

## EDUCATORS' UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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**Abstract:** This study explores educators' understanding of the concept of inclusive education in South African primary schools. The study draws on thorough research and reflective engagements over the past twenty years on promulgating inclusive education in South Africa. Despite various policies being introduced and adopted by the South African government, understanding the concept of inclusive education remains a contested issue in the education sector. Therefore, this study aims to deepen the core of the understanding and practices of the inclusive education concept. A case study design using a qualitative approach was used in the four primary schools in uMgungundlovu District, South Africa, to elicit a deeper understanding of inclusive education as a concept and practice within general education. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that educators' understanding of inclusive education was mainly based on respect and confidence by which learners experiencing learning barriers develop their abilities to the best of their potential. The educators' understanding was anchored on positive attitudes toward inclusive education as a concept of education. However, the study findings also showed that some educators' understanding of inclusive education was based on referring learners experiencing learning barriers to special schools. The study recommends that educators attend intensive training at institutions of higher learning to fill the gap in understanding and practice of inclusive education.

**Keywords:** *educators; inclusive education; learners experiencing barriers to learning; special school.*

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of Inclusive Education (IE) emerged during the world conference on special education needs in Salamanca (Spain) in 1994 and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (1994). At the Salamanca conference, all members reaffirmed Education For All (EFA) to respect the individual rights to education for all learners without discrimination (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusive education originates from special education, historically based on a medical model of categorising children, segregating education based on disability and separating children into special classes (Florian, 2014). In this regard, the discourse of disabilities was based on the medical model, which perceived disability as a biological problem needing medical attention, whilst the social model focuses on society as creating disability through physical and social barriers (Owens, 2015). With that being said, the social model became the dominant model in underpinning inclusive education because of its similar philosophies of inclusion concerning equal opportunities in an educational context. Since the introduction of inclusive education, it has challenged the existing education system such that many countries have put considerable effort into making their education

system more inclusive (Moberg et al., 2020). Therefore, inclusive education is a solution for educational inclusion without discrimination. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United et al., 1948) endorsed the right to education for all learners. In addition, the United Nations Standard rules on equalising opportunities for persons with disabilities who have a right to education. Following the declarations mentioned above, many countries were expected to implement this concept of inclusive education, and schools form the centre where implementation has to happen. Therefore, inclusive education guarantees the participation of all learners, especially those experiencing barriers to learning in the learning process. According to Kasongole and Muzata (2020), learners experiencing barriers to learning are those learners who experience disorders that are manifested in difficulty in reading, writing and solving simple mathematical concepts. With that said, learners experiencing barriers to learning are somehow left behind in acquiring skills and knowledge at the pace of their peers. Since inclusive education has been introduced worldwide, elementary schools have understood and are ready to implement this concept. South Africa is no exception to this.

Mphahlele (2020) studied the professional perceptions of IE in South Africa. The study found that the educators' understanding of the inclusive education concept was based on including all learners from the planning sessions to the delivery of the lessons. Mphahlele (2020) also found that educators' understanding of IE was not restricted to classroom teaching but that IE involved including all learners in extramural activities without segregation. This scholar noted that most educators who understand the concept of IE have recently joined the teaching profession compared with those who have worked for a long time (Mphahlele, 2020). However, Andrews et al. (2021) argued that most teachers still believe that the solution to make education accessible to all learners is associated with special needs thinking, which aligns with the individual learners' deficit model of differences. Therefore, it is clear from the scholars' study that teachers' understanding of IE depends on approaching learners with barriers to learning with a set of beliefs and attitudes constraining inclusive teaching.

Similar views are shared by Dreyer (2017), who found that most teachers' understanding of IE was limited to learners who require a high level of support and who should be placed in special schools where they state that there are specialists to teach learners with learning barriers. Hooijer et al. (2021) argued that the long-standing issue of placing learners experiencing barriers to learning in special schools and misconceptions about medical model thinking and the achievement potential of learners facing learning barriers are confronted with changing attitudes and beliefs of teachers toward more social rights or an inclusive model of supporting all learners. According to Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2018), understanding inclusive education reflects conflicting ideologies that depend on discourse and contextual dynamics. This study aims to fill this gap in the discourse on inclusive education. The literature review showed that understanding of inclusive education varies, leading to many perceptions of inclusive practices. Hence, the primary objective of this study is to explore educators' understanding of the concept of inclusive education. Additionally, this study explored educators' understanding of the concept of inclusive education to answer the question: What are the educators' understanding of the concept of inclusive education?

## **METHOD**

This study was based on an interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm understands the subjective world of human experience (Cohen et al., 2018). De Vos et al. (2017) added that the interpretive paradigm is also called the phenomenological approach to understanding people. Using the interpretive paradigm, this study ensured that the construct that emerged from data production was that of the teacher participants. To achieve the aim of this study within the interpretivism paradigm, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate because of its nature in answering questions about experience, meanings, and perspectives from the standpoint of the participants (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, the qualitative approach aims to view the world from an individual's perspective and to understand the phenomenon based on experiences (Maree, 2013).

This study employed a case study research design, given its potential to explore and gain insight into people's experiences of a specific phenomenon. According to Yin (2012), a case study is an empirical inquiry that examines a phenomenon in depth and within a real-life context and is used in various situations to add knowledge and understanding of individuals, organisations, groups, and social occurrences. Furthermore, a case study was used because of its potential to open the possibility of allowing the voices in this study (Niewenhuis, 2013). Therefore, a case study produced a discourse on educators' more profound understanding of IE.

The population for this study was teachers in the uMgungundlovu district in South Africa. Punch and Oancea (2014) postulated that the population in the ideal world should be subject to research and from whom the meaning of the research would be captured. The sample of 20 teachers to identify the participating primary school was purposive. According to du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), sampling refers to the people (also referred to as participants) the researcher can access within the population. In the context of this paper, the purposive sampling method was used to identify four primary schools to participate in this study. Purposive sampling involves researchers handpicking participants based on their typicality in the research focus (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014; Rule & John, 2011).

This paper's research instrument was semi-structured interviews to gather a deeper understanding of the concept of inclusive education from educators' perspectives. Research instruments are tools used to collect and record

data (Rule & John, 2011). Yin (2009) regards research instruments as sources of evidence. Each interview was approximately twenty minutes with each participant and was recorded using an audio recorder with the participants' permission before conducting the interview (Maree, 2013). The audio recorder allowed the researcher to concentrate on the discussions and responses of the participants carefully.

Data analysis involves reducing the volume of “raw data information, sifting trivia, identifying significant patterns,” and constructing a framework for communicating the data's essence (de Vos et al., 2017, p.397). The data in this paper consisted of transcripts and notes taken during the interviews. This was done to find the deeper meaning of teachers' understanding of inclusive education. Ethical considerations were discussed with the teachers before the commencement of the interviews. Cohen et al. (2018) refer to ethics as a matter of moral sensitivity to the rights of others. Additionally, Babbie (2013) suggests that anyone involved in the investigation must be aware of the general agreement on proper and improper conduct during the research process. Therefore, ethics means that in pursuing knowledge and truth, respecting the dignity of research participants takes precedence. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the confidentiality of the participants in this paper. All participants were issued letters to seek their willingness to participate in this research paper. In addition, permission was sought from the Department of Education and principals of schools.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the teacher's understanding of inclusive education. Participants were asked what they understood about inclusive education. The main findings suggest that the teacher participants' understandings of inclusive education were primarily informed by their teaching experiences and practices, allowing all learners to feel respected and confident to learn and develop to their best potential. Furthermore, the participants' views seemed to be anchored in beliefs and values that focused on serving the best interests of the learners. An example can be drawn from T2 from School B, who understood IE as learning that reached out to or helped all learners reach their potential. This assertion was based on the principle that all learners can learn and need support to realise this goal. The following excerpts support this view:

As every learner is unique in their learning style and capacity, IE is a teaching method that reaches out or helps every learner as much as possible to ensure that every learner on any cognitive level is included in the learning process. IE brings all learners together in one classroom regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area. It seeks to maximise the potential of all learners and make them feel part of the activities in the classroom environment rather than excluded. IE allows all learners to access the education system equally regardless of race, gender, physical, emotional, or mental challenges, social discrimination, home language, cultural or religious beliefs, or nature. In summary, IE is for all learners, including those with learning barriers (T2, School B).

The findings also revealed that IE is about reaching out to or helping all learners during the learning process and fostering unity among all learners to reach their potential. Therefore, the participants' understanding of IE was based on the values and principles of teaching all learners regardless of their strengths or weaknesses, thus making the classroom environment inclusive. It is apparent from the findings that there was an expressed commitment to include every learner in the lesson activities as they all have the right to be contained and accommodated. T3 from School D shared similar views to those of T2 from School B. This participant opined that IE is about helping all learners to access education. This was evident in the following response:

IE is not a one-size-fits-all approach; instead, it helps the learner who cannot work in a regular classroom facility fit into the teaching and learning system. It entails going out of your way to help a learner with an educational gap. IE allows all learners to access the education system regardless of race, gender, physical challenges, intellectual barriers, social discrimination, emotional challenges, linguistic, cultural, religious beliefs, or other human characteristics. In short, IE focuses on the learners' abilities rather than disabilities because, in every disability, there is an ability (T3, School D)

Essentially, the participants believed that inclusive education's driving principle responds to learners' individual needs by welcoming and providing age-appropriate support for their efforts. IE is concerned with accepting, understanding, and attending to learners' diversity, such as cognitive, physical, academic, social, and emotional factors. According to the participants, IE emphasises teaching that responds to the individual needs of

learners, embraces diversity, and nurtures the ability to access education. Accessing education means teachers use pedagogies that support learners to reach their potential. Another participant mentioned that IE is for learners who need extra help and employs appropriate support methods to accommodate all learners. T1 echoed this from School A, who posited:

IE is for learners who need some extra help and time to learn. In essence, it is not just like giving learners work and teaching them like we always do, but you help and go the extra mile as some of them do not learn at the same pace, time, and date as others, as a teacher, you got to find the other method of imparting knowledge. IE is all about providing the necessary support for all learners to reach their potential during teaching and learning. IE is about developing learners so that they can acquire skills in life. Support in IE varies psychologically to material depending on the learner's needs, so every learner feels accommodated in the schooling system (T1, School A).

The above extract shows an understanding of IE as a teaching approach. It influenced teachers to adopt reflective practices to find suitable teaching methods accommodating slower-paced learners. Teachers supported learners by becoming flexible in their practices to ensure academic gain. Supporting the learners included selecting appropriate teaching materials for the learners' cognitive development. The above suggests that IE demands teachers use "special teaching methods" to simplify content knowledge. Therefore, the findings revealed that IE is about helping all learners at their own pace by going the extra mile and finding supportive teaching methods to accommodate all learners' needs. The participants shared the need to explore other teaching pedagogies that may help learners instead of continuing with the orthodox teaching philosophy. Similar views shared were that IE teaches all learners in the same school, respecting learners' education and diversity. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

IE is about the schooling experience of all learners, whereby there is inclusivity. All learners of different abilities are taught in the same school regardless of their culture, disabilities, or ability to do schoolwork. IE is about respecting diversity in the schooling system and ensuring that diversity is embraced. IE provides an accessible, free, safe, and stimulating environment for all learners at the

school. It gives the right to education to all learners and allows them to learn differently but reach the same goals or outcomes (T5, School C).

The above participant's understanding of IE reveals that schools and classrooms should operate on the premise that learners experiencing learning barriers are as capable as learners without learning barriers. All learners can participate in the schooling system and the broader community. Much of this understanding is related to the legislative frameworks that learners must receive education in a flexible environment to reach their full potential. The above views revealed that IE teaches all learners to feel accepted and respected. The above understanding of IE advocates for an inclusive teaching approach that will ensure that all learners are supported, as classrooms must accommodate the learners' diversity. Likewise, T2 from School D understood IE to incorporate all learners in one classroom without discriminating against them but respecting the rights of learners. Consider the following excerpt.

IE is about incorporating all learners in the classroom by ensuring that the right to education of all learners is honoured regardless of their difficulties, such as learning barriers. IE aims to support all learners in an ordinary school and find new ways to help and accommodate all learners without discrimination and exclusion. It is about helping and caring for every learner by ensuring they can be taught like all other students. They cared for all learners and ensured that every learner was made more comfortable around different levels, not discouraging the child and having an unnecessary fear of education (T2, School D).

The above views revealed that IE is about accepting all learners' difficulties, being taught in an inclusive classroom, and being comfortable in the school environment. The findings suggest that IE acknowledges the right to education of all learners regardless of their abilities. It is also apparent from the results that IE builds a warm and caring teaching environment to nurture learners' abilities, alleviate fear, and build confidence and self-esteem. A teacher from School D echoed similar views that IE is about teaching all learners in the same school. It should promote a learning activity that aims to improve the knowledge of all learners without unfair discrimination. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

IE is about learners' schooling experiences to ensure inclusivity by providing education for all learners irrespective of their education level. All learners deserve a quality education that gives them opportunities for lifelong learning at their levels. It leads me to pronounce that IE is for all learners with or without learning barriers who are supposed to be valued as members of their school society. IE addresses diversity in schools and minimises referring learners to special schools. ... I am not for the idea that IE is for special schools; how will schools embrace all cultures regardless of colour if they refer learners to special schools? (T5, School D).

Participant T5 from School D demonstrated an understanding of IE that varied from previous participants when he viewed IE as a form of education that ensures that learners receive high-quality instruction. It is a strategy to minimise sending learners with learning barriers to special schools. The above assertions suggest that IE seems to remove sending learners to special schools and propagates that all learners are to be taught inclusively and according to IE prescripts. This practice will give learners much-needed appreciation, respect, and opportunities to sustain their futures. T3 from School A shared similar views and understood IE in the context of the family history of the learner. Consider the following excerpt.

In IE, all learners are accommodated and provided additional help in the same school to reach their educational goals regardless of their educational challenges. Therefore, IE involves including all learners in the primary school during teaching and learning, irrespective of where they come from, their socioeconomic background, and their learning styles. I believe that IE pertains to reaching out to every learner during the learning process, accepting learners as they are, and then attending to learners' differences and abilities in the schooling system so that all learners can achieve (T3, School A).

The above finding suggests that all learners can learn after receiving help from the school despite any challenges associated with intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The results also revealed that some participants believed knowing the learners' backgrounds should inform IE's understanding and teaching practice to accommodate all learners. The participant's understanding is based on understanding the learners' background to diagnose the learners' performance. This happens because

this participant believed social norms influence the learner's behaviour and performance.

The Sustainable Development Goals set the global education agenda to ensure IE for all and to promote lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2015). It further emerged from the participants' understandings of IE that it entails understanding learners' family backgrounds and accepting them as they are. These findings corroborate with Engelbrecht et al. (2015), who found that teachers demonstrated sensitivity to each learner and provided support according to individual needs by understanding the learners' backgrounds. Adewumi and Mosito (2019) note that it is essential to understand the learners' backgrounds to support their education appropriately. The other important point in highlighting the views and practices is that there seemed to be an alignment between the two (beliefs and actions).

The findings also reveal a diversity of views about what constitutes IE. Evidence of this emanates from the fact that, while the understanding of IE by most participants tends towards assisting learners in the schools they are enrolled in, few teacher participants in this paper expressed a different belief about what IE is about. For example, these participants believed that IE means referring learners to special schools. Their conceptualisation was that their schools needed to be more conducive to teaching IE and could not accommodate learners with learning barriers. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

For me, IE is for learners with learning barriers who are not coping at the ordinary school when you physically look at them, and they belong to special schools because they learn at a low pace compared to other learners. Therefore, IE means efforts and ways to support those learners to attend special schools with specialists and resources. Thus, IE aims to cater to learners with various learning barriers in special schools where they will be accepted, welcomed, and supported to learn at their own pace. Some teachers understand these learners with barriers to learning and are trained to accommodate them (T1, School C).

The participants' understandings of inclusive education were based on physical structure or a setting accommodating learners with special needs. Hence, they should be referred to as special schools rather than mainstream schools. The findings seem to provide perceptions that extraordinary people are trained and resources deemed suitable to meet the needs of learners with

learning barriers that are unavailable in mainstream schools. The finding is clear and specific about the unique facilities and personnel that may be appropriate for the particular needs of learners with learning barriers. T3 from School B shared similar views, arguing that in special schools, there are skills that can accommodate learners with learning barriers at comprehensive levels. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

IE refers to teaching special needs learners, such as those with disabilities, in special schools with skills and support in their learning rather than in mainstream schools. IE means that all learners with the same cognitive development are taught in the same School or special classroom, such as the special school where they can be accommodated. In the special school, where inclusivity is practised because all learners are similar, they are alike and easily accept one another, rather than in the main school, where there are no skills to accommodate learners with learning barriers (T3, School B).

The participants' responses revealed a substantial similarity in their understanding of IE, which put the learner at the centre of their teaching and learning philosophy and practices. They all viewed IE as a mindset that does not paint all learners with one brush. Given the above, this paper demonstrates that, according to the participants, IE is not a linear approach to education. Traditional teaching methods are rigid and cater to only a particular type of learner's capabilities and exclude others. Instead, they characterised IE as a flexible teaching and learning approach; it accommodates all learners. Acknowledging the diversity of learners' needs and capabilities, Singh (2016) asserts that IE is a better way of helping all learners to succeed at their own pace. Low-achieving learners can receive extra help despite struggling with their learning process. The participants also shared the sentiment of extra help when they stated that IE involves reaching out to each learner to ensure they are given time to learn effectively. This resonates with Florian and Beaton (2018), who opine that an inclusive pedagogical approach was developed to determine whether individual learners can receive additional help or support they need without being treated differently from others (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

The understanding of IE aligns with the principles of respect for diversity and an accessible, safe, and stimulating environment for all learners. To this end, Singh (2016) suggests that

IE addresses the diverse needs of all learners by reducing barriers to learning and within the learning environment where the education system should reach all learners. Another point to raise from the participants' understandings of IE is that it is against discrimination, and such issues are core values of the South African Constitution. In other words, their understandings are aligned with their knowledge of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996a) and the South African Schools Act of 1996 (RSA, 1996b). For instance, most of the participants' responses were in line with the objectives of these legislative frameworks, which state that a person should not be discriminated against, directly or indirectly, on the grounds of race, sex, social origin, age, disability, religion, language, and culture (DoE, 2001).

Participants linked IE with the features of non-racialism, which is opposed to gender biases and discrimination. Various scholars also share the point raised by the participants and the Department of Basic Education. For instance, Zabeli et al. (2021) define IE as an education that guarantees the rights of all learners regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, physical challenges, and socioeconomic aspects. This is evident from the participants' understandings of IE that they regard it as an education open to all learners regardless of race, gender, physical or intellectual barriers, religious denomination, social discrimination, or any discrimination on human characteristics. Therefore, IE brings to the fore the elimination of social exclusion resulting from societal discriminatory attitudes about gender, race, religion, social class, and ethnicity and provides a space where every learner matters and matters equally (UNESCO, 2017; Ainscow, 2020).

The study findings indicate that learners with learning barriers, due to their level of cognitive development, should be taught in special schools or rather be separated from other learners and placed in their special classrooms. The findings further suggest that since learners with learning barriers have limited cognitive abilities, they should be excluded from other learners and placed in special classrooms or referred to special schools where teachers have skills that can accommodate them. The participant's responses to the question were based on assumptions that IE entails that learners with learning barriers work at a slow pace; hence, they should be enrolled in special schools. These findings corroborate those of Geldenhuys and Wevers (2013). The research found that there was an urgent call to remove learners with learning barriers from mainstream schools so that they

could be educated separately in special classes or even in special schools because they were assumed to be working at a pace that suited a particular setting and were regarded as having special abilities. In the same vein, Salovitta (2020) believes that it is the right of learners with learning barriers to be placed in special education rather than mainstream schools to achieve the best results. This is evident from participants' understandings of IE as an approach for learners experiencing barriers to learning and not coping in the ordinary school because of their pace of learning; hence, they belong in a special school. Dreyer (2017) argues that there is still no solution to the problem of educational exclusion, as learners experiencing barriers to learning are marginalised in mainstream schools as they cannot keep up with the pace required during teaching and learning.

The participants' understanding of IE was also based on perceptions of this group of learners' limited abilities and capabilities; hence, they should be placed in the same (unique) school. Therefore, the participants' understanding of IE aligned with exclusion rather than inclusion. The participants indicated their knowledge of IE as intending to include and exclude learners experiencing barriers to learning in their classrooms, reflecting the acknowledgement of their willingness and unwillingness to teach these learners.

## CONCLUSION

The study's findings suggest that most teacher participants understood IE as an education for all learners accommodated in mainstream schools, regardless of any challenges or perceived differences learners might have. The findings have also shown that although many participants' understandings of IE were consistent with the concept's fundamentals, some did not believe in inclusive education as articulated in government policy documents. Consequently, they advocated the exclusion of learners experiencing barriers to learning. Most study participants suggested that the environment must be welcoming and pleasant to accommodate all learners in the school setting. However, the findings further suggest that some participants did not understand the essence of IE. Some participants viewed including all learners who experience barriers to learning in mainstream schools as something superficial rather than the right of learners to attain education. These participants' understanding of IE showed a fundamental lack of definition as they pointed out that learners should be referred to special needs

education schools because of their slow pace of comprehending the content of the lessons. This implies that participants interpret IE as understating special needs education. It was striking to learn that teachers still do not fully understand IE thirty-one years after introducing IE at the Salamanca Conference. Given all the contestations of the study participants about their understanding of IE, this study shows that the understandings of IE are highly contested, with many stakeholders constructing their differentiated views about it. The findings suggest that the debates on this issue are far from over, and more research is needed.

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