

# Interrogating the Disconnect: A Limpopo Province Case Study of Mainstream Educators' Engagement with Inclusive Education Policies

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## Abstract

This study investigates the disconnect between the intent of inclusive education policies and their practical implementation among mainstream educators in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Using a qualitative within a case study design, inductive approach within an interpretivist framework, the research collected data through interviews with ten educators from five mainstream schools in the Capricorn District. Findings reveal that educators face significant challenges, including a lack of understanding of inclusive education policies, insufficient specialized training, and limited institutional support. These barriers are further exacerbated by resource constraints, such as inadequate infrastructure and teaching materials, as well as attitudinal barriers among educators and school management. Many educators expressed frustration with the complexity of policy documents and the absence of clear, actionable guidelines, which hinder their ability to effectively implement inclusive practices in diverse classroom settings. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted professional development programs that provide practical strategies for inclusive teaching, simplified and accessible policy documents, and enhanced institutional support, including adequate resources and leadership involvement. These measures are imperative for mitigating the disparity between policy frameworks and their practical application, thereby facilitating the realization of inclusive education objective. The insights from this research offer valuable recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to improve training, resource allocation, and policy alignment, ultimately fostering more equitable and inclusive educational environments. By addressing these challenges, This study makes a substantive contribution toward the advancement of inclusive pedagogical objectives by promoting equitable access to quality education for diverse learners, irrespective of individual learning needs or systemic barriers

**Keywords:** inclusive education, policy implementation, educator engagement, mainstream education, educational barriers, professional development

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of an educational system is to provide quality education that equips learners with skills to realize their full potential, address socio-economic disparities, and foster inclusive development. However, developing countries like South Africa face systemic challenges in achieving this goal due to historical inequities, resource constraints, and evolving societal needs. (Robinson, Leeb, Merrick and Forbes, 2016; Tikly, 2011). A robust inclusive education framework necessitates the prioritization of equitable, high-quality pedagogical practices to dismantle stigmatization and counteract stereotyping of learners facing educational barriers. (Prinsloo, 2001; Hayes and Bulat, 2017). As such, it is the responsibility of an inclusive educational system to help learners become active contributors and participants in their society and the economy in general.

South African Constitution Section 29 of the asserts that all individuals have the right to access basic education, which includes both adult basic education and further education. The state is mandated to ensure this right by implementing reasonable measures to progressively make education accessible to all (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Subsequently, The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 mandates that mainstream education systems adopt comprehensive provisions to accommodate diverse learning needs, ensuring equitable access and participation for all learners without exclusion based on learning barriers. This implies that every individual is entitled to a quality, non-discriminatory education. Nevertheless, significant challenges exist for the Department of Basic Education (DBE) formerly the Department of Education (DoE) as well as for school management and, notably, educators, in

fostering and establishing an inclusive and effective learning environment. This responsibility includes ensuring equitable access for all learners, regardless of race, gender, or disability, within the education system. This challenge has led to a commitment to developing wholesome and inclusive educational and training systems that build upon the constitutional right to an inclusive society (Sepadi, 2018).

The implementation of inclusive and comprehensive educational systems is underpinned by key policy frameworks, notably Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) and the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) strategy, which collectively establish the legislative and procedural foundations for equitable pedagogical practices (Ngema, 2023). It is essential for educators to be well-versed in these frameworks to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education within mainstream schools. While training and workshops on inclusive education have been conducted, the challenges in interpreting, understanding and implementing these policies in schools within the Capricorn District in the Limpopo Province need to be investigated. Such a disconnect between interpretation and implementation of inclusive education policies in mainstream schools must be accounted for.

In the light of this, the present study was conducted to investigate these challenges with a view to offer solutions to the successful implementation of inclusive education. The information would be important for policymakers and higher learning institutions in their approaches to inclusive education training and implementation.

### *1.1 Problem Statement*

Inclusive education policies pose significant challenges for mainstream educators in South Africa, particularly in the Limpopo Province. Despite the legal mandates outlined in South African Constitution Section 29 and subsequent regulation such as the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 and policies like White Paper 6 and the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support document, there exists a notable gap between policy intent and practical application (Tshifura, 2012; Maapola-Thobejane, 2017; Malahlela, 2017; Sepadi, 2023). The result in the disconnect between policy intent and practice is mainstream educators struggling to comprehend and implement inclusive education practices in their schools and classrooms.

Even though these educators are still exposed to training and workshops in inclusive education, mainstream educators struggle to translate proposed policy guidelines into practice to respond to the diverse learning requirements of all learners (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2009; Sepadi, 2023).

The complexity of policies in inclusive education, coupled with limited resources and support, exacerbates these challenges (Malahlela, 2017; Sepadi, 2023). Understanding the root causes of the gap between policy interpretation and implementation is crucial for devising targeted interventions that can support mainstream educators in fostering truly inclusive learning environments.

The research problem focuses on the challenges encountered by mainstream educators in the Limpopo Province and aims to highlight the complexities involved in implementing inclusive education policies. These challenges and their underlying causes, policymakers, educational authorities, and other stakeholders can develop tailored interventions and support mechanisms to facilitate the successful implementation of inclusive education practices.

### *1.2 Study Objectives: To Determine Mainstream Educators' Knowledge of Inclusive Education Implementation*

-To determine challenges experienced by mainstream educators in inclusive education implementation.

-Determine intervention measures to assist mainstream educators in inclusive education implementation.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Inclusive Education in the South African Context*

In 1990, the international community, under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), initiated the Education for All (EFA) movement, a global effort dedicated to promoting equitable access to quality basic education for children, youth, and adults (UNESCO, 2008). The policy framework articulates these objectives through strategic priorities focused on fulfilling its mandate, including the expansion of early childhood education provision, the guarantee of free and compulsory basic education for all school-aged learners, and the establishment of comprehensive adult education programs incorporating life-skills development. Further priorities encompass significant improvements in adult literacy rates, the elimination of persistent educational inequities with particular attention to gender-based disparities and systemic enhancements to education quality to ensure meaningful and equitable learning opportunities across all population groups (Dagada, 2022). In 2000, 189 countries, including South Africa, reaffirmed their commitment to these educational objectives by

endorsing the Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2007). Inclusive education fully supports the vision of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which requires states to provide at least an inclusive, equitable, and quality education that will support lifelong learning opportunities for all. On questions of these educational goals, South Africa has achieved numerous objectives (Donohue and Bornman, 2014).

According to Cayley (2017) the South Africa education system is marred by problems such as school violence, high dropout rates, teenage pregnancies, and a decline in secondary school matric rates. Gulston (2010) further adds that learners in South Africa even achieve poorly in numeracy and literacy performance when compared with other African countries. The current state of education in South Africa is partially shaped by the enduring impact of education policies from the apartheid era. (Donohue and Bornman, 2014). Engelbrecht et al, (2006) suggests that What sets South Africa apart from other countries in terms of educational provision is the deep-rooted impact of racial attitudes and the institutionalization of discriminatory practices, which have resulted in considerable disparities in both access to and education of quality. The situation represents wider separation or division and inequality within the society.

In White schools, class sizes were smaller, whereas in Black schools, class sizes were approximately twice as large. (Florian and Beaton, 2017). White students were required to attend school and schools for Whites were well financed, while other racial groups did not have comparable support of their students nor was schooling compulsory (Asmal and James, 2001). furthermore, schools were further divided according to the learner's specific disability. Institutions for White learners with disabilities were well-resourced, whereas Black schools lacked the necessary resources for supporting learners with disabilities. (DoE, 2001 Florian & Beaton, 2017).

The deinstitutionalization of segregated special education systems commenced as early as the 1970s in several Global North nations, including Canada and the United States, marking a significant paradigm shift toward inclusive educational models (Hardman, 2015). inclusive education began in South Africa with the formation of democracy in 1994. Prior to 1994, division and segregation characterized the South African education system, where learners were divided not only along racial lines but also according to disability. A fully supported special education system was provided for White learners, while Black learners with disabilities either received inadequate provision or had limited access to educational opportunities (Maebana, 2016). One of the democratic government's primary priorities was the adoption of a new constitution in 1996, which enshrined principles of equality, human rights, and the right to education without discrimination. (DoE 1996). Also in 1996, the South African Schools Act was enacted to give practical effect to these constitutional values. Department of Education (1996) legislation incorporated specific mandates to improve infrastructural accessibility within educational institutions for learners requiring accommodations, while guaranteeing non-discriminatory fulfilment of all students' educational requirements

In 2001, the Department of Education (DoE) published White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (EWP6) following extensive consultations with relevant stakeholders. Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) articulates a comprehensive national strategy for establishing an inclusive education system designed to address systemic learning barriers encountered by diverse student populations. It would provide for the transformation of the present system, with the conversion of selected schools into full-service schools, to address various support needs. The support teams would be established at schools and districts to support the classroom educators. The education managers and educators would be trained for the purpose. Special schools remain operational to serve learners with high-support needs while functioning as resource centers for mainstream institutions (Govender, & Ajani, 2021).

The implementation of Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) was operationalized through a twenty-year strategic plan and dedicated funding framework, with subsequent policy development by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) producing key instruments including the Guidelines for Special Schools (Ngema, 2023), Full-Service Schools Policy (DBE, 2009), and Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) Strategy (DBE, 2014). These documents collectively reinforce the principles of inclusion and social justice embedded in South Africa's national curriculum (Tomlinson, 2001), while providing explicit guidance for addressing learning barriers through differentiated pedagogical approaches and adaptive assessment practices (DoE, 2014).

While South African schools have initiated inclusive practices by accommodating diverse learners within their communities, full systemic integration of inclusive education remains unrealized (Hardman, 2015). This partial implementation is evidenced by persistent enrollment disparities, wherein learners with disabilities continue to face exclusion due to unmet educational needs. Comparative data from UNESCO (2008) underscores this inequity, revealing a 20-percentage-point gap in primary school attendance between disabled and non-disabled children one of the most pronounced disparities documented across African nations.

Inclusive Education South Africa (2018) identifies various factors that hinder the implementation of inclusive

education in the country, including a system that prioritises academic outcomes at the expense of other considerations, inadequate budget planning, misalignment between school admission policies and broader policies, limited educator capacity, and a lack of integration of inclusive education into all DBE programmes.

### *2.2 South Africa's Legislative Framework for Inclusive Education*

#### *i) National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) Report, 1992*

The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) Report of 1992 was instrumental in shaping South Africa's education transformation following democratic transition. It offered key guidelines for the White Paper on Education, advocating for the inclusion of all marginalized groups in quality education and rejecting the racially segregated education system of the past. The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) was designed as a transformative policy instrument to dismantle systemic discrimination, structural inequalities, and institutionalized exclusion within South Africa's education sector. By advocating for principles of non-sexism, democratic governance, and a unitary education framework, the report provided foundational directives for addressing historical inequities perpetuated by apartheid-era policies. NEPI incorporated support services into the general education system, thereby promoting access to a cohesive curriculum. Its principles had a significant impact on the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996, highlighting human rights, values, and social justice. NEPI remains a foundational framework in the development of South Africa's democratic education system, especially in shaping inclusive education policies. Key priorities include redressing educational inequalities, ensuring equal learning opportunities, and promoting cost-effective, sustainable education and support.

#### *2.3 The 1995 Education Policy White Paper (South Africa)*

This White Paper presents the main policy directions for the thorough transformation of the system of education (Crispel and Kasperski, 2019). It emphasizes the importance of cultivating a teaching, learning, and support services environment that values diversity and ensures equal access to quality education for everyone. This involves changing the culture of educational institutions and developing a new ethos that includes all learners by providing a barrier-free learning environment. Meaningful changes in learning environments must be accompanied by supplementary support structures to ensure that learners with learning and development challenges can access education on an equal basis with their peers. Consequently, the curriculum should be adapted to address the diverse needs of all.

#### *2.4 South Africa's 1996 Schools Act (SASA)*

The South African Schools Act (SASA), Act 84 of 1996, establishes and regulates a standardized system of school governance in the Republic of South Africa. It aims to create a democratic national education system that can address the diverse needs of all learners, seeking to redress past injustices and inequalities in the education system (DoE, 1996). SASA also governs the enrollment of learners in both public and private schools, emphasizing the provision of equal and fair learning opportunities, as well as education that is responsive to the varied needs of all learners (Kelly, 2008). Additionally, the Act laid a crucial foundation for the development of subsequent legislation on inclusive education.

#### *ii) The 1996 National Policy Commissions (NCSNET/NCESS) on Inclusive Education*

As part of South Africa's democratic education reforms, the 1996 establishment of NCSNET and NCESS represented a deliberate policy mechanism to audit and transform special needs education following the inequities of apartheid. Their 1998 report identified barriers within learners, schools, communities, and the education system. Criticising existing approaches, they highlighted issues like unequal resource allocation and challenges faced by educators. The NCSNET and NCESS findings prompted the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to formulate a transformative policy framework grounded in democratic values and inclusive education principles. This strategic response directly addressed post-apartheid imperatives for an equitable education system capable of meeting heterogeneous learner needs. The commissions' recommendations proved instrumental in catalyzing South Africa's transition toward systemic educational inclusion *EPW6: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001)*

In 2001, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) introduced EPW6, a policy framework for inclusive education, in response to the recommendations made by NCSNET and NCESS. EPW6 outlined a comprehensive vision for an inclusive education and training system, including its funding model. The purpose of EPW6 was to create a unified education system for all learners within a 20-year period, serving as a developmental framework. However, despite offering a detailed description, the policy lacked clear guidelines for implementation, leading to challenges. Due to a lack of coherent national strategy in implementation, various provinces resorted to different approaches. This study investigates the implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools in the Limpopo Province, indicating

the challenges that emanate from the lack of a standardized national plan for implementation.

*iii) Outcomes-Based Education System (OBE), 1997*

In 1997, DBE introduced Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) as a transformative tool in education, providing a framework that ensures equitable access to quality education for all learner (DoE, 1996). According to Haug, (2017) The philosophical foundation of OBE is based on three key beliefs: that all learners have the potential to learn and succeed; that experiencing success fosters further achievement; and that schools can create conditions that are conducive to successful learning. These principles align closely with the inclusive education system outlined in EWP6.

This first principle underlines that success is for all learners, ensuring equal opportunities and access to learning without any limitations due to abilities. The second principle points out that the successful learning fosters further successes, underscoring support for enabling learners to achieve their full potential. The third principle highlights the role of schools in shaping learning, aligning with the social model of inclusion, which focuses on adapting environments to address diverse needs. The education system and schools must provide accommodations and support to ensure all learners can succeed.

*iv) Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS), 2014*

Introduced in 2014, the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) aims to establish a standardized framework for identifying, assessing, and supporting learners who need additional assistance to improve their participation in school activities. Developed through extensive consultations with relevant stakeholders, the policy focuses on the management and support of teaching and learning processes for learners facing barriers to learning within the National Curriculum Policy Statement (CAPS) for Grades 1 to 12. SIAS aligns with the inclusive education objectives outlined in EWP6, emphasizing the transformation of the education system towards greater inclusivity.

The new policy establishes new roles for District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs), School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs), special schools, and full-service schools. It calls for learning environments, especially full-service schools, to adapt in ways that enhance both the academic and social development of all learners, including those with disabilities. This approach aligns with the South African government's implementation of the social model of inclusion. The perspective of disability as a social construct highlights the importance of adapting full-service schools to address the diverse educational and developmental needs of all learners. SIAS represents a significant milestone in the inclusion and support of learners facing barriers to learning within the South African education system.

*2.5 South African Educators' Understanding of Inclusive Education and Its Implementation.*

The perspective of disability as a social construct highlights the importance of adapting full-service schools to address the diverse educational and developmental needs of all learners. SIAS represents a significant milestone in the inclusion and support of learners facing barriers to learning within the South African education system. This initiative framed the concept that students facing educational challenges should be integrated into mainstream schools. However, there is limited research on the feasibility and practical implementation of this approach (DoE, 2009). According to Maebana (2016), any implementation of the policy by the DBE must prioritize educators' understanding of what inclusive education entails. This focus should aim to address gaps in educators' skills and knowledge, particularly in adapting the curriculum to meet the diverse learning needs of all students.

School factors, both related to the child and educator variables, play an pivotal role in the learning process. Kennedy (2014), found that educators in schools with inclusive practices, resource rooms, were more positive about integrating learners with learning barriers into the regular classroom. On the other hand, inadequate facilities and a lack of teaching aids were identified as a significant barrier, which contributed to a lower level of willingness by educators to fully implement inclusive education( Maebana and Molotja, 2023).

Dapudong (2014) would argue inclusive education necessitates the acceptance of all learners, regardless of their differences, in schools within their communities, enabling them to learn interactively with and from one another. Considering thiseducators are expected to have the ability to teach a diverse range of learners, including those who may have experienced racial or linguistic disadvantages. Effective inclusive education necessitates that both general education and special education teachers receive training to collaborate with a common goal, addressing the diverse educational needs of all students (Friend et al., 2010; Khairuddin et al., 2016).

According to Dreyer (2017) to achieve an inclusive education setting, general education and special education

educators both must be specifically trained to provide an inclusive, effective learning environment despite various challenges. Accordingly, it is essential to provide adequate training for all educators in mainstream schools, particularly those who may struggle to teach or engage learners with learning needs, in order to overcome negative perceptions of inclusive education

According to Shaeffer (2019) and Mashiya (2014) in South Africa, inclusive education is partial and slow because there are many factors keeping the education system behind in playing its role concerning inclusive education. Such factors include the inability of educators to understand inclusive education, which embodies a persisting attitude that may be fuelled by a insufficient materials for educators, inadequate support from the support structures for educators and a lack of skills by educators.

Mbelu (2020) highlight that the success of implementing inclusive education is largely dependent on the preparedness of educators, particularly in terms of the skills and knowledge gained through training or workshops. Another key factor for the successful implementation of inclusive education in schools is the establishment of a positive learning environment. According to Cayley (2017), when learners with learning needs are victims of neglect, they will have very low self-esteem in their academic and social lives. As such, educating the educators to establish a learning environment that will promote positive peer interaction and learning is vital (Brodkin, 2003). It is also confirmed that learners with learning problems always seek support, respect, and empathy from educators (Zhang, 2022; Jaber et al., 2023). Consequently, when educators treat these learners differently, the learners may respond by highlighting their differences from others, which can lead to feelings of isolation within the classroom and result in personal, social, and emotional challenges.

According to Saloviita (2020) motivation and attitude of the educator are important in fostering inclusive education. Existing literature has shown that through the model of inclusive education, there is a resurgence of concern in providing appropriate and effective education for all. Inclusive education policy such as the White Paper 6 holds the view that attitudes from educators remain a strategic key point in the teaching of learners with disabilities in normal classes as well as in inclusive education. Moreover, Benson (2020) asserts that the policy on Education White Paper 6 is thoroughly dependent on educators displaying positive approaches towards inclusion, strong professional skills, high-quality pre-service education, and in-service training, including networking with other educators. The success of inclusive education would also depend on whether the educators proactively adapt to the classroom by creating a sense of belonging for their learners with disabilities. Among skills adaptation for the educators, it will include but not limit to adapting the relevant curriculum in addition to adapting the setup of the classroom (Zhang, 2022).

The classroom environment is naturally complex, and the increasing demands on educators, who often have minimal or no specialized training in addressing the needs of learners with learning barriers or additional learning needs, cannot be overlooked (Mbelu, 2020.). It is recommended that appropriate assistance and guidance for educators be provided through relevant support structures. Educator training programs should be designed to address classroom diversity by offering comprehensive training and ongoing professional development through regular workshops. Benson (2020) also echoed similar sentiments like those of Magg and Haug (2017) but reiterated the call for updated reform within nation-wide educator training programs to accommodate both general and special education teachers. They also maintained that adjusting these training programs would align professionals as active partners in ensuring successful inclusive education. This would allow professionals to respond appropriately, hence developing positive perceptions toward inclusion.

Equal learning opportunities for all can be assured if educators are trained well and motivated enough to develop a positive perception about inclusive education. While the previous studies by Dapudong (2014) was concerned with reshaping educator-training programs, educational environment-related variables, including child-related and educator-related variables, have a substantial impact on the way in which learning may take place in schools. As previously emphasised by Jaber et al., (2023), the effectiveness of constructive alignment of teaching and learning outcomes, guided by inclusive in and out of the classroom, can be impeded by a lack of facilities and teaching materials for educators. As such educational environmental variables that allows for inclusive learning and inclusive teaching has an impact on the attitude, motivation and perspective educators have on inclusive education implementation

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Approach*

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology. The approach was necessary to collect the data relevant to

understanding the challenges faced by educators in interpreting and implementing policies related to inclusive education in mainstream schools. Underpinned by Creswell and Poth (2018) understanding of qualitative methodology and its appropriateness to this study, the qualitative research approach is appropriate when the researcher aims to understand how individuals interpret their experiences and how they construct their perceptions of the world and their experiences.

### 3.2 Research Design

A case study design was employed in the study. According to Yin (2017), a case study design is ideal for conducting an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group, or event. This approach was particularly suitable for gathering educators' perspectives on the challenges they encounter in interpreting and implementing inclusive education within their schools.

### 3.3 Sampling

This study used purposive sampling to select research participants. As Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, and Joseph (2014) note, purposive sampling is employed to "enhance the utility of information gathered from a small sample, as is the case in this study." Ten educators were deliberately chosen from five mainstream schools in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province, South Africa.

### 3.4 Data Collection

Merriam (1998) define interviews as a method through which researchers establish direct contact with respondents, enabling them to ask questions and gather data during the interaction. In this study, interviews were employed as a primary data collection tool, utilizing an open-ended questionnaire to facilitate interaction between the researcher and respondents. This approach provided the researcher with flexibility to follow the interviewees' responses in unexpected directions while minimizing interference. The interviews have been instrumental in exploring educators' understanding, experiences, and attitudes regarding inclusive education implementation. Additionally, the predetermined set of questions for the one-on-one interviews served as a crucial framework, enabling the researcher to initiate meaningful conversations and gather valuable insights.

### 3.5 Procedures for data collection

Ethical clearance for the research was granted by the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC/1567/2023: PG). The educators were informed about the nature and purpose of the study, and their consent to participate was subsequently obtained.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2018) describe data analysis as the process of organizing, structuring, and extracting meaning from the collected data. In qualitative research, this entails evaluating and organizing the data, breaking it into manageable segments, coding it, synthesizing the findings, and identifying patterns for interpretation. The study employed content analysis. According to Merriam (1998) content analysis is a "systematic, replicable technique for condensing large amounts of text into fewer content categories based on clear coding rules." It involves filtering out irrelevant information to highlight what is significant, identifying patterns, and constructing a framework that effectively communicates the research findings. (what the data revealed) (Creswell, 2008). In this study, content analysis allowed the researchers to analyse the data in a systematic manner and identify information significant to the study.

## 4. Findings

Three main findings emerged from our study: Educators lack understanding of inclusive education policies, The lack of efficient and specialised training and workshops needed by educators and the attitudes of educators and school management towards the implementation of inclusive education.

Theme 1: Educators lack understanding of inclusive education policies

The DBE has policies such as the Education White Paper 6 and SIAS documents, which outline inclusive education and its implementation. The first finding was that some educators lack understanding of inclusive education policies such as the White Paper and SAIS document. Participants expressed their concerns about understanding the policies related to education:

*"There needs to be training and workshops specifically for inclusive education as I feel we don't understand the policies surrounding the implementation of inclusive education."* (Participant 1).

*“I didn’t even know that there were policies regarding inclusive education until I was in a situation with a learner who came with a doctor’s letter stating that they need to be given additional writing time due to their conditions. It was then, when we found out about the White Paper and SAIS document and its perspective on inclusive education.” (Participant 5).*

*“I feel like the Education White Paper document is written in a complex English, which we struggle to understand. It is so too wordy (Participant 4)*

Theme 2: The lack of efficient and specialised training and workshops needed by educators.

This participant expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of sufficient and specialised training related to Inclusive Education.

Participant 3 indicated that *“There needs to be training and workshops specifically for inclusive education as I feel we don’t understand the policies surrounding inclusive education implementation.”* While Participant 4 indicated that *“I think teaching in South Africa is already difficult because we deal with so many barriers that affect the learning process. Understanding inclusive education seems a whole lot difficult than just disciplining learners for they are disruptive behaviour. So, learning these policies is actually additional work that we have to do and if I am doing it and others are not becomes difficult to collectively form an understanding of these policies.”* This indicates that there is still a need to provide platforms for further training and workshops to widen the understanding and scope of implementation by educators in schools. Issues of accessibility of the policies were also highlighted by some of the educators, as indicated by the comment from participant 7:

*“I didn’t even know that there were policies regarding inclusive education until I was in a situation with a learner who came with a doctor’s letter stating that they need to be given additional writing time due to their conditions. It was then, when we found out about the White Paper and SAIS document and its perspective on inclusive education.”*

Theme 3: The attitudes of educators and school management towards the implementation of inclusive education

The participants expressed that:

*“I feel that we will not understand the policies about inclusive education because our principals and deputy principals do not teach the learners. And because they do not teach the learners, they do not take effective measures to make sure that we understand the policies and how they should be implemented. I personally feel that if the policies and documents that govern inclusive education are to be understood, principals and deputy principals should teach so that they feel and understand what we go through.” (Participant 8)*

*“I think teaching in South Africa is already difficult because we deal with so many barriers that affect the learning process. Understanding inclusive education seems a whole lot difficult than just disciplining learners for they are disruptive behaviour. So, learning these policies is actually additional work that we have to do and if I am doing it and others are not becoming difficult to collectively form an understanding of these policies.” (Participant 10)*

A study by Sepadi (2018), which focused on student educators’ preparation for inclusive education, highlighted that student educators do not feel prepared for inclusive education as there is not enough training and clear policies or guidelines available. His study also examined the student teachers' tertiary education, which introduced them to policies like the Education White Paper 6. However, the students felt that there was insufficient guidance on how to implement the curriculum in an inclusive manner (Sepadi, 2018).

Many of the participants in the study share the same sentiments as the student educators, as referenced above. According to the educators in this study, there is an absence at the school level of specific policies and procedures to help govern and implement inclusive education. The educators also indicated that support from school management may be hampered by their own understanding of the policies and procedures towards implementing inclusive education; as such, efforts and guidance become limited. As such, it is important that the alignment and implementation of any and such training should be revised to considered school management and their understanding and acceptance of inclusive in schools.



**Table 1.** Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Key Findings	Supporting Quotes/Evidence
1. Lack of Understanding of Inclusive Education Policies	Educators struggle to comprehend policies like White Paper 6 and SIAS due to complex language and lack of clarity.	" <i>The Education White Paper document is written in complex English, which we struggle to understand.</i> " (Participant 4)
2. Insufficient Specialized Training and Workshops	Educators feel unprepared to implement inclusive education due to inadequate training and workshops.	" <i>There needs to be training and workshops specifically for inclusive education.</i> " (Participant 3)
3. Limited Institutional Support and Resources	Schools lack resources (e.g., teaching aids, infrastructure) and support staff to implement inclusive practices.	" <i>We don't have the necessary resources to support learners with diverse needs.</i> " (Participant 6)
4. Attitudinal Barriers Among Educators and Management	Educators and school management often view inclusive education as an additional burden rather than a priority.	" <i>Principals and deputy principals do not teach learners, so they don't understand our challenges.</i> " (Participant 8)
5. Challenges with Policy Accessibility	Policies are not easily accessible or actionable, making implementation difficult for educators.	" <i>I didn't even know there were policies regarding inclusive education until I faced a specific situation.</i> " (Participant 5)

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a complex interaction of factors that contribute to the disparity between the intentions of inclusive education policies and their actual implementation in classrooms in Limpopo Province. This disconnect is influenced by a range of challenges faced by mainstream educators, including limited policy understanding, inadequate support, and insufficient professional development opportunities, all of which impact their ability to effectively engage with inclusive practices.

### 5.1 Policy Understanding and Accessibility

A key challenge identified is the limited understanding among educators of inclusive education policies, such as the Education White Paper 6 and the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support policy (SIAS) policy (Department of Education, 2001; DBE, 2014). The language complexity of these policies and the lack of accessible training materials mean that many educators struggle to comprehend the guidelines fully (Malahlela, 2017; Engelbrecht & Nel, 2022). Participant responses reflect a sense of frustration regarding the clarity and practical applicability of these policies, with many expressing the need for clearer, more actionable guidelines. Similar studies in other regions corroborate these findings, indicating that policy documents often lack the necessary simplicity and context-specific detail to guide teachers effectively (Florian & Spratt, 2021).

### 5.2 Professional Development and Training

The need for specialized training on inclusive education emerged as a critical area for improvement. Many educators feel unprepared to address diverse learning needs within mainstream classrooms, a sentiment echoed in previous research (Walton et al., 2023). This gap is compounded by the fact that most professional development programs in the region do not specifically address inclusive education or provide practical strategies for its implementation (Swart et al., 2021). The lack of continuous training further limits educators' ability to adapt to new challenges associated with inclusive teaching, resulting in a sense of isolation and frustration. As suggested by Donohue and Bornman (2020), inclusive education policies can be effectively implemented when professional development becomes ongoing and responsive to challenges pertinent to a mainstream setting.

### 5.3 Resource and Support Limitations

Another key finding pertains to the limited institutional support available to mainstream educators. While inclusive education policies depend on sufficient resources, many schools lack the necessary infrastructure, support staff, and materials to effectively assist students with diverse learning needs. (Walton and Engelbrecht, 2022). Educators in this study expressed concerns over the insufficient allocation of resources, which hampers their efforts to provide individualized support to students. Studies across different South African regions reveal similar challenges, where a shortage of physical resources, adaptive learning technologies, and classroom support personnel further exacerbates the difficulties in fostering inclusive environments (Walton and Engelbrecht, 2022).

#### 5.4 Attitudinal and Systemic Barriers

The study also highlights the impact of attitudinal and systemic barriers on educators' ability to implement inclusive education. Educators' attitudes toward inclusive education, influenced by their training and prior experiences, significantly affect their openness to adapt teaching strategies for diverse learners (Engelbrecht et al., 2020). Educators who feel unsupported or inadequately trained are more likely to view inclusive education as an additional burden, rather than as an integral component of teaching. Furthermore, a lack of alignment between school management practices and inclusive education goals can create an environment where policies are inconsistently applied or deprioritized. For example, participants noted that school leadership rarely participates in inclusive education training, which can undermine school-wide commitment to inclusivity (Malahlela, 2017).

### 6. Policy and Practice implications

Addressing the disconnect between policy and practice requires a multi-faceted approach. First, simplifying policy language and ensuring that policy documents are both accessible and practically applicable could improve educators' comprehension and confidence in implementing inclusive strategies. Additionally, restructuring professional development programs to include mandatory, specialized training in inclusive education would equip educators with the skills needed to address diverse student needs effectively. Training should also encompass practical strategies, collaborative techniques, and resources to support teachers in real-world classroom situations.

Moreover, a systematic allocation of resources to support inclusive education, particularly in underserved regions like Limpopo, would alleviate some of the logistical constraints faced by educators. Expanding access to specialized resources, such as adaptive learning materials and classroom assistants, can significantly enhance the capacity of schools to accommodate all learners. Finally, promoting a supportive school culture through the involvement of school leadership in training programs can foster an environment where inclusive education is not seen as a peripheral obligation but as a central component of the educational mission.

### 7. Future Research

This study highlights several areas for future research to advance inclusive education. Longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impact of policies and interventions, while comparative research across provinces could identify regional variations in implementation. Exploring the role of school leadership, technology, and adaptive tools in supporting inclusive practices is also critical. Additionally, future studies should evaluate and improve educator training programs, involve parents and communities, and include learner perspectives to provide a holistic view of inclusive education. Simplifying policy documents to make them more accessible to educators could also enhance implementation. Addressing these areas will help develop more effective strategies for fostering equitable and inclusive learning environments.

### 8. Conclusion

This study underscores the need for a holistic approach to inclusive education that addresses both educator preparation and systemic support. By improving training, resources, and institutional support, educational authorities can bridge the gap between policy intentions and practical implementation, ultimately working towards a truly inclusive education system in South Africa. Furthermore, the study concludes that the statements made by the educators is that there is a need to revise the approach in which inclusive education is currently implemented. Educators appear to have an understanding of inclusive education but feel they lack the necessary support through policies and interventions from the Department of Education to implement it effectively. The participants highlighted that training should be made available to better help educators with the diversity of the classroom and learning needs given the classroom sizes and limited experience with inclusive education. And while there is no prevailing negative attitude towards inclusive education by educators, the concern of it developing over time if these barriers are not addressed, is a certain possibility. Some of the educators also indicated that profession courses and including higher education specific to inclusive education could go a long way in helping the educators' overcome barriers to its implementation.

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