

Pedagogical Support Mechanisms for Learners with Learning Barriers in South Africa: An Analysis Study

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Abstract

Learners who experience barriers to learning continue to face challenges in accessing and fully participating in education, despite inclusive education policies in South Africa. This study aimed to explore how teachers at a primary school support learners with barriers to learning, with particular focus on accommodating learner diversity and promoting equitable access to education. The study was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm and employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The sample comprised ten participants, including four teachers, four members of the school-Based Support Team (SBST), and two District-Based Support Team (DBST) officials from the Mopani West District, Makhutswe Circuit, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers employed adaptive teaching strategies, curriculum differentiation, and collaborative support structures to address learner diversity. However, persistent challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and insufficient assistive technologies constrained effective implementation. The study concludes that while teachers, SBSTs, and DBSTs play a critical role in advancing inclusive education, systemic and resource-related barriers hinder optimal practice. It is recommended that stakeholder collaboration be strengthened, targeted professional development be enhanced, and inclusive education policies be more effectively implemented to support learners with barriers to learning.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Learning Barriers, Teachers' Support, Pedagogical Support Mechanisms, South Africa*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has steadily grown into one of the most important priorities in education systems around the world. At its core is a simple but powerful idea: every learner, regardless of ability or background, should have the chance to learn and participate meaningfully in school. This commitment is strongly reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), which calls on countries to build education systems that prevent exclusion and promote equal opportunities. In many ways, the push for inclusive education represents not only a shift in teaching approaches but also a broader recognition of inclusion as a fundamental human right. In South Africa, this global movement found expression in Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001). The policy laid out a vision for an education system that could respond to the very real diversity of learners in classrooms across the country. It emphasized early intervention, collaborative problem-solving among teachers, and the development of support structures like School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) and District Based Support Teams (DBSTs). But more than twenty years on, translating this vision into reality has proven difficult. Many mainstream schools still confront practical obstacles such as limited resources, large class sizes, insufficient specialist support, and uneven teacher preparedness.

Research confirms that teachers remain the frontline in identifying and responding to barriers to learning (Engelbrecht et al., 2021). To assist them, SBSTs and DBSTs were introduced with an intention to offer coordinated, systemic support to schools and learners. And yet, a persistent tension exists between what the policy aspires to and what teachers can accomplish in

their classrooms. Empirical studies show that despite good intentions, many teachers find it challenging to fully implement inclusive practices: they cite time constraints, lack of training, and inconsistent or limited engagement from district-level support (Donohue & Bornman, 2015; Walton, 2018). This study therefore investigates how teachers in two mainstream primary schools engage with SBSTs and DBSTs to support learners who face barriers to learning. By exploring teachers' experiences, actions, and perceptions, the study aims to illuminate how inclusive education plays out in day-to-day classroom interactions. The focus is particularly on two interrelated themes: how teachers embrace the diversity of their learners and how they work to ensure that all learners have fair access to education.

To ground this work in the current reality, we draw on recent peer-reviewed research that highlights the ongoing struggles and successes in implementing inclusive education in South Africa. For instance, Motitswe (2025) found that many teachers perceive their training as inadequate and still default to medical model thinking, rather than more progressive and inclusive approaches. Another study by Tshiloane and Sefotho (2025) in full-service schools revealed that overcrowded classrooms, limited time, and a lack of district-level support remain major barriers to meaningful inclusion.

Moreover, research in more specific contexts provides concrete insights into some of the classroom-level challenges and adaptive strategies. A study in the Vaal Triangle by Hove and Phasha (2023) showed that teachers use differentiated instruction, multi-level teaching, and concrete learning aids to support learners with learning disabilities even under conditions of overcrowding and time pressure. And in the foundation phase, collaborative models are showing promise: Jama and Lunga (2024) argue that a cooperative approach among teachers, SBSTs, and other stakeholders can improve the quality of education in inclusive classrooms by tailoring support in ways that are sensitive to both systemic constraints and individual learner needs.

South Africa has made steady progress in shaping policies that promote inclusive education, although the real-life execution of these policies continues to vary widely across schools. Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) introduced a visionary framework that aimed to create an education system capable of responding to the diverse needs of all learners. Even with its strong vision, many schools still struggle to achieve what the policy intended. This is often due to challenges such as limited funding, poor infrastructure, and an ongoing shortage of professional development opportunities for teachers. Recent research highlights that schools, especially those in rural and underserved communities, frequently lack essential tools such as assistive devices, accessible learning spaces, and specialist support staff. These barriers make it difficult for teachers to put inclusive education into practice in a consistent and meaningful way (Ngcobo and Muthukrishna, 2021, Walton and Engelbrecht, 2022, Nketsia, 2020, Mahlo, 2022).

By reducing discriminatory and excluding practices, the inclusion concept seeks to maximise everyone's involvement in society and education (Booth, 2005). Nonetheless, within and between cultures and educational systems, there may be significant variations in the definition and use of inclusive education (Dyson, 2006). There is no universally recognised concept of inclusion (Booth et al., 2006). Determining what we mean by inclusive education is essential to building an inclusive society as a whole. The author claims that including children and teenagers with disabilities is only one aspect of inclusive education. No matter a person's socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, language, race, ethnicity, disability, or any other aspect of their identity that might be considered different, they are all included. In addition to describing access to education and very narrowly defined achievement in it, the capability approach raises awareness of the need to evaluate aspects of education that are deemed valuable and, consequently, concerns regarding resource distribution given complex class, gender, race, and ethnic inequalities (Unterhalter and Brighouse, 2007:73).

Teachers' role in inclusive education

Teachers play an essential role in shaping the success of inclusive education. Their beliefs, attitudes, and everyday practices influence how learners with different strengths and needs experience the classroom. Studies show that when teachers view diversity as a resource and feel confident in adapting lessons, learners are more likely to participate fully and feel supported (Nel et al., 2016). Inclusive teaching encourages flexibility, creativity, and an understanding of each learner as an individual. However, many teachers in South Africa still feel unprepared to teach in inclusive classrooms. This often stems from limited initial training, as well as a lack of access to ongoing professional development once they enter the profession. As a result, teachers may rely on traditional teaching methods that unintentionally exclude learners who require additional support (Nel et al., 2016, Engelbrecht et al., 2021, Florian and Black Hawkins, 2011, Adewumi and Mosito, 2019, Sharma et al., 2023).

Support Structures: SBSTs and DBSTs

School Based Support Teams, together with District Based Support Teams, were created to strengthen collaboration within the school system. These structures are intended to help teachers identify learner needs early, coordinate intervention strategies, and guide schools in developing more inclusive learning environments (Khumalo, 2022). Although these teams are vital, research shows that many of them do not function as effectively as intended. Some teams lack adequate training, while others face high workloads or limited time to carry out their responsibilities. At district level, support teams often struggle with staff shortages and limited resources. These challenges make it difficult for schools to receive the consistent guidance they need to support learners with barriers to learning (Mahlo, 2020, Pillay and Di Terlizzi, 2021, Donohue and Bornman, 2015, Zulu and Khumalo, 2022).

Gaps In Practice

Despite strong commitments from both national and international policy frameworks, inclusive education in South Africa still faces several practical challenges. Overcrowded classrooms, shortages of learning materials, and uneven levels of implementation across provinces continue to affect the quality of support available to learners with barriers to learning (Adeyemi and Adu, 2022). Some schools make strong progress in building inclusive environments, while others struggle even with basic support systems (Engelbrecht and Savolainen, 2023). These variations highlight the need for context-driven research that examines how inclusion is being implemented at school level and how teachers navigate the daily demands of supporting learner diversity (Walton, 2018). The present study responds to this need by offering evidence from two mainstream schools in the Northwest Province. The study explores how teachers work with SBSTs and DBSTs to support learners who experience barriers to learning (Makoelle, 2020).

This study draws on a socio-ecological theoretical framework to explain how teacher support for learners with learning difficulties is shaped by a range of interconnected factors within and beyond the school environment. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the framework places the learner at the centre of the teaching and learning process, with the classroom forming the most immediate context in which support takes place. Within this space, teachers' everyday practices, attitudes, and understanding of learning difficulties play a central role in how learners are supported. However, teachers do not work in isolation. Their support is influenced by relationships with colleagues, school management, and support structures such as School-Based Support Teams, which together shape collaborative responses to learner needs. At a broader level, district support services, curriculum pressures, and access to professional development opportunities affect what teachers are able to do in practice. National inclusive education policies and wider societal views about learning difficulties further frame how support is understood and prioritised in mainstream primary schools. Viewing teacher support through this lens allows the

study to recognise it as a shared and context-dependent process, shaped by multiple levels of influence rather than the actions of individual teachers alone.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research paradigm

This study was located within an interpretivist research paradigm and employed a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how pedagogical support mechanisms are implemented for learners with learning barriers in mainstream primary schools. A qualitative case study design was adopted, focusing on two mainstream primary schools in the Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, to explore participants lived experiences and perceptions within their real-life educational contexts.

Population and Sampling

The study setting comprised two mainstream primary schools, referred to as School A and School B. Purposive sampling was used to select ten participants who were directly involved in supporting learners with barriers to learning. The sample included four teachers (TR1–TR4), four members of the school-Based Support Teams (SB1–SB4), and two District-Based Support Team officials (DB1–DB2).

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Individual interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, explored participants' experiences of supporting learners with barriers to learning, their collaboration with support structures, and challenges encountered in implementing inclusive practices. Relevant documents, including policy documents, SBST meeting minutes, and learner support plans, were reviewed to supplement and triangulate interview data. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, with codes generated inductively and themes developed through an iterative process. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant authorities, including the Department of Education, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through data analysis, four themes were identified as follows: (1) Embracing learner diversity, (2) Equal access to education, (3) Collaboration and professional development and (4) Systemic and resource challenges.

Embracing learner diversity

Teachers reported employing differentiated teaching, peer learning, and adaptive resources. SBSTs collaborated closely to design interventions. For example, SB2 stated: 'We support teachers to adapt lesson plans and identify learners who need additional support.' In addition, DB1 highlighted the shift in teacher perceptions: 'Teachers are starting to see diversity as an opportunity rather than a burden.'

Equal access to education

Participants emphasized curriculum adaptation, remedial sessions, and referrals. Despite these efforts, barriers such as overcrowded classrooms and limited assistive technologies

persisted. TR2 observed: 'I try to give more time to learners who struggle, but with 50 learners in a class, it becomes nearly impossible.' Document analysis revealed gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities.

Collaboration and Professional Development

Collaboration emerged as a key theme. Teachers and support team members reported that regular workshops, peer support, and mentoring enhanced their ability to support learners effectively. DB2 noted, 'Our joint workshops help teachers feel less isolated in addressing learning barriers.'

Systemic and Resource Challenges

Despite positive initiatives, participants identified systemic challenges such as overcrowded classes, shortages of assistive devices, and insufficient specialised staff. TR3 remarked, 'We know what needs to be done, but the school simply doesn't have the resources to make it happen.'

The findings of this study highlight both encouraging progress and ongoing challenges in the implementation of inclusive education. Teachers have shown a strong commitment to adapting their teaching approaches to support learner diversity. This reflects the inclusive pedagogy framework proposed by Florian and Black Hawkins (2011), which emphasises teaching that is responsive to all learners through flexible methods and a belief in the potential of every learner to participate and succeed. Recent studies support this, showing that teachers, even in schools with limited resources, are using a variety of strategies such as visual aids, peer collaboration, and differentiated instruction to include learners with different educational needs (Genovesi et al., 2024; *Frontiers in Education*, 2025). This demonstrates a positive shift in teaching practices towards greater inclusivity in many mainstream classrooms.

Despite this progress, several systemic barriers continue to hinder the full implementation of inclusive education. Key challenges include a lack of learning materials, large class sizes, and limited access to specialised support. These findings are consistent with earlier research by Walton (2018) and more recent work which shows that many teachers struggle due to the absence of professional development, assistive devices, and support staff such as psychologists or therapists (Tshiloane and Sefotho, 2025; Genovesi et al., 2024). In many cases, teachers are required to address complex learning needs without adequate support, which places significant strain on their capacity to provide effective and inclusive teaching (*Frontiers in Education*, 2025).

Furthermore, while collaboration between School Based Support Teams and District Based Support Teams is evident, its effectiveness is often limited by inconsistent communication, insufficient training, and resource constraints. Mahlo (2025) notes that although support structures exist, they are not always able to respond adequately due to a lack of coordination and professional expertise. This affects the quality and continuity of support provided to learners, especially those with more intensive learning needs. As a result, the gap between inclusive education policy and classroom practice remains wide in many contexts.

The findings of this study emphasize the urgent need for stronger support in turning inclusive education policies into practical outcomes. Regular training for teachers, sufficient learning materials, and the consistent presence of support personnel are essential to achieving this goal. As Engelbrecht, Nel and Tlale (2021) explain, inclusive education cannot rely solely on the commitment of individual teachers. It must be supported by structural changes within the education system that ensure schools are properly equipped and staffed to meet diverse learning needs. Without these changes, the values and goals set out in inclusive education policy will remain distant from the reality experienced in many classrooms

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted the critical role of teachers, SBSTs, and DBSTs in promoting inclusive education in South African mainstream schools. While positive practices such as differentiated teaching and collaboration were evident, systemic challenges persisted. This study concluded that there were some duties the SBST members were executing in their mainstream schools to facilitate the inclusion of diverse learners. These roles included identifying learners with barriers to learning, advocating for inclusive education to educators, parents and the community, collaborating with parents, strategic learner support, monitoring and evaluating their colleagues and referring learners for further specialised support. However, the study established that some members of SBSTs were not fully equipped to execute the role of screening learners at risk of barriers to learning because of their negative attitude that the process was tedious and lengthy. Some members indicated that they lacked the know-how to fill in the screening forms. More training on the execution of this role was requested by the participants. Members of SBSTs felt that the following strategies could improve the way they implement their role of supporting the inclusion of diverse learners in their schools. These strategies included continuous in-service training in inclusive education, reducing their workload so they can focus on inclusive education in their mainstream schools and involving parents in the education of their children with disabilities.

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