

Strategies for Promoting Inclusive Education in the General Education and Training Phase in Rural Schools, the Case of a Grade 9 Economic Management Sciences Classroom in Limpopo Province – South Africa



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ABSTRACT

This study explored strategies for promoting inclusive education in Grade 9 economic management sciences (EMS) classrooms in rural schools within Limpopo Province, South Africa, using a qualitative, case study approach. Data from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 20 participants, including EMS teachers, departmental heads, and principals, revealed five key themes: Differentiated instruction and teaching adaptation, teacher training and professional development, collaboration and support structures, challenges in resource availability, and leadership and administrative support for inclusion. The study highlights that despite the significant challenges rural schools face, there are actionable strategies, such as enhanced professional development, differentiated instruction, and increased collaboration, that can promote inclusivity in EMS classrooms. These findings provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers aiming to advance inclusive education in economically disadvantaged areas.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a critical focus in education systems worldwide, aiming to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have access to quality education.¹ In the South African context, the principles of inclusive education are embedded within the broader framework of education equity, as enshrined in the Constitution and supported by policies such as the White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education.² However, the practical implementation of inclusive education remains a significant challenge, especially in rural areas, where resources are limited, and teachers face unique

¹ Peder Haug, "Understanding Inclusive Education: Ideals and Reality," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 19, no. 3 (2017): 206–17; Mel Ainscow, "Promoting Inclusion and Equity in Education: Lessons from International Experiences," *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy* 6, no. 1 (2020): 7–16; David Mitchell and Dean Sutherland, *What Really Works in Special and Inclusive Education: Using Evidence-Based Teaching Strategies* (Routledge, 2020).

² Department of Basic Education, *Education White Paper* (Pretoria: DBE, 2001); Nasreen Seedat, "A Thematic Review of Inclusive Education Research in South Africa," 2018.

difficulties in creating inclusive environments. This is particularly evident in the General Education and Training (GET) phase, where educators are tasked with accommodating diverse learners, including those with learning disabilities, socioeconomic challenges, and language barriers.³

The subject of economic management sciences (EMS), which is introduced in Grade 7 and continues to Grade 9, poses particular challenges for inclusive education due to its multidisciplinary nature, encompassing economics, accounting, and business studies.⁴ These subjects require abstract thinking, problem-solving skills, and conceptual understanding, which can be difficult for learners with diverse learning needs in rural settings. Given the critical role of EMS in preparing learners for further studies in commercial subjects and life skills, it is essential to explore strategies that can support the promotion of inclusive education within this subject area.⁵ The implementation of inclusive education policies in rural schools in Limpopo Province, particularly in the Economic management sciences (EMS) classroom, remains limited despite efforts to provide equal learning opportunities for all students. Rural schools face numerous challenges, including limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and diverse learner needs, which hinder the promotion of inclusive practices.⁶ The complexity of the EMS subject, requiring learners to grasp abstract and practical concepts across multiple disciplines, further exacerbates these challenges. Therefore, there is a pressing need for research to identify strategies that teachers and administrators can adopt to promote inclusive education in Grade 9 EMS classrooms within rural schools facing resource constraints.⁷ The primary aim of this study is to explore and identify effective strategies for promoting inclusive education in Grade 9 EMS classrooms in rural schools in Limpopo Province. It seeks to understand the practices, perceptions, and challenges faced by teachers and administrators, with the goal of providing recommendations to improve inclusivity in the classroom. The study objectives include exploring current strategies used by EMS teachers, identifying challenges faced by educators and administrators, examining perceptions of the effectiveness of current practices, and proposing practical recommendations for improving inclusive education in Grade 9 EMS classrooms, considering the specific challenges of rural schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mvududu and Thiel-Burgess state that social constructivism is an ideal framework for inclusive education, as it recognizes that learners bring diverse abilities and perspectives into the classroom.⁸ It supports differentiated instruction by encouraging collaborative learning, where students engage in peer-supported activities to build knowledge together.⁹ Teachers, as facilitators, adapt their methods to meet varied learning needs, particularly in complex subjects like EMS. This approach is especially relevant in rural schools in Limpopo Province, where social and cultural contexts influence learning. By fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment, social constructivism helps create more engaging and meaningful learning experiences for all students.

³ J. Kormos and A. M. Smith, *Teaching languages to students with specific learning differences*, 18 (2023) Channel View Publications.

⁴ T. C. Musetha, *Challenges facing the teaching and learning of accounting as a subject in Vhembe East District in Limpopo Province* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Limpopo, 2022).

⁵ Emmanuel O Adu and Sindiswa S Zondo, "Exploring Teacher's Perspectives on the Relevance of Teaching Economics Management Sciences in Schools," *Universal Journal of Education Research* 11, no. 3 (2023): 57–66.

⁶ T. M. Naholo, *Teachers' challenges in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms: a case study of one primary school in Oshana region, Namibia* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Namibia, 2020); L. I. E. Serero, *Challenges of and guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education: experiences of full-service school educators* (Doctoral dissertation, North-West University, 2021).

⁷ Mojakgomo David Moloi, "Enhancing Professional Curriculum Practice in a Grade 9 Economic and Management Sciences Class," 2018; Zandile Fakude and Dickson Mdhilalose, "Managing Perceptions of Teachers to Changes in Grade 9 Economic and Management Sciences Curriculum, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa," *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (2021): 13–27.

⁸ Nyaradzo Mvududu and Jennifer Thiel-Burgess, "Constructivism in Practice: The Case for English Language Learners," *International Journal of Education* 4, no. 3 (2012): 108–18.

⁹ Pooja Khanna and Sunita Bhola, "Designing Integrative and Collaborative Learning for Students with Special Needs and Learning Disabilities in an Inclusive Classroom," in *Sustainable Blended Learning in STEM Education for Students with Additional Needs* (Springer, 2023), 173–94.

Teachers' Attitudes on Inclusive Education

Teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education play a crucial role in the successful implementation of inclusive strategies in classrooms.¹⁰ Positive attitudes towards inclusivity can significantly enhance the effectiveness of teaching diverse learners, as teachers become more willing to adapt their instructional methods and embrace differentiated teaching techniques.¹¹ However, in rural contexts, where resource constraints and lack of adequate training are prevalent, teachers may feel unprepared or overwhelmed by the demands of inclusive education, leading to negative attitudes.¹² Therefore, fostering a supportive environment through professional development and leadership support is essential in shaping teachers' perceptions and enhancing their commitment to inclusive education.¹³ Empowering teachers to view inclusive education as beneficial to all students can facilitate more inclusive practices, leading to improved learning outcomes in EMS classrooms.

The Role of the School as an Institute in Inclusive Education

The role of the school as an institution in promoting inclusive education is pivotal, particularly in rural settings, where resources and support structures are often limited.¹⁴ Schools are not just centers for learning but also hubs for fostering an inclusive culture that embraces diversity in learner abilities and backgrounds.¹⁵ In the context of Grade 9 economic management sciences (EMS) classrooms, schools must ensure that inclusive education is integrated into the curriculum, teacher training, and overall school policy. This requires leadership and administrative commitment to provide the necessary resources, professional development, and collaborative support systems that enable teachers to implement inclusive strategies effectively.¹⁶ Schools also need to actively engage with parents and the community to build a supportive network that reinforces inclusive practices.¹⁷ By creating an environment where all learners feel valued and supported, schools can play a crucial role in addressing the challenges of inclusivity and ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their socio-economic or educational background.

Learning benefits and consequences of inclusive education

a. Learning benefits of inclusive education

i. Enhanced Academic Performance

Inclusive education often leads to improved academic outcomes for all students, including those with and without disabilities.¹⁸ Research shows that students in inclusive settings tend to perform better academically due to increased engagement and motivation.¹⁹ According to Kart and Kart, students with disabilities in inclusive settings often achieve higher academic outcomes compared to those in segregated

¹⁰ Christopher Boyle, Joanna Anderson, and Kelly-Ann Allen, "The Importance of Teacher Attitudes to Inclusive Education," in *Inclusive Education: Global Issues and Controversies* (Brill, 2020), 127–46; Silvia Barnová et al., "Teachers' Professional Attitudes towards Inclusive Education," *Emerging Science Journal* 6 (2022): 13–24.

¹¹ Sajida Saif et al., "Embracing Diversity: The Case for Differentiated Instruction in Pakistan's Inclusive Classrooms," *Pakistan Journal of Law, Analysis and Wisdom* 3, no. 7 (2024): 151–63.

¹² Naser Zabeli and Majlinda Gjelijaj, "Preschool Teacher's Awareness, Attitudes and Challenges towards Inclusive Early Childhood Education: A Qualitative Study," *Cogent Education* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1791560.

¹³ G. Ketikidou and A. Saiti, "The promotion of inclusive education through sustainable and systemic leadership," *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, (2022); 1-16.

¹⁴ S. E. Barratt, *Perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of an inclusive education outreach team in one rural education district of the Western Cape* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch University, 2016).

¹⁵ L. Kieran, and C. Anderson, "Connecting universal design for learning with culturally responsive teaching," *Education and Urban Society*, 51(9), (2019):1202-1216; Renato Opertti, Zachary Walker, and Yi Zhang, "Inclusive Education: From Targeting Groups and Schools to Achieving Quality Education as the Core of EFA," *The SAGE Handbook of Special Education* 2 (2014): 149–69.

¹⁶ Rose Atieno Opiyo, "Inclusive Practice and Transformative Leadership Are Entwined: Lessons for Professional Development of School Leaders in Kenya," *Global Journal of Transformative Education* 1, no. 1 (2019): 52–67.

¹⁷ Thomas W Farmer et al., "Promoting Inclusive Communities in Diverse Classrooms: Teacher Attunement and Social Dynamics Management," *Educational Psychologist* 54, no. 4 (2019): 286–305.

¹⁸ Jason D Fruth and Melanie N Woods, "Academic Performance of Students without Disabilities in the Inclusive Environment," *Education* 135, no. 3 (2015): 351–61; Kate De Bruin, "Does Inclusion Work?," in *Inclusive Education for the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2020), 55–76.

¹⁹ Revathy Kumar, Akane Zusho, and Rhonda Bondie, "Weaving Cultural Relevance and Achievement Motivation into Inclusive Classroom Cultures," *Educational Psychologist* 53, no. 2 (2018): 78–96; James N Meindl, Diana Delgado, and Laura B Casey, "Increasing Engagement in Students with Autism in Inclusion Classrooms," *Children and Youth Services Review* 111 (2020): 104854.

settings.²⁰ Furthermore, inclusive education promotes collaborative learning environments that benefit all learners.²¹ In the context of a grade 9 economic management sciences (EMS) classroom, differentiated instructional strategies can help address the varied learning needs of students, facilitating better academic performance.

ii. Social and Emotional Development

Inclusive education fosters social interaction among students with diverse abilities, which is essential for the development of social skills and emotional intelligence.²² According to Krampac-Grljušić and Kolak, inclusive classrooms encourage positive peer relationships, which can lead to increased self-esteem and confidence among students with disabilities.²³ These social interactions provide opportunities for all students to develop empathy, respect, and understanding of diversity. In rural Limpopo schools, where community ties are strong, these social benefits can extend beyond the classroom, enhancing community cohesion.

iii. Development of Collaborative Skills

Inclusive education promotes the development of collaborative skills, as students learn to work together, appreciate diverse perspectives, and leverage each other's strengths.²⁴ For instance, in an EMS classroom, group projects and discussions can foster teamwork and critical thinking, as students navigate different viewpoints and approaches to problem-solving. Chen emphasizes the importance of collaboration in the learning process, asserting that it prepares students for the workforce, where teamwork and communication are crucial.²⁵

iv. Improved Teacher Competence

Teachers in inclusive settings often enhance their professional skills and competencies through continuous learning and adaptation to diverse learners' needs.²⁶ Inclusive education encourages teachers to adopt innovative teaching methods, such as differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which can improve overall teaching effectiveness.²⁷ The development of these skills is particularly vital in rural areas of Limpopo, where teacher training may be less accessible.

b. Consequences of Inclusive Education

i. Resource challenges

Despite its benefits, inclusive education can also present challenges, particularly in resource-limited settings.²⁸ Mphahlele states that rural schools in Limpopo may face shortages of educational materials, specialized staff, and training opportunities that are essential for effective inclusive practices.²⁹ A study

²⁰ Ayse Kart and Mehmet Kart, "Academic and Social Effects of Inclusion on Students without Disabilities: A Review of the Literature," *Education Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2021): 16.

²¹ Mayonel J Jardinez and Lexter R Natividad, "The Advantages and Challenges of Inclusive Education: Striving for Equity in the Classroom," *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 12, no. 2 (2024): 57–65.

²² Yolanda Muñoz-Martínez, Carlos Monge-López, and Juan Carlos Torrego Seijo, "Teacher Education in Cooperative Learning and Its Influence on Inclusive Education," *Improving Schools* 23, no. 3 (2020): 277–90.

²³ A. Krampac-Grljusic and A. Kolak, "Peer relations in inclusive classes," *Research in Pedagogy*, 8(1), (2018); 17-35; Aleksandra Krampac-Grljusic and Ante Kolak, "Peer Relations in Inclusive Classes," *Research in Pedagogy* 8, no. 1 (2018): 17–35.

²⁴ Keimei Sugiyama et al., "Inclusive Leadership Development: Drawing from Pedagogies of Women's and General Leadership Development Programs," *Journal of Management Education* 40, no. 3 (2016): 253–92; James McLeskey et al., *High Leverage Practices for Inclusive Classrooms* (Routledge New York, NY, 2022).

²⁵ R. H. Chen, "Fostering students' workplace communicative competence and collaborative mindset through an inquiry-based learning design," *Education sciences*, 11(1),(2021); 17.

²⁶ Deborah Robinson, "Effective Inclusive Teacher Education for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities: Some More Thoughts on the Way Forward," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 61 (2017): 164–78.

²⁷ Mey A van Munster, Laureen J Lieberman, and Michelle A Grenier, "Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction in Physical Education," *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2019): 359–77; Laura Rusconi and Myriam Squillaci, "Effects of a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Training Course on the Development Teachers' Competences: A Systematic Review," *Education Sciences* 13, no. 5 (2023): 466.

²⁸ Jennae Bulat et al., *School and Classroom Disabilities Inclusion Guide for Low-and Middle-Income Countries* (RTI Press, 2017); Liezl Schlebusch et al., "Challenges and Opportunities of Implementing Early Interventions for Autism Spectrum Disorders in Resource-Limited Settings: A South African Example," *Starting at the Beginning*, 2020, 99–132.

²⁹ L.A. Mphahlele, *Towards a support structure for the implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools in Limpopo* (Doctoral dissertation, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, 2017).

by Okongo, Ngao, Rop, and Nyongesa highlights that inadequate resources can hinder the implementation of inclusive strategies, leading to a disparity between policy and practice.³⁰ This can result in teachers feeling overwhelmed and unsupported, ultimately affecting their ability to create inclusive environments.

ii. Resistance to change

Implementing inclusive education can encounter resistance from teachers, parents, and the broader community.³¹ Some educators may hold preconceived notions about the capabilities of students with disabilities, which can hinder their willingness to adapt their teaching strategies.³² In rural contexts, cultural attitudes and beliefs about disability can further complicate efforts to promote inclusive education.³³ Addressing these beliefs through community engagement and awareness-raising initiatives is crucial for fostering acceptance and support for inclusive practices.³⁴

c. Potential for Increased Workload

Teachers in inclusive classrooms often report increased workloads due to the need for differentiated instruction and additional planning to meet diverse learning needs.³⁵ This heightened workload can lead to teacher burnout and job dissatisfaction, particularly in under-resourced settings. According to Carter, the perceived burden of inclusive education can impact teacher retention rates, which is particularly concerning in rural areas where teacher shortages are already prevalent.³⁶

i. Inequitable access to quality education

While inclusive education aims to provide equitable access to quality education for all students, disparities can arise, particularly in rural contexts.³⁷ Factors such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained personnel, and insufficient funding can lead to unequal educational opportunities for students with disabilities compared to their peers without disabilities. This inequity can perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage and hinder the overall goal of inclusive education.³⁸

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study explored strategies for promoting inclusive education in a Grade 9 economic management sciences (EMS) classroom in rural schools within Limpopo Province, South Africa. Using a case study approach, the research delved into the practices, perceptions, and experiences of teachers and administrators involved in inclusive education within the General Education and Training (GET) phase. This method enabled a deep exploration of the challenges and strategies utilized in rural educational settings by collecting rich, detailed data from multiple perspectives, particularly focusing on teachers' and school leaders' roles in fostering inclusive practices.

The study involved 20 purposefully selected participants, including 12 commercial subject teachers (accounting, business studies and economics), 4 departmental heads, and 4 school principals, all

³⁰ Okongo et al., "Effect of Availability of Teaching and Learning Resources on the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Pre-School Centers in Nyamira North Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya."

³¹ T. G. Lebona, *The implementation of inclusive education in primary schools in the Lejweleputswa education district* (Doctoral dissertation, Welkom: Central University of Technology, Free State, 2015); P. Lalvani and E. Osieja, *Battle fatigue: Parents, institutionalized ableism, and the "fight" for inclusive education*. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 2024, 15407969241259365.

³² Mitchell and Sutherland, *What Really Works in Special and Inclusive Education: Using Evidence-Based Teaching Strategies*.

³³ Hannu Savolainen et al., "Understanding Teachers' Attitudes and Self-Efficacy in Inclusive Education: Implications for Pre-Service and in-Service Teacher Education," *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 27, no. 1 (2012): 51–68.

³⁴ J Jansen-van Vuuren and H M Aldersey, "Stigma, Acceptance and Belonging for People with IDD across Cultures," *Current Developmental Disorders Reports* 7 (2020): 163–72.

³⁵ Charity Neejide Onyishi and Maximus Monaheng Sefotho, "Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Differentiated Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms: Implication for Teacher Education.," *International Journal of Higher Education* 9, no. 6 (2020): 136–50.

³⁶ Lisa Roberts Carter, *The National Teacher Shortage Crisis: Understanding Teacher Attrition and Turnover* (Edgewood College, 2021).

³⁷ Vincent Ekow Arkorful et al., "Equitable Access and Inclusiveness in Basic Education: Roadblocks to Sustainable Development Goals," *International Journal of Public Administration*, 2020; Jiayi Shi and Peter Sercombe, "Poverty and Inequality in Rural Education: Evidence from China," *Education as Change* 24, no. 1 (2020): 1–28.

³⁸ Tesfaye Basha Ludago, "Practices, Challenges and Opportunities of Inclusive Education Implementation in Kambata Tambaro Zone, Ethiopia," *Open Access Library Journal* 7, no. 2 (2020): 1–23; Alexis Zickafoose et al., "Barriers and Challenges Affecting Quality Education (Sustainable Development Goal# 4) in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2030," *Sustainability* 16, no. 7 (2024): 2657.

directly involved in teaching or overseeing Grade 9 EMS in rural schools. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, providing insights into individual and collective experiences. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes from the interviews and discussions, revealing common strategies and challenges in promoting inclusive education. This method helped uncover best practices and areas needing attention to ensure inclusive learning in rural classrooms.

To ensure the ethical integrity of the study several measures were undertaken before data collection. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee, along with permission from the Department of Basic Education and consent from school principals. Participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, benefits, and risks, and written informed consent was secured to ensure voluntary participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through coded data and secure storage accessible only to the research team. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. The study adhered to principles of non-maleficence, ensuring no harm came to participants and offering the option to skip sensitive questions. Cultural sensitivity was prioritized by respecting local norms and providing translation services when necessary. Finally, participants were informed they could request a summary of findings, ensuring transparency and fostering trust throughout the research process.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The thematic analysis revealed several key strategies employed by commercial teachers and administrators in rural schools to promote inclusive education in Grade 9 Economic Management Sciences (EMS) classrooms in rural schools in Limpopo Province. The identified themes include: (1) Differentiated instruction and teaching adaptation, (2) teacher training and professional development, (3) collaboration and support structures, (4) challenges in resource availability, and (5) leadership and administrative support for inclusion.

1. Differentiated instruction and teaching adaptation

This theme emerged as participants emphasized the importance of adapting teaching methods to meet the diverse learning needs of students, including those with learning difficulties, disabilities, and varying learning paces. Many teachers mentioned that differentiated instruction was key to ensuring that no student was left behind.

Teacher 1 (Economics): “In my class, I use different strategies like group work and one-on-one support for learners who struggle to understand certain concepts. This helps me ensure that all learners are learning, even if at different paces.”

Teacher 3 (Business Studies): “I simplify complex topics for learners with learning difficulties. Sometimes, I use real-life examples that they can relate to. This makes it easier for them to grasp the content.”

Department Head 2: “We encourage teachers to be flexible with their teaching methods. For example, visual aids and practical examples can go a long way in helping learners understand difficult topics in EMS.”

2. Teacher training and professional development

Participants highlighted the need for ongoing training in inclusive education strategies. Some teachers felt that their initial teacher education did not adequately prepare them to address the needs of diverse learners, including those with disabilities.

Teacher 5 (Accounting): “Most of us didn't receive sufficient training in inclusive education. We need more workshops on how to teach learners with different challenges, especially in rural schools where resources are scarce.”

Teacher 8 (Economics): “Continuous professional development is important. I attended one workshop on inclusive education, but I feel we need more practical training, especially on how to handle learners with disabilities in the classroom.”

Principal 1: “We need to invest more in training our teachers. If they are equipped with the right skills, they will be more confident in managing inclusive classrooms.”

3. Collaboration and support structures

Teachers and administrators noted that collaboration between teachers, school support staff, and inclusive education specialists was essential for promoting inclusive education. Participants mentioned the importance of shared responsibilities and collective efforts in overcoming challenges.

Teacher 9 (Business Studies): “I often work with the school's inclusive education specialist to get advice on how to manage learners with special needs. It helps when we work together to come up with strategies that work for individual learners.”

Department Head 4: “Teachers cannot do it alone. We hold meetings where teachers share strategies that have worked for them. Collaboration ensures that no one feels isolated in trying to implement inclusive practices.”

Principal 3: “I encourage my teachers to collaborate with each other and with specialists. Sometimes, a solution comes from another teacher who has dealt with a similar situation before.”

4. Challenges in resource availability

Participants pointed out the lack of resources, such as teaching aids, assistive technologies, and infrastructure, as a major barrier to implementing inclusive education in rural schools. The absence of adequate learning materials and proper facilities hindered effective inclusion.

Teacher 7 (Accounting): “One of the biggest challenges we face is the lack of resources. We don't have the materials we need to accommodate learners with disabilities. Simple things like large print books or audio aids are missing.”

Teacher 2 (Economics): “Some of our classrooms are not accessible to learners with physical disabilities. We don't even have ramps or special desks to accommodate them.”

Principal 2: “In rural schools, the challenge is bigger because we don't always get the same level of support as urban schools. We try to make do with what we have, but it's not always enough.”

5. Leadership and Administrative Support for Inclusion

Participants agreed that the role of leadership was crucial in promoting a culture of inclusion. Principals and departmental heads who actively promoted inclusive practices were seen as instrumental in creating an inclusive school environment.

Department Head 1: “As a leader, I make it my responsibility to support my teachers. If they need resources, I do my best to get them. If they need guidance on inclusion, I ensure we work together to find solutions.”

Teacher 4 (Business Studies): “Our principal is very supportive. He has made sure that we prioritize inclusive education in our school development plans, and this has made a huge difference.”

Principal 4: “We cannot expect teachers to manage inclusive classrooms alone. As school leaders, we must be the ones pushing for the necessary resources and ensuring teachers have the support they need.”

The results of this study revealed that while teachers and administrators in rural schools are committed to promoting inclusive education in Grade 9 EMS classrooms, they face significant challenges, particularly in terms of resource availability and adequate training. However, strategies such as differentiated instruction, collaboration, and strong leadership support play a crucial role in overcoming these challenges.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest a need for more investment in teacher training and resources to better equip rural schools for inclusive education. The results showed that promoting inclusive education in Grade 9 EMS classrooms in rural schools presents both challenges and opportunities. Differentiated instruction, which involves tailoring teaching methods to accommodate diverse learner needs, is a cornerstone of inclusive education. This study revealed that teachers often modify lesson plans, utilize varied teaching materials, and employ flexible instructional strategies to meet students' varying abilities. Similar findings were reported by Dixon et al., who emphasized that differentiated instruction enhances learner engagement and addresses disparities in classroom abilities.³⁹ In rural EMS classrooms, however, teachers frequently face challenges in executing such strategies due to large class sizes and limited training.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, successful cases underscore the role of adaptability and creativity in making inclusive teaching effective. Teachers' capacity to implement inclusive strategies is significantly shaped by their professional training. Participants highlighted the inadequacy of pre-service and in-service training to equip them with the skills needed to manage diverse classrooms. Previous studies corroborate this concern and have emphasized the need for context-specific training that addresses the realities of rural education.⁴¹ Continuous professional development programs, focusing on inclusive methodologies and classroom management, have been shown to positively influence teacher efficacy in fostering inclusivity.⁴² In Limpopo's rural schools, the lack of consistent training initiatives creates gaps in teachers' preparedness for inclusive practices.

Collaboration among teachers, administrators, and external stakeholders is essential for effective inclusion. Participants in this study identified collaborative planning and shared resources as vital strategies for overcoming classroom challenges. Research by Pancsofar and Petroff underscores the importance of co-teaching models and professional learning communities in promoting inclusive education.⁴³ In rural settings, however, the lack of formalized support structures often places the burden of inclusivity solely on individual teachers. Initiatives fostering teamwork and mentorship can mitigate this isolation, as evidenced by studies highlighting the role of peer collaboration in enhancing teaching effectiveness and morale.⁴⁴ Resource constraints, including inadequate teaching materials, technology, and infrastructure, emerged as a significant barrier to inclusion in Limpopo's rural EMS classrooms. This finding aligns with Liotta, who noted that limited resources hinder inclusive practices, particularly in underprivileged contexts.⁴⁵ Participants in the study often relied on improvisation and community resources to fill gaps, demonstrating resilience despite systemic limitations. Addressing these challenges requires not only increased funding but also innovative approaches to maximize existing resources, such as partnerships with local businesses or non-governmental organizations. Leadership and administrative

³⁹ Felicia A Dixon et al., "Differentiated Instruction, Professional Development, and Teacher Efficacy," *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* 37, no. 2 (2014): 111–27.

⁴⁰ A. Massouti, M. Al-Rashaida, and M. Alhosani, "A qualitative study on Dubai's inclusive education policy from school leaders' perspectives." *Sustainability*, 16(3), (2024); 1252.

⁴¹ K. Starr, and S. White, "The small rural school principalship: Key challenges and cross-school responses." *Journal of Research in Rural Education (Online)*, 23(5), (2008);1.

⁴² Federico R Waitoller and Alfredo J Artiles, "A Decade of Professional Development Research for Inclusive Education: A Critical Review and Notes for a Research Program," *Review of Educational Research* 83, no. 3 (2013): 319–56; Jenni Donohoo, "Collective Teacher Efficacy Research: Productive Patterns of Behaviour and Other Positive Consequences," *Journal of Educational Change* 19, no. 3 (2018): 323–45.

⁴³ Nadya Pancsofar and Jerry G Petroff, "Teachers' Experiences with Co-Teaching as a Model for Inclusive Education," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 20, no. 10 (2016): 1043–53.

⁴⁴ Rachel Shanks et al., "A Comparative Study of Mentoring for New Teachers," *Professional Development in Education* 48, no. 5 (2022): 751–65; A. Goldstein, Teachers' perceptions of the influence of teacher collaboration on teacher morale.2015; D. Schleifer, C Rinehart, and T. Yanisch, Teacher Collaboration in Perspective: A Guide to Research. *Public Agenda*. 2017.

⁴⁵ Lance Allen Liotta, "Digitalization and Social Inclusion: Bridging the Digital Divide in Underprivileged Communities," *Global International Journal of Innovative Research* 1, no. 1 (2023): 7–14.

support play a pivotal role in creating an inclusive school culture. Participants emphasized the importance of principals and departmental heads in fostering a supportive environment through policy implementation, resource allocation, and advocacy for inclusive practices. The research by Hong highlights that effective school leadership directly correlates with successful inclusion.⁴⁶ However, in rural schools, leadership often struggles with competing demands and limited resources, which can hinder the prioritization of inclusive education. Strengthening administrative capacity and empowering leaders with training on inclusion policies are critical for addressing these challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion, it is recommended that school leaders should take a more active role in promoting inclusive education by providing ongoing support to teachers through mentorship, collaboration, and resource allocation. Schools should create platforms for teachers to collaborate and share best practices in inclusive education. Peer learning and collaboration can alleviate the burden on individual teachers and improve the overall implementation of inclusive strategies. The DBE should prioritize resource allocation to rural schools, ensuring they have the necessary infrastructure, teaching aids, and assistive technologies to support inclusive education. Policymakers should integrate comprehensive inclusive education modules into teacher education programs and provide regular in-service training. These programs should focus on practical classroom strategies for inclusion, with a particular focus on rural schools. The DBE should revisit and refine inclusive education policies to reflect the unique challenges faced by rural schools. Policies should emphasize the need for tailored interventions and resource distribution to ensure equity. Schools and policymakers should actively engage parents and communities to raise awareness about the benefits of inclusive education. Workshops and awareness programs can help shift attitudes and create a supportive environment for all learners. Schools in rural areas should collaborate with non-governmental organizations and inclusive education specialists to gain additional resources and expertise in implementing inclusive strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored strategies for promoting inclusive education in Grade 9 EMS classrooms within the GET phase in rural schools of Limpopo Province. By examining the practices, perceptions, and experiences of teachers, departmental heads, and principals, the study highlighted the multifaceted efforts required to foster inclusivity. Key strategies included differentiated instruction, teacher training and professional development, collaborative practices, leveraging support structures, and strong leadership. Despite systemic challenges, such as resource limitations and insufficient training opportunities, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability in their efforts to support diverse learners. These findings underscore the importance of targeted interventions, policy alignment, and increased resource allocation to advance inclusive education in under-resourced settings.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

There were notable limitations that occurred when the study was carried out that should be acknowledged. The focus on rural schools in Limpopo Province limited the generalizability of the findings to other regions or urban contexts, where challenges and strategies may differ. The qualitative nature of the research relied on a relatively small sample size, which may not capture the full diversity of experiences and practices across all rural schools. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating broader samples, including urban and peri-urban schools, and employing mixed methods to triangulate findings. Additionally, investigating the perspectives of learners and parents could enrich understanding and support the development of more comprehensive, inclusive practices tailored to diverse educational practices.

⁴⁶ Hong Chen, "Applications of Cyber-Physical System: A Literature Review," *Journal of Industrial Integration and Management* 2, no. 03 (2017): 1750012.

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