E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (EHASS)
ISSN – Online 2720-7722 | Print 2821-8949
Volume 7 Issue 10 2026 pp 3185 – 3192
Available online at: https://noyam.org/journals/ehass/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202671018

Check for updates

Overcrowding, an obstacle to the implementation of individual attention on reading: A case of five inclusive Rural Primary Schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa

Maite E. Maebana [1]

[1] University of South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Several factors impact the proper organisation and planning of teaching in South African classrooms. Overcrowding is rife in the inclusive rural primary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. This study aimed to investigate the effect of overcrowding as an obstacle to implementing individual attention to reading in inclusive rural primary schools in Limpopo, South Africa. The study followed a qualitative research approach, where a case study design was adopted. Six Foundation Phase teachers were purposively selected to participate in the study, based on their experience in teaching in inclusive rural primary schools. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The generated data was analysed through a thematic content analysis method. The findings revealed that overcrowding in inclusive rural primary schools prohibits teachers from attending Professional Development Programmes and Workshops. The implementation of inclusive education is negatively affected by overcrowding, which limits effective teaching strategies and support for learners with diverse needs. Professional development opportunities should be made more accessible to teachers in rural areas through localised workshops and the provision of classroom support during training periods. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education by informing educational policy, teacher training, and school planning by highlighting the need for structural and systemic changes to support inclusive education in rural South African contexts.

Keywords: Admission Policies, Individual Attention, Inclusivity, Obstacles, Overcrowding.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a global priority in pursuit of equitable and quality education for all learners, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has made significant strides in promoting inclusive education, particularly through policies such as the Education White Paper 6, which advocates for the inclusion of learners with diverse educational needs in mainstream classrooms.[1] Despite these efforts, several systemic and contextual challenges

[1] South Africa. Department of Education, *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (Department of Education, 2001).

CORRESPONDENCE – Maite E. Maebana **Email:** maebame@unisa.ac.za
PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received: 10th March, 2026 | Accepted: 7th September, 2026 | Published: 20th November, 2026.
TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Maebana, Maite E. "Overcrowding, an obstacle to the implementation of individual attention on reading: A case of five inclusive Rural Primary Schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no.10 (2026): 3185 – 3191. https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202671018
COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING - © 2026 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Journals.
This is an open access article under the CCBY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

persist, especially in rural areas like Limpopo Province, where limited infrastructure, teacher shortages, and high learner enrolment contribute to overcrowded classrooms.

Overcrowding in classrooms is an international issue that affects the quality of teaching and learning.[2] In South Africa's rural schools, this problem is intensified by a lack of resources and insufficient support for teachers. Although initiatives such as the provision of mobile classrooms have been implemented, rural schools continue to experience large learner intakes, making effective inclusive education difficult to achieve. Overcrowding compromises teachers' ability to provide individual attention, especially for learners who require remedial support or differentiated instruction. Moreover, overcrowded classrooms often lead to increased behavioural challenges, poor learner performance, and heightened teacher stress.While previous studies have explored the challenges of inclusive education in South Africa, there remains a significant gap in understanding how overcrowding specifically affects teachers' ability to support individual learning needs in rural inclusive settings. In particular, there is limited qualitative research focusing on Foundation Phase teachers in Limpopo Province, who are at the forefront of early literacy development and are expected to cater to learners with varying educational needs in overcrowded classrooms.

This study aims to investigate the effect of overcrowding as an obstacle in implementing individual attention to reading in inclusive rural primary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. By focusing on teachers' lived experiences, the study sought to uncover the practical implications of overcrowding on classroom management, learner engagement, and professional development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Osai conducted a study on teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms in a basic school in Ghana.[3] The findings of the study revealed that educators' perceptions of overcrowded classrooms are 'stressful'. Similarly, teachers described some situations in an overcrowded classroom which they defined as stressful. Some of the descriptions given by educators include insufficient learning environments, safety and health concerns, limited contact between pupils and educators, disruptive behaviour, emotional and mental challenges for educators, increased workload, and insufficient time in the classroom. In addition, the factors contributing to traumatic experiences include lack of administrative support, lack of policy enforcement, insufficient teacher preparation and professional development, and lack of teaching materials for learning.

In the same breath, Marais research revealed that numerous problems were experienced by teachers who were teaching in overcrowded classrooms. Guiding principles regarding support from lecturers, significant observation, and the responsible engagement of mentor teachers are suggested.[4] In addition, Van Vuuren conducted a study on the effect of policy and law on inclusive education in overcrowded Gauteng classrooms. The findings revealed that educational policies and laws do affect the teaching and learning of inclusive education in overcrowded Gauteng classrooms.[5] Inclusive education can only be successful if teachers have an extensive understanding of how to identify barriers to learning, obtain skills to implement inclusive education in overcrowded classrooms and plan for diversity with confidence.

Lack of individual attention

The lack of individual attention often results in the emergence of adverse effects on the learners who are struggling and may need extra attention. These impact learning outcomes, as these learners are more likely to have lower test results. Overcrowding can lead to a chaotic classroom environment that is more difficult for the teacher to manage. West and Meier conducted a study on overcrowded classrooms. The

---

[2] H. Hachem and F. Mayor, " Overcrowded Classrooms: A Threat to Educational Quality," *International Journal of Educational Research* 94 (2019): 1–12.

[3] J.A Osai, "Experiences with Overcrowded Classrooms in Basic Education in Ghana," 2021.

[4] Petro Marais, "'We Can't Believe What We See': Overcrowded Classrooms through the Eyes of Student Teachers," *South African Journal of Education* 36, no. 2 (May 31, 2016): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v36n2a1201.

[5] Adel Janse Van Vuuren, *The Effect of Policy and Law on Inclusive Education in Overcrowded Gauteng Classrooms* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2020).

findings revealed a lack of infrastructure, such as a lack of classrooms, as well as a high LER the number of learners per teacher in a classroom, and the possible solutions and strategies employed when dealing with overcrowded classrooms.[6]

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Shulman's Theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (1986)

This study is guided by Shulman's Theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), which integrates both the understanding of subject matter and the methods for teaching that content effectively. Shulman argued that excellent teaching requires more than content mastery; it demands the ability to transform subject knowledge into forms that are understandable to diverse learners.[7] This theoretical lens is particularly relevant in the context of overcrowded inclusive classrooms, where Foundation Phase teachers face challenges in balancing curriculum delivery with the diverse learning needs of many learners.

In inclusive settings, the ability to adapt teaching strategies to accommodate all learners, especially in overcrowded classrooms, is a practical application of PCK. Teachers must not only understand reading instruction content but must also know how to present it in ways that are developmentally appropriate, accessible, and engaging to a wide range of learners, including those with learning barriers.

Shulman identified several key components of teacher knowledge:

Content Knowledge: This is the teacher's grasp of the subject matter, in this case, reading instruction in the Foundation Phase.

- **Pedagogical Knowledge:** This refers to general teaching strategies, including classroom management and lesson planning, which become crucial in managing large, inclusive classrooms.
- **Curricular Knowledge**: Teachers need to understand the structure and sequencing of content and be aware of suitable instructional materials that align with the curriculum.
- **Knowledge of Learners:** Understanding how different learners process information and what teaching methods are most effective for various needs.
- **Knowledge of Educational Context:** Awareness of school infrastructure, resources, community backgrounds, and classroom constraints.
- **Knowledge of Educational Ends:** Insight into the goals and values of education.

In the context of this study, Shulman's theory helps frame how teachers' knowledge bases influence their classroom practices in overcrowded settings. Teachers must not only manage a large number of learners but must do so while ensuring that the quality of teaching, particularly in reading, is not compromised. The theory also emphasizes the importance of continuous professional development, which enables teachers to refine their pedagogical strategies and respond effectively to the dynamic needs of inclusive classrooms.

Applying PCK to the findings of this study sheds light on the challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers in rural settings of Limpopo Province, where overcrowded classrooms often limit the extent to which teachers can provide individualized support and implement interactive reading strategies. Despite these constraints, the study found that teachers who possess strong pedagogical and content knowledge, and who regularly participate in professional development workshops, were better able to navigate the demands of inclusive education.

Shulman's Theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge provides a comprehensive framework to understand the interaction between teacher expertise and instructional practice in overcrowded inclusive classrooms. It highlights the essential role of teacher knowledge in achieving educational outcomes, particularly in complex environments where learners' needs are varied, and resources are limited.

---

[6] Joyce West and Corinne Meier, "Overcrowded Classrooms – The Achilles Heel of South African Education?," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (April 30, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.617.

[7] L. S. Shulman, "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching. ," *Educational Researcher* 15, no.2(1986): 4-14.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach within a case study design framework. The qualitative approach was chosen to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges of Foundation Phase teachers working in overcrowded inclusive classrooms. A case study design enabled the researcher to gain in-depth insight into real-world practices within the natural context of selected schools in Limpopo Province.

Study Sample and Population

The study was conducted in the Dimamo Circuit, located in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The population included Foundation Phase teachers teaching in inclusive rural primary schools. A purposive sampling technique was used to select eight teachers from four mainstream primary schools. The selection criteria included: teachers currently teaching in inclusive Foundation Phase classrooms; their experience in teaching reading; and participation in ongoing professional development programmes related to reading instruction.

This sampling approach ensured that participants possessed the knowledge and experience necessary to provide rich, relevant data related to the study objectives.

Data Collection

Data was collected through two primary methods:

- Semi-structured interviews, which allowed for open-ended responses while still addressing key themes related to overcrowding, reading instruction, and professional development;
- Document analysis, which involved reviewing lesson plans, classroom records, and professional development materials to triangulate and support interview findings.

These methods enabled the collection of comprehensive, context-specific data aligned with the study's qualitative nature.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected was analysed using thematic content analysis, guided by Creswell's (2009) model of data analysis. The process included:

- Transcribing the interviews;
- Reading and re-reading the data for familiarization;
- Coding the data into meaningful units;
- Identifying and grouping emerging themes;
- Interpreting the themes in relation to the research questions and Shulman's (1986) Theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge.

This analysis approach allowed for the identification of patterns and insights into how overcrowding affects reading instruction in inclusive classrooms.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection. All participants were fully informed about the aims, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study in a language they understood. They were given an opportunity to ask questions and received clear explanations before signing consent forms. Participants' identities, as well as the names of the schools involved, were protected through the use of pseudonyms. All data were stored securely, and access was restricted to the research team. No personally identifiable information was disclosed in any publication or presentation arising from this study. Also, participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation or to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any consequences or penalties. These ethical measures ensured the study was conducted with integrity and in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that overcrowded classrooms present a serious challenge to the successful implementation of inclusive education and effective reading instruction in Foundation Phase classrooms within rural primary schools in Limpopo Province. The participants' narratives reflect a shared concern over the impact of overcrowding on learner engagement, instructional quality, and overall educational outcomes.

Impact on Teaching and Learning

Overcrowded classrooms limit teachers' ability to engage learners through interactive and learner-centered pedagogies. One participant stated, *"Learners learn better through playing; this is highly difficult, especially in overcrowded classes."* This sentiment aligns with the literature, which emphasizes that Foundation Phase learners, in particular, benefit from hands-on and play-based learning.[8] However, with class sizes far exceeding the recommended ratio of 1:25,[9] the physical space and attention required for such pedagogical approaches become impractical. The inability to manage classroom space and learner movement effectively undermines the core principles of inclusive education, which emphasize differentiated instruction and the accommodation of diverse learner needs.[10]

Learner Diversity and Individual Support

Another recurring theme from the findings is the struggle to accommodate learners with varying learning abilities. One teacher observed: *"Our classrooms consist of learners with diverse needs. Some are slow, and some can quickly grasp the content without many difficulties."* This reflects the inherent complexity of inclusive classrooms, where teachers are expected to address a broad spectrum of cognitive, emotional, and developmental differences. Research by Loreman et al. stresses the importance of differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms, where learning activities should be tailored to meet individual learner profiles.[11] However, the study shows that overcrowding restricts teachers' capacity to implement such strategies, leading to a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to support struggling readers adequately.

This challenge is compounded by the lack of teacher assistants. A Grade 2 teacher explained that she is responsible for 70 learners without any support staff. This not only increases the administrative and emotional burden on the teacher but also compromises the quality of education. Studies in South Africa have similarly found that teacher workload and the absence of classroom assistants hinder effective implementation of inclusive education policies.[12]

Negative Emotional and Behavioural Outcomes

The participants also reported a correlation between overcrowding and learners' behavioural issues. One teacher described how the use of the "telling method" – where the teacher does most of the talking – limits learner participation: *"We do all the talking, and learners are required to listen for long periods. This leads to frustration, boredom, and disruptive behaviour."* This observation is supported by research which argues that passive learning environments diminish student motivation and promote disengagement, particularly among younger learners.[13] In overcrowded settings, learners may not only struggle academically but may also develop negative attitudes toward school, further exacerbating the cycle of poor performance and dropout.

---

[8] UNESCO, "Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future," 2020.

[9] Department of Basic Education, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): Foundation Phase Grades R–3* (Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, 2011).

[10] Lani Florian and Kristine Black-Hawkins, "Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy," *British Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 5 (October 2, 2011): 813–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.501096.

[11] Timothy John Loreman, Joanne Marie Deppeler, and David Hubert Harvey, *Inclusive Education. Supporting Diversity in the Classroom* (Routledge, 2010).

[12] Petra Engelbrecht et al., "Enacting Understanding of Inclusion in Complex Contexts: Classroom Practices of South African Teachers," *South African Journal of Education* 35, no. 3 (August 31, 2015): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v35n3a1074.

[13] Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, no. 1 (January 2000): 54–67, https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1020.

Infrastructural Constraints and Systemic Issues

The findings also echo national and provincial reports regarding infrastructure shortages in rural South African schools. Matshipi et al. identified that many classrooms are too small and ill-equipped to handle large numbers of learners.[14] A teacher in this study stated: *"The situation in this school is unbearable… we are expected to do miracles."* This highlights the emotional toll on teachers working under conditions that fail to meet basic educational standards. Furthermore, the increased learner-educator ratio from 27.4 in 2012 to 29.8 in 2021 illustrates that the issue is not isolated but part of a broader systemic problem that undermines the quality of public education in South Africa.[15]

Inclusive Education Undermined by Overcrowding

The principles of inclusive education as articulated in White Paper 6 advocate for the transformation of teaching practices to meet the needs of all learners, including those with learning barriers.[16] However, the findings of this study suggest that overcrowded classrooms fundamentally obstruct the realization of these goals. Teachers are unable to provide individual attention, conduct meaningful assessments, or create positive classroom climates conducive to learning. This undermines efforts to ensure equity and quality in education for all learners, particularly those with special educational needs.

Comparative Perspectives and International Relevance

This issue is not unique to South Africa. In the United States, overcrowding has also been identified as a major reason for the decline in educational quality.[17] International research further supports the notion that large class sizes are inversely correlated with learner achievement, particularly in the early years of schooling.[18] However, the impact may be more pronounced in developing contexts where resources are scarce, teacher training is inconsistent, and infrastructure is inadequate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results have shown that participants believed that overcrowded classes led to limited personalized individual interaction with learners in the Foundation Phase Classes, and poor time management, which are associated with poorer literacy and reading performance. It is therefore recommended that problem-solving strategies, which cover issues such as prejudiced actions and the language proficiency barrier with regard to the teaching of Reading in the Foundation Phase, are imperative during in-service teacher training. If implemented, these strategies will enhance classroom atmospheres conducive to teaching and learning, which will ultimately create greater opportunities for a better quality of education for all learners.

CONCLUSION

The discussion highlights the strong and multifaceted effects of classroom overcrowding on teaching effectiveness, learner engagement, and the broader goals of inclusive education in Limpopo Province. The findings call for urgent policy attention and structural intervention, including investment in school infrastructure, recruitment and training of additional teachers and support staff, reduction of class sizes and strengthening of in-service teacher development on inclusive pedagogy. Addressing overcrowding is not merely a logistical concern but a critical step toward ensuring educational equity and fulfilling the promise of inclusive education.

---

[14] M. M Matshipi, N. A Mulaudzi, and M Lekhetho, "Challenges Faced by Schools in Implementation of Inclusive Education in South Africa," *Journal of Education and Practice* 8, no. 28 (2017): 28–34.

[15] M Gustafsson, "Learner–Educator Ratios and Their Impact on Learning Outcomes in South African Schools ," *Working Paper* (Stellenbosch University, 2022).

[16] Department of Education, "Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System" (Pretoria: Department of Education, 2001).

[17] The Tech Edvocate, "The Effects of Overcrowded Classrooms on Education," 2021, https://www.thetechedvocate.org/the-effects-of-overcrowded-classrooms-on-education/.

[18] Peter Blatchford, Paul Bassett, and Penelope Brown, "Examining the Effect of Class Size on Classroom Engagement and Teacher–Pupil Interaction: Differences in Relation to Pupil Prior Attainment and Primary vs. Secondary Schools," *Learning and Instruction* 21, no. 6 (December 2011): 715–30, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2011.04.001.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blatchford, Peter, Paul Bassett, and Penelope Brown. "Examining the Effect of Class Size on Classroom Engagement and Teacher–Pupil Interaction: Differences in Relation to Pupil Prior Attainment and Primary vs. Secondary Schools." *Learning and Instruction* 21, no. 6 (December 2011): 715–30. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2011.04.001.

Department of Basic Education. *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): Foundation Phase Grades R–3*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, 2011.

Department of Education. "Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System." Pretoria: Department of Education, 2001.

Education, South Africa. Department of. *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System*. Department of Education, 2001.

Engelbrecht, Petra, Mirna Nel, Norma Nel, and Dan Tlale. "Enacting Understanding of Inclusion in Complex Contexts: Classroom Practices of South African Teachers." *South African Journal of Education* 35, no. 3 (August 31, 2015): 1–10. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v35n3a1074.

Florian, Lani, and Kristine Black-Hawkins. "Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy." *British Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 5 (October 2, 2011): 813–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.501096.

Gustafsson, M. "Learner–Educator Ratios and Their Impact on Learning Outcomes in South African Schools." *Working Paper*. Stellenbosch University, 2022.

Hachem, H., and F. Mayor. " Overcrowded Classrooms: A Threat to Educational Quality." *International Journal of Educational Research* 94 (2019): 1–12.

Loreman, Timothy John, Joanne Marie Deppeler, and David Hubert Harvey. *Inclusive Education. Supporting Diversity in the Classroom*. Routledge, 2010.

Marais, Petro. "'We Can't Believe What We See': Overcrowded Classrooms through the Eyes of Student Teachers." *South African Journal of Education* 36, no. 2 (May 31, 2016): 1–10. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v36n2a1201.

Matshipi, M. M., N. A Mulaudzi, and M Lekhetho. "Challenges Faced by Schools in Implementation of Inclusive Education in South Africa."*Journal of Education and Practice* 8, no.28(2017):28–34.

Osai, J.A. "Experiences with Overcrowded Classrooms in Basic Education in Ghana," 2021.

Ryan, Richard M., and Edward L. Deci. "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions." *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, no. 1 (January 2000): 54–67. https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1020.

Shulman, L. S. "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching." *Educational Researcher* 15, no. 2 (1986): 4-14.

The Tech Edvocate. "The Effects of Overcrowded Classrooms on Education," 2021. https://www.thetechedvocate.org/the-effects-of-overcrowded-classrooms-on-education/.

UNESCO. "Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future," 2020.

Vuuren, Adel Janse Van. *The Effect of Policy and Law on Inclusive Education in Overcrowded Gauteng Classrooms*. University of South Africa (South Africa), 2020.

West, Joyce, and Corinne Meier. "Overcrowded Classrooms – The Achilles Heel of South African Education?" *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10, no. 1 (April 30, 2020). https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.617.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Dr. Maite E. Maebana, a senior academic leader and curriculum specialist at the University of South Africa (UNISA), with extensive expertise in teacher education, assessment design, and inclusive pedagogy. He coordinates the National Education Committee (NEC), supervises teaching practice and research students, and provides structured professional augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) training to educators across Limpopo, and Mpumalanga provinces, in South Africa. His scholarship is grounded in Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and emphasizes culturally responsive teaching, integrating African philosophies such as Ubuntu, Bosadi, and Letsema into classroom practice. Dr. Maebana has advanced postgraduate training in qualitative methodology and

curriculum design, complemented by professional development in emotional intelligence and inclusive education. Passionate about mentoring, He supports student teachers through collaborative supervision and evidence-based practice. His current research focuses on literacy development, inclusive schooling, and manuscript publication on AAC in special schools.