

# Classroom Heterogeneity and its Influence on Learner Behaviour and Academic Performance in the Foundation Phase

Mamphwe Dzulani<sup>1</sup>; Mulovhedzi Shonisani Agnes<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education,  
Department of Early Childhood Education. University of Venda.  
ORCID No: <sup>1</sup>0009-0008-9861-2940; <sup>2</sup> 0000-0002-8355-3377

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**Abstract:** Learners with differences in cognitive development, culture, language, and socio-economic backgrounds are found in Foundation Phase heterogeneous classrooms. It challenges educators in adjusting their teaching strategies to accommodate different learners. These differences also provide opportunities for educators to include culture in learning activities, encourage group activities, and support holistic development. The purpose of the study was to explore how educators manage heterogeneous classrooms and respond to learners' differences, and how these shape their teaching practices. The study adopted Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which reflects that social interactions in learning and development are important. The study employed a qualitative research design. Interviews and observations were conducted to collect data from eight Foundation Phase educators selected through purposive sampling from four schools within Vhembe District in Limpopo Province. Thematic analysis was utilised. The study findings revealed that managing heterogeneous classrooms impacts teaching and learning; educators adjust instructional strategies to ensure all learners' needs are met. Educators in heterogeneous classrooms face challenges in teaching learners of different abilities. The study recommendation is a continuous educator training, culturally responsive materials, and ongoing collaboration between educators and education stakeholders, aligning the Sustainable Development Goal 4 commitment to promote inclusive and equal learning for all learners.

**Keywords:** *Heterogeneous Classrooms, Inclusive Education, Foundation Phase, Adaptive Teaching Strategies, Sociocultural Theory.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Many South African rural schools, educators find it challenging to teach different learners using the same methods in the classroom (Tai, 2022). Educators explained that working in overcrowded classrooms with limited learning materials are challenging and also provide opportunities to promote inclusive education (Goyibova, Muslimov, Sabirova, Kadirova, and Samatova, 2025). Educators are required to apply a range of instructional strategies. To meet individual learner needs (Rasmitadila, Rachmadtullah, Samsudin, & Aliyyah, 2021). This study explores how Foundation Phase educators manage classroom diversity and how learner differences influence teaching practices. The study chose Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasising that social interactions in learning and development importance (Cong-Lem, 2022). The study used observations of Foundation Phase

classrooms, where educators make daily efforts to support learners from diverse backgrounds despite limited resources, experiences inspired the researcher to investigate how educators respond to classroom diversity in practice (Jama & Lunga, 2024). The study to explore local lived experiences of South African educators and learners (Skae, Brown, & Wilmot, 2020). The study provides valuable information for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in promoting inclusive and culturally responsive education (Motitswe, 2025).

The study addresses the following questions:

- How does classroom diversity affect teaching strategies used in the Foundation Phase classroom?
- What challenges do educators face when managing different learners in a heterogeneous Foundation Phase classroom?

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), learning is a social process shaped by learners' cultural, linguistic, and family backgrounds. Other authors, emphasise that learning is not only an individual activity but is also deeply influenced by social interactions with educators, peers, family members, and the broader community (Veraksa, Cunha de Araujo & Solovieva, 2024). Interview questions, classroom observations, and the analysis of culturally responsive teaching practices were all grounded in this theoretical framework.

### ➤ *Sociocultural Theory*

The study adopted Sociocultural theory to understand how Foundation Phase educators teach in heterogeneous classrooms, Vygotsky's view that knowledge is constructed through collaborative interactions among learners, educators, and the community (Alkhudiry, 2022). Sociocultural in South African classrooms, learners are different in culture, language, and knowledge shape their understanding, experiences, values, and intergenerational participation (Johnson, Golombek, & Rieker, Eds., 2024). It revealed that families, elders, and communities' role are important in learners' development (Steed, Shapland & Leech, 2022). In Foundation Phase classrooms, differences in language, culture, and prior experiences create both opportunities and challenges for educators striving to provide inclusive learning experiences (Goyibova, Muslimov, Sabirova, Kadirova, & Samatova, 2025). The study understands classroom heterogeneity in the Foundation Phase, its impact on learner development, and the adaptive teaching strategies educators use to manage diversity (Foley, Faas & Darmody, 2024). In Sociocultural Theory, educators are mediators who connect new knowledge to learners' cultural experiences enabling them to participate actively in learning activities and supporting the SDG 4 of the United Nations inclusive, for an example, socially situated teaching practices (Anyichie, Butler, Perry & Nashon, 2023; Sadiki, 2024; Wibowo, Wangid, & Firdaus, 2025). Educators use home languages, folk stories, culturally relevant examples, and community knowledge encourage understanding and engagement in the classroom (Hofman-Bergholm, 2022). The theory informed the design of interviews and classroom observations and the literature review on inclusive strategies that respond to learners' social and cultural backgrounds.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study review literature, about classroom heterogeneity and its impact on teaching practices. The study explores how educators adjust their lessons to meet learners' diverse needs, including abilities, learning styles, languages, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds. Heterogeneous classroom, challenges in teaching and learning and offers opportunities of adjusting teaching methods, particularly in South African education's inclusive policies.

### ➤ *Classroom Heterogeneity*

Classroom heterogeneity are the differences that learners bring to a single classroom. In the Foundation Phase, learners vary in their abilities, languages, race, culture, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational needs. (Pritchett, 2022; Basnet, 2024 & Bakay, 2023; and Patel, Mohammed & Koen, 2024). In other research educators are required to adjust their teaching methods to accommodate all learners' different needs; for, example, use differentiated instruction (ID) (Ituma, 2025). Research on different languages in classrooms reveals that educators switch languages to improve comprehension and participation, especially for emergent learners (Elshafie, & Zhang, 2024). Different learners' behaviour also affects classroom functioning, with evidence showing adaptive teaching enhances engagement and reduces disruption and time waste (Lutz, Frey, Rank, and Gebhardt, 2024). Other studies show that early intervention, strong educator training, and learner-centered approaches effectively address heterogeneity in classrooms (Lakkala, Galkien, Navaitien, Cierpiałowska, Tomecek & Uusiautti, 2021). Educators group learners and give them activities and learning resources that suit their abilities and scaffold learning for learners those who struggle, this ensuring that all learners' needs are met despite their challenges (Sepadi, 2025). In South African contexts, policies support inclusive education, but challenges such as underfunded schools, overloaded classrooms, different languages, lack of resources, and immigration, delay the implementation of inclusive education and increase inequality (Mbewe, Kamchedzera & Kunkwenzu, 2021; Mpanza & Govender, 2022; Egbedeyi & Babalola, 2023; Gichurur, 2024). There is a need for research in exploring how educators manage in heterogeneous classrooms and how they respond to learners' differences, and how these shape their teaching practices (Cerna et al., 2021; Meadows, 2021; Yele & Specioza, 2024).

### ➤ *Importance of the Foundation Phase*

In the early years of a child's learning, developmental stage is important (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2020). Researchers such as Attanasio, Cattani and Meghir (2022) recognised that, in early childhood education basic skills in reading, writing, counting, social and cognitive abilities yield better long-term results, improve learners school readiness, reduce dropouts compared trying to fix problems later. Other researchers revealed that learners' academic and personal development are prioritised in Early Childhood Development and Education by providing equal access to quality education (Gichuru et al. 2021; Rao, Yang, Su & Cohrsen, 2023; Alam and Mohanty 2023). Well supported systems manage heterogeneity more effectively through educators support and training, appropriate learning environments, and access for all learner and contributes positive in achieving Sustainable Developmental Goal (SDG4) of providing quality education (Nakidien, Singh, & Sayed, 2021; Lakkala et al., 2021). Learners who can't read with understanding, use different languages, culture, poor access to early education and poverty are worsened by inequalities in education and affect future learning in heterogeneity

classroom (Phala and Hugo 2022; Bakay 2023). Research reveal that without proper support, classroom diversity becomes a challenge (Goyibova, Muslimov, Sabirova, Kadirova and Samatova 2025). The study explores the importance Foundation Phase educators adapting their practices in diverse, under-resourced classrooms.

#### ➤ *Impact of Heterogeneity on Teaching Strategies in Classroom*

Heterogeneous classrooms affect the way Foundation Phase educators plan and deliver their lessons (Naparan and Alinsug 2021; Chimbunde and Moreeng 2024). Research shows that in heterogeneity educators are encouraged to use differentiated instruction, adjust lesson content and pace to accommodate learners who have different abilities including in multi grade schools, they group learners according to ability (Lindner, Nusser, Gehrer & Schwab 2021). Other researchers reveal that teachers using peer support, and plan different tasks per group when they teach the same topic across levels, for an example: braille materials, tactile graphics, auditory aids, and peer support (Marks, Woolcott & Markopoulos, 2021; Ginja & Chen, 2020). Some educational systems recommendation of an educator-to-learner ratio of 1:30 benchmark is not met in practice, and it put educators more under pressure to differentiate teaching with fewer resources (Zondo, Human-Vogel, & Omidire, 2025). Strong educational support allows individualised learning, accommodate different learning needs and is culturally responsive in teaching and learning especially in schools facing systemic inequality (Lambrecht, Lenkeit, Hartmann, Ehlert, Knigge, & Spörer, 2020; Caingcoy 2023; Bülbül, 2024). Other researcher reveal that for a successful learning, educators are required to plan before, rather than accommodating identifying learners' difficulties (Kaur and Bhatia 2024). Other educators use code-switching, group activities, storytelling, and visual aids, including supporting holistic development (Ristiamadani & Tauchid, 2025; Alam & Mohanty, 2023). During interviews educators reported that they are underdeveloped to deal with the diversity classrooms, lack of support, and materials needed to adapt teaching for all learners (Mbewe, Kamchedzera and Kunkwenzu, 2021). The study notes the gap between Inclusive Education Papers policy intentions and classroom realities emphasise the need for deeper exploration into how Foundation Phase educators adapt their practices in heterogeneous classroom (Rinquest, & Simba, 2024).

#### ➤ *Challenges Educators Face in Heterogeneous Classroom*

Educators in heterogeneous classrooms, especially in rural areas, face multiple challenges in dealing with learner differences that can affect teaching and learning (Alam and Mohanty 2023; Matodzi, 2025). Participants in this study explained how education department fail to equip them with the relevant skills they need to differentiate instruction, it left them not ready to deal with heterogeneous classrooms (Hills and Sessoms-Penny 2021). Overcrowding continues to limit individualised learner support and effective classroom management (Mpanza and Govender 2022). Other researcher reveal that educators have limited training

strategies to support multi-lingual learners. In this study, educators expressed concern about not knowing learners' home languages well and said that code-switching was the only way they could communicate effectively (Heugh 2025). Many educators were unfamiliar with the SIAS process and it led to delays in receiving help for learners with conditions example; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia (Makofane, Ndlovu, Mphahlele, & Themane, 2024). Other researcher reveals the significant weakness on School Based Support Team (SBSTs) and school psychologists which are often unavailable, many educators end up managing on their own, which leaves them overwhelmed (Walton & Engelbrecht (2022). Heavy workload often results in educators' stress and burnout, because they try to balance teaching and diverse needs in classrooms (Hoadley, 2020). The study finds that educators reported feeling tired, emotionally drained, and unsure of how to help different learners. Inclusive education cannot be achieved through policy alone; educators need ongoing training, real support, and materials that reflect their actual classroom realities (Matjeni, & De Jager, 2025). This research seeks to understand on what Foundation Phase educators actually go through and to find appropriate strategies to make inclusion happen in real classrooms, not just on paper.

## IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### ➤ *Research Design*

In this study, qualitative research method was to explore the complex ways in which diverse learners influence teaching and learning in the classroom (Dehalwar and Sharma (2024). This approach allowed the researcher to access educators' real-life experiences and to capture insights that would be overlooked by more rigid or numerically driven studies (Nugent, Carroll, & Lodge, 2023). Participants of this study involve eight educators which were purposefully selected based on minimum of 5 years' experience teaching in diverse learning classrooms (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022). The study used semi-structured interviews and classroom observation to collect data, both verbal accounts and real-time classroom practices (Sahito, Özer, Abro and Junejo, 2024). Data was analysed through thematic analysis to navigate recurring patterns, challenges, and innovative strategies in heterogeneous classrooms (Campbell, Durepos, Nguyen, Whitmore, Gehrke, Graham, and Jack, 2021). To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher applied established qualitative criteria, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, supported by engagement, triangulation, and member checking to deepen understanding when exploring a heterogeneous classroom (Ahmed, 2024). The study considered ethical issues by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, allowing voluntary participation, and adhering to institutional ethical standards to protect participants' rights and maintain integrity throughout the research process (Mirza, Bellaleem, & Mirza, 2023).

## V. DATA ANALYSIS

The study thematic analysis to interpret data collected on interviews and observation, which provides clear and organised steps for qualitative research. It helped the study to identify recurring patterns and themes in the strategies educators use to manage heterogeneous classrooms, respond to learners' differences, and how these shape their teaching practices (Lindner, Nusser, Gehrler & Schwab, 2021; Lim, 2024). The study used thematic analysis coding, reflecting participants' first-hand experiences of working in heterogeneous classrooms to produce detailed interpretations and findings that connect to real teaching environments, making the research relevant and credible for inclusive education (Thompson, 2022; Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021).

## VI. RESULTS

### ➤ *Data Analysis Revealed three Main Themes:*

- Impact of Teaching Heterogeneity on teaching strategies in the classroom
- Importance of the Foundation Phase
- Difficulties in Supporting a Varied Group of Learners

### ➤ *Theme 1: Impact of Teaching Heterogeneity on Teaching Strategies in the Classroom*

Educators in Foundation Phase classrooms teaches groups of learners who speak different languages, learning abilities, and cultural backgrounds. Educators shared that they regularly adjusted or modified their teaching so that each learner could follow and take part in lessons. It becomes harder for educator to plan and assess lessons when learners are so different, but also saw learners helping one another during class and educators trying creative ways to include everyone. Educators depended on their experience and knowledge of their learners' backgrounds, although some said they had not been trained enough to assist all learners effectively.

- Educator 2, spoke with reflective insight, shared that:  
Every day, they have to rethink how they will present the lesson. What works for one group confuses another
- Educator 1, responded, with concern that:  
They are doing their best, but they have not received training on how to teach in such heterogeneous classroom settings.

Educators need more practical training, before and after they start teaching, to handle heterogeneous classrooms better. Diversity is part of everyday classroom, which calls for creativity and adaptability. During observation educators often moved learners into small groups during lessons, responding to how learners behaved or understood the work at that moment.

### ➤ *Theme 2: Importance of the Foundation Phase*

Foundation Phase is where most learning and social skills begin to take shape. This phase is a key period where

learners develop early reading, counting, and interaction skills that prepare them for higher grades. It is time when learners who struggle, especially those from multilingual or low-income homes, need more attention and support.

In a hopeful tone, educator 4 stated that, if learners are given the right support now, they will be ready for the rest of their schooling.

Early intervention to address learning gaps (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Attanasio, Cattani & Meghir, 2022) and Sociocultural Theory, stresses in supporting learners early to prevent learning gaps as they grow. Educators considered that large classes and a shortage of resources made it hard to reach every learner.

### ➤ *Theme 3: Difficulties in Supporting a Varied Group of Learners*

It was observed that Foundation Phase educators often adjusted their lessons to meet the different learners' levels and their backgrounds. This involved switching between languages, using songs or drawings, and preparing tasks that match learners' levels.

- Educator 3 mentioned that, teaching in a classroom with mixed abilities requires always them to adjust their methods so that every learner can understand, for example, switching to another language.

This challenges made it difficult for them to adapt; educators spoke about not having enough materials, working in overcrowded classrooms, and not receiving guidance on how to teach mixed-ability groups.

- Educator 2 shared that, they feel overwhelmed by the number of learners in a single class.  
Educators' abilities were limited in giving each learner the individual attention they needed. In these constraints;
- Educator 4 proudly shared that, they make their own posters or charts using what they have, and they let learners help one another because it encourages teamwork.

Educators actively create posters and promote peer support. Resilience educators tried to find simple, practical ways to make lessons effective. There is a need for better access to materials, practical training, and continuous professional development to help educators manage heterogeneous classrooms more effectively.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In this study, the exploration of diverse learners in the classroom showed how it shaped the way educators teach, how confident they feel, and how learners take part in lessons. The findings revealed that having learners of different backgrounds often pushes educators to adjust their teaching strategies to accommodate all learners. It also creates some difficulties, such as handling behaviour and planning lessons that suit learners with different needs.



Educators need more time, training, and motivation to reach every learner. The study points that they need stronger support, including continuous educator training and clear policies to guide educators in heterogeneous classrooms. Proper support and resources, classroom diversity can help strengthen learning instead of limiting it.

## VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

### ➤ *Impact of Teaching Heterogeneity on Teaching Strategies in the Classroom*

The study showed that Foundation Phase educators are familiar with the wide range of learning needs that exist in classrooms, influenced by differences in ability, language, and background. Many educators feel unprepared to deal with such diversity effectively. Both initial training and continuous development do not always give educators enough practical tools for teaching in mixed classrooms. Educators used what they know about their learners and past experience, but this alone does not meet all the challenges they face. Educator training should be improved, and ongoing support should encourage educators to use flexible and creative approaches to reach every learner.

### ➤ *Importance of the Foundation Phase*

The Foundation Phase is an important role to help young learners to develop basic skills, in reading, mathematics, and social skills, especially those coming from poor home backgrounds with limited resources or where a different language is spoken. It is still a challenge for educators to give learners the support they need due to factors such as overcrowded classrooms and a lack of materials. In this study educators understand the need to notice and help learners with difficulties early, many still feel held back by the challenges in the education system that make it harder to support every child equally.

### ➤ *Difficulties in Supporting a Varied Group of Learners*

Foundation Phase educators are required adapt their teaching methods to meet the needs of all learners from different backgrounds. Educators cope, show dedication and flexibility, but they are also hindered by challenges in the education system that make it difficult to apply inclusive teaching consistently. To assist educators, managing diversity better, educators' development programmes should include practical content on how to work with mixed-ability classes, and they should also have access to regular workshops. It is also important to reduce class size and make sure schools have enough resources. These changes would assist educators in giving more individualised support to learners and in identifying learning problems early.

## DECLARATIONS

I, Dzulani Mamphwe, declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the manuscript.

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## APPENDIX A: EDITORS REPORT

### Language Certificate



Reference No:1000686

[kufazano@gmail.com](mailto:kufazano@gmail.com)

+27631434276

27 October 2025

To whom it may concern,

#### **RE: CONFIRMATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING**

This serves to confirm that I have edited a document written by Mamphwe Dzulani and Mulovhedzi Shonisani Agnes titled, **The Impact of Classroom Heterogeneity on Teaching Practices**.

The scope of my editing comprised:

- Spelling
- Tense
- Vocabulary
- Punctuation
- Word usage
- Language and sentence structure
- References

If you need any further details, kindly contact me on the details provided above.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kufakunesu Zano", written over a horizontal line.

Kufakunesu Zano

Dr Kufakunesu Zano, PhD (English). A member of the South African Translators' Institute, Ref  
1000686