

**Navigating inclusive education: Teacher challenges and mitigation
strategies for learners with disabilities in Waterberg District,
Limpopo**

By

MAKOMA JOSEPHINAH MORWATSHEHLA

44590016

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DECLARATION

Name: Makoma Josephinah Morwatshehla

Student number: 44590016

Degree: Master of Education in Psychology of Education

I declare that the dissertation “**Navigating Inclusive Education: Teacher Challenges and Mitigation Strategies for Learners with Disabilities in Waterberg District, Limpopo**” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references, and that any use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been fully disclosed.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my beloved husband, whose steadfast support, patience, and encouragement enabled me to pursue and complete this academic journey.

To my two sons and two daughters, gifts from God, I pray that you always carry this truth in your hearts: with God, all things are possible. As stated in Matthew 19:26, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

May you grow to face life’s challenges with faith, courage, and determination, trusting always in God’s abundant power and grace to accomplish far beyond what you can imagine.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACCRONYMS

ADHD	: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
CAPS	: Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
CSTL	: Care and Support for Teaching and Learning
CWDs	: Children with Disabilities
DBST	: District-Based Support Team
DoE	: Department of Education
DPOs	: Disabled People's Organisations
FGD	: Focus Group Discussion
ILST	: Institutional Level Support Team
ISP	: Individual Support Plan
LD	: Learning Disabilities
NCESS	: National Committee for Education Support Service
NCSNET	: National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training
NGOs	: Non-Governmental Organisations
PBIS	: Positive Behavioural Interventions and Support
PLC	: Peer Learning Communities
SACE	: South African Council for Educators
SADC	: Southern African Development Community
SBST	: School-Based Support Team
SIAS	: Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support
SMT	: School Management Team
UDL	: Universal Design for Learning
UN	: United Nations
UNESCO	: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	: United Nations Children's Fund

ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges teachers face in educating learners with disabilities or learning barriers, as well as the strategies they implement to address these difficulties. A qualitative research approach was employed, with data collected through focus group discussions and participant observation involving teachers from selected primary schools in the Waterberg District of Limpopo province. The study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model, which provides a theoretical framework for understanding how interactions across multiple systemic levels, from the microsystem to the macrosystem, influence both the challenges experienced and the support strategies available for learners with disabilities.

The findings indicate that teachers face numerous obstacles, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional resources, limited parental involvement, and insufficient access to specialised support services. Despite these constraints, teachers adopted strategies such as differentiated instruction, peer-assisted learning, motivational support, and inclusive classroom environments to address diverse learner needs. Although the teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusive education, the study reveals that systemic challenges, particularly gaps in policy implementation and insufficient professional development, significantly impede effective practice. The study therefore recommends improved teacher training, adequate teaching resources, reduced learner–teacher ratios, and strengthened collaboration among schools, parents, and policymakers to advance inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, disabilities, barriers to learning, learners, teachers, challenges, mitigation strategies, primary schools, SIAS Policy, differentiation

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a general overview of the study, which explores the challenges teachers face when instructing learners with disabilities and other learning barriers, as well as the strategies used to address these challenges. It introduces the study by outlining the background and rationale, clearly articulating the research problem, and specifying the objectives and research questions that inform the inquiry. In addition, the chapter discusses the importance of the study by emphasising its expected contributions to the field of inclusive education and its practical relevance for teachers, schools, and policymakers. The chapter further provides a brief account of the research methodology employed and concludes with an outline of the study's overall structure.

1.2. Background and Motivation

In South Africa, the progression of inclusive education is deeply shaped by the country's apartheid history and continued efforts to redress longstanding inequalities within the education system. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) guarantees the right to education for every citizen, including children with disabilities.

In alignment with this constitutional commitment, White Paper 6: Special Needs Education (Department of Education, 2001) introduced a strategic framework to establish an inclusive education and training system, with particular emphasis on providing suitable support for learners with diverse educational needs. Additionally, the implementation of the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) (Department of Basic Education, 2014) sought to improve the early identification of learning barriers and ensure that appropriate support mechanisms are put in place.

Despite these policy initiatives, a notable gap remains between policy objectives and classroom practice. Donohue and Bornman (2014) attribute this disconnect to limited resources, inadequate teacher preparation, and broader systemic constraints within the education sector.

Inclusive education is founded on the principle of providing equal access to high-quality education for all learners, including those with disabilities and special educational needs. Learners with disabilities represent a diverse population with varied and often complex learning requirements. These learners may experience challenges across multiple domains, including cognitive development, communication skills, physical functioning, and social or emotional well-being (Turnbull et al., 2020). Common disabilities and learning needs may include conditions such as autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sensory impairments, as well as specific learning difficulties like dyslexia and dyscalculia (UNESCO, 2020; World Health Organization, 2023).

Mpu and Adu (2021) emphasise that inclusive education is intended to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all learners, including those who face disabilities or other barriers to learning. The successful implementation of inclusive education within mainstream classrooms requires teachers to manage and respond effectively to a wide range of learner needs. However, teachers frequently encounter substantial difficulties in addressing the diverse learning demands of learners with disabilities, which may negatively affect learner performance and the overall inclusivity of classroom environments (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Inclusive education is grounded in integrating learners who experience learning barriers into ordinary schools, necessitating the transformation of schools and communities to provide appropriate support services. When inclusive education is effectively implemented, learners with and without disabilities learn together in shared classroom settings, promoting not only academic development but also social inclusion, mutual respect, and understanding among all learners (UNESCO, 2020).

According to Sasikala (2023), teachers frequently encounter challenges when educating learners with disabilities or learning barriers, often stemming from insufficient training, resources, and support. These difficulties, as noted by Williams (2021), include adapting instructional materials and teaching approaches, managing classroom dynamics, and providing personalised assistance to address learners' diverse needs. Nevertheless, teachers persevere in cultivating an inclusive classroom atmosphere that nurtures both academic and social growth among learners. In response to these challenges, teachers employ various strategies, as outlined by Jones, Smith, and Patel (2019), including integrating assistive technologies, engaging in collaborative teaching practices, and implementing differentiated instruction. These approaches are intended to improve learning experiences and ensure that all learners receive the support they need to succeed in the classroom.

The motivation for this study is grounded in the core principles of inclusive education, which promote equal access to high-quality education for all learners, regardless of disability or learning challenges. Teachers play a pivotal role in creating inclusive learning spaces; however, they often face considerable challenges in addressing the varied needs of learners with disabilities or other learning barriers (Ainscow, 2020).

By exploring these challenges and identifying practical strategies to address them, this study aimed to assist teachers in strengthening their professional practice and to contribute to improved educational outcomes for all learners in inclusive classroom contexts.

1.3. Problem Statement

Studies by Hove and Phasha (2024) reveal that teachers encounter significant challenges when attempting to meet the diverse learning needs present in their classrooms. These challenges hinder the effective education of learners in general, especially for children with disabilities. As a result, many learners with disabilities remain marginalised and are often excluded from meaningful engagement in the teaching and learning process (Hove & Phasha, 2025). Within the South African context, teachers continue to face considerable barriers in implementing inclusive

education, thereby compromising the attainment of inclusive schooling objectives (UNESCO, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Although international frameworks promote educational equity and inclusion, persistent systemic challenges continue to obstruct the effective application of inclusive practices in schools (UNESCO, 2020). A clear understanding of the specific difficulties teachers face is therefore critical for developing appropriate interventions and support structures to improve educational access and outcomes for learners with disabilities.

Despite international commitments to inclusive education, learners with learning disabilities such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and developmental coordination disorder continue to face significant academic and social challenges (UNESCO, 2020; Vieira et al., 2024). These learners often experience difficulties with concentration, feel shame or low self-esteem, withdraw socially, or exhibit behavioural and emotional challenges (Krämer et al., 2021; Narváez-Olmedo et al., 2021; Vieira et al., 2024). This situation reflects the inability of the education system to consistently provide the necessary accommodations and support required by learners with disabilities, thereby limiting their active participation and engagement in classroom activities.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate the challenges teachers face in educating learners with disabilities or other learning barriers, and to identify effective strategies that support inclusive teaching practices and promote meaningful learner participation in South African primary school settings.

1.4. Aim(s) of the Study

The main aim of this study was to investigate the challenges teachers face when teaching learners with disabilities or other learning barriers, and to examine the effectiveness of the strategies they use to support these learners academically.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- explore the challenges and effects related to the teaching of learners with disabilities and barriers to learning.

- examine the teaching approaches and instructional practices employed by teachers to support learners with disabilities and learning barriers; and
- identify and assess possible mitigation strategies that can assist teachers in effectively educating learners with disabilities and barriers to learning.

1.5. Research Questions

This study was guided by the following main research question: How do teachers address the challenges involved in teaching learners with disabilities or other learning barriers, and how effective are the strategies they use to support these learners academically?

To answer this overarching question, the study was informed by the following sub-questions:

- i) What key challenges do teachers experience when teaching learners with disabilities and learning barriers, and how do these challenges affect teaching effectiveness and learner achievement?
- ii) How do the instructional approaches, adaptations, and support strategies that teachers employ meet the academic needs of learners with disabilities and barriers to learning?
- iii) Which intervention or mitigation strategies can address the identified challenges, and how do teachers perceive their practicality and potential effectiveness within classroom contexts?

1.6. Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it enhances understanding of the practical difficulties teachers face when educating learners with disabilities or learning barriers in mainstream classroom contexts. By focusing on teachers' lived experiences, the study provides valuable insights into how inclusive education policies are interpreted and

enacted at the classroom level and exposes gaps between policy intentions and actual teaching practices.

The findings presented in this study might assist teachers, school management teams (SMTs), and support structures such as school-based support teams (SBSTs) in developing more effective strategies to promote inclusive teaching and learning. In addition, the results may guide and inform education stakeholders' decisions on formulating targeted professional development programmes, improving resource allocation, and strengthening support systems aimed at enhancing teachers' ability to respond to diverse learner needs.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education in South Africa, particularly within under-resourced school environments. It provides a basis for future research and informs policy development focused on advancing equity, inclusion, and the provision of quality education for all learners, regardless of disability or learning barriers.

1.6.1. Overview of the Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing Inclusive Education

Educating learners with disabilities or learning barriers presents distinctive challenges that require specialised knowledge and adaptive teaching strategies. Research on this topic highlights various obstacles teachers encounter, including inadequate training, insufficient resources, and socio-emotional demands. This overview of extant literature synthesises research to elucidate these challenges and explores effective mitigation strategies adopted by teachers. Jali (2014) suggests that one of the key purposes of a literature review is to distinguish existing research from gaps that require attention, aiding researchers in identifying crucial factors related to their topic.

Within the broader global context, South African teachers continue to face challenges in adapting the curriculum and communicating effectively with learners with disabilities. Although the education system is gradually shifting from segregated models towards inclusive practices, teachers in mainstream schools often struggle to establish fully inclusive classroom environments (Jali, 2014). Jali's study highlights the complexities

teachers face as they attempt to accommodate diverse learning needs within ordinary classroom settings.

Asmaveedu (2021) examined the challenges teachers face when educating learners with disabilities, focusing on both their impact and the strategies used to manage them. The study aimed to uncover the various dimensions of these challenges, analyse their impact on teachers, and identify strategies for overcoming them. It revealed various difficulties faced by teachers in this context, including issues related to teaching materials, curriculum structure, behavioural and emotional challenges, and time constraints.

Similar findings were reported by Abongdia, Foncha, and Dakada (2015), who investigated teachers' experiences in identifying learners with learning barriers. Their study emphasised that overcrowded classrooms and limited instructional time significantly hinder teachers' ability to identify and adequately support learners with diverse needs. Large class sizes were found to restrict opportunities for individual attention, thereby reducing the effectiveness of inclusive practices.

A major concern highlighted in the literature is the insufficient training and professional development provided to teachers in relation to inclusive education. Many teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to support learners with disabilities effectively. The absence of specialised training, coupled with limited access to ongoing professional development opportunities, negatively affects teachers' ability to implement inclusive strategies and individualised education plans. Studies by Kurth and Foley (2014), Mulholland and O'Connor (2016), and Shaffer and Thomas-Brown (2015) consistently indicate that teachers often lack the skills and confidence required to meet the complex needs of learners with disabilities.

Resource limitations further compound the challenges of inclusive education. Access to appropriate learning materials, assistive technologies, and specialised support services remains limited in many schools, particularly in under-resourced communities. Such shortages restrict teachers' ability to provide meaningful and effective support to learners with disabilities (Kang & Martin, 2018; Olsson, Roll-Pettersson, & Von Ahlefeld Nisser, 2019).

In addition to material constraints, classroom management and behavioural challenges are prominent concerns in inclusive settings. Teachers frequently struggle to manage diverse behavioural needs, as behavioural difficulties among learners with disabilities may disrupt teaching and learning processes. Addressing these challenges while simultaneously meeting the needs of learners without disabilities places considerable pressure on teachers (McKenna, Flower, & Ciullo, 2015; Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, Wilson, & Morgan, 2016).

Attitudinal and social factors also play a critical role in the effectiveness of inclusive education. Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and expectations regarding learners with disabilities significantly influence educational outcomes. Negative attitudes or low expectations may undermine the effectiveness of inclusive education. Social dynamics, including peer interactions, can also influence the inclusion process (Hornstra et al., 2015; de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2015).

Moreover, limited collaboration among teachers, parents, and specialist support personnel poses an additional barrier to effective inclusion. Inclusive education relies on cooperative efforts and shared responsibility; however, many teachers report inadequate collegial support and few opportunities for collaborative planning. This lack of collaboration can result in professional isolation and increased difficulty in addressing learners' diverse needs (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2017; Alhassan & Abosi, 2014).

Overall, the literature indicates that the successful implementation of inclusive education is hindered by multiple interrelated challenges, including inadequate training, insufficient resources, limited support systems, and negative attitudes towards disability. These factors not only affect teachers' instructional practices but also have a direct impact on the academic and social experiences of learners with disabilities, who may be marginalised or overlooked rather than supported according to their individual needs. To effectively support learners with disabilities, teachers must identify and leverage their strengths and unique learning styles. This approach recognises that while all children share commonalities, each learner is distinct (Spratt & Florian, 2015).

The characteristics and behaviours of learners with disabilities can vary significantly due to their individual differences. Certain learners may exhibit negative behaviours such as unacceptable conduct, withdrawal from peers, or even bullying behaviour, stemming from challenges in understanding social cues in their environment (Lesenye, Mandende, Makgato & Cekiso, 2018). Addressing these challenges necessitates a holistic approach that incorporates appropriate professional training, sufficient resource provision, supportive learning environments, and a fundamental shift in attitudes towards recognising learners with disabilities in terms of their strengths and potential rather than their perceived limitations.

1.6.2. Mitigation strategies for addressing challenges encountered by teachers in inclusive education

Reducing the challenges faced by teachers in inclusive education requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that combines effective policy implementation, structured support systems, and research-informed instructional practices. A key intervention involves strengthening the role of the school-based support teams (SBST), which operates under the guidance of the School Management Team (SMT). The SBST is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) Policy and ensuring that adequate support is provided to learners, teachers, and schools. As frontline implementers of inclusive education, teachers play a pivotal role in effectively implementing the SIAS policy. The policy is intended to support learners within mainstream education rather than exclude them, and provides clear guidelines for identifying learner needs and developing appropriate support programmes. Teachers are therefore expected to uphold inclusive principles by avoiding stigmatisation and labelling, while taking time to understand learners' individual needs and learning challenges.

Another critical mitigation strategy is enhancing teacher professional development. Providing ongoing, targeted training focused on inclusive education practices such as differentiated instruction, curriculum adaptation, and the use of assistive technologies

can significantly improve teachers' competence and confidence in managing diverse classrooms. Such professional development opportunities enable teachers to respond more effectively to the varied learning needs of learners with disabilities and to implement inclusive teaching strategies successfully (Güzel-Özmen, 2016; Roberts et al., 2021).

Another essential strategy lies in resource allocation and support. Schools need to increase access to specialised instructional materials and assistive technologies that facilitate effective learning for learners with disabilities. Ensuring sufficient funding for these resources, together with the appointment of additional support personnel such as learning support teachers or classroom aides, can greatly enhance the quality of teaching and learning for all learners (Smith, 2019; Liu et al., 2020).

Implementing positive behavioural interventions and support (PBIS) is another effective strategy for promoting inclusion. These programmes aim to create positive, structured classroom environments by teaching and reinforcing appropriate behaviours, thereby reducing disruptions and improving the overall school climate (Houchins, Shippen, & Jolivette, 2017; Freeman, Sugai, Simonsen, & Everett, 2019; Simonsen, Britton, & Young, 2015). By adopting PBIS frameworks, schools can foster a supportive and structured learning environment

Equally important is fostering inclusive attitudes among teachers. Changing teachers' perspectives towards inclusive education is a crucial step in ensuring successful implementation. Professional development programmes should, therefore, highlight the benefits of inclusion and showcase the strengths and potential of students with disabilities. In addition, peer support and mentorship programmes can be instrumental in cultivating positive attitudes and reinforcing teachers' commitment to inclusive practices (Santos et al., 2018; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2019).

The adoption of co-teaching models has also been shown to enhance instructional quality and learner outcomes in inclusive classrooms. Co-teaching involves collaboration between general education and special education teachers to deliver instruction that accommodates diverse learning needs. Approaches such as team

teaching, station teaching, parallel teaching, and alternative teaching offer flexibility and allow teachers to adapt instruction to different learning styles and abilities (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017; Sileo & van Garderen, 2018).

Finally, promoting collaborative practices among teachers, specialists, and parents enhances the support network for learners with disabilities. Encouraging regular team meetings, shared planning sessions, and professional learning communities allows teachers to exchange effective strategies and ideas. Such collaborative efforts ensure a unified approach to inclusive education and contribute to the creation of learning environments in which all learners are supported and able to thrive (Lindsay et al., 2019; Mariga et al., 2014).

1.7. Delimitation of the study

This study focused on investigating the challenges teachers encounter when educating learners with disabilities or barriers to learning in mainstream primary schools, as well as the strategies employed to address these challenges.

The study was conducted in four primary schools within the Waterberg District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The schools were selected from quintiles 2 and 3, which means schools in relatively poor areas with limited resources and those in areas with slightly better resources, but still facing some challenges, respectively. Therefore, this study involved schools with limited resources but that were actively implementing inclusive education policies.

The study participants comprised twenty (20) teachers, both male and female, aged between 28 and 38 years, all of whom had direct experience teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers. The study was limited to primary school settings, as this phase is critical for foundational learning and the early identification of learning difficulties.

The study specifically examined teachers' lived experiences, focusing on their instructional practices, classroom management strategies, and the institutional support they received. Furthermore, the study was situated within a qualitative

research paradigm and utilised focus group discussions and classroom observations as data collection methods. As a result, the findings are not intended to be generalised to all South African schools but rather to provide in-depth insights applicable to similar educational contexts.

1.8. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model as its theoretical framework, as it provides a comprehensive perspective for understanding the multiple, interconnected factors that influence learners with disabilities and the challenges teachers face in educating them. The model emphasises the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments, conceptualising development as being shaped by a range of interrelated systems that collectively influence educational experiences.

Previous studies have demonstrated the applicability of Bronfenbrenner's model in inclusive education contexts. For example, Singh and Sharma (2022) applied the Bioecological Systems Model to examine how teacher training and support structures influence the implementation of inclusive education practices. Their findings highlighted the interaction between different systemic levels and how these interactions affect teachers' capacity to effectively support learners with diverse needs. Similarly, Roberts and Simpson (2021) utilised the model to explore the influence of environmental contexts on inclusive education practices for learners with disabilities in public schools. Their study illustrated how multiple layers within the bioecological framework interact to shape teaching practices and learner outcomes. These findings support the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's model to the present study, as it offers a nuanced lens for examining the complex challenges teachers face and for identifying effective support strategies for learners with disabilities.

1.8.1 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model

Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny (2017) further describe Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model as a valuable analytical framework for understanding the challenges

teachers encounter when working with learners who experience disabilities or learning barriers. The model conceptualises human development as occurring within a set of interacting systems and is particularly relevant to inclusive education in the South African context. It highlights the interconnected relationships between learners, classrooms, schools, families, communities, and broader policy environments, enabling researchers and teachers to better understand how these multiple systems influence learning experiences and educational outcomes.

The Bioecological Systems Model explains human development as the result of ongoing interactions among multiple interconnected systems that shape learners' physical, biological, psychological, social, and cultural development. The model emphasises that changes or events within one system may influence, or be influenced by, other systems, conceptualising the environment as a series of nested, interrelated structures. These systems include the following:

- **Microsystem**

Teachers can focus on immediate classroom interactions, such as peer dynamics and teacher-student relationships. Understanding the microsystem helps teachers address specific challenges faced by students with disabilities, like social isolation or communication barriers.

- **Mesosystem**

Teachers collaborate with professionals involved in students' lives, such as parents, special education teachers, therapists, and community support. Facilitating communication and cooperation across these systems ensures a comprehensive approach to supporting students with disabilities.

- **Exosystem**

Teachers consider external influences such as school policies, community resources, and societal attitudes towards disabilities. By advocating for inclusive policies within schools and communities, teachers create supportive environments for students with

disabilities, thereby indirectly affecting them through their close relationships within the microsystems.

- **Macrosystem**

This encompasses the broader cultural beliefs, values, and ideologies within society that shape attitudes towards disabilities, including concepts like democracy, social justice, and Ubuntu. Within this context, teachers play an important role in promoting respect for diversity, challenging negative stereotypes, and cultivating inclusive classroom environments that reflect these societal values (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

1.9. Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology adopted for the study. It describes the research paradigm, research approach, research design, population and sampling procedures, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations that guided the investigation.

1.9.1. Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a set of underlying beliefs and assumptions that inform how research is conducted and knowledge is generated within a particular discipline. It provides the philosophical basis for decisions on research design, data collection methods, and data interpretation. Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) explain that a research paradigm comprises key elements, including ontology, which concerns the nature of reality; epistemology, which concerns the nature of knowledge; and methodology, which refers to the strategies and procedures used to investigate phenomena.

This study was situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and can best be understood through individuals' subjective experiences. Interpretivism seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of human behaviour by exploring the meanings people assign to their experiences within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) note that this

paradigm emphasises the role of context and lived experience in shaping individuals' perceptions and actions.

In this study, the interpretivist paradigm guided the exploration of primary school teachers' lived experiences and the challenges they encounter when teaching learners with disabilities and learning barriers in mainstream classrooms. This approach enabled the researcher to capture rich, detailed insights into teachers' perspectives, attitudes, and coping strategies, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how inclusive education is implemented and experienced in everyday classroom practice.

1.9.2. Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study, as it is particularly suited to exploring human experiences, perceptions, and behaviours in depth. Qualitative research focuses on understanding the meanings individuals attach to their experiences within specific social settings (Creswell, 2023). It utilises flexible, interactive data collection methods that generate rich, descriptive data, including interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis (Merriam, 2009).

For this study, data were gathered through focus group discussions and classroom observations. These methods were selected because they provide a detailed understanding of teachers' interactions with learners with disabilities during instructional activities. Focus group discussions created opportunities for teachers to share experiences, discuss common challenges, and reflect on strategies used in inclusive classrooms, thereby capturing both shared and divergent perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Classroom observations complemented the focus groups by allowing the researcher to observe teaching practices and teacher–learner interactions in real-time, offering contextual insights into how instructional strategies are adapted to meet the diverse learning needs of learners with disabilities.

1.9.3. Research Design

Research design refers to the systematic plan that guides the processes of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting in a research study. It serves as a

blueprint that links the research questions to appropriate methods and procedures, ensuring that the study is conducted in a logical, methodologically sound manner. According to Lelissa (2018), a research design outlines how relevant data will be obtained, the techniques used to analyse the data, and the way the research objectives will be addressed.

Throughout the study, a qualitative, exploratory design helped the researcher gather in-depth insights and perspectives through observation methods and focus groups. For example, a focus group (group of teachers) encouraged group interaction and dialogue, which revealed common themes and innovative ideas for addressing challenges. Exploratory research helped to highlight potential strategies or interventions for teachers. It answered the “what, why, and how” research questions. Additionally, this approach enabled a broad, flexible exploration of the challenges teachers face and the strategies they employ to address them (Patton, 2015).

1.9.4. Study Setting

The study setting refers to the location where research is conducted. The study was conducted in four selected primary schools located in the Waterberg District of the Limpopo Province, South Africa. These schools were chosen because they represented diverse teaching environments where teachers encounter learners with various types of disabilities and learning barriers. The selected schools were quintile 2 (schools in relatively poor areas with limited resources) and quintile 3 (schools in areas with slightly better resources, but still facing some challenges), indicating that they are partially resourced and serve communities with different socio-economic backgrounds. Conducting the study in these schools provided a realistic understanding of the challenges teachers faced in implementing inclusive education within resource-limited contexts.

1.9.5. Participant's selection

The participants in this study were 20 primary school teachers from four selected primary schools in the Waterberg District of Limpopo Province. The teachers were selected using purposive sampling because they had experience teaching learners

information regarding teachers' experiences and challenges in teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers.

Focus group discussions provided participants with the opportunity to express their views freely, while allowing the researcher to guide discussions around key themes such as teaching challenges, instructional strategies, and the effectiveness of inclusive education practices. This method also allowed for probing and follow-up questions to explore emerging issues in greater depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Non-participant classroom observations were also used to capture teachers' real-time interactions, teaching methods, and adaptations when working with learners with disabilities. Observations offered contextual and real-time insights that enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2021).

The use of both interviews and observations enabled methodological triangulation, ensuring that data from multiple sources complemented one another and strengthened the overall validity of the study (Nowell, Norris, & White, 2021).

1.10. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted over four weeks at the selected primary schools. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the College of Education Research Ethics Committee at the University of South Africa, and permission was granted by the Limpopo Department of Basic Education and the principals of the participating schools. Once all approvals were granted, the researcher arranged focus group discussions and classroom observations in consultation with the participating teachers to minimise disruption to teaching and learning activities.

Teachers participated voluntarily in small-group discussions focused on the challenges encountered and the strategies employed when teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers. Each session lasted 45-60 minutes and was guided by an instrument with mostly open-ended questions.

with disabilities or learning barriers in inclusive classrooms. Five teachers were selected from each school, and they agreed to take part in the study voluntarily.

The participants were chosen because they had the knowledge and experience needed to answer the research questions. They were able to share their experiences, challenges, and teaching strategies in inclusive classrooms. The purpose of selecting these teachers was not to represent all primary school teachers, but to gain a better understanding of their experiences in the selected schools. This is appropriate for a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015).

1.1. Methods of Data Collection

This study utilised qualitative data collection methods, namely focus group discussions and non-participant classroom observations, to obtain detailed and meaningful non-participant classroom observations were conducted over four weeks to document teaching methods, learner engagement, and inclusive practices. Notes were recorded systematically using an observation checklist.

1.1. Data Analysis

The study employed a qualitative data analysis approach using thematic analysis to interpret data obtained from focus group discussions and classroom observations. This method was suitable for identifying patterns and themes related to the study's focus (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

All collected data were transcribed and carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy. The researcher then coded the data, clustered similar ideas, and identified key themes. Follow-up observation data were used to deepen the insights gained from interviews and validate the findings through triangulation (Alasa & Raiula, 2022)

The findings are presented descriptively and supported by relevant literature and a theoretical framework to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges teachers face and the strategies they employ to promote inclusive education.

1.2. Ensuring Rigour

1.2.1. Credibility

Credibility relates to the extent to which the study accurately addresses its research objectives (Tracy, 2020). In this study, credibility was enhanced through triangulation and detailed descriptions of the research processes, methodological decisions and results. The researcher adhered to recognised qualitative research procedures and ensured participants' views were accurately represented.

1.2.2. Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be applied in different contexts and settings (Adler, 2022; Korstjens & Moser, 2022). Transferability in this study indicated to readers how the study's conclusions could be relevant across various frameworks, scenarios, time periods, and populations. An appropriate and adequately described sample was drawn to help other researchers independently assess the applicability of the findings in their respective contexts.

1.2.3. Confirmability

Confirmability concerns the degree to which the findings are shaped by participants' responses rather than by the researcher's bias. To ensure confirmability, the researcher documented the processes used to collect, analyse, and verify the data, allowing the findings to be audited or confirmed by others (Adler, 2022; Korstjens & Moser, 2022).

1.2.4. Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency and replicability of the research process. The study provides a detailed account of the methodology, enabling other researchers to follow similar procedures (Adler, 2022; Byram, 2022).

1.3. Ethical Consideration

Ethical principles guiding the study included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity (American Psychological Association, 2022; World Medical Association, 2024). Participant information was kept confidential and

accessible only to the researcher. The researcher ensured that data collection was anonymous to protect participants' identities; therefore, after collecting data, information containing identifiers (such as names and contact details) was removed from the research instruments.

Informed consent was obtained by clearly explaining the purpose of the study to the prospective participants before their involvement. Participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they were free to decline or withdraw from the study at any stage. Written consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that participants had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and express any concerns they may have about the study, particularly given that some of the questions posed in the interviews might cause discomfort.

1.4. Limitations

This study was conducted in a single district; therefore, the findings reflect the experiences and perspectives of the participating teachers within that specific context. Readers should consider the contextual nature of the findings when assessing their applicability to other educational settings. The study also relied on self-reported data, which may have been influenced by participants' personal perceptions and experiences. Furthermore, the absence of supporting documentary evidence, such as teachers' reflective journals and minutes of relevant meetings, required participants to rely on memory when describing classroom challenges, which may have resulted in incomplete or less detailed accounts. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges of implementing inclusive education in South African primary schools and offers recommendations that may inform educational policy, practice, and future research.

1.5. Definition of Terms

Key concepts: inclusion, Inclusive education, barriers to learning, disability, quintile.

1.5.1. Inclusion

Inclusion refers to the recognition and appreciation of learner diversity through increased participation in educational activities and reduced exclusion from mainstream schooling (UNESCO, 2020). It involves creating supportive educational environments, implementing inclusive policies such as Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), and ensuring access to quality education through collaborative support systems.

General Comment No. 4 (UN, 2016) emphasises that inclusion requires systemic transformation, including adjustments to curricula, teaching strategies, organisational structures, and educational practices, to eliminate barriers and ensure meaningful learning opportunities for all learners.

1.5.2. Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is an educational approach that promotes the full participation and acceptance of all learners within the education system. It requires adapting curricula, teaching methods, and institutional structures to accommodate diverse learner needs, regardless of learners' abilities, backgrounds, or characteristics. Inclusive education seeks to prevent marginalisation and promotes respect for differences related to age, gender, culture, language, socio-economic status, disability, and health conditions.

1.5.3. Barriers to Learning

Barriers to learning are factors that hinder learners' effective participation in education. These barriers may arise from individual characteristics, curriculum design, learning environments, family circumstances, or broader social contexts (DoE, 2005).

Lomofsky and Lazarus (2010) identify the following four categories of barriers:

- Systemic barriers, such as overcrowded classrooms, a lack of learning resources, inadequate infrastructure, and limited teacher training.
- Societal barriers, including poverty, delayed school entry, and unstable home environments.
- Pedagogical barriers, such as inflexible curricula, inequitable assessment

practices, and insufficient learner support.

- Medical barriers, including sensory, physical, neurological, and cognitive impairments.

1.5.4. Disability

Disability refers to functional limitations in tasks, skills, and behaviour that an individual may experience due to physical, intellectual, sensory impairments, medical conditions, or mental illness. These limitations may be temporary or permanent and are commonly explained within the medical model of disability (UNESCO, 2020).

1.5.5. Quintile

The quintile system is used by the South African Department of Basic Education to categorise public schools into five groups (Quintile 1 to Quintile 5) based on the socio-economic conditions of the communities they serve. To elucidate, Quintile 1 schools serve the poorest communities and receive the highest level of state funding, while Quintile 5 schools serve more affluent areas and receive the least government funding (Department of Basic Education, 2019).

1.6. Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

This chapter provides an overview of the study by outlining the background to the research topic, the problem statement, the research aims and objectives, the research questions, the significance of the study, the scope, and the limitations. It sets the context for the study and clarifies its overall purpose and focus.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents a critical review of the relevant literature on inclusive education, with particular emphasis on the challenges teachers encounter when teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers, as well as the strategies used to address them. The chapter synthesises theoretical and empirical studies and highlights gaps in existing research that the current study seeks to address.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the research paradigm, approach, and design adopted for the study. It further outlines the study setting, population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations that guided the research process.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter reports the data analysis and presents results from focus group discussions and classroom observations. The results are presented in relation to the research questions and are supported by qualitative summaries.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the Findings

This chapter discusses the study's findings by integrating data from classroom observations and focus group discussions with relevant literature on inclusive education. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model is incorporated into the discussion as a theoretical framework to interpret how different systems, such as the classroom, school, family, and policy context, influence teachers' experiences and practices when teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers. The chapter also considers the implications of the findings for inclusive teaching practices.

Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

The final chapter summarises the study's key findings, draws conclusions in relation to the research objectives, and offers recommendations for teachers, policymakers, and future researchers to strengthen inclusive education and improve support for learners with disabilities.

1.7. Summary of Chapter One

This chapter provided a background to the study, which sought to explore the challenges experienced by teachers when educating learners with disabilities or learning barriers in South African primary schools, as well as the strategies used to address these challenges. Addressing such challenges is critical to ensuring equitable

access to quality education for all learners. The findings will advance inclusive education by offering practical insights that support teachers, inform policy development, and promote inclusive practices across the broader education system.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

Teaching learners with disabilities or those who experience barriers to learning remains a significant challenge for teachers globally. This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the relevant literature on learning disabilities, the challenges teachers encounter when educating learners with disabilities, and the strategies used to mitigate these challenges. In addition, the chapter examines institutional support structures, differentiated instructional strategies, the role of school-based support teams (SBSTs), and the involvement of parents in supporting learners with disabilities.

Inclusive education policy in South Africa, as outlined in Education White Paper 6, acknowledges that learners are diverse and possess unique educational needs that require responsive and flexible teaching approaches (Mpu & Adu, 2021). While this policy promotes equitable access to education, the diversity of learner needs often complicates teachers' efforts to implement effective instructional strategies alongside their broader professional responsibilities. To support inclusive practices, the Department of Basic Education introduced the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy to guide teachers in identifying and addressing learners' individual needs within mainstream classrooms (DBE, 2014).

This chapter further reviews national and international policies and frameworks aimed at supporting learners with disabilities and learning barriers. It also explores the academic and professional support provided by specialised support teams and structures that facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive education.

2.2. Disability

Disability is widely recognised as a complex and multidimensional concept encompassing physical, cognitive, emotional, and sensory impairments that may limit a learner's capacity to fully participate in and benefit from educational opportunities (World Health Organisation, 2019). Disability can also be defined as a functional

limitation arising from physical, intellectual, or sensory impairment, medical conditions, or mental illness, as defined by the medical model of disability (UNESCO, Guideline for inclusion). It can be congenital or acquired, and its severity varies, affecting learners differently. The literature underscores the need to understand each learner's unique requirements to provide tailored support that facilitates meaningful engagement in learning (Thompson, 2020).

2.3. What are learning disabilities?

The Learning Difficulties Information Guide from the Australian State of Victoria Department of Education and Training (2022) states that learning disabilities are a subset of learning difficulties that are classified as congenital neurological differences (which may or may not be diagnosed), including specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dyscalculia.

Dyslexia includes difficulties with reading, writing, spelling, and comprehension that may occur in the classroom. Dyslexia can significantly affect both academic performance and social participation of learners in the classroom (Snowling et al., 2020; American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Learners with this learning difficulty often face challenges in processing instructions, acquiring foundational skills, keeping pace with peers, constructing knowledge independently, and interacting effectively with others. Consequently, learners with such learning disabilities are sometimes labelled as underachievers, as their academic performance frequently does not reflect their potential (International Dyslexia Association, 2023; Snowling et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, Prasad & Burle (2022) aver that learning disabilities vary from person to person. This implies that one person with a learning disability may not experience the same type of learning difficulties as another person with a similar disability.

While not everyone agrees with the use of the term “learning disability”, its use is widely accepted the world over in government and academic literature. The main issue seems not to be the term itself, but the way society often perceives individuals with learning disabilities as “less capable” or “intellectually challenged,” reflecting pervasive negative stereotypes. History suggests that ‘learning disability’ originated with and was popularised by Dr Samuel Kirk, based on his writings in the early 1960s and comments

made at the April 6, 1963, conference on the exploration of problems of the 'perceptually handicapped child'. His terminology was well-received and contributed to the formation of an organisation initially called the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, which later evolved into today's Learning Disabilities Association (Lerner, 2000).

Kirk's (1962) widely cited definition describes learning disabilities as a disorder or delayed development in one or more domains, including speech, language, reading, spelling, writing, or arithmetic. These developmental disorders are typically linked to potential cerebral dysfunction or emotional disturbances rather than to intellectual deficits, sensory deprivation, or cultural and instructional influences (Orim, Ishifundi, Edim, & Samuel, 2023).

2.4. Learning support

Learning support, as conceptualised through the social-ecological model, recognises that learners develop at their own pace and can achieve independent learning and personal growth when provided with appropriate guidance (Dreyer, 2013; UNESCO, 2020; Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2022). Effective support involves implementing a range of strategies, accommodating different learning styles, modifying school systems, and collaborating with relevant stakeholders within the educational environment (Landsberg, Krüger & Nel, 2005; DBE, 2022). Education White Paper 6 emphasises that learning support for learners with additional needs should be integrated into everyday classroom practice, aiming to remove barriers that restrict access to the curriculum and learning opportunities (DoE, 2001; DBE, 2022).

Classroom teachers are therefore responsible for employing diverse instructional strategies that promote the active participation of all learners. Through such support, learners can engage meaningfully with both teachers and peers within an established learning environment (Mittler, 2012). The literature further emphasises the value of individualised support plans tailored to each learner's unique needs and to promote inclusive learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2020; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022).

2.5. Policies catering for learners with disabilities

Local and global policies emphasise that all learners are important and equally important, underscoring the principle that all children, regardless of any impairment, possess the potential to realise their full human capabilities. UNICEF’s mandate prioritises the protection of children’s fundamental rights and well-being, ensuring that learners with disabilities are not subjected to discrimination, exclusion, stigma, or violence (UNICEF, 2022).

In South Africa, the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy provides structured procedures to ensure that all learners have access to quality education and receive the support they need to reach their full potential (DBE, 2014). SIAS offers guidelines for learner enrolment, assessment of educational needs, and the level of support required. This framework enables early identification of learning barriers, allowing teachers to intervene promptly. Responsibilities under the SIAS framework are shared among classroom teachers, school-based support teams (SBSTs), and district-based support teams (DBSTs).

Implemented in 2014, the SIAS policy replaced earlier approaches that often labelled learners with difficulties as having “special needs” or considered the challenges as inherent to the child. The policy provides clear guidance for screening, assessing, and supporting learners experiencing learning barriers, including those with disabilities. It promotes differentiation of curriculum content, adjustment of teaching methods and classroom environments, and the provision of appropriate accommodations during assessments (DBE, 2014).

The joint report by the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) and the National Committee on Support Services (NCESS) (1997) identified systemic obstacles as ‘barriers to learning and development’ and recommended moving away from the label ‘special needs’ toward the term ‘learners experiencing barriers to learning’ (DoE, 2001). Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) adopted this perspective, focusing on addressing structural barriers that impede learners from accessing quality education. Contemporary research, such as McKenzie (2024), highlights that the policy framework recognises a broad spectrum of learning

barriers, not only disabilities, and seeks to ensure inclusive education tailored to each learner's unique needs.

Additionally, the South African school curriculum provides the structural foundation for teaching and learning processes for learners with barriers. The SIAS policy aligns with the Integrated School Health Policy to establish a coordinated system for early identification and intervention, aiming to reduce learning disruptions and prevent school dropout. Health professionals, including those in primary care facilities, hospitals, clinics, community centres, and maternal and child health services, play a vital role in supporting learners' educational and developmental outcomes (Department of Health & Basic Education, 2012).

2.6. Differentiation

Differentiation refers to the deliberate adaptation of curriculum content, learning activities, teaching strategies, learning processes, and instructional resources to accommodate the diverse interests, needs, experiences, and abilities of learners (Tomlinson, 2014). It involves adjusting instruction, processes, and assessment to respond to learners' varying readiness levels, learning styles, and interests. Differentiation does not imply reducing academic standards or expectations; rather, it provides learners with multiple pathways to engage with the curriculum and demonstrate their understanding. This approach is particularly important in inclusive classrooms that include learners with disabilities, as it ensures equitable access to learning and meaningful participation for all learners.

2.7. Academic support

Academic support encompasses the services and resources offered to assist learners with disabilities in achieving academic success.

2.7.1. Implementation of differentiation in the classroom.

2.7.1.1. Differentiated teaching and learning

Implementing differentiation in the classroom requires strategic planning and a deep understanding of each learner's needs. According to Tomlinson and Murphy (2019), teachers play a key role in establishing a classroom culture that acknowledges, respects, and values learner diversity. This requires teachers to have in-depth knowledge of the curriculum and the learners they teach, as discussed below.

➤ *The curriculum*

Teachers require a thorough understanding of the curriculum to implement differentiation effectively. Successful differentiation is grounded in teachers' in-depth knowledge of subject content, including the discipline's key structures, concepts, and ideas, as well as the academic language and discourse associated with it. Such knowledge enables teachers to design learning experiences that promote authentic and progressively complex understanding for all learners (Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008). Furthermore, teachers must be able to identify the elements of the curriculum that can be differentiated, namely content (what is taught), process (how learning takes place), and product (how learners demonstrate their understanding through assessment) (Tomlinson, 2014).

➤ *The learner*

Equally important is teachers' understanding of the learner. Tomlinson (2014) emphasises that effective differentiated teaching depends on teachers' awareness of learners' strengths, learning preferences, challenges, and developmental needs. Baseline assessments serve as a valuable tool in identifying learners' current performance levels, specific learning needs, and the type of support required to facilitate progress. Classroom observation further supports this understanding by allowing teachers to examine how learners approach tasks, organise their learning, and perform under different conditions (Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008). In addition, meaningful interaction with learners allows teachers to learn about their interests, motivations, and preferences, which can inform the design of more engaging, individually aligned tasks. Learner profiles further support the process by consolidating essential information about each learner, including their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, personal characteristics, strengths, and learning barriers.

These profiles serve as valuable reference tools that guide teachers in planning instruction that accommodates diversity within the classroom (Tomlinson & Murphy, 2019).

The use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), cited earlier in this chapter, further strengthens differentiated teaching and learning by promoting flexible instructional approaches that support learner variability. UDL is an educational framework grounded in scientific research on how individuals learn and aims to optimise learning experiences by providing equitable access to educational content (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). By incorporating multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, UDL enables teachers to design lessons that accommodate all learners from the outset, rather than retrofitting instruction after challenges arise (Griggs & Moore, 2023). This approach ensures that learners can access information in different formats, actively participate in learning activities, and express their understanding through various modes (Piticari, 2023). As such, differentiation should be intentionally planned as part of lesson design and not introduced as an afterthought.

2.7.1.2. Differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction refers to a teaching approach that acknowledges learner diversity by adjusting curriculum content, learning processes, and expected outcomes to accommodate the distinct needs of each learner (Ferguson, 2008). This approach recognises all learners, including children with disabilities, as unique individuals who learn within their age-appropriate peer groups and require varying forms of support to succeed academically (Asian Development Bank, 2022). Differentiation is underpinned by the principle that proactive and responsive teaching practices are essential in addressing learners' diverse levels of readiness, interests, and educational needs (Tomlinson et al., 2008).

Research by Suleyman (2019) highlights that effective differentiated instruction requires teachers to have a comprehensive understanding of learners' educational backgrounds, prior knowledge, learning readiness, interests, and existing skills. Differentiation involves presenting subject matter in multiple ways to ensure accessibility and meaningful engagement for all learners. Content differentiation

focuses on aligning learning materials and resources with learners' abilities to prevent frustration and promote successful task completion. Process differentiation refers to the varied instructional methods, activities, and materials used to support learners in practising and understanding the content. When learning tasks are appropriately structured, learners are more likely to complete them effectively and within the expected timeframe. Differentiation of product allows learners to demonstrate their understanding through varied forms of assessment, aligned with individually set learning goals, thereby providing evidence of mastery.

Whitehead asserts that the fundamental aim of education is to develop learners who attain deep conceptual understanding in at least one area alongside practical competence in another. Within a differentiated instructional framework, curriculum planning prioritises learners' strengths and capabilities rather than their limitations. This approach enables teachers to individualise content, learning processes, and assessment products while remaining aligned with curriculum standards and intended learning outcomes.

In the South African context, Education White Paper 6 provides the foundation for inclusive education by advocating for flexible teaching approaches and multilevel instruction that enable teachers to accommodate the diverse learning needs of learners in inclusive classrooms (Department of Education [DoE], 2001). Building on these principles, the Professional Teaching Standards of the South African Council for Educators (SACE) emphasise teachers' professional responsibility to provide equitable, inclusive, and high-quality educational opportunities for all learners (SACE, 2019, Section 4.1). Consequently, effective differentiated instruction requires teachers to adopt flexible and inclusive pedagogical practices that create supportive, welcoming, and responsive learning environments for diverse learners.

Common strategies associated with differentiated instruction include multilevel teaching, in which learners are grouped according to performance levels, abilities, or readiness, and learning activities are tailored to each group. Classroom rotation is another effective strategy that allows learners to engage with new concepts at varying levels of complexity. In addition, peer tutoring supports collaborative learning by enabling learners to assist one another, often creating a more comfortable

environment for asking questions and seeking clarification than teacher-led instruction alone.

2.7.1.3. Differentiated learning activities and assessment

Differentiated learning activities and assessment practices are intentionally designed to respond to learners' varied abilities, learning preferences, and needs within inclusive classrooms. This approach enables learners to demonstrate their understanding through a range of formats, including written tasks, oral presentations, practical demonstrations, and creative projects (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Recent research suggests that providing multiple assessment options allows learners with disabilities to express their knowledge in ways that reflect their individual strengths and reduce unnecessary barriers to performance (Heacox, 2022). By incorporating alternative assessment methods, differentiated assessment practices promote meaningful learner engagement and ensure that all learners are afforded equitable opportunities to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

2.7.1.4. Individual support plan

An Individual Support Plan (ISP) is a structured support mechanism developed to provide targeted assistance or extended learning opportunities for learners who experience barriers to learning. The ISP is collaboratively formulated by classroom teachers, parents or caregivers, and members of the school-based support team (SBST) (Department of Education, 2014). It documents the learner's strengths, learning goals, areas requiring additional support, and the specific accommodations or instructional adaptations necessary to enhance learning (Friend & Bursuck, 2019). Alberta (2013) describes the ISP as a formal, written plan that outlines clearly defined outcomes and coordinated strategies implemented through the joint efforts of teachers, families, and support services. This collaborative and systematic process ensures that learner support remains holistic, individualised, and responsive to changing educational needs.

2.8. Challenges and mitigation strategies when dealing with learning disabilities.

The Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy, introduced by the Department of Basic Education in 2014, provides a structured framework for the early identification, assessment, and support of learners who require additional educational assistance to promote participation and inclusion in schools (DBE, 2014). The policy is complemented by the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) framework, which facilitates coordinated support from various stakeholders, including government departments, community organisations, non-governmental organisations, early intervention services, and rehabilitation providers (Equal Education Law Centre (EELC), 2021).

Despite these policy provisions, research indicates that teachers encounter significant challenges in effectively supporting learners with learning disabilities. These challenges include limited professional training in inclusive education, difficulties in identifying learning barriers, overcrowded classrooms, and time constraints that restrict the implementation of individualised support strategies (Imaniah & Fitria, 2018; Mag et al., 2017; Materechera, 2020; Engelbrecht, 2020). The United Nations Transforming Education Summit (2022) highlighted that while many education systems are progressing toward inclusive education, genuine inclusion requires systemic reform. This includes moving away from uniform teaching approaches toward educational practices that recognise and value learner diversity, ensuring that all learners are supported equitably within the schooling system.

The SIAS framework requires that teachers and all personnel directly involved with the learner apply the SIAS process daily. Teachers, as members of the SBST, must possess knowledge of learning barriers and actively participate in interventions (Donald, 1997; DoE, 2014). However, the capacity among schools and health professionals to conduct professional screening remains limited (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

2.9. Support teams

Support teams are integral to the education of learners with disabilities, providing targeted interventions through collaboration among special education teachers, psychologists, and other specialists (Katz, Parath & Parekh, 2020). Coordination between support teams and classroom teachers is essential to implement effective support strategies.

2.9.1 Institutional Level Support Teams

The Institutional-Level Support Team (ILST), commonly referred to as the school-based support teams (SBST), is responsible for coordinating learner support within the school and liaising with the district-based support team (DBST) and other relevant service providers to address institutional needs. The SBST identifies and determines the support requirements of learners, teachers, and the school, and coordinates appropriate interventions within the framework of the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy. To fulfil its responsibilities effectively, the SBST is expected to meet regularly (Mahlangu, Maile, & Mashaba, 2023; EELC, 2021).

The primary purpose of the SBST is to identify and address barriers to learning within the school and to provide structured support aimed at enhancing the teaching and learning process (Department of Education, 2001). In fulfilling this role, the SBST coordinates support for learner, educator, and institutional needs through a collaborative, systematic approach (Johnson et al., 2007; Donald et al., 1997; Department of Education, 2001).

According to Education White Paper 6, the core function of the Institutional-Level Support Team is to establish coordinated learner and educator support services by:

- Coordinating support for learners, teachers, and institutional development within the school.
- Identifying institutional needs, particularly barriers to learning at the learner, educator, and school levels.

- Developing collaborative strategies to address identified needs and barriers, with a strong emphasis on educator development and parental consultation and support.
- Mobilising resources from both within and outside the institution to address challenges.
- Monitoring and evaluating the work of the team using an action–reflection framework.

Within the SIAS process, the SBST is further required to:

- Provide the DBST with documented evidence of support offered at the school level, including Support Needs Assessments 1 and 2 (DBE, 2014).
- Ensure that parents are actively involved and informed about decisions made regarding their child's support.
- Consist of teachers with specialised knowledge and interest in addressing barriers to learning, a member of the School Management Team (SMT), and, where appropriate, administrative staff or learner representatives, all committed to supporting learners effectively (Hay, 2013).

2.9.2. District-Based Support Team

The district-based support Team (DBST) functions as a district-level management structure responsible for coordinating and promoting inclusive education. Its responsibilities include educator training, curriculum support, resource allocation, infrastructure development, and the identification, assessment, and reduction of barriers to learning. The DBST comprises personnel from Education District and Circuit offices, Curriculum and Institutional Development and Support services, systemic support units, psycho-social and specialised learning support services, as well as representatives from special school resource centres.

In line with Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001), one of the key responsibilities of the DBST is to assist teachers in implementing flexible teaching approaches and

assessment practices that accommodate diverse learner needs. The roles of the DBST include:

- Assisting schools without an established ILST to form support teams and providing ongoing support to existing ILSTs.
- Training and capacitating institutional-level support teams across schools within the district.
- Supporting teachers in implementing targeted interventions for learners with high support needs.
- Providing direct specialised support to individual learners when required.
- Monitoring the appropriate use of support-related funding at schools.
- Coordinating and managing systems for identifying learners' levels of support needs at district, circuit, and school levels.
- Coordinating services provided by the extended network of support personnel within the DBST structure.

2.9.3. Teacher

Teachers play a central role in the successful implementation of inclusive education within classroom settings. They are responsible for establishing supportive and inclusive learning environments, applying differentiated teaching strategies, and collaborating closely with support teams and parents to address learners' diverse needs. Research highlights the importance of ongoing professional development in strengthening teachers' capacity to effectively support learners with disabilities by enhancing their knowledge, skills, and confidence (Sokal & Sharma, 2020). In addition, teachers are required to demonstrate strong collaborative skills to ensure a coordinated, holistic approach to learner support that integrates classroom practices with services provided by support teams and families.

2.9.4. Parents

Parents are key partners in the education and support of learners with disabilities. Studies emphasise that parents serve as children's first teachers, providing emotional security, motivation, and guidance while actively contributing to problem-solving and learning support (Maqoqa, Molepo, & Kariyana, 2023). Research further indicates that parental involvement plays a vital role in the successful development and implementation of support strategies for learners with disabilities (Hornby & Lafaele, 2019).

Parents offer valuable insights into their children's strengths, challenges, and learning needs, enabling effective collaboration with teachers to ensure continuity of support across school and home environments. Qinghua and Minghui (2022) note that parental engagement at home, such as discussing school activities, listening to children read, reading alongside them, and supervising homework, positively influences learners' academic progress. The SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) reinforces the role of parents by assigning them shared responsibility in supporting their children and encouraging active participation in accessing appropriate early intervention programmes within their communities.

2.10. Chapter Summary

Educating learners with disabilities presents a complex challenge that requires a coordinated, inclusive, and adaptable approach. This literature review has highlighted the significance of differentiated instruction, individualised support plans, and the contributions of support teams in promoting inclusive education. The review further emphasises the importance of collaboration among teachers, support personnel, and parents in addressing barriers to learning. By strengthening these partnerships and implementing evidence-based support strategies, schools can create learning environments that promote equity, participation, and success for all learners.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological framework adopted to examine the challenges teachers face when educating learners with disabilities or learning barriers, as well as the strategies used to address them. It outlines the research paradigm, design, and approach, together with the study population, sampling procedures, data collection techniques, and methods of data analysis. The selected methodology is carefully aligned with the study's objectives to ensure that the findings are credible, trustworthy, and responsive to the research questions guiding the investigation.

3.2 Research Paradigm

The study was conducted within an interpretivist research paradigm, which emphasises understanding social phenomena through the meanings individuals attach to their experiences. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and can best be understood by exploring participants' subjective perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm was appropriate for the study, as it sought to gain insight into teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the challenges they face when teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers, as well as the strategies they employ to manage these challenges.

Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) explain that the interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to explore participants' contexts, beliefs, and experiences in depth, rather than relying on objective or quantifiable measures. In this study, the interpretivist approach enabled the researcher to interpret teachers' experiences within their specific school environments and broader socio-educational contexts, thereby supporting the qualitative nature of the research.

3.3 Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed for both data collection and analysis. Qualitative research focuses on exploring individuals' experiences, attitudes, and interactions within their natural settings (Creswell, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach was appropriate for the study because it aimed to understand teachers' challenges and coping strategies, rather than to test hypotheses or quantify variables. Data were gathered through semi-structured focus group discussions and classroom observations. The focus group discussions allowed participants to express their views openly while enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions for clarification and deeper insight. Classroom observations enabled triangulation to validate the data collected from the focus groups.

Overall, the qualitative approach facilitated a rich, detailed understanding of teachers' lived experiences in inclusive education settings, consistent with the interpretivist paradigm (Nzuza, 2023; Sepadi, 2025) and the exploratory research design reported next.

3.4 Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design. A qualitative research design within an exploratory framework focuses on understanding the meanings individuals or groups attribute to social or human phenomena by collecting and analysing non-numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was suitable for gaining an in-depth understanding of teachers' lived experiences and perceptions.

The exploratory design was selected because it allows researchers to examine issues that have not been extensively studied and to generate new insights within a specific real-life context (Stebbins, 2001). Given the complexity and context-specific nature of inclusive education challenges, the exploratory approach enabled the researcher to identify patterns, practices, and potential strategies used by teachers in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, this design was chosen to help identify possible interventions that may support teachers in addressing learning barriers more effectively.

3.5 Sampling Strategies

Sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants who can meaningfully contribute to addressing the research problem. This study adopted a non-probability sampling strategy, which allows the researcher to intentionally select participants based on the purpose of the study rather than through random procedures (Adeoye, 2023). More specifically, purposive sampling was utilised.

Purposive sampling involves selecting individuals with the experience and knowledge needed to generate rich, relevant qualitative data (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). This strategy was particularly appropriate for the present study, as it enabled the researcher to identify teachers with direct exposure to inclusive classroom practices and thus well-positioned to share informed perspectives. In qualitative research, purposive sampling supports the exploration of complex phenomena by prioritising depth and relevance over generalisability (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Palinkas et al., 2015).

The sampling process focused on teachers who could provide detailed insights into the challenges of teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers, as well as the strategies used to address them. Four primary schools located in quintiles 2 and 3 within the Waterberg District of Limpopo Province were selected. These schools were chosen due to their diverse learner populations and constrained resources, which often intensify inclusive education challenges. Five teachers were purposively selected from each school, resulting in a total of twenty (20) participants. This approach ensured that all participants had relevant experience and contributed varied yet comparable perspectives on inclusive education.

3.6 Sampling Criteria

To ensure the relevance and credibility of the data, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Participants were required to be qualified primary school teachers currently teaching in mainstream classrooms, to have a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience, and to have direct experience teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was

obtained from all participants. Teachers who did not meet these criteria or lacked experience with inclusive education were excluded from the study.

Applying these criteria ensured that participants were knowledgeable about inclusive practices and could provide meaningful contributions to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Taherdoost, 2023). The final sample comprised ten (10) foundation phase teachers and ten (10) intermediate phase teachers who participated in focus group discussions. In addition, one foundation phase teacher from each of the four participating schools was selected for classroom observation.

3.7 Data Collection Methods

3.7.1 Focus group

In this study, one focus group discussion was conducted at each of the four selected schools, with five teachers participating in each group. Focus group discussions involve structured conversations among a small group of participants who share experiences related to a specific topic (Aharpour, Angus, & O'Connell, 2020). Participants are typically selected based on their familiarity with the research issue and their ability to contribute relevant insights (Gundumogula, 2020).

Open-ended questions guided the discussions, allowing participants to describe the challenges they encounter when teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers and to share the strategies they use to address these challenges. The group setting encouraged interaction and reflection on shared experiences, while all discussions were audio-recorded to ensure accurate data capture.

3.7.2 Observation

Classroom observations complemented the focus group discussions by providing contextualised evidence of teaching practices and interactions within inclusive classrooms. Observation is a qualitative data collection method that enables researchers to examine behaviours, interactions, and practices as they occur in their natural settings (Ekka, 2021; Muzari et al., 2022).

This study employed non-participant, semi-structured classroom observations. The researcher observed teachers during routine classroom activities without participating

in the teaching or interacting with learners. A semi-structured observation guide was used to ensure that consistent aspects of classroom practice were observed across all participating teachers while allowing flexibility to document context-specific events and practices.

The observations focused on teachers' instructional strategies, classroom management practices, teacher–learner interactions, and the ways in which teaching was adapted to accommodate learners with disabilities or learning barriers. Field notes were recorded throughout each observation to document behaviours, interactions, and contextual information relevant to the study.

To minimise the influence of the researcher's presence on participants' behaviour, observations were conducted during normal classroom activities after obtaining informed consent from teachers and permission from school principals. The researcher remained unobtrusive by sitting quietly at the back of the classroom, avoiding interaction with teachers and learners during lessons, and allowing participants time to become accustomed to the researcher's presence before observations commenced. These measures helped to reduce the observer effect and preserve the authenticity of classroom practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.8 Research Process

The researcher visited the selected schools and formally introduced the study to school principals and teachers. Permission letters and informed consent forms were distributed, and participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. Teachers who consented to participate were included in the focus group discussions and selected for classroom observations.

The study aimed to explore teachers' experiences in teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers, as well as the strategies they use to address these challenges. During the focus group discussions, participants responded to questions regarding the types of disabilities and barriers encountered, the processes used to identify these barriers, and the strategies implemented to support affected learners. Additional discussions focused on the availability of support services and the involvement of

schools and parents in supporting inclusive education.

3.9 Data Analysis

Data collected through focus group discussions and classroom observations were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic approach that involves identifying and interpreting recurring patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019).

The first phase involved familiarisation with the data, during which the researcher repeatedly reviewed transcripts and observation notes to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. In the second phase, meaningful segments of data were coded to capture key ideas related to teachers' challenges and mitigation strategies. The third phase focused on organising codes into preliminary themes that reflected recurring patterns across the dataset.

During the fourth phase, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance to the research questions. The fifth phase involved clearly defining and naming each theme to reflect its core meaning. In the final phase, the themes were presented in a structured narrative supported by selected participant quotations and observation excerpts to enhance authenticity and credibility.

Data were analysed manually, and findings were presented through descriptive thematic discussions aligned with the study objectives. Trustworthiness was enhanced through the use of methodological triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nowell et al., 2021).

3.10 Ethical Concerns

Ethical principles were central to this study, ensuring that all research activities were conducted responsibly and with respect for participants. The study adhered to the core principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, treating participants with fairness and dignity throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written consent was obtained from all

participants to confirm voluntary participation (Flick, 2018).

Confidentiality was strictly maintained. Personal information was protected, and pseudonyms were used in all data records to prevent identification. Data were securely stored and accessible only to authorised personnel, ensuring that participants' identities, opinions, and professional contexts remained private. The information collected was used exclusively for academic purposes, minimising any potential risk, discomfort, or unintended consequences.

The study received ethical clearance from the Unisa College of Education Ethics Review Committee and permission to conduct research in schools from the Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee (LPREC). These approvals confirmed compliance with provincial and institutional ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical oversight ensured the research process was transparent, credible, and aligned with best practices in educational research, protecting participants' rights and welfare throughout.

3.11 Limitations and Assumptions.

3.11.1. Limitations

Despite the measures taken to ensure methodological rigour, the study was subject to the following limitations:

Time constraints: The limited observation period may have restricted the depth of understanding of teachers' day-to-day practices and the challenges they encounter in implementing inclusive education.

Study context: The study was conducted with teachers from selected primary schools within a single district. Consequently, the findings reflect the experiences and perspectives of participants within this specific context. Readers should therefore consider the contextual nature of the findings when assessing their applicability to other educational settings.

Subjectivity: As the study relied on qualitative data generated through focus group discussions and classroom observations, the findings were influenced by participants' perceptions and experiences. Although measures such as triangulation and detailed documentation were

employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the possibility of subjective interpretation cannot be entirely eliminated.

3.11.2 Assumptions

The study was based on the following assumptions:

Participants provided honest, accurate, and complete accounts of their experiences during the focus group discussions.

The classroom observations reflected teachers' typical instructional practices and interactions with learners. The participating teachers had sufficient knowledge and experience of inclusive education to provide meaningful information relevant to the study.

The data collection instruments, including the focus group discussion guide and observation schedule, were appropriate for addressing the research objectives.

3.12 Chapter summary

This chapter detailed the methodology used to examine the challenges faced by teachers instructing learners with disabilities or learning barriers. The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach, employing purposive sampling to select experienced participants. Data were gathered through focus group discussions and classroom observations and were analysed thematically to identify key patterns and themes. Ethical considerations were strictly observed to ensure participant protection and research integrity. While limitations such as time constraints, sample size, and subjectivity were acknowledged, the methodology provided a solid foundation for addressing the study's objectives. The subsequent chapter presents the research illustrating how the methodology facilitated the collection and analysis of relevant data.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the focus group discussions (FGDs) and classroom observations conducted with primary school teachers working with learners who have disabilities or experience barriers to learning. The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings relating to the challenges teachers encounter in implementing inclusive education and the strategies they employ to support learners with disabilities and learning barriers.

The findings are organised according to the key themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and classroom observations. Each theme is supported by direct quotations from participants and evidence from classroom observations to illustrate teachers' experiences and classroom practices. The interpretation and discussion of these findings in relation to the existing literature are presented in Chapter 5.

4.2 Participants

The study involved 20 teachers, all of whom participated in the FGDs. In addition, classroom observations were conducted in four foundation phase classrooms, taught by four of the teachers who participated in the FGD, to capture real-time teaching practices and interactions with learners experiencing disabilities or learning barriers.

4.2.1 Participant background and demographic information

To provide context for the classroom observations, the background and demographic characteristics of the four observed Foundation Phase teachers are presented in Table 4.1. The table includes information on the participants' school affiliation, teaching experience, class size, grade taught, subject observed, and whether the class included learners with disabilities or learning barriers. These characteristics provide contextual information for understanding the classroom settings in which the observations were conducted.

Table 4.1: Background Information of Observed Teachers (n=4)

	School A	School B	School C	School D
Age (28-45)	45	35	29	43
Phase/Grade Taught	Grade 2	Grade 2 & 3	Grade 2 & 3	Grade 2
Subject	ENG/FAL	Maths	SEPEDI/HL	ENG/FAL
Teaching Experience (Years)	21 years	8 years	5 years	10 years
Class Size	35 learners	46 learners	54 learners	41 learners
Presence of learners with disabilities/ barriers	Yes (learning barriers and speech difficulties)	Yes (learning barriers and physical disability)	Yes (learning barriers and attention difficulties)	Yes (learning barriers and intellectual disability)

The data in Table 4.1 show that the observed teachers were drawn from four primary schools, with one teacher from each school. All four observed participants were female teachers responsible for Foundation Phase classrooms. This reflected the staffing profile of the selected schools, where female teachers predominantly occupy Foundation Phase teaching. Therefore, the participants were selected based on the study's selection criteria and their availability rather than their gender. All observed participants were responsible for large classes, ranging from 35 to 54 learners, reflecting the overcrowding commonly experienced in public primary schools. Each observed class included learners experiencing disabilities or barriers to learning, including speech impairments, physical disabilities, intellectual challenges, and attention-related difficulties.

The teaching experience of the observed participants ranged from five to 21 years, representing a mix of moderately and highly experienced educators within the sample. Despite their varying levels of experience, all teachers grappled with similar contextual realities, particularly large classroom sizes and the attendant difficulties of catering to diverse learners' needs. This background information provides an important foundation for interpreting the classroom observation results presented in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

4.2.2 Classroom Observation Results

The classroom observations provided insights into teaching practices, classroom environments, learner engagement, challenges and mitigation strategies. As such, the observations were instrumental in addressing all three research questions of the study. Observations were structured around key indicators of inclusive education, including teacher-learner ratio, classroom environment, lesson punctuality, and use of learning materials, among others.

4.2.2.1 Teacher–Learner Ratio



*Figure 4.1 Teacher presenting a lesson while learners remain seated
Researcher's photograph (2026).*

Across the four observed classrooms, three had more than 40 learners per class, while one had 35 learners. These results suggest that the teacher-to-learner ratio was notably high, making it difficult to provide learners with individualised attention. The teachers struggled to support learners who required special assistance, especially because many learners needed ongoing support.

The overcrowding in these classrooms also made it challenging for teachers to circulate during lessons, further limiting their ability to identify struggling learners or provide immediate support. In the three largest classes, learners with disabilities or learning barriers tended to sit quietly or rely on peers for help because the teacher could not attend to everyone equally.

Overall, the high teacher-to-learner ratio reduced opportunities for personalised instruction. This challenge was particularly evident when learners required differentiated support or clarification, underscoring the need for smaller class sizes in inclusive education settings.

4.2.2.2 Classroom Environment and Management

The classroom environments across the four schools were warm and positive. In all four classes, teachers demonstrated friendly interpersonal interactions with learners, using positive tones, facial expressions, and gestures that helped establish a supportive atmosphere. Three of the classrooms had brightly coloured posters, alphabet and number charts, and learner artwork displayed on the walls, creating a visually stimulating learning environment. However, one classroom had minimal decoration due to limited resources, with only a few outdated charts displayed.

Despite these positive aspects, two of four classrooms struggled with limited physical space due to overcrowding. In these classes, the narrow pathways between desks made it difficult for learners, especially those with physical disabilities, to move around freely. The lack of space restricted the teachers' ability to organise learners in these classrooms and caused visible difficulty in navigating the room to monitor work, forcing them to remain mostly at the front or middle of the class.

Classroom management was generally strong in three of the four classrooms. Teachers used clear rules, consistent routines, and signals, such as hand claps or verbal cues (e.g., "eyes on me"), to maintain order. In contrast, one classroom experienced frequent disruptions, with learners talking, quarrelling, fidgeting or moving around during lessons. The teacher in this classroom struggled to maintain discipline, often pausing teaching to address misbehaviour. This challenge was exacerbated by

the large class size and limited seating space. Nevertheless, across the classrooms, the teachers' efforts to maintain structure contributed to a stable environment, despite the challenges posed by overcrowding and resource limitations.

4.2.2.3 Lesson Punctuality and Start Time



Figure 4.2: Foundation Phase classroom during lesson observation.

Source: Researcher's photograph (2026).

Lessons began on time in all four classrooms, demonstrating strong routine and teacher commitment. Teachers ensured that learners were settled before beginning the day's instruction. In three classrooms, learners were already seated and attentive when the teacher entered, indicating they were accustomed to structured daily routines. The fourth class took slightly longer to settle, requiring the teacher to remind them of behaviour expectations before starting the lesson.

The punctual lesson starts helped learners transition smoothly into learning activities, particularly benefiting those who depended on predictable routines to remain focused. Structured lesson introductions were observed in all classrooms. Teachers used strategies such as warm-up songs, review questions, or short recaps of previous content. These practices helped establish continuity and mentally prepare learners for the new lesson.

While punctuality was consistent, transitions between different lesson activities varied. In two classes, transitions were efficient and well-managed, with clear instructions guiding learners on what to do next. In the other two classes, transitions were slower and disorganised, as learners needed repeated instructions. This affected the overall teaching time and reduced opportunities for extended learning activities.

4.2.2.4 Use of Learning Materials

The availability and utilisation of learning materials varied among the four observed classrooms. In two classes, teachers used a range of instructional materials, including charts, picture cards, flashcards, counters, and real-life objects. These materials supported visual and tactile learning, helping learners understand abstract concepts more concretely. For example, in one class, the teacher used bottle tops and sticks to teach counting, capturing the interest of many learners.

In the remaining two classrooms, learning materials were limited due to inadequate resources. Teachers relied primarily on textbooks and verbal explanations, with little use of visual aids. This lack of materials made it difficult to cater to diverse learning needs, especially for learners who required concrete, hands-on methods. In one of these classrooms, the teacher apologised for the lack of adequate teaching aids and said she had to purchase materials personally when she could afford to.

Across all four classrooms, no specialised materials for learners with disabilities were observed. For instance, there were no visual schedules, enlarged print materials, assistive listening devices, or adaptive writing tools. Limited access to diverse learning resources hindered the effectiveness of inclusive teaching strategies.

4.2.2.5 Learner Involvement, Motivation, Active Participation & Independent Work



*Figure 4.3: Learners seated and ready for the lesson at the start of class.
Source: Researcher's photograph (2026).*

Learner involvement varied considerably across the four classrooms. In three classrooms, learners were actively engaged during lessons, responding enthusiastically to teachers' questions and participating in group activities. These teachers incorporated interactive strategies such as chanting, role-play, songs, and question-and-answer sessions, which kept learners attentive and motivated. One teacher used storytelling combined with gestures and drawings on the board, which helped maintain learner interest.

However, in one classroom, learner involvement was noticeably low. A significant number of learners appeared disengaged, particularly those seated at the back. Learners with disabilities or learning difficulties tended to remain passive in all four classrooms unless the teacher specifically called on them. In two classrooms, teachers made deliberate efforts to involve struggling learners by giving them simpler questions or allowing them additional time to respond.

Opportunities for independent work were observed in all four classrooms, though the level of independence varied. In two classes, learners worked independently on worksheets or writing activities for substantial periods, showing confidence and familiarity with the tasks. In the other two classes, many learners required continuous

support, frequently raising their hands or leaving their seats to seek help. Those with learning barriers particularly struggled with independent tasks and relied heavily on the teacher's assistance.

Overall, the level of learner engagement and motivation was strongly influenced by the teacher's instructional style, availability of learning aids, and the level of classroom management.

4.2.2.6 Inclusivity and Accommodation of Learner Diversity

Inclusive teaching strategies were observed in two of the four classrooms, where teachers differentiated explanations, used peer-support arrangements, or organised learners into mixed-ability groups. These teachers simplified instructions, provided additional examples, and used gestures or illustrations to make content more accessible. For instance, one teacher paired a learner with reading difficulties with a more advanced peer to enable collaborative learning.

In the remaining two classrooms, lessons were delivered using a single instructional method for all learners. The teachers provided whole-class explanations without modifying tasks for learners experiencing difficulties. During worksheets and literacy tasks, struggling learners were left to copy from peers, indicating a lack of tailored support. Teachers in these classrooms did not appear to have clear strategies for adapting instruction to meet their learners' individual needs.

Across all four classrooms, learners with disabilities were present but rarely received targeted support. No assistive devices or adapted teaching methods were observed. While teachers expressed positive attitudes and willingness to support all learners, limited training, insufficient resources, and overcrowded classes hindered the practical implementation of inclusive practices.

4.2.2.7 Differentiation of Assessment and Teacher Feedback

Assessment differentiation was minimal across the four observed classrooms. In all four classes, teachers provided the same activity sheets and exercises to every learner, regardless of their ability levels. There were no simplified worksheets, extension tasks for advanced learners, or adapted assessments for those with

disabilities. This uniform approach made it difficult for learners with learning barriers to demonstrate their understanding, as many could not complete the tasks independently.

Teacher feedback, however, was consistently observed in all classrooms. Teachers used verbal praise, such as “Well done!”, “Good job!” or clapping, to encourage learners and reinforce positive behaviour. In three classrooms, teachers circulated the room offering corrective feedback, although this was limited by large class sizes. In the fourth classroom, feedback was mostly directed at learners seated near the front, as the teacher struggled to manage the larger group.

Although teachers were supportive and encouraging, the lack of individualised feedback caused mainly by overcrowding and time constraints meant that struggling learners often went unnoticed.

4.2.2.8 Praise and Encouragement



*Figure 4.4: Teacher encouraging learner participation during the lesson.
Source: Researcher's photograph (2026).*

Praise and encouragement were consistently strong across all four classrooms. Teachers frequently celebrated learner achievements, regardless of how small. In all observed classes, teachers used verbal praise, applause, and positive reinforcement

to build learner confidence. In two classes, teachers incorporated motivational chants such as “You can do it!” or “Try again!” that energised learners and helped foster a positive emotional climate.

This continuous encouragement increased learners’ willingness to participate, especially in activities that required reading or answering questions. Even learners who appeared shy or hesitant were more willing to attempt responses after receiving praise. This demonstrated that teacher affective support played an essential role in maintaining learner engagement, despite the challenges posed by class size and limited resources.

4.3 Focus Group Discussion

A focus group discussion (FGD) is a qualitative method in which a selected group of participants engages in a structured discussion on a specific topic (Sachdeva et al., 2024). In this study, four FGDs were conducted with five primary school teachers from each of the four participating schools. The FGDs explored their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers. This method enabled participants to collaboratively reflect on their classroom practices, exchange experiences, and articulate their perspectives on inclusive education within their respective school environments. The questions posed in the FGDs were varied, comprehensive, and open-ended to ensure that all three research questions were addressed.

Analysis of the focus group data revealed several recurring and interconnected themes related to inclusive teaching practices and learner support. These themes included the types of disabilities encountered in classrooms, barriers to learning beyond formal disabilities, early identification of learning challenges, challenges faced by teachers, coping and mitigation strategies, training received, valuing learner diversity, support available at the school level, teacher-provided support, strategies for accommodating learner diversity, and parental involvement. The identification of these themes was facilitated by an iterative coding and data analysis process, which

revealed patterns that consistently emerged across the discussions, reflecting shared experiences among the participants.

Each theme is explored in its own subsection, providing a structured, coherent presentation of the results. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the results presented, participants' exact words are included as verbatim quotations. These quotations illustrate and support the analysis, ensuring that the participants' perspectives and lived experiences are accurately represented. This approach grounds the findings in teachers' perspectives, thereby strengthening alignment between the data and the research objectives.

Table 4.2: FGD participant code names

School	Participant Code
School A	Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, Teacher 5
School B	Teacher 6, Teacher 7, Teacher 8, Teacher 9, Teacher 10
School C	Teacher 11, Teacher 12, Teacher 13, Teacher 14, Teacher 15
School D	Teacher 16, Teacher 17, Teacher 18, Teacher 19, Teacher 20

4.3.1 Types of disabilities encountered



Figure 4.5: Focus group discussion with participating teachers.

Source: Researcher's photograph (2026).

The teachers were asked, “What types of disabilities have you come across at this school?”

When teachers were probed about the types of disabilities they observed in their classrooms, Teacher 1 was the first to elaborate, explaining that the learning environment had become increasingly diverse. She remarked, “In my classroom, I have learners with physical challenges who struggle to walk properly, others with hearing impairments, and some who cannot grasp simple concepts as quickly as their peers. Sometimes you find all these needs in one classroom.” Her response highlighted the complexity of managing multiple disabilities simultaneously.

Teacher 2 added to the discussion, noting the presence of learners with autism spectrum disorders and communication difficulties. She explained, “I have a boy who

exhibits behaviours linked to autism; he struggles with eye contact, gets overwhelmed easily, and sometimes repeats words instead of answering questions.” She further noted that speech and language delays often make it harder for such learners to participate meaningfully in class activities.

Similarly, Teacher 3 commented on the challenges posed by intellectual impairments and visual difficulties. She stated, “Some learners cannot read even short words because they have visual problems or cognitive delays. A few also have multiple disabilities, where you don’t just deal with one challenge but a combination.” This sentiment reflected a consensus among participants that disabilities in classrooms are broad and multifaceted, requiring teachers to adapt continually.

Collectively, the teachers’ accounts across the FGDs illustrated the complex and diverse nature of disabilities encountered in mainstream classrooms, confirming the need for differentiated instruction and support systems to meet individual learner needs.

4.3.2 Barriers to Learning Beyond Disabilities

The teachers were further asked, “Besides disabilities, what barriers to learning have you observed?”

The teachers agreed that many learners experience barriers unrelated to formal disabilities, which equally hinder their academic progress. Teacher 4 began by highlighting socio-economic challenges. She explained, “Some of my learners come to school on an empty stomach, and this affects everything from concentration to participation. Hunger is one of the biggest barriers I see daily.” Her statement reflected a recurring challenge among learners from impoverished backgrounds.

When the discussion continued, Teacher 5 emphasised the lack of parental support. She remarked, “Parents rarely assist with homework. Some say they don’t understand the work, while others simply don’t have time due to work commitments.” She noted that this lack of involvement often leads learners to fall behind, especially those who need additional reinforcement at home.

Teacher 2 focused on language barriers, explaining that many learners struggle because the language used at home differs from the language of instruction. She

narrated, “I have several learners who speak Sepedi or Xitsonga at home, but our learning materials are mainly in English. This makes comprehension extremely difficult for them.”

The teachers’ accounts indicated that barriers such as poverty, limited parental involvement, and language difficulties are deeply intertwined with learning outcomes. These results proffer that learners bring diverse socio-economic, socio-cultural, and emotional challenges into the classroom, which teachers must constantly navigate carefully and skilfully.

4.3.3 Early identification of disabilities and learning barriers

The question was asked, “What processes do you follow at this school to ensure children with disabilities or barriers to learning are identified early?”

Participants expressed that early identification is crucial but often complex. Teacher 8 explained that observation forms the foundation of identification, stating, “We normally pick up when a child is not coping, maybe they struggle to follow instructions, or their behaviour is different from others. Once we see this, we report to the SBST for further action.”

Building on this point, Teacher 6 noted that although the SIAS policy guides the process, many teachers still struggle to apply it. She said, “We use the SNA1 form as required, but honestly, many of us were never properly trained. Sometimes we are unsure whether we are identifying a behaviour issue or an actual learning disability.” Her comment pointed to a gap between policy and practice.

Teacher 9 added that delays in identification are common due to limited professional expertise within the school. She elaborated, “Even if we suspect a disability, assessment takes a long time because we do not have specialists like psychologists or therapists on site. So, learners continue struggling unattended.”

Together, the responses to this question demonstrated that while teachers understand the importance of identifying disabilities early, they face practical challenges, including limited training, insufficient expertise, and delays in the referral process.

4.3.4 Challenges Faced When Teaching Learners with Disabilities or Learning Barriers

Another question asked was, “What challenges do you face as teachers when teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers?”

The teachers’ responses revealed deep frustration and emotional strain. Teacher 18 began the discussion by emphasising the issue of overcrowding. She stated, “With over 40 learners in one class, giving individual attention becomes almost impossible, especially for those who need extra help.” This highlighted the physical limitations that teachers experience in large classrooms.

Teacher 19 pointed out the issue of insufficient training in inclusive education. She remarked, “We are not fully trained for this. The workshops we attend are too short. Most of the time, we end up relying on our own judgment.” Her response indicated a gap in professional development that directly affects teaching effectiveness.

Adding to the challenges, Teacher 17 described emotional exhaustion. She shared, “Sometimes it becomes overwhelming. We want to help every child, but the workload and pressure make it very difficult.” This reflected a strong emotional strain associated with teaching diverse learners.

Teachers further reported insufficient access to assistive technologies and appropriate learning resources, which significantly constrained their capacity to support learners effectively. These constraints highlight the urgent need for increased professional development opportunities for inclusive education, reduced class sizes, and more access to educational resources.

4.3.5 Coping Strategies and Mitigation Approaches

The teachers were further asked, “How do you deal with these challenges in your classroom?”

Teachers described several strategies they employ to cope with classroom diversity. Teacher 11 explained that she relies on differentiated instruction. She said, “I simplify

instructions for those who struggle and give more advanced tasks to stronger learners. This helps everyone work at their own pace.”

Teacher 12 mentioned using visual aids and hands-on activities. She explained, “Visuals help learners who struggle to understand verbal explanations. I use pictures, charts, and physical objects to demonstrate concepts.” Her strategy emphasised multi-sensory learning.

Teacher 13 highlighted peer support as a strategy, stating, “I group learners so they can assist each other. Those who grasp concepts quickly help those who struggle.” Other teachers expressed a liking for this approach, noting that it encourages collaboration and reduces pressure on the teacher. Despite limited resources, teachers showed creativity and resilience by adapting classroom methods to accommodate diverse needs.

4.3.6 Training Received



*Figure 4.6: Focus group discussion on training received for inclusive education.
Source: Researcher’s photograph (2026).*

Question asked: “What training have you received to teach learners with disabilities or learning difficulties?”

Most teachers reported receiving minimal training. Teacher 6 explained, “We’ve attended one or two workshops, but they were too general and not practical.”

Teacher 10 added, “We need proper training that shows us how to handle real-life classroom situations. The theory alone is not enough.”

Similarly, Teacher 7 expressed frustration, stating, “Sometimes we feel like we are expected to perform miracles without the necessary tools or knowledge.”

It became clear that teachers are aware of inclusive education policies but feel inadequately equipped to implement them effectively.

4.3.7 Is learner diversity valued in your school, and how is this demonstrated by the teachers

Another incisive question asked in the FGDs was, “Is learner diversity valued in your school, and how is this demonstrated by the teachers?”

When teachers were asked about valuing learner diversity, Teacher 3 was quick to remark that inclusion has become a central philosophy in her classroom. She stated, “I always teach my learners to respect each other’s differences, whether it’s ability, background, or language. We talk openly about how everyone is unique.” Her emphasis on respect illustrated how teachers use classroom conversations to normalise diversity.

Teacher 1 expanded on this by sharing how she creates an inclusive environment through her teaching strategies. She explained, “I try to design lessons that accommodate every learner. Sometimes I use different examples, games, or visual aids so that no one feels left out, regardless of how they learn.” Her methods demonstrated active efforts to ensure that teaching is accessible to all learners.

Teacher 4 highlighted the importance of celebrating differences during school events. She noted, “We celebrate differences during cultural days and awareness campaigns. It helps learners see diversity as something positive, not something that sets people apart.” This reinforced the view that diversity is not only acknowledged but appreciated through school activities.

The teachers agreed that valuing diversity is essential to fostering a sense of belonging among learners. Their responses show that although inclusive practices

vary, the underlying commitment to acknowledging learner differences remains strong at the sampled schools.

4.3.8 Support Available at the School

It was considered crucial to also pose the question, “What support structures are available at your school to help you assist learners with disabilities or learning barriers?”



*Figure 4.7: Focus group discussion on support structures available at the school.
Source: Researcher's photograph (2026).*

Teachers expressed that although support structures exist, they are often insufficient. Teacher 12 mentioned the school-based support teams (SBST) as the primary support mechanism. She explained, “We do have the SBST, but they are overwhelmed. They have too many cases and cannot always attend to learners immediately.” Her statement revealed the pressure placed on SBST members, over and above their teaching and other administrative responsibilities.

Teacher 14 mentioned the involvement of district officials but noted that their visits are inconsistent and far between. She said, “We sometimes receive support from district-

based support teams, but they come maybe once a term or when we make urgent requests. It's not enough for the number of learners who need help. Teacher 13 raised the issue of limited access to specialists. She stated, "We don't have therapists, psychologists, or full-time remedial teachers. There is one part-time remedial teacher, but she comes only once a week, and sometimes her schedule doesn't align with our learners' needs."

These responses reveal that although basic support systems exist, the lack of specialised personnel and inadequate support from the district leaves teachers with significant gaps to fill on their own.

4.3.9 Support Provided by Teachers to Learners

Another important question was, "What kind of support do you provide to learners who experience learning difficulties?"

Teachers shared various forms of support they provide despite heavy workloads. Teacher 15 stated, "I always try to encourage them, even when they get things wrong. I know they are trying, so I give them positive feedback to build their confidence." Her response highlighted the emotional support teachers provide.

Teacher 12 explained that she breaks tasks into smaller steps so that learners can better understand instructions. She noted, "I usually explain things in simpler ways and allow extra time for learners who process information slowly."

Additionally, Teacher 14 described how she uses multiple modes of explanation. She said, "I use visual demonstrations, oral explanations, and sometimes practical examples. Some learners understand better when they can see or do something."

The participants' responses illustrate the dedication teachers show in supporting learners individually, even when systemic resources are limited.

4.3.10 Strategies to Accommodate Learner Diversity

Participants were also asked, "What strategies do you use to accommodate diverse learning needs in your classroom?"

Teachers reported using a wide range of strategies to address learner diversity.

Teacher 7 explained that she uses differentiated instruction to meet learners at different levels. She shared, “I give different tasks depending on the learner’s ability. Some get simplified activities, while others get more advanced ones.”

Teacher 8 described her reliance on multi-sensory teaching approaches. She stated, “I use visuals, demonstrations, role-play, and storytelling. These methods help both fast and slow learners understand the content better.”

Teacher 9 added that she often uses flexible grouping as a strategy. She remarked, “Sometimes I group learners based on their abilities, and other times I mix them so they can support each other. It depends on the lesson and the needs I see on that day.”

Collectively, teachers demonstrated adaptability and creativity in addressing diverse learning needs, even with limited resources.

4.3.11 The level of parental involvement at the school

Participants were asked about parental involvement as follows: “How would you describe the level of parental involvement in your school?”

Teachers expressed concerns about inconsistent parental involvement. Teacher 14 noted, “Some parents are very supportive and attend meetings regularly, but many do not respond when we call or send letters. It’s difficult to work with learners whose parents are not involved.”

Teacher 12 pointed out that parents of high-achieving learners tend to be more involved. She said, “Parents whose children perform well are the ones we see more often. Parents of struggling learners rarely attend meetings, and this makes intervention difficult.”

Adding to this, Teacher 11 mentioned that work pressures often limit parental participation. She explained, “Some parents work long hours, so they hardly show up for school meetings. Others simply do not prioritise involvement in their child’s education.”

The teachers' accounts highlighted a persistent gap between school and home, which undermines efforts to support struggling learners. These results highlight the critical role of parental involvement in children's educational success.

4.3.12 Involvement of Parents of Learners with Disabilities



Figure 4.8: Focus group discussion on parental involvement of learners with disabilities.

Source: Researcher's photograph (2026).

It was important to ask this follow-up question: "What about the involvement of parents whose children have disabilities or learning barriers?"

A mix of experiences emerged regarding the parents of learners with disabilities. Teacher 20 shared that some parents are cooperative and willing to work with the school. She explained, "Some parents attend meetings and try to help where they can, even if they don't fully understand their child's disability."

However, Teacher 17 noted that denial remains a major obstacle. She stated, "Many parents are still in denial about their child's disability. They do not want to accept recommendations or referrals because they fear the stigma."

Teacher 16 raised another important issue: fear of losing social grants. She explained, “Some parents avoid bringing medical reports because they think if their child is diagnosed, they might lose the child support grant. This creates barriers for the school when trying to support the learner.”

The narratives revealed that parental involvement is often influenced by emotional, cultural, and economic factors. While some parents engage actively, many remain hesitant, uncertain, or resistant, which complicates the support process for affected learners.

4.4 Chapter Summary

The results from the focus group discussions and classroom observations indicate that although teachers are dedicated to implementing inclusive education, they continue to encounter substantial obstacles, including large class sizes, inadequate professional preparation, and insufficient resources. While teachers have adopted a range of adaptive strategies to address these challenges, the results indicate a clear need for strengthened institutional support, ongoing professional development, and increased parental involvement to enhance inclusive classroom practices. Chapter 5 will critically interpret these findings in relation to existing literature and propose recommendations for both practice and policy.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the study's results, derived from focus group discussions with 20 teachers and classroom observations conducted in four primary schools. This chapter discusses the findings by critically engaging directly with the research problem and addressing the study's guiding research questions. The findings are critically interpreted and examined alongside relevant literature to position the study within existing scholarship on inclusive education, teaching learners with disabilities, and addressing barriers to learning.

In addition, the discussion is framed by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model, which serves as a theoretical lens for understanding how individual, classroom, institutional, and broader contextual factors shape teachers' experiences and instructional practices in inclusive school and classroom settings. By applying this framework, the chapter highlights the interaction between learners, teachers, schools, families, and policy environments. The chapter concludes by presenting conclusions and recommendations aimed at strengthening inclusive teaching practices and improving learning experiences for learners with disabilities and those experiencing barriers to learning.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

5.2.1 Teacher–Learner Ratio and Overcrowding

Classroom observations revealed that three of the four observed classrooms had enrolments exceeding the Department of Basic Education's recommended classroom occupancy of 40 learners per classroom, with class sizes of 41, 46, and 54 learners, while one classroom accommodated 35 learners (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2013). These findings suggest that overcrowding remains a significant challenge in many inclusive classrooms.

The observations further revealed that large class sizes significantly limited teachers'

ability to provide individualised support, particularly to learners with disabilities or learning barriers. Teachers experienced difficulty moving freely within classrooms, monitoring learner progress, providing timely feedback, and attending to learners who required additional support. Such conditions reduced opportunities for differentiated instruction and meaningful learner participation.

These findings were strongly reinforced by the focus group discussions, during which teachers consistently identified overcrowding as one of the most serious challenges affecting inclusive teaching. Participants reported that large class sizes made it extremely difficult to differentiate instruction and assessment or to provide adequate support to learners with diverse educational needs. These findings are consistent with the Department of Basic Education (2013), which recognises the importance of maintaining appropriate classroom occupancy to facilitate effective teaching and learning. They also align with UNESCO (2020), which emphasises that inclusive education requires adequate learning conditions, including manageable class sizes that enable teachers to respond to learner diversity effectively. Similarly, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) stresses that inclusive education requires sufficient resources and support to ensure meaningful participation and equitable learning opportunities for all learners.

While previous South African studies by Engelbrecht et al. (2017) and Donohue and Bornman (2014) similarly found that overcrowded classrooms impede inclusive teaching practices and learner support, the findings of the present study demonstrate that overcrowding remains a persistent challenge despite ongoing policy commitments to inclusive education.

5.2.2 Classroom Environment and Management

Classroom observations indicated that three of the four classrooms had a generally warm and welcoming environment, characterised by positive teacher–learner relationships and visible learning displays. However, despite these efforts, limited space due to overcrowding affected classroom organisation and learner mobility, particularly for learners with physical impairments. Classroom management was maintained through clear routines and rules, but managing behaviour became more challenging as class size increased.

During focus group discussions, teachers acknowledged that maintaining effective classroom management in inclusive settings requires additional effort, patience, and emotional resilience. Teachers emphasised that while they strive to create inclusive and respectful learning environments, physical constraints and lack of support often undermine these efforts. This aligns with the literature, which suggests that inclusive classroom environments require not only positive attitudes but also adequate infrastructure and manageable class sizes (Savolainen et al., 2022).

5.2.3 Use of Learning Materials and Teaching Resources

Classroom observations showed that only two of the four teachers regularly used varied teaching materials such as charts, pictures, and real-life objects. In the remaining classrooms, teaching relied mainly on textbooks and chalkboards, limiting opportunities for multi-sensory learning. A noticeable shortage of assistive technologies and adapted instructional materials was observed, especially for learners with hearing, visual, and intellectual impairments.

Teachers further indicated during focus group discussions that inadequate teaching and learning resources significantly constrain their capacity to effectively implement inclusive classroom practices. Many teachers expressed frustration at being expected to accommodate diverse learners without adequate materials or institutional support. Similarly, Mahlo (2017) found that limited resources are a significant obstacle to the successful implementation of inclusive education in South African schools. However, it is also worth noting that resource constraints are a longstanding barrier not only to inclusive education but to the delivery of quality education for all children in South African public schools (Department of Basic Education, 2014).

5.2.4 Learner Involvement, Participation and Independent Work

Observations revealed that learner involvement varied across the four classrooms. In three classrooms, learners were actively engaged during interactive activities such as questioning, storytelling, and group work. However, learners with disabilities or learning barriers were often less involved unless the teacher deliberately encouraged or supported them. Opportunities for independent work were observed in all four classrooms, but learners who faced barriers often needed additional guidance to complete tasks. Similar findings have been reported in previous research (Florian &

Black-Hawkins, 2011), which highlights the importance of intentional inclusion strategies to promote participation and motivation among diverse learners.

Focus group discussions further highlighted that learner participation is closely linked to teaching strategies and the availability of appropriate support. Teachers indicated that although interactive teaching strategies enhance learner participation, overcrowded classrooms and limited instructional time restrict opportunities for individualised support. These findings are consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory, which emphasises the importance of social interaction and scaffolded learning in supporting learners' cognitive development. Recent research similarly highlights that inclusive learning environments that promote interaction, collaboration, and appropriate instructional support enhance both academic and social outcomes for learners with learning difficulties (Krämer et al., 2021).

5.2.5 Inclusivity and Accommodation of Learner Diversity

Classroom observations indicated that inclusive practices were inconsistently applied. In two classrooms, teachers used peer support and group work to accommodate learner diversity. However, in the other two classrooms, lessons were delivered uniformly without modifications for learners who struggled. Differentiation of instruction and assessment was minimal across all observed classrooms. This suggests a gap between inclusive education policy and classroom practice.

Teachers acknowledged during focus group discussions that they lack sufficient training in inclusive education and differentiation. Similar to findings by Pillay and Tlale (2024), while teachers demonstrated supportive attitudes toward inclusive education, many reported feeling unprepared to implement inclusive strategies in practice. This observation aligns with research findings identifying limited teacher training as a persistent obstacle to the effective implementation of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020).

5.1.1 Teacher Feedback, Praise and Emotional Support

Observations showed that assessment practices were largely uniform, with the same tasks given

to all learners regardless of ability. Differentiated assessment was rarely observed across the four classrooms. Positive reinforcement contributed to a supportive classroom atmosphere and appeared to boost learner confidence. However, individualised feedback was limited due to time constraints and high learner numbers.

Teachers in focus group discussions highlighted the emotional demands of teaching in inclusive classrooms. Many described feelings of stress and frustration, but also emphasised their commitment to supporting learners emotionally. This finding is supported by the literature (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), which indicates that emotional support and positive teacher–learner relationships play a crucial role in inclusive education. The findings further align with Tomlinson’s (2014) assertion that effective differentiation requires both pedagogical and institutional support.

5.2.6 Support Systems and Parental Involvement

Focus group discussions revealed that the school-based support teams (SBST) provides some assistance, but its effectiveness is limited by workload and lack of specialised professionals. Teachers also reported inconsistent parental involvement, particularly among parents of learners with disabilities or learning barriers. Participants further reported a lack of access to specialised professionals such as psychologists and therapists. Classroom observations indirectly reflected this challenge, as teachers were often solely responsible for supporting learners with diverse needs.

Teachers reported that socio-economic constraints and parental denial of learners’ disabilities frequently impede effective collaboration with schools. These observations align with Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory, which highlights the critical role of coordinated interaction among schools, families, and wider support networks in promoting learner development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Weak linkages between these systems were found to negatively affect inclusive education practices. These findings are consistent with those of Oranga et al. (2022), who emphasise the critical role of parental involvement in learner success, more so in inclusive education contexts.

5.3 Conclusion of the Findings

The findings indicate that the implementation of inclusive education in the selected

primary schools varies across schools and remains incomplete, owing to multiple contextual factors and obstacles. Teachers encounter a range of interconnected challenges, including high learner–teacher ratios, inadequate teaching and learning resources, limited professional training, and insufficient parental and institutional support. Although teachers adopted inclusive practices such as differentiated teaching, collaborative learning, and learner motivation strategies, these efforts were often constrained by the absence of sustained resources and systemic support. As a result, the impact of these strategies was uneven, underscoring the need for stronger structural and institutional support to strengthen inclusive education practices.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the study’s findings in relation to existing literature and the theoretical framework, focusing on the challenges teachers experience and the approaches they use to support learners with disabilities and those facing barriers to learning. The discussion confirms that while teachers operate under challenging conditions, they demonstrate persistence, adaptability, and a strong commitment to inclusive education. The chapter concludes that the successful realisation of inclusive education depends on coordinated efforts among teachers, schools, families, communities, and policymakers to create supportive and enabling learning environments.

CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the study's recommendations and concluding reflections, based on the findings discussed in Chapter 5. The recommendations emerge from evidence gathered through classroom observations and focus group discussions with primary school teachers and are intended to respond to the challenges identified in teaching learners with disabilities and those experiencing barriers to learning. In addition, the chapter offers a consolidated conclusion that summarises the main findings, reflects on the study's contribution to knowledge, and emphasises the significance of inclusive education in the primary school context.

The recommendations are directed at key stakeholders, including teachers, school management, parents and communities, as well as policymakers and the Department of Basic Education. Each of these stakeholders plays a vital and interconnected role in strengthening inclusive education practices. This interdependence is explained through Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model, which served as the theoretical framework guiding the study. The chapter concludes by reinforcing the view that inclusive education is a collective responsibility that requires coordinated action, adequate support structures, and sustained commitment at all levels of the education system.

6.2 Recommendations

Drawing on the study's findings, a set of recommendations is presented to enhance teaching practices and learning experiences for learners with disabilities and those experiencing barriers to learning.

6.2.1 Recommendations for Teachers

The findings of this study indicate that teachers encounter persistent challenges associated with large class sizes, limited preparation for inclusive education, and the wide range of learner needs present in mainstream classrooms. In response, it is recommended that teachers participate in ongoing professional development

programmes that prioritise inclusive education. Such programmes should focus on practical, classroom-based strategies for identifying barriers to learning, adapting instruction, and providing appropriate support to learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. Continuous training of this kind would strengthen teachers' skills, improve their confidence, and build their capacity to implement inclusive practices effectively.

Teachers are further encouraged to use differentiated instruction and flexible assessment practices to accommodate learner diversity. The findings showed that many learners struggled when uniform teaching methods and assessments were used. By adapting content, teaching methods, and assessment tasks, teachers can better respond to individual learner needs. Differentiation may include simplifying instructions, providing additional time, using visual and hands-on materials, and offering alternative ways for learners to demonstrate understanding.

In addition, fostering learner motivation through praise, encouragement, and interactive teaching strategies is strongly recommended. Classroom observations indicated that learners responded positively when teachers used verbal praise, encouragement, and interactive methods such as group work and questioning. Teachers are also encouraged to establish peer learning communities within their schools, where they can collaborate, share experiences, and learn from one another. Such collaboration can reduce professional isolation and promote the sharing of effective, inclusive practices.

6.2.2 Recommendations for Schools

Schools have a central responsibility in fostering environments that enable inclusive education to function effectively. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that schools give priority to the acquisition and availability of assistive devices, visual resources, and adapted learning materials for learners with disabilities and those experiencing barriers to learning. The study found that a shortage of appropriate resources limited teachers' capacity to implement inclusive teaching strategies. Improved access to suitable learning materials would help teachers address diverse learning needs more effectively.

In addition, schools are encouraged to develop, review, and consistently implement inclusive education policies that promote accessibility and supportive learning environments, in accordance with the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy and Education White Paper 6. This includes ensuring that school infrastructure is accessible to learners with physical disabilities and that school cultures actively promote inclusivity, acceptance, and respect for diversity. Effective school leadership is critical in driving the implementation of inclusive policies and ensuring that they are translated into everyday practice.

The study further highlights the need for strengthened collaboration within schools through well-structured peer learning communities and the effective operation of school-based support teams (SBSTs). Although SBSTs were present in the sampled schools, their effectiveness was often constrained by limited capacity and resources. Enhancing collaboration among teachers and strengthening support structures can facilitate early identification of learning barriers and ensure more coordinated and sustained support for both teachers and learners.

6.2.3 Recommendations for Parents and Communities

The study's findings highlight parental and community involvement as key influences on learners' academic performance and emotional development. It is therefore recommended that schools actively promote parental participation through regular meetings, workshops, and awareness initiatives aimed at supporting learners with disabilities and those experiencing barriers to learning. These initiatives can help parents gain a clearer understanding of their children's needs and strengthen cooperation between home and school.

Parents are encouraged to engage consistently with teachers to support learning activities at home and reinforce intervention strategies implemented in the classroom. Clear, ongoing communication between parents and educators can enhance continuity in learner support and improve educational outcomes. The study found that limited parental involvement often negatively affected learners' progress, particularly those facing persistent learning barriers.

Communities also have a responsibility to contribute to inclusive education by

addressing stigma and negative perceptions related to disability. Community-based awareness programmes can promote acceptance, understanding, and respect for learner diversity. Creating supportive community environments can strengthen learners' confidence, participation, and sense of belonging both within and beyond the school context.

6.2.4 Recommendations for Policymakers and the Department of Education

The findings of this study point to the need for stronger systemic and policy-level support for inclusive education. It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education take active measures to reduce overcrowding in classrooms by improving teacher–learner ratios through the appointment of additional teachers and, if required, the construction of new classrooms. Reduced class sizes would enable teachers to offer more individualised support and respond more effectively to the needs of learners with disabilities and learning barriers.

Policymakers should further ensure that inclusive education is meaningfully integrated into both pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes. The study revealed that many teachers had limited exposure to practical training related to inclusive practices, which constrained their ability to manage diverse classrooms. Training programmes that emphasise hands-on strategies and classroom-based applications would better prepare teachers to successfully implement inclusive education.

Additionally, increased financial investment is required to support the provision of assistive technologies and access to specialised support services, including therapists, psychologists, and remedial teachers. The availability of specialised personnel would complement teachers' efforts, enhance early identification of learning barriers, and support effective intervention strategies across schools.

6.3 Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges teachers face in educating learners with disabilities and those experiencing learning barriers, as well as the strategies used to

address these challenges. Data gathered through classroom observations and focus group discussions revealed that while teachers are committed to inclusive education, they operate in contexts marked by overcrowded classrooms, limited professional training, inadequate resources, and inconsistent parental involvement.

Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrated determination and adaptability by employing strategies such as differentiated instruction, peer support, and positive reinforcement to promote learner participation. However, the study concludes that inclusive education cannot rely solely on individual teacher efforts. Sustainable and effective inclusion requires coordinated support across multiple levels of the education system.

Informed by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model, the study underscores the interconnected influences shaping inclusive education, including classroom practices, school structures, family engagement, community attitudes, and policy frameworks. The study therefore concludes that inclusive education is attainable, provided there is collective responsibility, sufficient resourcing, and long-term commitment to supporting learner diversity.

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APPENDIX A: TEACHERS' FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of disabilities have you come across at this school?
2. Besides disabilities, what barriers to learning have you observed?
3. What processes do you follow at this school to ensure children with disabilities or learning barriers are identified early?
4. What challenges do you face as teachers when teaching children with disabilities or barriers to learning?
5. How do you deal with these challenges in your classrooms?
6. What training have you received to teach learners with disabilities or learning difficulties?
7. Is learner diversity valued, and how is this demonstrated by the teachers?
8. What support is available at the school for teachers and learners with disabilities or barriers to learning?
9. What kind of support do you provide to learners who experience learning difficulties?
10. What strategies do you use to accommodate the diversity of learners in your class?
11. How would you describe the level of parental involvement at the school?
12. What about the involvement of parents whose children have disabilities or barriers to learning?

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPATION OBSERVATION

Name of teacher:

Date:

Name of observer:

Duration:

Y= Yes

N= N

No	Elements to be observed	Y	N	Comments
1	Is there a proper teacher-to-learner ratio?			
2	Is the classroom environment welcoming to every learner?			
3	Does the teacher begin the lesson on time?			
4	Is a variety of learning materials used to cater to all learners?			
5	Are the learners involved and motivated?			
6	Do the teaching strategies used promote inclusivity and accommodate learner diversity?			
7	Is there active participation of learners?			
8	Are learners given opportunities to work independently?			
9	Is the classroom well-managed?			
10	Is there any use of differentiations in assessment?			
11	Does the teacher give feedback to learners?			
12	Are learners praised and encouraged?			

APPENDIX C: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION LETTER

Department of Early Childhood Education

College of Education

University of South Africa

13th May 2025

Request for permission to conduct research.

The principal

Title: Navigating inclusive education: Teacher challenges and mitigation strategies for learners with disabilities in Waterberg District, Limpopo

Dear Principal,

I, Makoma Josephinah Morwatshehla, am conducting a research study under the supervision of Dr. M. S. Mncanca in the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of South Africa (UNISA) as part of my master's degree. You are invited to participate in a study titled **“Navigating inclusive education: Teacher challenges and mitigation strategies for learners with disabilities in Waterberg District, Limpopo.”**

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges teachers experience when teaching learners with disabilities or learning barriers, as well as the strategies they apply to address these challenges. The study also seeks to promote support mechanisms that help accommodate learner diversity in the classroom.

Your school has been selected because it is one of the public schools in the Waterberg District of Limpopo that accommodates diverse learners. The study will involve participant observation and a focus group discussion at your school, which will take approximately two hours to complete. The researcher will request permission to observe one of your foundation phase teachers during a teaching and learning session.

The findings of this study may be valuable in enhancing teachers' attitudes toward learners with disabilities, assisting the Department of Education in providing relevant teacher training, and ensuring adequate resources and institutional support. It may also encourage foundation phase teachers to strengthen early identification and intervention practices for learners in their classrooms.

Yours sincerely,

.....

APPENDIX D: CONSENT OF THE PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Department of Early Childhood Education

College of Education

University of South Africa

13th May 2025.

The teacher

Title: Navigating inclusive education: Teacher challenges and mitigation strategies for learners with disabilities in Waterberg District, Limpopo

DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT,

My name is Makoma Josephinah Morwatshehla, and I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr M. S. Mncanca in the Department of Early Childhood Development towards a Master of Education (MEd) degree at the University of South Africa (UNISA).

We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled: “**Navigating inclusive education: Teacher challenges and mitigation strategies for learners with disabilities in Waterberg District, Limpopo.**” This study aims to gather more information about the challenges faced by teachers who teach learners with and without disabilities in the same classroom.

You are invited to participate because of your experience in teaching classrooms with diverse learners. Approximately 20 participants will be involved in this study. Five (5) teachers will participate in a focus group discussion, and one (1) teacher will be

observed at your school. The remaining fifteen (15) participants will be drawn from other schools.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and if you choose to take part, please note that your name will not be recorded anywhere. No one, apart from the researcher and the identified members of the research team, will know about your participation in this research.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering participation in this study.

Yours Sincerely

.....

APPENDIX E: CONSENT/ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

CONSENT

I..... hereby agree to participate in research on..... I understand that I am participating freely and without being forced in any way to do so. I also understand that I can stop participating at any point should I not want to continue, and that this decision will not in any way affect me negatively. I understand that this is a research project whose purpose is not necessarily to benefit me personally in the immediate or short term. I understand that my participation will remain confidential.

.....

Signature of participant

Date:

CONSENT FOR TAPE RECORDING<If applicable.>

I hereby agree to the tape-recording of my participation in the study. <If applicable.>

.....

Signature of participant

Date:

I understand that the information that I provide will be stored electronically and will be used for research purposes now or at a later stage.

.....

Signature of participant

Date

APPENDIX F: FIELDWORK LOG

Title: Navigating inclusive education: Teacher challenges and mitigation strategies for learners with disabilities in Waterberg District, Limpopo

Research Site location:

Research Site Address:

Data Collection Method:

Date	Time	Participant Number	Description Interaction/Events	of Analysis of interaction/event in relation to research design/procedure

APPENDIX G: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 08 January 2025

Ref: **2024/11/15/000000392/07/RB**

Name: **M J MORWATSHEHLA**

Student No.: **44590016**

Decision: Ethics Approval form

Dear **M J MORWATSHEHLA**

Researcher(s): Name: **M J MORWATSHEHLA**

E-mail address: 44590016@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Telephone: **0735362198**

Supervisor: Name: **Dr Mzoli Mncanca**

E-mail address: mncanms@unisa.ac.za

Telephone: **012 429 4877**

Title of research: *Challenges teachers face when teaching learners with disabilities or barriers to learning to learning and mitigation strategies.*

Qualification: MEd

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above-mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period **2025/01/08 to 2028/01/08**.

*The **low risk level** application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on **15 November 2024** in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.
2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
8. The study's risk level is Category 2- Low risk: Human participants are involved and there is foreseeable risk of inconvenience. Non-vulnerable adult participants and non-sensitive information is involved.
9. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date **2028/01/08**. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

The reference number **2025/01/08/00000392/07/RB** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof RB Monyai
Acting Head: CEDU Research
monyarb@unisa.ac.za



Prof Mpine Makoe
Executive Dean: CEDU
gakisme@unisa.ac.za



Approved - decision template – updated 16 Feb 2017

University of South Africa
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
PO Box 392 UNISA, 0003 South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4150
www.unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX H: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

CONFIDENTIAL



LIMPOPO
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE PREMIER

Office of the Premier

Research and Development Directorate

Private Bag X9483, Polokwane, 0700, South Africa

Tel: (015) 230 9910, Email: mokobij@premier.limpopo.gov.za

LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

REVIEW DATE: 16 APRIL 2025

PROJECT NUMBER: LPREC/65/2025: PG

SUBJECT: CHALLENGES TEACHERS FACE WHEN TEACHING LEARNERS WITH
LEARNING DISABILITIES OR BARRIERS TO LEARNING AND MITIGATING
STRATEGIES.

RESEARCHER: MJ MORWATSHEHLA

Chairperson: Prof I Swarts



Chairperson: Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee

The Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee (LPREC) is registered with National Health Research Council (NHREC) Registration Number **REC-111513-038**.

Note:

- i. This study is categorized as a Low Risk Level in accordance with risk level descriptors as enshrined in LPREC Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)
- ii. Should there be any amendment to the approved research proposal; the researcher(s) must re-submit the proposal to the ethics committee for review prior data collection.
- iii. The researcher(s) must provide annual reporting to the committee as well as the relevant department and also provide the department with the final report/thesis.
- iv. The researchers will be required to make presentations of the study findings and recommendations at the Provincial Research Conference/Departmental Research Day.
- v. The ethical clearance certificate is valid for 12 months. Should the need to extend the period for data collection arise then the researcher should renew the certificate through LPREC secretariat. PLEASE QUOTE THE PROJECT NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES.

APPENDIX I: PROFESSIONAL EDITOR CERTIFICATE



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

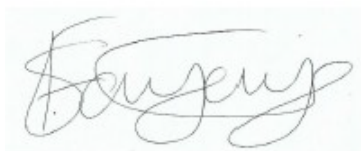
I hereby confirm that I have proofread and edited the following thesis using Windows 'Tracking' System to reflect my comments and suggested corrections for the author to action: **Navigating Inclusive Education: Teacher Challenges and Mitigation Strategies for Learners with Disabilities in Waterberg District, Limpopo** By **MAKOMA JOSEPHINAH MORWATSHEHLA (44590016)**

Although the greatest care was taken in the editing of this document, the final responsibility for the work rests with the author.

Sincerely,

Sibhekisipho Fayayo

24/04/2026



STF Media and Communication: Sibhekisipho Fayayo (Director)
083 502 2363 || sibhekisiphofayayo@gmail.com
BA Hons. English and Communication (MSU), MA English Language and Comparative Literature (UFH)
PhD Candidate (UP)

