

Academic Paper

# A Mutually Enriching Inclusive Education Teacher Professional Development Program: Mentors' and Mentees' Reflections

Lawrence Meda (Sharjah Education Academy)

Laila Mohebi (Zayed University)

Areej El Sayary (Zayed University)

Suha Karaki (Zayed University)

## Abstract

The COVID-19 global pandemic accelerated inclusive education professional development programs to help teachers get up to speed with inclusive pedagogical practices. The purpose of this study is to explore mentors' and mentees' reflections about their experiences of participating in an inclusive education professional development program. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm and it was done as a case study of a professional development program in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Twenty-five mentees and five mentors were purposively selected to participate in semi-structured interviews and complete a questionnaire. It was found that the professional development program provided a milestone of achievement in terms of empowering both mentors and mentees to be able to implement inclusive pedagogical practices. It is concluded that inclusive education can be achieved by any teacher or faculty member if they are committed to dedicating time to read and learn about it.

## Keywords

Collaborative learning, inclusive education, teacher professional development, inclusive pedagogical practices

## Article history

Accepted for publication: 11 July 2023

Published online: 01 August 2023



© the Author(s)

Published by Oxford Brookes University

## Introduction

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic negatively affected the education sector and resulted in some Special Educational Needs and Disabled (SEND) students dropping out of their studies because they were not getting support that they needed. According to Addis, McNulty and

Duggett (2021), the risk of several vulnerable students (including SEND) dropping out of studies has doubled because of the current COVID-19 pandemic. This necessitated teacher professional development (TPD) programs to capacitate educators in new ways by offering inclusive pedagogical approaches which enable countries to “build more inclusive, efficient and resilient education systems” which are stronger than they were before the pandemic (World Bank, 2020, p. 6). There is a need for offering TPD sessions to enable all educators to learn new ways of providing quality and equitable education to all students. This is inclusive of SEND students who require additional support to access quality education which is the main national goal of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (National Agenda, 2018). One of the main strategies which can be used to ensure that SEND students receive quality and equitable education during this time of COVID-19 is by offering inclusive education TPD sessions to in-service teachers. TPD sessions play a significant role in re-training qualified teachers to make them more competent in different ways of supporting SEND students.

The purpose of this study was to explore mentors’ (university supervisors) and mentees’ (school educators) reflections about their experiences of participating in an inclusive education TPD program which they attended for around five months. The study was guided by one critical question: What are mentors’ and mentees’ experiences of participating in an inclusive education TPD program? The paper is divided into seven successive sections, this introduction being the first. The second section presents the literature review and a theoretical framework guiding this study. The third section focused on context of the study. The fourth section focused on research design and methods which were used. Results and discussion are in sections five and six respectively. The paper ends with a succinct conclusion and implications in section seven.

## Literature Review

Generally, professional development sessions play a significant role in making employees more effective in any form of work that they will be undertaking. Mizell (2010) conceptualized professional development as any different type of educational experiences related to a person’s work. In education, TPD is a structured professional learning opportunity that is aimed at developing teachers to improve their knowledge, skills, and practices (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). People in different jobs participate in professional development to learn and apply new knowledge and skills to make their performance more effective (Mizell, 2010). TPD has the same function, to enhance teachers’ capacities so that they provide quality education to children. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2009) states that TPD helps teachers today successfully teach in multicultural classrooms where there are some children with special learning needs. TPD is critical to teachers as it “continually expands their knowledge and skills to implement the best educational practices” (Mizelle, 2010, p. 3). Chitiyo, Kumedzro, Hughes and Ahmed (2019) argue that teachers in Ghana felt inadequately prepared to teach SEND students in an inclusive classroom and they needed TPD to improve. Similarly, teachers in Zimbabwe requested TPD sessions to help them get up to speed with inclusive pedagogical practices (Chitiyo, Hughes, Changara, Chitiyo & Montgomery, 2016).

There is a need for TPD sessions to be implemented in ways which are collaborative in nature. Mizell (2010) postulates collaborative learning is critical in TPD. Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) concur that a good TPD should actively engage teachers so that they discuss and learn from each other’s best practice. When teachers engage in collaborative learning where they will be interacting and sharing ideas, this helps them develop a comprehensive understanding of content (Bandura, 1977) and subsequently improves their abilities to deliver quality inclusive teaching. Vygotsky (1978) states effective learning occurs when students interact extensively among themselves and with the instructor. Boud, Cohen and Sampson (2014) echoed the same sentiment that collaborative learning is indispensable as it enables peers to share important information and learn more effectively. A study conducted by Anto and Coenders (2019) found that professional

development of teachers was effective because they were engaged in activities where they were discussing ideas. A TPD or mentorship program needs to be conducted in a collaborative manner as that promotes learning and a smooth transfer of knowledge (Baroudi, 2019; Ragins 2016). Similarly, Douglass, Smith and Smith (2013) contend that embedding social interaction in a mentorship program enables both mentors and mentees to freely express their views and learn from their fellow peers in a conducive environment. When learning takes place in a context such as that, it enables stakeholders to gain knowledge.

Both mentors and mentees need to gain knowledge and skills about dealing with SEND students. Benkohila, Elhoweris and Efthymiou (2020) argue that mentors require additional information about how to provide reasonable accommodations in a classroom. This is important so that they can facilitate discussions with mentees more effectively. This will enable inclusive learning relationships to occur (Efthymiou & Kington, 2017). Douglass et al. (2013) concur that in a mentorship program, both mentors and mentees benefit especially if there is active engagement of both parties. They will learn from each other's experiences, challenges, and best practices. This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory which predominantly foregrounds interaction as the main form of teaching and learning. The theory is used as a theoretical framework for this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Vygotsky's social learning theory was used as a theoretical framework for this study. The theory states that meaningful learning occurs in an interactive environment (Vygotsky, 1978). This means there must be interaction between a mentor and mentees and mentees among themselves. This theory related to this study as there was continuous interaction between mentors and mentees during the inclusive education TPD program. Vygotsky (1978) postulates that the social learning theory is underpinned by social interaction (which happens between instructor and students and among students themselves). Mentors scaffolded the mentees in the TPD program. This is consistent with the social learning theory where Vygotsky (1978) states that scaffolding involves a more knowledgeable other supporting another person to achieve their learning goals.

The theory also has the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which involves what a learner can or cannot do without support of a knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978). This concept was related to this study as both mentors and mentees gradually gained knowledge which helped them move from the known to the unknown with the support of one another. Language is part of the social learning theory and it involves the use of a medium of instruction which is understood by all parties involved. In this study, English was the main language, but for mentees who were not conversant in it, they had an option of learning using Arabic.

Vygotsky's theory was chosen as it places learners at the centre of learning where they interact with the instructor and other students. This is similar to what was happening in this study where mentees interacted among themselves, with the program facilitator, and with their mentors. The theory was also chosen as it can be used in a mentorship program. Baroudi (2019) used it as an analytical framework for her study about mentors and mentees at a higher education institution in the UAE. Similarly, Connolly (2017) argues that the social learning theory is ideal for using in a peer mentoring program where there is interaction between different stakeholders. Similarly, Ragins (2016) echoed the same sentiments that collaboration of different stakeholders' results in high quality mentoring relationships. This supports the relevance of the theory to this current study where mentors and mentees collaborated in the TPD program, learning from each other's experiences and ideas.

## **Context of the Study**

The Al Jalila Foundation (AJF) is a non-profit organization which was founded as part of a global initiative to promote the UAE as a hub of excellence for education and medical research. With the launch of AJF came the *Ta'alouf* Inclusion Special Education Teacher Training Program which

aimed to provide support to teachers and students on matters related to inclusion. AJF worked collaboratively with a federal university in the UAE to offer the inclusive education TPD program. Selected lecturers from the university joined the program as mentors. Teachers and administrators who were working in schools across the emirates in the UAE were enrolled into the TPD program as mentees. There were 63 mentees who occupied different positions in schools as teachers, principals, coordinators, learning support teachers, social workers, special needs teachers, and heads of departments.

Thirteen university faculty members were assigned the task of mentoring the cohorts (under study) between December 2020 and April 2021. Further to implementation of COVID-19 restrictions, all mentoring was carried out via online forums. Mentors had to submit a weekly tracking sheet on which they recorded the name of the participant, position within the school, school name, activities undertaken, mentoring time provided, and any comments. As part of the assessment, each mentee was expected to submit a portfolio. It is important to note that not all mentors were special education specialists.

The program itself comprised six instructional Zoom sessions with the facilitator and at least three hours of mentoring per participant with a university faculty member. The TPD program covered topics which included: inclusive education laws, gifted and talented students, learning difficulties, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, hearing/sight impairment, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

## Methods

### Research Design

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach and its paradigmatic position was interpretivism. A qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm were selected as they are compatible. Lapan, Quartaroli and Riemer (2012) argue that the two approaches complement each other and can be used in a study that seeks to understand and interpret data using researchers' subjective views. Creswell and Creswell (2017) concur that both a qualitative approach and interpretivism are suitable in a study where the researcher seeks to obtain rich textual data about a subject under investigation. The study was done as a case study of an inclusive education TPD program in the UAE. A case study was selected as it enabled researchers to undertake an in-depth investigation of the experiences of both mentors and mentees (Yin, 2018).

### Participants

Purposive sampling, which is characterized by deliberate targeting of information-rich participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017), was used to select 25 mentees and five mentors for this study. This purposeful sampling procedure helped researchers to capture mentors' and mentees' experiences (of participating in the TPD program) and to develop shared patterns and themes (Creswell, 2012). All mentees were participating in the program for the first time. Some of the mentors joined the program for the first time whereas others had taken part with previous cohorts. Each mentor had at least three mentees. The mentors were required to meet with their mentees and report on the activities they covered. Mentors were also expected to guide mentees on the portfolio which was submitted as the main assessment for this program.

### Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire with all participants. The interviews were conducted on Zoom since face-to-face meetings were

discouraged as a preventative measure to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Each interview lasted between 16 and 30 minutes. Interviews were selected as they were suitable for this study where participants had to reflect on their experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) postulate interviews allow participants to share their experiences and reflect on their participation in a particular program. An open-ended questionnaire was used as some participants opted to fill in a questionnaire instead of being interviewed. Similar questions were asked in both data collection tools to ensure consistency. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to all participants prior to data collection. All participants consented to the interviews being recorded. Participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any point. Each participant signed a consent form.

## Data analysis

Data was analyzed using content analysis where researchers began by transcribing data, reading it several times to get meaning, and organizing it according to some units. The researchers manually analyzed the data and followed a color-coding process (Creswell, 2012). Researchers moved from inductive to deductive analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) by organizing the data according to themes and sub-themes as shown in Table 1. They met several times to ensure that data which was put into themes and sub-themes was correct and consistent with the coding process (Creswell, 2012).

**Table 1: Themes and Sub-themes**

Themes	Sub-themes
In-depth information about inclusion	Informative sessions, enabling and empowering, recommending the TPD program
Collaborative learning	Interactive learning, supporting one another, productive meetings
Challenging tasks	Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) application of knowledge and skills, eye opener

## Results

Results in this study are categorized into three main themes which emerged from analysis. These are in-depth information about inclusion, collaborative learning, and challenging tasks. Each of the themes is presented in detail in this section.

### In-depth Information about Inclusion

Except for one participant (mentor), all mentees and mentors who participated in this study acknowledged that the TPD program which they attended provided them with comprehensive information about inclusion. A mentee said: "I found that the programme was well thought of and an informative source. The suggestions and the strategies on coping with the classroom challenges including Autism and you know all the spectrums the ADHD I found that helpful." Similarly, another mentee said:

*It was so informative and I loved every part of it. I really found that the facilitator was good. All the stories that she told us and everything were so relatable to the classroom. Everything was shown exactly the way a teacher needs to know. For example, how to identify the needs of learners in the classroom, and different strategies which can be used to support their needs. I just found the program so helpful.*

Another mentee echoed the same sentiments about information she learnt from the program:

*I learnt some techniques and tips which are helpful in an inclusive classroom. I learnt how to deal with students with different learning needs. For us especially in the kindergarten, it is a little bit challenging to deal with special needs children, but I learnt that during the program.*

Mentors echoed these sentiments, stating that the program provided some in-depth information to them about inclusion. A mentor said: "I have the background of inclusion. I studied it before, but, I can say the knowledge that I have was not 100%. This AJF program has added to my knowledge on inclusion as I have learnt a lot." Another mentor agreed that the program increased their knowledge and understanding of inclusion. She said: "yes, I learnt a lot about special needs. I discussed theories of inclusion with my mentees and how they can help students with special needs. That added more knowledge to me about inclusion."

Both mentors and mentees reported that there are a lot of topics related to inclusion which they did not know, but learnt through the AJF program. One mentee who learnt a lot from the program said:

*I did not have any idea what ADHD, ASD, and sensory disabilities, were. I heard the names and acronyms before, but did not know what they were. After attending this AJF program, I could understand what they all meant. The facilitator did a wonderful job. She explained every level of disability and everything in a very good manner. Really, I was impressed with the content which we teachers learnt. She did a wonderful job. For someone like me, I was nothing, I did not know anything about special needs and disabilities, I was blind when I was entering into the classroom. After the AJF program, I could categorize students according to their special needs and disabilities. I could know that these students were behaving like this, that means they fall into this category of disability. I could recognise and sort out all those things.*

Another mentee concurs that the program was like an enabler for her as it empowered her to be able to teach and support SEND students effectively. The mentee said:

*I really enjoyed the program, it was very effective. I did not know much about these special types of cases and these types of students, and sometimes I could see myself getting lost whenever I was having SEND students in my class. I did not know how to deal with them. This program opened my mind as I have ideas about teaching and supporting special needs children.*

A mentee who had been in the teaching field for two years reported that the program offered a very good foundation to her career as a teacher as she did not have a background in inclusion and special needs education. The mentee acknowledged that the program helped her develop a new mindset about inclusion. The new mindset cleared up her misunderstanding that special needs children should not be in mainstream classrooms. The mentee said:

*I started teaching two years ago and did not have a background of inclusion. I was scared to have a special needs student in my class because I was not sure if I was going to be able to give them the attention they needed. I always thought that all children who require special needs should be in special centres. I did not know a teacher in class will be able to give a special need child support in a mainstream class. But, after attending the AJF program, it made me realize that I was wrong. Children with some special needs and disabilities can be in the same class with children without disabilities.*

It was not only mentees who reported that they learnt some new things, even mentors themselves admitted this. One mentor said: "It [AJF program] has given me much better understanding and also a desire to learn more in order to help more." Mentors were motivated to learn more about the topics they were discussing with mentees. This helped them gain new knowledge about inclusion which they did not previously have. A mentor supported this view saying: "I did not specialize in inclusive education. But, through research which I was doing to help my mentees, it helped me understand more about inclusion." Another mentor did not know about inclusion and did not know how to accommodate special needs students in her classes at the university. She learnt how to do that through the AJF program. The mentor said:



*I did not understand how someone would teach a student with a special need in their class when they have for example, 25 other students in that same general classroom. I wondered how the teacher would take care of that student who has a special need. This program helped me as I became more tolerant and understanding of what inclusion is and how it works and more importantly how I can manage special needs students in a mainstream classroom. Through the program, I learnt how I can tweak my teaching strategies to accommodate a special need student and all other students in the class. I have learnt along the way.*

Both mentors and mentees recommended the program to all teachers in the country because they felt it added a lot of value in terms of their understanding of inclusion. A mentee said:

*If someone comes to me and ask if they should join the AJF program or not, I am telling you, I would encourage them 100% to go ahead to join. The coordinators did a good job in choosing training material which was included.*

Similarly, a mentor echoed the same sentiment about recommending the program to all teachers saying: “our schools in this country will be more inclusive if all teachers have an opportunity to study this TPD program.” The one mentor who felt that the program did not increase her knowledge said: “I did not learn anything, I do not know what ADHD is. I know autism only from Hollywood movies. I did not learn anything. The program did not prepare me in terms of dealing with special needs students.” It is interesting to note that despite the mentor reporting that she did not learn anything which she could use in her classes, she felt the program was useful to mentees and encouraged them to attend it. The mentor said: “the program is very good for teachers as it prepares them for inclusion. But, it did not prepare me.” All mentors and mentees who reported that they learnt from the program gave credit to the collaborative learning which was happening through the program.

## **Collaborative Learning**

All mentors and mentees who participated in this study reiterated that they learnt from each other during the AJF program. Most of the mentors were not inclusive education specialists, so they had to research a topic prior to meeting with their mentees. This helped them learn more about inclusion together with information they learnt from mentees through discussions. One mentor supported this statement saying:

*I was guiding my mentees on different topics which were in the course outline. I did not know some of the learning difficulties and disabilities, but I had to read prior to my meeting with them. That helped me add more knowledge and understanding of inclusive education and participate in discussions with my mentees effectively.*

Most of the mentors created a WhatsApp group for easy communication with their mentees. It was mainly to remind each other that there was a session with the facilitator and discussion with the mentor. Some mentors used the social media platform to facilitate discussions and they had to read information related to inclusion before engaging in discussions with mentees. A mentor confirmed this saying:

*The thing that I was really interested in and found to be really nice and I gained from it is the WhatsApp group I created. Whenever they [mentees] had any question, they posted on the group and I started to provide them with extra materials. Sometimes I sent them videos and there are things that I benefitted from because I was reading as well. I had to read resources before sending to them and be ready for their questions and discussion. That was one of the things that was good.*

Another mentor had to do research together with her mentees. She did not only gain information about inclusion, but was inspired to change her specialization from TESOL to special education. The mentor said:

*I still remember the first cohort, I was a mentor and it was a bit difficult because I did not know much about inclusion and I had to actually sit with the mentees and I had to do the research with them because I did not have that much of a base you know. It was great experience. From the first cohort, I got the hang of it and I learnt so much and I am telling you this project has had such a big impact on me that I actually chose this specialisation afterwards. So, this tells you how much it has impacted as I decided to start my PhD in inclusive education. I could have gone into TESOL because this was my specialization and my Masters was on it. But, I looked and I am like no, this is a bit boring let me change to inclusion.*

Collaborative learning was reported by both mentors and mentees. . They worked together during discussions and learnt from each other's knowledge and expertise. A mentor said:

*Among the three mentees that I had, two of them practiced inclusive education before. They had many years of experience of working with SEND students in schools. When it comes to completing tasks for this AJF, it was easy for them. They were on top of the game. They knew a lot about inclusion and I learnt a lot from their experience through discussions that we had. They had this deep knowledge and experience about special education. Even their portfolios which they submitted, they were very well thought of and they got As. I did not have a problem working with them.*

The same mentor went on to say:

*They [mentees] were wonderful people to work with. I enjoyed working with them as I also learnt from their expertise. In all the engagement that I have with people, I try to learn something from them. I learnt from my mentees' expertise and they also learnt something from me. So, it was a good mentor and mentee relationship that we had.*

Another mentor confirmed that she learnt from discussions she had with her mentees. She said: "It was very good experience as I gained some knowledge through discussions that we had." Mentees echoed the same sentiments about learning in a discussive manner. One mentee said:

*I liked the individual meetings that we had with mentors and when they were discussing the topics with all students in class. You know, when you discuss something, it is much better than when someone just talks without giving a chance for a discussion.*

Another mentee supported the view that learning was done through discussions:

*My experience was great, I am happy that I was part of this program. It was really nice, the meetings with mentor, and sessions with the facilitator were really fun because they were always discussing things with us. The mentor made it easy for us to be honest, because my experience in teaching is like only two years.*

Discussions which were taking place were not limited to mentors and students. Sometimes students were encouraged to discuss among themselves and learn from each other. A mentor supported this view saying: "mentees were all working as a team. They were assisting each other with some ideas which were relevant to their final portfolio. There was a lot of interaction among themselves." A mentee concurred with the point of interaction saying:

*It was a very interactive and interesting course in my point of view. The positive thing was the fact that I could hear from other teachers' point of view their perspectives about different*



*challenges in their classes. They were sharing stories with different situations and how they managed the challenges. That was very useful to me.*

Mentees helped each other during the mentorship program. Some had difficulties with English since their mother tongue is Arabic. They helped each other with language. A mentor confirmed this saying: “one challenge that I had is, for some mentees their English is zero. This is because they teach Islamic studies. Students worked together to assist each other with language and that was helpful.”

## Challenging Tasks

Mentors strived to let mentees gain more knowledge about inclusion by giving them challenging tasks to do. A mentor who had a background in inclusive education said:

*I could challenge them more each time we had a discussion. For example, I had a question about a student with autism, I asked them to go and search for strategies which can be used to support that child. I could challenge them more like that. But, in some cases, I felt that I had to hold their hand more than before and it was more about me giving them information than them helping me out with information.*

Another mentor gave her mentees challenging tasks by asking them to do things differently. She said: “I challenged them to open their eyes to see how things can be done differently. I encouraged them to do things differently all the time.” The program was conducted during the time of COVID-19 in such a way that participants had to think hypothetically and complete their assessments. This challenged mentors to think and this was supported by a mentor who said: “mentees were challenged to think hypothetically or reflect on an experience they had with a special needs student. That assignment challenged their thinking along with some discussions that we had in our sessions.” Another mentor said: “the program added a lot of knowledge to the mentees through engagement that they had as they were required to do some reflections and complete challenging tasks.” The challenging tasks enabled mentees to gain comprehensive knowledge about inclusion and to be able to apply it. A mentee confirmed that she managed to apply the information. She said:

*I actually used the knowledge I gained because I have special needs kids in my class, you know kids who are physically and mentally challenged. I applied the knowledge which I learnt from the AJF course to assisting two special needs children in my class and to a great extent, it was a fantastic success.*

The program and its challenging tasks empowered teachers so much that they gained knowledge and skills which they are using to teach children inclusively. It has made some teachers change their mindsets about inclusion and begin to implement it more effectively than before.

## Discussion

TPD is indispensable as it plays a significant role in helping teachers gain in-depth knowledge about special education. This was confirmed by mentees and mentors who participated in the AJF TPD program. The knowledge which teachers gained enhanced their inclusive pedagogical approaches. This is consistent with OECD (2009) which argues that TPD is critical as it enables teachers to succeed in a multicultural classroom. Sayed, Salmon and Balie (2020) argue from a South African perspective that embedding inclusive education in TPD empowers teachers to be able to teach effectively in a diverse classroom with children who have different needs. If teachers are deprived of TPD related to inclusion, they will feel inadequately prepared to teach children, as was the case of educators in Ghana (Chitiyo et al., 2019). Similarly, teachers in Zimbabwe echoed

the same sentiments about feeling ill-prepared to teach SEND students as they did not have comprehensive knowledge and skills on dealing with their special needs (Chitiyo et al., 2016). The fundamental purpose of an inclusive education TPD is for teachers to gain knowledge and skills about dealing with all children in a classroom. This resonates with Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism which is aimed at both mentors and mentees gaining knowledge and skills because of their participation in a program.

Both mentors and mentees who participated in the AJF TPD program benefitted because of the way teaching and learning was happening. Participants confirmed that they were learning in a collaborative environment. Collaboration is a critical aspect of Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory. There was collaboration among mentees, with mentors, and session facilitators. This enabled both mentors and mentees to gain comprehensive knowledge about special education as they were learning from each other's reflection, experience, and best practices. Mizell (2010) postulates that TPD must be done in a collaborative environment so that all parties involved learn from each other's expertise. Similarly, Anto and Coenders (2019) argue that collaboration makes TPD more effective. Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (1977) emphasized that collaborative learning is indispensable as people acquire knowledge when they are interacting with one another. The Vygotskian principle assumes that mentees' cognitive abilities will be enhanced through social interactions with their fellow mentees and with mentors (Vygotsky, 1978). This implies that in a mentorship program like the one reported in this study, the collaborative relationship of mentors and mentees provides a mutually enriching learning experience for both parties. Baroudi (2019) contends that there is need for collaboration of mentors and mentees in a mentorship program as this empowers both parties.

It was reported in this study that mentors guided mentees with their portfolios and supported them in areas they were finding difficult. This aligns with Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding and ZPD. Boud et al. (2014) state that mentors collaborate with mentees and offer support as part of scaffolding to develop their learning. This helps improve mentees' cognitive skills and ability to solve problems within an interactive environment (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) concurs that when mentees collaborate with their mentors, they are scaffolded in a way that allows them to understand the concept better. Boud et al. (2014) state that scaffolding and collaboration go hand in hand and they both enable students to engage in the exploration of knowledge.

The findings of this study show that some mentors gave challenging tasks to their mentees and helped them by giving them more information on topics they were not familiar with. This resonates with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD where a more knowledgeable other interacts with students and supports them to acquire new knowledge. The concept of ZPD was also evident in this study where mentees progressed gradually from discussing what they knew to attempting to acquire new knowledge with the support of their mentors and session facilitator. The concept of ZPD is essential in a TPD program as it marks a point where new knowledge was acquired (Vygotsky, 1978). In this case, the ZPD was confirmed when mentees stated that through the support they had from their mentors, they managed to learn some new ways of supporting SEND students in a classroom.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore mentors' and mentees' reflections about their experiences of participating in an inclusive education professional development program which they attended for for a period of around five months'. The study concludes that inclusive education can be achieved by any teacher or faculty member if they are committed to dedicating time to read and learn about it. One does not need to have inclusion qualifications to be able to offer quality mentorship. This is evidenced by the reflections of mentors who had a mutually enriching experience learning about and mentoring on inclusion during the AJF TPD program. The mentoring

program empowered teachers to be able to cater for the diverse learning needs of special needs children and to offer effective inclusive pedagogical practices during online learning. Another significant contribution that comes out of this study is that even if teachers and faculty members have background knowledge on inclusion, inclusive education TPD sessions are indispensable. They are imperative in the current era where the global pandemic of COVID-19 has changed the way in which teaching and learning occur, and which has subsequently deteriorated SEND students' abilities to access learning and to succeed. Teachers and faculty members need to continuously attend professional development sessions to learn new strategies which can help them improve their inclusive pedagogical practices. It is recommended that inclusive education professional development opportunities should be regulated so that all teachers attend. They should not be done as a one-off exercise, but rather frequently, to improve teachers' capacities to support children with learning difficulties and disabilities.

## References

- Addis, S., McNulty, R., & Duggett, B. (2021). *The Pandemic's Impact on At-Risk Students, Schools, and Graduation Rates*. Anderson: National Dropout Prevention Center. Retrieved October 13, 2021, Available at: <https://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Pandemics-Impact-on-At-Risk-Students-Schools-and-Graduation-Rates.pdf>.
- Anto, A.G., & Coenders F. (2019). Teacher Learning in Collaborative Professional Development: Changes in Teacher and Student Practices. In: J. Pieters, J. Voogt, & N. Pareja Roblin (Eds.), *Collaborative Curriculum Design for Sustainable Innovation and Teacher Learning* (pp. 229-247). Springer, Cham. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-20062-6\_13.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological review*, 84, 191-215. DOI: 10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191.
- Baroudi, S. (2019). *Impact of Peer Mentoring Role on Mentors' Personal Development and Leadership Practices: A study among Undergraduate Emirati Female Students at a Higher Education Institution in the United Arab Emirates*. Doctoral Thesis, British University in Dubai. Available at: <https://bspace.buid.ac.ae/handle/1234/1510>.
- Benkohila, A., Elhoweris, H., & Efthymiou, E. (2020). Faculty attitudes and knowledge regarding inclusion and accommodations of special educational needs and disabilities students: a United Arab Emirates case study. *Psycho-Educational Research Reviews*, 9(2), 100-111. Available at: <https://perrjournal.com/index.php/perrjournal/article/view/135>.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (2014). *Peer Learning in Higher Education* (1st ed.). Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Chitiyo, M., Hughes, E. M., Changara, D., Chitiyo, G., & Montgomery, K. M. (2016). Special education professional development needs in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(1), 48-62. DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2016.1184326.
- Chitiyo, M., Kumedzro, F. K., Hughes, E. M., & Ahmed, S. (2019). Teachers' professional development needs regarding inclusive education in Ghana. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 15(2), 53-79. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1224611.pdf>.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Connolly, S. (2017). The impact of peer mentoring on the mentors. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 9(2), 255-266. DOI: 10.1108/JARHE-10-2015-0078.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Boston: Pearson.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyster, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved October 16, 2021. Available at: [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/productfiles/Effective\\_Teacher\\_Professional\\_Development\\_REPOR\\_T.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/productfiles/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_REPOR_T.pdf).
- Douglass, A.G., Smith, D.L., & Smith, L.J. (2013). An exploration of the characteristics of effective undergraduate peer-mentoring relationships. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 21(2), 219-234. DOI: 10.1080/13611267.2013.813740.
- Efthymiou, E., & Kington, A. (2017). The development of inclusive learning relationships in mainstream settings: A multimodal perspective. *Cogent Education*, 4(1), 1-22. DOI: 10.1080/2331186X.2017.1304015.
- Lapan, S. D., Quartaroli, M. T., & Riemer, F. J. (Eds.). (2012). *Qualitative research: An introduction to methods and designs*. Jossey-Bass.

- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mizell, H. (2010). *Why professional development matters*. Oxford: Learning Forward. Retrieved October 12, 2021. Available at: <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/professional-development-matters.pdf>.
- National Agenda. (2018). *First-Rate education system*. From UAE Vision 2021: Retrieved October 12, 2021. Available at: <https://www.vision2021.ae/en/national-agenda-2021/list/first-rate-circle>.
- OECD. (2009). *The Professional Development of Teachers. Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments: First Results from TALIS*. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/berlin/43541636.pdf>.
- Ragins, B.R. (2016). From the ordinary to the extraordinary: high quality mentoring relationships at work. *Organisational Dynamics*, 45, 228-244. DOI: 10.1016/J.ORGADYN.2016.07.008.
- Sayed, Y., Salmon, T., & Balie, L. (2020). *Embedding Inclusive Education in Teacher Professional Development in South Africa: Impact evaluation report on the Teaching for All project*. Johannesburg: British Council.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- World Bank. (2020). *The COVID-19 pandemic: Shocks to education and policy responses*. Retrieved October 18, 2021. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33696/148198.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Designs and Methods*. Los Angeles: Sage.

## About the authors

**Lawrence Meda** received his PhD in Curriculum Studies from the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, 2014. He is an Associate Professor and Director of Research in Sharjah Education Academy. Dr. Meda currently has 49 publications to his name, including articles in top-tier international journals. His research interests are in Curriculum Studies, Educational Technology, Inclusive Education and Teacher Education.

**Laila Mohebi** received her PhD in Education program from the British University in Dubai in 2018. In 2019, she started her academic career as assistant professor at Zayed University. Her research interests are teacher education, teacher candidate feedback after teaching, early childhood education and TPACK (technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge).

**Areej El Sayary** received her PhD in Education program from the British University in Dubai in 2018. In 2019, she started her academic career as assistant professor at Zayed University. Dr. Areej is an accomplished researcher, having published on cognitive development, Interdisciplinary STEM curriculum, and assessment and presenting her work in several regional conferences.

**Suha Karaki** received her MA in Education (TESOL) and her BA in Communication Arts (Journalism) from the Lebanese American University in Beirut, Lebanon and is currently doing her PhD in Special Education and Inclusion at the British University in Dubai. Her research focus is on positive education and students with special educational needs and disabilities.