

Conceptualising Inclusive Education: Insights from South African Primary School Principals

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Abstract

This study explores the understanding of inclusive education by principals in South African primary schools. It draws on in-depth research and reflective engagements over the past 30 years on the implementation of inclusive education in South African schools. Although the South African government introduced and adopted various policies, understanding the concept of inclusive education in the education sector remains contentious. This research focusses on understanding the principles and practices of inclusive education in schools, ensuring that all students have equal access to learning opportunities. Research objectives have been sharpened to investigate the implementation of inclusive education, accommodating different types of learners, and strategies used to promote a supportive learning environment. A qualitative case study design was used in the six primary schools in the uMgungundlovu district, South Africa, to encourage a deeper understanding of inclusive education as a concept within general education. The data collected were analyzed using content analysis. By examining various aspects of inclusive education, this study uncovers the essential role of educators in fostering an inclusive classroom culture that satisfies the diverse needs of all learners. The study concludes that inclusive education involves holistically teaching all learners by implementing differentiated instruction with adequate support for diverse learners. The findings of the study have practical implications for the education sector, as they highlight the need for intensive training in higher education institutions to bridge the gap in understanding and practice of inclusive education, underlining its urgency and importance.

Keywords: diverse learners, educational policies, educators' role, holistic teaching, inclusive education, learning environment, learning leadership, teacher training

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a transformative study area due to its profound implications for the educational landscape and broader social outcomes. This significance transcends its historical evolution and is rooted in several contemporary factors that align with the principles of human rights and dignity, recognising the intrinsic value of every individual. By ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to learn and suc-

ceed, inclusive education reflects a commitment to the fundamental belief in the equality and potential of every human being. Disability activism occurred when inclusive education first emerged. This was significant in some proclamations and agreements that acknowledge everyone is suitable for education served as an essential turning point in the direction of inclusive education (1948 [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(Article 26\)](#); 1966 [The International Cove-](#)

nant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; 1982 The World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons; 1990 The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (EFA); 1994 The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education; 2000 The World Education Forum, Dakar; 2006 The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities). An inclusive school is defined as follows in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education: All children should learn together whenever possible, regardless of any challenges or differences they may have. This is the core tenet of inclusive schools. To ensure that all students receive high-quality education, inclusive schools must identify and address the diverse needs of their students. This includes adapting to students' varying learning styles and rates and developing curricula, organisational structures, teaching methods, resource utilisation, and community partnerships. [Winarati et al. \(2024\)](#) postulated that each student has a learning style; therefore, differentiated instruction is necessary to enhance learning outcomes. Schools should offer various services and support to meet special needs ([UNESCO 1994](#)). Consequently, given the differences between contexts and individuals, inclusive education is considered a policy-based concept that challenges research and its implementation in learning situations.

According to [Hernández-Torrano et al. \(2020\)](#), inclusive education is based on social justice and democracy. It goes beyond differences in the ability to include gender and cultural backgrounds. For this reason, [Göransson and Nilholm \(2014\)](#) state that inclusive education aims to counteract discrimination and exclusion, focussing on diversity, equity, citizenship, and the universal right to adequate and adapted education that

meets the needs of all learners. The concept of inclusive education has significant implications for South Africa due to the historical backdrop of apartheid, which systematically divides schools according to race. Following South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, the country's policies underwent a significant transformation, moving from an apartheid-era framework to one that offers services to all citizens equally. The founding law of the Republic of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996 ([Republic of South Africa, 1996](#)), the country's founding law, has influenced the creation of inclusive education systems. An aspect of this process is to provide education to students with disabilities ([Fadhil & Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021](#)).

Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an inclusive education and Training System ([Department of Education, 2001](#)) lays the foundation for an inclusive education system in South Africa. The scope of this policy is broad because it aims to meet the various demands of all learners who encounter obstacles in their education. This policy demands a substantial change in perspective. Therefore, school leaders must adapt to the transformed ways of managing and leading the school curriculum. School principals are expected to be instructional leaders who can provide effective leadership and management and maintain improved teaching and learning ([Nkadimeng & Thabakadimeng, 2020](#)). Scholarly research verifies that to support efficient teaching methods and enhance student achievement, principals must possess and demonstrate the necessary instructional leadership competencies ([Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019](#); [Mestry, 2017](#); [Cox & Mullen \(2023\)](#); [Bush, 2013](#); [Hallinger, 2022](#); [Hardini et al., 2021](#)). [MacBearth \(2019\)](#) defines instructional leadership as curriculum and learning leadership.

Similarly, Chabalala and Naidoo (2021) characterise instructional leadership as the procedures and actions to improve curriculum delivery. This was documented in South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996, where the role of principals is to implement all educational programmes and curriculum activities. Therefore, inclusive education was not excluded, and principals had to understand it for its proper implementation. According to Khaleel, Alhosani, and Duyar (2021), school principals are vital actors who successfully and effectively direct all functions by carefully implementing educational policies. Likewise, Tanzi and Hermanto (2024) assert that the principal motivates teachers and should always provide accommodation services to children with special educational needs at school. The literature states that principals are crucial to developing inclusive schools (De Matthews et al., 2021). Therefore, principals' understanding of inclusive education is essential for implementing this concept in the classroom, as they are curriculum managers. Inclusive education is dramatically dependent on competent principals who carry out inclusive education well (Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024). The latter further asserts that the principal can turn the integrated school system into an inclusive school or improve the efficacy of inclusive education.

For inclusive education to be successful, Mbua (2023) claimed that school leaders must play a critical role. In this regard, the understanding of inclusive education by school principals is essential to promoting inclusive schools. According to Geleta (2019), the principal views inclusive education as providing opportunities for disabled people to fully participate in the educational process. Principals' conceptualisation of inclusive education is founded on a philosophical approach rather than just a physical placement in a mainstream context, accor-

ding to Merrigan and Senior (2023). The latter discovered that the principals were sceptical of the claim that children with special education needs benefit the most from regular education. They underlined that whether a school is a mainstream or special education environment, participation in all aspects of school life is essential to inclusion. Mbua (2023) found that principals' conceptions of inclusion are predicated on their appreciation of diversity and their role in helping students become ready for a world that is becoming increasingly diverse. The latter studies showed favourable attitudes and emphasised the importance of principal leadership in inclusive education. Scheer (2021) shares the differing points of view of principals on inclusive education. The scholar discovered that inclusion is limited to integrating students with special needs into regular classrooms and does not always equate to scepticism about the implementation of inclusive education. However, a study by Nzuzza (2024) found that some teachers still believed that learners who experience barriers to learning should be enrolled in special schools. This notion displays negative attitudes and goes against the principles of inclusive education.

The gap in the literature on principals' understanding of inclusive education lies in the need for more comprehensive research on how principals conceptualise inclusive education and how their perceptions influence implementing inclusive practices in schools (Mbua, 2023). This deficiency hinders their ability to effectively lead and manage inclusive educational environments. Although some studies have classified principals' understandings and perceptions of inclusive education (Poon-McBrayer, 2017), there is a lack of in-depth analysis of how these understandings and perceptions directly impact the strategies and actions taken by school

leaders to foster an inclusive environment. Furthermore, there is a need to explore the relationship between principals' leadership styles and their attitudes toward inclusion and how these attitudes shape the school's inclusive education practices (Scheer, 2021). This gap highlights the importance of further research to understand better the complexities of principals' roles in inclusive education. Therefore, this study explored the understanding of inclusive education by principals. This study was conducted to answer the following question: What is the principals' understanding of inclusive education?

2. Method

This study used the interpretivism paradigm due to its significance in natural environments (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Other scholars have argued that interpretivism allows researchers to understand social life and the meaning people attach to specific phenomena (de Vos et al., 2017). This study conceptualised the understanding of inclusive education in primary schools. Therefore, the interpretivist paradigm was deemed suitable for this study. In this study, a qualitative approach was used. According to the literature, a qualitative approach allows exploring and understanding human experiences and interpretations associated with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; de Vos et al., 2017; du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014; Thambu et al., 2021). Therefore, the existing study explored principals' understanding of inclusive education to gather their interpretations of this concept (Suleiman et al., 2019). This study used a case study design. According to Yin (2015), the design of case studies is an empi-

rical investigation of the phenomenon in the real world. Using a case study, this study aims to understand the principles of inclusiveness. Therefore, the emphasis of this study on principals in six different schools qualified the use of a case study.

a. Participants

This study used convenience sampling to select six primary schools in the uMgundlovu district in the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. According to Cohen et al. (2018), convenience sampling allows researchers to choose the nearest study sites that are accessible during the research process. Therefore, six schools were selected based on their proximity to the researcher. Six participants were part of the research process and the schools they led were the research sites. Specifically, the sample consisted of four female and two male principals. The anonymity of the schools and participants was demonstrated using pseudonyms. For example, participants were named Principal 1 – 6 and Schools A – F. According to du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), anonymity is essential when a researcher assumes that the names of participants will not be recorded at any stage of the research process. Furthermore, participants were asked to provide their informed consent to participate. Participants were also notified that they could choose to withdraw at any time during the investigation if, for any reason, they felt obliged to do so. The research schools that outline their quintile rankings and demographic information are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Schools	School Quintile Ranking	Participants	Gender	Years of Experience
A	3	Principal 1	Female	9
B	2	Principal 2	Female	8
C	2	Principal 3	Female	2
D	3	Principal 4	Female	5
E	3	Principal 5	Male	3
F	2	Principal 6	Male	7

b. Procedures

The interviews were conducted meticulously to ensure the collection of comprehensive data. Before the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Semi-structured interviews with participants were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of inclusive education (de Vos et al., 2017). The participants were asked the following fundamental question. What is your understanding of inclusive education? The researcher made individual appointments with each participant at a time that was convenient for them and all interviews were conducted at each participant's school. Each interview was recorded using a voice recorder and lasted 30 – 40 minutes for each participant. Semi-structured interviews allowed interactive conversations, ensuring that the study was enriched with detailed and in-depth descriptions of participants' experiences, views, and opinions regarding inclusive education.

c. Data Analyses

The verbal transcripts of the interviews were arranged and classified according to themes that emerged with respect to the participants' perceptions of inclusive education. Qualitative content analysis was used to

analyse the data. De Vos et al. (2017) postulate that content analysis provides information, fresh perspectives, and details that facilitate replication and legitimate deductions from data in all circumstances. Researchers have thoroughly understood inclusive education using a coding approach (Cohen et al., 2018). After reviewing each interview transcript multiple times, the researcher noted the significant emerging themes and patterns. Therefore, codes were created, compared, and redefined as required. Cohen et al. (2018) claimed that the coding procedure helps record the viewpoints shared by participants and the trends that surfaced additional data-generating tools. A member check was used to increase the rigour of the data and a report was returned to the participants to determine whether they felt that the findings provided transferability and credibility to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014).

3. Result and Discussion

a. Findings

This section covers the results of this study, which examined the principals' perceptions of inclusive education. The results are relevant for the conceptualization of inclusive education by principals. Table 2 summarises these data.

Table 2. Data Illustration

	Aspect	Description
1	Holistic Approach to Inclusive Education	Teaching the Whole Child Inclusive education focusses on addressing the entire spectrum of a child's needs
		Equal Opportunities Ensures that all children have the same learning opportunities regardless of their abilities
2	Non-Discriminatory Practices	Integration All students are integrated into the learning process together
3	Differentiated Instruction	Catering to Needs The teaching methods are adjusted to meet the unique needs of each student
		Diverse Examples Use of varied examples to ensure that all students can relate to the material
4	Real-World Connections	Relevance Incorporating real-world examples makes learning more engaging
		Concrete Objects Use of tangible items to represent abstract concepts

As illustrated in Table 2, the findings reveal that inclusive education is based on treating all learners equally and without discrimination. This includes recognising that every child is teachable and has the potential to learn and succeed. Principal 4 from School D echoed the following.

“My understanding of IE is that you teach a child holistically. In inclusive education, you do not discriminate. Perhaps this person cannot see, hear, or have a disability. You teach them to understand that children need a place to learn. When you take all of them and put them in front of you, know that they need a place to learn. In inclusive education, you teach a child as is. Then, when you discover that there are challenges, you must have ways to tackle those problems so that the learners can get the education that he or she is in school for at the end of the day. Inclusive education treats all learners the same. Recall that we are the same in the eyes of the Lord. So, you take a child as they are, then you will find when in the classroom that there are these problems, but you teach the child whole as they are. In inclusive education, everyone is teachable. Recall that the child has been born and has gone through all stages. Everyone is teachable; that is how I see inclusive education. You take the child as they are put in the classroom and guide them along the way until there is a place of learning where they are taken to deal with whatever challenges they have to prosper in the future.”

The above findings revealed that inclusive education is about accepting learners as they are and that learners deserve education in a classroom without victimisation. The findings emphasise that inclusive education should focus on the education of learners, as learners can learn despite any challenges that might come in the way of education. Principal 6 from School F shared similar views, stating that inclusive education is about maintaining a balance among all learners in the classroom.

“Inclusive education is an educational practice in the classroom where teaching and learning are inclusive of all inside. This means that those with academic abilities or intelligence are better than those, and others with shortcomings can co-exist and live together. Educators can strike a balance to accommodate the different types of learners in the classroom. While not compromising the quality of education. To achieve such an environment, we need to invest more in teachers to understand the nature of classrooms, not just in this school but even in another school. There are a variety of learners. Some are capable, and some are not, so the moment we go, we understand that in the classroom, we can bring about inclusive education with no one sidelined. Not that others get priority, and the way teaching works is for them only because the teacher says ‘ngihamba nabahambayo’. The slow one is not accommodated, and why he is slow is not

understood. Also, my understanding of inclusive education is that the school must create opportunities and an environment that can accommodate even a disabled child. IE must accommodate every type of learner. We have shortcomings in the areas of ramps and infrastructure.”

These findings show that inclusive education should care for all learners equally during teaching and learning. The findings give educators the responsibility to ensure that all learners are accommodated without discrimination and that schools always provide opportunities for inclusion. Another participant, based on the understanding of inclusive education in the curriculum, stated that learners should be taught in the classroom. Principal 5 from School E had the following characteristics:

“My understanding of inclusive education is that every learner is unique and different, and you can tell this from the careers available in the world and South Africa. This shows that we cannot all do the same thing, so education in the classroom should not be treated as such. In short, the curriculum should be suitable for any learner, regardless of their family background.”

The above findings reveal that inclusive education is unique to learners and that the curriculum should include learners from all backgrounds. Similarly, Principal 3 from School C was added to the curriculum discussion.

“Inclusive education is when a teacher teaches so that it accommodates all levels of learners. For example, when creating a map of South Africa, you can use colours for provinces instead of names to accommodate those less gifted or struggling. Sometimes bring concrete objects to represent what you are teaching about. I understand that when teaching accommodates all levels of learners, it makes it more practical for those. Even when performing activities and worksheets, it is essential to design them to

accommodate all levels of learners using a differentiated curriculum.”

The above findings reveal that inclusive education calls for the differentiation of struggling learners. The findings also advocate the use of natural things to symbolise lessons. The other participants shared the same sentiment. Principal 1 from School A shared the following points:

“My understanding of inclusive education is that all learners, gifted or poor, must be accommodated. Inclusive education accommodates everyone by implementing differentiation, if necessary.”

The above findings reveal that inclusive education accommodates all learners regardless of their differences and emphasises inclusion during teaching and learning. Similarly, Principal 2 from School B shared that some learners experience mental challenges, but this does not mean that they cannot be educated.

“Inclusive education means that learners do not separate according to their learning levels. In inclusive education, there is nothing like having the mentally challenged learner learn separately and those performing well learn separately. So you need to include all of them in the lesson even though others have challenges, so that helps even to screen learners and bullying.”

The above findings revealed that inclusive education is about creating an environment where all students, regardless of their abilities, learn together and are valued equally. It's not about separating students based on their learning levels or abilities but rather about creating a supportive and accepting community where everyone feels included and supported.

b. Discussion

To implement inclusive education, a comprehensive approach must be adopted. This journey begins with rigorous and continuous teacher training in differentiated instruction, understanding diverse learners, and inclusive classroom management. The curriculum should be dynamic and adaptable, with resources and support that extend beyond co-existence. This requires sufficient funding for specialist staff and materials and ensuring accessible infrastructure for all. Fostering an inclusive school culture that cherishes diversity and belonging bolstered by social-emotional learning programmes is the foundation of inclusive education's transformative potential. This study offers profound insights into inclusive education, underscoring its principles and practical implications for schools. The findings highlight the importance of a discrimination-free learning environment that reinforces the principle of equality by treating all learners equally. [Göransson and Nilholm \(2014\)](#) argued that inclusive education is a powerful tool to combat discrimination and exclusion, focussing on diversity, fairness, citizenship, and the universal right to adequate and customised education for all learners. They emphasise the need for schools to provide a supportive and inclusive environment that values and respects all students.

The participants consistently emphasised that all learners were teachable, reflecting an optimistic and inclusive mindset. This finding supports the view that no student should be separated from the teaching process due to their intellectual level. This perspective collaborates with [Corral-Granados et al. \(2024\)](#), who asserted that inclusion should ensure quality teaching for students with special needs and describe what teaching should look like for all students with diverse needs. The need to include all learners in the

same lesson, regardless of their academic ability, is paramount. This suggests that inclusive education should accommodate all learners. This finding agrees with the study by [Mbua \(2023\)](#), who postulated that inclusive education goes beyond teaching and learning and must involve the school environment to support all learners. The findings further emphasise the individuality of each learner, noting that learners come from diverse cultural backgrounds and should not be treated the same. This supports inclusive educational principles, ensuring that all learners feel valued and understood. This is consistent with the views of [Corral-Granados et al. \(2024\)](#), who highlighted that inclusion addresses differences such as gender and cultural background.

The study findings suggest the use of a differentiated curriculum to cater to all levels of learners in the same lesson and the use of various teaching strategies to address individual needs. This practical approach to inclusive education ensures that learners who struggle in the classroom receive tailored support. Diverse learners are those with different learning styles, abilities, and needs. This included students with disabilities, various cultural backgrounds, and students with other academic skills. This collaborates with research that high-quality inclusive education provides a sense of belonging when an individualised curriculum is offered and emphasises the importance of curriculum flexibility and adaptable resources for the success of inclusive education ([Lindner & Schwab, 2020](#); [Norwich, 2020](#)). The study findings highlight the importance of equality, personalised support, and the need for comprehensive teacher training. This includes training teachers through professional development programmes to manage diverse classrooms, promote positive interactions between students, and adapt teaching materials to diffe-

rent learning styles. Comprehensive preparation is crucial to the successful implementation of inclusive education. These findings are consistent with those of Nzuzza (2024), who found that educators who have undergone professional development in inclusive education understand and accommodate diverse learners in the classroom.

In addition, the study revealed that schools should improve their infrastructure, such as modifying classrooms, restrooms, and playgrounds, to make them accessible to all learners, including those with disabilities. This could include installing ramps for wheelchair access, providing adjustable desks for students with mobility issues, and ensuring that all areas of the school are well-built and easy to navigate. This cannot be overstated, as it ensures that physical environments support inclusive practices, making it easier for all learners to navigate and use school facilities. This is consistent with a study by Nzuzza (2024), who found that schools should have specific and unique facilities to accommodate diverse learners. By addressing the practical implications of this study on understanding inclusive education, more opportunities will be created and inclusive classrooms will be realised.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study revealed that inclusive education is not only about teaching learners as they are, but also about embracing diversity, accommodating different learning styles, and providing support to overcome challenges. This study found that creating a truly inclusive learning environment within South African primary schools is essential to ensure that all learners, regardless of their background or ability, have the potential and opportunity to thrive. The study revealed that while participants had positive attitudes towards inclusive education and

understood its core principles, significant challenges hindered its successful implementation. Furthermore, this study emphasises the importance of inclusive teaching methods to accommodate diverse learners. However, the study highlights critical barriers such as inadequate infrastructure and the need for increased teacher training.

Based on the findings obtained in this study, it was recommended that, school principals, teachers, policy makers and other stakeholders must prioritise professional programmes for teachers, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement inclusive practices effectively. At the same time, investing in accessible infrastructure and establishing clear policies are vital steps towards creating an inclusive learning environment. The study recommends that further research explore more information on understanding the concept of inclusive education and its practices in diverse global contexts to achieve educational and social goals.

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