

Current Challenges in Implementing the School-Level Curriculum in South Africa: Implications for Inclusive Education

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HOW TO CITE:

Tebogo Mogashoa, Busisiwe Nyalunga (2026). Current Challenges in Implementing the School-Level Curriculum in South Africa: Implications for Inclusive Education. International Journal of Special Education, 41(11s), 1243-1253

ABSTRACT:

This research examined the challenges affecting the implementation of the school-level curriculum in South Africa, with particular attention to implications for inclusive education and equitable learner outcomes. The research was premised on the view that understanding contextual and systemic barriers can inform curriculum reform and strengthen teaching practice. Guided by an interpretative paradigm, a qualitative phenomenological design was employed to explore the lived experiences of teachers, learners, and school managers. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The findings revealed multiple, interrelated challenges that constrain effective curriculum implementation, including inadequate teaching and learning resources, limited managerial and district-level support, teachers teaching outside their areas of specialization, infrastructure deficits, and socio-economic barriers that affect learner participation and achievement. Participants also reported limited teacher involvement in curriculum development processes and challenges associated with the dominance of English as the language of learning and teaching, which has implications for learner inclusion and access. The study concludes that addressing these systemic constraints is essential to strengthening curriculum delivery and promoting inclusive, high-quality education. It recommends collaborative curriculum development, sustained professional support for teachers, and improved school-level resourcing to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all learners.

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Keywords: Curriculum Implementation, Inclusive Education, School Leadership, Teacher Professional Development, Educational Equity

1. Introduction

Curriculum implementation remains a central concern in education reform, particularly in contexts marked by historical inequality and ongoing socio-economic disparities. In South Africa, curriculum transformation has been a key strategy for redressing the injustices of the apartheid education system and promoting equity, inclusion, and access to quality education

for all learners. Since the democratic transition in 1994, the national curriculum has undergone several reforms aimed at standardising educational quality, promoting social justice, and ensuring that schools respond effectively to diverse learner needs. Despite these reforms, significant challenges persist at the school level, raising concerns about the effectiveness of curriculum implementation in achieving inclusive and equitable educational outcomes.

A curriculum functions as a framework that guides teaching, learning objectives, assessment practices, and classroom organisation. In the South African context, post-1994 reforms sought to dismantle racially segregated and unequal educational structures. The introduction of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) represented the first major reform effort, aiming to replace apartheid-era curricula with a more learner-centred and inclusive approach. However, OBE encountered substantial implementation challenges, including inadequate teacher training, limited resources, language barriers, and misalignment between curriculum expectations and assessment practices. These challenges led to the development of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS), which sought to simplify and strengthen curriculum delivery while promoting human rights and inclusion.

Continued concerns regarding curriculum complexity and implementation pressures resulted in the introduction of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), implemented between 2012 and 2014. CAPS aimed to streamline policy documents, clarify content expectations, and standardise assessment procedures. While these reforms were designed to enhance educational quality and inclusivity, research indicates that implementation challenges remain prevalent, particularly in under-resourced schools. Persistent issues such as inadequate infrastructure, shortages of teaching and learning materials, insufficient professional development, large class sizes, and socio-economic inequalities continue to hinder effective curriculum delivery. These challenges disproportionately affect vulnerable learners, including those from low-income communities and learners requiring additional support, thereby undermining inclusive education goals.

Although extensive policy reform has occurred, there remains a gap between curriculum design and classroom practice. Limited teacher involvement in curriculum development, insufficient district-level support, and systemic inequalities contribute to inconsistencies in implementation across schools. As a result, disparities in learner achievement persist, with

significant performance gaps between well-resourced and under-resourced schools. Understanding these school-level implementation challenges is therefore critical for strengthening curriculum delivery and promoting equitable educational opportunities.

In conclusion, this research seeks to examine the current challenges affecting the implementation of the school-level curriculum in South Africa. By exploring the lived experiences of teachers, learners, and school managers, the research aims to generate insights that can inform collaborative curriculum development, strengthen professional support structures, and enhance inclusive teaching practices. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring that the curriculum fulfils its intended purpose of guiding effective, equitable, and high-quality education for all learners.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This research adopted a qualitative research design to explore the challenges affecting the implementation of the school-level curriculum in South Africa. A qualitative design was appropriate because the research sought to understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of curriculum implementation within their specific school contexts. The design enabled an in-depth exploration of systemic and contextual factors influencing curriculum delivery and inclusive educational practices.

Research Paradigm

The research was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and shaped by individual experiences within particular sociocultural contexts. Interpretivism was appropriate because the research aimed to understand how teachers, learners, and curriculum officials make sense of curriculum implementation in their daily practice. Rather than seeking objective measurement, the research focused on participants' subjective meanings and interpretations of the challenges they encounter.

Research Strategy: Phenomenology

A phenomenological research strategy was employed to explore participants' lived experiences of curriculum implementation. Phenomenology was suitable for this research because it seeks to understand how individuals experience and interpret a particular phenomenon. The approach allowed the researchers to examine how teachers, learners, and a curriculum official perceived systemic constraints, resource limitations, and inclusive education challenges within their school environments.

The researchers applied bracketing to minimise personal bias and focus on participants' accounts. Data analysis involved identifying significant statements, clustering them into themes, and synthesising textual descriptions to capture the essence of participants' experiences.

Participants and Sampling

The research was conducted in selected high schools in the Johannesburg Central District. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants with direct experience in curriculum implementation. The sample consisted of 10 participants: 7 high school teachers (PL1–PL5 levels), 2 learners aged 18–20 years, and 1 district curriculum official.

Participants were selected based on their knowledge of curriculum implementation processes and their willingness to share their experiences. This sampling strategy ensured depth and relevance of data consistent with qualitative inquiry.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews, one focus group interview, and document analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences. Teachers and learners participated in individual interviews lasting approximately one hour, while the curriculum official participated in a focus group discussion lasting approximately 80

minutes. Open-ended questions guided the interviews, allowing flexibility to probe emerging issues. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Document Analysis

Document analysis was used to supplement interview data. Relevant curriculum policy documents, including the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and related implementation guidelines, were examined to understand the policy framework guiding school-level curriculum delivery. Document analysis provided contextual insight and supported data triangulation.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim before analysis. Coding was conducted systematically to identify patterns related to curriculum challenges, inclusive practices, and systemic constraints. Themes were refined to ensure alignment with the research questions and the broader literature on curriculum implementation and inclusive education.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of interview and document data, and inclusion of participants with direct curriculum implementation experience.
- Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants.

- Dependability was strengthened through systematic documentation of data collection and analysis procedures.
- Confirmability was addressed through bracketing and maintaining an audit trail of decisions made during analysis.

Triangulation of data sources (teachers, learners, curriculum official, and policy documents) enhanced the validity and consistency of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee and permission was granted by the district education authorities. Participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study. Data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

3. Results

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quotes	Key Interpretation
Resource Constraints and Impact on Teaching & Learning	Material scarcity & pedagogical adaptation	P2: "When schools have a shortage of textbooks... learners cannot read effectively." P7: "Learners lose interest and fall behind."	Shortages limit learner engagement and cognitive development; reflect systemic inequality (Piaget; Spaul, 2019).
	Increased teacher workload & overcrowded classrooms	P3: "Teachers are compelled to search for resource materials instead of delivering content." P9: "One teacher for 70 learners... extremely challenging."	High workload and large class sizes reduce instructional quality and teacher motivation.
	Educational inequality & resource distribution	P4: "Learners from well-resourced schools perform better..."	Resource disparities reinforce inequities; learners in under-resourced schools face cumulative disadvantage.
Teaching Outside Expertise	Knowledge deficits & erosion of confidence	P1: "I struggled when given social sciences class... dreaded going to class." P10: "Like bus drivers... if not well-equipped, cannot guide learners."	Lack of subject mastery lowers teacher self-efficacy, creating anxiety and instructional gaps (Bandura, 1997).
	Pedagogical stress & instructional frustration	P4: "It is quite frustrating because this is not my subject."	Stress compromises lesson depth and learner comprehension.

	Professional growth through adaptability	P2: "Teaching a new subject allows... they can excel."	Discomfort can foster reflection and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2019).
Experienced vs. Novice Teachers	Value of experience	P1: "Experience is the best teacher... experienced teachers know how to navigate."	Experience improves classroom management, lesson pacing, and instructional clarity.
	Novices bring innovation	P10: "New teachers... bring fresh ideas and relate well to learners."	Novices introduce creativity, technological fluency, and modern pedagogy.
	Need for balance	P5: "Experienced teachers excel at management; new teachers connect with technology."	Collaboration between experienced and novice teachers maximizes instructional effectiveness (Feiman-Nemser, 2021).
Systemic Infrastructural Issues	Poor infrastructure impedes teaching	P1: "Some schools lack furniture... learners fight over chairs."	Inadequate facilities reduce teacher effectiveness and learner engagement (Earthman, 2018).
	Lack of technological resources	P9: "Teaching CAT without electricity... access to computers is crucial."	Technology access is vital for modern teaching; absence limits innovation and engagement (Mishra & Koehler, 2022).
	Overcrowding & inequality	P6: "If learners do not have chairs... some even stand during lessons."	Overcrowding and poor infrastructure reinforce educational inequalities (UNESCO, 2020).
Socio-Economic Background of Learners	Food insecurity & hunger	P5: "Imagine a learner who comes without having eaten... how can they focus?"	Hunger impedes cognitive function, attendance, and learning outcomes.
	Bullying & inequality	P6: "Learners with better shoes... others feel insecure."	Socio-economic differences create social exclusion and affect learner self-esteem.
	Family struggles & lack of parental support	P10: "Domestic abuse... some learners miss school to work part-time or care for family."	Family instability reduces motivation, attendance, and academic performance (Van der Berg, 2023).
Management Failures in Supervision	Deficient instructional support & feedback	P2: "Teachers end up teaching in their own	Limited leadership support diminishes teacher efficacy and reflective practice.

		ways... affects curriculum.”	
	Leadership behaviours undermining motivation	P6: “If managers do not support teachers, new teachers lose motivation.”	Authoritarian or unsupportive leadership reduces morale and engagement.
	Weak accountability	P3: “Inadequate supervision leads to inconsistency and teacher demotivation.”	Weak monitoring and evaluation hinder professional standards and trust (Bush & Glover, 2016).
Teachers’ Lack of Participation in Curriculum Development	Limited understanding of curriculum goals	P2: “Teachers may not fully understand curriculum goals...”	Exclusion reduces conceptual clarity, misaligning instruction and assessment.
	Reduced motivation & innovation	P9: “Teaching becomes less creative and more mechanical.”	Lack of involvement lowers intrinsic motivation and hinders pedagogical innovation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2022).
	Continuous Professional Development (CPD) as solution	P8: “Without ongoing development, teachers risk teaching outdated material.”	Sustained, context-specific CPD improves teacher competence, curriculum alignment, and classroom effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2021).

4. Discussion

Theme	Key Findings / Results	Theoretical Framework / Literature	Discussion / Interpretation
Resource Constraints and Their Impact on Teaching and Learning	– Shortage of textbooks, laboratory equipment, and technology. – Overcrowded classrooms and increased teacher workload. – Inequitable resource distribution affecting learner outcomes.	– Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory (Concrete & Formal Operational Stages). – Spaul (2019). – Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2022).	Resource shortages limit learners’ active engagement, problem-solving, and cognitive development. While teachers adopt creative coping mechanisms, persistent structural inequities undermine equitable learning opportunities. Addressing resource gaps is essential for promoting cognitive growth and educational equity.

Teachers Teaching Outside Their Areas of Expertise	– Teachers experience a lack of confidence and increased anxiety. – Reduced lesson depth and learner comprehension. – Some teachers identify opportunities for professional growth.	– Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (2018). – Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997). – Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (2019).	Teaching outside one's area of expertise negatively impacts instructional quality and teacher confidence. However, with adequate support, training, and mentorship, these challenges can be transformed into opportunities for professional growth and reflective practice.
Experienced vs. Novice Teachers	– Experienced teachers demonstrate strong classroom management, instructional clarity, and adaptive strategies. – Novice teachers contribute innovative teaching methods, technology integration, and fresh perspectives. – A need for collaboration and mentorship is evident.	– Feiman-Nemser (2021). – Ingersoll & Strong (2011).	Integrating the strengths of both experienced and novice teachers enhances instructional quality. Mentorship and collaborative professional relationships support reciprocal learning and maximize the benefits of experience and innovation within schools.
Systemic Infrastructural Issues	– Poor physical infrastructure, including damaged classrooms, furniture, and laboratories. – Lack of electricity and adequate technological resources. – Overcrowding and infrastructural inequality across schools.	– Earthman (2018). – Barrett et al. (2019). – Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2019).	Inadequate physical and technological infrastructure directly undermines teaching and learning. These deficiencies disproportionately affect under-resourced schools, reinforcing systemic inequalities. Investment in infrastructure is essential to improve educational quality and equity.
Socio-Economic Background of Learners	– Poverty, hunger, and family instability influence learning. – Bullying, low self-esteem, and	– Van der Berg (2023). – Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and	Socio-economic conditions create significant cognitive, emotional, and social barriers to learning. Effective interventions must address both material needs and learners'

	reduced learner motivation. – Limited parental support and stressful home environments.	holistic development frameworks.	socio-emotional well-being to promote engagement, resilience, and equitable academic outcomes.
Management Failures in Supervision	– Limited instructional support and feedback. – Weak accountability mechanisms. – Leadership practices that undermine teacher motivation.	– Hallinger & Murphy's Instructional Leadership Model (1985; Hook, 2021). – Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. – Transformational and Distributed Leadership theories.	Weak supervisory practices reduce teacher efficacy, motivation, and accountability. Strengthening instructional leadership, feedback systems, and monitoring processes fosters professional growth and improves both teacher performance and learner outcomes.
Teachers' Lack of Participation in Curriculum Development	– Limited understanding of curriculum goals. – Reduced teacher motivation and instructional innovation. – Unequal or insufficient access to Continuous Professional Development (CPD).	– Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (2020). – Fullan (2022). – Hargreaves & Fullan (2022).	Active teacher participation in curriculum development enhances ownership, motivation, and effective implementation. Collaborative CPD and participatory curriculum processes strengthen instructional quality, professional learning, and pedagogical innovation.

Limitations

Although this study provided valuable insights into the challenges affecting the implementation of the school-level curriculum in South Africa, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was limited to a relatively small sample drawn from selected schools within one province. As such, the findings cannot be generalised to represent all schools across South Africa, given the vast differences in context, infrastructure, and resource availability between provinces.

Secondly, the study relied primarily on qualitative data obtained through interviews. While this method offered rich, detailed perspectives, it also depended heavily on the participants' honesty and willingness to share their experiences.

Subjectivity may have influenced some responses, as participants could have presented views shaped by personal emotions or professional frustrations. In addition, the researcher's professional background as a teacher may have influenced the interpretation of data, particularly in relation to classroom practices and teacher perspectives. This positionality should be acknowledged as both a strength, providing insider understanding, and a potential source of bias.

Lastly, time and logistical constraints limited the researcher's ability to conduct classroom observations, which could have provided first-hand evidence of curriculum delivery in practice. Future research should therefore consider incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods to enhance the depth and

generalizability of findings. Comparative studies across provinces would help to capture regional variations in curriculum implementation, while longitudinal research could track how reforms and interventions evolve and influence learner outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This research examined the challenges and opportunities affecting teaching and learning in under-resourced South African schools. Key findings revealed a complex interplay between resource availability, teacher expertise, infrastructure, leadership, socio-economic contexts, and curriculum participation.

Resource Constraints were a major barrier to effective teaching and learning. Shortages of textbooks, laboratory materials, and technological tools, combined with overcrowded classrooms, limited learner engagement, and widened educational inequalities. These findings highlight systemic disparities in funding and school resources.

Teacher Expertise and Adaptability emerged as a significant factor. Many teachers were required to teach outside their areas of specialization, resulting in reduced confidence, instructional stress, and compromised lesson depth. Nevertheless, some teachers used these challenges for professional growth, reflecting the potential of transformative learning and self-efficacy in practice.

Experience versus Innovation revealed that experienced teachers excel in classroom management and content delivery, while novice teachers contribute creativity, modern pedagogical methods, and technological proficiency. Collaboration between these groups enhances instructional quality, professional growth, and learner outcomes.

Infrastructure Limitations—including poorly equipped classrooms, lack of electricity, and inadequate technological resources—directly hindered teaching effectiveness and learner participation. Such deficiencies were particularly pronounced in disadvantaged schools, reinforcing educational inequities.

Socio-Economic Factors such as poverty, hunger, and limited parental support adversely affected learners' cognitive performance, motivation, and emotional well-being. These challenges underscore the importance of holistic learner support programs addressing both academic and socio-emotional needs.

Leadership and Supervision deficiencies, including weak instructional guidance and limited accountability, were found to demotivate teachers and reduce instructional quality. Strengthening school leadership through feedback, mentorship, and participatory decision-making is crucial for improving teaching standards.

Teacher Involvement in Curriculum Development was limited, reducing ownership, motivation, and innovation in classroom practice. Active engagement through collaborative curriculum planning and context-specific professional development was identified as key to effective implementation.

Implications of the study suggest that multi-level interventions are necessary, including equitable resource distribution, targeted teacher training, infrastructure investment, strong leadership, inclusive curriculum development, and socio-economic support for learners.

In conclusion, improving teaching and learning in under-resourced schools requires coordinated strategies that address systemic inequalities, enhance teacher capacity, and support learners' holistic development. Evidence-based policies and collaborative practices can foster equitable education, professional growth among teachers, and positive learning outcomes for all students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance teaching and learning in under-resourced schools:

Equitable Resource Provision

- Ensure all schools have adequate textbooks, laboratory equipment, and technological tools.

- Prioritize resource allocation to under-resourced and disadvantaged schools to reduce educational inequalities and support learner engagement.

Targeted Teacher Training and Professional Development

- Provide Continuous Professional Development (CPD) that is context-specific, sustained, and collaborative, focusing on curriculum interpretation, assessment literacy, instructional strategies, and technology integration.
- Offer specialized support for teachers required to teach outside their areas of expertise, including mentoring and subject-specific workshops.

Mentorship and Collaboration Between Experienced and Novice Teachers

- Encourage structured mentorship programs to pair experienced teachers with novices, fostering knowledge transfer, pedagogical innovation, and technological fluency.
- Promote collaborative teaching models to balance experience with new approaches, enhancing classroom engagement and instructional quality.

Infrastructure Improvement

- Invest in safe, well-maintained classrooms with adequate furniture, electricity, and ICT resources.
- Reduce classroom overcrowding by constructing additional learning spaces and optimizing learner-teacher ratios.

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Strengthening School Leadership and Supervision

- Develop school leaders' capacity in instructional leadership, mentoring, and accountability systems.
- Implement structured feedback, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms to support teacher performance and improve curriculum delivery.

Enhanced Teacher Participation in Curriculum Development

- Include teachers in curriculum design, review, and training processes to foster ownership, motivation, and innovative instructional practices.
- Encourage collaborative curriculum planning sessions and reflective professional learning communities.

Addressing Socio-Economic Barriers

- Implement school-based support programs, including feeding schemes, counselling, and parental engagement initiatives, to address the broader social and emotional needs of learners.
- Partner with local communities and government agencies to mitigate the impact of poverty and family instability on learning outcomes.

These recommendations collectively aim to create equitable, supportive, and resource-rich educational environments, ensuring that all learners have access to quality education and teachers are empowered to deliver effective instruction.

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7. Acknowledgements

The Authors would like to extend their deepest appreciation to the faculty and staff of the curriculum studies department at the University of South Africa, for their academic support and for always proving conducive feedback. Our appreciation further goes to all the participants who willingly took part in this study; without their cooperation, this study would not have been possible.

8. Author Declaration

The authors declare that this study is their own original work and that it has not been submitted, in part or in full, for any degree or examination at any other institution of higher learning. All sources used or quoted in this study have been duly acknowledged and referenced in accordance with the prescribed academic guidelines. This study does not contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where proper acknowledgement has been made. The Authors further declare that this study complies with ethical standards, and where applicable, ethical clearance was obtained before the commencement of the study.