

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
 Vol. 25, No. 5, pp. 840-859, May 2026
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.5.37>
 Received Feb 4, 2026; Revised Mar 20, 2026; Accepted May 11, 2026

Teachers' Understanding and Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment in South African Schools

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Abstract. Inclusive education is increasingly becoming a critical aspect of modern education worldwide. This qualitative study explores teachers' understanding and implementation of inclusive education policies at a school in South Africa. It is situated within the interpretive paradigm, using a single-case study design. The theory of inclusive education served as the theoretical basis for this research. A total of ten teachers were purposefully sampled for the study. Data were collected through a focus group discussion, and the raw data were analysed thematically. The key findings indicate that teachers have a good understanding of various South African inclusive education policies. Additionally, the study revealed that teachers are making progress in implementing these policies, despite some inconsistencies in their application. Furthermore, it was found that challenges such as time constraints and a lack of resources hinder teachers from fully implementing inclusive education policies. The study recommends that teachers receive continuous professional development and

Citation:

Mnguni, M. A., Gcabashe, N. B., Maphumulo, T. B., Cele, S. M. K., & Sibisi, P. N. (2026). Teachers' Understanding and Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment in South African Schools. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 25(5), 840–859.
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.5.37>

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support to enhance their implementation of these policies and to overcome the challenges they face. This research makes a significant contribution to the development of inclusive policies and the practices of inclusive teachers in South Africa.

Keywords: Inclusive education; learners; barriers to learning; policies; teachers

1. Introduction

In South Africa's post-apartheid educational landscape, access to education and meaningful participation for all learners, particularly those from marginalised groups, low-income households, and those with diverse learning abilities, must be made educationally and legally equitable (Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). The country's inclusive education is grounded in the constitutional rights of all learners and extends beyond the mere integration of students with diverse needs (e.g., emotional, social, and behavioural) into mainstream classrooms. It necessitates a reconceptualisation of the entire education system at all levels (e.g., policy, institutional, and classroom) to ensure learning and participation for everyone (Kenny, McCoy, & O'Higgins Norman, 2023).

Inclusive education involves the removal of barriers at all educational levels. This approach, rooted in the South African educational framework, has progressively evolved over the past twenty years into a system where learners facing barriers to learning are accommodated in mainstream schools and provided with specialised educational and support services, inclusive education, full-service schools, and collaborative educational support from the districts (DoE, 2001). This has been articulated in, and continues to guide, the South African education system through the policy known as Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education - Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001). This policy serves as a framework for what schools and departments should focus on to create an inclusive environment for all learners.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Bank (WB) (2011) estimate that globally, the prevalence of disability among school-aged children is between 2.2% and 2.6%. In South Africa, Statistics South Africa (2023) estimates that there are approximately 20 million children of school-going age. This estimate suggests that there are around 400,000 children who may have disabilities. In an attempt to ensure that these learners are able to access the support they need within the education system, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has implemented the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) Policy. The SIAS policy is intended to guide the identification of learning barriers and the development of support structures and/or services for learners at different points in their educational journey (DoE, 2014).

From the outset, the policy has prioritised identification, comprehensive support planning, and the use of various teaching methods by the teachers involved. DBE has recently started initiatives to improve the capacity of teachers to implement inclusive education. Teachers have received training on Braille, Autism, and South

African Sign Language (DBE, 2025). These training programmes aim to help teachers provide appropriate interventions for learners with diverse learning needs in their schools.

It is undeniable that there is a large amount of legislation and policy surrounding inclusive education; however, there remains a gap in the implementation of this in actual classrooms. This means there is a disparity between what is intended by inclusive education policies and what is practiced (Mugambwa et al., 2020). This is despite the view that teachers are considered the primary implementers and enablers of inclusive education policies (Sepadi, 2025). Malahlela and Johnson (2024) state that teachers' knowledge concerning inclusive education policies is not sufficient for them to feel confident in being inclusive in their classrooms. Lack of training, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, and absence of support from DBE have been documented in the literature as barriers to teachers implementing inclusive education in their classrooms (Motitswe, 2025). This current study explored teachers' understanding and implementation of inclusive education policies to create an inclusive learning environment.

To achieve this aim, three research objectives were formulated:

- To explore teachers' understanding of inclusive education policies in South African schools.
- To investigate teachers' implementation of inclusive education policies aimed at creating inclusive learning environments in South African schools.
- To examine the challenges faced by teachers when implementing inclusive education policies in South African schools.

2. Literature Review

The literature review section explores existing studies that focus on the implementation of IE policies and the challenges encountered by teachers when implementing IE.

2.1 Inclusive education and practices

Different countries have developed various strategies to support learners' diverse learning needs in response to the appeal of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). To align with this international trend, the South African government, through DBE introduced Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, aimed at reducing barriers to learning and increasing access to education for all. The South African education system has also invested in providing quality education to all learners, irrespective of their backgrounds (DoE, 2001).

The Education White Paper 6 of 2001 developed strategies to facilitate the inclusion of all learners in mainstream schools (DoE, 2001). Inclusivity refers to an approach aimed at supporting all learners in achieving the necessary skills and valuable knowledge in all learning environments (Nilholm, 2020). The DBE has presented policies to guide schools on how to support and accommodate learners with diverse learning needs (DoE, 2002). The SIAS policy is one of these and advocates for the establishment of support structures such as District-Based Support Teams

(DBST) and School-Based Support Teams (SBST) to promote inclusiveness in schools by screening, identifying, and supporting learners with barriers to learning. Despite these policy developments, research indicates that the implementation of IE in South African schools remains uneven. Studies suggest that numerous educators continue to encounter challenges in effectively supporting learners with diverse needs due to factors such as inadequate professional training, limited teaching resources, and insufficient institutional support (Govender, 2024; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). Consequently, although IE is well established at the policy level, its successful implementation in classroom practice often relies on the enhancement of teacher capacity, the improvement of support systems, and the assurance of adequate resource allocation

2.2. Inclusive education policy development in South Africa

The implementation of IE in South Africa should be understood within the larger context of the political, social, and cultural changes that have occurred in the country since 1994, aligning with the principles enshrined in the Constitution. Engelbrecht (2020) posit that the introduction of IE in South Africa has evolved into a human rights and social justice issue, aiming to challenge and address exclusionary practices within the education system. Consequently, the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System framework was released in 2001 to address the inequalities in education created by the government of the previous regime.

This framework demands that the DBE provides a range of support programmes and services throughout the system to cater to the needs of learners who experience barriers to learning and development (DoE, 2001). The SIAS policy is among the key IE policies aimed at establishing support structures for teachers when implementing IE in schools (DBE, 2014). The SIAS policy facilitates support for learners with diverse learning needs, and there are specific stages that teachers must follow to identify these learners. Teachers play a crucial role in managing cases involving identified at-risk learners (Hess, 2020).

Stage 1 is the initial stage where a teacher assesses a learner upon admission, completes a vulnerability assessment, and creates a profile of the learner. If a learner is transferring from another school, they must present their learner profile, which helps the teacher to better understand the learner and further assess their needs. Research on IE implementation highlights that early identification of potential learning barriers is essential for effective intervention, as it allows teachers to respond before difficulties become deeply entrenched (Donohue & Bornman, 2023).

Stage 2 involves the teacher identifying and assessing barriers to learning and development, determining the type of support needed, the frequency of that support, and who will provide it. This occurs at the school level, with consultation from the parent or guardian. The teacher is guided by the SIAS policy throughout the process, and everything should be documented as evidence. The SIAS policy clearly stipulates the kind of learners who require support and those who need additional assistance to learn in class. This policy document further clarifies the

types of support, ranging from lower to higher levels, that learners may need. If the teacher fails to provide support for various reasons, the matter should be escalated to the school-Based Support Team (SBST) for review and intervention. Consequently, all schools are required to establish these support structures. Again, the SBST is guided by the SIAS policy, which outlines the type of additional support the learner may require.

In Stage 3, if all avenues have been exhausted at the school level, the matter may be referred in writing to the district-Based Support Team (DBST) for further intervention and support, utilising the relevant documents stipulated by DBE. Research indicates that multi-level support systems involving collaboration among teachers, schools, and district support teams are crucial for ensuring that IE policies are implemented effectively within complex educational contexts (Ainscow, 2020; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024).

However, recent studies indicate that, although the SIAS policy provides a comprehensive framework for supporting IE, many teachers continue to encounter challenges in its practical implementation. For instance, research conducted by Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) and Ainscow (2020) suggests that teachers frequently report limited professional training, insufficient support resources, and heavy workloads as factors that hinder the effective implementation of IE policies.

2.3. Role of teachers in IE policy implementation

Teachers are regarded as agents of change and play a crucial role in implementing IE (DoE, 2001). However, Materechera (2020) notes that while the implementation of inclusion is key to achieving its goals, it still poses challenges for some teachers in schools. This underscores the need for ongoing professional development to meet the demands of implementing IE in schools. Successful implementation of IE requires extensive training for teachers (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024).

Inclusive teachers are expected to demonstrate a commitment to learner diversity, provide equitable support to all learners, collaborate effectively with others, and engage in continuous professional development (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE), 2012). The degree of their effectiveness is influenced by the quality of teacher development, the cultivation of positive attitudes and dispositions, pedagogical competence, an informed understanding of diverse learning needs, and a strong sense of self-efficacy (Nel, Tlale). While teachers are fundamental to the implementation of this policy, they often face challenges that affect their ability to implement IE in classrooms.

2.4. Challenges of the implementation of IE policies

Despite the establishment of comprehensive policies such as the Education White Paper 6 and the SIAS Policy, the implementation of IE in South African schools continues to face substantial challenges. One of the main issues is teachers' ability to cope with limited resources and overcrowded classrooms, which compromises the implementation of inclusion (Mahlo, 2017; Mpu & Adu, 2021; Andrews et. al., 2021). For example, Sepadi (2025) states that some teachers find it difficult to reach all learners experiencing barriers to learning in these overcrowded classes. Some scholars (Dalton, McKenzie, & Kahonde, 2012) further argue that teachers lack

adequate training in inclusive education and that the quality of this training is poor (Engelbrecht, 2015), resulting in ineffective implementation. Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) explain that, even when teachers receive initial training in IE, the quality and depth of this training are often insufficient to equip them with the skills required for practical implementation in classrooms. Additionally, a study by Mpanza and Govender (2022) found that another concern raised by teachers is the lack of support from district officials, leaving them uncertain about how to provide additional assistance to learners with learning disabilities. Despite these challenges, South Africa has made progress in establishing clearer policy guidelines and fostering collaboration and partnerships with other sister departments to enhance teacher training and support.

2.5. Gaps in understanding and IE implementation by the teachers

Research in IE indicates that insufficient progress has been made since the international breakthrough for inclusion marked by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Dignath, Rimm-Kaufman, van Ewijk, Kunter, and Kunter (2022) identified several factors that contribute to teachers' perceptions of the gap between inclusion policy and practice. In their findings, they highlighted teachers' attitudes (cognitive evaluations), feelings (emotional evaluations), and self-efficacy (preparedness to teach in inclusive classrooms), aligning these with their training experiences that benchmark professional understanding of inclusion. A significant finding is that most teachers with special education training demonstrate a greater embrace of inclusive education (IE) compared to those who have undergone regular teacher training.

The researchers in this study concur that professional development, training, and support for teachers are essential for driving transformative change, and they are obliged to cultivate equitable and inclusive environments for learners to achieve success. In the South African context, these gaps are particularly pronounced. IE policies such as Education White Paper 6 and the SIAS in South Africa provide a comprehensive vision for inclusion; however, teachers frequently report difficulties in translating policy into practice (Donohue & Bornman, 2023; Matolo & Rambuda, 2022; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024).

2.6. Theoretical Framework

The study is based on the theory of inclusive education. The theoretical foundations of IE are deeply embedded within a broader academic discourse that regards equitable access to quality mainstream schooling as a fundamental right for all learners (Mpu & Adu, 2021). As Al-Shammari (2019) argues, the principle of inclusion applies regardless of an individual's background, ability, or socio-economic status.

Existing scholarship consistently shifts the focus of the so-called 'problem' of diversity from the learner to the educational system itself, a central argument supported by scholars such as Ioannidi and Malafantis (2022). This body of literature is closely linked with social justice paradigms, which emphasise the need to dismantle structural barriers to classroom participation (Nilholm, 2020). A key element of this theoretical framework, as highlighted by Jardinez and Natividad (2024), is the social model of disability. This model fundamentally challenges

deficit-based narratives, a critique also emphasised by Kumari (2024), by asserting that exclusion stems from inaccessible environments and prejudicial attitudes rather than individual impairments. Consequently, the current body of knowledge strongly advocates for the systemic transformation of schools to better accommodate human diversity.

This systemic reorientation is further mandated by international human rights frameworks, which multiple authors cite as the primary impetus for inclusive policy. As Nilholm (2020) has established, these frameworks recast education from a privilege to an inalienable right, a principle enshrined in instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 1948). Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) examine how these instruments impose a duty on states to foster educational equality and dignity. Pedagogically, inclusivity necessitates a departure from rigid one-size-fits-all instruction to accommodate diversity in the classroom.

Singh (2024) defines Universal Design for Learning as a seminal approach that advocates for multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. Synthesising these perspectives, it is evident that inclusive education theory culminates in a vision for a transformative culture of belonging. Ultimately, as the reviewed scholarship collectively affirms, the objective is to cultivate learning environments where diversity is harnessed as a collective strength and where equity is actively engineered through sustained institutional commitment (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021).

Drawing on the synthesised theoretical framework, this study posits that teachers' understanding and implementation of inclusive policies are crucial in bridging transformative policy ideals and tangible classroom practices. The literature collectively argues that IE requires a systemic shift from deficit-based thinking to the removal of institutional barriers, a principle central to the social model of disability as discussed by Jardinez and Natividad (2024) and Kumari (2024). Consequently, exploring teachers' understandings investigates whether they align with this core theoretical reorientation, viewing diversity through a social justice lens, as advocated by Ioannidi and Malafantis (2022), rather than as an individual learner deficit.

Furthermore, since the theory is underpinned by human rights obligations that redefine education as a fundamental right (Nilholm, 2020), teachers' comprehension of these normative foundations is essential for meaningful implementation. Investigating their subsequent implementation practices, therefore, examines how theory translates into practice, specifically whether their pedagogical approaches reflect the flexible, responsive strategies, such as Universal Design for Learning, endorsed by Singh (2024) to create equitable and participatory learning environments demanded by the theory. Ultimately, this study assesses the extent to which teachers, as key agents within the system, are enacting the systemic transformation called for by the broader literature to foster a genuine culture of belonging in South African schools.

3. Research methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach guiding this study. It is important to note that research methodology plays a significant role in the decisions made regarding the processes to be executed (Nyirenda, Kumar, & Theobald, 2020). The elements of research methodology employed in this study include the research approach, research paradigm, research design, sampling, data collection instruments, data analysis, and ethical considerations. A research methodology guides the researcher in determining the type of data required for a study and in identifying the most appropriate data collection tools for the research purpose (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

3.1. Research approach, paradigm and design

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore teachers' understanding and implementation of inclusive education policies. We selected this approach because the study aims to investigate and establish the phenomenon of IE, as well as perceptions of it and how these views are translated into practice (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study utilised a single-case study design, which allows researchers to develop an in-depth analysis of one or more individuals. The research paradigm guiding this study is an interpretive qualitative paradigm, which shapes the researcher's understanding of reality, knowledge, and methods, influencing how data are generated and how meaning is constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Adopting an interpretive research paradigm enabled the researchers in this study to understand the participants' experiences in implementing IE policies in a selected school. Rehman and Alharthi (2016) argue that the goal of this research paradigm is to understand individuals' interpretations of the phenomena they interact with, and that these phenomena should be seen through the eyes of the participants, not the researcher. In this case, this pertains to the teachers' understanding of IE and how they translate it into practice.

3.2. Sampling

Kumar (2018) defines sampling as a technique that involves selecting a small, manageable number of individuals who represent a larger group. For this study, ten foundation phase teachers were purposefully selected, each with a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience and over 5 years of teaching in the foundation phase at this school. Shaheen and Pradhan (2019) posit that purposive sampling is most useful when only a small number of individuals in the population exhibit the characteristics expected of the target group. Teachers in the foundation phase who did not meet the aforementioned criteria were excluded from participation. Furthermore, Colom (2021) notes that this method of data collection usually involves no more than 10 participants who share experiences within a group by responding to a series of questions aligned with the research question.

Another reason for selecting these participants is that early identification of learners experiencing barriers to learning begins with these teachers, who serve as the primary point of contact with parents to discuss their children's progress. The

school has approximately 850 learners, ranging from Grade R to Grade 7, and is located in an urban area in the Gauteng province, under the Tshwane East circuit.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

Korstjens and Moser (2018) posit that qualitative research is a methodological approach aimed at exploring and providing a greater understanding of real-world issues. In this study, data were collected through focus group discussions with participants from a purposively selected sample. This data collection method was particularly relevant to the study, as it allowed participants to discuss and express their issues with one another (Sithole et al., 2013). The chosen data collection method, which yields qualitative data (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016), is consistent with the interpretive paradigm. It also enabled participants to learn from one another about the phenomenon being discussed.

The interview guide and questions were developed by the researchers and aligned with the research topic and objectives of this paper. The interview proceedings were conducted in English, with two researchers leading the discussions and asking follow-up questions for clarity. The focus group discussions lasted for one hour and were recorded with the participants' permission using three different recorders as a backup plan. These recordings were later transcribed to make the raw data more accessible to us as researchers.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data collected through focus group discussions were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by the IE theoretical framework. Braun and Clarke (2006) define this approach as fundamental for qualitative analysis and identify the main skills useful for conducting other forms of qualitative analysis.

Thematic analysis offers a structured method that enables researchers to interpret and derive meaning from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We chose this technique because it allowed us to identify, analyse, and report patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which helped us explore teachers' understanding of inclusive education and how they translate it into practice. The themes are presented in detail in the findings section. The analysis followed the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; review of themes in relation to the dataset; definition and refinement of the essence of each theme; and finally, producing the final report. Familiarisation with the data.

During this phase, we familiarised ourselves with the depth and content of the data. We repeatedly read the data to understand and search for meaning and patterns. Additionally, the verbatim transcriptions of each participant were converted to text for easier comprehension. In the second phase, generating initial codes, we manually coded our individual excerpts by highlighting them in distinct colours. The third phase, which involves searching for themes, focuses on identifying initial themes that emerged from the data. In this study, the following themes emerged: teachers' policy understanding, implementation of inclusive education (IE) policies, and challenges in implementing these policies. The fourth phase involves reviewing and refining themes, with the main focus on ensuring

that the emerging themes are appropriate for achieving the research objectives. The fifth phase is defining and naming the themes, which includes identifying the essence of each theme. This phase assisted us in achieving a detailed data analysis. The final phase involves producing and compiling the final report of our research, which includes writing up a research article.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Before collecting participant data, this study carefully considered the ethical requirements. Ethical data collection practices were employed, ensuring respect for both the research process and the participants. After receiving ethical clearance from the institution's College of Education Ethics Committee (CEDU-REC), a letter was drafted to the Gauteng Department of Education requesting permission to conduct a study in schools in Gauteng, which was granted. Letters were also drafted to the school principals requesting permission to conduct the study, as well as letters to the teachers in the foundation phase requesting their participation, including a request to record the proceedings; permission was obtained in both cases. The privacy and confidentiality of the participants were upheld, with codes P1-P10 used to protect their identities. The study adhered to the ethical principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent at all stages of the research process (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

4. Findings

Themes that emerged during data analysis were used to present the findings. These themes include teachers' understanding of policy, the implementation of policies, and the challenges in implementing inclusive education policies.

Summary of the findings

Themes	Key findings
Teacher policy understanding,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study found that teachers understand inclusive education policies and their importance in creating inclusive classrooms. • The research revealed that teachers understand the purposes of different policies in advancing inclusive education in South African classrooms.
Implementation of policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study revealed that teachers are making efforts to implement these policies in their classrooms; however, inconsistencies in policy implementation were observed. • The study reported that teachers encounter challenges, such as a lack of resources to screen and support learners with learning needs, when implementing inclusive education policies such as SIAS.
Challenges in implementing inclusive education policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study revealed that teachers struggled to create inclusive classrooms due to time constraints and the prescriptive nature of the curriculum. • The study reported that teachers expressed difficulty in differentiating the curriculum or content to meet the needs of learners with diverse learning requirements.

Theme 1: Teacher' policy understanding

This theme reports on the participants' understanding of inclusive education policies. This is important because, for teachers to implement IE policies, they first need to comprehend them. The participants had the following to say when asked about their understanding of IE policies.

“According to my understanding when we refer to policies and procedures..... they serve as a guideline, as most learners...they usually learn differently. Therefore, there must be some guidelines that will assist us in identifying those particular learners who have some of the many barriers, such as SIAS and many others. If we do not have policies and procedures, that will mean that all the learners are the same; they are not different and learn at the same pace”- P1

“My understanding of inclusive education policies is that they say that we must teach all learners, despite their differences and barriers to learning.”- P10

From the above commentaries, it is clear that teachers understand inclusive education policies and their importance in creating inclusive classrooms. In particular, participants such as P1 underscored that inclusive education policies guide teachers in identifying learners' learning needs and addressing those needs accordingly. Additionally, P10 expressed that inclusive education policies direct teachers to recognise learners' differences and accommodate them in their classrooms. This aligns with the South African constitution, which advocates for the equal treatment of all learners in schools and requires schools to ensure that all learners have access to quality education.

As teachers indicated their understanding of inclusive education policies, some mentioned various policies that guide them in creating inclusive classrooms. For example, P7 said:

“I just wanted to add to the message that in the White Paper 6, there is the SIAS Policy that governs the screening of learners with barriers to learning.”- P7

The assertion of P7 above demonstrates that he understands the purpose of the SIAS policy, which guides teachers in the screening and identification of learners with barriers to learning. P8 added:

“To add on that, the policies...they, to me, it's like an eye opener, to look out. What are we doing? And moreover, it enlightens you that when you have a situation like this, now you can identify, you can support and then you can refer. We have different structures that we can use within the policy. We have got SIAS, which is screening, identification, assessment and support. So, in this structure, it is where you identify the main problem and what type of problem, where can you refer the problem, what must be done with that problem? After that, we go to the...we also have a mother

body structure in the school premises, which is an SBST. The SBST also help in assisting the teachers on how to address the underlying factors. So, if the SBST cannot also help, then we will refer to other stakeholders.”- P3

The sentiment expressed in P3 suggests that inclusive education policies, such as SIAS, provide frameworks within schools to support teachers in creating inclusive classrooms. This indicates that the responsibility for fostering inclusive environments does not rest solely with individual teachers; rather, relevant structures are established to assist them. Having structures like SBST on school premises enables teachers to refer students' needs to this team, which can then recommend and develop intervention strategies to accommodate all learners' needs. This may encourage teachers to identify students with learning barriers, as they are aware that a support structure is in place to help them assist these learners.

Theme 2: Implementation of inclusive education policies

This theme reports on the actual implementation of IE policies by teachers in their classrooms. The comments from the teachers indicate that most educators are making progress in implementing these policies in schools. For instance, participants P6 and P5 outlined how they apply various IE policies.

“In identifying learners, especially at the beginning of the year or each term, there is an early identification tool that is served by the district. There is a baseline assessment, and we capture all learners, and we also use the schedule...the progression schedule to identify learners who has barriers in different learning areas or subjects. Then we also use the learner profile. Remember the learner profiles that are in Grade R, that follows the learner into the next phase, where the teacher will notify or report if there are any challenges with the learner. And teachers also keep the observation book where they record learner issues. In the case conferencing, we highlight the areas that need to be attended to, that is basically how we mostly identify and address the barriers”- P6

“I identify by...screening. I use a screening tool and... When we start reading early in the year, I ask them questions, or when I teach, I can see this one is not taking part in the class, and then I do screening for the whole class. And then when I teach always, I can see who is having problems, and I have an observation book. I write what he or he doesn't do when we do things. That's how I do it.”- P5

The notable similarities between the implementations of the SIAS policy P6 and P5 are that both relied on a screening tool provided by the district to identify learners with learning barriers. A standardised screening tool can help teachers easily identify these barriers among learners, particularly in the early grades. P6 confirmed that learners are screened as early as the reception grade (Grade R), and teachers develop an individual student profile that accompanies each learner as they progress from one grade to the next. This individual learner profile enables teachers to understand the specific learning barriers each student may have and to provide the necessary support tailored to those particular needs. Both P6 and P5 used observation books to record the capabilities of learners and the areas that

require attention. This practice helps teachers maintain a record of all learners, especially those experiencing barriers to learning, ensuring they receive appropriate support.

Furthermore, P3 mentioned that she relies on baseline assessments to identify and select learners with barriers to learning. She said:

“Baseline test assessment that we do in the beginning of each term helps us a lot in putting, not that you put them in categories, but you know the kind of learners that are in your classroom, so that you can accommodate them like the gifted learner and a slow learner. You must know how to deal with each child depending on their learning needs...” P5

From the above account of P5, it can be deduced that conducting a baseline assessment at the beginning of the term enables him to understand the type of learners in his classroom. However, it is not clear from his commentary whether he maintains any documentation for each individual learner, which might hinder his ability to support and refer learners to structures such as SBST. This is because categorising learners as gifted or slow based on a baseline assessment may not be effective for the school in developing interventions to support meaningful learning.

In contrast, teachers such as P8 and P9 outlined the process they follow to screen, identify, and support learners with barriers to learning. They recounted:

“Normally what happens is that after the identification by the teacher, the teacher would try whatever the strategy. In the classroom after the class. If it fails within the classroom, the teacher will coordinate with the phase, and if it fails within the phase and will go to the SBST, the SBST will also make a recommendation and if it fails within the school, then it comes to LSEN specialist.”- P8

“Now you can identify. You can support and then you can refer. We have 4 different structures that we can use and have for years, which is screening, identification, assessment and support. So, in this structure, it is where you will identify the main problem. And what type of problem? Where can you refer the problem? What must be done with that? Only after that you will go to them. We also have a motherboard structure which is an SBST. The SBST will also help in assisting the teachers on how to address the underlying factors.”- P9

From the sentiments expressed above, it is clear that teachers understand the procedures for supporting learners with barriers to learning. Although teachers did not specify when a learner should be referred to other structures, it is encouraging to know that schools have systems in place to support these learners, as required by the SAIS policy. Additionally, it emerged from the comments that learners with barriers to learning can be referred to structures outside the school if the interventions within the school fail to provide adequate support. This is beneficial because LSEN (Learner Special Educational Needs) specialists are trained to assist learners facing such challenges.

Theme 3: Challenges in implementing inclusive education policies

Although teachers seem to understand and know how to implement various IE policies, they face challenges in doing so. They reported several difficulties, and they had this to say:

"I think we have a challenge with curriculum differentiation, because we have to teach five levels, let...let me just say categories. Now we have this gifted learner. You have the average; we have the one with many barriers. Now you have to make sure that you teach all of them in an hour or 30 minutes, let's say in, in, in, in total you have only an hour. Now we have to deliver that curriculum to four distinct categories of kids...or learners. That is the challenge, because at that time they still have to write. They are very slow at the same time, and by the time the period is over, they're not done. That is when we come in and say the kids are slow, they're writing slow, but the information is too much for them in the centre. So, we need that curriculum differentiation, how do we teach." - P3

The above commentary indicates that P3 struggles to differentiate the curriculum when teaching in class, which means she finds it difficult to design lessons that cater to diverse learners. This may have implications for learners, as those with learning barriers could be excluded from learning activities. Consequently, they risk being left behind, which contradicts the objectives and aspirations of inclusive education policies.

For P6, time constraints present a significant challenge when implementing inclusive education policies. He stated:

"With me it's time...time frame, because now you're given 10 weeks, we have to cover the ATP. Now you have this Learner A who is way too slow. Now we just have to run, and they say at this time you are supposed to be here. You are not...You're even far. And we cannot even catch up with the morning classes...the afternoon classes. We don't have time because our kids, they stay far. They use one bus ... when they arrive, at that time, the classes are starting. So, we don't have time to catch up." P6

The challenge of time constraints mentioned by P6 is acknowledged by this teacher, who wishes to create inclusive classrooms. In South Africa, curriculum implementation is guided by the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP), requiring teachers to cover specific content on a daily or weekly basis. As a result, some teachers prioritise curriculum coverage over providing additional support to learners with learning barriers.

In addition to time constraints and the challenges associated with curriculum differentiation, teachers also face difficulties related to the lack of appropriate resources for learners with learning barriers. This is evident in the comments made by P8 and P5.

“About the resources that we need to deal with kids that can’t do certain things or special needs kids, especially with sensory ball...sensory or getting more toys, puzzles and things that can stimulate those kids, especially in the Foundation Phase, where a lot of stimulation is needed for kids to really complete.”- P8

“We need LTSMs for the learners that are not seeing properly or something that they can...something that will help them. Like when...when we teach other children or this one is finished quickly, we must give them something to do aside so that we can help those who are going slow”- P5.

The sentiments expressed by P8 and P5 suggest that some schools still lack suitable Learner-Teacher Support Materials (LTSM) to enhance teaching and learning for students with barriers to learning. As P8 stated, LTSMs, such as sensory balls, are important for learners, especially in the Foundation Phase, where they need to learn through various senses. P5 also noted that teachers require LTSMs not only for students with learning barriers but also for gifted learners, who often complete tasks quickly. Teachers can use different LTSMs to keep gifted learners occupied while simultaneously supporting those with barriers to learning in the classroom.

4. Discussion

This study examined how teachers understand and implement IE policies to foster an inclusive learning environment within South African schools. The findings reveal that teachers possess a grasp of inclusive education policies and acknowledge their role in promoting inclusivity in South African classrooms. This stands in contrast to the research conducted by Mosala and Sefotho (2025), which indicated that teachers lack legal clarity about their duties in implementing IE. It is possible that the teachers involved in this study have a general awareness of IE policies.

Furthermore, the study showed that teachers are actively attempting to implement these policies in their teaching practices; however, inconsistencies in the execution of these policies were noted. Engelbrecht (2020) argues that although policies are in place, their practical implementation often falls short due to insufficient support and resources. In contrast to Engelbrecht's claim (2020), teachers in this study reported that support structures are available, as promoted by the SIAS policy, enabling them to refer cases when needed. The observed inconsistencies in implementing inclusive policies, such as SIAS, may stem from challenges such as a lack of resources for screening and supporting learners with learning needs.

Similarly, Matolo and Rambuda (2022) discovered that teachers do not effectively utilise screening tools, such as learner profiles, to identify barriers, and the Support Needs Assessment 1 is not properly employed to evaluate the challenges learners face. The ineffective use of screening resources by teachers can have serious consequences for learners with learning needs, as it may hinder them from receiving essential support from teachers and other stakeholders. Some teachers fail to keep records, such as learner profiles, during the identification and screening process; instead, they rely only on baseline assessments and believe that their subsequent interventions are adequate to support learners with learning needs.

Such practices, which risk excluding learners with learning needs, contradict the principles of inclusive education theory, which emphasises the removal of institutional barriers in every learning environment.

Additionally, the study revealed that teachers encountered significant challenges in establishing inclusive classrooms due to time constraints and the rigid nature of the curriculum. A study by Nembambula et al. (2023) similarly reported that limited instructional time constituted a major hurdle for teachers implementing inclusive education. In South Africa, all teachers are required to adhere to a prescriptive curriculum, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which dictates what must be taught at specific times.

To support teachers with curriculum delivery, the DBE provides an Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) that outlines the required content, and teachers must align their instruction with the ATP guidelines. Consequently, teachers find it difficult to deviate from the ATP, even when classroom realities necessitate revisiting lessons for learners with additional learning needs. As a result, teachers often proceed to new topics before these learners have fully grasped the content, ultimately excluding them from meaningful learning experiences.

This situation may compromise individual learners' right to quality education, conflicting with the principles of inclusive education, which views education as a fundamental human right (Nilholm, 2020; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). Teachers also highlighted curriculum differentiation as a significant challenge in their pursuit of inclusive classrooms. They expressed difficulty in adapting the curriculum or content to accommodate learners with diverse educational needs.

Okongo et al. (2015) contend that learners with disabilities require a range of teaching approaches; however, most teachers struggle to vary their instruction to address these varied needs. Lastly, the study found that limited resources to support learners experiencing barriers to learning impeded teachers' ability to create inclusive classrooms. Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2022) reinforced this point, observing that South African teachers frequently work in under-resourced environments and lack adequate training, which pose substantial obstacles to the implementation of inclusive practices.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study concludes that while teachers possess a foundational understanding of South Africa's IE policies, significant inconsistencies remain in how these policies are translated into practice within classroom settings. This gap between knowledge and execution suggests that theoretical awareness alone is insufficient to guarantee the effective implementation of inclusive practices. Teachers may comprehend the principles and objectives outlined in policies such as the SIAS) policy; however, variations in application—ranging from inconsistent use of screening tools to inadequate record-keeping—undermine the goal of creating truly inclusive learning environments. These discrepancies can result in learners with diverse needs not receiving timely or appropriate interventions, thereby perpetuating the very

barriers that inclusive education seeks to dismantle. Consequently, the study recommends that teachers engage in continuous, targeted professional development programmes designed not only to reinforce policy knowledge but also to provide practical strategies for consistent implementation.

Such training should be complemented by robust support systems, including access to resources, mentorship, and collaborative opportunities among teachers. Furthermore, close supervision and regular monitoring of inclusive practices are essential to identifying gaps, offering constructive feedback, and ensuring accountability. Effective record-keeping practices must also be emphasised, enabling teachers and other key stakeholders to track learner progress, document interventions, and facilitate meaningful, data-driven support for students with diverse learning requirements.

In addition to strengthening teacher capacity and oversight, the study highlights the need for continual review and refinement of IE policies to ensure they remain responsive to the changing realities of contemporary classrooms. Educational contexts are dynamic, influenced by shifts in demographics, curriculum demands, resource availability, and learner diversity. Therefore, policies must be periodically assessed and updated to maintain their relevance and effectiveness. Involving teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders in the policy review process can offer valuable insights into practical challenges and successes, promoting a more collaborative and context-sensitive approach to inclusive education.

Looking ahead, the study recommends that future research focus on South African secondary schools, as the current investigation may not fully capture the unique dynamics and challenges at this level. Secondary education presents distinct complexities, including subject specialisation, increased curriculum pressure, and the developmental needs of adolescents, all of which can influence how inclusive policies are understood and enacted. Conducting similar studies in secondary schools would contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of IE implementation across different phases of schooling. This, in turn, would inform more targeted interventions, policy adjustments, and support mechanisms that address the diverse needs of all learners throughout their educational journey.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge all the participants who participated in this study.

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