises from a combination of cognitive, behavioral, ethical, and transformative capacities rather than from any single dimension alone.

Attitude constitutes the ethical and value-based foundation of inclusive professional competency because it shapes preschool teachers' beliefs, dispositions, motivations, ethical commitments, and willingness to embrace learner diversity as an appreciated educational resource rather than a challenge to be managed. In inclusive preschool education, having positive attitudes impacts whether teachers genuinely believe that every learner, regardless of disability, gender, language, culture, or socioeconomic background, has the right and the capacity to learn and succeed in an equitable learning environment (Batt et al., 2024). Unlike knowledge and skills, which primarily address what preschool teachers know and can do, attitude reflects the values and professional dispositions that guide instructional decisions and interactions with preschoolers. Research consistently demonstrates that teachers' attitudes significantly influence the successful implementation of inclusive education because classroom practices are shaped not only by professional knowledge but also by educators'

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beliefs about diversity, disability, equity, and social justice (Batt et al., 2024). Positive attitudes foster empathy, respect for diversity, collaboration, accountability, professional ethics, reflective practice, and commitment to lifelong learning, thereby encouraging teachers to remove barriers to participation and create supportive learning environments for all students. Conversely, negative attitudes may lead to low expectations, resistance to instructional adaptations, and ineffective implementation of inclusive policies despite adequate knowledge or institutional support. Therefore, attitude serves as the motivational engine that transforms technical competence into meaningful inclusive practice by inspiring educators to apply their knowledge and skills ethically, equitably, and consistently. This perspective aligns with competency theory, which recognizes that effective professional performance is grounded not only in technical expertise but also in the values, behaviors, and dispositions that guide professional practice (Mu et al., 2015; Kebede & Phasha, 2024). Consequently, commitment to equity, respect for diversity, professional ethics, empathy, collaboration, accountability, reflective practice, and lifelong learning should be regarded as essential components of educators' attitudes and indispensable elements of inclusive professional competency.

Knowledge forms the intellectual basis of inclusive professional competency, as it equips preschool teachers with the theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, legal understanding, and pedagogical principles required to create, implement, and assess inclusive learning environments. Within inclusive education, this knowledge goes beyond mastery of subject content and includes a broad understanding of inclusive education philosophy, disability studies, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, assessment accommodations, education policies and legislation, child development, multicultural education, classroom diversity, and research-based teaching strategies (Vasianovych et al., 2020). This

knowledge helps preschool teachers better understand differences among preschoolers, recognize barriers to participation in play and achievement, and make informed decisions that support equity and inclusion for all preschoolers. However, knowledge alone is not sufficient to ensure professional competence, as competency frameworks emphasize that theoretical understanding must be applied effectively through appropriate skills, professional attitudes, and sound judgment in practice. In this sense, knowledge serves as the cognitive foundation for lesson planning, curriculum modification, assessment design, and evidence-informed teaching in inclusive classrooms. Moreover, educators with strong knowledge not only understand what inclusive practices are but also why they are necessary from pedagogical, ethical, and legal perspectives, which strengthens their ability to implement inclusion with confidence and responsibility (Mu et al., 2015; Kebede & Phasha, 2024). Therefore, elements such as inclusive pedagogy, educational policy, learning theories, disability legislation, curriculum adaptation, assessment principles, child development, and educational research collectively define the knowledge dimension, as they provide educators with the essential conceptual tools needed to address learner diversity and promote high-quality inclusive education effectively.

Skills constitute the practical, performance-oriented dimension of inclusive professional competency, allowing educators to apply theoretical knowledge in effective, adaptive, and contextually appropriate classroom practice (Kebede & Phasha, 2024; Luo & Li, 2024). While knowledge provides the conceptual foundation of inclusive education, skills determine how successfully teachers can implement these concepts in real instructional settings. Inclusive education demands a wide range of integrated professional abilities, such as differentiated instruction, curriculum adaptation, collaborative teaching, classroom management, clear communication, the use of assistive technologies, formative assessment, problem-solving, conflict

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resolution, and leadership (Mu et al., 2015; Kebede & Phasha, 2024). These competencies enable teachers to address learner diversity effectively, adjust teaching strategies to individual needs, support active participation, and establish learning environments that are inclusive, accessible, and supportive. Competency research consistently highlights that professional competence is demonstrated through observable performance rather than theoretical understanding alone, making skills the practical expression of professional capability. From this perspective, skills serve as the mechanism through which inclusive education is implemented, enabling educators to integrate evidence-based knowledge and inclusive values into daily teaching practice. Key elements of this dimension include instructional adaptation, communication, collaboration, assessment literacy, digital competence, leadership, critical thinking, and classroom management, all of which support responsive decision-making and effective engagement with diverse learners and stakeholders. Consequently, within the AKSA framework, skills function as the essential link between knowledge and educational outcomes by converting conceptual understanding into meaningful, learner-centered, and inclusive professional practice.

Agency is the most advanced dimension of inclusive professional competency, as it reflects educators' ability to act purposefully, independently, and ethically in shaping inclusive educational practice (Batt et al., 2024). Unlike knowledge, which provides conceptual understanding, and skills, which enable practical execution, agency focuses on the educator's capacity to make informed professional decisions, initiate improvement, respond to complex challenges, and actively advocate for learners who may be at risk of exclusion (Mu, 2021). In preschool settings, teachers often work in diverse, resource-limited classrooms with irregular demands, where planned methods alone are insufficient. In such contexts, agency allows educators to go beyond procedural compliance and

engage in reflective, innovative, and context-responsive practice. It includes elements such as professional autonomy, critical decision-making, leadership in instructional practice, advocacy for equity, adaptability to changing conditions, resilience in challenging situations, accountability for learner outcomes, and engagement in continuous professional development. Contemporary competency literature increasingly highlights that effective professionals are not only those who demonstrate routine competence but those who can adapt, learn, and exercise judgment in evolving environments (Mu, 2021; Wang et al., 2017). Similarly, Batt et al. (2024) emphasize that agency is essential for sustaining meaningful professional performance over time. Within the AKSA framework, agency therefore integrates attitude, knowledge, and skills into purposeful action, enabling preschool teachers to function as reflective practitioners and active change agents who contribute to inclusive preschool cultures, reduce barriers to learning and development, and promote equitable educational and developmental opportunities for all children.

Inclusive professional competency refers to educators' integrated capacity to mobilize appropriate attitudes, knowledge, skills, and agency to design, implement, evaluate, and continuously improve equitable learning environments that promote the meaningful participation, achievement, and well-being of all learners, regardless of their diverse characteristics. This multidimensional conception of competency extends beyond what educators know and can do to include the ethical values they uphold, the professional judgments they make, and their capacity to lead and advocate for inclusive educational practices. In the Ethiopian context, although no single national preschool teacher competency framework exists, relevant competencies are embedded across key Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy and teacher education documents. Instruments such as the Education and Training Policy (MoE, 1994), the General Education Curriculum Framework (MoE, 2018), the Teacher Education Curriculum

Framework (MoE, 2020), the National Professional Standards for Teachers (MoE, 2012), and the Education Sector Development Program VI (MoE, 2020) collectively outline expected preschool teacher competencies in terms of professional knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practice.

These policy frameworks consistently emphasize that preschool teachers should demonstrate competence in child-centered and inclusive pedagogy, curriculum implementation, play-based learning, assessment of early learning, classroom management, communication, and the facilitation of children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development. They also promote competency-based teacher education that strengthens understanding of child development, professional ethics, reflective practice, and continuous professional learning. Accordingly, preschool teachers are expected not only to acquire theoretical knowledge but also to apply practical skills and professional dispositions that enable them to respond effectively to diverse learning needs through developmentally appropriate and inclusive approaches. These expectations align with contemporary competency-based education perspectives that integrate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practice to enhance the quality of early childhood education (MoE, 2010, 2018, 2020; Herut & Setlhako, 2024).

However, despite these policy intentions, the literature indicates persistent implementation gaps that hinder the development of fully competent preschool teachers in Ethiopia. Existing frameworks often provide broad and general teacher competency standards that are not sufficiently tailored to the specific demands of early childhood education. In addition, challenges such as shortages of qualified preschool teachers, limited practical training opportunities, weak institutional capacity, inadequate professional support systems, resource constraints, and regional disparities continue to undermine effective implementation (Herut & Setlhako, 2024). These challenges suggest that the current preschool

teacher competency framework remains fragmented and largely policy-driven, underscoring the need for a comprehensive, context-specific framework that explicitly integrates attitudes, knowledge, skills, and agency as core dimensions of inclusive professional competency. Such a framework would strengthen teacher preparation, certification, professional development, and quality assurance, ultimately improving the quality and inclusiveness of early childhood education in Ethiopia.

Statement of the Problem

Increasing global commitment to inclusive education through international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), Sustainable Development Goal 4, and the Education 2030 Framework for Action (UN, 2015), ensuring meaningful participation and learning for all children remains a persistent challenge. The realization of inclusive education largely depends on teachers' professional competency; however, evidence from diverse educational contexts indicates that many teachers feel inadequately prepared to address learner diversity effectively (Kebede & Phasha, 2024). Teachers frequently report challenges related to understanding disability, adapting instruction, assessing diverse learners, and collaborating with families and support professionals (UNESCO, 2020; Luo & Li, 2024).

In Ethiopia, national policies increasingly advocate inclusive educational practices (MoE, 2012, 2018, 2020, 2022; Herut & Setlhako, 2024). However, inclusive education implementation remains uneven across educational settings. Previous studies have documented several challenges affecting inclusive education, including inadequate teacher preparation, shortages of instructional resources, limited specialist support services, and weak institutional mechanisms for supporting inclusion (Kebede & Phasha, 2024; Herut & Setlhako, 2025). Although these studies have provided valuable insights into the barriers to implementing inclusive education, comparatively little attention has been given to teachers'

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professional competency as a multidimensional construct that enables them to respond effectively to learner diversity.

Existing Ethiopian research has also tended to examine individual dimensions of teachers' competency, such as attitudes toward inclusion or disability-related knowledge, rather than examining professional competency as an integrated construct (Kebede & Phasha, 2024). Consequently, evidence remains limited on how preschool teachers understand and experience professional competency across interconnected dimensions of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and professional agency. Examining these dimensions together matters because effective inclusive practice requires more than positive attitudes or adequate knowledge alone; teachers also need the practical skills and professional agency to translate their beliefs and knowledge into inclusive actions within their specific educational contexts.

This gap matters especially in early childhood education, which lays the foundation for children's later educational experiences and can play a critical role in establishing inclusive learning trajectories and promoting positive developmental outcomes for children with disabilities. Preschool teachers work at an important stage of children's development and are often among the first education professionals to identify and respond to diverse learning needs. Their professional competency therefore affects not only classroom participation but also children's early experiences of belonging, engagement, and inclusion.

Although Ethiopian studies have examined various dimensions of teachers' competencies for inclusive education, much of the available evidence has focused on individual components or relied predominantly on quantitative approaches. These approaches provide important evidence about levels, relationships, or measurable characteristics of competency, but they offer less insight into how teachers describe, interpret, and experience competency in their everyday professional contexts. In particular, context-specific qualitative evidence from Ambo Town is limited regarding how preschool teachers

understand professional competency for inclusion as an interconnected construct involving attitudes, knowledge, skills, and professional agency. Understanding these perspectives matters because professional competency is shaped not only by teachers' individual characteristics but also by the institutional and contextual conditions in which they work, including professional preparation, access to resources and specialist support, workload, collaboration, and administrative support.

A qualitative descriptive research design is therefore appropriate for addressing this gap because it enables the study to provide a comprehensive and context-sensitive description of participants' perspectives and experiences in their own terms. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses or statistically examining relationships among variables, the qualitative descriptive approach allows the study to explore how preschool professionals describe the meaning, role, and challenges of professional competency for inclusive education across its interconnected dimensions. This approach is particularly useful for capturing participants' direct accounts of what they perceive as necessary for effective inclusive practice and the contextual factors that facilitate or constrain their professional competency.

The lack of context-specific evidence on preschool teachers' professional competency limits policymakers, teacher educators, and educational leaders' ability to develop interventions that effectively respond to the professional and contextual needs of early childhood teachers. Generating evidence from the perspectives of preschool professionals in Ambo Town can therefore contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions required to strengthen inclusive professional practice. Accordingly, this study sought to explore how preschool professionals in Ambo Town experience professional competency for inclusive early childhood education, with particular attention to the interconnected dimensions of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and professional agency, as well

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as the challenges that may facilitate or constrain their development and application.

Research questions

1. How do preschool teachers describe their attitudes toward inclusive early childhood education?
2. How do preschool teachers describe the knowledge they consider necessary for implementing inclusive early childhood education?
3. How do preschool teachers describe the skills they use to support inclusive early childhood education?
4. How do preschool teachers describe their professional agency in implementing inclusive early childhood education?
5. What measures do preschool teachers recognize as enhancing inclusive professional competency?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. Qualitative descriptive research is appropriate when researchers seek rich, straightforward descriptions of participants' experiences and perceptions while staying close to their own words and meanings (Creswell, 2009). The design was selected to explore preschool teachers' perceptions of professional competency for inclusive early childhood education, with particular attention to the domains of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and professional agency.

Participants, Sampling, and Data Collection Tools

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These methods are well suited to qualitative descriptive studies because they facilitate detailed accounts of participants' experiences and viewpoints while allowing researchers to explore issues in depth (Creswell, 2009).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Selection criteria included experience

teaching diverse learners, direct interaction with children with disabilities, and willingness to participate in the study. The researchers sought to include participants from different preschool settings and with varying years of professional experience.

Eleven preschool professionals participated in one focus group discussion. The group consisted of one preschool expert from the town education bureau, three teachers from government preschools, three teachers from faith-based preschools, and four teachers from private preschools. The focus group discussion explored participants' views regarding the competencies required for effective inclusive preschool education.

Additionally, fourteen preschool teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, when no substantially new information emerged. The interviews explored participants' understandings of professional competency and the competencies they considered essential for supporting diverse learners in inclusive classrooms. No individual participated in both the FGD and the individual interviews. We treated the two groups as separate to obtain complementary qualitative evidence and to avoid repeated contributions from the same participant across the two data-collection methods. In this regard, the sample of preschool teachers is shown in [Tables 1 and 2](#).

Table 1

FGD Participants

No	Sex	Type of preschools	Educational Qualification	Field of study	Experience in years	Attachments with children with disabilities
1	M	Office (Ambo Town Education Office, the responsible personnel for ECE)	MA	Cooperative Management	16	Unable to specify the type of disability
2	M	Government	Diploma	Natural science	3	Problem in self-help skills
3	F	Government	Diploma	Social science	13	Problem in communication skills
4	F	Government	Degree	Biology	10	Deafness
5	M	Religion	Certificate	ECE	21	Spinal cord defect
6	F	Religion	Certificate	ECE	21	Unable to specify the type of disability
7	F	Religion	Certificate	ECE	17	Deafness
8	F	Private	Degree	Civics	8	Unable to specify the type of disability
9	F	Private	Diploma	SNIE	16	Unable to specify the type of disability
10	F	Private	Certificate	ECE	19	Developmental delay
11	F	Private	Diploma	Afan Oromo	23	Unable to specify the type of disability

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants included 11 preschool practitioners from diverse institutional settings, including government, private, religious, and education office-based preschools, ensuring variation in professional background and work context. Of the participants, four were male, and seven were female, reflecting the gender distribution commonly observed in early childhood education settings. In terms of educational qualifications, participants demonstrated heterogeneous academic backgrounds. Three participants held degrees, one had a master's degree, four possessed diplomas, and three had certificate-level qualifications. While several participants specialized in Early Childhood Education (ECE) or Special Needs and Inclusive Education (SNIE), others were trained in unrelated fields such as biology, natural science, social science, civics, Afan Oromo, and cooperative studies, indicating limited professional alignment between formal training and preschool teaching roles.

Participants' teaching experience ranged from 3 to 23 years, with the majority having more than 15 years of professional experience, suggesting substantial practical exposure to preschool education. This extensive experience provided rich insights into classroom realities and inclusive practices over time. Regarding exposure to inclusive education, several participants reported direct experience working with children with disabilities, including deafness, developmental delay, spinal cord defects, and communication difficulties. However, not all participants had such attachments; they were unsure of the disability type, indicating uneven practical experience with inclusion across preschool types.

Overall, the FGD composition reflects diverse professional trajectories, varying qualifications, and uneven exposure to inclusive practices, offering a comprehensive perspective on preschool teachers' competencies, challenges, and experiences in early childhood education.

Table 2

Interview Participants

No	Sex	Type of preschools	Educational Qualification	Field of study	Experience in years	Attachments with children with disabilities
1	F	Government	Diploma	Social sciences	4	Hearing difficulty
2	F	Government	Degree	Afan Oromo	13	Unable to specify the type of disability
3	F	Government	Diploma	SNIE	10	Low Vision
4	M	Government	Diploma	ECE	2	Unable to specify the type of disability
5	F	Government	Degree	SNIE	8	Deafness
6	F	Private	Certificate	ECE	16	Unable to specify the type of disability
7	M	Private	Certificate	ECE	21	Unable to specify the type of disability
8	F	Private	Certificate	ECE	11	Problem in verbal skill

Table 2 continues.

9	F	Private	Diploma	Natural Sciences	6	Unable to specify the type of disability
10	F	Religion	Diploma	Natural Sciences	15	Unable to specify the type of disability
11	M	Religion	Certificate	ECE	18	Hearing impairment
12	F	Religion	Diploma	Art	14	Unable to specify the type of disability
13	F	Religion	Certificate	ECE	20	Unable to specify the type of disability
14	F	Religion	Certificate	ECE	8	Unable to specify the type of disability

The interview participants comprised 14 preschool practitioners representing government, private, and religious preschools, ensuring diversity in institutional context. Of the participants, 11 were female, and 3 were male, reflecting the predominantly female composition of the early childhood education workforce. Participants' educational qualifications varied considerably. Five participants held diploma-level qualifications, two had degree-level qualifications, and seven possessed certificate-level training. While several participants specialized in Early Childhood Education (ECE) or Special Needs and Inclusive Education (SNIE), others were trained in Afan Oromo, social sciences, natural sciences, and art, indicating diverse academic preparation and varying alignment with inclusive early childhood education.

Participants' professional experience ranged from 2 to 21 years, with most having more than 10 years of teaching experience. This breadth of experience enabled participants to provide both early-career and veteran perspectives on preschool teaching and inclusion. In relation to inclusive practice, a number of interviewees reported direct teaching experience with children with disabilities, including hearing difficulties, deafness, low vision, and challenges in verbal communication. However, several participants were unsure about the type of difficulty in the child and their formal experience working with children with disabilities, suggesting irregular exposure to inclusive education across preschool settings.

Overall, the interview sample reflects heterogeneity in qualifications, experience, and exposure to disability, providing rich, contextually grounded insights into preschool teachers' professional competencies, challenges, and practices related to Inclusive Early Childhood Education.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the town education bureau. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Oral informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data collection was conducted at preschool sites at times convenient for participants. The focus group discussion lasted approximately three hours, while individual interviews averaged two hours. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to discuss their perceptions and experiences regarding professional competency in inclusive early childhood education.

Data Analysis

Data from the 14 individual semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion (FGD) involving 11 participants were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. The analysis was conducted systematically to ensure that the findings remained grounded in participants' accounts and directly addressed the research questions. All interviews and the FGD were audio-

recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed repeatedly to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data.

The analysis proceeded through several iterative stages. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the interview and FGD transcripts and reviewing participants' descriptions, experiences, and views regarding professional competency for inclusive early childhood education. Second, initial codes were generated inductively from meaningful statements and segments of the data. The research questions guided coding but did not impose predetermined themes; instead, codes emerged from participants' accounts of their experiences.

Third, the researchers compared, grouped, and organized codes with similar meanings into broader categories across both individual interview and FGD data. The researchers examined similarities, differences, and recurring patterns within and across the two data sources. Fourth, the researchers progressively organized related categories into candidate themes and sub-themes through an iterative process of comparison and interpretation. Fifth, the candidate themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the original transcripts to assess their coherence, distinctiveness, and adequacy in representing participants' perspectives.

Sixth, the themes and sub-themes were refined, defined, and named according to their central meanings. The final thematic structure comprised five major themes: (1) attitudes toward inclusive education, (2) knowledge for inclusive practice, (3) skills for inclusive practice, (4) professional agency, and (5) limited institutional support and resources for inclusive early childhood education. The first four themes captured participants' perceptions and experiences of professional competency, while the fifth theme reflected the institutional and contextual conditions that influenced their ability to develop

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and enact these competencies in practice. The inclusion of both individual interview and FGD data enabled the researchers to examine individual experiences alongside views expressed collectively during the group discussion.

Seventh, representative quotations were selected from both individual interviews and the FGD to provide direct evidence for the findings. Quotations were selected based on their relevance, clarity, and ability to illustrate the central meaning of each theme or sub-theme, while duplicated or repetitive quotations were excluded. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and the qualitative descriptive research design, with attention to the institutional and professional contexts in which participants' experiences occurred.

Throughout the analysis, the researchers maintained an iterative process of moving between the raw transcripts, codes, categories, themes, and final interpretations. Where differences arose in coding or interpretation, two researchers discussed the relevant transcript extracts, compared the alternative interpretations, and reached agreement through consensus. This process helped ensure that the final themes were grounded in the data from interviews and the FGD and represented participants' perspectives rather than reflecting a single researcher's interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The purpose of this study is to examine the inclusive professional competency of preschool teachers, including four pillars (attitude, knowledge, skills, and agency) of inclusive professional competency in the context of the Ambo town preschool setting. Specifically, the study aims to describe an integrated competency model that reflects the multidimensional nature of inclusive practice in preschool settings. The results are thematized in [Annexure 1](#).

Discussion

This section presents a discussion of the study's findings regarding preschool teachers' professional competency for inclusive early childhood education. The study conceptualized professional competency through four interconnected dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and professional agency. The interpretation of the findings is grounded in qualitative descriptive frameworks and prior practical studies to explain how preschool teachers perceive these dimensions and how they influence teachers' ability to implement inclusive practices in early childhood settings. Additionally, the discussion highlights the implications of the results for preschool teacher education programs, ongoing professional enhancement, and policy and practice for inclusive early childhood education.

Conditional attitude towards inclusive early childhood education

The study revealed that preschool teachers generally expressed support for the principle of inclusive education; however, their attitudes were often conditional and accompanied by uncertainty regarding their ability to implement inclusive practices effectively. While participants acknowledged the right of children with disabilities to learn alongside their peers, many questioned their own competence to meet diverse learning needs and frequently relied on specialists to assume responsibility for supporting these children. These results suggest that preschool teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are not solely determined by their beliefs about inclusion itself but are strongly influenced by their perceived competence and preparedness to teach diverse learners.

This finding aligns with the argument that positive attitudes alone are insufficient to ensure successful implementation of inclusive education (Sharma et al., 2021). Teachers may endorse inclusion philosophically while simultaneously doubting their capacity to translate inclusive values into classroom practice. According to

Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior, attitudes influence behavior when individuals also perceive that they possess the necessary control and capability to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to this theory, teachers' beliefs and perceived social expectations influence their willingness to implement inclusion. In the present study, teachers frequently expressed favorable views toward inclusion but reported low confidence and limited preparedness, suggesting that their perceived behavioral control was weak. Consequently, support for inclusion remained largely conceptual rather than practical.

The findings further support research indicating that teacher attitudes toward inclusion are closely linked to self-efficacy and professional competence. Studies have consistently demonstrated that teachers who possess greater knowledge of disabilities, stronger instructional skills, and more experience with inclusive practices tend to exhibit more positive attitudes toward inclusion than those who feel inadequately prepared (Sharma et al., 2021). The participants' statements, such as "I think inclusion is a good idea, but I feel unsure about how to do it properly" and "I try my best, but I think specialists should handle most of the work," illustrate how uncertainty regarding competence can undermine teachers' confidence in their ability to implement inclusive education effectively.

A particularly significant finding was that some teachers perceived children with disabilities as beyond their professional responsibility and viewed specialized settings as more appropriate educational placements. Such perceptions reflect the persistence of deficit-oriented views of disability, whereby educational challenges are attributed primarily to the child's impairment rather than to barriers within the educational environment. This perspective contrasts with the social model of disability, which emphasizes that exclusion often results from environmental, instructional, and systemic barriers rather than from the disability itself (Oliver, 1990). According to Oliver (1990), negative or conditional views may be shaped by social and institutional

understandings of disability rather than disability itself. The tendency of some participants to wait for specialists or alternative placements suggests that inclusive education has not yet been fully internalized as a shared responsibility within preschool settings.

At the same time, the findings indicate that teachers' reservations about inclusion should not be interpreted simply as opposition to the inclusiveness of preschool education. Rather, many participants linked their concerns to inadequate training in special needs education, insufficient support systems from specialists, and limited access to professional resources. Their statements demonstrated a willingness to support children with disabilities when appropriate guidance and support were available. Previous studies have similarly reported that teachers become more supportive of inclusion when they receive specialized training, mentoring, and opportunities to develop practical inclusive teaching competencies (Sharma et al., 2021; Sharma & Pace, 2022).

The findings also highlight the interconnected nature of attitudes and other dimensions of professional competency. Teachers' attitudes appeared inseparable from their knowledge, skills, and professional agency. Participants who reported limited knowledge and skills often expressed lower confidence and greater dependence on external support, whereas those who perceived themselves as more capable demonstrated greater willingness to assume responsibility for inclusive practices. This suggests that attitudes toward inclusion should not be viewed as an isolated personal characteristic but as a dynamic component of professional competency shaped by teachers' experiences, preparation, and working conditions. Similarly, contemporary research suggests that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are not fixed personal dispositions but are shaped by professional learning opportunities, teaching experience, perceived competence, self-efficacy, and the availability of institutional support; attitudes should be understood as a dynamic component of professional competency that

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develops through interaction between individual and contextual factors (Sharma et al., 2021).

Mostly, the findings indicate that preschool teachers generally value the ideals of inclusive education; however, their attitudes remain conditional due to concerns about competence, limited preparation, and insufficient institutional support. The results imply that efforts to strengthen inclusive education should move beyond attempts to change attitudes alone and instead focus on enhancing teachers' knowledge, pedagogical skills, and professional agency through sustained professional development and systemic support. In this way, positive beliefs about inclusion can be transformed into confident and effective inclusive practice.

Limited inclusive early childhood pedagogical knowledge

The findings revealed that preschool teachers exhibited a developing level of inclusive pedagogical knowledge and that much of their understanding was acquired through personal experience rather than formal professional preparation. Participants consistently reported inadequate knowledge of disability-related pedagogy, identification procedures for the need, and assessment practices in line with the needs of the child, individualized support strategies, and inclusive instructional approaches. Although teachers demonstrated a general awareness of inclusive education policies and principles, they lacked the specialized knowledge required to translate these principles into effective preschool setting practice. This finding suggests a substantial gap between policy awareness and pedagogical competence.

Knowledge is widely recognized as a fundamental component of teacher professional competency for inclusive preschool and other settings. According to Shulman (1987), effective teaching requires the integration of pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and contextual understanding. Within inclusive settings, this knowledge base extends beyond general pedagogy to include understanding learner diversity,

disability characteristics, differentiated instruction, assessment adaptation, and individualized support planning. The limited knowledge reported by participants therefore represents a significant limitation on their ability to respond effectively to diverse learning needs in preschool settings. This can reinforce impairment-focused interpretations and reduce teachers' ability to identify and address environmental barriers.

A notable finding was that participants relied heavily on personal experience rather than structured professional learning. Statements such as *"Most of what I know comes from experience"* indicate that teachers often developed their understanding through trial-and-error approaches in teaching children with disabilities rather than through systematic preparation for specific types of disabilities. While experiential learning contributes to professional growth, it cannot substitute for comprehensive training in inclusive pedagogy for children with disabilities. Earlier studies have shown that teachers who receive specialized preparation in inclusive education demonstrate greater confidence, stronger instructional competence, and more positive attitudes toward inclusion than those who rely solely on practical experience (Sharma et al., 2021).

The current findings are also consistent with recent evidence from Ethiopia. A study by Kebede and Phasha (2024) found that developing teachers' competencies for inclusive education requires targeted teacher education programs that strengthen teachers' knowledge and instructional capacity for working with diverse learners. The study at hand and Kebede and Phasha (2024) emphasized that insufficient preparation of teachers in pre-service training remains one of the major barriers to effective implementation of inclusive education in Ethiopia.

Likewise, research conducted among Ethiopian pre-primary teachers reported that teachers often possess limited knowledge of special needs education, disability identification, and inclusive support strategies despite expressing generally positive attitudes toward inclusion

Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., July–Sep, 2026, 15(3), 56-87 (Ginja & Chen, 2021; Kebede & Phasha, 2024). The study concluded that inadequate preparation of preschool teachers at their pre-service training negatively affects teachers' ability to provide appropriate services for children with special educational needs.

Another important finding in the present study was participants' limited understanding of disability characteristics and support systems. Many teachers reported uncertainty regarding disability types, severity levels, and children's specific learning needs at the preschool level. Such uncertainty is particularly problematic because understanding learner differences is central to inclusive pedagogy. Inclusive education requires preschool teachers to recognize differences among preschoolers and use this information to design responsive instruction rather than relying on one-size-fits-all teaching approaches. Without adequate disability-related knowledge, teachers may struggle to identify barriers to learning and may carelessly adopt deficit-oriented views that focus on children's limitations rather than their strengths and potential. The same concept is shown by researchers (Ginja & Chen, 2021; Kebede & Phasha, 2024).

Participants also reported considerable vagueness regarding identification and assessment procedures. Preschool teachers frequently indicated that they were unable to determine children's specific educational needs and therefore implemented the same curriculum for all children. This result highlights limitations in assessment procedures. Effective inclusive preschool education needs ongoing assessment to recognize strengths, barriers, and support needs that can inform instructional planning. According to Black and Wiliam (2018), assessment should serve as a tool for improving learning and development and guiding instruction rather than merely measuring children's achievement. The inability of participants to use assessment information for instructional adaptation shows a critical gap in their professional competency.

Moreover, participants described a significant disconnect between policy awareness and

inclusive implementation in preschool settings. While preschool teachers were generally aware of children with disabilities' right to inclusive education, they perceived limited implementation of these policies in practice. This finding reflects evidence from Ethiopian research showing that teachers often support inclusive education philosophically while deficient in knowledge and skills necessary to implement it effectively. For example, [Ginja & Chen \(2021\)](#) found that many Ethiopian teachers support the idea of inclusion but possess differing understandings of what inclusive education means and regularly report insufficient preparation for working with children with disabilities.

The findings can also be understood through the lens of the policy-practice gap in inclusive education. While governments increasingly promote inclusive education through legislation and policy frameworks ([MoE, 2012; 2022](#)), successful implementation depends on pre- and in-service teacher training that provides the knowledge and competencies necessary to operationalize inclusive principles in daily preschool settings in practice. Awareness of policy alone is insufficient if teachers lack the pedagogical expertise required to identify children's needs, adapt instruction to their needs, and provide individualized support ([Ainscow, 2020](#)). The findings suggest that strengthening inclusive education in Ethiopian preschool settings requires comprehensive pre-service preparation, sustained professional development on inclusion, mentoring, and practical training focused on disability awareness, assessment of needs, differentiated instruction, and individualized support systems and planning. Without such dedication, teachers are likely to continue relying on generalized instructional approaches and experience difficulty translating inclusive policies into meaningful inclusive preschool settings in practice.

Limited Inclusive Pedagogical Skill

The findings revealed that preschool teachers' inclusive pedagogical skills were limited and mostly restricted to general instructional practices rather than specialized inclusive teaching approaches. Although participants reported using child-centered methods such as play, songs, repetition, visualization, and demonstrations, these methods were primarily designed for whole-class instruction and were not systematically adapted to address the diverse needs of children with disabilities in the preschool. As a result, instructional accommodations, differentiated teaching, individualized support, and assessment-targeted interventions were largely absent from participants' reported practices. These findings suggest that teachers possess basic pedagogical skills for early childhood education but lack the specialized competencies necessary for inclusive teaching. This gap warrants particular attention, as pedagogical skills constitute the practical dimension of teacher competence.

While positive attitudes and knowledge provide a foundation for inclusion, teachers must also be able to translate these into effective classroom practices, including differentiated instruction, individualized support, and the adaptation of learning activities to meet diverse needs ([Shulman, 1987](#)). Contemporary models of teacher competence emphasize that effective inclusion depends on teachers' ability to adapt curriculum, differentiate instruction, modify learning environments, implement individualized supports, and monitor learner progress ([European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022](#)).

A notable finding was that teachers commonly responded to learning difficulties by repeating explanations or providing additional examples rather than modifying instructional approaches. Statements such as *"I usually explain again or give more examples"* suggest that teachers viewed adaptation primarily as increasing the quantity of instruction rather than changing the quality or mode of instruction. This reflects what inclusive education scholars describe as a traditional remediation approach, where learners are expected

to fit existing teaching methods rather than instruction being adapted to accommodate learner diversity. Inclusive pedagogy, in contrast, advocates for flexible instructional approaches that proactively anticipate and respond to differences among learners. The findings therefore suggest that participants' instructional practices remain largely rooted in conventional teaching models rather than inclusive pedagogical frameworks.

The findings also showed inadequate competence in differentiated instruction and individualized accommodation. Participants frequently stated that they lacked the skills necessary to support children with disabilities and often perceived themselves as unable to meet individual learning needs. Such perceptions are concerning because differentiation is widely regarded as one of the core competencies required for inclusive early childhood education. According to Ainscow (2020), differentiated instruction involves modifying content, process, learning activities, and assessment in response to learners' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. The inability of participants to make such adaptations suggests that preschool children with disabilities may experience restricted opportunities for meaningful participation and learning within preschool settings.

Another significant finding was the challenge teachers experienced in managing the class. Participants reported difficulties managing classrooms that included children with disabilities. This finding aligns with previous research demonstrating that classroom management is one of the most frequently reported challenges in inclusive settings, particularly when teachers lack training in behavior support, individualized intervention, and inclusive instructional strategies (Sharma et al., 2021). Effective classroom management in inclusive education extends beyond keeping order; it involves creating learning environments that promote participation, engagement, belonging, and positive social interaction for all children. The participants' reported difficulties suggest constraints in their capacity to establish such inclusive environments.

The findings further revealed weaknesses in inclusive assessment practices. Participants indicated that assessment primarily focused on academic achievement and that assessment results were rarely used to modify instruction. Statements such as *"I keep the results in mind, but I don't always change my teaching"* demonstrate a disconnection between assessment and instructional decision-making. This finding reflects limited assessment skills and limited use for instructional modification, which is a critical component of inclusive pedagogy. According to Black and Wiliam (2018), assessment should function as an ongoing process that informs teaching and supports learning. Similarly, the meaningful inclusive assessment frameworks emphasize the importance of using assessment to identify strengths, barriers, and support needs rather than merely evaluating performance (UNESCO, 2020). The participants' emphasis on academic outcomes with limited attention to social, emotional, and developmental domains suggests that assessment practices may not sufficiently capture the holistic needs of young children for inclusive preschool settings.

Particularly concerning was the finding that some children with disabilities appeared to receive only custodial rather than educational support. Statements such as *"We are helping him in feeding, but no support is provided for his education and development"* and *"The child is simply sitting with friends and observing activities"* indicate that participation was often understood as physical presence rather than active engagement in learning. This finding highlights a critical distinction between placement and inclusion. Inclusive education is not achieved merely by enrolling children with disabilities in regular classrooms; rather, it requires meaningful participation, engagement, and learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2020). The findings therefore suggest that some children may be physically included while remaining educationally marginalized.

The results are consistent with recent international and Ethiopian evidence. A study by

Kebede and Phasha (2024) found that Ethiopian teachers frequently lack the practical competencies needed to implement inclusive education despite expressing positive attitudes toward inclusion. The authors argue that insufficient training in instructional adaptation, classroom accommodation, and learner support limits teachers' ability to translate inclusive policies into classroom practice. Similarly, Ginja and Chen (2023) reported that many Ethiopian teachers support inclusive education philosophically but lack the pedagogical expertise necessary to effectively teach learners with disabilities.

International research also highlights the importance of developing inclusive pedagogical competence. Inclusive teaching requires teachers to extend learning opportunities for all learners rather than creating separate approaches for children perceived as different. Likewise, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2022) identifies differentiated instruction, collaborative problem-solving, learner-centered assessment, and adaptive teaching as essential competencies for inclusive educators. The limited presence of these competencies in participants' accounts suggests that professional development initiatives have not yet sufficiently addressed the practical dimensions of inclusive teaching.

From a sociocultural perspective, the participants' skill limitations should not be viewed solely as individual deficiencies but also as reflections of broader systemic conditions. Teachers' opportunities to develop pedagogical expertise are influenced by teacher education programs, professional development opportunities, mentoring systems, instructional resources, and institutional support structures. Consequently, the inadequacy of inclusive pedagogical skills observed in this study may reflect weaknesses within the broader educational system rather than solely the shortcomings of individual teachers.

Generally, the findings indicate that preschool teachers possessed general teaching skills but lacked the specialized pedagogical competencies required for inclusive education. Their

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instructional adaptations were limited, assessment practices were largely academic and non-responsive, classroom management challenges persisted, and educational support for children with disabilities was often insufficient. These findings suggest that improving inclusive education requires sustained investment in practical teacher preparation and professional development focused on differentiated instruction, inclusive assessment, classroom accommodation, behavior support, individualized planning, and evidence-based inclusive pedagogical practices. Strengthening these competencies is essential for ensuring that children with disabilities move beyond mere physical presence in classrooms toward meaningful participation, learning, and achievement.

Constrained inclusive professional agency

The findings revealed that preschool teachers experienced limited professional agency in implementing inclusive education. Although participants recognized the importance of supporting children with diverse learning needs, many reported feeling unable to take initiative, make independent decisions, advocate for learners, or implement appropriate interventions for needy groups. Teachers frequently attributed their limited inclusive agency to insufficient inclusive knowledge, inadequate inclusive pedagogical skills, lack of confidence in achieving the goal of inclusive policy, and weak inclusive institutional support. As reflected in statements such as *"Because of our lack of abilities and knowledge of inclusive education, we are expecting others (special teacher and school) to take responsibility for the child"* and *"We refer the child to other individuals because we are unable to help,"* many participants perceived themselves as having a limited role in addressing the needs of children with disabilities. These findings suggest that professional agency was not absent but constrained by both individual and systemic factors.

The concept of professional agency has gained increasing attention in educational research

because it emphasizes teachers' capacity to make focused decisions, influence practice, solve problems, and shape educational outcomes within their professional contexts. According to Priestley et al. (2026), teacher agency is not merely an individual characteristic but an achievement that emerges through the interaction between personal capacities and contextual opportunities. In other words, teachers are more likely to exercise agency when they possess adequate knowledge and skills and when their working environments provide the resources, support, and autonomy necessary for action for inclusion. The findings of the current study strongly support this perspective, as participants consistently linked their limited agency to deficits in competence and support systems.

A significant finding was that participants frequently transferred responsibility for children with disabilities to specialists, other professionals, or external agencies. Such responses indicate what some scholars describe as diminished professional ownership of inclusive early childhood practice. Inclusive education frameworks emphasize that supporting learner diversity is a shared responsibility of all teachers rather than a task delegated exclusively to specialists (Sharma et al., 2021). However, when teachers perceive themselves as inadequately prepared, they may avoid decision-making and defer responsibility to others. This pattern has been documented in several studies showing that low self-efficacy and limited professional competence reduce teachers' willingness to take initiative in inclusive settings (Sharma et al., 2021). The participants' reliance on referrals and external support therefore reflects not resistance to inclusion but a lack of confidence in their ability to address learners' needs effectively.

The findings also suggest a strong relationship between professional agency and teacher self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their capability to organize and execute actions required to achieve desired outcomes. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to investigate new instructional approaches, persist when challenges

Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., July–Sep, 2026, 15(3), 56-87 arise, and advocate for their learners. In contrast, teachers who doubt their competence often avoid taking responsibility for complex educational challenges. Participants' statements such as *"I haven't taken many specific actions, mostly just trying my best"* illustrate the uncertainty and low confidence that can limit professional initiative for inclusive early childhood education. Consequently, professional agency appears closely intertwined with teachers' perceptions of their own competence.

Another important finding was the limited evidence of structured reflection and intentional professional learning. Although participants reported thinking about their teaching practices, reflection was often informal and unstructured for children with disabilities. This is noteworthy because reflective practice is widely regarded as a key mechanism through which teachers develop agency and professional expertise. According to Schön (2017), reflective practitioners actively analyze their actions, evaluate outcomes, and use insights to improve future practice. In inclusive education, reflection enables teachers to identify barriers to participation, adapt instruction, and respond more effectively to learner diversity. The absence of systematic reflective practices among preschool teachers may then contribute to the persistence of limited agency and reduced professional development.

Participants reported consulting colleagues, communicating with parents, and expressing a desire to acquire additional knowledge and skills. Statements such as *"To plan pedagogy and teaching strategies for children with disabilities, we need awareness of the child's specific needs"* demonstrate a willingness to improve practice and assume greater professional responsibility. This finding is important because it suggests that teachers do not reject inclusive early childhood education; rather, they seek the competencies and support necessary to engage with it more effectively. Recent research emphasizes that agency should not be viewed as a fixed attribute but as a developmental process that can be strengthened through professional learning,

collaboration, mentoring, and supportive leadership.

The findings are also consistent with recent evidence from Ethiopia. [Kebede and Phasha \(2024\)](#) reported that Ethiopian teachers often experience limited professional action in inclusive education because of inadequate training, resource shortages, and insufficient institutional support. Similarly, [Ginja and Chen \(2023\)](#) found that many Ethiopian teachers support the goals of inclusive education but feel inadequately prepared to make instructional decisions for learners with disabilities. These studies suggest that constrained agency is not merely an individual issue but reflects broader structural challenges within teacher education and educational support systems.

From an ecological perspective, teacher agency is shaped by past experiences, present working conditions, and future aspirations ([Priestley et al., 2026](#)). The participants' accounts illustrate all three dimensions. Their limited preparation in pre-service training influenced their current confidence and decision-making, while inadequate support systems restricted opportunities for action. At the same time, their expressed aspiration for training, collaboration, and information reflects ambitions for greater professional involvement in inclusive early childhood practice. This suggests that agency among preschool teachers should be understood as constrained rather than absent.

Generally, the findings indicate that professional agency is a critical yet limited component of preschool teachers' competency for inclusive early childhood education. Teachers recognized their responsibility to support diverse learners but often lacked the confidence, knowledge, skills, and institutional support necessary to act effectively. The findings imply that strengthening inclusive early childhood education requires not only improving teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and pedagogical skills but also creating conditions that enable teachers to exercise professional judgment, engage in reflective practice, collaborate with stakeholders,

and take ownership of inclusive early childhood caring and teaching. Enhancing professional agency is therefore essential for transforming teachers from passive implementers of policy into active agents of inclusive educational change.

Limited institutional support and resources for inclusive early childhood education

The findings revealed that preschool teachers perceived insufficient institutional support and resource limitations as significant barriers to the development and implementation of professional competency for inclusive early childhood education. Participants consistently reported shortages of training opportunities for inclusive early childhood education, teaching materials for inclusive pedagogy, specialist support services, and collaborative structures between multidisciplinary professionals. Furthermore, teachers emphasized that the absence of coordinated support systems constrained their ability to translate positive intentions into effective inclusive early childhood practices. These findings suggest that professional competency for inclusion is not solely dependent on individual teacher characteristics but is strongly influenced by the institutional environments in which teachers work.

This conclusion supports contemporary perspectives that conceptualize inclusive education as a systemic rather than an individual endeavor ([Ainscow, 2020](#)). Although teachers play a central role in implementing inclusion, their effectiveness is shaped by the availability of resources, leadership support, professional development opportunities, collaborative networks, and policy implementation mechanisms. According to [UNESCO \(2020\)](#), inclusive education requires the development of supportive systems that enable teachers to respond effectively to learner diversity. Thus, teacher competency should not be understood solely as an individual attribute but as a capacity that is nurtured and sustained through supportive educational structures.

A particularly significant finding was the widespread demand for additional training. Participants repeatedly emphasized that they

lacked opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills required for inclusive practice. This finding reinforces previous research indicating that professional development is one of the most influential factors affecting teachers' readiness for inclusion. Studies have consistently shown that teachers who receive ongoing training demonstrate higher levels of competence, confidence, self-efficacy, and commitment to inclusive practices than those who receive limited professional support (Sharma et al., 2021). The participants' repeated requests for training therefore reflect not resistance to inclusion but recognition of the need for professional learning opportunities that can strengthen their capacity to support diverse learners.

The findings also emphasized substantial shortages of instructional resources and teaching materials. Participants indicated that limited access to appropriate learning materials for inclusive early childhood education constrained their ability to accommodate children with diverse needs. This finding is particularly important because effective inclusive education often requires flexible learning resources, adaptive materials, assistive technologies, and accessible learning environments (UNESCO, 2020). The absence of such resources may restrict teachers' ability to differentiate instruction and provide individualized support.

Another notable finding was the absence of formal and systematic collaboration systems. Participants reported inadequate opportunities to collaborate with specialists, colleagues, families, and other professionals. This finding is consistent with ecological and collaborative models of inclusive education, which emphasize that inclusion is most effective when responsibility is shared among multiple stakeholders. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), educational outcomes are influenced by interactions among individuals, institutions, and broader social systems. Similarly, modern inclusive education frameworks highlight multidisciplinary collaboration as essential for addressing the complex needs of diverse learners (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive

Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., July–Sep, 2026, 15(3), 56-87 Education, 2022). The absence of structured collaboration therefore limits opportunities for knowledge sharing, joint problem-solving, and coordinated support.

Importantly, participants perceived that deficiencies in institutional support negatively affected all dimensions of inclusive professional competency. Preschool teachers indicated that inadequate training weakened their knowledge, limited resources constrained their instructional skills, and insufficient support structures reduced their confidence and professional agency. This finding supports the argument that attitudes, knowledge, skills, and agency are interconnected and influenced by contextual factors. Recent studies have demonstrated that teachers are more likely to implement inclusive practices when they work in environments characterized by supportive leadership, collaborative cultures, adequate resources, and ongoing professional development. Conversely, when such conditions are absent, teachers often experience uncertainty, frustration, and reduced capacity to address preschool children's diversity effectively.

The findings are also consistent with recent research conducted in Ethiopia. Kebede and Phasha (2024) reported that inadequate institutional support remains one of the most significant barriers to inclusive education implementation in Ethiopian schools. Their study found that shortages of training, specialist services, instructional resources, and administrative support constrain teachers' ability to develop and apply inclusive competencies. Similarly, Ginja and Chen (2023) observed that although Ethiopian teachers generally support the philosophy of inclusion, weak institutional structures often hinder effective implementation.

From an ecological perspective, the participants' experiences demonstrate that teacher competency develops within a wider institutional context. The ecological model of teacher agency proposed by Priestley et al. (2026) argues that teachers' actions are shaped by the interaction between individual capacities and environmental conditions. In the present study, teachers

frequently expressed a willingness to support inclusion but described organizational barriers that limited their ability to act effectively. This indicates that strengthening inclusive education requires attention not only to teacher preparation but also to the institutional conditions that enable teachers to exercise inclusive professional competence.

The other aspect that this study identified is that the educational backgrounds of some preschool teachers also emerged as an important contextual factor influencing professional competency and agency. Participants reported academic preparation in fields such as civics, biology, and agriculture, which may not provide specialized preparation in early childhood development and pedagogy. This is important because effective early childhood practice requires specialized knowledge of child development, developmentally appropriate pedagogy, observation and assessment, and responsiveness to children's diverse learning needs ([European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022](#)). Consequently, teachers entering preschool classrooms without specialized early childhood preparation may require additional support to develop competencies in play-based learning, disability identification, differentiated instruction, classroom adaptation, and developmentally appropriate assessment. This interpretation is consistent with research emphasizing the importance of teachers' professional knowledge and pedagogical capacity for effective and inclusive teaching ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). In the present study, the reported qualification mismatch may help explain participants' accounts of gaps in knowledge and skills and their reliance on colleagues or specialized professionals when responding to children with diverse needs. It may also constrain professional agency, as teachers who perceive themselves as insufficiently prepared may have less confidence in independently adapting instruction, making professional decisions, and initiating appropriate support. Teacher agency is shaped not only by individual capacities but also

by professional knowledge, relationships, available resources, and institutional conditions ([Priestley et al., 2026](#)). Thus, the findings suggest that professional competency in inclusive preschool education is influenced not only by individual attitudes and willingness but also by the alignment between teachers' educational preparation and the developmental and pedagogical demands of early childhood education.

Generally, the findings indicate that professional competency for inclusive early childhood education is shaped by both individual and systemic factors. While teachers reported limitations in their own knowledge, skills, and confidence, they also emphasized that these limitations were reinforced by inadequate institutional support, insufficient resources, and weak collaboration systems. The findings therefore suggest that efforts to improve inclusive early childhood education should move beyond focusing exclusively on teacher-level interventions and instead adopt a comprehensive systems approach that strengthens professional development, resource provision, collaborative structures, leadership support, and institutional capacity. Such an approach is essential for creating conditions in which teachers can effectively develop and exercise the competencies required for inclusive practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored preschool professionals' experiences of professional competency for inclusive early childhood education in Ambo Town. The findings indicate that professional competency for inclusion is not limited to teachers' possession of knowledge or positive attitudes; rather, it is an interconnected capacity involving attitudes, knowledge, skills, and professional agency, which is strongly influenced by the institutional conditions in which preschool professionals work.

Regarding attitudes, participants generally expressed positive views toward the principle of inclusion and recognized that children with

disabilities can learn when appropriate intervention and support are available. However, these positive attitudes were often conditional on the availability of adequate training, specialist assistance, teaching materials, and manageable classroom conditions. Some participants expressed uncertainty about their responsibility for children with disabilities and believed that specialized professionals should take primary responsibility when children had significant or permanent disabilities. This suggests that supportive attitudes toward inclusion in Ambo Town do not always translate into confidence and readiness to implement inclusive practices.

The findings concerning knowledge revealed important limitations in participants' understanding of disability types, characteristics, severity, identification, assessment, and individualized support needs. Several participants reported having only basic knowledge and indicated that much of what they knew had been acquired through experience rather than specialized professional preparation. Difficulties in identifying children's specific needs were also associated with limited information at enrolment and the absence of clear procedures for assessment and referral. Consequently, some participants reported relying on the regular curriculum because they lacked sufficient information to identify and respond to individual learning needs.

In relation to skills, participants described using play, songs, repetition, visualization, additional explanations, and different teaching approaches to support children's learning. These accounts demonstrate the presence of practical inclusive strategies within some preschool classrooms. Nevertheless, participants also reported difficulties in adapting instruction, providing adequate accommodations, conducting comprehensive assessments, and managing classrooms that included children requiring additional support. The findings therefore suggest a gap between teachers' willingness to use basic inclusive strategies and their capacity to consistently provide individualized and appropriately adapted support.

The findings on professional agency further demonstrated that participants made efforts to support children, consulted colleagues and parents, and sometimes referred children to other professionals. However, these actions were frequently described as informal, reactive, or dependent on external assistance. Participants reported limited structured reflection on their teaching, uncertainty about specific actions to take, and reliance on specialists when they perceived their own knowledge and skills to be insufficient. This indicates that professional agency in the Ambo Town context is constrained not only by individual competency but also by the availability of professional networks, institutional guidance, and specialist support.

Across all four dimensions, limited institutional support and resources for inclusive early childhood education emerged as a central contextual condition. Participants described insufficient professional preparation, shortages of teaching and learning materials, limited specialist support, difficulties in classroom management, inadequate collaboration mechanisms, and a gap between awareness of inclusive education policies and their implementation at the preschool level. The findings therefore suggest that strengthening teachers' professional competency cannot be achieved solely by expecting individual teachers to acquire additional knowledge and skills. Their ability to enact inclusive practice is also dependent on the institutional support, resources, collaboration, and guidance available within their preschool environments.

An additional context-specific finding was the mismatch between some teachers' educational backgrounds and their assignment to preschool classrooms. Participants indicated that some teachers had academic backgrounds such as biology, civics, and other fields rather than specialized preparation in early childhood education. This mismatch may contribute to gaps in knowledge and skills related to child development, play-based pedagogy, inclusive teaching, disability identification, and developmentally appropriate assessment. The

finding further suggests that professional competency for inclusion in Ambo Town is influenced not only by teachers' individual attitudes, knowledge, skills, and agency but also by the alignment between their professional preparation and the specific demands of preschool education. Therefore, strengthening inclusive early childhood education requires attention to both individual competency development and institutional practices concerning teacher placement and professional support.

In general, the findings provide a detailed account of inclusive professional competency in Ambo Town, showing that attitudes, knowledge, skills, and agency are closely interconnected and are shaped by the conditions in which preschool professionals work. The study therefore concludes that strengthening inclusive early childhood education in Ambo Town requires a combined focus on teacher competency development and the institutional conditions that enable teachers to apply that competency in practice.

Recommendations

Based directly on the experiences and challenges reported by participants, the following context-responsive recommendations are proposed for strengthening inclusive early childhood education in Ambo Town.

Provide preschool-specific professional development.

Participants reported having basic knowledge of disability and limited access to specialized training. Therefore, teacher professional development should move beyond general awareness of inclusion and provide practical, preschool-specific training on identifying diverse learning needs, understanding different types of disabilities, adapting activities and materials, classroom management, individualized support, and inclusive assessment. Training should include demonstrations, classroom-based practice, and follow-up mentoring rather than relying solely on one-time workshops.

Establish a clear procedure for early identification and referral.

Participants reported that children were sometimes enrolled without adequate information about their disabilities and that teachers recognized difficulties only after observing learning or developmental problems. Preschool settings in Ambo Town should therefore establish a simple and practical procedure for early identification, documentation, communication, and referral of children who may require additional support. This procedure should clarify what preschool teachers are expected to observe and document, when concerns should be communicated to families, and when referral to appropriate professionals is necessary.

Develop a formal teacher–family–specialist collaboration mechanism.

Participants reported consulting parents and colleagues but also described the absence of a formal collaboration system and reliance on specialists when they felt unable to support a child. Preschool administrators should therefore establish regular and structured opportunities for teachers, families, and relevant professionals to discuss children's learning and developmental needs. A simple referral and consultation network could allow teachers to obtain professional advice without transferring responsibility for the child entirely to specialists.

Strengthen access to adapted teaching and learning materials.

The reported shortage of teaching materials limited teachers' ability to respond to diverse needs. Rather than relying only on general resource provision, preschool administrators and relevant education offices should identify the specific materials required for inclusive preschool activities, including visual materials, manipulatives, communication supports, and adaptable play-based resources. Teachers can also be supported to develop low-cost, locally available materials appropriate to individual children's needs.

Support teachers to translate positive attitudes into inclusive practice.

Although participants generally recognized the value of inclusion, some remained uncertain about

their responsibilities or believed that children with significant disabilities should primarily be supported by specialists. Professional development should therefore include practical discussion of teachers' roles and responsibilities in inclusive preschool education, using classroom examples and problem-solving activities. This can help teachers connect their positive beliefs about inclusion with concrete professional actions.

Strengthen teachers' practical skills for differentiated and inclusive instruction.

Participants reported using play, songs, repetition, visualization, and additional explanations but also acknowledged difficulties in adapting instruction and providing adequate accommodations. Teachers should therefore receive classroom-based coaching on differentiated instruction, activity adaptation, individualized support, positive classroom management, and inclusive play-based teaching. Demonstrating how ordinary preschool activities can be adapted for children with different abilities may be more useful than providing theoretical information alone.

Broaden assessment beyond academic achievement.

Participants indicated that assessment focused mainly on academic development, with less attention to social skills and play. Preschool assessment practices should therefore include developmental, social, communication, participation, play, and functional indicators, alongside academic learning. Teachers should be supported to use assessment information to modify instruction and provide appropriate support rather than simply recording children's performance.

Create opportunities for structured professional reflection.

Participants reported that they thought about their teaching but did not always reflect in a structured manner. Preschool leaders could introduce brief regular reflective meetings or teacher learning sessions in which teachers discuss challenging cases, examine strategies they have tried, identify children's support needs, and consider possible adjustments to their teaching.

This would provide a practical mechanism for strengthening professional agency within existing preschool settings.

Clarify implementation of inclusive education policies at the preschool level.

Participants demonstrated awareness of inclusive education policies but reported a gap between policy documents and actual implementation. Relevant education authorities and preschool administrators should therefore translate existing policies into clear preschool-level procedures, responsibilities, and monitoring mechanisms. Instead of introducing additional policies, the immediate priority should be to clarify how existing inclusion commitments are expected to operate in everyday preschool practice.

Prioritize institutional support alongside teacher competency development.

The findings indicate that teachers' competency cannot be strengthened effectively through training alone. The reported limitations in resources, specialist support, collaboration, and classroom conditions suggest the need for a coordinated institutional support approach. Ambo Town preschool administrators and education stakeholders should therefore assess each preschool's specific support needs and develop feasible improvement plans addressing professional development, materials, referral pathways, collaboration, and classroom support.

Align teachers' educational preparation with preschool assignments.

The findings indicate that some teachers assigned to preschool classrooms had academic backgrounds such as biology, civics, and others rather than specialized preparation in early childhood education. Therefore, education authorities and preschool administrators in Ambo Town should, where staffing conditions permit, prioritize teachers with appropriate early childhood education preparation for preschool assignments. Where teachers from other academic backgrounds must be assigned because of staffing constraints, they should receive structured induction and continuing professional

development in early childhood development, play-based pedagogy, inclusive education, disability identification, differentiated instruction, classroom management, and developmentally appropriate assessment. Regular mentoring and classroom-based professional support should also be provided to strengthen their ability to apply these competencies in inclusive preschool settings.

CRediT Author Statement

Dinke Aga Hirpa: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Formal analysis, and writing the original draft.

Dawit Negassa Golga: Methodology, Supervision, Validation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there are no institutional, financial, or personal conflicts of interest related to this study.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Ambo University, Department of Special and Inclusive Education, Institute of Education and Behavioral Studies (Ref. SNIE/09/2018; approved on 30 June 2018, Eth.C). Prior to participation, all respondents provided verbal informed consent after receiving a full explanation of the study's objectives and procedures, in accordance with established ethical standards.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and in compliance with institutional and ethical data-sharing guidelines.

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Annexure1*Themes, subthemes, and ideas of respondents - Inclusive professional competency*

Theme	Sub theme	Contextual Description	Idea of Participants
Attitude toward inclusive early childhood education	Positive attitude but lacking confidence in implementing inclusive early childhood education	Participants indicated support for the principle of inclusion, but indicated uncertainty about how to effectively implement inclusive practices in their preschool classrooms. Some participants viewed the provision of support for children with disabilities as requiring specialist expertise and therefore perceived specialists as having a major responsibility for such children.	"I think inclusion is a good idea, but I feel unsure about how to do it properly"
	Recommendation for special school of special classes	Preschool teachers expressed doubts about the feasibility of educating children with disabilities in regular preschool settings when teachers and schools lack adequate resources, preparation, or specialized support. Some participants described uncertainty about their professional responsibility for children perceived as having permanent or significant disabilities.	"They (the children) are disabled; how can they learn in a regular school? It is better to give them an opportunity in a special school or special class because there is no teacher who can meet their learning needs" "In case the child has some permanent problem, we consider that it is not our responsibility"
	They would be more willing if they received training on inclusive early childhood education and support	Participants acknowledged that children with disabilities can learn when appropriate intervention and support are available, while also expressing concern about their ability to provide adequate support when classroom needs exceed their capacity. And they indicated that training on support systems would increase their ability and confidence to respond to children with disabilities.	"In my opinion, if they get appropriate intervention, they can learn, but if we cannot manage, they may fail" "I am open to helping children with diversified needs, but no training (in inclusive) is provided for preschool teachers" "If we get training on support systems for these children, it becomes easier for us"

Inclusive pedagogical knowledge	Most of what preschool teachers know about inclusive pedagogy comes from experience	Participants described their knowledge of special needs and disability as limited and reported having little or no specialized preparation at the preschool level. According to preschool teachers reported that much of their understanding of supporting children with diverse needs had been acquired through their day-to-day teaching experiences rather than formal specialized training.	"I have very basic knowledge; I haven't had special training (focusing on special needs at preschool level)" "Most of what I know comes from experience"
	They (the preschool teachers) do not know enough about disabilities and learners' needs	Respondents stated difficulties in identifying different types of disabilities, their characteristics, and appropriate support systems. As described by respondents limited information about children's disability type, severity, abilities, and individual support needs.	"We are not familiar with disability types, symptoms, or support systems" "We are not aware of the disability, the type, severity level, or the needs of the child"
	Preschool teachers are unsure how to identify and assess children's needs	Participants reported that information about disabilities was not always available when children were enrolled, meaning that teachers sometimes recognized difficulties only after observing learning or developmental problems. They described a lack of clarity and systematic procedures for identifying children's abilities, difficulties, and support needs. Preschool teachers indicated that limited knowledge about individual needs made it difficult to adapt the curriculum, resulting in the regular curriculum being used for most or all preschool children.	"Children are enrolled without informing us about disabilities; we recognize them only after negative consequences such as delay in reading or writing" "There is no clarity in identifying and assessing the child's status in terms of ability and need" "We use the regular curriculum for all preschool children because we cannot identify specific needs"

	Preschool teachers know the policy, but they do not recognize how to implement it	Participants demonstrated awareness of the policy principle that children with disabilities have a right to inclusive education. They distinguished between awareness of inclusive education policies and their implementation, particularly at the preschool level.	"We know the policy that children with disabilities have the right to learn in an inclusive preschool" "We know the policies at document level; in practice, no one is performing them particularly at preschool level"
Inclusive pedagogical skill	Preschool teachers mainly use general teaching methods	Respondents described using play, songs, and repetition as strategies to help children understand lessons and participate in classroom activities. They reported using play-based learning, visual materials, and varied teaching approaches to make learning content more accessible to children.	"For children to understand the lesson, we use play, songs, and repetition" "We use play-based learning, visualization, and different approaches to make content clearer"
	Preschool teacher do not know enough about adapting instruction for children with disabilities	Participants described providing additional explanations and examples when children experienced difficulty understanding lesson content. They acknowledged limitations in their knowledge and practical skills for providing appropriate support to children with disabilities. Preschool teachers perceived the accommodations and support currently provided to children with disabilities as insufficient to meet their learning needs.	"I usually explain again or give more examples" "We do not have the skills or knowledge to help the child" "The support and accommodation we provide are not sufficient"
	Managing a diverse classroom is considered and complex difficult	Participants described difficulties managing the classroom when children requiring additional support were included, suggesting that diverse learning needs increased classroom management	"Managing the class becomes more difficult with children who need extra support"

	Assessment focuses more on academics than inclusion	demands. Respondents reported that assessment results were considered in teaching, but that assessment information did not always lead to changes in instructional practice. They indicated that assessment practices tended to emphasize academic development, with comparatively less attention given to children's social development and play.	"I keep the results in mind, but I don't always change my teaching" "Assessment mainly focuses on academic development, with less follow-up on social skills and play"
	Children with disabilities often receive limited educational support in preschools	Preschool teachers described providing basic physical or caregiving assistance to a child while perceiving limited educational and developmental support. They described situations in which a child was physically present in the classroom but participated only minimally in learning activities.	"We are helping him in feeding, but no support is provided for his education and development" "The child is simply sitting with friends and observing activities".
Inclusive Professional Agency	They(preschool school teachers) are doing their best, but they lack confidence	Respondents stated making efforts to support children despite limited knowledge, resources, or formal preparation, but indicated that their actions were largely informal rather than based on specific intervention plans. They reported reflecting on their teaching practices but indicated that such reflection was informal and not conducted through a structured process.	"I haven't taken many specific actions, mostly just trying my best" "I think about my teaching, but not in a structured way"
	They(preschool teachers) often depend on others to support the child	Participants linked their reliance on specialists to perceived limitations in their own knowledge and ability to provide appropriate support to children with disabilities. They reported referring children to other professionals when they	"Because of our lack of abilities (in support provision of children with disabilities) and knowledge, we are expecting others(specialized professional) to take responsibility for the child"

		felt unable to address their needs and perceived that some families questioned their professional capacity to provide adequate support.	"We refer the child to other individuals because we are unable to help" "Families do not rely on us because they think we are not professionally sufficient"
	They(preschool teachers) try to work with parents and colleagues	Preschool teachers described consulting parents about children's difficulties but also reported situations in which parents did not acknowledge or accept concerns about their child's disability. They reported seeking assistance or consultation from colleagues when they observed learning or behavioral difficulties among children.	"We consult parents, but sometimes they deny the child's disability" "We consult colleagues when we observe learning or behavioral difficulties"
	They(the preschool teachers) want to become more effective inclusive practitioners	Participants emphasized the importance of having information about children's individual needs when planning teaching strategies and pedagogical approaches. They emphasized the need for adequate information to facilitate communication and consultation with families, teachers, and other professionals involved in supporting children.	"To plan pedagogy and teaching strategies, we need awareness of the child's specific needs" "We need information to consult families, teachers, and other professionals"
The way for enhancement of inclusive professional competency	Preschool teachers need more training and materials	Participants identified additional training and teaching materials as important resources for strengthening their capacity to support children with diverse needs.	"We need more training and teaching materials"
	There is no formal collaboration system in supporting children with disabilities in preschool settings	Preschool teachers reported that collaboration among professionals was not supported by a formal or established institutional system.	"There is no formal collaboration system"