International Journal of Instruction *January 2027 ● Vol.20, No.1*
e-ISSN: 1308-1470 ● www.e-iji.net *p-ISSN: 1694-609X*
pp. 651-672

Article submission code: 20260426113049
Received: 26/04/2026 Revision: 10/08/2026
Accepted: 18/08/2026 OnlineFirst: 01/10/2026

Understanding the Challenges encountered by School Management Teams Using a Social Justice Lens

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Inclusive education is central to South Africa's democratic and social justice agenda. However, the implementation of inclusive education in special schools remains constrained by systemic inequalities, particularly in rural contexts. This study explores leadership challenges faced by School Management Teams (SMTs) in a rural special school in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and guided by a qualitative case study design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with SMT members and support staff responsible for curriculum management, administration and learner support. The findings reflect on persistent structural and institutional barriers hindering effective leadership, including the shortage of specialised teachers, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to assistive technologies, insufficient professional development, and inconsistent parental involvement. These challenges reflect the broader spectrum of inequalities that undermine inclusive education as a social justice imperative. Despite the various constraints, SMTs have demonstrated adaptive practices such as distributed leadership, collaborative decision-making, and community engagement to sustain teaching and learning. This study argues that SMTs operate at the intersection of policy ambition and contextual scarcity, where inclusive ideals are continuously negotiated. It highlights the importance of situating school leadership within a social justice framework that recognises structural disadvantage and uneven resource distribution. The study contributes context-specific insights into leadership practices in rural special schools, underscoring the need for targeted policy support, capacity building, and sustained investment in special needs education.

Keywords: inclusive education, school management teams, special schools, social justice, rural education

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive Education in Special Schools

In the South African context, inclusive education is widely conceptualised in the extant literature as a transformative approach that extends beyond addressing disability-related

Citation: Dlamini, Q. P., & Cele, S. M. K. (2027). Understanding the challenges encountered by school management teams using a social justice lens. *International Journal of Instruction*, *20*(1), 651-672.

concerns to encompass the restructuring of the entire education system to accommodate learner diversity (Department of Education, 2001). This study is guided by two central research questions: (1) What challenges do School Management Teams (SMTs) in rural special schools encounter in implementing inclusive education within the South African policy framework? (2) How do SMTs interpret their leadership roles through a social justice lens in advancing inclusive education? The overarching goal of the current research is to critically examine the systemic, structural, and sociocultural barriers that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education in rural special schools. In pursuing this aim, the study explores how SMTs navigate these challenges and exercise leadership practices that promote equity, recognition, and representation, drawing on Fraser's (2010) three-dimensional Theory of Social Justice as the analytical lens. By situating the investigation within the South African policy landscape, the research intends to generate context-specific insights that contribute to scholarly discourse on inclusive education while simultaneously offering practical recommendations for policymakers and leaders in the education sector. Ultimately, this study seeks to strengthen the alignment between inclusive education policy and practice, thereby advancing the democratic values of equality, human dignity, and social justice in the context of special schools.

Various scholars have argued that inclusive education should not be narrowly interpreted as the mere placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools, but rather as a systemic shift towards responsiveness and flexibility within educational the education sector (Masalesa, 2022; Matsolo et al., 2018; Mokhampanyane, 2024). Thus, extent literature increasingly reflects a shift from deficit-oriented understandings of learners towards approaches that foreground adaptation of the schooling environment to meet diverse needs. In defining inclusive education, researchers generally emphasise its integrative and supportive nature. For example, Engelbrecht (2015) and Walton and Engelbrecht (2022), conceptualise inclusive education as a framework that seeks to unify special and mainstream education systems while providing a continuum of support services across different delivery modes. These support mechanisms include teacher retraining, the development of inclusive pedagogies, and the facilitation of learner transitions across educational phases (Armstrong et al., 2016; Department of Education, 2000). Thus, inclusive education is collectively positioned as both a pedagogical and systemic reform agenda.

The policy landscape in South Africa further reinforces inclusivity or inclusion in education. Scholars consistently note that inclusive education is underpinned by democratic values of equality, human dignity, and social justice (Dreyer, 2017). It aligns with international frameworks such as UNESCO's (2008) definition, which frames inclusion as a process of ensuring quality education for all learners through adjustments to structures, strategies, and content. Within the national context, the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Basic Education, 2001) remains the cornerstone policy, supported by complementary frameworks such as the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (Department of Education, 2014) and the Integrated School Health Policy (Department of Basic Education, 2012; Department of Health, 2012). Collectively, these policies provide a comprehensive framework for advancing inclusive education in South Africa. Notwithstanding these

policy commitments, extant literature consistently highlights significant challenges in the implementation of inclusive education. Adewumi et al. (2019) argue that inclusive education policy in South Africa often remains "symbolic", with limited translation into meaningful practice. Empirical investigations reinforce this claim. For example, Chirowamhangu's (2024) study in the Eastern Cape reveals that resource shortages, politicised allocation processes, and infrastructural deficits such as the continued use of pit toilets undermine policy implementation. Similarly, Kota et al. (2018) identified infrastructural inadequacies as a persistent barrier, while Isaacs et al. (2025) attribute ongoing inequalities to weak political commitment and fragmented policy execution. Taken together, these studies suggest that systemic and structural constraints continue to impede the realisation of inclusive education.

In addition to structural barriers, extant literature also foregrounds the role of sociocultural factors in shaping inclusive education. Several scholars have identified deeply entrenched beliefs about disability, often linked to witchcraft, ancestral displeasure, or familial wrongdoing among the factors contributing to the marginalisation of learners with disabilities (Ndlovu, 2023; Yaacob et al., 2021). Such cultural perceptions complicate the implementation of inclusive practices, particularly at the community level, and they often undermine bottom-up approaches to inclusion. In response to such stereotypes, Hudson et al. (2019) and Ramango and Naicker (2022) argue for stronger top-down policy interventions to promote equity and accountability. This resonates with Matland's (1995) top-down policy implementation framework, which emphasizes the importance of clear policy directives, enforceable mandates, and monitoring mechanisms. Hudson et al. (2019) highlight the relevance of this approach in the South African context, where policy coherence and accountability remain critical challenges. Supporting this view, Bipath et al. (2021), through case studies conducted the Eastern Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, demonstrate that a lack of alignment between national and provincial departments exacerbates implementation difficulties. However, Shukia (2020) cautions that overly centralised approaches may overlook local complexities, while Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) contend that such approaches are nonetheless necessary to address entrenched systemic barriers. Overall, extant literature suggests that inclusive education in South Africa remains a contested and evolving process, shaped by tensions between policy intent and contextual realities.

Further challenges in implementing inclusive education emerge from different definitions of disability. Traditionally, research has been focused on the medical perspective, whereby learners have been classified into various diagnostic groups, as defined in such manuals as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition and International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision, and where placement procedures rely on SIAS criteria. Ong-Dean (2015) questions this approach, suggesting that it has the potential to lead to exclusion because of the emphasis on learners' deficiencies only. Alternatively, Vetoniemi and Kärnä (2021) propose a social perspective of disability, which draws one's attention to obstacles imposed by the system or the environment that prevent learners' participation. New research, such as Mahlaule et al. (2024), emphasizes the need for the combined approach, which takes into account both models of disability. This implies that the literature describes inclusive education as a rather complex process that demands sensitive leadership.

This study draws on Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory of social justice as a critical analytical lens. Fraser's framework, which foregrounds redistribution, recognition, and representation, provides a useful lens for interrogating structural inequalities, cultural marginalisation, and participatory exclusions that shape inclusive education in South Africa. When applied to the context of special schools, this framework can facilitate a deeper understanding of how resource allocation, societal attitudes towards disability, and the inclusion of marginalised voices influence the implementation of inclusive education.

The Relationship Between Inclusive Education and SMT Leadership

The relationship between inclusive education and SMT leadership is widely described in extant literature as both interdependent and complex. Several scholars concur that SMTs function as critical intermediaries between policy frameworks such as EWP6 and SIAS, and the realities of classroom practice (Engelbrecht, 2020; Naicker & Mestry, 2023). However, this important role is often performed within contexts characterised by systemic constraints, including chronic underfunding, infrastructural deficits, and socioeconomic inequalities (Engelbrecht, 2020). As such, SMTs are often required to mediate between policy expectations and contextual limitations. Recent research further illustrates the extent of these challenges. Chirowamhangu (2024) demonstrates that rural and resource-constrained special schools face acute shortages of psychosocial services, transport, and specialist staff, exerting considerable strain on SMTs. Efforts to mitigate these pressures have culminated in, the emergence of adaptive leadership practices, including shared decision-making, community partnerships, and professional learning communities (Naicker & Mestry, 2023). These practices enable SMTs to build collective capacity and respond more effectively to systemic challenges. However, despite these adaptive strategies, extant literature indicates that deeper structural barriers persist. Ratau and Motitswe (2025) report that overcrowded classrooms, insufficient departmental support, limited parental involvement, and inadequate training continue to hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. Mbelu (2025), focusing on full-service schools, argues that ethical leadership, central to fostering inclusive and equitable school cultures, remains inconsistently practised due to systemic and institutional constraints. Complementing these findings, global analyses by UNESCO (2020) suggest that outdated leadership models and fragmented implementation processes continue to limit progress towards inclusive education. Collectively, these studies underscore the complexity of SMT leadership in inclusive contexts, highlighting the need for contextually responsive, ethically grounded, and strategically adaptive practices to bridge the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities.

Challenges Faced by SMTs in Managing Special Schools

A central concern emerging from the literature concerns the specific challenges that SMTs face in managing special schools in South Africa. Scholars have consistently highlighted a disjuncture between inclusive education policy aspirations and the realities of implementation (Ainscow, 2020; Donohue & Bornman, 2015). Empirical studies reveal persistent obstacles, including inadequate infrastructure, shortages of

assistive technologies, limited professional development opportunities, and insufficient departmental support (Equal Education, 2025; Mahlaule et al., 2024). While these challenges are well documented, they are often examined at the systemic level, with limited attention to how SMTs experience and negotiate them. Engelbrecht (2020) Much of the existing research focuses on structural reforms and resource allocation, rather than on the lived experiences of those responsible for implementation (Engelbrecht, 2020). This observation points to a significant gap in the literature. Makoelle and Burmistrova (2020) extend this argument by demonstrating that persistent inequalities in school financing and resource distribution exacerbate the challenges faced by SMTs, particularly in disadvantaged communities. In their analysis, the authors highlight the ways in which SMTs can navigate competing demands related to policy compliance, resource constraints, and learner diversity.

The significance of examining the various challenges faced by SMTs lies in the strategic position these SMTs occupy within the education system. As mediators between national policy frameworks and classroom practice, SMTs play a pivotal role in shaping the implementation of inclusive education. However, without a nuanced understanding of the contextual realities within which SMTs operate, inclusive education risks remaining aspirational rather than achievable (Setlhodi, 2020). The review of literature underscores the complexity of inclusive education in South Africa, highlighting persistent tensions between policy intent and implementation, as well as the critical yet underexplored role of SMT leadership. By drawing on a social justice lens and foregrounding the experiences of SMTs, this study seeks to contribute to a more contextually grounded understanding of the challenges of managing special schools in rural settings, which are often resource constrained.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Justice Theory is widely accepted as a foundational framework for addressing social inequalities through the promotion of equality, the recognition of human dignity, and the facilitation of meaningful participation, particularly among marginalised groups (Ntshoe, 2020). Several scholars have traced the intellectual roots of the theory to ancient Greek philosophy, noting its evolution into a contemporary, multifaceted framework that engages with diverse socioeconomic concerns, including land distribution, housing, and economic policy reform (Ntshoe, 2020). In theorising its contemporary relevance, Ulriksen and Plagerson (2021) conceptualise Social Justice Theory as instrumental, emancipatory, imperfect, paradox-sensitive, and relational, thereby underscoring its adaptability to complex and dynamic social realities. While the theory is often associated with broader traditions such as Conflict Theory and Critical Theory, Campbell (2021) argues that it should not be confined to these paradigms alone, as multiple theoretical perspectives may contribute to the pursuit of socially just outcomes. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that Social Justice Theory provides a flexible and robust lens for critically interrogating structural inequalities and social disparities.

Within this broader theoretical landscape, the principles of Social Justice Theory play a crucial role in conceptualising and advancing equitable societies. Miller's (1999) work,

as discussed by Reshma (2018), foregrounds the fair distribution of resources as a central tenet of justice, highlighting the material conditions necessary for social equity. Similarly, Rawls's (1971) theory of justice as fairness, as examined by Patterson (2022), emphasises the importance of maintaining background justice by addressing unjustified inequalities through continuous institutional adjustments. In contrast, critiques emerging from political economy highlight the structural inequalities embedded within capitalist systems, including moral asymmetries and disparities in wealth distribution within welfare-mediated labour markets (Voigt, 2018). Extending these debates, Wetherly et al. (2017) demonstrate that social justice principles are applicable across diverse contexts, including sport and leisure, where competing notions of fairness such as equal citizenship, equality of opportunity, and sufficiency-based distribution must be negotiated. Collectively, these contributions underscore that Social Justice Theory is concerned not only with the equitable distribution of resources but also with challenging marginalisation, addressing systemic prejudice, and promoting inclusive participation. In this regard, the theory provides a critical framework for ensuring that all the members of society have equitable access to opportunities and resources, thereby fostering social inclusion and addressing persistent inequalities (Voigt, 2018).

Within the context of the current study, Social Justice Theory provides a critical and integrative lens through which the challenges faced by SMTs in managing a typical rural special school can be meaningfully interpreted, particularly in relation to the persistent inequalities that characterise inclusive education in South Africa. As reflected in extant, inclusive education is not merely a pedagogical concern, but a broader social justice project aimed at redressing historical inequities and promoting equitable access for learners with diverse needs (Engelbrecht, 2020; Seeko & Mathebula, 2023). However, the implementation of policies such as the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Basic Education, 2001) and SIAS (Department of Basic Education, 2014) continues to be undermined by systemic constraints, including resource shortages, inadequate infrastructure, limited specialist support, and weak departmental coordination (Chirowamhangu, 2024; Isaacs et al., 2025; Ratau & Motitswe, 2025). Drawing on Social Justice Theory, and particularly its emphasis on the redistribution of resources, the recognition of marginalised groups, and the promotion of participatory inclusion, the study interrogates how these structural inequities shape the lived realities of SMTs in resource-constrained settings. For example, the persistent lack of assistive technologies, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient professional development opportunities reflect inequitable resource distribution, while exposing sociocultural stigmas surrounding disability (Ndlovu, 2023; Yaacob et al., 2021), reflect the diversity of issues that undermine inclusive practices. At the same time, limited parental and community involvement, alongside weak institutional support raise critical concerns about representation and participation in decision-making. As scholars such as Ulriksen and Plagerson (2021) suggest, the relational and context-sensitive nature of Social Justice Theory allows for a nuanced understanding of these intersecting challenges, while Campbell (2021) emphasizes its capacity to engage with multiple theoretical perspectives in pursuit of equitable outcomes. Furthermore, insights from Rawls' (…) justice as fairness (Patterson, 2022) and broader political economy critiques (Voigt,

2018) reinforce the need to address systemic inequalities that constrain SMTs' ability to enact inclusive education effectively. Thus, the theory enables the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of leadership challenges and critically examine how issues of inequality, marginalisation, and structural disadvantage are reproduced within the schooling system. Consequently, Social Justice Theory is particularly relevant to this study as it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how SMTs navigate the tensions between policy aspirations and contextual realities, while simultaneously highlighting the need for more equitable, inclusive, and context-responsive educational practices.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative case study design situated within the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivists assume that reality is socially constructed and best understood through individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study design was justified because it allows for an in-depth, holistic exploration of complex social phenomena within bounded contexts (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). This design was particularly appropriate for investigating the leadership challenges faced by SMTs in special needs education settings. Using a case study design helps to collect rich and thick data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recent scholarship emphasizes that qualitative case studies are especially effective in capturing the contextual realities of inclusive education leadership in South Africa, where systemic inequities shape practice (Mokhampanyane, 2024).

Population and Sample

The target population comprised seven purposively selected participants: the principal, deputy principal, three departmental heads (covering the Foundation Phase, Senior Phase, and Technical Occupational Programme), one occupational therapist, and one district official. All the participants were coincidentally female, and they were chosen because of their direct involvement in leadership, curriculum management, learner support, or district oversight, ensuring that the research captured diverse perspectives on the challenges and strategies for managing a special school in KwaZulu-Natal.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants were information-rich and directly engaged in leadership and management processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). This sampling strategy prioritised depth of insight over breadth, consistent with qualitative inquiry (Etikan et al.,2016). Participant demographics reflected the diverse roles within the SMT, with sample size determined by saturation during interviews (Guest et al.,2006).

Setting and Context

Data collection occurred at one selected special school in KwaZulu-Natal during the 2025 academic year. The school was characterised by infrastructural limitations, resource constraints, and diverse learner needs, making it a representative context for understanding the challenges that militate against inclusive education. This setting reflected broader systemic issues in South African special schools, including socioeconomic inequalities and fragmented departmental support.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through formal invitations, and informed consent was obtained before interviews. All the participants were provided with written consent forms, which they read and signed before taking part in the study. The forms clearly stipulated that participation was entirely voluntary and that individuals had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or negative consequences. They also outlined the research's purpose, the procedures involved, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. By signing the consent form, participants confirmed that they understood the information provided, agreed to take part willingly, and acknowledged that their contributions would be used solely for academic purposes. Ethical clearance (Reference number 6949) was secured from the University of South Africa, ensuring compliance with institutional and national research ethics guidelines.

Interviews were conducted in person at the school. These were audio recorded and the permission to record was requested through an independent clause on the consent form. Audio data were supplemented by field notes. Each interview in this study lasted approximately 1 hour per participant, providing ample time for participants to share their experiences in depth. The primary language used was English, but participants were allowed to use their home languages when they felt more comfortable, particularly to ensure clarity and authenticity in expressing complex ideas related to their roles and the challenges they encountered. Further, audio-recording helped to enhance accuracy and completeness of the data. These recordings were later transcribed verbatim, which ensured that the voices of participants were captured faithfully and that no detail was lost during the subsequent thematic analysis.

Data collection spanned several weeks, enabling iterative engagement and follow-up as necessary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout, with pseudonyms used in reporting the findings. P – Principal: The school's overall instructional and administrative leader. DP – Deputy Principal: Works closely with the principal and oversees curriculum delivery and the school's daily operations. DHF – Departmental Head: Foundation Phase: Oversees teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase and provides instructional support to Foundation Phase teachers and support staff, while reporting to the SMT and Principal to ensure effective curriculum delivery for learners with diverse disabilities. DHS – Departmental Head: Senior Phase: Manages curriculum implementation and assessment practices within the Senior Phase. DHT – Departmental Head: Technical Occupational Program: Responsible for coordinating and supporting the Technical Occupational (TO) stream. OT – Occupational Therapist: Provides therapeutic and specialist support to learners with diverse learning and physical needs. DO – District Official: Represents the district-level support structure and provides oversight, monitoring, and guidance to schools.

Collectively, these participants provided comprehensive insights from multiple vantage points, enabling a deep understanding of the operational, pedagogical, and systemic challenges experienced within the school context.

Table 1
Participants

Participant's role	Sex	Code assigned
Principal	Female	P
Deputy Principal	Female	DP
Departmental Head 1 (Foundation Phase)	Female	DHF
Departmental Head 2 (Senior Phase)	Female	DHS
Departmental Head 3 (TO Programme)	Female	DHT
Occupational Therapist	Female	OT
District Official	Female	DO

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase model. This involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Coding was both inductive and deductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data while being informed by the distributed leadership framework. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility (member checking), dependability (audit trails), confirmability (reflexivity), and transferability (thick descriptions).

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using an interview schedule, guided by an interview protocol developed by the author (QD). The semi-structured interview served as the method, while the interview schedule functioned as the tool to structure and facilitate the process. The protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences of leadership challenges, policy implementation, and resource management. Sample items included: *"What challenges do you face in implementing inclusive education policies at your school?"* and *"How does your SMT collaborate to address resource shortages?"* The researcher (QD) also served as the key instrument (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022), employing reflexivity and sustained engagement to construct meaning with participants.

FINDINGS

This section discusses five key findings in relation to existing literature and the guiding theoretical framework. The discussion is organised around the main themes that emerged from the data and is interpreted through Nancy Fraser's (2010) three-dimensional of social justice. It highlights how the findings relate to, support, and extend existing knowledge on SMT leadership in rural special school settings in South Africa.

Table 2
Themes

Themes
1. Shortage of Specialised Human Resources and Its Impact on Inclusive Practice
2. Funding and Resource Constraints as Barriers to Inclusive Education
3. Policy Implementation and Systemic Constraints in Inclusive Education
4. Limited Capacity Building and Inadequate Professional Development Support
5. Parental and Community Involvement as Both Constraints and Enablers of Inclusive Education

Theme 1: Shortage of Specialised Human Resources and Its Impact on Inclusive Practice

A dominant theme that emerged from the data relates to the persistent shortage of qualified special education teachers and support staff, particularly in rural and under-resourced contexts. Participants consistently highlighted the difficulty of recruiting and retaining suitably trained personnel, which in turn constrains the effective implementation of inclusive education. One SMT member explained:

> *"We struggle to find teachers that are trained in autism or multiple disabilities, and those we do find often leave for better opportunities"* (P).

The above concern is further reinforced by another participant, who emphasised the implications of inadequate training at the classroom level:

> *"In the Foundation Phase, there are learners who need intensive support, but our teachers are not trained in remedial or therapeutic strategies. This makes it difficult to effectively implement inclusive practices"* (DP).

Taken together, the above accounts reveal a shared concern among participants regarding the inadequacy of specialised human resources. Both participants agreed that the shortage was not only about the number of staff but also about the lack of the appropriate skills and expertise required to support learners with diverse and complex needs. While the first participant foregrounds challenges related to recruitment and retention, particularly the migration of skilled teachers to better-resourced settings, the second participant draws attention to the immediate pedagogical implications of this shortage, especially in the Foundation Phase where early intervention is critical. These perspectives are complementary and collectively illustrate how systemic staffing challenges translate into diminished capacity for inclusive teaching and learning at the school level.

The findings resonate strongly with existing scholarship, which consistently identifies shortages of specialised teachers and support personnel as a major barrier to the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa. Research shows that that rural and under-resourced schools experience significant difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified staff, a challenge that is compounded by broader systemic inequalities (Chirowamhangu, 2024). Similarly, Ratau and Motitswe (2025) identify inadequate teacher training as a persistent obstacle, while Mbelu (2025) links limited professional preparation to the underdevelopment of effective instructional leadership in

inclusive settings. From a broader perspective, Engelbrecht (2020) argues that insufficient human resources continue to undermine inclusive education implementation across the country.

When interpreted through a social justice lens, the findings point to critical issues of inequitable resource distribution and limited capacity-building opportunities within disadvantaged contexts. The shortage of specialised personnel reflects deeper structural inequalities within the education system, where rural schools remain disproportionately affected. This aligns with broader arguments in the literature that inclusive education cannot be realised without adequate investment in human capital and sustained professional development (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). Consequently, the findings underscore the critical need for targeted policy interventions to strengthen teacher training, improve retention strategies, and ensure the equitable allocation of skilled personnel in special schools.

Theme 2: Funding and Resource Constraints as Barriers to Inclusive Education

Another salient theme emerging from the findings relates to persistent funding and resource constraints, which the participants identified as a significant barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education. Across the data, participants highlighted the inadequacy of financial support, which manifests in outdated infrastructure, non-functional therapeutic spaces, and limited access to essential assistive technologies. One participant remarked:

> *"Our therapy rooms are not functional, and without proper resources, inclusive education remains a dream rather than a reality"* (OT).

This concern is further shared by another participant, who drew attention to the impact of limited funding on early intervention and learner development:

> *"Limited funding affects the early development of our learners with special needs in the Foundation Phase. Many of these children require early intervention through occupational and speech therapy, yet the school's budget cannot consistently cover these services. Further, teaching resources, such as tactile learning materials, Braille books, and assistive communication devices, are often either unavailable or insufficient"* (DH1).

Both participants express a shared understanding that inadequate funding undermines the foundational elements required for inclusive education. Their accounts are mutually reinforcing, as they collectively highlight both infrastructural and pedagogical deficits. While the first participant foregrounds the deterioration and dysfunctionality of physical spaces necessary for therapeutic support, the second participant extends this concern to their implications for early childhood development, particularly the absence of critical intervention services and specialised learning materials. Together, these perspectives illustrate how financial constraints permeate multiple dimensions of schooling, ultimately limiting the school's capacity to facilitate meaningful inclusion.

The above findings are strongly supported by existing literature, which consistently identifies underfunding as a central challenge in the South African inclusive education

landscape. Studies by Equal Education (2025) and Mahlaule et al. (2024) reveal that many special schools continue to operate with outdated infrastructure, limited therapeutic facilities, and insufficient assistive technologies, all of which compromise the quality of education provided. Similarly, Chirowamhangu (2024) and Kota et al. (2018) demonstrate how infrastructural deficits and inequitable resource allocation undermine policy implementation, particularly in resource-constrained provinces. Isaacs et al. (2025) further attribute these persistent challenges to weak political commitment and fragmented policy execution, reinforcing the systemic nature of the problem.

From a social justice perspective, the findings can be interpreted as reflecting deep inequalities in the distribution of educational resources. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (2010) notion of redistribution, the lack of adequate funding in special schools highlights the unequal allocation of material resources necessary for equitable participation. Furthermore, the absence of appropriate learning materials and therapeutic services undermines the recognition of learners with disabilities, as their specific needs are not adequately addressed within the schooling environment. As argued in the literature (Nguyen et al., 2026, Patterson, 2022; Voigt, 2018), equitable access to resources is fundamental to achieving fairness within any social system, including education. Consequently, the findings underscore that without sustained financial investment and equitable resource distribution, inclusive education risks remaining aspirational rather than attainable, particularly in rural and marginalised contexts.

Theme 3: Policy Implementation and Systemic Constraints in Inclusive Education

A third key theme that emerged from the findings relates to the challenges associated with policy implementation and broader systemic constraints. Participants reiterated that although inclusive education policies such as the Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) and the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) framework are in place, their practical application at the school level remains problematic. They highlighted a lack of clear guidance and inconsistent support from district and provincial offices, which creates significant gaps in implementation. One participant explained:

> *"Policies are there, but the guidance on how to apply them in our context is missing"* (DO).

This concern is further elaborated by another participant, who provided a more detailed account of how policy implementation is shaped by systemic challenges:

> *"Policy implementation is guided by the Department of Education's inclusive education framework and White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education. These policy frameworks ensure that staff members align classroom practice with departmental policies, including curriculum adaptation, learner support, and assessment accommodations. However, implementation of these policies is often undermined by systemic challenges such as limited access to specialised resources, inadequate infrastructure, and delays in receiving updated policy directives from the district office"* (DH2).

Both participants agreed that while policy frameworks exist and provide a formal structure for inclusive education, their implementation is significantly constrained by contextual realities. The first participant foregrounds the absence of practical guidance, suggesting a disconnect between policy formulation and contextual applicability. While acknowledging the role of policy in guiding practice, the other participant extends this argument by illustrating how systemic issues such as resource shortages, infrastructural limitations, and administrative delays—undermine effective implementation. These perspectives are complementary, collectively demonstrating that the challenge lies not in the absence of policy, but in the conditions necessary for its meaningful implementation.

These findings align closely with existing scholarship, which has consistently highlighted the gap between inclusive education policy and practice in South Africa. For example, Seeko and Mathebula (2023) argue that although the policy of inclusive education is central to the country's transformation agenda, its implementation often remains disconnected from the realities of schools. Similarly, Bipath et al. (2021) demonstrate, through case studies across multiple provinces, that a lack of coherence between national and provincial departments exacerbates implementation challenges. Hudson et al. (2019) emphasise that unclear policy directives and weak accountability mechanisms hinder effective implementation, while Isaacs et al. (2025) attribute persistent inequalities to fragmented and inconsistent policy execution.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings resonate with Matland's (1995) top-down approach to policy implementation, which underscores the importance of clear objectives, strong coordination, and effective monitoring mechanisms. The absence of these elements, as reflected in the participants' accounts, contributes to implementation failure, particularly in complex and under-resourced contexts. At the same time, Shukia (2020) cautions that overly centralised approaches may fail to account for local realities, thereby reinforcing the challenges identified by study participants.

When viewed through a social justice lens, these findings point to issues of representation and participation in policy processes. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's framework, the limited involvement of school-level actors in shaping policy implementation highlights a lack of meaningful representation, while the failure to adapt policies to local contexts reflects systemic inequities. Furthermore, the interplay between policy limitations and resource constraints underscores broader issues of redistribution and recognition within the education system. As such, the findings suggest that enhancing inclusive education does not only require well-designed policies but contextually responsive implementation strategies, strengthened institutional support, coupled with greater alignment between policy intentions and school-level realities.

Theme 4: Limited Capacity Building and Inadequate Professional Development Support

The fourth theme relates to the lack of sustained capacity building and continuous professional development for both teachers and SMT members. Across the data, participants consistently emphasised that while inclusive education demands specialised

knowledge and adaptive pedagogical skills, opportunities for ongoing training remain limited and inconsistently provided. In this regard, professional learning communities (PLCs) were identified by participants as a potentially valuable mechanism for strengthening practice; however, such structures were reported to be weakly institutionalised and irregularly supported. One participant noted:

> *"We need ongoing workshops to build confidence in handling complex disabilities"* (DH2).

This concern is further reinforced by another participant, who highlighted the implications of inadequate teacher preparation within the Foundation Phase:

> *"Some of our teachers in the Foundation Phase are not specialising in inclusive education. They are not trained to teach in this context, which makes it difficult to adapt"* (DH1).

Both participants expressed concern about the insufficient development of the professional competencies required for effective inclusive education. Their responses are complementary, with the first participant foregrounding the need for structured, continuous in-service training to build confidence in managing diverse and complex disabilities, while the second emphasizes preservice and specialisation gaps among Foundation Phase teachers, particularly in inclusive pedagogical adaptation. Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that the challenge is not only the absence of training opportunities, but also the lack of sustained, structured, and context-specific professional development pathways that support inclusive teaching practices over time.

These findings are strongly supported by existing scholarship, which consistently identifies inadequate professional development as a key barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education in South Africa. Ratau and Motitswe (2025) argue that insufficient teacher training continues to undermine inclusive classroom practices, particularly in resource-limited schools where educators are often expected to manage complex learning needs without adequate preparation. Similarly, Mbelu (2025) highlights that limited leadership development opportunities contribute to the underdevelopment of ethical and instructional leadership within inclusive and full-service school contexts. For Chirowamhangu (2024), systemic constraints in rural schools restrict access to ongoing professional learning opportunities, thereby limiting institutional capacity to respond effectively to issues related to learner diversity.

From a social justice perspective, these findings highlight significant issues of redistribution and recognition. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (2010) framework, the unequal access to professional development opportunities reflects broader patterns of resource inequality within the education system, where rural and under-resourced schools are disproportionately disadvantaged. At the same time, the lack of adequate training undermines the recognition of diverse learner needs, as educators are insufficiently equipped to respond to disability-related complexities in meaningful and inclusive ways. Furthermore, the absence of sustained professional learning structures limits participatory capacity within schools, thereby weakening collective efforts to strengthen inclusive education practices. In this regard, the findings underscore the need

for systematic, ongoing, and contextually responsive capacity-building initiatives that are embedded within school structures and supported at district and provincial levels to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Theme 5: Parental and Community Involvement as Both Constraints and Enablers of Inclusive Education

A fifth theme relates to the complex and often inconsistent nature of parental and community involvement in supporting inclusive education within the school context. Participants reported that while parental engagement is widely recognised as essential for learner development, its realisation is uneven and significantly shaped by socioeconomic conditions. In many instances, poverty, unemployment, and family instability were identified as key barriers limiting meaningful parental participation. One participant observed:

> *"When parents are involved, learners thrive, but many families face poverty-related limitations, and they cannot fully participate in school governance structures, extracurricular activities, and support programmes"* (P).

This challenge is further deepened in contexts where family structures are disrupted, as reflected in the following account:

> *"Some of the learners at this school are orphans, and it is difficult to involve parents as most of them hail from child-headed homes"* (DP).

However, the data also reveal a more enabling dimension of community engagement, where some parents demonstrate willingness to participate in school activities, governance structures, and collaborative initiatives despite limited formal education or socioeconomic constraints. As one participant explained:

> *"Some parents are willing to be part of what is happening in the school. Even though they are uneducated, they are willing to participate"* (DH3).

Collectively, these accounts illustrate a dual, somewhat contradictory role for parental and community involvement within the school. On the one hand, the participants highlight structural socioeconomic barriers, including poverty and orphanhood, which limit consistent and meaningful engagement. On the other hand, there is evidence of willingness and commitment among some parents and community members to support school activities, despite their lack of formal educational. The findings therefore suggest that parental involvement is neither absent nor uniform, but rather unevenly distributed and shaped by broader social and economic realities.

These findings are consistent with existing scholarship, which emphasises that parental involvement in special and inclusive education contexts is frequently shaped by structural inequalities. Chirowamhangu (2024) notes that socioeconomic disadvantage in rural areas significantly limits parental participation in educational processes, particularly when families struggle with poverty and limited access to basic services. Similarly, Ratau and Motitswe (2025) highlight that weak parental involvement continues to undermine the effective implementation of inclusive education, especially in resource-limited schools. However, broader literature also recognises the potential of

community partnerships and external stakeholders, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in strengthening school capacity and supporting inclusive education initiatives (Naicker & Mestry, 2023; Zhenghui et al., 2026).

From a social justice perspective, these findings highlight issues of representation, participation, and recognition. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (2010) framework, the limited and uneven participation of parents reflects broader challenges of representation, as socioeconomic marginalisation constrains meaningful involvement in educational decision-making. At the same time, the willingness of some parents to engage, despite structural disadvantages, signals the importance of recognising community agency and resilience within constrained contexts. Further, the reliance on NGOs and community partnerships reflects ongoing issues of redistribution, as external actors often compensate for systemic resource shortages within schools. Overall, the findings illustrate that parental and community involvement function simultaneously as both a constraint and a critical enabling factor in the implementation of inclusive education, particularly in rural and resourced-limited settings.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study collectively demonstrate that an SMT in a rural special school operates within deeply constrained conditions characterised by systemic shortages of specialised personnel, inadequate funding, limited professional development opportunities, weak policy support structures, and inconsistent parental involvement. Across the themes, it is evident that SMTs are required to mediate between ambitious inclusive education policy frameworks such as the Education White Paper 6 and the SIAS policy, and the harsh realities of under resourced schooling contexts. The shortage of qualified teachers, particularly those trained in autism, multiple disabilities, and remedial pedagogies, reflects what Chirowamhangu (2024) describes as the chronic difficulty of attracting and retaining specialised staff in rural schools. This is further supported by Ratau and Motitswe (2025) who argue that inadequate teacher training continues to undermine inclusive classroom practice. Further, Mbelu (2025) highlights that leadership capacity in inclusive settings remains underdeveloped due to insufficient systemic support. These converging findings suggest that human resource constraints are not isolated issues, but these are structurally embedded issues within broader inequalities in the education system. When interpreted through Nancy Fraser's (2008) lens of redistribution, recognition, and representation, it becomes evident that the inequitable distribution of skilled personnel, insufficient recognition of diverse learner needs, and limited participation of key stakeholders in decision-making processes collectively reproduce educational exclusion in special schools.

In addition to human resource constraints, the findings strongly highlight infrastructural and financial limitations as critical barriers to the implementation of inclusive education. Participants' accounts of non-functional therapy rooms, insufficient assistive technologies, and inadequate learning materials illustrate the material deprivation that continues to characterise many special schools in South Africa. These observations are consistent with Equal Education (2025) and Mahlaule et al. (2024), who reported that special schools remain under resourced, with outdated infrastructure and limited

therapeutic spaces that compromise effective teaching and learning. Chirowamhangu (2024) similarly emphasises that infrastructural deficits and inequitable resource allocation significantly hinder the realisation of inclusive education, particularly in rural settings. From a social justice perspective, these conditions reflect a failure of redistribution, where learners with disabilities are systematically disadvantaged in access to essential educational resources. Further, the inability of schools to provide consistent therapeutic and assistive support raises concerns of recognition, as learners' diverse needs are not adequately accommodated within existing institutional arrangements. These findings reinforce Isaacs et al. (2025), who argue that persistent gaps between policy intentions and school-level realities are largely driven by weak political commitment and fragmented implementation processes. Thus, SMTs are positioned as frontline actors who must attempt to implement inclusive education without the necessary material and institutional support, thereby perpetuating structural inequities within the system.

The study further reveals that policy implementation challenges, limited capacity building, and uneven parental involvement significantly shape the lived realities of SMTs. The participants' experiences indicate that although inclusive education policies provide formal guidance, there is often a lack of contextualised support for implementation, echoing Seeko and Mathebula's (2023) argument that a persistent gap exists between policy rhetoric and school level practice. Similarly, Bipath et al. (2021) highlight inconsistencies between national and provincial departments, which contribute to fragmented implementation, while Hudson et al. (2019) and Shukia (2020) note tensions between top-down policy approaches and local contextual realities. The findings also demonstrate that limited professional development opportunities constrain SMTs and teachers from effectively responding to diverse learner needs, aligning with Ratau and Motitswe (2025) and Mbelu (2025), who emphasise the consequences of inadequate training and weak leadership development systems. Moreover, the uneven nature of parental involvement reflects broader socioeconomic inequalities, as highlighted by Chirowamhangu (2024), where poverty and child-headed households restrict meaningful participation. However, the willingness of some parents and communities to engage also signals potential for strengthened partnerships, consistent with Naicker and Mestry (2023), who argue that community collaboration can enhance school capacity. Through Nancy Fraser's (2008) framework, these findings underscore deficits in representation, as marginalised voices are often excluded from meaningful participation in educational decision-making processes, thereby weakening the democratic potential of inclusive education. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that inclusive education in rural special schools is shaped by intersecting structural, institutional, and socioeconomic constraints, requiring not only policy reform but also sustained investment, capacity building, and stronger accountability mechanisms to bridge the persistent gap between policy and practice.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the multifaceted challenges confronting SMTs in a rural special school in KwaZulu-Natal, where structural, institutional, and socioeconomic constraints significantly impede the effective realisation of inclusive

education. Persistent shortages of specialised teachers and support staff, inadequate funding and relevant infrastructure, weak policy implementation support, limited professional development opportunities, and inconsistent parental involvement collectively undermine the capacity of SMTs to deliver equitable learning opportunities. Interpreted through Nancy Fraser's (2008) three-dimensional theory of social justice, these findings reveal entrenched inequalities in redistribution, recognition, and representation within the education system. While SMTs strive to mitigate these challenges through adaptive strategies such as collaboration, community engagement, and informal leadership practices. However, these efforts remain constrained by systemic inefficiencies and resource limitations.

Consequently, inclusive education in rural and under-resourced contexts remains more aspirational than practical, with a pronounced gap between policy expectations and lived realities. It is important to acknowledge that the single-site case study design limits the generalisability of these findings, underscoring the need for cautious interpretation. For policymakers and educational leaders, the study highlights the urgency of investing in sustained capacity building, equitable resource allocation, strengthened policy support, and structured community partnerships to ensure that inclusive education is not merely a policy ideal but a lived reality. Future research should adopt comparative designs across rural and urban settings, use longitudinal approaches to track SMT practices over time, and incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives to provide a holistic understanding of the dynamics of inclusive education. Moreover, intervention-based studies evaluating leadership development initiatives, resource allocation models, and community-driven support systems could yield actionable insights to strengthen inclusive education outcomes. Ultimately, addressing the broader structural conditions that shape schooling environments is indispensable for advancing equitable, context-responsive, and sustainable approaches to inclusive education in South Africa.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no competing financial, professional, or personal interests that may have influenced the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The study was conducted independently, and no external funding or affiliations have compromised the objectivity, integrity, or interpretation of the findings presented herein.

Funding Statement

External funding was received for this work. However, the research was conducted independently, and all aspects of the study, including its design, data collection, analysis, and reporting, were conducted without the funder's influence.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools

We hereby declare that no Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. We further affirm that we are fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, and overall integrity of this work. All the ideas, analyses, and interpretations presented are our own, and all the sources used are appropriately acknowledged in accordance with accepted academic standards.

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