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Identifying Professional Competencies of Teachers of Students with Intellectual Disabilities in the Special Education System of Iran

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have shown that the quality of teacher's performance is a very important factor in determining the learning outcomes and achievements of the educational system. This research was conducted through qualitative text analysis using the pertinent research projects, scientific documents and formal educational, documents at national and international levels, as well as the related literature with the aim of identifying and explaining the role of professional competencies of special education teachers and trainers with a focus on students with intellectual disabilities. The results of the analysis have been presented in the form of a set of competencies required by teachers and trainers of intellectually disabled students, which include components such as positive and supportive interaction and creating hope in children, control of emotions and stress, attitude and skills for facilitation of affairs, ability in cultivating creativity, intelligent behavior with scientific vision and cultural awareness, designing empowerment activities and timely intervention programs, enriching, adapting and strengthening content and learning environment, as well as teaching skills needed for effective communication, problem solving, safety and health, and defending their individual and social rights. The presented arguments can be used in the field of educational policy making, evaluation of professional competence and empowerment of teachers and trainers in general and special education, as well as in the design and development of curricula for students with intellectual disabilities. ©**authors**

1. Introduction

Today, due to the rapid changes as well as the current and future requirements of societies, the necessity of comprehensive education and development of human capital has gained importance. Particularly, training and preparation of students as the driving engine of future generation's social progress has attracted serious research attention to human resource policy and planning mechanisms. Numerous research show that one of the most important and influencing factors in the process of education and success of students is the quality of teachers. Teaching is a complex task in which a teacher or instructor needs to have a profound knowledge of the topic and apply it in the related fields. A teacher is also required to use different skills and techniques of presenting the material, evaluating and providing feedback for the students. Thus, professional and successful teaching is the result of the vast and deep knowledge and understanding of the subject, along with various skills of conveying the content, the ability to manage the situation and the educational environment, as well as having sufficient professional experience. It also requires having love, interest, motivation and commitment to the teaching task. In general, these characteristics are discussed under professional competencies of people taking different occupations. Based on the definitions provided in the literature, competence includes different traits, characteristics, knowledge, values, beliefs, abilities, capabilities, skills, motivations and attitudes of a person. Mulder (2017) observes competences as "a person's performance in doing a specific task" and is used to achieve the desired goals in the given profession.

In light of the aforementioned conceptualization of 'competence', the success of the educational systems is directly related to the quality and professional competence of its teachers and trainers. Undoubtedly, the higher the knowledge, skills, motivation and professional competence standards of the teachers of a system, the higher will be the quality and desirability of the processes, achievements and outputs of that educational system. Therefore, today, identifying, explaining and verifying the professional competencies of teachers and trainers in the processes of recruitment, employment, maintenance, training and professional development are among the main requirements and priorities of dynamic and efficient educational systems.

In this regard, many researches on improving the skills and qualifications of special education teachers have an important contribution in increasing the achievements of their students. Teachers who have a solid foundation of knowledge and awareness of the nature of disabilities in children, have a sense of commitment and have acquired the necessary skills to solve the problems caused by disabilities among these children, will be able to set realistic goals for students and monitor their progress with more precision.

They collaborate with other colleagues and professionals and families to find ways for these students to enter the society and support them so that they can lead an independent life (Preeti, 2011). Education cannot achieve the intended scientific development and innovation unless appropriate changes are made in the working methods of teachers, as real agents. In other words, the key to the success of education systems lies in the health and growth of its teachers. In this regard, Likoko et al., (2013) believe that teacher quality contributes more to student achievement than any other factor, including class size, class composition, or student background knowledge. Therefore, to improve the quality of education, it is necessary to focus more on teachers and the aspects that affect their work in schools. Today, the emphasis placed on the professional competence of teachers in teaching, the activation of students in learning, and the guiding role of teachers in education, leaves no room for traditional non-scientific and non-professional behaviors. The fact is that in today's complex conditions, we can no longer rely on purely intuitive methods and traditional principles, without using patterns, models and scientific methods. This is despite the fact that in many cases in

education, scientific models and methods are not implemented appropriately.

In addition, the special characteristics and needs of exceptional students require that their teachers and trainers work with them in a specialized manner and within the framework of special education; This makes the work of this group of teachers and trainers many times more difficult. Therefore, the burnout rate of special education teachers is often higher than other teachers. Sometimes a special education teacher begins his work with the goal of helping his students and in order to help them become productive members of society, but he faces great challenges in teaching and management. Special education refers to specially planned education that meets the unusual needs of exceptional students or students with different educational needs. In this regard, special materials, teaching techniques, equipment and facilities may be required. One of the most important goals of special education is to discover the abilities of exceptional students and invest in them (Seif Naraghi & Naderi, 2013). From the point of view of education specialists, exceptional students are called children who are cognitively, intellectually, physically (sensory, motor), emotionally and or socially different from their peers, and this difference is so great that their enjoyment of proper education requires changes (commensurate with the characteristics of this students) in programs, content, methods, materials and normal educational space and provision of special educational and rehabilitation services to them.

Usually, in order to provide education according to the characteristics of different spectrums of students with special needs, educational systems in the world divide them into different disability groups. In Iran's education system, exceptional children and students are divided into seven groups: mentally retarded (intellectually disabled), hearing impaired (deaf), visually impaired (blind), autism spectrum disorder, physically disabled, multiple-disability, and students with learning disorders. The purpose of this research is to investigate and explain the professional competences of teachers and trainers in the exceptional education system, with a focus on the characteristics of the teachers of mentally retarded students, who account for more than half of the population of exceptional students in public education in Iran. It should also be noted that this article is a part of a larger research project that aims to identify and provide a suitable model for the professional qualification of teachers and trainers of intellectually disabled students. The data sources of the study included literature review, content analysis of scientific and upstream documents, as well as interviews. Participants encompassed special education experts, teachers and managers. Nevertheless, this article is focused on presenting findings from the review of the literature section.

2. Literature Review

Review of the related literature shows that there is paucity of research about the professional competencies of special-needs teachers in the country. However, some of related research conducted over the last few years are mentioned in this section. The model presented by Askari Matin and Kiani (2017) aimed at measuring the professional qualification of a teacher up to the standards of the Islamic Republic of Iran consists of seven areas: 1. Plan and prepare for education 2. Plan and design for learning 3. Effective teaching 4. Manage learning environment 5. Organizational responsibility and professional development 6. Social capital and cultural activity, and 7. Spirituality, ethics and belief in God.

The findings of Khoroushi et al.'s (2016) research, which was carried out with the aim of providing a conceptual model of competencies expected from student teachers in the curriculum of Farhangian (Teachers) University, were divided into four main categories including competencies such as: subject matter knowledge, teaching knowledge, educational and subject related knowledge, and general knowledge. Subject matter knowledge implies that a qualified teacher must be proficient and have sufficient specialized knowledge of the content in order to guide students and contribute to

transformation in the field of education. Another finding of this research indicated that some of the teacher competencies deal with the educational practice. This feature bears both methodological or process-oriented and product-oriented role for the teacher. Also, teachers are expected to act wisely and demonstrate the ability to quest and research to solve problems and at the same time act as a social activist and educational referent in the process of educating students.

Jahani et al. (2019), in an attempt to develop and validate a model for professional competencies of Farhangian University faculty members (who are mostly former teachers at public education), mentions the two main categories of professional competence comprising: a) *individual factors* (e.g., moral, intellectual, psychological, knowledge, educational skills, management skills, research skills and communication skills) and b) *organizational relations' background factors* (e.g., membership, organizational interaction, acceptance of professional responsibility and benefiting from the organization's facilities. In addition, the authors reported that moral factors had the highest priority in this model. In the same vein, Dibaee and colleagues (2015) believe that the conceptual framework of teachers' competence can be developed based on the relevant documents in five components of competency: knowledge, attitude, skill, ability and personality traits. Amini Moghadam (2018) in a study entitled "Designing a model based on the professional competence of primary school teachers" listed the following qualifications required for teachers: general knowledge, specialized knowledge, general abilities, mental abilities and skills, specialized abilities, motivations, general and specialized beliefs and attitudes.

Łukasik et al. (2018) in research entitled the educational competencies of teachers at the beginning of their professional activity, introduces ten basic areas of competencies, which are: diagnostic, coaching, educational, social, emotional, organizational, mediation, caring and rescue, sustainable development, treatment and, and legal competency.

Wei et al (2010) characterized the professional competence of teachers including: industrial, planning development, teaching preparation, practical teaching, teaching evaluation, management, counseling, public relations promotion and interpersonal communication among colleagues. Vila et al. (2014) investigated the importance of professional qualifications and its role in innovation and creativity in their research. They concluded that having professional qualifications plays a significant role in innovation. Eno and Ferreira (2010) have introduced lesson research as a suitable method for teachers' professional development, while Gallo-Fox and Scott Bury (2016) and Mellita (2008) and have introduced cooperative or collaborative teaching as a model for teachers' professional development. Similarly, Holmqvist and Lelinge (2021) who have recently analyzed several collaborative models for Teachers' professional development in inclusive education, reported that participation in professional development trainings resulted in teachers having more positive attitudes towards inclusive education particularly those who had the highest risks of burnout. In this regard, Hong et al. (2008) who examined the lack of coordination between pre-service and in-service teacher training competencies, categorized teachers' competencies in six main categories of: intellectual ability, value system, interpersonal skills, management ability, professional abilities, and personality traits. And according to Bredekamp (1996), in addition to the general knowledge of teaching content, teachers with intellectual disabilities need to know the relevant standards and demonstrate evidence of students' learning. Bredekamp (1996) believes that in order to understand and realize the various teaching methods as well as the interaction between teachers and educators that have positive effects on the child's growth and learning, teacher preparation curricula should "prepare teachers to understand how to apply this knowledge in planning specific programs and in evaluating and tailoring education to meet the individual needs of children," especially those from "different linguistic and cultural backgrounds" (p.339).

In this regard, based on the standards declared by the Department of Education of

Australia (2020) two of the most important features for teachers of exceptional students with mental disabilities are: a) using effective educational strategies to employ information and communication technology in teaching-learning process, b) the ability to identify and create opportunities to involve parents or guardians of children in the academic progress and educational priorities of their child's school.

3. Method

The study used a qualitative text analysis in order to gain insights into the professional competencies of special education teachers in the Iran's education context. Different from classical content analysis, which is limited to "manifest content," qualitative text analysis is a form of thematic analysis in which understanding and interpretation of the text play a far larger role (Kuckartz, 2014, pp. 31–33).

The texts were collected from published articles, national educational documents, laws and regulations available at accredited databases and official websites including Iran's Ministry of education and Supreme Council of Education as well as the selected international databases such as O.net and Department of Education of Australia. The materials for analysis were selected from among the last 10 years. After eliminating irrelevant texts, 34 documents were finally selected for this study.

Deductive categories were constructed under themes like special education teachers, features of children with Intellectual Disability (ID), and professional competencies.

Competences were searched from the selected databases, official documents and articles published in domestic publications. The keywords covered general and specialized teacher competencies, professional competence, students with ID, and special education teacher qualifications. Since this study aimed to investigate competencies related to teachers and trainers of students with ID, those competencies not relevant to special education were excluded from this study.

4. Findings

Competencies required for teaching children and students with intellectual disabilities

Mental retardation or intellectual disability is a type of disability in the person's current functioning, which often has two main characteristics: 1. General intelligence functioning is significantly below the average: in order to recognize a person as mentally retarded, his intelligence score must be at least two standard deviations lower than the average. 2. Defects in adaptive behavior: Defects in adaptive behavior occur in conceptual, social and functional areas. In fact, defects in adaptive behavior are manifested in skills such as communication, self-care, daily life activities, social skills, self-direction, health and safety, spending free time, basic school education, and job-related issues. Statistics show that the educable mentally retarded group constitutes about 2% of the total number of school-aged children. This group of people are unable to understand the feelings, emotions and thoughts of others, and in general they are unable to understand the views and feelings of others (Gerhat et al., 1995, Cited in Nesaeian, 2009).

The definition of mental retardation or intercultural disability has undergone extensive changes over time, so that currently the process of changes in the definition of mental retardation is located in the following three areas:

a) In the past, adaptive behavior and age were not considered as criteria for mental retardation, while in the new definitions, efforts have been made to expand the diagnosis criteria beyond the IQ score.

b) In the past, in order to diagnose mental retardation, the cutoff score was 85, but in the current definition, the cutoff point for IQ score has been reduced and the IQ score of 70 is considered.

c) It has also been tried to consider this disorder as a condition that can be improved, which is not necessarily permanent.

According to the DSM-5 classification, while theoretically, based on the normal distribution curve, we expect about 2.27% of the population to be within two standard

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deviations of the average or much lower than the average. But in recent years, the prevalence of mental retardation has been reported in about 1 to 1.5 percent of the population. Experts believe that the lower prevalence figures are due to the consideration of adaptive behavior in the definition and diagnosis of mental retardation. (Ganji, 2014).

The review of existing literature shows that in order to effectively educate mentally retarded students, teachers and trainers of this kind of exceptional students should consider the following characteristics as important requirements of education.

- Limitations in the person's current function should be taken into account in the social context appropriate to the person's age and culture.
- An authentic assessment of intelligence and adaptive behavior should take into account the cultural, linguistic and other differences of children.
- Despite their limitations, these people have many capabilities.
- The main purpose of describing the limits should aim at setting a support profile.
- With individual support over a certain period of time, the life function of a mentally disabled person can be improved.

In addition, previous research shows that teachers and trainers who work with students with intellectual disabilities need professional competencies such as positive and supportive interaction and hope creation in children, control of emotions and stress, as well as positive facilitation attitudes and skills. Additionally, the ability to cultivate creativity in students, behaving intelligently along with scientific vision and cultural awareness, the ability to design and implement empowerment activities, to enrich and adapt the content and learning environment to the needs of the students, and skills to teach problem solving, defending individual and social rights as well as the ability to use modern tools and technologies have been identified as the competencies that teachers of students with intellectual disabilities should have.

Professional qualifications of teachers based on national and international documents

Perhaps it can be said that the most obvious reference to qualifications required for teacher in Iran's upstream documents can be observed in the guidelines and statutes of preparatory and teacher training colleges. In this regard, in Dehghan's description (1950), it is stated that the graduates of teachers' courses must "have enough familiarity with the basics of science and literature and be familiar with the secrets of nature and the wonders of creation. In addition, they should know a foreign language to be able to use foreign books and magazines so that they can be continuously informed about the developments and the course of education in the world and new educational methods. In this way, they can always renew and develop the knowledge they have acquired in their studies. Also, Safi (1992), who is one of the pioneers of teacher education and training in Iran, mentions having "courage, truthfulness, trust, dignity and sobriety, self-respect, honor, kindness and courtesy, good speech and politeness, obligation to perform duties and responsibilities, and devotion to the public, and avoiding any "ugly and insidious impurities" as the qualities of teachers and educators of children and youth.

But, a close look at the upper documents related to education in the last decade, such as the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (2011), the Theoretical Foundations of Reform in the Public Formal Education System (2011), the National Curriculum (2012) and the Law for Teachers' Rating System (2022) shows that these documents, while dealing with the totality of professional qualifications in the teaching profession, mostly refer to teachers' general competencies and there are no specific compilations of competencies for any of the subgroups and teaching grades, including exceptional teachers. However, in the Fundamental Reform Document of Education, which is considered as the most important document of public education policies and guidance in the last decade in the country, terms such as religious, moral, revolutionary, personal, professional, specialized, evaluation, individual and collective dimensions, and finally educational

and scientific competencies are mentioned among the qualities required for teachers.

Also, in the Theoretical Foundations of Reform in Public Formal Education System of the Islamic Republic of Iran, attention has been paid to teachers' qualification dimensions such as knowledge, experience, belief, emotion, and behavior. In addition, competency areas such as religious (religious, devotional, and moral), biological and physical, social and political, economic and professional, scientific and technological, aesthetic and artistic have been defined. This theoretical document also mentions statements such as cognitive, motivational, voluntary and practical, proper interaction with the government institution and other civil institutions, compliance with the law, responsibility, social and political participation, upholding social values, maintaining and promoting health and physical and mental health of self and others, environmental protection and respect for nature and appropriate communication with others as competences expected from teachers. Finally, in the National Curriculum, the basic competencies for teachers and trainers are defined in the form of six areas of reasoning, faith, science, practice, and ethics.

In addition, in the Law for Teachers' Rating System and its executive regulations, which was recently approved by the parliament and the government in 1401 and is regarded as the main criterion for determining teachers' competence level in all public education system, three types of competence are mentioned: general competencies, specialized competencies and professional competencies. Table No. 1 shows the dimensions and components of each of these competencies.

Table1. Dimensions and components of general, specialized and professional competencies of teachers in Teachers' Rating System

A) General competencies	
Dimensions	**Components**
Personal and general traits	Accountability
	Abiding by the Islamic morals appropriate to teaching profession
	Communication skill
	Organizational commitment and belonging
	Observance of hijab and Islamic clothing appropriate to the dignity of a teacher
	Belief and adherence to Islamic, national and Islamic revolution values
	Legalism and adherence to laws and regulations
	Having a jihadist spirit
	Hopeful and trustful
	Being capable of multi-dimensional education
b) Specialized competencies	
Dimensions	**Components**
Specialized knowledge	Good command of the subject matter
	Good command of the objectives of education levels and curriculum
	Familiarity with educational and training laws and regulations
Educational knowledge	Familiarity with the foundations of Islamic education (theoretical foundations of the fundamental reform document and...)
	Educational psychology and learning theories
	Educational design
	Teaching strategies and methods
	Classroom planning and management
	Principles of measurement and evaluation
	Educational technology and E-learning
Achievements	Gaining a position in the exemplary teaching contest

	Earning a position in the production of e-content
	Obtaining the position of an exemplary teacher
	Winning positions in competitions and festivals approved by the Education Ministry
	Designing and production of educational software approved by the research organization
	Participation and gaining ranks and titles in sports, artistic, cultural and educational competitions
Scientific creativity and innovation	Building educational tools and equipment (approved by the research organization)
	Presenting creative ideas in educational or management methods
Ability to think scientifically and to conduct research	conducting research, authoring and editing books and articles

c) Professional competencies:	
Dimensions	**Components**
Integrated application of knowledge, attitude and skills	planning and preparing diverse learning situations
	Understanding and accepting individual differences of students
	Diversification and enrichment of educational opportunities
	Participation in talent search and guidance
	Seeking participation and cooperation in educational activities
	Application of specialized and educational knowledge
	Application of knowledge related to teaching and learning
	Integration of educational areas and educational situation
	Lifelong learning and professional, individual and group development
	Seeking consultation and participation in councils
	Creativity, thinking and problem-solving skills
Competitive performance in the educational situation	Student's progress in educational and athletic activities

But with a brief review of international documents, it can be seen that most of the competencies of each group of teachers at different levels of education have been explained separately. For example, the U.S. Department of Labor's (O.net, 2010) database lists the following competencies as occupational tasks for special education teachers at elementary level:

- Administer standardized ability and achievement tests to elementary students with special needs.
- Attend professional meetings, educational conferences, or teacher training workshops to maintain or improve professional competence.
- Collaborate with other teachers or administrators to develop, evaluate, or revise elementary school programs.
- Confer with parents, administrators and other professionals for the personal, physical, social and educational development of students
- -Develop or implement of strategies to meet the needs of students

- Establish and communicate clear objectives for all lessons, units, and projects to students.
- Establish and enforce rules for behavior and procedures for maintaining order among students.
- Guide or counsel students with adjustment problems, academic problems, or special academic interests
- Instruct and monitor students in the use and care of equipment or materials to prevent injuries and damage.
- Instruct students in daily living skills required for independent maintenance and self-sufficiency, such as hygiene, safety, or food preparation
- Interpret the results of standardized tests to determine students' strengths and areas of need
- Maintain accurate and complete student records as required by laws,
- Meet with parents or guardians to discuss their children's progress, advise them on using community resources, or teach skills for dealing with students' impairments.

- Modify the general elementary education curriculum for special-needs students.
- Monitor teachers or teacher assistants to ensure adherence to special education program requirements.
- Observe and evaluate students' performance, behavior, social development, and physical health.
- Organize and display students' work in a manner appropriate for their perceptual skills.
- Organize and supervise games or other recreational activities to promote physical, mental, or social development.
- Plan or conduct activities for a balanced program of instruction, demonstration, and work time that provides students with opportunities to observe, question, and investigate.
- Plan or supervise experiential learning activities, such as class projects, field trips, demonstrations, or visits by guest speakers.
- Prepare classrooms with a variety of materials or resources for children to explore, manipulate, or use in learning activities or imaginative play.
- Prepare objectives, outlines, or other materials for courses of study, following curriculum guidelines or school or state requirements.
- Prepare, administer, or grade tests or assignments to evaluate students' progress.
- Provide assistive devices, supportive technology, or assistance accessing facilities, such as restrooms.
- Teach socially acceptable behavior, employing techniques such as behavior modification or positive reinforcement.
- Teach students personal development skills, such as goal setting, independence, or self-advocacy

5. Conclusion

The qualitative text analysis of the official educational documents and laws and the findings from the domestic research regarding the professional competence of teachers in Iran's educational system, with a focus on the specific competencies of teachers and trainers of students with mental disabilities shows that so far in the national documents in the country despite addressing the teachers' professional competence in general terms, specific competencies have not been designed for any of the teacher subgroups and levels of education, including the exceptional education teachers. However, in the executive regulation of Teachers' Rating System (2022), attempts haves been made to define teacher competencies in three areas of general, specialized and professional along with the related behavioral indicators. This study shows that identifying and explaining the components of professional competence for teachers of mentally retarded/intellectually disabled students, that account for more than half of the special needs student population in the country, can improve the quality of the teaching-learning process and the educational outcomes. In addition, it seems necessary to develop specialized competency models for all levels both in general and in special education, from pre-primary to higher education.

However, by examining the previous research conducted in the last decade and the available international documents, it can be seen that the teachers and trainers of special needs students, especially for the mentally retarded group, should have characteristics and competencies such as encouraging positive and supportive interaction, creation of hope in the children, controlling emotions and stress, having facilitative skills and attitudes, demonstrating the ability to cultivate creativity, behaving intelligently with scientific vision and cultural awareness, designing of rehabilitation activities and timely intervention, enrichment, adaptation and strengthening of curriculum and learning environment as well as teaching students appropriate communication skills, problem solving, safety and health issues and how to defend their individual and social rights. The discussions raised in this article can be used in educational policy making, evaluation of professional competence, developing empowerment programs for special education teachers and trainers, and also in designing and development of curricula for intellectually disabled students.

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