

## **Disability Education as a Missing Dimension in Community Development Practice in Kwa-Zulu Natal Province, South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper acknowledges the inadequacies in current community development practices, particularly regarding disability education in the rural areas of Kwa-Zulu Natal. It contends that a transformative integration of community education centred on disability is imperative for improving practice in this field. Community development often marginalises communities by persistently excluding them and inadequately addressing the integration of essential themes such as disability. Employing a qualitative methodology, this study analyses existing literature. The findings indicate that many community development initiatives predominantly emphasise health, economic activities, and gender-related issues while systematically overlooking other critical themes that are disability-related. Consequently, the study advocates for enhancing community development practices. Specifically, it recommends formally recognising Disability Studies as a distinct academic discipline within higher education institutions in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province to facilitate grassroots solutions to community challenges.*

**Keywords:** *disability education, community development, Kwa-Zulu Natal*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the past few decades, community development has seen remarkable changes as a critical field of practice and research, driven by the global imperative to address socioeconomic disparities and promote inclusive growth. The central purpose of community development is to assist local communities in becoming capable and sustainable (Subrayen & Dhunpath, 2019). However, the practical application of community development strategies often reveals critical deficiencies, particularly in integrating disability inclusion. Disability is a revolving concept that refers to any physical or mental condition or impairment that limits activity and restricts participation. Excluding disability reduced the success of community development efforts and exacerbated existing inequalities, especially within marginalised communities (Subrayen & Dhunpath, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for us, as researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, to bridge these gaps and ensure that community development practices effectively meet the diverse needs of all community members. Disability-inclusive practices respect and appreciate diversity as part of human existence. It occurs when the entire community benefits equally from development processes and encourages awareness, participation and human rights for all members to improve their quality of life ((Mousavi, 2015).

This paper provides a background on the community development crisis in Kwa-Zulu Natal, conceptualising community development, community education and social inclusion. Disability is a missing dimension in community development. Strategies to promote disability inclusion include adopting a community-based rehabilitation (CBR) approach, implementing mobile learning platforms, developing inclusive policies and practices, training community leaders and members and creating disability education workshops (Grills & Varghese, 2019).

### **Background**

Globally, the discourse on community development has been shaped by frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasise inclusive

practices in education and lifelong learning for all (UN, 2015). It aims to foster diversity, empowering the underrepresented group and promoting equal access to resources and opportunities. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a human rights treaty that recognises people with disabilities as having equal rights as people without disabilities (UN, 2006). Certain principles upheld by the UNCRPD include accepting disability as part of human diversity, equality of opportunities, accessibility, and promoting inclusion and participation (Grills & Varghese, 2019). A Community-based rehabilitation (CBR) framework is used to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities at the community level (Mousavi, 2015). Looking at the health, education, livelihood, social and empowerment components. Through community-based workers, people with disabilities, their families, and communities engage in rehabilitative, educational and advocacy activities (van Pletzen et al., 2014). The focus is on equalising opportunities and improving participation. The aim is to achieve community-based community development (CBCD). Different actors are engaged from the beginning, and their needs and activities are practised (Bachfischer et al., 2023).

In the context of South Africa, the legacy of colonialism and apartheid has left deep-seated inequalities that continue to shape the socio-economic landscape. While post-apartheid South Africa has made significant strides in promoting economic development and health equity, other critical dimensions of community development, such as disability education, have received less attention (Mkhize, 2019). This neglect is more than just a gap in service delivery. Still, it represents a fundamental oversight in designing and implementing community development strategies. In Kwa-Zulu Natal, this gap is evident in the limited integration of disability inclusion into community development practices. Research indicates that while there has been progress in economic and health-related aspects of community development, excluding this critical dimension has left communities vulnerable and disempowered (Akintolu & Letseka, 2021).

Moreover, the marginalisation of disability in community development not only reflects broader societal prejudices but also severely limits the potential of these initiatives to be truly inclusive. The failure to integrate disability education into community development practices undermines the rights of people with disabilities and restricts their ability to participate fully in societal life (Subrayen & Dhunpath, 2019). Addressing these gaps is not just a matter of equity but is essential for the sustainability and effectiveness of community development efforts. This paper argues that a more holistic approach to community development is needed that incorporates disability inclusion as a central component of community development practice. By problematising the exclusion of these dimensions, this study seeks to contribute a more comprehensive understanding of community development better aligned with the needs and realities of local communities in the Kwa-Zulu Natal.

### **Community Development Crisis in Kwa-Zulu Natal**

Community development in Kwa-Zulu Natal needs to be improved by several interrelated challenges that undermine its effectiveness, particularly in rural and marginalised areas. One of the most significant issues is the need for meaningful community participation in local governance and development planning processes (STATS, 2018). People with disabilities are mostly affected by community initiatives due to challenges in education, employment and their socio-economic status (Bezzina & Manhique, 2025). The Integrated Development Plan (IDP), intended to be a vehicle for community involvement, often needs to meet its goals, with studies showing that less than 30% of rural communities actively participate in these processes (Khawula, 2016). This lack of participation is due to logistical barriers and deep-seated mistrust between communities and local government officials, exacerbated by corruption and poor communication (Dlamini et al., 2017). Moreover, the strained relationships between ward councillors and community members have led to a situation where development projects are often misaligned with the community's actual needs, leading to ineffective outcomes (Goble et al., 2017). For example, in the Umzumbe Municipality, it was found that 70% of development

initiatives failed to achieve their intended impact due to poor community involvement (Khawula, 2016). This disconnect hinders the success of development projects and perpetuates a cycle of disenfranchisement and inequality, further marginalising already vulnerable communities (Ngcamu, 2022).

Additionally, the socio-economic landscape of KZN, combined with environmental challenges, significantly constrains the potential for effective community development. The province faces some of the highest unemployment rates in South Africa, with youth unemployment alone exceeding 50% in some rural regions (Majola, 2020). These economic challenges are compounded by the poor retention of skilled professionals, particularly in the health sector, where rural areas are underserved due to inadequate salaries, poor working conditions, and a lack of career development opportunities (Leonardi et al., 2006). For instance, more than 60% of healthcare facilities in rural KZN are understaffed, leading to substandard service delivery and increased morbidity and mortality rates. Moreover, environmental issues such as climate change pose severe risks to agricultural productivity, a primary livelihood source for many rural communities (Zwane & Mthembu, 2017). Climate-induced events like droughts have devastated crop yields and livestock, leading to food insecurity and exacerbating poverty, (Leonardi et al., 2006). The provincial government's response has been inadequate, with less than 20% of affected communities receiving adequate support or relief (Goble et al., 2017). Addressing these interconnected challenges requires a comprehensive and integrated approach to community development that prioritises socio-economic empowerment and environmental resilience (Ngcamu, 2022)

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in the intersection of community development, community education, and social inclusion. This framework seeks to explore the underlying dynamics that influence the effectiveness of community development practices, particularly in addressing the gaps in disability inclusion within communities.

### **Community Development**

Community development is a multidisciplinary field that draws on concepts from sociology, economics, political science, and education. It is fundamentally concerned with empowering communities, enhancing their capacities, and promoting sustainable development (Shava & Thakhathi, 2016). Theoretically, community development is often guided by participation, empowerment, and sustainability principles. Participation refers to the active involvement of community members in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. At the same time, empowerment focuses on increasing the capabilities of individuals and communities to control their development paths (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Sustainability, on the other hand, emphasises the need for long-term solutions that do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Agyeman et al., 2003). However, traditional community development approaches have often been critiqued for their narrow focus on economic development and health, which, while important, tend to overlook other critical dimensions such as disability inclusion (Shava & Thakhathi, 2016). This critique forms the basis for this study's conceptual framework, which seeks to broaden the scope of community development by integrating these often-neglected areas.

### **Community Education**

Community education, also called public education, refers to lifelong learning within the community based on the need to develop self-sustainability. It provides an opportunity for communities to gain access to different specific units and education (Ardiwinata & Mulyono, 2018). Community education aims to broaden their knowledge and skills to improve people's competencies. Individuals and groups with shared interests are enriched, creating partnerships and opportunities for innovation, self-reliance and sustainability (Saepudin & Mulyono, 2019). These learning series are formal yet presented in an informal way to be understood by a more

significant number of community members. Disabilities are one of the critical dimensions that should be taught in communities as they are part of human existence. People with disabilities are often excluded and experience barriers that hinder their full participation. Community education on disability will allow more inclusive communities where diverse members are accepted and can participate freely. A study conducted on the strength of adult community education as a professional field in aid-receiving countries. To identify factors influencing the global development of professional training and research in community education, particularly in low-and-moderate-income, foreign aid-receiving countries. The findings revealed per-capita aid is unrelated to strength of professional community education, but nonviolent grassroots activism, income inequality, and government fiscal decentralization were significant predictors when controlling for civil liberties (Wojcicki et al., 2025)

### **Social Inclusion**

Social inclusion is a pivotal element of this conceptual framework, establishing a connection between community development and community education. It pertains to enhancing the engagement of individuals and groups in societal activities, particularly those disadvantaged due to their identity, capabilities, or socio-economic status (Silver, 2015). Social inclusion encourages social interactions between people with social relevance or an impersonal institutional mechanism that opens access to participation in all spheres of social life (Silver, 2015). In community development, social inclusion guarantees that marginalised populations, including individuals with disabilities, are not merely participants in developmental initiatives but are also empowered as active contributors to these processes (Denkewicz, 2024). Furthermore, social inclusion within this framework encompasses incorporating disability advocacy into community development strategies. Integrating these educational components within community development promotes a comprehensive approach that addresses economic and health-related needs alongside socio-legal and familial issues, which is essential for sustainable development (Denkewicz, 2024). It embraces and recognises the importance of diversity, which has become vital to the new understanding of identity. Persons with disabilities are at the forefront of calling for approaches based on social inclusion and valued recognition (Saloojee & Saloojee, 2011). A study conducted on social inclusion of children with disabilities. The findings of this provided evidence that despite society's efforts to promote social inclusion, children with disabilities continue to report feeling lonely and excluded, having limited contact socially outside of home, and encountering systemic barriers (Woodgate et al., 2020).

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This paper is based on a qualitative approach, which involves reviewing existing literature to understand the. It draws from academic research, reports, and international legal documents. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which views knowledge as socially constructed and context-dependent. From this perspective, disability is understood not solely as a medical condition but as a concept shaped by the environments. The interpretivist approach is suitable for exploring how disability has been excluded from community development practice, as it focuses on meanings, values, and social processes rather than quantifiable outcomes. The analysis highlights how disabled individuals often face unique challenges during displacement. By focusing on real-life experiences documented in the literature, this study aims to shed light on the human impact of overlapping systems of inequality and to support more inclusive responses to forced migration.

Literature was selected using purposeful strategies to ensure that it covered a broad range of important thematic areas. Sources were included if they addressed issues relating to disability education, community development, and displacement practices. An analysis of a body of literature produced over time was conducted to identify both historical continuity and

contemporary developments. Although no rigid timeframe was imposed, priority was given to sources that provided insight into disability education in community development practices.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Disability as a Missing Dimension in Community Development Practice**

The existing literature underscores the critical gaps in integrating disability education within community development practices in KZN. These missing dimensions significantly limit the effectiveness of community development initiatives and perpetuate existing inequalities and social injustices.

#### **Disability education as a missing dimension**

Disability education is an essential yet frequently overlooked component of community development. The systematic exclusion of disability education from community development frameworks has far-reaching implications, not only for the empowerment of individuals with disabilities but also for the overall inclusivity and effectiveness of development initiatives (Saepudin & Mulyono, 2019). The research underscores that in rural districts of KZN, access to essential services like wheelchairs is critically limited. Rehabilitation therapists in these areas report numerous barriers, including inadequate outreach efforts and scarce resources, significantly hindering necessary support (McIntyre et al., 2021). These deficiencies do more than restrict the physical mobility and independence of individuals with disabilities; they also intensify their social isolation, reinforcing their marginalisation within both their communities and the broader societal context (McIntyre et al., 2021).

The challenges encountered by students with physical disabilities at universities in kZN further illuminate the systemic neglect of disability issues within the region. These students frequently face substantial obstacles that hinder their educational attainment, including inadequate physical infrastructure and a lack of tailored support services for their academic success (Hlengwa & Masuku, 2022). This situation reflects a broader problem within community development practices, where disability education is not prioritised. As a result, individuals with disabilities remain at a significant disadvantage, unable to fully participate in or benefit from educational opportunities that could enhance their socio-economic prospects (Mbhele & Makhoba, 2022). The absence of dedicated disability education initiatives not only limits the potential of these individuals but also perpetuates a cycle of exclusion that is deeply embedded within the community development process (McIntyre et al., 2021).

The failure to integrate disability education within community development strategies has broader societal consequences. Without comprehensive education and adequate support systems, communities are often ill-equipped to include individuals with disabilities in various social, economic, and political activities, further entrenching their marginalisation (Holness & Rule, 2018). This exclusion reinforces existing inequalities and limits the overall efficacy of community development initiatives, as the potential contributions of individuals with disabilities are systematically overlooked (McIntyre et al., 2021). To address these issues, there must be a concerted effort to integrate disability education into all community development planning and implementation levels. Such integration would not only ensure that individuals with disabilities are fully included but also empower them to contribute meaningfully to the development of their communities, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable society (Hlengwa & Masuku, 2022).

### **Strategies for Disability Education through Community Development Practice**

Disability education can be effectively integrated into community development practices in KZN by adopting a community-based rehabilitation (CBR) approach. This strategy emphasises the involvement of local communities in the design and implementation of

rehabilitation services, ensuring that people with disabilities are not only recipients of services but active participants in their development. Continuous education and training of healthcare professionals and community members are essential for CBR to be successful. This approach promotes social inclusion and enhances the quality of life for people with disabilities, aligning with broader community development goals (Hlalele et al., 2015).

Another essential strategy is the implementation of mobile learning platforms that deliver disability education directly to rural and underserved areas. The effectiveness of mobile learning in providing critical education to healthcare workers in rural clinics despite challenges such as poor network coverage and limited resources. By adapting this model to disability education, communities in KZN can receive ongoing education and support, which is crucial for the sustained empowerment of individuals with disabilities (Chamane et al., 2022).

Developing inclusive policies and practices within educational institutions is vital for the success of disability education initiatives. Jarvis (2020) highlights the disparities in Physical Education (PE) delivery across different school contexts in Kwa-Zulu Natal, underscoring the need for inclusive educational practices that accommodate students with disabilities. By ensuring that academic programs at all levels are accessible and inclusive, communities can create environments where individuals with disabilities are fully supported and can contribute meaningfully to society (Jarvis, 2020).

**Table 1: Strategies for Effecting Disability Education in Community Development Practice**

Strategies	Expected Results
Adopt a community-based rehabilitation (CBR) approach	Greater social inclusion and quality of life for people with disabilities.
Implement mobile learning platforms	Increased access to education and support for individuals with disabilities.
Develop inclusive policies and practices	Improved educational outcomes for students with disabilities.
Train community leaders and members	Enhanced community awareness and support for disability issues.
Create disability education workshops	Strengthened support systems and empowerment for individuals with disabilities.

(Source: Authors 2024)

### Implications of the Findings

The findings from the analysis of institutional education strategies within community development practices in Kwa-Zulu Natal have significant and far-reaching implications, both for the region and potentially for broader applications in similar contexts.

### Inclusion through Disability Education

The findings underscore the critical need for inclusive disability education within community development practices. Adopting CBR and mobile learning platforms tailored to disability education could transform the lives of individuals with disabilities in KZN. These strategies not only promote social inclusion by enabling individuals with disabilities to participate fully in their communities but also challenge the pervasive marginalisation that they face (Jarvis, 2020). The broader societal implications include a shift toward more inclusive practices within educational institutions and workplaces, potentially leading to greater economic participation and improved quality of life for people with disabilities. This could foster a culture of inclusivity and equality, where the contributions of all community members, regardless of ability, are valued and supported (van Pletzen et al., 2014).

**Enhanced Community Engagement and Collaboration**

The findings also highlight the importance of collaboration between universities, local communities, and various stakeholders, including government NGOs and religious organisations. Goal 17 of the SDGs (UN, 2015) and Article 32 of the UNCRPD encourages partnerships and international cooperation. ((UN, 2006). Such collaborations can lead to the development of more effective and contextually relevant educational programs, ensuring that community development initiatives are not only accessible but also impactful. The implications of these partnerships are significant, as they can foster a greater sense of ownership and involvement among community members, leading to more sustainable and self-sufficient communities. Additionally, these collaborations could serve as models for other regions facing similar challenges, demonstrating the effectiveness of a multi-stakeholder approach to community development (Hlalele et al., 2015).

**Sustainability of Development Outcomes**

Finally, the findings suggest that integrating institutional education into community development practices is crucial for the sustainability of development outcomes in KZN. Addressing the educational gaps in disability inclusion, these strategies help build a more informed, cohesive, and resilient community. Sustainable development is more likely achieved when communities have the knowledge and skills to navigate their challenges independently. This could lead to long-term improvements in various socio-economic indicators, such as reduced poverty rates, improved health outcomes, and enhanced social cohesion, which is essential for the overall development of KZN (Holness & Rule, 2018).

**CONCLUSION**

This study has explored the critical role of institutional education in enhancing community development practices in Kwa-Zulu Natal, with a specific focus on legal, family, and disability education. The integration of these educational dimensions into community development frameworks is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity for addressing the socio-economic challenges that persist in the region. The findings underscore the transformative potential of legal education in empowering marginalised communities, enabling them to navigate disability landscapes, advocate for their rights, and engage more effectively in civic life. This empowerment is crucial for fostering a culture of active citizenship and social justice, which is foundational to sustainable community development. The analysis also highlights the importance of family education as a cornerstone for social cohesion and stability within communities. By expanding and enriching the educational offerings of community learning centres to include culturally relevant family education, these programs can significantly strengthen family dynamics and reduce social dysfunction. Incorporating cultural values, such as Ubuntu, into these educational initiatives ensures they resonate deeply with the community members, enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability.

Furthermore, the study has highlighted the critical need for disability education within community development. Adopting community-based rehabilitation (CBR) approaches and implementing mobile learning platforms are identified as effective strategies for promoting the inclusion and empowerment of individuals with disabilities. These initiatives are essential for fostering a more inclusive society where the rights and contributions of all members, regardless of ability, are recognised and valued.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, offering a blueprint for how institutional education can be leveraged to achieve more equitable and effective community development outcomes. By addressing the educational deficits in disability inclusion, these strategies contribute to building more informed, cohesive, and resilient communities. This

integrated approach addresses the specific needs of KZN and provides valuable insights that can be adapted to similar global contexts. As the region continues to grapple with complex development challenges, the strategic implementation of these educational initiatives will be critical. Ongoing evaluation and adaptation of these strategies will be necessary to ensure they remain responsive to the evolving needs of the communities they serve. Ultimately, this study advocates for a more holistic and inclusive approach to community development, where institutional education plays a central role in empowering individuals, strengthening communities, and promoting sustainable development.

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