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Breaking Down Barriers: The Impact of Inclusive Education Policies on Access and Success for Students Living with Disabilities in South Africa

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Abstract. Educational access and student success availability for disabled students take inclusive education policies as its essential core structure and daily guiding policy. Current educational policies fail to remove all barriers that prevent students from achieving complete system inclusion worldwide. The research examined how inclusive education policies affect students with disabilities who access education and their academic achievement, especially by studying remaining barriers under supportive policy structures. This study examined the assumption that although inclusive education policies were designed to enhance student success and access for disabled students, these policies face implementation failures and systemic obstacles that stop them from delivering their intended goals. Research examined the impact of present inclusive education policies by studying their effects on educational access and academic success outcomes for students with disabilities. The research gathered secondary data using a comprehensive desktop by studying academic literature, official reports, and real-world cases, focusing on inclusive education systems. This method used qualitative content analysis of such documents to find common themes and point out gaps and challenges in policy execution, together with their direct influence on disabled students. This research discovered which main obstacles students with special needs confront, which primarily consist of insufficient teacher preparation combined with resource deficiencies alongside social prejudices, even in environments that apply inclusive policies. The research presented guidelines to enhance policy implementation, improving student outcomes for those with disabilities. The research followed principles of desktop ethics by collecting data only

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from open-source materials, which undergo appropriate documentation of original authorship. Only secondary research methods were used without collecting new data to comply with ethical principles focused on second-hand materials.

Keywords: Academic success; Access; Disability; Inclusive education; Policy impact

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a fundamental human right that guarantees all students, regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other circumstances, equal chances to learn and succeed in mainstream educational environments (Mahlaule et al., 2024). In South Africa, inclusive education has gained traction since the end of apartheid, striving to eliminate discriminatory practices and foster fair learning settings. Students with disabilities, a group that has historically faced marginalization in the education system, are key to this discussion (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020). Inclusive education policies aim to dismantle evident and subtle obstacles, guaranteeing that all students can access quality education and the assistance needed for academic and personal achievement (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024).

South African inclusive education policies are laid down within a number of international and national frameworks. South Africa is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which emphasizes the role of inclusive and quality education to all people (Nel, 2020). The policy of inclusive education in the local context is based on Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education -Establishing an Inclusive Education and Training System (2001). The given policy aims to transform the education system by identifying and removing barriers to learning and supporting students with special needs in general schools (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Even though significant strides have been made in formulating policies, the reality of the implementation of such frameworks across provinces and communities is patchy (Ohajunwa, 2022).

Although there has been legislative advancement, students with disabilities in South Africa continue to encounter significant obstacles in gaining access to and thriving in mainstream educational settings (Mahlaule et al., 2024). These factors comprise poor physical infrastructure, absence of assistive learning technologies, inadequate educator training, and restricted funding for initiatives promoting inclusive education. Additionally, societal perceptions of disability, frequently influenced by stigma and misconceptions, persist in affecting the success of inclusion initiatives (Carew et al., 2020). The difficulties indicate a disparity between policy and implementation, emphasizing the necessity to thoroughly assess how inclusive education policies are converted into tangible benefits for students with disabilities (Majoko, 2023).

Inclusive education's significance goes beyond just physical accessibility; it also includes emotional and academic assistance, modifications to the curriculum, and

inclusive teaching methods that accommodate various learning needs (Uleanya et al., 2021). The success of students with disabilities should be assessed not only by their enrolment but also by retention, academic performance, and their feelings of inclusion in the school setting (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024). Consequently, it is crucial to investigate whether learners are included in schools and if they are being actively involved and assisted in ways that promote sustained achievement (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020).

This paper examined the impacts of inclusive education policies on student access and performance of learners with disabilities in South Africa. The aim of the study was to deepen the understanding of inclusive education in the South African context through the analysis of the challenges that are currently present and the effective programs. It was also aimed at offering practical recommendations to improve the implementation of policies to ensure that all learners, their abilities notwithstanding, can realize their full potential in an inclusive and supportive learning setting.

Based on the reformulated objectives and the objectives set, the following research questions are developed. They should be concrete, researchable, and directly related to the policy implications, issues, and solutions on which the study focuses: What is the role of inclusive education policies in South Africa in influencing the academic performance of students with disabilities? (This is in response to the aim of investigating the effects of policy on academic performance.) What contribution does inclusive education policy make in South Africa to improving access to mainstream education by students with disabilities? (This corresponds to the goal of evaluating access and success improvements and identifying possible obstacles for embedding.)

1.1 Research objectives

It is against this backdrop that students with disabilities in mainstream school systems persistently fail to access cost-effective educational opportunities and fail to succeed in such systems that this research aims to foster an understanding of how inclusive education policy can be used to change these realities in South Africa. In this respect, the study will be influenced by the following objectives:

- To explore the impact of inclusive education policies in South Africa on students with disabilities' academic success
- To assess how these policies improve access to education and academic success

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Underpinning

2.1.1 Inclusive Education Theory

The theory of inclusive education lays the groundwork for comprehending how educational systems can more effectively support students with disabilities. It highlights fairness, involvement, and the reorganization of educational settings to support every learner (Nilholm, 2021). This theory corresponded with the objectives of the research. At the heart of this theoretical framework were important discussions like the social versus medical models of disability and the

rights-based approach to education, which significantly influence policy development and execution in inclusive education.

2.1.2 Social Model vs Medical Model of Disability

The medical model of disability sees disability as an individual problem, concentrating on diagnosing, treating, and correcting impairments (Amundson, 2022). In this framework, the objective of education is frequently to "correct" the student so they can align with a conventional educational system. This method unintentionally results in exclusion, as it shifts the burden onto the learner to adjust, instead of on the system to be inclusive (Lawson & Beckett, 2021).

Conversely, the social model of disability redirects attention from personal disabilities to emphasize the societal and environmental obstacles that prevent complete participation (Graham et al., 2023). From this viewpoint, disability arises not from a medical condition but from inaccessible systems, biased practices, and societal attitudes. The theory of inclusive education is based mainly on the social model, contending that schools and policies must be restructured to eliminate barriers and accommodate varied learning requirements (Amundson, 2022).

In South Africa, numerous obstacles encountered by students with disabilities, such as impractical infrastructure, insufficient assistive technologies, and inadequately trained teachers, clearly indicate a system still shaped by the medical model (Graham, 2020). The research examined the effectiveness of South Africa's inclusive education policies, especially Education White Paper 6, in reflecting the principles of the social model by striving to establish adaptable learning environments that acknowledge and support diversity instead of isolating students because of disability.

2.1.3 Rights-Based Approaches to Inclusive Education

The rights-based inclusive education model is founded on worldwide human rights systems, which comprise that of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). South Africa has signed the document (Heroux & Peters, 2020). This approach declares education as a basic human right, and it states that every student, regardless of his or her disability, is entitled to quality, inclusive and accessible education within their home communities (Artiles et al., 2021). A rights-based approach goes beyond charity or medical perspectives and focuses on dignity, equality and participation.

Regarding policy, South Africa has made significant pledges to a rights-oriented perspective on education. The Education White Paper 6 and associated policy papers emphasize the state's responsibility to deliver inclusive education as a legal and ethical obligation (Kakos, 2025). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these policies relies on how they are executed and the real experiences of students within schools.

Referring again to the study, assessing the effects of inclusive education policies from the perspectives of rights-based and social model frameworks enabled a thorough evaluation of whether existing initiatives genuinely empower students with disabilities. Are educational institutions eliminating obstacles, modifying

teaching approaches, and offering fair learning chances? Or do learners continue to encounter exclusion in more nuanced ways, like inaccessible curricula or unsupported learning environments? The study utilized the inclusive education theory to assess not only the accessibility of the education services to students with disabilities in South Africa but also the quality and the inclusiveness of the education that students receive.

The concept of inclusive education, which is informed by the social model of disability and the rights-oriented principles, played an essential role in the understanding of the purposes and impacts of policies on inclusive education (Setty & Dobson, 2023). These theoretical viewpoints highlight that the responsibility for change rests with the education system rather than the learner, asserting that inclusive education is a right, not a privilege. Consequently, this study employed these frameworks to examine the efficacy of South African policies in dismantling obstacles and creating settings that enable all learners, especially those with disabilities, to access, engage in, and thrive within mainstream education (Cologon & Mevawalla, 2023).

2.2 Access to Education

Access to education, especially in the context of inclusive education, extends well beyond simply being able to register at a school. It includes the complete spectrum of opportunities and resources required for all learners, particularly those with disabilities, to engage in a meaningful and fair manner within the educational system (Zembe-Mkabile, 2021). In inclusive education, “access” refers to establishing settings where all learners have the right and chance to learn, flourish, and succeed without encountering systemic or structural obstacles (Engelbrecht et al., 2016).

This entails tackling and eliminating barriers that impede learners’ access to, and complete involvement in, conventional education. Genuine access involves not merely showing up in a classroom but participating in the learning experience with dignity, assistance, and acknowledgment of personal differences. A crucial element of access is physical infrastructure. For students with disabilities, the architectural layout of schools can either aid or hinder their learning. Inclusive access requires that educational institutions are physically reachable, incorporating ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and classrooms tailored for mobility assistance and sensory requirements (Ntseto et al., 2021).

In various South African schools, a deficiency in fundamental physical facilities continues to hinder progress. Students who rely on wheelchairs or have visual or hearing disabilities frequently cannot access their local schools due to barriers, perpetuating exclusion and unequal opportunities (Solomon, Luger, & Ned, 2024). Consequently, inclusive education policies should focus on investing in infrastructure to guarantee that all students can access and navigate educational environments safely and comfortably. Aside from infrastructure, having access to the curriculum is also crucial. Students with disabilities should have access to the curriculum in a manner suitable to their educational requirements (Forsberg & Schultz, 2023). Offering educational resources in accessible formats like braille,

large print, or audio, and modifying teaching approaches to accommodate various cognitive and developmental skills is essential (Mahlaule et al., 2024). Inclusive education necessitates that teachers shift from a uniform instructional approach to differentiated teaching and incorporate assistive technologies. Although there are policy commitments in South Africa, numerous schools do not have the resources or teacher training required to effectively implement inclusive curricula, hindering educational success for students with disabilities (Mampane, 2022).

Social participation is just as essential for access: it refers to the capacity of learners with disabilities to fully engage in the school's social and cultural activities. Inclusive education encompasses more than academics; it involves a sense of belonging. Students should sense acceptance and appreciation from their classmates and teachers (Hess, 2020). Regrettably, numerous students with disabilities still face social isolation, harassment, or low expectations from educators, hindering their chances to succeed (Pillay et al., 2023). Encouraging access in this context involves nurturing inclusive educational environments that honour diversity, enhance empathy, and proactively confront stigma and discrimination.

2.3 Research Gaps in the Literature

Although there has been a strong theoretical framework of inclusive education theory, social model of disability, and rights-based approaches, and the empirical research on education access in South Africa, there still remain major gaps in the literature. Although education systems such as the Education White Paper 6 and UNCRPD propose systemic change and equal access, scant research has been conducted to thoroughly assess how these policies are successfully carried out and implemented in different South African settings, especially in rural, under-resourced schools. The literature is usually policy-oriented or in urban areas, and little is known about what the experiences of students with disabilities in marginalized neighbourhoods are like.

Also, there is no longitudinal information on the long-term academic and social results of the policies of inclusive education, and the question concerning the long-term impact of policies remains open. This has not addressed the views of key stakeholders, students, parents, and teachers, specifically on the ways social attitudes and teacher preparedness affect policy performance. Moreover, two areas of research that are lacking include the research that explores the use of assistive technologies and differentiated curriculum in resource-limited settings, which is important in learning about barriers to accessing curriculum and social involvement of students with disabilities.

3. Methodology

Overall, this desktop-based, qualitative methodology provided a cost-effective and ethically sound way to explore complex educational issues without requiring direct engagement with vulnerable populations. This study adopted a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing desktop research methods to gather and analyze secondary data. This methodology was appropriate as it allows for an in-depth

understanding of how inclusive education is implemented through a critical review of existing literature, policy documents, official government reports, and real-world case studies. By relying on pre-existing sources, the research drew from a broad knowledge base and evidence already collected, interpreted, and peer-reviewed by scholars and institutions.

Systematic review of scholarly publications (peer-reviewed journal articles, research theses, books, and academic essays published within the period of 2015-2025) was the main source of primary data collection. The basic elements of reliability included credibility, transferability and reliability of the sources applied in the study. This ensured that the study is guided by current and relevant academic discussions surrounding inclusive education in South Africa and globally. In addition to academic literature, official reports from bodies such as the South African Department of Basic Education, the United Nations, and advocacy organizations for people with disabilities were included to provide context on policy frameworks, implementation strategies, and progress assessments.

These sources offered insights into how inclusive education policies are designed and monitored nationally and internationally. The data collected was analysed using qualitative content analysis, a method for identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within textual data. The content analysis focused on recurring issues such as access to physical infrastructure, curriculum design, teacher preparedness, and the social inclusion of learners with disabilities. The goal was to highlight common themes, policy gaps, and implementation challenges affecting learners.

4. Results and Findings

After the thorough process of data analysis based on the six steps of the thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), some prominent characteristics can be identified as the themes of the reviewed data. These themes are important in offering critical perspectives on how the policies of inclusive education affect the access and outcomes of students living with disability in educational contexts in South Africa. The themes are discussed and brought out below.

4.1 Theme 1: Legislative and Policy Framework

South Africa's dedication to inclusive and fair education is deeply embedded in its constitutional structure. The Constitution of South Africa (1996), specifically Section 29(1), guarantees the right of all individuals to basic education, encompassing adult basic education, which the government is obliged to provide and ensure is accessible. This constitutional clause emphasizes education as a fundamental human right and a crucial means for social change (Engelbrecht, 2020).

Even more crucially, the Constitution requires that this right be fulfilled without discrimination, thereby establishing a legal basis for equal educational chances for all students, including individuals with disabilities (Ntombela, 2022). According to the constitutional principles, several national policies have been put in place in

order to provide inclusive education. In this regard, the Education White Paper 6 (2001), *Special Needs Education: Building an inclusive Education and Training System*, is one of the fundamental policy documents. It indicates a change in the concept of education, the isolated special education will be replaced with an inclusive model that can support students regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities (Bourdoux et al., 2020).

White Paper 6 recognizes that the apartheid legacy created a disjointed and unequal education system, especially for students with disabilities, and aims to change this through systemic and institutional reforms (Meier & West, 2020). Nevertheless, critics contend that although the policy aims to be progressive, it has experienced sluggish and erratic execution, partly due to inadequate educator training, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of resource allocation (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020).

Supporting this policy is the Disability Rights Charter (2000), a document created by civil society that defines the rights and needs of individuals with disabilities in South Africa. Even though it is not a legally binding document, it acts as a strong advocacy tool and a standard for assessing governmental actions (Anastasiou & Bantekas, 2023). The Charter highlights the right to obtain inclusive education in settings that respect dignity and autonomy (Waitoller, Beasley, West, & Randle, 2022). It advocates for appropriate adjustments and eliminating systemic obstacles that impede students with disabilities. Nevertheless, its impact is frequently limited by the disconnect between policy statements and their actual implementation in practice.

The South African Schools Act (1994) enhances the legal framework by outlining the government's obligations to guarantee that every child goes to school and that schools are available and free from discrimination. The Act facilitates the creation of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to encourage democratic governance; however, this has faced criticism for perpetuating inequality in affluent schools with more resources and more informed stakeholders. Although the Act encourages equal access in inclusive education, it does not include specific enforceable measures for supporting learners with disabilities, giving institutions excessive discretion.

The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007 by South Africa on the international level shows a strong commitment to the international standards. CRPD 24 mandates the state parties to create a comprehensive education system that is inclusive at all levels, including provision of support services, personalized accommodations and teacher training. By approving the Convention unconditionally, South Africa has committed to adapting its national laws and practices to match international standards. Nonetheless, regular evaluations and shadow reports from civil society have indicated a gap between commitment and reality, emphasizing ongoing problems like inaccessible school facilities, inadequate assistive technologies, and scarce support personnel (Majid, 2023).

4.2 Theme 2: Key Challenges in South African Education for Students with Disabilities

Inclusive education can be defined as a form of education where every student is accepted and given full integration in academics and social life. In developing countries, such as South Africa, the inclusion process is problematic because it has not adopted it as fast as developed countries (Phasha et al., 2017). Inclusive education, its implementation in South Africa, should be considered in the context of the overall political, social, and cultural transformation of the country since 1994 and the systematic and gradual reorganization of education in accordance with the Constitutional principles and ideals (Reygan & Steyn, 2017). This has seen the transition to inclusive education being largely aided on both educational and social grounds.

Although South African education has significantly advanced in terms of quantity, especially by enhancing primary school access for all students (Department of Basic Education, 2015; Wolhuter, 2014), the successful execution of policy guidelines has been uncertain, even with the establishment of a rights framework for full access and participation in education, increasing the total number of students accessing education overall. According to Walton and Rusznyak (2017), educational rights must go beyond just "rights to education" to encompass "rights in education", which involve the quality of education reflected in practical and supportive chances to engage in classroom learning activities. The subsequent difficulties have significantly contributed to this aspect.

Weaknesses in the policy documents and implementation guidelines, epitomized by the absence of a coherent understanding of their strategic objectives and practical approaches as articulated in Education White Paper 6, have hampered the quality and relevance of education received by every learner. Thus, according to research, there is a constant struggle between a national educational change agenda that emphasizes equity and social justice and the reality in school communities (Andrews et al., 2019). The inevitable unintended effects of these policies and implementation directives shortcomings include infrequent and often contradictory policy implementation, and in some cases, a chronic reliance on traditional, more deficit-centered and linear-causal implementation strategies that were in place prior to 1994 (Engelbrecht, 2018; Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018; Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018; Walton, 2018).

Indicatively, the intense dependence on the concept of medical deficit in the proposed support continuum has created conflict and confusion over a wider understanding of inclusive education, as stipulated in the policy document. The findings of the study demonstrated that many primary schools, even full-service ones, prefer their students with learning issues to be placed in separate classrooms called special education rather than regular classes (Andrews et al., 2019).

By doing this, they further perpetuate a narrow, simplistic, medicalized understanding of inclusive education that centers around (dis)ability and contribute to reinforcing the idea that inclusive education is nothing more than rearranging the deck chairs rather than transforming the system within school communities (Engelbrecht, 2019; Walton, 2018; Walton & McKenzie, 2020).

Considering these research findings, it comes as no surprise that in 2015, the Department of Basic Education conceded that some conceptual and practical barriers on all levels of the education system continue to stand in the way of developing a truly inclusive education system (Department of Basic Education 2015).

In addition, policymakers have underestimated the short- and long-term socio-economic outcomes of implementation in a middle- to low-income country since the realization of equitable and quality education to all people, as recommended by policy proposals, has been compromised by financial constraints (Department of Basic Education, 2015; Engelbrecht, 2019). Financial constraints, as Andrews, Walton, and Osman (2019) note recently, continue to affect the availability of resources needed to build successful inclusive school communities almost 20 years after White Paper 6 was released.

The lack of sufficient human, technical and infrastructural facilities to facilitate more inclusive learning and support systems and the curriculum, especially in rural areas, continues to spell out the massive gap between the intentions of policy papers and the reality of schools. Such a state of affairs creates the skepticism of certain groups of school communities about the viability of implementing inclusive education, both in terms of education and economics (Andrews et al., 2019).

4.3 Theme 3: Impact of Inclusive Education Policies

Education that includes everyone is a fundamental right for all learners. Notwithstanding global policy efforts, educational exclusion remained widespread, particularly in the Global South, and disproportionately impacts students with disabilities.

4.3.1 System-level Emergence

South Africa has re-established the right to inclusive education of children with a disability by signing and ratifying international conventions such as CRPD and publishing policy documents on the rights of persons with disabilities, including the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (SA Department of Social Development 2016). Further, White Paper 6 (SA DoE, 2001) sets out a policy objective of inclusive school provision not only to the disabled children alone but to every child who is disadvantaged by poverty, language, and other related factors.

A series of guideline documents (such as Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning (SA DBE, 2010) and Guidelines for Full-service/Inclusive Schools (SA DBE, 2009)) have followed White Paper 6 and are intended to provide the details required to bring inclusive education to fruition. We argue that White Paper 6 creates the right environment of system-level emergences in policy, funding, teacher education, curriculum, and partnerships with parents and communities.

4.3.2 Policy Potentials

The Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (SA DBE, 2014) encompasses the aspects that may reinforce the past path dependencies,

described above, as well as the aspects that may allow the implementation of inclusive education by changing the past practice in a number of ways. These included considering the child holistically; expecting parents/caregivers, teachers, and older students to contribute to the development of support plans; the view that the support must be given predominantly in ordinary schools and discouraging the referral to special schools; as well as recognizing the school and society as barriers to learning (Schuelka & Engsig, 2020). There are detailed information and a training campaign on implementing the SIAS policy across the country.

Should we consider schools and classrooms as complex adaptive systems that are in continuous evolution and change, the policy may become an active and innovative practice to meet the needs of an inclusive school community. Early in the study, it is premature to consider the impact of SIAS. It may lead to a more laissez-faire system of accountability, characterized by creative exploration and decentralized decision-making (Soudien, 2018). Alternatively, it can be applied in a strict, simple manner so as to continue marginalization and enhance current path dependencies.

4.3.3 Curriculum

In an inclusive education system, curriculum development is 'a social environment where meaning is created concerning the conflicting forces of power found in the wider society' (Soudien, 2018, p.152). An inclusive curriculum in South Africa must recognize the complexities surrounding the creation and maintenance of exclusion and integrate social and environmental justice principles and practices. Some aspects of the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy (SA DBE2012) endorse inclusive teaching; however, it has generally faced criticism for its rapid, uniform, and content-intensive requirements (Andrews et al., 2019).

Other curriculum advancements, however, presented greater optimism. These developments included the recognition of South African Sign Language as an educational field and a compulsory practical and applicable curriculum for students diagnosed with severe intellectual disabilities. An idea of a three-stream model included vocational and occupational paths in addition to the existing academic destinations of the students, which allowed them to learn and work, for those who were not interested in the academic focus (McKenzie, 2020).

4.4 Theme 4: Barriers to practical implications

Even with advanced policies and global commitments, students with disabilities in South Africa still encounter notable obstacles that impede the successful enactment of inclusive education. A significant challenge was the insufficient infrastructure in regular schools. Numerous schools are not physically accessible, missing ramps, suitable restroom facilities, and classroom areas modified for mobility-impaired students (Yeboah et al., 2023). This physical exclusion is intensified by the lack of specialized educational resources like Braille materials, assistive devices, and modified learning tools essential for students with sensory or cognitive disabilities (Mampane, 2022). In the absence of these fundamental

supports, students with disabilities frequently struggle to engage fully in the learning experience.

An additional significant obstacle is the insufficient readiness and capability of teachers. Educators frequently do not possess the essential training to meet the varied needs of students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom environment (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Although Education White Paper 6 emphasizes the need for teacher development, many educators feel unprepared to tailor instruction or offer personalized assistance. This deficiency in professional capability frequently resulted in frustration, diminished expectations, and even subtle instances of exclusion in classrooms. Additionally, chronic underfunding of inclusive education worsens these issues, since schools often lack the financial means to employ support personnel like learning support assistants, occupational therapists, or speech-language therapists (Mampane, 2022).

The attitudinal obstacle is equally an important concern. Widespread societal and cultural misunderstandings regarding disability frequently lead to stigmatization and discrimination within educational settings (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020). Students with disabilities might be perceived as unable or as a burden to educators and classmates, which adversely impacts their self-esteem and participation in education. These negative perspectives extend beyond students and educators, as they can also manifest in school administration and policy execution, where inclusive education is given less priority than more 'mainstream' issues (Sijuola & Davidova, 2022).

Furthermore, bureaucratic delays and poor coordination among agencies, such as the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Social Development, contributed to administrative dawdling in the provision of support services and school placements (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024). In communities with low funding, students who would otherwise succeed in an inclusive education school often cannot navigate such systems (McKenzie & Dalton, 2020).

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that inclusive education in South Africa, as mediated by policies such as the Education White Paper 6, is not a step towards inclusivity but a multifaceted and dynamic process within a complex educational ecosystem. Inclusion education is not a linear process where obstacles are overcome; instead, it is a complex journey of interaction between socio-cultural, historical, and economic parameters and various stakeholders: policy makers, educators, students, and communities.

The findings indicate that the White Paper 6 has led to a policy environment that is supportive to transformation; however, the educational environment is paradoxical in that both path dependencies and emergent practices that support change and obstruct change exist. Nevertheless, in the face of difficulties, hopeful ripples (i.e., grassroots activities and stakeholder efforts) show a potential of

promoting inclusive practices, which serve as positive feedback mechanisms in the system.

This intricate view of inclusive education highlighted in this research paper implies that policymakers and educators need to stop thinking of inclusiveness as a linear objective and rather consider its dynamic aspect. This necessitates the development of adaptive initiatives to respond to the intersecting socio-cultural and systemic forces affecting student access and attainment of students with disabilities. The concept of ripples of hope identification suggests that context-based, localized action can lead to systemic change and that, therefore, policymakers must encourage and amplify such efforts.

South Africa can empower policy implementation to establish equitable educational environments by focusing on stakeholder collaboration, investing in teacher training, available infrastructure, and inclusive curricula. Such results promote the notion of moving away from the current trends of prevailing over individual obstacles to developing a more encompassing environment in which every learner is empowered.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

The limitation of this study is that the results address the broader policy and systemic dynamics, and this might not fully reflect the granular, lived experiences of students with disabilities in various contexts in South Africa, especially in the rural setting. Dependence on the available literature and policy analysis also limits the understanding of real-time classroom activity and the views of stakeholders.

The future research must focus on long-term research to determine the long-term effects of inclusive education policies on academic and social performance. Also, the qualitative research that will examine the voices of students, parents, and teachers may give more details on the barriers and effective practices. Research on how assistive technologies and differentiated curricula can be used in resource-limited contexts would also fill critical literature gaps, which then influence more practical recommendations on inclusive learning in South Africa.

5.3 Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations:

In order to improve the execution and effects of inclusive education policy, it is advised that the government consider expanding accountability and support frameworks to ensure that all provinces and schools apply them uniformly. Creating clearer lines of responsibility may be a way of bridging gaps between policy and practice.

Also, offering continuous professional growth opportunities to teachers, such as those of inclusive pedagogies, disability awareness, and differentiated instruction, would enable teachers to work more effectively with different learners in the classroom. Lastly, it may be of great help to instil a culture of inclusion at the school level by organizing awareness programs and anti-discrimination

movements to help students with disabilities to feel empathetic, accepted, and supported by their peers.

6. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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