

**Role Play as a Pedagogical Tool  
in Inclusive Language Classrooms:  
Benefits, Challenges and Opportunities  
for Learners with Communication Disabilities  
in Malawi**

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Ben de Souza<sup>1</sup>  
ORCID: 0000-0002-6746-9511

**Abstract**

*In a language classroom, communication is central yet it presents unique challenges for inclusivity. Past research studies have suggested that role play offers potential benefits for engaging learners with different needs. However, little is known about the benefits of role play to learners with communication disabilities in a Malawian context. This study investigated these benefits for learners with communication disabilities through Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory. Much as the sociocultural theory does not explicitly acknowledge that there are communicatively challenged members of the speech community, it guided this study as it focuses on the role of social interaction and collaborative learning in cognitive development. The study employed a qualitative research approach using interviews and classroom observations with six secondary school language teachers who have implemented role play in inclusive classrooms in Malawi. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The findings revealed that role play increases participation and attention, as learners with communication disabilities were eager to participate. However, a lack of teacher expertise limited the potential of role play for inclusivity, making it less effective. I therefore argue that the effectiveness of role play depends on teachers' ability to adapt activities to meet diverse learners' needs. Therefore, strengthening opportunities for learner-led discussions, repeated practices and pull-out lessons can help address the gaps.*

**Keywords:** *Communication disabilities, inclusive education, language learning, role play, sociocultural perspective*

**Introduction**

Inclusive education seeks to provide equitable learning opportunities for all learners, including those with disabilities, by promoting teaching strategies that address diverse learner needs (Haug, 2017; Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). In language classrooms, where communication is fundamental, ensuring inclusivity presents unique challenges, particularly for learners with communication disabilities (Eun, 2016). Research studies (e.g. Vitalaki, Kourkoutas & Hart, 2018) suggest that role play is one potential pedagogical strategy for promoting inclusion in such environments. According to Alabsi (2016), role-play encourages learners to engage in simulated real-world scenarios and promotes social interaction and collaborative learning, which are essential for cognitive development. Despite its potential, role play in inclusive classrooms, particularly in low-resource settings such as Malawi, is underexplored (Banks & Zuurmond, 2015; Chiyembekezo, Kondowe & Ngwira, 2019; Chimwaza, 2015).

This study investigates the benefits, challenges and opportunities for implementing role play as a pedagogical tool in inclusive language classrooms for learners with communication disabilities in Malawi. By communication disabilities, I refer to cognitive and epistemic limitations due to speech impairments during the teaching and learning process. While research (such as Chawinga, 2023; Chisamba, 2014; Chiyembekezo et al., 2019) highlights the potential of role play to enhance learner engagement and facilitate active participation in general settings, less is known about its effectiveness in inclusive settings, especially for learners with communication disabilities. In the context of Malawi, where educational resources and teacher training for inclusive education are limited (Blanks, 2016; de Souza, 2022; MacJessie-Mbewe et al., 2023), it is essential to understand how the role play can be adapted to meet the needs of all learners. The study offers insights into how role play can support

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<sup>1</sup> **Corresponding author:**

Ben de Souza, Department of Secondary and Post-School Education, Faculty of Education, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa. E-mail: souzaben@outlook.com

learners with communication challenges and identify practical approaches for overcoming the barriers to its successful implementation. Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the benefits of using role play for learners with communication disabilities in inclusive language classrooms in selected secondary schools in Malawi?
2. What challenges do teachers face in implementing role play in inclusive language classrooms, particularly for learners with communication disabilities?
3. How can the effectiveness of role play be enhanced to promote inclusion for learners with communication disabilities in language classrooms?

## **Literature Review**

The literature review in this section focuses on inclusive education and communication disabilities. The review also explores the benefits of role play in an inclusive language classroom, the challenges teachers face in implementing role play in such contexts, and opportunities afforded by role play.

### **Inclusive Education and Communication Disabilities**

Inclusive education is predicated on the belief that all learners, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have the right to access quality education in a mainstream setting (UNESCO, 2005). This approach requires adopting pedagogical practices that accommodate the needs of diverse learners. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) advocates for a shift from segregated to inclusive education, emphasising that schools should adapt to all learners rather than expecting learners to adapt to the school system. Bruce and Borders (2015: 374) observe that learners with communication disabilities, including hearing impairments, speech disorders or developmental language delays, often face significant barriers in regular language classrooms where verbal communication is a key mode of interaction.

Research studies (including Dockrell, Lindsay & Palikara, 2011) show that communication disabilities can hinder learners' participation in classroom discussions, understanding of new concepts and expression of knowledge. Consequently, exploring teaching methods that reduce these barriers and facilitate engagement is essential. Role play, which offers learners opportunities for active participation in simulated real-world scenarios, has emerged as a potential strategy for supporting inclusive education by providing alternative avenues for communication and interaction (Martin, 2013; Vitalaki et al., 2018).

### **Benefits of Role Play in Inclusive Language Classrooms**

Several studies have demonstrated the positive impact of role play on learner engagement and cognitive development. In inclusive language classrooms, role play provides a dynamic and interactive platform for learners to practise language skills, develop empathy and build confidence in their communicative abilities (Martin, 2013; Gillies, 2016). For learners with communication disabilities, role play offers a range of benefits. Alabsi (2016) explains that role play encourages active participation from all learners, including those with communication challenges, by offering diverse modes of expression beyond verbal language. Learners can use gestures, visual aids and other non-verbal communication to participate, making the learning environment more inclusive (Chiyembekezo et al., 2019).

As Alabsi (2016: 230) observes, by engaging in role play, learners are exposed to new vocabulary and concepts in contextually rich scenarios, which aids in retention and understanding. For learners with communication disabilities, this contextual learning is particularly valuable, as it reinforces language in practical, real-world settings (Vitalaki et al., 2018). Role play allows learners to take on different roles and perspectives, which promotes empathy and social interaction (Dimastoro & Bharati, 2022). This is especially important for learners with communication disabilities, who may benefit from structured opportunities to interact with their peers in a supportive and non-judgmental setting (Chiyembekezo et al., 2019). By participating in role play, learners with communication disabilities can practise language use in a low-pressure environment, which can help to build their confidence in using language in everyday situations (Gillies, 2016).

### **Challenges of Implementing Role Play in Inclusive Classrooms**

Despite the potential benefits of role play, its implementation in inclusive language classrooms, particularly in low-resource settings like Malawi, needs to be improved. One significant barrier is the lack of teacher training and expertise in working with learners with communication disabilities. According

to Chiyembekezo et al. (2019), many teachers are not adequately trained to adapt role play activities to meet the needs of all learners, particularly those with hearing impairments or severe speech disorders. As such, teachers often lack the specialised skills required to modify role play activities to suit learners with different communication needs. For instance, while learners with mild communication impairments may benefit from standard role play scenarios, those with more severe impairments may require additional support, such as sign language interpretation or assistive technology.

In many Malawian classrooms, resources such as visual aids, assistive devices and teaching materials that facilitate role play for learners with communication disabilities are limited or non-existent (Chiyembekezo et al., 2019; Kumwamba, 2023). This lack of resources hampers the ability of teachers to create an inclusive environment where all learners can participate meaningfully (Chitiyo et al., 2019). Moreover, managing a classroom where learners have diverse needs can be challenging, particularly during role play activities that require collaboration and interaction (Kilgour et al., 2015). Kilgour et al. (2015: 12) also observe that teachers may struggle to balance the needs of learners with communication disabilities while ensuring that the rest of the class remains engaged and on task.

### **Opportunities Role Play Presents in Inclusive Language Classrooms**

In Malawi's inclusive language classrooms, where learners of diverse abilities learn side by side, role play emerges as a powerful tool for breaking communication barriers (Chiyembekezo et al., 2019). Kumwamba (2023) observes that role play creates opportunities for all learners—including those with communication disabilities—to participate, express themselves, and engage meaningfully with language content. Thus, in a system where inclusivity is often challenged by limited resources and rigid teaching methods, role play offers a flexible, low-cost strategy that encourages interaction, creativity and social learning.

Role play promotes inclusion by shifting the focus from correctness to communication. It allows learners to assume different roles, practise real-life conversations, and collaborate with peers in a supportive environment (Kilgour et al., 2015). For learners with communication disabilities, this interactive setting reduces pressure and builds confidence, encouraging them to take risks and use language in ways that traditional methods may not allow.

Furthermore, role play supports differentiated learning (Vitalaki et al., 2018). Teachers can adapt scenarios, offer visual aids and provide repetition or simplified scripts to meet diverse learner needs. In Malawi, where classrooms are often overcrowded and under-resourced, this adaptability makes role play particularly valuable. It helps teachers create inclusive spaces without needing advanced technology or materials. However, to fully harness these opportunities, Malawian teachers need targeted training in inclusive teaching strategies (Chitiyo et al., 2019). Without this, role play risks excluding the very learners it aims to support.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Role play as a pedagogical tool is grounded in sociocultural theoretical perspective that social interaction plays a key role in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky argues that learning is inherently a social process, with knowledge being co-constructed through collaborative interactions between individuals. This perspective speaks to 'scaffolding', where more knowledgeable others, such as teachers or peers, support learners navigating complex tasks (de Souza, 2023). Wong, Hall and Hernandez (2020: 29) observe that "Vygotsky believed that human development is the result of interactions between people and their social environment".

This study adopts Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective as a theoretical framework because it emphasises the role of social interaction and cultural context in learning. Vygotsky's belief that knowledge is constructed through interaction with others mirrors how role play facilitates language acquisition through meaningful interactions and cultural simulations. By allowing learners to take on various roles and learn from peers, role play promotes inclusivity, enabling learners of diverse abilities to collaborate and support one another. Role play benefits learners with communication disabilities through non-verbal communication and alternative methods (Chiyembekezo et al., 2019). This reflects Vygotsky's view of learning through multiple modes of expression, hence its use in this study.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the benefits, challenges and opportunities of using role play as a pedagogical tool in inclusive language classrooms for learners with communication disabilities in Malawi. Specifically, the research used interviews and classroom observations. These methods were selected to enable an in-depth examination of the experiences of secondary school language teachers who incorporate role play in classrooms with learners facing communication challenges (see Wong et al., 2020). The qualitative approach, interviews and classroom observations allowed for an analysis of teachers' reflections on how role play facilitates or hinders inclusive learning while highlighting the strategies they use to overcome obstacles and the opportunities that arise from role play.

The research was conducted with six secondary school language teachers from three inclusive secondary schools in Malawi. These schools were purposefully selected to include institutions actively practising inclusive education, especially for learners with communication disabilities such as hearing impairments, speech difficulties and language disorders (see Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Teachers were chosen based on their experience with inclusive classrooms and their use of role play as a teaching strategy, ensuring a range of perspectives from different classroom contexts. Interviews were selected as the data collection method due to their structured yet flexible format, allowing the exploration of personal experiences and beliefs (Wong et al., 2020). The interviews focused on teachers' perceptions of the benefits of role play, challenges in implementing it in inclusive classrooms, strategies for adapting role play for learners with communication disabilities and recommendations for improving its use to promote inclusivity in language learning. Classroom observations were employed to complement and validate the self-reported data from the interviews.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, providing a systematic approach to identifying patterns and themes from the interviews and classroom observations. As described in Clarke and Braun (2017), the analysis followed six key steps: familiarisation with the data, initial coding of transcripts, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally, presenting the themes in a narrative form supported by participant quotes. This process allowed for a detailed examination of how teachers use role play in inclusive classrooms and how they navigate the associated challenges.

The study was conducted with ethical approval from Mzuzu University's Research Ethics Committee. The ethical clearance (MZUNIREC/DOR/23/49) was granted to a larger research project with a colleague from the University. This individual paper is an outcome from the said research project. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity through pseudonyms (index codes of A, B and C representing the secondary school names and Arabic numbers 1, 2, 3, etc representing the participant names, e.g. A1, B2, C3). Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study without consequence. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, strategies such as triangulation, member checking and reflexivity were employed (see Cohen et al., 2018). Triangulation involved gathering data from multiple teachers across different schools to capture various experiences in inclusive education. The use of classroom observations also added to the trustworthiness of the triangulated data. Member checking allowed participants to review the findings and verify the accuracy of the interpretations.

### **Research Findings**

This section presents the research findings. Firstly, the section presents findings on how role play increases participation and attention in inclusive language classroom. Secondly, the presentation focuses on the teachers' lack of expertise and its adversity to the benefits of role play in inclusive classroom. Lastly, the section presents findings on the need for iterative strategies to utilise opportunities from role play for inclusivity.

#### **How Role play Increases Participation and Attention in Language Classroom**

During the classroom observations in all the six lessons, I observed that learners, including those with communication disabilities, became more attentive and engaged during role play. Interestingly, the learners with communication disabilities were eager to participate, and even those who did not speak were given non-verbal roles to ensure inclusivity. During the interviews, teachers reported that learners grasp concepts better, with high retention rate after role playing exercises, as captured below:

A1: *I would say mostly when we are using role playing, students tend to draw all their attention to the play. So, they participate more. They listen. Because now we have chosen people who are doing this. It is not like everyone will do the role play. But then we have chosen people to do the role play and the other learners tend to be attentive to participate. I mean, to understand or to know what is happening. So, they give more attention. I think I would say they listen. They also fully participate. They feel happy. And sometimes they can use even songs themselves to be involved in a lesson. So, in that way, they also fully participate. And even if I have stayed a long time without maybe using role play, they could remind, we need to do that thing.*

C1: *Learners with disabilities are actually eager to be involved in the role-play. We find other students that do actually want to be involved. So, we can actually involve them in the role play by giving them maybe some roles that would not necessarily need them to speak, but they can just be there maybe to do some other things. And maybe to make them feel involved and included in whatever is happening.*

C2: *When I have used role play, most of the times, almost I should say 80 percent, they do grasp the words, whatever I was teaching. Then the remaining 20 percent, it needs special attention. And most of the times, I think in Form 2, there are a few of them that need most of the special attention, but most of them, it is like their performance is not that totally different, and they are on the same range. Like these mock examinations, we can say they have improved a lot.*

Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning occurs through social interaction and the use of cultural tools. In role play, learners are actively engaged in social interactions, both verbal and non-verbal, which helps them internalise new language concepts. The attention and participation observed in learners (as participants A1, C1 and C3 shared during the interviews) reflect the idea of scaffolding, where the teacher and peers support learners in performing tasks that they might not be able to do alone. Wong et al. (2020) argue that this interaction helps learners internalise the knowledge through social collaboration, particularly in a context culturally relevant to them (i.e. role play in language learning). Therefore, role play serves as a pedagogical tool that enhances mental capacities, as it offers structured social interactions.

### **Teachers' Lack of Expertise and its Adversity to the Benefits of Role Play**

From the classroom observations conducted, the main challenge identified in using role play is the lack of teacher expertise, especially in managing learners with disabilities, such as hearing impairments. It was evident during the observations that teachers struggled to communicate with the learners with communication impairments as their basic sign language skills were not enough. It also became evident during the observations that some learners were shy or felt excluded because they believed they were delaying others. Teachers admitted to have sometimes excluded learners with communication disabilities due to time constraints, as reported in the interviews:

B2: *It is hard for us to incorporate them. Maybe for those that are not deaf, it is a bit easier. We do incorporate them because they do hear what we say. They do hear what their friends say. Even though they may miss out on the explanations or the translation of some words. But then they are able to hear what we are saying. So those ones are not our big challenge as they are easy to handle because whatever you tell them, they do write. But then those that have hearing impairments, it is hard for us to even communicate with them because even if we use just the basic sign language skills that maybe we have acquired, it is still not enough. So, I feel they are left out.*

A2: *I am not trained well in how to handle them. Of course, at the university, we had a special needs course, but then it was just the basic one. It was not everything. We do not have the skills. And somehow, you may have the learners left out. For example, those that are deaf and dumb, or have hearing impairment, we feel they are left out. We feel that there is nothing they hear in the class. The translators cannot translate everything. For them to hear, they would have to hear it right from us, the teachers. So, it is like most of the time, they do not understand.*

In a sociocultural theoretical perspective, learners develop higher mental functions through guided participation in pedagogically significant activities (Vygotsky, 1978; Wong et al., 2020). Judging from the classroom observations and interview responses, the challenge lies in the lack of pedagogically

appropriate tools (e.g. sign language skills and better communication strategies) to support learners with communication disabilities. The teachers' limited ability to communicate effectively with hearing-impaired learners means these learners are deprived of crucial social interactions, a key aspect in the Vygotskian sociocultural approach. This situation indicates a gap in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where learners could succeed with proper support but currently lack the necessary scaffolding from teachers (de Souza, 2023).

### **The Need for Iterative Strategies to Use Opportunities from Role Play**

The classroom observations demonstrated that the role play is part of the teaching culture. The observations gave an impression that role play help learners remember lessons more effectively. During the interviews, teachers proposed that learners should be given more opportunities to speak and that pull-out lessons should be arranged for those needing extra support, as reported below:

*C1: You are supposed to be doing the role play now and then, and you are supposed to be doing other activities as well, now and then. That will help the learners with disabilities. Because if we do that once, it will just end there.*

*C2: I should say, the learners easily grasp whatsoever is being taught, just because most of the time what you have seen, you easily remember, rather than what you have heard. So, when these learners have seen something being portrayed, something being put into action, they easily remember that thing. And even sometimes when I am teaching in front of them, I can imitate something, and they easily remember that.*

*B1: I think we should allow students to speak more than the teacher. And actually, because role playing involves a special group where some students are role playing and others are just listening to their friends, we can maximise the speaking by allowing comments from other friends after those have spoken.*

*A2: Pull-out lessons are arranged when the students have approached you. At the school, there are only four specialist teachers. So, they cannot manage to be teaching in all the classes. After the lesson, learners need to assess themselves to see if they have captured the concepts or not. We ask them to tell us, and then we have pull-out lessons. It is done by the specialist teacher or the subject teacher.*

The strategies shared above speak to the sociocultural perspective that learning is enhanced through social interaction and the internalisation (Vygotsky, 1978). Role play, when used regularly, becomes a pedagogical tool that mediates learning by providing learners with repeated opportunities to engage in meaningful social interactions. The use of repeated practices, where learners with communication disabilities continuously engage in role play, supports the Vygotskian view that learners construct knowledge through active participation in socially meaningful activities (cf. Wong et al., 2020). The pull-out lessons reflect the principle of the ZPD, as they provide additional scaffolding for learners who need more support.

### **Discussion**

The increasing recognition of the need to adapt teaching strategies to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners, particularly those with disabilities, is a central theme in the literature on inclusive education (Bruce & Borders, 2015). In this growing discourse, role play emerges as a promising instructional strategy, especially in the context of language education where communication is both the medium and the objective of instruction. As shown in Chiyembekezo et al. (2019), role play offers a platform for active participation, peer interaction and co-construction of knowledge. These affordances are particularly critical in inclusive classrooms, where learners bring diverse communicative abilities and learning needs.

In the Malawian context, where inclusive education is still evolving, the use of role play provides a window of opportunity to address the communication challenges faced by learners with communication disabilities. The study at hand, which examined language teachers' use of role play in inclusive secondary school classrooms, found that role play significantly enhanced learner engagement, particularly for those with communication disabilities. Learners who are often silent or marginalised during conventional instruction demonstrated increased attention and willingness to participate when engaged in role play activities. This agrees with the principles of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory,

which emphasises the fundamental role of social interaction in cognitive development. Role play serves as a scaffold within the learner's ZPD (Wong et al., 2020), enabling learners to develop language and social skills through guided participation.

However, the study also highlights critical limitations. While role play has the potential to promote inclusion, its success is mediated by key contextual factors, most notably, teacher preparedness, adaptability of learning activities and resource availability (Kumwamba, 2023). Teachers in the study expressed mixed feelings about their ability to fully support learners with communication disabilities. Although they attempt to adapt instruction using strategies like questioning and simplified language, many acknowledge that they lack formal training in inclusive pedagogies. This gap in expertise limits their ability to modify role play activities to accommodate diverse needs effectively.

Vygotsky's view of teachers as cultural mediators is especially relevant here. In his framework, teachers are not mere transmitters of knowledge, but active participants in shaping the learning environment to suit learners' developmental stages (Vygotsky, 1978). To fulfill this role, teachers must be equipped with appropriate pedagogical tools, including differentiated instruction strategies, accessible materials and a deep understanding of diverse learning profiles (de Souza, 2023). Without this foundation, role play may become performative rather than transformative, failing to reach its inclusivity potential.

Moreover, role play's value lies not just in its interactivity, but in its capacity to nurture cognitive transformation (Vitalaki et al., 2018). This study has shown that, for learners with communication difficulties, role play provides a structured yet flexible medium through which they can explore abstract language concepts, express emotions and engage in social negotiation. It became very evident from the classroom observations that role play creates a low-stakes environment where mistakes are tolerated, peer support is encouraged and linguistic experimentation is possible. In this way, role play acts as a bridge from external, socially mediated interaction to internal cognitive development, a process central to Vygotsky's theory.

Importantly, this process is not automatic. I argue that for role play to be truly inclusive, teachers must be intentional in their design and implementation of activities. Opportunities for learner-led discussions allow learners to take ownership of their learning and build confidence. Repetition of role play tasks helps reinforce concepts and provides multiple entry points for learners with different paces of understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, targeted support such as pull-out lessons can offer personalised guidance for learners who may need more intensive intervention, as teachers suggested during the interviews.

Summarily, role play holds considerable promise as an inclusive teaching and learning strategy in Malawian language classrooms. It facilitates communication, fosters collaboration and supports the cognitive development of learners with and without communication disabilities. However, its effectiveness is contingent on the presence of trained, reflective teachers who can adapt practices to meet diverse needs. Enhancing teacher capacity and providing structural support are therefore critical steps toward leveraging role play as a genuinely inclusive pedagogical tool.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Despite the benefits of role play, the challenges identified, such as insufficient teacher expertise and limited resources for learners with communication disabilities, suggest that not all learners have equitable access to it. Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective emphasises that the cultural environment must provide learners with the necessary tools to succeed. In the context of inclusive education, this means that teachers need more support in training and resources to create a truly inclusive learning environment. To fully implement an inclusive and socioculturally responsive classroom, teachers must receive continuous training on inclusive practices, particularly regarding adapting role play for learners with communication disabilities. Moreover, schools and educational systems need to invest in the necessary resources, such as assistive technologies and professional support networks, to ensure that all learners can benefit from role play's social and cognitive advantages. These efforts will promote an environment where social interaction, cultural tools and collaborative learning converge to support the cognitive development of all learners. Based on the study's insights, I recommend the following:

- Teacher preparedness is a critical factor in the success of inclusive teaching and learning strategies. Regular professional development sessions focused on inclusive pedagogies, particularly adapting role play for learners with communication disabilities, are essential. These

training sessions should emphasise using alternative communication methods such as sign language, visual aids and other supportive techniques that can be incorporated into role play activities. As Kumwamba (2023) notes, such training enhances teachers' ability to modify instructional approaches, ensuring that learners with varying communication needs can participate meaningfully.

- The integration of assistive technologies such as communication boards or speech-generating devices, can significantly enhance the participation of learners with severe communication disabilities in role play activities. While this approach necessitates investment in technological resources, its potential to improve learning outcomes is substantial. Martin (2013) highlights the importance of using such tools to bridge communication gaps, making role play more accessible and effective for all learners.
- Collaboration between teachers and specialists, including special education experts, speech therapists and other professionals, is crucial in designing role play activities that meet the needs of all learners. Joint planning ensures that role play scenarios are adapted to accommodate learners with communication disabilities, providing a more inclusive and supportive environment. This collaborative approach ensures that role play is accessible, engaging and tailored to the diverse needs of the classroom.
- Role play activities should be designed to reflect the cultural and linguistic context of the learners. By incorporating culturally relevant scenarios, teachers ensure that learners, including those with communication disabilities, can relate to and engage with the content meaningfully. This approach is particularly important in settings like Malawi, where cultural diversity significantly shapes learners' experiences.

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### **Author Biography**

**Dr Ben de Souza** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Secondary and Post-School Education, Faculty of Education at Rhodes University in South Africa. He holds the degrees of Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Education from Rhodes University, and Bachelor of Education from the University of Malawi. His academic, research and supervision interests are inclusive education, teacher education and Education for Sustainable Development.