

BARRIERS TO LEARNING IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT, CAPRICORN DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE

Marubini Christinah Sadiki¹, Tebogo Jillian Mampane²

^{1,2} Department of Inclusive Education, University of South Africa, South Africa

Abstract

This paper examines the ongoing barriers to learning within inclusive education environments, to promote equitable access and meaningful participation for all learners. Rooted in the principles of equity, diversity, and social justice, inclusive education aims to create learning environments where every learner, regardless of ability, background, or identity, can thrive. Despite this ideal, systemic challenges, such as rigid curricula, insufficient educator training, socioeconomic inequalities, and prevailing attitudinal biases, continue to obstruct full inclusion. Utilising current research, policy reviews, and case studies from various educational settings, the paper highlights both structural and pedagogical factors that contribute to the marginalisation of learners. This study advances the understanding of overcoming barriers to learning within inclusive education environments. Ultimately, it asserts that addressing these barriers is not only a technical challenge but a moral obligation, demanding a collective effort to transform education systems into inclusive spaces of belonging, empowerment, and opportunity for all.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Overcoming Barriers, Environment, Equity and Social Justice, Systemic

1. Introduction

Inclusive education represents a progressive approach to teaching and learning that embraces the diversity of all learners, ensuring equal opportunities for their participation and success (Thelma & Madoda, 2024). It rejects exclusionary practices and advocates for the inclusion of learners with diverse needs, whether related to disability, language, socio-economic status, or cultural identity, within mainstream education systems (Manase, 2025). This philosophy is anchored in key international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), both of which affirm every child's right to quality, inclusive education. In South Africa, these principles are embodied in Education White Paper 6 (2001), which emphasizes the need to remove learning barriers and create supportive, accessible environments for all learners.

2. Despite strong policy commitments, the effective implementation of inclusive education remains hindered by various structural and pedagogical challenges (Spandagou, 2025). These challenges encompass inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, inflexible curricula, and insufficient educator training. Learners with disabilities remain particularly vulnerable to exclusion due to persistent stigma, delayed or inaccurate identification of their learning needs, and a lack of specialized support services (Mampane, 2022). Furthermore, socio-economic inequalities and linguistic diversity contribute to the marginalization of these learners (Mackenzie, 2022). Addressing these issues is not only a procedural requirement but also a moral and educational responsibility. Effective strategies to overcome these barriers include differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, robust support systems, strong school leadership, and active collaboration with families and communities (Carrington et al., 2025). This paper explores these challenges and evaluates inclusive policies and practices that foster equitable access and meaningful participation, with the ultimate goal of transforming education into a system that genuinely serves every child.

2. Method

The study employed a qualitative case study design, enabling in-depth exploration of learners' lived experiences and perceptions within inclusive education settings (Manthata, 2023). This approach was chosen to capture the nuanced, context-specific challenges faced in rural schools of the Capricorn District.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select primary school learners and principals from schools implementing inclusive education. Participants were drawn from schools designated as full-service, piloting, and special schools, ensuring a diverse representation of inclusive education contexts.

Data Collection

The researcher used questionnaires, interviews, and document reviews to gather qualitative data for this study. The questionnaires were prepared in English, had both closed- and open-ended items, and were administered to educators. For closed-ended items, the respondents were required to choose one proper response, whereas they were requested to respond to the open-ended items in writing.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to barriers and enablers of inclusive education. Themes included educator preparedness, resource availability, infrastructure limitations, and collaborative support structures.

Trustworthiness

The study ensured credibility through member checking, triangulation, and audit trails, enhancing the reliability of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

3. Literature Review

Inclusive education, supported by international frameworks like the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), upholds the right of all learners to receive quality education within mainstream classrooms. Achieving genuine inclusion involves recognizing and removing obstacles that limit full participation and learning, especially for learners with diverse needs (Matolo & Rambuda, 2021). This literature review examines the characteristics of these barriers and assesses strategies designed to foster equitable access and active engagement in inclusive educational settings.

Barriers to Learning in Inclusive Education

Barriers to learning are multifaceted, arising from a combination of systemic, pedagogical, socio-economic, and attitudinal factors (Nurhayati, 2025). One key challenge is the rigid and standardized curriculum, which frequently fails to accommodate the diverse learning styles and needs of learners. Ituma (2025) contends that such inflexible curricula often marginalize learners requiring differentiated instruction, including those with disabilities, language difficulties, and socio-emotional challenges.

Another major obstacle is the lack of adequately trained educators. Despite policies mandating inclusive education, many learners feel unprepared to address the varied needs of learners in mainstream classrooms (Ratau & Motitswe, 2025). Studies indicate that limited knowledge of inclusive teaching practices, low self-confidence, and insufficient professional development contribute to exclusionary approaches (Ajani & Ntombela, 2025). Moreover, physical and infrastructural shortcomings such as inaccessible facilities, scarce assistive technologies, and overcrowded classrooms further hinder inclusion and effective learning (Oshowole, 2024). Attitudinal barriers remain prevalent, with negative stereotypes and low expectations for learners with disabilities or from marginalized communities leading to stigma and social isolation within schools (Tafirenyika, Mashiri, & Mavundutse, 2025). The cultural and linguistic diversity is frequently neglected or undervalued, exacerbating exclusion for learners from minority backgrounds (Maguvhe, 2015).

Strategies for Equitable Access and Participation

To overcome educational barriers, the literature highlights strategies grounded in equity, participation, and social justice. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a flexible framework that supports diverse learners through varied modes of content delivery, engagement, and expression (Capp, 2020). It is endorsed as a proactive, inclusive model that anticipates learner diversity (Manyarela, Mphuthi, & Malebo, 2025).

Research underscores the value of sustained, collaborative training in enhancing educators' inclusive practices (Ndale, 2025). Peer networks, mentoring, and professional learning communities further support long-term implementation. Engaging families and community organizations strengthens learner support, with Deslandes' partnership model shown to boost motivation and achievement, particularly for those with learning challenges (Hoang, 2024; Deslandes, 2025).

Inclusive education also depends on robust policy and leadership. Effective implementation requires funding, monitoring, and ongoing professional development (Mokoginta, Wawointana, & Mamonto, 2025). School leaders foster inclusive cultures by promoting diversity and respect (Assefa & Zenebe, 2025). Support structures—such as multidisciplinary teams and psychosocial services—are vital for addressing individual needs. The SIAS policy exemplifies early intervention through systematic identification and support (Department of Basic Education, 2014; Makhalemele & Jama, 2023).

Structural and pedagogical obstacles that marginalize learners

Structural and pedagogical barriers continue to significantly contribute to the marginalization of learners in inclusive education settings (Walton, 2025). From a structural perspective, many schools lack the essential physical infrastructure needed to accommodate learners with disabilities or special educational needs (Deghaye, 2021). This includes inaccessible buildings, overcrowded classrooms, limited assistive technologies, and a shortage of specialized personnel such as therapists and support staff. In resource-limited contexts, these challenges are intensified by high learner numbers and insufficient funding, making it difficult to provide individualized support (Akpalu et al., 2025). Additionally, systemic issues such as inflexible curricula, standardized assessments, and bureaucratic obstacles further constrain schools' ability to meet the diverse needs of their learners (Ober, 2025). These structural deficiencies ultimately reinforce exclusion and hinder the full inclusion of learners who do not fit within traditional educational frameworks (Abdulle, 2024).

From a pedagogical standpoint, teaching methods and curriculum delivery frequently remain inflexible and inadequately responsive to the diverse needs within inclusive classrooms (Chio, 2025). Many learners continue to depend on educator-centred approaches that emphasize rote memorization and standardization, rather than employing differentiated instruction that actively involves all learners (Cole-Onaifo, 2022). This approach disproportionately impacts learners with cognitive, sensory, or language difficulties, along with those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. A lack of ongoing professional development and limited understanding of inclusive teaching strategies leave many educators ill-equipped to modify their practices (Msimango, 2025; Ajani & Ntombela, 2025). Consequently, learners who require alternative instructional methods, additional time, or multi-sensory learning often fall behind, perpetuating educational disparities (Brown, 2022). Addressing these pedagogical challenges is essential to guarantee that all learners can effectively access, engage with, and benefit from quality education.

Inclusive education aims to provide equitable access and meaningful participation for all learners, particularly those with diverse needs. Despite international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), significant barriers persist, especially in the Global South (Matolo & Rambuda, 2021). This discussion critically examines the literature on barriers to learning, identifying both opportunities and challenges in fostering inclusive educational practices.

Barriers to Learning in Inclusive Education

Multifaceted Nature of Barriers

Barriers to learning are complex and arise from systemic, pedagogical, socio-economic, and attitudinal factors (Nurhayati, 2025). For instance, Ituma (2025) highlights how rigid curricula often marginalize learners needing differentiated instruction, exacerbating challenges for those with disabilities. This rigidity is particularly detrimental in resource-limited settings like Limpopo Province, where teachers struggle to meet diverse learner needs (Maebana & Molotja, 2023).

Opportunities: Recognizing the multifaceted nature of barriers allows for a more comprehensive approach in addressing them. By understanding that barriers are not merely technical issues, educational stakeholders can adopt strategies that encompass social, cultural, and economic dimensions.

Challenges: However, the persistence of these barriers indicates a systemic failure to implement effective inclusive practices. The lack of flexibility in curricula and assessments often leads to the exclusion of learners who do not fit traditional educational models (Walton, 2025).

Lack of Adequately Trained Educators

A significant challenge in implementing inclusive education is the ongoing lack of adequately trained educators. Many teachers report feeling unprepared to address the varied needs of learners in mainstream classrooms (Ratau & Motitswe, 2025). This inadequacy stems from insufficient professional development opportunities, which are essential for equipping teachers with effective inclusive teaching strategies (Ajani & Ntombela, 2025).

Opportunities: The literature emphasizes the need for continuous, hands-on training that enhances educators' confidence and competence in inclusive practices (Ndale, 2025). Programs that promote collaborative learning among teachers can foster a culture of inclusivity within schools.

Challenges: The reality remains that many in-service training programs are insufficiently practical and fail to address the specific needs of educators, leaving them ill-equipped to enact inclusive teaching strategies (Byrne, 2022).

Physical and Infrastructural Shortcomings

Physical barriers, such as inaccessible facilities and overcrowded classrooms, significantly impede inclusive education (Oshowole, 2024). Many schools lack the necessary infrastructure, such as ramps and specialized resources, making it difficult for learners with disabilities to participate fully (Deghaye, 2021).

Opportunities: Addressing these infrastructural challenges provides a clear path for improvement. Investment in accessible facilities and assistive technologies can create an enabling environment for all learners.

Challenges: However, systemic underfunding and high learner-to-teacher ratios in many schools complicate these efforts, hindering the ability to provide individualized support (Akpalu et al., 2025).

Attitudinal Barriers

Attitudinal barriers, characterized by negative stereotypes and low expectations for learners with disabilities or from marginalized communities, further contribute to exclusion (Tafirenyika et al., 2025). These attitudes can lead to stigma and social isolation within schools, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage.

Opportunities: Initiatives that promote awareness and challenge stereotypes can help shift these attitudes, fostering a more inclusive school culture. Programs that involve community engagement and parental involvement are crucial for changing perceptions (Hoang, 2024).

Challenges: Nonetheless, deeply entrenched societal attitudes are difficult to change, and without sustained efforts, the impact of such initiatives may be limited (Maguvhe, 2015).

Strategies for Equitable Access and Participation

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The literature highlights Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a promising framework for fostering inclusive education. UDL promotes flexibility in curriculum development, allowing for multiple means of engagement and representation (Capp, 2020).

Opportunities: Implementing UDL can lead to more inclusive classrooms that accommodate diverse learning styles and needs from the outset.

Challenges: However, successful UDL implementation requires significant changes in teacher training and curriculum design, which may face resistance from traditional educational frameworks (Manyarela et al., 2025).

Collaborative Partnerships

Engaging parents, caregivers, and community organizations in the educational process is vital for creating inclusive environments (Deslandes, 2025). Collaborative partnerships can enhance learner motivation and support systems.

Opportunities: Strengthening these partnerships can lead to more comprehensive support for learners and a shared commitment to inclusive practices.

Challenges: The challenge remains in overcoming historical separations between schools and communities, particularly in regions where mistrust exists (McKenzie et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The literature on barriers to learning in inclusive education reveals a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities. While significant barriers persist, particularly in resource-limited contexts, there is potential for transformative practices through targeted strategies like UDL and collaborative partnerships. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics at play and a commitment to fostering inclusive educational environments that empower all learners.

3. Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data and guided the structure of the discussion, with direct quotes from participants used to illustrate points. These themes include: overcrowded classrooms, insufficient capacity-building initiatives for inclusive teaching, and a lack of adequate resources. Each of these themes is explored in depth under the following headings.

Over-enrolled classrooms

Handling large classes makes it difficult for educators to provide personalized attention, closely monitor each learner's progress, and address diverse learning needs. The absence of individual engagement particularly affects learners requiring additional support, such as those with learning difficulties or language barriers. Learners with disabilities often need tailored instruction, consistent feedback, or specific interventions. In overcrowded classrooms, educators frequently lack the time and resources to adequately meet these individual needs, which can adversely affect learners' academic achievement and overall development. These challenges were evident in educators' accounts of their experiences, with the following examples representing common responses shared.

It is extremely challenging; I simply don't have enough time to properly support learners who face barriers to learning. With 48 learners in my class, it's impossible to give each child the individual attention and help they require.

Implementing Individualised Education Plans (IEPs), using differentiated teaching strategies, or applying specialised interventions for learners with learning barriers becomes far more difficult in these conditions. Honestly, I'm struggling to manage effectively.

Sadly, there's little I can do when the classroom remains overcrowded. Although I've reported this situation to my principal, no measures have been taken so far to resolve it. As a result, I'm currently unable to provide sufficient support to learners with learning difficulties, which is very worrying.

I'm expected to ensure inclusive and equitable learning for all learners in my classroom, but in reality, overcrowding leads to the exclusion and isolation of those who most need support.

The data indicated that despite having the necessary qualifications, educators struggled to support learners with barriers to learning in overcrowded classrooms. Excessive class sizes limited opportunities for meaningful social interaction, peer collaboration, and group activities, all of which are crucial for developing social and communication skills. Learners with disabilities frequently felt isolated or overlooked in these settings. All participants concurred that the absence of interventions to reduce over-enrolment further hindered efforts to realize education for all. Educators emphasized that overcrowded classrooms made it nearly impossible to provide personalised support tailored to the individual needs of each learner.

Lack of capacity-building initiatives to support inclusive pedagogies, OR insufficient educator training

The study found that managing behaviour and maintaining learner engagement is significantly hindered when educators lack training in inclusive strategies for overcrowded, diverse classrooms. Without adequate professional development, educators often feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped to meet the varied needs of learners, leading to anxiety, reduced confidence, and a reluctance to adopt inclusive practices. Participants reported that insufficient skills and support contribute to stress, frustration, and burnout, negatively impacting teaching quality and learner outcomes. Learners requiring additional support, such as those with disabilities, language barriers, or emotional challenges, are especially vulnerable to being overlooked.

Educators expressed concern over the absence of in-service training, noting that overcrowded classrooms exacerbate the difficulty of implementing inclusive, differentiated approaches. The lack of training delays early identification and intervention, further disadvantaging learners with barriers. The study underscores the critical need for targeted professional development to enhance educators' capacity to support diverse learners effectively.

Inadequate resources

Educators reported that the lack of adequate resources in classrooms makes it almost impossible to offer personalized support to each learner, especially those with learning barriers who need adapted instruction or extra help. Inclusive education frequently relies on specialized teaching aids, assistive technologies, and customized learning materials like braille books, visual aids, and modified desks. However, in overcrowded classrooms, these limited resources are stretched even thinner, decreasing their accessibility and effectiveness for the learners who depend on them most. This scarcity contributes to educator fatigue and reduces their ability to differentiate teaching or closely track each learner's progress, as reflected in the following statement:

I find it challenging to support learners effectively when resources are insufficient. The shortage of textbooks and learning materials means that not every learner has their own copy, making it difficult for them to follow lessons or complete independent work. In my school, we lack appropriate resources such as teaching assistants or support staff, which forces educators to manage large, diverse groups on their own.

Together, these factors severely limit educators' capacity to provide individualized attention and to apply inclusive, learner-centered approaches effectively. The data demonstrate that insufficient resources create both structural and practical barriers, which weaken the fundamental goals of inclusive education, ensuring equal access, participation, and achievement for every learner. Having appropriate resources in classrooms is crucial to embracing and supporting learner diversity, especially in inclusive settings. When resources are inadequate, attempts to overcome learning barriers and foster equitable access and engagement are greatly undermined. As the responses indicate, this scarcity not only hinders learners' academic progress and participation but also increases educator stress and burnout, ultimately threatening the aim of achieving truly inclusive and equitable education for all.

Implications for policy and practice

Despite progressive frameworks like Education White Paper 6 and SIAS, rural schools struggle with implementation due to vague guidelines and limited contextual relevance. Policymakers must localize and simplify policy language, ensuring it resonates with the realities of educators in under-resourced areas. Overcrowded classrooms, lack of assistive technologies, and inaccessible infrastructure persist.

Implications for Policy

Inclusive education policies must be backed by dedicated funding streams, infrastructure upgrades, and resource audits to ensure equitable access. There is clear evidence of Educator Training Deficits. Educators lack confidence and practical skills to support diverse learners, and the implication of this is that policies should mandate ongoing, hands-on professional development, including mentorship and peer learning tailored to inclusive pedagogies. When focusing on Curriculum rigidity, standardised curricula marginalise learners with diverse needs, creating implications of promoting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction as foundational principles in curriculum reform. Because of limited data collection on learner outcomes and educator preparedness. The government needs to develop inclusive education indicators and robust monitoring systems to inform adaptive policy adjustments.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice are steering educational practices to shift from educator-centred to learner-centred approaches using multi-sensory methods and flexible assessments. UDL offers a proactive model for designing lessons that accommodate all learners from the outset. Principals must champion inclusive values and foster collaborative problem-solving. Leadership training should emphasise diversity, equity, and stigma reduction. The South African Government needs to build school-family-community networks to support learners holistically. From this, there is a strengthening of the social and emotional scaffolding necessary for inclusive success. Learner Support Systems should deploy multidisciplinary teams and psychosocial services using the framework used in the SIAS policy, which provides a structure, but must be scaled and adapted to local contexts. Considering contextual adaptations-educators need to be empowered to tailor curricula and teaching strategies to local learner profiles. And focus on addressing linguistic diversity, cultural dynamics, and rural poverty through responsive practices.

4. Discussion

Despite progressive frameworks like Education White Paper 6 and SIAS, rural schools struggle with implementation due to vague guidelines and limited contextual relevance. Policymakers must localize and simplify policy language, ensuring it resonates with the realities of educators in under-resourced areas. Overcrowded classrooms, lack of assistive technologies, and inaccessible infrastructure persist.

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6. Recommendations

To effectively tackle the persistent barriers to learning within inclusive education, it is crucial to adopt a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategy founded on equity, collaboration, and innovation. A central priority should be enhancing educator capacity through ongoing, practice-based professional development. This should include specialised training in inclusive pedagogical approaches, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and differentiated instruction, thereby equipping learners to respond effectively to the diverse needs of all learners.

Additional support through initiatives such as peer mentoring, professional learning communities, and regular in-service workshops can further build educators' skills, increase their confidence, and encourage the sustained application of inclusive teaching methods.

Equally important is the need to address structural and resource-related limitations. Governments and educational authorities should allocate targeted funding to reduce class sizes, enhance accessible infrastructure, and provide critical teaching materials and assistive technologies. Employing teaching assistants or extra support staff can also help manage diverse classrooms more effectively, ensuring that learners facing barriers receive the personalised attention they need. Promoting inclusive school cultures and empowering leadership is also vital. School leaders must actively advance the values of diversity, participation, and respect by embedding them into everyday practice and institutional decision-making. Inclusion policies should be reinforced by clear action plans, systematic monitoring, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that policy commitments translate into meaningful change.

Building strong collaborative partnerships with parents, caregivers, community organisations, and specialists is another key recommendation. Regular, transparent communication between home and school helps align educational goals, while involving families in processes such as Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) deepens engagement and shared responsibility for learner success. Moreover, flexible curriculum and assessment practices are necessary to meet varied learning needs. Schools should implement learner-centred approaches that embrace cultural and linguistic diversity, alongside integrating life skills and social-emotional learning to nurture every learner's holistic development. By putting these strategies into practice, education systems can move closer to creating inclusive environments in which every learner regardless of background or ability can access, participate in, and benefit from a meaningful educational experience.

Conclusions

Creating an inclusive education environment involves recognizing and addressing the multiple barriers that limit equitable access and meaningful participation for all learners. Successfully overcoming these challenges requires a holistic approach that includes providing sufficient resources, reducing classroom overcrowding, improving educators' competencies through targeted training, and adopting flexible, learner-centered pedagogies. Furthermore, schools must foster strong collaborative partnerships with parents, communities, and support staff to ensure that learners with diverse needs receive consistent and personalized support. By prioritizing inclusive practices and nurturing a culture of flexibility, empathy, and collaboration, learners and institutions can develop learning environments where every learner feels valued, supported, and empowered to achieve their full potential. Ultimately, the effectiveness of inclusive education depends on a shared commitment to removing systemic obstacles and viewing diversity as a strength that enhances the entire educational experience.

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