

## **AN EVALUATION OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' CHALLENGES IN ENSURING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES: A CASE OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE CAPRICORN SOUTH DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE**

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### **Abstract**

Inclusive education serves as a fundamental component in guaranteeing equal access to high-quality education for every student, particularly those with varying needs. The role of school principals is crucial in fostering and maintaining inclusive practices; nevertheless, they frequently encounter ongoing obstacles that impede successful execution. This research investigates the difficulties faced by secondary school principals in advancing inclusive education practices. Employing a qualitative research methodology, data were gathered through interviews and document analysis from principals at secondary schools. The results indicate that school principals struggle with a lack of inadequate professional development to inclusive education practices, resistance of the principal, and insufficient resources. Moreover, systemic challenges such as ambiguous policy guidelines and minimal support from educational authorities further hinder progress. The research underscores the critical necessity for focused professional development, enhanced resource distribution, and more robust policy enforcement to bolster inclusive education. The findings offer actionable recommendations for policymakers, school administrators, and educators, aimed at promoting the effective execution of inclusive practices within secondary schools.

*Keywords: Evaluation, School, Principals, challenges, inclusive education*

### **1. Introduction**

The importance of inclusive education in ensuring equitable access to high-quality education for all students, including those with disabilities, learning difficulties, and diverse sociocultural origins, has been recognized globally (UNESCO, 2020). The core idea of inclusive education is to remove obstacles to learning and create a supportive atmosphere where all students may participate completely and reach their full potential (Pradhan & Naik, 2024). Given this paradigm, school administrators are essential to the successful implementation of inclusive practices because they provide leadership, allocate resources, support educators, and promote inclusive policies within their organizations (Jhonshon, Mendoza, & Sobirin 2024). In addition to management, they are also responsible for strategic planning, which calls for the ability to balance institutional mandates with the various demands of learners.

Although inclusive education policies have been widely adopted, secondary school principals often face significant obstacles that prevent these practices from being successfully implemented (Kagwiria, 2024). These difficulties include a lack of resources, including instructional materials and assistive technology; a lack of training for principals in inclusive pedagogy; and resistance from parents or employees who might not fully understand or support inclusive approaches. These difficulties are made worse by overcrowded classrooms and curriculum requirements, making it more difficult for principals to guarantee that every student receives equitable attention and assistance (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025). School leaders are further burdened by systemic issues like unclear policy directives, little assistance from educational authorities, and a dearth of professional development opportunities (Zerrad & Schechter, 2025).

Understanding the discrepancy between policy goals and real classroom circumstances requires evaluating the challenges faced by secondary school principals (Shambare & Jita, 2025). In order to provide guidance for focused interventions, policy changes, and professional development programs, this study attempts to identify the obstacles and constraints that principals encounter (Karanikola et al., 2025). In the end, understanding these obstacles is essential to enhancing the caliber and durability of inclusive education methods, guaranteeing that all students, regardless of their aptitudes or origins, can thrive in secondary school settings (Makweya & Sepadi, 2025).

The goal of inclusive education is to give all students, including those with impairments, a range of linguistic origins, and different social and cultural contexts, equal access to education (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). Since they supervise curriculum development, manage resources, assist teachers, and foster an inclusive school climate,

school principals play a critical role in putting these policies into practice. However, the success of inclusive education often depends on how well principals handle the problems caused by a lack of funding, inadequate preparation for teachers, big class numbers, structural constraints, and opposition from parents or employees (White & Fletcher, 2025). The difficulties secondary school principals face in advancing inclusive education methods are investigated in this study. By examining these issues, the research hopes to identify gaps between the goals of policies and the realities of classrooms, providing information that can guide professional development, interventions, and policy improvements. Setting up inclusive, equitable, and sustainable learning environments where all students may succeed academically, socially, and emotionally requires an understanding of these difficulties.

Principals are clearly crucial in removing obstacles and fostering an inclusive learning environment. However, more targeted research is needed to look at the specific ways that principals could help inclusive education ideas be successfully adopted in a range of settings (Ackah-Jnr, 2022). In particular, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which acknowledges inclusive education as a basic human right, has strengthened the global push for inclusive education. Over time, numerous countries have put regulations into place to guarantee that education is accessible to all, emphasizing inclusive classrooms, curricula, and teaching methods (Utari, Soraya, & Wulandari, 2024).

School principals are essential in implementing these inclusive education practices. They affect the learning environment, teaching methods, and school culture in their role as educational principals (Tnag, 2025). Their duties have an impact on how parents, teachers, and students perceive and behave with regard to inclusion. Principals set the norm for effective inclusive practices by cultivating a school culture founded on support, respect, and inclusion (Eden, Chisom, & Adeniyi, 2024). Research shows that when administrators actively support inclusion, it improves teachers' commitment to inclusive education and positively impacts kids' intellectual and social development (Rivana et al., 2024). The success of inclusive education programs, however, depends on school leaders, according to recent study.

Research on the relationship between principals' styles and practices and measurable student outcomes, like academic achievement, social integration, and emotional well-being, is lacking (Laursen, 2025). Research on the relationship between school principals and policy implementation is lacking (Amin, 2025). The way principals carry out and execute national and local inclusion policies in their schools requires further study (Theoharis, 2024). Additional investigation is required to completely comprehend the extent to which principals connect their actions with policy directives. According to Amin (2025), these observations could influence policy ideas aimed at strengthening the role of principals in promoting inclusive education.

Principals can create support networks that improve the educational experiences of students with a range of needs by collaborating closely with educators, parents, and other stakeholders (Maqhubela, 2025). Additionally, they are essential in providing professional development opportunities that give educators the abilities and information needed to address the requirements of every student. According to Wood (2025), principals are in charge of managing the distribution of resources, including special education services. When resources are distributed fairly, students with special education needs can have the resources and assistance they need to succeed academically (Kumari, 2025). The fundamental role of principals in education has been extensively studied, but little is known about the specific strategies that support inclusive education. According to research, the quality of the school principal and the policy both affect how effective inclusive education is (Nasir et al., 2025). Principals have a significant influence on the implementation and upkeep of inclusive education programs, whether they are transformative, instructional, or collaborative (Wang, Deng, & Tian, 2025). Additionally, their commitment and personal beliefs are crucial to establishing a learning atmosphere that is really inclusive (Munif, 2025).

## **2. Method**

### **Study population and sampling**

Participants were selected through a convenience sample consisting of ten principals from two secondary schools located in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. The study focused on principals who were 45 years of age or older. Purposive sampling was utilized to recruit participants, specifically aiming at those who had participated in workshop associated with the CN6900 Engaged Scholarship Project in the Capricorn South District. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which was reached after conducting interviews with ten participants. To maintain confidentiality and safeguard the identities of the participants, pseudonyms were used instead of their actual names.

### **Research Design**

An exploratory descriptive phenomenological design was utilized for this research. As stated by Oluka (2025), phenomenology represents a qualitative research method that emphasizes the examination of individuals' lived experiences, with the goal of articulating the essence of a phenomenon by investigating it from the viewpoint of those who have encountered it. This design was deemed suitable for the current study, as it aimed to identify and describe the challenges encountered by school principals in promoting inclusive education practices within the Capricorn South District. By employing this approach, principals were afforded the opportunity to express and reflect on their experiences and the challenges they faced in the implementation of inclusive education practices.

#### **Data analysis**

Data analysis is conducted to minimize, organize, and extract meaning from gathered data (Mezmir & Gray, 2020). In this research, Tesch's methodology was utilized to pinpoint emerging themes and subcategories. Verbatim transcripts of interviews, obtained from audio recordings, were analyzed once data saturation was achieved. Thematic analysis was considered the most suitable approach due to its adaptability and capacity to yield rich, detailed, yet intricate narratives of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2023) six guiding steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times to grasp their complete meaning, with notes taken to record impressions and emotions conveyed by participants. Similar codes were consolidated into categories, which were subsequently combined to create overarching themes.

Although previous research has examined the challenges encountered by school principals in advocating for inclusive education in secondary schools, there is a scarcity of evidence regarding similar studies conducted in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. This renders the current study unique, as it was conducted in a context with minimal research and where no prior investigation of this nature has been performed. The primary challenges identified were a lack of adequate professional development opportunities for inclusive education and the hesitance of principals to actively support inclusive practices. The themes were further analyzed to ascertain how some could be structured into broader themes with related subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2023). During the review phase, the researcher confirmed that all selected excerpts directly addressed the research question. A supportive and trusting atmosphere was fostered throughout the process to promote openness and authenticity from participants.

#### **Data Collection**

The principals engaged in comprehensive individual interviews to express their views on the execution of inclusive education practices. Each principal was presented with an identical set of questions, which were meticulously clarified to guarantee understanding and encourage a more profound insight prior to the provision of their responses. This uniform questioning strategy enabled the gathering of comprehensive and comparable data for the research. Each interview session spanned roughly 40 to 50 minutes. The reliability of the data was enhanced by fostering trusting relationships with the participants, addressing any conflicting information, and employing a co-coder (Ary et al., 2014). Consistency was assured through the use of convenience sampling for participant selection and by offering a detailed description of the research design, study environment, and the methods for data collection and analysis (Saunders et al., 2016).

### **3. Findings and discussion**

This research utilized a qualitative methodology to investigate the perceptions of secondary school principals regarding the implementation of inclusive education practices. The examination of the data gathered from the participating principals identified three primary themes: (1) Inadequate professional development to inclusive education practices, (2) resistance of the principals to inclusive education practices, and (3) Insufficient resources to inclusive education practices. These identified themes organized the presentation of the findings, which are supported by direct quotes from participants, and are elaborated upon in the following sections.

#### **Inadequate Professional Development to inclusive education practices**

Participants reported that inadequate training in inclusive teaching strategies creates significant barriers to achieving equitable and inclusive education. The study revealed that principals acknowledged having limited pedagogical skills, which refers to insufficient knowledge, strategies, and methods required to effectively address the diverse learning needs of all learners within an inclusive classroom.

The following excerpts illustrate participants' perspectives on this challenge:

Participants emphasized that insufficient training and a lack of resources are significant challenges to achieving inclusive education. The following quotes illustrate these issues:

"Without proper training that equips principals with the essential skills, knowledge, and competencies, we cannot adequately support learners with diverse needs. In the realm of inclusive education, a lack of training can severely impede principals' capacity to meet the varied requirements of their learners. Thus, it is not feasible to compromise on principal preparation." (Principal 3, female, 52 years).

"Continuous resource shortages obstruct our capability to effectively manage schools, implement inclusive education strategies, provide sufficient support to teachers, and cater to the diverse needs of all learners." (Principal 8, female, 59 years).

"My school is not yet ready to adopt inclusive education practices due to our unclear understanding of what inclusive education involves. It is crucial for the Department of Education to offer guidance and support to all schools to ensure the successful implementation of inclusive practices in our schools." (Principal 9, female, 53 years).

"Effectively managing schools without adequate training hampers the execution of inclusive education practices. Focused training programs will enable us to better assist the diverse needs of all learners in our schools." (Principal 7, female, 49 years).

The active involvement of principals is essential in embedding inclusive education across all dimensions of school operations, encompassing curriculum design, teacher training, and equitable resource allocation (Kunwar, & Adhikari 2023). This indicates that effective school principals require not only strong management skills but also a deep commitment to inclusive values, highlighting the crucial role of leadership in fostering inclusive school cultures (Alier, 2025). The research additionally indicated that a lack of adequate professional development opportunities poses a considerable challenge for school principals. The lack or inadequacy of training programs, workshops, mentorship initiatives, and ongoing learning platforms hinders principals' ability to enhance their skills, knowledge, and competencies (Said, Laid, Boudjemaa, & Djahnit, 2025). In the realm of inclusive education, this deficiency limits principals' ability to effectively address the diverse needs of learners. Furthermore, a shortage of resources continues to create significant challenges to achieving equitable and inclusive education (Isnawati, Zakaria, & Pratomo, 2025).

#### **Resistance of the principal to inclusive education practices**

Principal resistance can greatly hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024). This resistance frequently postpones the adoption of policies, teaching methods, and programs intended to assist learners with diverse needs (Kucukkaragoz & Meylani, 2025). Additionally, a deficiency in principal support can undermine teachers' confidence in meeting the needs of diverse learners, leading to insufficient assistance for learners with disabilities, learning challenges, or those from underrepresented backgrounds. In this research, the apprehension of overloading teachers surfaced as a significant factor contributing to resistance, with certain principals showing hesitation to adopt inclusive practices that could potentially increase teachers' workloads. Tackling this issue necessitates capacity-building efforts, awareness initiatives, and supportive leadership actions aimed at empowering principals to advocate for inclusive education within their institutions.

Principal resistance has emerged as a significant challenge to the effective implementation of inclusive education. This resistance frequently hinders the adoption of inclusive policies, teaching strategies, and programs aimed at supporting learners with diverse needs (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024; Kucukkaragoz & Meylani, 2025). A deficiency in principals support further diminishes teachers' confidence in accommodating learners with disabilities, learning challenges, or those from marginalized backgrounds. In this research, principals identified various concerns that contributed to their hesitance in adopting inclusive practices. For example, one participant remarked:

"I do not wish to compromise the learning time of diverse learners in my school, fully aware that we are presently unable to sufficiently meet their varied needs" (Participant P4, female, 58 years).

Likewise, another principal conveyed that:

"Our school currently lacks the capacity and solutions necessary to effectively implement inclusive practices. At this time, special schools seem to be the most appropriate option for learners with diverse needs, as they are better equipped with the resources and specialized support required to address those learners' needs" (Participant P1, female, 55 years).

Concerns regarding preparedness and capacity also fueled resistance. One participant remarked:

"I do not believe that my school is adequately prepared to accommodate learners with diverse needs. Implementing such practices without sufficient preparation could lead to frustration for both teachers and the parents of learners with and without disabilities" (Participant P4, male, 58 years).

Another participant pointed out teacher workload as a hindrance:

"I am worried about imposing additional burdens on my teachers and thus reluctant to introduce inclusive education practices" (Participant P8, female, 54 years).

Negative perceptions of inclusive education were also evident, as demonstrated by a participant who stated:

"I currently view inclusive practices as extra job because our teachers are already overloaded with large class" (Participant P 8, male, 51).

Resistance from school principals can greatly hinder the implementation and effectiveness of inclusive education in secondary schools. The reluctance of principals to embrace advanced inclusive practices may result in delayed implementation, decreased teacher morale, disadvantages for learners, a weakened culture of inclusivity, and challenges to compliance with educational policies (Revelian, 2025). It is crucial to address this resistance through focused leadership training, awareness programs, and continuous support to cultivate inclusive environments in secondary schools (Nwisagbo, Osuji, & Amachree, 2025). In this research, several principals indicated various types of resistance to the adoption of inclusive education practices. Their concerns were primarily focused on issues such as limited resources, inadequate training, uncertainty about policy implementation, and apprehension regarding the potential burden on teachers. Policymakers should prioritize principals development programs that focus on inclusive education and equip principals to actively lead these initiatives, thus promoting sustainable and effective inclusion practices (Lijun & Te 2024). Resistance to inclusive practices, limited professional training, and inadequate resources persist as major obstacles to the effective implementation of inclusive education (Isnawati, Zakaria, & Pratomo, 2025).

#### **Insufficient resources to inclusive education practices**

Secondary schools frequently encounter challenges in implementing inclusive education due to insufficient resources, including inadequate funding, limited learning materials, and poorly equipped infrastructure. These constraints hinder schools' capacity to effectively address the diverse needs of all learners. The following excerpts from participants illustrate these challenges:

"In my school we cannot accommodate diverse learners because we don't have funds to upgrade the school to suit those learners with diverse needs" (Participant P2, male, 49 years).

"We don't have sufficient financial, human, and material resources. Schools struggle to implement inclusive education effectively, limiting their ability to meet the diverse needs of all learners" (Participant P7, female, 59 years).

"While the principal plays a key leadership role, the successful implementation of inclusive education depends on collective effort. Everyone in the school community must be actively involved to ensure that all learners' diverse needs are met. I am committed to promoting inclusive education; however, the lack of adequate resources limits my ability to do so effectively" (Participant P4, female, 55 years).

"Policymakers must actively monitor schools and provide adequate infrastructure and support to enhance the quality of education for all learners" (Participant P2, male, 57 years).

In the context of this study, the absence or insufficiency of financial, human, material, and infrastructural resources restricts school principals' capacity to successfully execute programs and deliver inclusive education for every student. Ensuring equitable distribution of resources is fundamental in inclusive education, as it guarantees that learners with diverse needs can access the tools and support services necessary to achieve academic success (Kumari, 2025).

#### **4. Conclusions**

The challenges faced by secondary school principals in the implementation of inclusive education are multifaceted, encompassing limited opportunities for professional development, resistance to change, and insufficient resources. Addressing these obstacles requires a comprehensive approach, which includes targeted professional development, proper allocation of resources, and systemic reforms aimed at creating an inclusive learning environment. Although previous research has examined the challenges encountered by school principals in advocating for inclusive education in secondary schools, there is a scarcity of evidence regarding similar studies conducted in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. This renders the current study unique, as it was conducted in a context with minimal research and where no prior investigation of this nature has been performed. The primary challenges identified were inadequate professional development to inclusive education practices, resistance of the principal to inclusive education practices and insufficient resources to inclusive education practices which hesitance principals to actively support inclusive practices. The challenges faced by principals in ensuring inclusive education practices are interlinked, encompassing inadequate professional development, resistance to change, and insufficient resources.

The study concludes that effective school leadership by principals is essential for the successful implementation of inclusive education practices. However, challenges such as inadequate training, resistance to change, and limited resources highlight the need for targeted interventions. To address these barriers, continuous professional development is recommended to equip principals with the skills and knowledge necessary to champion inclusive practices. Furthermore, fostering collaborative partnerships among educators, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders is crucial for creating a supportive environment in which inclusive education can thrive.

### **Recommendations**

Considering the findings from this study, several recommendations are put forward to tackle the challenges encountered by secondary school principals in promoting inclusive education practices within the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. To enhance inclusive education in secondary schools, it is essential to prioritize professional development for both principals and teachers through consistent, targeted training programs that emphasize inclusive education strategies, policies, and best practices. These efforts should be supplemented by workshops, mentorship programs, and peer-learning platforms designed to improve pedagogical skills for effectively supporting diverse learners.

Sufficient resource allocation is also essential, necessitating the supply of suitable material, human, and financial resources, such as accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and modified educational materials. To guarantee that all students may participate completely and succeed, these gaps must be filled with adequate financing, well-equipped facilities, qualified personnel, and appropriate learning resources. The Department of Education, legislators, and other stakeholders can benefit greatly from the study's conclusions about how secondary school principals can successfully adopt and uphold inclusive education policies. A comprehensive strategy that incorporates systemic changes, capacity-building, and sufficient budget allocation is needed to remove these obstacles. In order to empower principals as change agents and build inclusive schools that offer equal learning opportunities to all students, such approaches are essential.

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