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Examining the Achievements and Obstacles in Implementing Inclusive Education in Early Childhood Settings in South Africa: An Integrative Review

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Abstract

Early childhood education is fundamental in establishing the groundwork for inclusive learning, ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have equal educational opportunities. However, inclusive education is often perceived as a theoretical ideal rather than a practical and achievable model in early learning, posing challenges for educators in its implementation. This integrative review examines the achievements and obstacles associated with implementing inclusive education in South African early childhood settings. It aims to clarify the concept of early childhood inclusion by identifying effective strategies and persistent challenges to guide policy development. By synthesizing existing research, the study highlights progress made, barriers encountered, and potential recommendations for improvement. Findings suggest that although policy frameworks advocate for inclusivity, practical execution is hampered by limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and societal perceptions. Overcoming these challenges requires joint efforts from policymakers, educators, and communities. Integrating inclusive education training into teacher preparation programmes and fostering advocacy skills among educators are some of the strategies being adopted to address these issues. This review contributes to ongoing discussions on best practices, policy enhancements, and sustainable approaches to creating inclusive early learning environments.

Keywords

Early childhood, Early learning, Inclusive education, Integrative review

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a widely endorsed global approach aimed at ensuring equal access to quality education for all learners, including those with disabilities and special educational needs (Engelbrecht, 2020; Genovesi et al., 2022; Nuruddin & Rasidi, 2023). The concept was formally introduced as a progressive educational framework during the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994). Aligned with the principles of the Salamanca Declaration, the global "Education for All" initiative (UNESCO, 2000) underscores the importance of integrating all children into mainstream schools as a means to challenge discriminatory attitudes and advance inclusive education. The United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), ratified by over 175 countries, further establishes inclusive education as an internationally accepted standard (Powell et al., 2019). Both the Salamanca Statement and the UNCRPD emphasize that inclusive education is a fundamental human right rather than a privilege.

Over the years, inclusive education has been extensively debated and researched as both a theoretical framework and a pedagogical reform, despite differences in its classification and implementation across various education systems (Kotor et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2019). While the movement toward inclusion is a global priority, Khan et al. (2017) highlight that nearly 90% of children with special needs in many developing nations lack access to public schooling, with only about 50% advancing to secondary education. Despite continuous efforts to promote educational equality, discrimination against individuals with disabilities persists (Genovesi et al., 2022). The development of inclusive education remains an evolving discourse, with its theoretical foundations subject to interpretation and ongoing refinement.

In South Africa, inclusive education is guided by policies such as White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), which outlines strategies for integrating learners with diverse needs into mainstream schools. This policy framework supports the broader objectives of social transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, aiming to address historical inequalities and promote an inclusive society (Engelbrecht, 2020). Grounded in principles of equity, diversity, and social justice, inclusive education seeks to establish learning environments that cater to the unique needs of all children, ensuring their active participation and overall development (Kotor et al., 2022). However, early childhood education institutions experience both successes and challenges in implementing inclusive education.

Goal 4 of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasises the importance of ensuring inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education, with a particular focus on fostering lifelong learning opportunities for all, including young children, by 2030 (UN, 2015). Since 1994, the transition toward inclusive education in South Africa has gained momentum (Andrews et al., 2019; Engelbrecht & Muthukrishna, 2019). The factors influencing inclusive education are interconnected, shaping both the opportunities and challenges associated with its implementation.

Despite policy efforts, the integration of inclusive education into early childhood settings remains a complex and multifaceted process (Engelbrecht, 2020). This integrative review analyses existing literature on the implementation of inclusive education in South African early learning contexts. Most of the studies that were done before, focused on primary, high school and institutions of higher learning with little focus in early childhood education. By synthesizing insights from academic research, policy documents, and case studies, the review highlights key achievements and persistent challenges affecting the success of inclusive practices. Gaining a deeper understanding of these factors is essential for identifying areas that require policy enhancement and practical interventions to strengthen inclusivity in early childhood education across South Africa.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts an integrative literature review (ILR) approach to synthesize existing research on early childhood education (ECE) as it relates to the topic under investigation. An ILR is a systematic method that gathers and analyses knowledge from various research designs, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative studies to develop a comprehensive understanding of a particular subject (Grove et al., 2013). By integrating theoretical and empirical literature, this approach provides a well-rounded synthesis of existing knowledge from multiple perspectives (Torraco, 2016). The study follows a structured, multi-step process as outlined by Lubbe et al. (2020).

The first step involved formulating the primary research question: *What are the successes and challenges in implementing inclusive education in South African early childhood settings?* The second step consisted of conducting a systematic search using reputable electronic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Web of Science to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. The identified studies were further validated through cross-referencing, leading to the final selection of twenty-five (n=25) relevant studies, which were then analysed using qualitative thematic analysis.

Keywords used in the search process included terms such as “inclusive education,” “implementation of inclusive education,” “early childhood education or learning,” “pre-school,” “early learning,” and “foundation phase,” as these terms are frequently used interchangeably in academic literature. To refine the search further, specific phrases such as “successes in implementing inclusive education in South African early learning” and “challenges in implementing inclusive education in South African early learning” were applied.

Selection criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 to ensure the research remained relevant to contemporary issues in early childhood education.

The initial search yielded 126 studies, but only those specifically addressing children aged 0–8 years—widely recognized as the early childhood period—were included. Studies that focused solely on primary, secondary, or higher education were excluded. Additionally, grey literature, unpublished reports, and studies with significant methodological limitations, such as unclear sample sizes or unverified data, were also omitted to maintain the rigor of the review.

The next step involved selecting relevant studies following an initial screening process, where articles were evaluated based on their titles and abstracts to determine their relevance. This screening resulted in the identification of twenty-five articles. In the fourth step, a thorough full-text review was conducted, during which the remaining articles were assessed to confirm their alignment with the inclusion criteria. Three articles were excluded at this stage due to a lack of relevant information, leaving twenty-two studies for analysis. Finally, data extraction was carried out to collect essential information from the selected studies, including their research focus, methodologies, key findings, and conclusions. Each study was summarised, with critical reflections on its contributions to the field of early childhood education. Given the integrative nature of the review, four themes capturing positive experiences and four themes outlining challenges were identified, which will be explored in detail in the following sections.

RESULTS

Key Themes and the Results of the Reviewed Article

This section presents the research themes examined in the review. The study explores two primary themes along with their corresponding subthemes, which are as follows: (1) successes in implementing inclusive education -policy development and advocacy, teacher commitment and innovation, universal design for learning, community and NGO

support, (2) challenges in implementing inclusive education - limited resources and infrastructure, educator training and capacity building, socio-cultural attitudes and stigma and assessment and identification gaps.

Table 1 Research Themes

Key theme	Sub-theme	Results	Author(s)
Successes in Implementing Inclusive Education	Policy Development and Advocacy	Developed policies that promote inclusive education. Outlining systematic procedures for educational needs.	Engelbrecht and Green (2018) Matolo & Rambuda (2022) Ledwaba & Sefotho (2024)
	Teacher Commitment and Innovation	Use of innovative teaching strategies, including differentiated instruction and assistive technologies Use of ability grouping Collaboration with other teachers and knowledgeable stakeholders.	Tomlinson, (2017) Swart & Pettipher, (2016) Engelbrecht et al. (2016) Hove & Phasha (2022) Maesala & Ronél (2024)
	Universal design for learning	Including UDL as an effective inclusive strategy for effective classroom practices.	McKenzie and Dalton (2020) Dalton, McKenzie, and Kahonde (2012) Song (2017) Bandalaria (2020)
	Community and NGO Support	Developed programs aimed at empowering teachers and parents with skills to support children with disabilities. Campaigns to combat stigma surrounding disability in early learning settings	Andrews, Walton, Osman, (2019) Donohue & Bornman, (2014) Engelbrecht and Green (2018) Mbelu & Maguvhe (2024) Masondo & Mabaso (2025)
Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education	Limited Resources and Infrastructure	Lack of adequate resources, including assistive devices, learning materials, specialised staff and accessible infrastructure Limited instructional time	Nembambula, Ooko & Aluko (2023) Mahlaule, McCrindle & Napoles (2024) Maesala & Ronél (2024)
	Educator Training and Capacity Building	Many educators lack specialized training to effectively support diverse learners Many educators feel ill-prepared to handle learners with special needs due to inadequate pre-service and in-service training	Aloka & Mamogobo (2024) Matolo & Rambuda (2022) Mahlaule, McCrindle & Napoles (2024) Makuya & Sedibe (2021) Yeboah, Aloka & Charamba (2023)
	Socio-Cultural Attitudes and Stigma	Some communities still hold stigmatizing views about children with disabilities Societal beliefs and misconceptions about disabilities often result in children with special needs being marginalized or excluded from mainstream education settings	Swart and Pettipher (2016) Legodi-rakgalakane & Mokhampanyane (2022) Makuya & Sedibe (2021)
	Assessment and Identification Gaps	Many early learning centres lack trained personnel to conduct appropriate assessments. Lack of qualified professionals, such as educational psychologists and special education specialists, hampers timely and accurate identification of learning barriers.	Engelbrecht and Green (2018) Mahlaule, McCrindle & Napoles (2024) Ledwaba & Sefotho (2024)

DISCUSSION

Successes in Implementing Inclusive Education

Policy Development and Advocacy

The South African government has introduced various policies to support inclusive education. Key policies that provide a strong foundation for inclusivity include the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 (Department of Education, 1996), Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), and the National Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) (Department of Basic Education, 2014). SASA (Department of Education, 1996) establishes the right to basic education for all children in South Africa, emphasising equality and non-discrimination (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Although this legal framework ensures that no child is denied access to education due to disability or other barriers, Engelbrecht (2020) argues that challenges persist in translating policy into inclusive practices at the school level.

Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) reinforces the right to education for all learners and expresses the government's commitment to fostering an inclusive education system. However, Engelbrecht et al. (2016) point out that despite this policy's focus on inclusion, many educators struggle to modify their teaching strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs. Engelbrecht (2020) further stresses that achieving true inclusivity requires moving beyond policy statements to practical strategies that equip teachers with the necessary skills and resources to effectively support all learners.

The SIAS policy (Department of Basic Education, 2014) provides a framework for identifying learners in need of additional support and establishing appropriate intervention strategies (Mahlaule et al., 2024). While this policy represents progress in strengthening support mechanisms, Engelbrecht et al. (2016) argue that its effectiveness relies on schools' capacity to implement systematic screening and intervention processes. Donohue and Bornman (2014) note that these policies have influenced the early childhood education sector by promoting inclusive practices and encouraging teacher training initiatives. However, Engelbrecht and Green (2018) highlight that while policy frameworks are crucial in shaping inclusive education; their practical implementation is often hindered by limited resources and insufficient teacher training.

Matolo and Rambuda (2022) examined how South African educators apply the SIAS policy in schools. Their statistical analysis indicated that implementation was relatively modest, suggesting that educators may require further capacity building to effectively execute the policy. Ledwaba and Sefotho (2024) argue that despite the existence of inclusive education policies and the availability of both pre-service and in-service training, teachers still face difficulties in adapting the curriculum to meet the diverse learning needs of their students. Their research, which focuses on the experiences of Foundation Phase teachers in rural inclusive schools, highlights these persistent challenges. This suggests that contextual factors play a significant role in the successful implementation of inclusive policies.

Teacher Commitment and Innovation

Despite limited resources, many early childhood educators remain deeply committed to inclusive education, as noted in existing literature (Maesela & Ronél, 2024; Mahlaule et al., 2024; Nembambula et al., 2023). To support diverse learners, educators employ innovative teaching methods, such as differentiated instruction and assistive technologies. Differentiated instruction enables teachers to tailor content, teaching processes, and assessments to meet individual student needs, ensuring meaningful engagement for all learners (Tomlinson, 2017). Additionally, assistive technologies—including text-to-speech software, visual aids, and adaptive learning tools—have been instrumental in enhancing learning experiences for children with disabilities (Florian & Spratt, 2013). In the South African early childhood education sector, many teachers integrate play-based learning and multisensory teaching approaches to cater to a wide range of learning styles (Swart & Pettipher, 2016).

A study by Maesela and Ronél (2024) examined 255 teachers working with learners with visual impairments in South African full-service schools, exploring how they implement inclusive education policies. The findings reveal that although educators were initially reluctant to embrace inclusive practices, collaboration with colleagues and other experts helped them navigate challenges. This collaborative approach aligned with the socio-ecological model of inclusion, enabling them to implement inclusive strategies more effectively.

Similarly, Hove and Phasha (2022) conducted a qualitative study investigating teachers' perspectives on ability grouping as an instructional strategy in selected South African primary schools within the broader inclusive education framework. Their research suggests that teachers view ability grouping as a method that fosters interaction among learners with disabilities, facilitates differentiated instruction, and optimizes the use of teaching resources. However, a key challenge remains in ensuring that all educators receive sufficient training and access to necessary resources to implement inclusive teaching methods effectively. Engelbrecht et al. (2016) highlight the significance of teacher attitudes and ongoing professional development in strengthening inclusive education practices.

Universal design for learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational framework designed to accommodate diverse learners by incorporating multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. By proactively developing curricula and learning environments that are accessible to all students, UDL serves as a key strategy for fostering inclusive education (Bandalaria, 2020). The Global Education Monitoring Report on inclusion and education recognizes UDL as an effective approach to enhancing accessibility and minimizing barriers in education (UNESCO, 2020).

A study conducted by McKenzie and Dalton (2020) examined the integration of UDL within South Africa's inclusive education policies. Their findings suggest that UDL provides a shared framework for educators and policymakers, aiding in the practical implementation of inclusive education policies in classrooms. This alignment helps address diverse learning needs without requiring frequent curriculum modifications. Additionally, Dalton, McKenzie, and Kahonde (2012) facilitated workshops introducing UDL to South African teachers and therapists. Participants reported that UDL principles supported curriculum differentiation, making it easier to accommodate students with varying abilities. However, Song (2017) found that while teachers in under-resourced schools recognized the potential benefits of UDL, many were uncertain about how to apply it effectively in their classrooms. This highlights the need to adapt UDL to specific educational contexts and underscores the importance of comprehensive teacher training. Likewise, Bandalaria (2020) stresses the significance of a holistic and inclusive approach to UDL in reducing learning barriers and contributing to broader social development.

Community and NGO Support

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based initiatives have played a crucial role in promoting inclusive education. Programs such as inclusive playgroups and teacher training workshops have contributed to the effective implementation of inclusive practices. Organizations like Inclusive Education South Africa and the Disability Rights Fund have developed initiatives aimed at equipping teachers and parents with the skills needed to support children with disabilities (Andrews et al., 2019). Additionally, community-led efforts have fostered peer support networks and awareness campaigns to challenge the stigma associated with disability in early learning environments (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Engelbrecht and Green (2018) highlight that NGOs play a vital role in providing training, advocacy, and material resources, thereby complementing government initiatives in inclusive education.

Mbelu and Maguvhe (2024) explored the socio-ecological classroom within the broader whole-school approach to inclusive education, emphasizing that inclusive education extends beyond traditional classroom settings. Their study revealed that children with disabilities require consistent support both at school and at home. However, an imbalance of power exists between teachers and parents, with educators often assuming a dominant role due to their specialized knowledge. Similarly, Masondo and Mabaso (2025) found that while parents are eager to engage in their children's education, they frequently lack the necessary information and skills to establish effective home-school partnerships.

Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Limited Resources and Infrastructure

A major obstacle in implementing inclusive education is the shortage of essential resources, including assistive technology, learning materials, and accessible infrastructure. Many early learning centres, particularly in underprivileged areas, struggle to provide adequate support for children with disabilities (Maesela & Ronél, 2024). Donohue and Bornman (2014) note that resource limitations remain a significant barrier to inclusion, with numerous schools facing shortages in classroom space, specialized personnel, and appropriate teaching aids. Insufficient funding further compounds the problem, preventing institutions from acquiring necessary assistive devices such as braille machines, hearing aids, and adapted learning materials.

Mahlaule et al. (2024) conducted research in six special needs schools (SNS) in the Ekurhuleni South District of South Africa, examining the perspectives of teachers and healthcare professionals on implementing inclusive education policies. Their findings revealed differing views between these two groups regarding resource availability and their respective roles in policy execution. The study also highlighted several challenges, including inadequate training, resource shortages, limited parental involvement, difficulties with curriculum adaptation, unsuitable learning environments, and ineffective referral systems.

Similarly, Nembambula et al. (2023) explored the obstacles teachers faced in implementing inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research identified four major themes: reduced instructional time, insufficient resources, lack of support, and the broader impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning. Maesela and Ronél (2024) further emphasize that full-service schools face unique difficulties, particularly in supporting learners with visual impairments due to limited resources and a lack of teacher expertise. Their study on inclusive education policy implementation in South Africa reinforces these ongoing challenges.

Educator Training and Capacity Building

Although policies advocate for inclusive education, many educators lack the specialized training needed to support a diverse range of learners. There is a pressing need for ongoing professional development programs to equip teachers with the skills required for inclusive pedagogies. Engelbrecht et al. (2016) highlight that many educators feel unprepared to address the needs of learners with disabilities due to insufficient pre-service and in-service training. Furthermore, teacher training institutions often fail to offer adequate coursework on inclusive education, leading to gaps in educators' knowledge and readiness when they enter the workforce (Mahlaule et al., 2024).

In a study by Aloka and Mamogobo (2024), the challenges teachers face in implementing inclusive education were explored at a mainstream school in South Africa. The research identified several teacher-related barriers, such as negative attitudes, limited understanding of inclusive education policies, low confidence in applying inclusive practices, and insufficient training in this area. Consequently, Legodi-rakgalakane and Mokhampanyane (2022) and Matolo and Rambuda (2022) suggest that the Department of Education should place greater emphasis on both initial and ongoing professional development for in-service teachers, particularly in areas such as disability awareness, learner identification, and effective support strategies.

A qualitative study by Yeboah et al. (2023) examined mainstream teachers' perceptions of inclusive education and the personal challenges that hinder its successful implementation. The findings revealed several significant obstacles, including low teacher resilience, limited self-efficacy, negative attitudes, and inadequate training in inclusive education. Similarly, Makuya and Sedibe (2021) identified additional difficulties faced by teachers, such as a lack of support, negative learner attitudes, parental resistance, and an exam-driven education system. Mahlaule et al. (2024) further stressed the urgent need for staff training in differentiated instruction for learners with physical and intellectual disabilities. In response to these challenges, Matolo and Rambuda (2022) advocate for teacher training institutions to ensure that future educators gain a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education policies, particularly the rationale, principles, and effective implementation of the SIAS 2014 policy in schools.

Socio-Cultural Attitudes and Stigma

Cultural perceptions of disability and inclusion can pose barriers to progress, especially when certain communities hold stigmatizing views about children with disabilities. These attitudes can lead to resistance in adopting inclusive education practices. Swart and Pettipher (2016) argue that societal beliefs and misconceptions about disabilities play a critical role in the marginalization and exclusion of children with special needs from mainstream educational settings. Such misconceptions are often rooted in cultural, social, and historical biases, where disability is viewed through lenses of pity, charity, or fear rather than through acceptance and understanding. Consequently, children with disabilities are often perceived as unable to thrive in regular classrooms, resulting in their segregation or placement in specialized institutions instead of being integrated into general education settings (Legodi & Mokhampanyane, 2022). Swart and Pettipher (2016) further emphasize that these societal attitudes not only limit the educational opportunities for children with special needs but also prevent mainstream students from gaining a deeper appreciation of diversity, which is essential for building inclusive communities.

An evaluation by Legodi-rakgalakane and Mokhampanyane (2022) of educators' experiences with inclusive education in primary schools across South Africa revealed varied perspectives on the inclusion of learners with disabilities. These perspectives highlighted concerns about stigma, with some educators fearing that inclusion might perpetuate negative stereotypes about learners with disabilities. Additionally, the study underscored the significance of children's rights, with some teachers stressing the importance of providing equal access to education for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Educators also expressed differing views on how inclusive education impacts overall educational quality, raising questions about whether inclusive practices can offer equal opportunities for every child. While some teachers acknowledged the advantages of inclusivity in promoting fairness and social justice, others worried about how these practices could affect the academic performance of students without disabilities. These differing viewpoints highlight the complexities involved in implementing inclusive education and point to the necessity for comprehensive professional development, clear policy guidelines, and adequate support to ensure that inclusive education is effective and equitable for all learners.

Assessment and Identification Gaps

The identification of learners with special needs is often delayed due to inefficient assessment systems. Early detection is critical for effective intervention, yet many early learning centres lack the trained professionals necessary for conducting proper assessments. Engelbrecht and Green (2018) argue that the shortage of qualified professionals, such as educational psychologists and special education experts, significantly delays the accurate identification of learning barriers. Without appropriate assessment tools, many children with disabilities do not receive the timely support they require, which can negatively impact their long-term educational outcomes.

In their study, Mahlaule et al. (2024) highlight the challenges posed by referral systems, focusing on the experiences of teachers and healthcare workers involved in implementing policies in special needs schools. They found that inadequate referral systems create substantial difficulties in providing prompt and suitable interventions for learners. When referral mechanisms are ineffective, many learners with special needs struggle to access the support they need, leading to delays in interventions that could have addressed their learning barriers earlier. This inefficiency in the referral process is a significant obstacle to the success of inclusive education policies, as it prevents children from receiving the targeted assistance necessary for their academic and social development.

Similarly, Ledwaba and Sefotho (2024) emphasize the importance of early identification of learning difficulties in their study, which focused on the experiences of Foundation Phase teachers in rural inclusive schools in South Africa. Their findings suggest that early identification is crucial for effectively adapting the curriculum and successfully including learners with diverse learning needs. When teachers identify learning challenges early, they can adjust their teaching strategies, materials, and assessments to support all learners from the beginning. However, Ledwaba and Sefotho note that early identification is often delayed due to factors such as a lack of training, limited resources, and inadequate collaboration between teachers, parents, and healthcare professionals. Both studies underline the need for well-established systems that facilitate early identification and referral, as these are essential for addressing learning barriers and ensuring that learners receive the necessary interventions. Without efficient referral systems and early identification practices, learners with special needs risk being overlooked or misdiagnosed, which may result in further educational challenges and social exclusion.

CONCLUSION

The South African government has made significant progress in promoting inclusive education through policies such as the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996, the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), and the National Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) (Department of Basic Education, 2014). These policies establish a solid legal framework that guarantees educational access for all children and aims to eliminate discrimination based on disabilities and other obstacles. However, challenges persist in ensuring full implementation at the school level, as noted by Engelbrecht (2020).

Despite these challenges, early childhood educators show a strong commitment to inclusion by utilizing innovative teaching methods, including differentiated instruction and assistive technologies. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers an effective framework for promoting inclusivity by improving accessibility and minimizing

learning barriers. Additionally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based initiatives play a crucial role in supporting inclusive education. These organizations contribute by providing essential teacher training, advocacy, and resources that complement government efforts, as highlighted by Engelbrecht and Green (2018). Continued collaboration between the government, educators, and civil society is essential for sustaining and advancing inclusive education in South Africa.

The successful implementation of inclusive education in early childhood faces several obstacles that prevent its full realization. A key challenge is the lack of sufficient resources, such as assistive devices, learning materials, and accessible infrastructure. Financial limitations also hinder the acquisition of essential tools, including braille machines, hearing aids, and adapted learning resources, making the situation more difficult.

Another major hurdle is the inadequate training of educators. Despite policies promoting inclusive education, many teachers feel unprepared to effectively support diverse learners due to insufficient pre-service and in-service training (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). Teacher training institutions often fail to offer comprehensive courses on inclusive pedagogies, resulting in gaps in educators' knowledge and readiness (Mahlale et al., 2024).

Cultural attitudes toward disability and inclusion also present challenges to inclusive education. In some communities, there are still stigmatizing views about children with disabilities, leading to resistance to inclusive education initiatives. Swart and Pettipher (2016) argue that entrenched societal beliefs and misconceptions contribute to the exclusion of children with special needs, as disability is often viewed with pity or fear rather than acceptance and inclusion.

Additionally, the delayed identification of learners with special needs due to inefficient assessment systems hampers early intervention. Many early learning centers lack trained staff to carry out proper assessments, and the absence of qualified professionals, such as educational psychologists and special education experts, affects the timely and accurate identification of learning barriers (Engelbrecht & Green, 2018). Without the appropriate assessment tools, many children with disabilities do not receive the necessary support, which negatively impacts their long-term educational outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study suggests that the government should strengthen mechanisms for enforcing inclusive education policies at the school level. This should include regular monitoring and evaluation to assess adherence and address the challenges schools encounter. Ensuring adequate funding is essential to providing early learning centres with necessary resources, such as assistive devices, specialized learning materials, and infrastructure upgrades. Expanding professional development programs focused on inclusive teaching strategies, such as differentiated instruction and the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), is also recommended. These programs will help equip educators with the skills needed to effectively support diverse learners.

Encouraging collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations is vital to enhance teacher training, foster parental involvement, and implement awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma surrounding disabilities. Engaging parents, community leaders, and other key stakeholders in discussions about inclusion can help promote positive attitudes and acceptance.

Additionally, future research should be encouraged to explore best practices in inclusive education, particularly those that integrate the UDL framework. Conducting case studies and pilot programs will provide valuable insights for developing context-specific strategies to improve inclusivity in early childhood education. Establishing training programs to prepare educators for the early identification of learning barriers is also crucial. Furthermore, investing in hiring specialized professionals, such as educational psychologists and special education experts is important to ensure effective assessments and interventions.

Finally, parents and caregivers should be actively involved in decision-making processes related to inclusive education. Workshops and community forums can serve as platforms for raising awareness and creating support networks for families of children with disabilities. By implementing these strategies, the government can work towards establishing a more inclusive and equitable education system that meets the needs of all learners.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The author declares no competing interest.

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