

Ubuntu Paradigm for Afrocentric Research in Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Supporting School Transitions for Learners with Down Syndrome

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ABSTRACT:

This study interrogates how Ubuntu philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) can reconfigure inclusive education for learners with Down Syndrome during early school transitions in South Africa. Despite progressive policy commitments, systemic barriers, limited teacher preparedness, and fragile home-school collaboration continue to undermine equitable transitions. Employing a qualitative case study design, data was generated through semi-structured and narrative interviews with parents, teachers, and school support teams, triangulated with policy and institutional documents. Thematic analysis illuminated four critical dimensions: Ubuntu values of care, patience, and shared responsibility as relational anchors of transition; IKS-informed pedagogies of demonstration, play, and embodied learning as culturally congruent enablers of engagement; systemic constraints that delimit institutional readiness; and family-school collaboration as a decisive factor in learner adjustment. Advancing an Afrocentric relational framework, this study contributes to international scholarship in school psychology. It foregrounds culturally responsive, evidence-informed practices that align policy intent with lived realities. The findings extend global debates on multicultural perspectives, social justice, and equity in education. They offer actionable insights for school psychologists, educators, and policymakers seeking to strengthen transition processes for neurodiverse learners across diverse perspectives.

Keywords: Ubuntu Philosophy; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Inclusive Education; School Psychology; Down Syndrome; Multicultural perspectives.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education in South Africa is formally grounded in the Education White Paper 6. This

policy commits the state to building a single, inclusive education system that accommodates all learners, including those with intellectual disabilities (Department of Education, 2001). It emphasises the

need for systemic support and collaboration across education, health, and social services. More than two decades after its adoption, multiple studies confirm that learners with disabilities continue to experience exclusionary practices. This is particularly evident during early school transitions (Fontil et al., 2019). Inadequate support structures and limited teacher preparation are significant challenges (Randez, 2024). Additionally, weak coordination between families and schools exacerbates these issues. Learners with Down Syndrome are especially vulnerable during the transition from home to school (Brynard, 2016; Barclay, 2017; Bull, 2020). This phase requires coordinated cognitive, social, and emotional support that many mainstream schools are not structurally equipped to provide (Bull, 2020). South African and broader African scholarship increasingly argues that inclusive education frameworks rooted in Eurocentric and individualised models are inadequate (Letseka, 2012; Abrol, 2023; Sefotho & Letseka, 2024). These frameworks do not address the communal caregiving traditions that are essential to child development. Additionally, they overlook the relational worldviews that shape these developmental processes from an African perspective. Ubuntu philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems offer an alternative epistemological foundation by positioning learning, care, and identity as collective processes (Letseka, 2012). These processes are sustained through shared responsibility, interdependence, and community participation. Situating school transitions for learners with Down Syndrome within this Afrocentric paradigm enables a more culturally responsive understanding of inclusion. This approach aligns policy intent with the lived realities in South African communities.

Inclusive Education and Systemic Implementation in South Africa

The rights-based framework for inclusive education is outlined by the Department of Education (2001), emphasising the need to address historical exclusion. Engelbrecht et al. (2016) provide evidence of inconsistent implementation, emphasising a significant gap between policy and

practice. Engelbrecht et al. (2016) focus on macro-level policy challenges, while Randez (2024) emphasises the importance of teacher training in inclusive pedagogy. Both studies emphasise the necessity of addressing systemic barriers; however, they approach the issue from different angles. Donohue & Bornman (2015) argue that curricula are inadequately adapted for learners with cognitive disabilities, while other researchers suggest that these adaptations are poorly implemented rather than entirely ineffective. Additionally, Human Rights Watch (2015) stresses the urgency of immediate support for early transitions, contrasting with calls for long-term systemic changes. While empirical studies like Engelbrecht et al. (2016) offer valuable insights into policy effects, they often neglect the perspectives of marginalised learners. Randez's (2024) findings on teacher training may also overlook psychological aspects that impact teachers' ability to change their practices. This study aims to synthesise insights from existing literature to develop a comprehensive model for inclusive education. Addressing both institutional capacity and teacher competencies, it seeks to challenge current practices and propose actionable solutions.

School Transitions and Learners with Down Syndrome

The research problem regarding the transition of learners with Down Syndrome from home to school is supported by credible sources like Barclay (2017) and Bull (2020), which provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges involved. These studies underline the necessity for consistent support during this critical developmental phase. The alignment of findings from Brynard (2016) and Gesel et al. (2021) demonstrates how poorly planned transition processes uniformly lead to increased anxiety and social isolation among learners. Both studies emphasise the need for structured collaboration between home and school, despite differing methodologies. While Brouwer (2021) emphasises parental exclusion during school entry decisions, Bennett et al. (2022) focus on the emotional response of parents, indicating a divergence in perspectives. These disagreements reveal gaps in understanding parental involvement's impact on

transition success. The strengths of existing studies lie in their identification of key factors affecting transitions, but they often lack longitudinal data to support long-term outcome claims. Furthermore, some methodologies may not adequately capture the intricacies of family-teacher relationships, which are crucial for effective transitions. This study aims to extend the conversation by examining how parental involvement can be systematically improved to foster better transitions for learners with Down Syndrome. Integrating insights from previous research, it seeks to develop a model that enhances collaboration between families and teachers.

Ubuntu, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and Inclusive Education

The integration of Ubuntu philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems provides a foundational framework for addressing the inclusive education needs of diverse learners. This study draws from credible sources that articulate the importance of communal relationships and shared responsibility in educational contexts (Kamga, 2018; Hlalele, 2022). Both Ubuntu and Indigenous Knowledge Systems promote collective accountability and cultural responsiveness in educational practices, but they approach inclusivity from different cultural perspectives. The alignment of these frameworks suggests a complementary relationship that can enhance educational experiences for marginalised students (Letseka, 2012; Mkosi et al., 2023). While some scholars advocate for the seamless integration of Ubuntu into educational frameworks, others raise concerns about its practical applicability in diverse environments. Methodological differences in how these frameworks are studied reveal gaps regarding their implementation and effectiveness in real-world settings (Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). The existing literature demonstrates the merits of Ubuntu in fostering empathy and cooperation, yet it often lacks quantitative validation of its impact on learner outcomes. Moreover, the varied interpretations of Indigenous Knowledge Systems complicate their application across different educational environments, raising questions about their validity (Hlalele, 2022). This study aims to fill identified gaps

by exploring how blending Ubuntu and Indigenous Knowledge Systems can enhance inclusive education practices for learners with disabilities. By positioning itself within the ongoing discourse, it seeks to generate insights that challenge traditional educational paradigms and advocate for culturally responsive approaches.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that integrates the Ubuntu philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) (Hlalele, 2022; Mkosi et al., 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). It aims to explain how culturally grounded relational processes shape school transitions for learners with Down Syndrome within an inclusive education perspective. Ubuntu positions learning and development as collective processes sustained through interconnected relationships between the learner, family, school, and community (Letseka, 2012; Kamga, 2018). It emphasises shared responsibility, dignity, and mutual care as enabling conditions for inclusion. Indigenous Knowledge Systems extend this relational foundation by foregrounding communal caregiving and intergenerational knowledge transfer (Mkosi et al., 2023). Additionally, oral communication practices and culturally embedded meaning-making serve as central mechanisms through which support is enacted during educational transitions. Within this framework, successful school transition is conceptualised as an outcome of dynamic interaction between systemic factors (policy alignment, school readiness, teacher competence), relational processes (home-school collaboration, emotional support, trust), and cultural practices (communal responsibility, storytelling, shared child-rearing norms), rather than as an individual learner deficit (Engelbrecht et al., 2015). The framework shifts analysis away from biomedical or individualised explanations of difficulty. Instead, it advocates for a culturally responsive, system-oriented understanding of inclusion that aligns inclusive education practice with African epistemologies and social realities.

The conceptual framework of Afrocentric inclusive education underscores the importance of communal learning and support. However, there

remains a significant research gap in exploring how these principles specifically address the unique challenges faced by learners with Down Syndrome during school transitions. South African inclusive education research has extensively documented policy implementation challenges and systemic barriers affecting learners with disabilities (Motitswe, 2025). Existing studies primarily rely on Eurocentric and individualised frameworks that inadequately account for relational, communal, and culturally embedded processes shaping school transitions (Alexiadou, 2019; Herrmann-Israel & Byram, 2023). Ubuntu philosophy conceptualises personhood as relational, asserting that individual well-being and development are inseparable from communal relationships (Kamga, 2018). This perspective emphasises mutual care and shared responsibility within a community. While Ubuntu and Indigenous Knowledge Systems are increasingly discussed in South African education theory, their empirical integration into inclusive education research remains underdeveloped (Letseka, 2012; Mkosi et al., 2023). This is particularly evident in relation to transition processes and intellectual disability, where it is weakly operationalised. There is insufficient empirical evidence explaining how Afrocentric, community-based frameworks can function as systemic enablers of inclusive school transitions. This is particularly relevant for learners with Down Syndrome in the South African perspective.

The identified research gap reveals the inadequacy of current inclusive education frameworks in addressing the unique challenges faced by learners with Down Syndrome during school transitions. There is a need for structured support and collaboration between families and schools to prevent increased anxiety and social isolation. Despite South Africa's constitutional commitment and inclusive education policy framework, learners with Down Syndrome continue to experience fragmented and inequitable transitions from home to school (Department of Education, 2001; Barclay, 2017; Bull, 2020). This is mainly due to systemic weaknesses, limited teacher preparedness, and poorly structured home-school partnerships (Randez, 2024). Existing inclusive education practices are primarily informed by individualised

and deficit-oriented models (Abrol, 2023; Amka et al., 2024). These approaches insufficiently account for the relational, communal, and culturally embedded forms of support that characterise many South African communities. Although Ubuntu philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems offer culturally congruent frameworks that emphasise shared responsibility, interdependence, and collective caregiving (Kamga, 2018; Mkosi et al., 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024), these paradigms remain marginal in empirical research. Additionally, their practical implementation related to school transitions for learners with intellectual disabilities is also limited (Barclay, 2017; Bull, 2020). Therefore, there is a lack of contextually grounded evidence to guide teachers, families, and policymakers in designing inclusive transition processes that align systemic support with African epistemologies and lived realities.

Considering the identified gaps in inclusive education practices and the necessity for culturally relevant support frameworks. This study will explore the following research questions to enhance the transition processes for learners with Down Syndrome in South Africa.

1. *How do Ubuntu values shape the transition from home to school for learners with Down Syndrome in South African inclusive education perspectives?*
2. *What role do Indigenous Knowledge Systems play in supporting collaboration between families and schools during the school transition of learners with Down Syndrome?*
3. *What systemic factors enable or constrain the application of Ubuntu- and Indigenous Knowledge-based practices in inclusive school transition processes?*

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

Method

This research employed a qualitative methodology, as it is ideally suited to delve into the lived experiences of parents, teachers, and stakeholders engaged in the inclusion of children with Down syndrome in early childhood education. Qualitative research facilitates a comprehensive examination of social and educational dynamics, emphasising the

importance of meaning, context, and interpretation over quantifiable metrics (Morgan, 2022). The study was grounded in an interpretivist framework, which posits that knowledge is constructed socially and influenced by the viewpoints of individuals involved (Darby et al., 2019). This interpretivist lens was selected due to the intricate and context-sensitive nature of inclusion, which engages various actors, including families, teachers, and communities. Investigating their experiences necessitates an approach that acknowledges subjectivity, cultural intricacies, and the existence of multiple realities.

Design

The study utilised a case study methodology, which is particularly advantageous in the field of educational research due to its capacity to provide in-depth, comprehensive insights into actual practices (Crowe et al., 2017). The selected case involved a special educational needs institution in Johannesburg that serves students with Down syndrome (DS) through both inclusive and semi-specialised classrooms (Zack & Lewis, 2022). This methodological approach facilitated a thorough exploration of the strategies employed, the challenges encountered, and the achievements realised in the early inclusion of learners with DS. Moreover, it permitted the study to triangulate information from a diverse range of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and support staff, thereby augmenting the richness and credibility of the findings (Joslin & Müller, 2016).

Sampling

In this study, purposive sampling was employed to enlist individuals possessing relevant insights and expertise in fostering the educational growth of children with Down Syndrome (DS) during early childhood. The targeted population comprised parents or guardians of children with DS enrolled at the designated school, teachers experienced in teaching these learners in the early grades, as well as members of the School-Based Support Team (SBST) and the School Management Team (SMT) responsible for overseeing inclusive education practices. This strategic sampling method ensured that only those participants with direct engagement and substantial knowledge contributed to the study

(Palinkas et al., 2015). A carefully curated sample of about seven individuals was selected, including three parents, two teachers, one SBST member, and one SMT member. Although the sample size was relatively small, the focused nature of the study, combined with the participants' significant informational value stemming from their direct involvement in inclusive transitions, facilitated the generation of rich and contextually relevant data.

Data Collection

In line with the research question, a comprehensive range of data was gathered through various methodologies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, teachers, and members of the School-Based Support Team (SBST) and School Management Team (SMT), enabling participants to share their experiences in depth while allowing researchers to seek clarification and delve deeper into the meaning behind their responses (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Additionally, narrative interviews facilitated personal storytelling from some participants regarding their experiences in supporting learners with Down syndrome, providing profound insights into their lived experiences and emotional nuances (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2015). To complement the data obtained from interviews, an analysis of relevant documents, school records, support plans, and pertinent legal and policy frameworks, including the Bela Act and various White Papers, was undertaken, enhancing the triangulation process and offering crucial contextual insights (Morgan, 2022). All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and incorporated code-switching into indigenous languages where appropriate to ensure participant comfort and fidelity. The study's validity and reliability were bolstered through the triangulation of diverse data sources, peer debriefing, and member checking, providing participants with the chance to review and verify the accuracy of the transcripts. This methodology allowed for a richer analysis by integrating individual narratives within broader systemic and legislative frameworks.

Data analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to derive insights from qualitative data, following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006) through six distinct phases: immersing in the data, generating preliminary codes, identifying themes, revisiting those themes, articulating and labelling the themes, and composing the report. Initial codes were created from interview transcripts and organised into broader categories, including holistic development through inclusive teaching practices, shifts in teacher capacity and attitudes, family involvement characterised by Ubuntu principles, and the dynamics of peer relationships and social inclusion, with themes refined through iterative comparison across various study groups. To assure the credibility of the study, the methodology adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, employing triangulation and prolonged participant engagement to reinforce trustworthiness, while comprehensive contextual descriptions enhanced transferability. Dependability was achieved through an audit trail meticulously recording research decisions, coding specifications, theme evolution, and analytical notes, thereby bolstering methodological transparency. Additionally, reflexive journaling was utilised to promote confirmability and minimise researcher bias. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to identify biases and ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than subjective preconceptions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee on 3 June 2024. The ethical approval number is SEM1-2024-132. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was also obtained from the Department of Education, Gauteng Province, on 18 June 2024, for the study to be conducted at the chosen school. The ethics approval number is 8/4/4/1/2. Because the study involved children with disabilities, additional ethical safeguards were observed. Parents provided consent for minors, and an educational psychologist was available for participant support. Confidentiality was upheld through pseudonyms

and secure data storage. Interviews were conducted respectfully, reflecting the Ubuntu ethic of care, ensuring that no emotional or psychological harm occurred during participation.

RESULTS

This study presents the key results, structured around four dominant themes that emerged from the data. Each theme integrates verbatim quotations from participants, along with selected national and international education policy texts. This approach demonstrates the contextual realities and systemic frameworks that shape early intervention and transition for children with Down syndrome.

THEME 1: Ubuntu values and relational support in School transitions

This theme reflects how care, patience, emotional availability, and collaboration underpin successful transitions. Across parents and teachers, transition support is described as a relational process, not an isolated school task. Parent 1 describes their day-to-day caregiving role during the transition from home to school. The emphasis is on emotional presence, kindness, and patience as deliberate strategies to support adjustment:

"I ensure that I am emotionally and physically available for him, offering constant encouragement and setting clear but reasonable expectations. I avoided shouting and instead spoke to him kindly and patiently, which helped him cope better with the changes".

Parent 3 situates Ubuntu values within moments of emotional distress during the transition to a new school. The quote emerges from a narrative of anxiety, fear, and gradual reassurance through collective care involving both family and school staff:

"It took all my patience and the reassurances of the school staff to help him feel safe. Each day felt like a battle against anxiety and fear. Slowly but surely, things began to improve."

From the teacher's perspective, Teacher 1 reinforces the same relational ethic, linking learner

development directly to sustained cooperation between school and home:

“Effective development for children with Down Syndrome requires a strong relationship and communication between the school and the support system at home.”

Later in the interview, Teacher 1 explicitly frames successful transitions dependent on shared responsibility and collaboration rather than individual effort:

“In my experience, the key to successfully transitioning learners with Down Syndrome from home to school involves patience, consistency, and a collaborative approach.”

Together, these quotations show Ubuntu in practice: care is shared, patience is collective, and successful transitions depend on interdependence.

THEME 2: Indigenous Knowledge Systems as Cultural Enablers of Inclusion

This theme emphasises learning approaches rooted in demonstration, play, observation, and participation, methods that align with Indigenous Knowledge Systems and contrast with rigid, formal instruction. Parent 1 explains how learning at home was facilitated through showing and doing rather than verbal instruction alone, reflecting experiential and visual learning traditions:

“I often demonstrated what I wanted him to do, as he learned better through visual and practical examples”.

This approach is echoed by Teacher 2, who critiques conventional teaching methods and advocates for demonstration-based learning:

“Learners should learn through demonstration rather than our traditional way of teaching and learning. This approach helps learners understand better”.

Teacher 2 further explains how play, music, and movement are used intentionally to sustain engagement and understanding in the classroom:

“Learning through play is highly effective. Activities in class should be done through playing, such as singing songs, because learners get bored easily.”

The same teacher connects enjoyment, participation, and learning outcomes, reinforcing culturally responsive pedagogy:

“By learning through play while singing and dancing, they enjoy the process and also gain content knowledge.”

Collectively, these quotations show how Indigenous Knowledge-informed practices support inclusion by aligning teaching with learners’ ways of knowing and engaging.

THEME 3: Systemic Factors Influencing Inclusive Transitions

This theme captures how institutional capacity, discipline systems, parental engagement, and formal support structures shape transition experiences. Parent 3 reflects on their child’s early schooling experience, highlighting systemic limitations despite goodwill from teachers:

“The teachers were kind and tried their best, but the school wasn’t equipped to give my child the needed support.”

From within the classroom, Teacher 1 describes recurring challenges linked to external environments and inconsistent reinforcement:

“Discipline was a continuous challenge, especially after holidays when learners returned with behaviours learned from their communities.”

The same teacher connects systemic challenges to parental perceptions and involvement:

“If parents do not see their child’s potential, it becomes challenging for us to help the child develop.”

At an institutional level, the SBST Coordinator explains how systemic processes are used to support families and learners during transitions:

"The SBST communicates all necessary information about the child's background, assessments, and medical documentation to help parents understand their child better."

Together, these accounts show how system readiness, coordination, and shared understanding directly influence transition success.

THEME 4: Family Engagement and Home-School Collaboration

This theme focuses on communication, shared planning, and sustained involvement between families and schools during transitions. Parent 1 explains their active engagement during the transition process, particularly in building understanding of school systems and support structures:

"I actively participated in the initial stages of transitioning to the new school by understanding the school's processes and working closely with the school's counsellor to support his needs."

The same parent elaborates on the practical methods used to maintain communication:

"I maintained open and direct communication with the teachers and school management team (SMT) through face-to-face conversations."

When reflecting on the value of collaboration, Parent 1 explicitly links communication to learner benefit:

"Yes, effective communication among parents, teachers, and the SMT greatly benefits learners with Down Syndrome during transitions."

From a management perspective, the SMT Member situates family involvement as foundational to successful transitions:

"Families who are well-informed and involved can better support their child's learning and development at home."

These quotations collectively demonstrate that effective transitions are co-produced through sustained, structured home-school partnerships.

DISCUSSIONS

This study examined how Ubuntu values and Indigenous Knowledge Systems influence school transitions for learners with Down Syndrome in South Africa's inclusive education. Findings show successful transitions depend more on relational, cultural, and systemic processes rather than individual readiness, emphasising Ubuntu values of care, patience, emotional presence, and shared accountability. Support is seen as relational, emphasising emotional availability, kindness, and collaboration. Ubuntu is thus an active practice shaping caregiving and support. Indigenous pedagogies like demonstration, play, music, and embodied participation are critical for inclusion, especially as children with Down Syndrome learn better through experiential methods. Systemic factors greatly affect outcomes; despite teachers' commitment, schools often lack resources, coordination, and readiness, with discipline issues, parental engagement challenges, and limited institutional capacity showing the limits of goodwill without systemic support. Family involvement and home-school collaboration are crucial; effective communication, planning, and mutual understanding improve transitions, leading to smoother adjustment and emotional well-being security.

This study aligns with African scholarship critiquing Eurocentric models of inclusive education, emphasising Ubuntu's relational view of learning, care, and development (Brouwer, 2021; Bennett et al., 2022). Significantly, the findings extend beyond educational theory to offer evidence-informed implications for school psychology practice. Relational care, patience, and shared responsibility, central to Ubuntu, can be operationalised as culturally responsive counselling strategies (Kamga, 2018). Additionally, play-based and demonstration pedagogies rooted in Indigenous Knowledge

Systems enhance psychoeducational interventions, particularly for learners with disabilities. Structured family-school collaboration emerges as a protective factor against anxiety and social isolation during transitions, directly addressing the emotional distress often caused by poorly coordinated transitions for learners with Down Syndrome (Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Rande, 2024). Reframing transition support through Ubuntu and Indigenous Knowledge, this study uniquely embeds transition practices within an Afrocentric relational framework, not merely as technical processes. These insights provide school psychologists and educators with actionable, contextually grounded tools to strengthen equity-driven outcomes for neurodiverse learners. While rooted in South Africa, the findings contribute to global debates on multicultural school psychology, demonstrating how Afrocentric frameworks can enrich evidence-based practice internationally (Bennett et al., 2022).

While much of the literature on inclusive education aligns with this study, key differences explain why learners with Down Syndrome still face fragmented transitions despite policies. Support is often seen through individual readiness, expertise, and formal interventions (Alexiadou, 2019; Herrmann-Israel & Byram, 2023). However, this study shows participants focus on relational continuity, safety, and caregiving, which mainstream models overlook. Emphasising patience and kindness, Ubuntu practices emerged prominently, contrasting formal transition programs that rely on checklists and procedures. This may explain why policies fail to promote true inclusion, revealing a deeper epistemological gap between policy and community practice. Parental involvement, often seen as systemic exclusion (Brouwer, 2021), is here shown to be informal and culturally embedded, often invisible in formal structures. This suggests a perceived lack of parental support might be an institutional blind spot. In pedagogy, while curriculum adaptation is critiqued (Donohue & Bornman, 2015), how teachers enact teaching, using demonstration, play, music, and movement, appears more vital. These methods align with Indigenous Knowledge Systems and improve engagement, even in under-resourced schools. Finally, while scholars advocate for Ubuntu as a guiding philosophy

(Letseka, 2012; Kamga, 2018), concerns about its practical use persist. This study shows Ubuntu is practised informally by parents and teachers, often unrecognised in policy, suggesting the gap between theory and practice stems from methods that overlook everyday relational dynamics practices.

The results of this study can be interpreted as evidence that inclusive school transitions for learners with Down Syndrome are fundamentally social and cultural processes, rather than purely educational or administrative events. Ubuntu values shape how support is understood and enacted, positioning transition success as a collective achievement rooted in interdependence rather than individual adaptation. This interpretation challenges dominant deficit-oriented models that locate transition difficulties within the learner. The findings further suggest that Indigenous Knowledge Systems provide a practical pedagogical logic for inclusion. Learning through demonstration, play, and embodied participation reflects culturally embedded ways of knowing that resonate with learners' strengths. For learners with Down Syndrome, these approaches reduce anxiety, increase engagement, and support meaning-making, indicating that culturally responsive pedagogy functions as both an instructional and emotional support mechanism during transitions. Systemic constraints identified in the findings should be interpreted not as failures of individual teachers or families, but as manifestations of broader structural misalignment. Despite policy commitments, schools often lack the institutional capacity to integrate relational and culturally grounded practices into formal transition processes. This reinforces the argument that inclusive education challenges are systemic in nature and cannot be resolved through isolated interventions or teacher goodwill alone. The centrality of family engagement in the findings underscores the need to reinterpret home-school collaboration as a shared knowledge system, rather than a unidirectional flow of information from school to parent. Parents emerge as co-teachers whose experiential knowledge and emotional labour are critical to transition success. Recognising this role reframes inclusion as a partnership grounded in mutual respect and trust, consistent with Ubuntu epistemology.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the necessity of re-contextualising the discussion surrounding inclusive education for learners with Down Syndrome. It emphasises the importance of framing this conversation within an Afrocentric framework that aligns with Ubuntu philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The persistent barriers faced by these learners, especially during pivotal school transitions, highlight the inadequacies of a Eurocentric, individualistic approach. This approach fails to account for the interconnectedness of community, culture, and caregiving practices inherent to African societies. Through systemic analysis, we find that the traditional models of inclusive education often overlook the relational dynamics essential for the development and well-being of learners with Down Syndrome. Implementing an Afrocentric paradigm brings forth a culturally responsive methodology that resonates with South African community values. This approach advocates for a shift towards collaborative engagement among families, teachers, and the broader community. Framing education as a collective responsibility, this study reinforces the idea that inclusivity must be rooted in social interdependence rather than isolated individual success. The implications for policy-makers are profound; to bridge the existing gap between policy and practice, there must be a paradigm shift that prioritises teacher training in inclusive pedagogy informed by Ubuntu values. Moreover, the synthesis of existing literature reveals critical insights into the emotional and social dimensions of school transitions, calling for a more holistic approach to support structures that cater to the specific needs of learners with Down Syndrome. Future research must continue to explore these dynamics, ensuring that the voices of marginalised

learners are central to the discourse on inclusive education. The integration of an Afrocentric perspective in educational policy and practice enhances the experiences of learners with Down Syndrome. It also enriches the educational landscape by fostering a culture of inclusivity, empathy, and shared responsibility that resonates deeply within South African communities.

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Credit authorship contribution

Mohamed Mosala was responsible for the Conceptualisation, formal analysis, administration of the project, methodology, and the initial draft, as well as the revision and editing of the manuscript. Maximus M. Sefotho provided supervision. All authors engaged in reviewing the article, contributed to the discussion of the results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and assumed accountability for the integrity of the findings presented.

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