

Interrogating Systemic and Contextual Barriers to Support Provision in Schools: Implications for Inclusive Education Policy And Practice

Phindile Doreen Zulu^{1,2} Andile Alfred Mdikana

¹KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, Inclusive Education Directorate

²University of South Africa

HOW TO CITE:

Phindile Doreen Zulu , Andile
Alfred Mdikana (2026).
Interrogating systemic and
contextual barriers to support
provision in schools: Implications
for Inclusive Education Policy and
Practice.
International Journal of Special
Education, 41(18s), 1134-1145

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT:

Copyright: © 2026 Authors.
Open access publication under the
terms and conditions
of the Creative Commons Attribution
(CC BY)
license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

ABSTRACT:

Inclusive education in South Africa is guided by the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy framework, which seeks to ensure equitable learner support across diverse schooling contexts. Yet, systemic and contextual barriers continue to undermine effective implementation. This study interrogates the constraints that impede support provision in schools, focusing on structural, resource, and contextual dynamics. Recent scholarship highlights persistent challenges in inclusive education policy delivery, including inadequate resourcing, limited teacher preparedness, and socio economic inequities (Donohue & Bornman, 2015; Engelbrecht & Savolainen, 2018; Walton, 2022). Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected from educators and support teams across KwaZulu Natal schools. Findings reveal that institutional capacity gaps, insufficient professional development, and contextual inequities significantly constrain learner support. The study concludes that addressing these barriers requires systemic reform, targeted capacity building, and stronger alignment between policy and practice. These insights contribute to ongoing debates on inclusive education implementation and provide implications for strengthening SIAS delivery in diverse schooling environments.

Keywords: Inclusive education, SIAS policy, support structures, systemic barriers, contextual challenges

1. Introduction

Inclusive education in South Africa is framed by the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy, which aims to ensure equitable learner support across diverse schooling contexts. Despite this policy, schools continue to face systemic and contextual barriers that undermine effective support provision. Globally, inclusive education has been recognised as a critical pathway to equity and social justice

(Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In the South African context, however, challenges such as resource constraints, teacher preparedness, and socio-economic disparities persist (Donohue & Bornman, 2015; Engelbrecht & Savolainen, 2018).

1.1 The problem and research objectives

While the SIAS framework provides a structured approach to identifying and supporting learners, its implementation is often hindered by systemic

²Corresponding author: Dr Andile Alfred Mdikana. Email address: amdikana@gmail.com

inefficiencies and contextual realities. Schools struggle to operationalise support structures effectively, resulting in gaps between policy intentions and classroom practice. This study addresses the pressing need to interrogate these barriers and explore their implications for inclusive education delivery

The aim of this study is to examine systemic and contextual barriers to support provision in schools within the SIAS framework. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Identify the structural and contextual factors that constrain support provision.
2. Analyse how these barriers affect the implementation of SIAS policy in practice.
3. Explore implications for strengthening inclusive education policy and practice.

1.2 Review of Relevant Literature

South African Context

Research consistently highlights the challenges of implementing inclusive education in South Africa. Donohue and Bornman (2015) argue that resource shortages and inadequate teacher training remain significant obstacles. Engelbrecht and Savolainen (2018) emphasise the tension between policy and practice, noting that systemic reform is essential for sustainable inclusion. Walton (2022) underscores the socio-economic inequities that exacerbate barriers to learner support, particularly in under-resourced communities.

Recent work by Ntombela and Ramatea (2026) extends this discussion to higher education, showing that while access has expanded, students with disabilities continue to face barriers to meaningful participation. Their review identifies enablers such as institutional commitment and targeted support, but also constraints including limited resources and entrenched assumptions about learner diversity.

Historical and Policy Dimensions

Inclusive education in South Africa is shaped by historical legacies of segregation. Walton and Engelbrecht (2024) argue that colonial and

apartheid path dependencies continue to influence categorisation and schooling practices. They propose a complexity approach, recognising that inclusive education evolves through both entrenched inequalities and emergent practices at local and system levels. Similarly, Tlale (2024) highlights that inclusive education policy can act as an enabler when properly aligned with access to quality education. His work stresses that policy frameworks must be accompanied by practical implementation strategies to avoid remaining aspirational only.

International Perspectives

Internationally, scholars such as Ainscow (2020) and Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) stress the importance of rethinking support structures to achieve equity in diverse educational settings. They argue that inclusion requires systemic transformation, not just integration of learners with disabilities into mainstream classrooms.

Synthesis

- ✧ Local literature highlights persistent barriers: resource shortages, training gaps, and socio-economic inequities.
- ✧ Policy analyses reveal that historical legacies and weak systemic reform continue to undermine inclusive education.
- ✧ Recent scholarship points to higher education challenges, showing that inclusion must extend beyond schools to universities.
- ✧ International perspectives reinforce the need for structural change and sustained professional development.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore the experiences of District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) in implementing the SIAS policy. This design was chosen because qualitative inquiry allows researchers to capture participants' lived experiences and construct meaning from their perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Roberts, 2011). The study was framed within an interpretive, constructivist paradigm, recognising

that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and reflection (Engelbrecht & Swanepoel, 2013).

2.2 Participants / Sample

The study employed purposive sampling, focusing on the Zululand District in KwaZulu-Natal. This district was selected due to its rural context, infrastructural challenges, and proximity to the researcher's home, which facilitated access. Participants were drawn from the Special Needs Education Services (SNES) directorate, specifically DBST members who had received orientation on SIAS and had begun implementing the strategy prior to its gazetting in 2014. All DBST members from SNES Directorate were invited to participate, as they were considered most knowledgeable about inclusive education practices in the district (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Gomm, 2008).

2.3 Instruments

- ✧ Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations.
- ✧ Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to articulate their experiences while allowing the researcher to probe for deeper insights.
- ✧ Document analysis focused on SIAS implementation records and related policy documents.
- ✧ Observations provided contextual understanding of DBST practices and interactions with schools.

This triangulation of instruments ensured depth, credibility, and validity of findings (Hatch, 2002; De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, & Delpont, 2011).

2.4 Procedure

The researcher spent two to three days in the district office, conducting interviews and analysing documents used by DBSTs in SIAS implementation. Participants were allowed to construct knowledge about their experiences, while the researcher engaged reflexively, balancing listening with active probing based on

professional expertise. Ethical considerations were observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically within a constructivist paradigm, acknowledging that DBSTs' experiences are socially constructed rather than fixed realities. Iterative coding and categorisation were employed to identify recurring themes related to systemic and contextual barriers. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, recognising the researcher's dual role as listener and participant in the construction of meaning (Mahlo, 2011).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were upheld throughout the study to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of participants. Permission was obtained from the University of South Africa

Allen, L. (2011). *Young people and sexuality education: rethinking key debates*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Amunga, J., Maiyoo, J., Achokaa, J & Ashioya, I. (2009). Violence against Children and the Effect on Education. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 19(1):119–122.

Anderson, G.D. (2016). Service Outcomes Following Disclosure of CSA During Forensic Interviews: An Exploratory Study. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 10(5):477–494.

Arthur, J. & Waring, M. (2012). *Research methods and methodologies in education*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Balogh, R., Bretherton, K., Berney, T., Graham, S., Richold, P., & Worsley, C. (2001). Sexual abuse in children with intellectual disability. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 45(3):194–201.

Barth, J, Bermetz L, Heim E, Trelle S & Tonia T 2013. The current existence of CSA worldwide: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Public Health*, 58(3):469–483.

- Bloor M, Frankland J, Thomas M & Robson K 2001. *Focus groups in social research*. London, England: Sage.
- Bronferbrenner U 1979. *The ecology of human development: experiments by design and nature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner U 2005. *Making human beings human. Bioecological perspectives on human development*. London, England: Sage.
- Bronfenbrenner U & Evans GW 2000. Developmental science in the 21st century. Emerging Questions, theoretical models, research designs and empirical findings. *Social Development*, 9(1):115–125.
- Brookes H & Higson-Smith C 2004. Responses to gender-based violence in schools. In L Richter, A Dawes & C Higson-Smith (eds). *Sexual abuse of young children in southern Africa*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC.
- Callender T & Dartnall L 2010. Mental health responses for victims of sexual violence and rape in resource-poor settings. Briefing Paper, Sexual Violence Research Initiative. Accessed 3 February 2010.
- Carron AV & Brawley LR 2000. Cohesion: Conceptual and measurement issues. *Small Group Research*, 31(1):89–106.
- Chinawa J, Aronu A, Chukwu B & Obu H 2014. Existence and pattern of child abuse and associated factors in four secondary institutions in Enugu, Southeast Nigeria. *European Journal of Paediatrics*, 173(4):451–456.
- Creswell JW 2003. *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Department of Education 2001. *Education White Paper 6. Special needs education: Building an inclusive education and training system*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Department of Education 2005. *Conceptual and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of Inclusive Education: District Based Support Teams*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Engelbrecht P 1999. A theoretical framework for inclusive education. In P Engelbrecht, L Green, S Naicker & L Engelbrecht (eds). *Inclusive education in action in South Africa*. Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik.
- Engelbrecht P & Green L 2007. *Responding to the challenges of inclusive education in southern Africa*. Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik.
- Euser S, Alink LRA, Tharner A, IJzenndoor MH & Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ 2015. The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse in Out-of-home Care: Increased Risk for Children with a Mild Intellectual Disability. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 29(1):83–92.
- Faller KC & Henry J 2000. Child Sexual Abuse: A Case in Community Collaboration. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24(9):1215–1225.
- Finkelhor D 1994. The international epidemiology of child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 18(5):409–417.
- Gill A 2012. *Group Cohesion, Unit 2 Sport & Exercise Psychology*. Chesterfield, England: Chesterfield College.
- Given LM 2008. *The Sage encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Heany CA & Israel BA 2008. Social networks and social support. In K Glanz, BK Rimer & K Viswanath. *Health behaviour and health education: theory, research, and practice* (4th ed). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- House JS 1981. *Work stress and social support*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Jewkes R, Penn-Kekana L & Rose-Junius H 2005. 'If they rape me, I can't blame them': Reflections on the social context of child sexual abuse in South Africa and Namibia. *Social Science and Medicine*, 61(8):1809–1820.
- Jooste C & Jooste M 2016. Intellectual impairment. In E Landsberg, D Kruger & E Swart (eds). *Addressing barriers to learning: A South African perspective*. Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik.

- Krause N 1986. Social support, stress and well-being. *Journal of Gerontology*, 41(4):512–519.
- Krueger RA 1988. *Focus groups: A practical guide to applied research*. London, England: Sage.
- Langford CPH, Bowsher J, Malony JP & Lillis PP 1997. Social support: conceptual analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 25:95–100.
- Lomofsky L & Lazarus S 2001. South Africa: First steps in the development of an inclusive education system. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 31(3):303–317.
- Martinello E 2015. Reviewing Risks Factors of Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities as Perpetrators of Sexually Abusive Behaviors. *Sexuality & Disability*, 33(2):269–278.
- Mitchell D (ed.) 2005. *Contextualising inclusive education. Evaluating old and new international perspectives*. London, England: Routledge.
- Morgan DL & Krueger RA 1998. *Focus group kit (Volumes 1–6)*. London, England: Sage.
- Nyokangi D & Phasha N 2015. Factors Contributing to Sexual Violence at Selected Schools for Learners with Mild Intellectual Disability in South Africa. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 23(9):231–241.
- Oliver LW 1988. *The Relationship of Group Cohesion to Group Performance: A Research Integration Attempt*. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.
- Phasha TN & Nyokangi D 2012. School-Based Sexual Violence Among Female Learners With Mild Intellectual Disability. *Violence Against Women*, 18(3):309–321.
- Phasha TN & Myaka LD 2014. Sexuality and sexual abuse involving teenagers with intellectual disability: Community conceptions in a rural village of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Sexuality and Disability*, 32(2):153–165.
- Pinheiro PS 2006. *World report on violence against children: Report of the independent expert for the United Nations study on violence against children*. Geneva: United Nations.
- Reiter S, Bryen DN & Shachar I 2007. Adolescents with intellectual disabilities as victims of abuse. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 11(4):371–387.
- Reppucci ND, Jones LM & Cook SL 1994. Involving parents in child sexual abuse prevention programs. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 3(2):137–142.
- South African Human Rights Commission 2002. *Towards a barrier-free society: A report on accessibility and built environments*. Accessed 15 May 2025.
- Tilden VP & Weinert SC 1987. Social support and the chronically ill individual. *Nursing Clinics of North America*, 22(3):613–620.
- Vaismoradi M, Turunen H & Bondas T 2013. Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing & Health Sciences*, 15(3):398–405.
- Willis TA 1991. Social support and interpersonal relationships. In Margaret Clark. *Prosocial Behaviour, Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, 12:265–289.
- Wissink IB, van Vugt EGJ, Moonen X, Stamas GJM & Hendriks J 2015. Sexual abuse involving children with an intellectual disability (ID): a narrative review. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 36:20–35.
- World Health Organization 2010. *Report on violence and health in Africa*. Brazzaville: World Health Organization, Office for Africa. Research Ethics Committee, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, and the Zululand District Office prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed about the aims, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study, with the right to withdraw at any stage (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Written consent forms were signed, outlining participants' rights and ensuring voluntary participation without coercion (Neuman, 2006). Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly

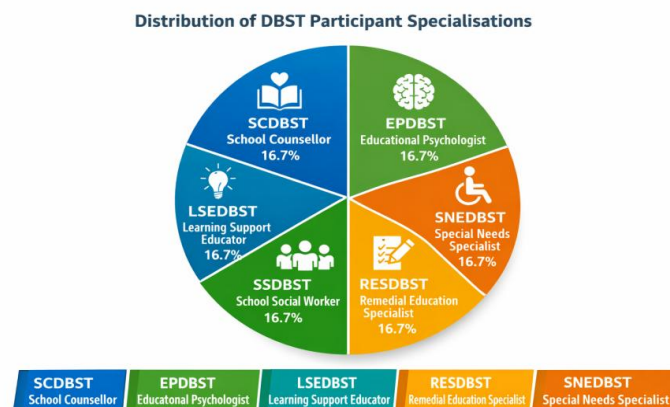
maintained by concealing identities and securing all personal data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006). Audiotapes and records were handled responsibly, with assurances of destruction after analysis. These safeguards align with Creswell's (2013) emphasis on respecting participants' voices and De Vos et al.'s (2011) view that ethical guidelines must be internalised by the researcher.

3 Results

3.1 Presentation of findings

In this chapter a detailed presentation of findings emanated from the data generated through individual interviews, observations and document analysis will be presented. The data generated is also centred around the main research question. The six DBST participants ranged in age from 44 to 55 years, with the majority in their mid-forties, indicating a group that is professionally mature and settled in their careers. Five were female and one male, reflecting the gendered nature of support services in education, often associated with nurturing and sensitivity.

Figure 1: "Distribution of DBST Participant Specialisations".



- ✧ SCDBST (45, Female) – School Counsellor with a background in Social Sciences and 15 years of teaching experience. She has seven years in counselling and is pursuing a Master's in Educational Psychology.
- ✧ EPDBST (55, Female) – Educational Psychologist with extensive experience in special schools and district management. She holds a Master's in Educational Psychology and is completing a PhD in Psychology of Education.
- ✧ LSEDBST (45, Male) – Learning Support Educator with a teaching background and personal motivation to specialise in Inclusive Education. He holds an Honours degree and is pursuing a Master's in Inclusive Education.
- ✧ SSDBST (45, Female) – School Social Worker with qualifications in Industrial Psychology, Education Leadership, and Business Administration. She is completing a Master's

in Sociology and supports learners with psycho-social challenges.

- ✧ RESDBST (44, Female) – Remedial Education Specialist with multiple postgraduate qualifications including a PhD in Leadership and Management. She has 13 years of teaching experience and focuses on designing support programmes for learners with barriers.
- ✧ SNEDBST (46, Female) – Special Needs Education Specialist with 18 years of teaching experience and a Bachelor's in Special Needs Education. She is pursuing a Master's in Inclusive Education and supports early identification and placement of learners with disabilities.

Overall Insights

All participants demonstrated commitment to professional growth, having upgraded their qualifications to align with inclusive education

reforms. Despite initial training predating the adoption of Inclusive Education in South Africa, they have embraced change and diversity in their practice. Each has over a decade of teaching experience and more than six years in district support roles, positioning them as credible informants on SIAS implementation.

3.2 Inequality in provision of support and recognition of DBST work

Many DBST members expressed frustration at the lack of recognition and support from senior management. Their work was often undermined, with the Special Needs section viewed as less critical compared to other Directorates. Circuit managers lacked understanding of DBST roles, leading to poor collaboration and neglect of inclusive education responsibilities. Participants emphasised that SIAS policy should be a collective responsibility, not confined to SNES officials.

Illustrative Quote:

“The worse and frustrating thing that hampers the service delivery is that my work is not taken seriously and is undermined by most of the senior management in the district.” (RESDBST)

3.3 Insufficient tools of trade and inadequate human capital

Participants reported shortages of essential resources such as policy documents, transport, and assistive devices. DBST officials were overstretched, with some responsible for supporting over 700 schools instead of manageable clusters. Teachers often lacked access

to individual SIAS documents, relying on shared photocopies during training. A shortage of specialists (e.g., remedial teachers, learning support assistants) was identified as a major impediment. Participants suggested creating more posts and assigning DBST members to smaller school clusters to reduce workload.

Illustrative Quote:

“I am currently working around seven hundred (700) and more schools instead of working with 80 schools.” (SNEDBST)

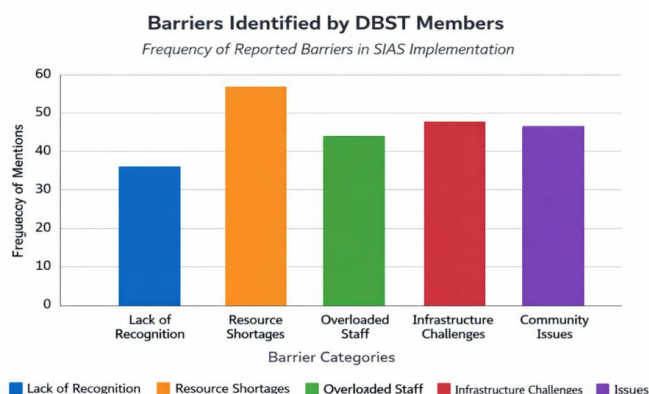
3.4 Community participation in learning interactions and activities

Positive examples were noted where parents and communities engaged in school projects, supporting vulnerable learners. Initiatives such as the Soul Buddies Club demonstrated collaborative efforts between learners, teachers, parents, and communities. However, parental involvement was inconsistent; some parents actively participated, while others were disengaged. Psycho-social barriers, including substance abuse among learners, were reported as major challenges affecting school performance. Participants stressed the need for advocacy and training to strengthen parental and community roles in SIAS implementation.

Illustrative Quote:

“Some of the elements which hamper my work negatively is the increase of substance abuse in schools. Learners get drugs at home and develop behavioural problems in schools which later affect their school performance.” (EPDBST)

Figure 2. Barriers Identified by DBST Members.



This bar graph illustrates the frequency of reported barriers to SIAS implementation, as identified by DBST participants. Resource shortages were most frequently mentioned, followed by community issues, infrastructure challenges, overloaded staff, and lack of recognition.

3.5 Significant results without interpretation

- ✧ Recognition gaps: DBST work undervalued by senior management and circuit officials.
- ✧ Resource shortages: Lack of tools of trade, transport, and policy documents.
- ✧ Human capital deficits: Overloaded officials and shortage of specialists.
- ✧ Community dynamics: Mixed parental involvement; substance abuse as a growing barrier.

4. Discussion

4.1 Inequality in Provision of Support and Recognition of DBST Work

The findings revealed that DBST members experience limited recognition and support from senior management, which undermines their morale and effectiveness. This aligns with Engelbrecht and Savolainen (2018), who argue that inclusive education implementation often suffers when institutional hierarchies fail to value support structures equally. The lack of understanding among circuit managers regarding DBST roles reflects a systemic gap between policy and practice, echoing Donohue and Bornman (2015), who highlight that inclusive education policies in South Africa are frequently undercut by weak administrative collaboration. Implication: Strengthening interdepartmental collaboration and clarifying DBST roles through advocacy and training could enhance policy coherence and accountability.

4.2 Insufficient Tools of Trade and Inadequate Human Capital

Resource shortages and understaffing emerged as major barriers to effective SIAS implementation. Participants' accounts of inadequate tools of trade and excessive workloads mirror

Makhalemele (2011) and Geldenhuys & Wevers (2013), who found that resource constraints and limited specialist support hinder inclusive education delivery. The absence of remedial teachers and learning support assistants further exacerbates inequities in service provision. Implication: The Department of Education should prioritise resource allocation and human capital development, ensuring that DBSTs are adequately staffed and equipped. This supports Deming's PDCA model, which emphasises planning and resource identification as prerequisites for effective implementation.

4.3 Community Participation and Psycho-Social Barriers

While some schools demonstrated strong community engagement through initiatives like the Soul Buddies Club, inconsistent parental involvement and rising substance abuse among learners were noted. These findings resonate with Masha (2015, 2017) and Lebona (2013), who emphasise that parental participation is crucial for learner success and psychosocial well-being. The SIAS policy's call for community-based support structures (DoE, 2014) remains under-realised in practice. Implication: Sustained advocacy and training for parents and communities are essential to foster shared responsibility for learner support. Schools should integrate community partnerships into their support strategies to mitigate psycho-social barriers.

4.4 Theoretical and Policy Implications

The study reinforces the constructivist paradigm, showing that DBST experiences are socially constructed within systemic and contextual realities. It also validates Deming's PDCA theory as a useful lens for understanding iterative improvement in support provision. Policy-wise, the findings call for stronger alignment between Education White Paper 6 (2001) and SIAS implementation, ensuring that inclusive education is not confined to specialist sections but embedded across all district operations.

4.5 Limitations of the Study

The study was confined to one district (Zululand), which limits generalisability to other contexts.

The small sample size, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, may not capture the full diversity of DBST experiences across provinces. Time constraints and reliance on self-reported data may also have influenced the depth of responses. Future research could expand to multiple districts and include comparative analyses to strengthen external validity.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study interrogated systemic and contextual barriers to the provision of support in schools within the framework of the SIAS policy. The findings revealed several critical challenges that affect the effectiveness of inclusive education implementation in the Zululand District.

◇ Recognition Gaps

District-Based Support Team (DBST) members reported that their work was undervalued by senior management and circuit officials, resulting in low morale and limited collaboration. The lack of recognition for their specialised expertise led to feelings of marginalisation and frustration. This gap also created tension between administrative and support structures, weakening the coherence of inclusive education delivery. The findings suggest that recognition and advocacy for DBST roles are essential to strengthen accountability and interdepartmental cooperation.

◇ Resource Shortages

The study found severe shortages of tools of trade, including transport, assistive devices, and access to updated policy documents. Many DBST members operated under constrained conditions, often using personal resources to reach schools in remote areas. These shortages hindered timely support visits, monitoring, and training. The absence of adequate infrastructure and materials also limited the capacity of schools to implement SIAS effectively, particularly in rural contexts where poverty and distance exacerbate logistical challenges.

◇ Human Capital Deficits

DBST officials were overloaded with excessive caseloads, supporting hundreds of schools with minimal personnel. The shortage of specialists such as remedial teachers, learning support assistants, and educational psychologists—intensified the workload and reduced the quality of support. Participants highlighted that while they possessed strong professional commitment, the lack of human resources made it difficult to provide sustained, individualised interventions. This deficit reflects broader systemic issues in recruitment, training, and retention of inclusive education professionals.

◇ Contextual and Environmental Challenges

The Zululand District's rural geography, poor road infrastructure, and socio-economic hardships further complicated SIAS implementation. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and HIV prevalence affected learner attendance and parental involvement. These contextual realities limited community participation and reinforced the need for integrated psychosocial and educational support systems.

◇ Professional Growth and Adaptation

Despite these barriers, DBST members demonstrated remarkable adaptability and commitment. Most had upgraded their qualifications to align with inclusive education reforms, showing willingness to embrace change and diversity. Their professional development reflects a growing recognition of inclusive education as a dynamic, evolving field requiring continuous learning.

◇ Community participation challenges: While some schools benefited from strong parental and community involvement, inconsistent engagement and rising psycho-social barriers (e.g., substance abuse) hindered learner support. Together, these findings underscore the persistent gap between inclusive education policy intentions and practical implementation in rural district contexts.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the implementation of the SIAS policy and enhance inclusive education support structures:

- ◇ Address Recognition Gaps
- ✧ Policy Action: Develop formal recognition frameworks within the Department of Education to acknowledge DBST contributions, including performance awards, reporting structures, and visibility in district planning.
- ✧ Practice Action: Conduct regular advocacy workshops for senior management and circuit officials to clarify DBST roles, responsibilities, and impact. This will foster respect, collaboration, and morale among support teams.
- ◇ Improve Resource Allocation
- ✧ Policy Action: Prioritise budget allocations for essential tools of trade (transport, assistive devices, updated SIAS manuals) in rural districts.
- ✧ Practice Action: Establish resource-sharing hubs at circuit level to ensure schools have access to teaching aids, assessment tools, and intervention materials. Encourage partnerships with NGOs and private sector donors to supplement government provision.
- ◇ Strengthen Human Capital
- ✧ Policy Action: Create additional posts for remedial teachers, learning support assistants, and educational psychologists to reduce caseloads and improve service delivery.
- ✧ Practice Action: Implement continuous professional development programmes for DBST and SBST members, focusing on

inclusive pedagogy, psychosocial support, and early identification of barriers. Encourage mentorship models where experienced specialists guide new recruits.

- ◇ Mitigate Contextual Challenges
- ✧ Policy Action: Integrate SIAS implementation into broader rural development strategies, ensuring alignment with health, social welfare, and infrastructure initiatives.
- ✧ Practice Action: Provide mobile support units or cluster-based outreach programmes to overcome distance and poor road conditions. Strengthen community engagement through structured parent training and awareness campaigns to build shared responsibility for learner support.
- ◇ Support Professional Growth and Adaptation
- ✧ Policy Action: Institutionalise career pathways for DBST members that reward further study in Inclusive Education, ensuring retention of skilled professionals.
- ✧ Practice Action: Encourage reflective practice and peer learning forums where DBST and SBST members share experiences, challenges, and innovations in SIAS implementation.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Future studies could expand beyond a single district to include comparative analyses across multiple provinces, thereby enhancing generalisability. Longitudinal research examining the impact of improved resource allocation and community engagement on SIAS implementation would provide valuable insights. Additionally, mixed-methods approaches could triangulate qualitative findings with quantitative data to strengthen evidence for policy reform.

References

- Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education: Lessons from international experiences. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 6(1), 7–16.
- Anderson, G. (1998). *Fundamentals of educational research*. London: Falmer Press.
- Bless, C., Higson-Smith, C., & Kagee, A. (2006). *Fundamentals of social research methods: An African perspective* (4th ed.). Cape Town: Juta.

- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2010). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Deming, W. E. (1986). *Out of the crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Educational Services.
- Department of Basic Education. (2014). *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS)*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Department of Education. (2001). *Education White Paper 6: Special needs education: Building an inclusive education and training system*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Department of Education. (2005). *Conceptual and operational guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- De Vos, A. S., Strydom, H., Fouché, C. B., & Delport, C. S. L. (2011). *Research at grassroots: For the social sciences and human service professions* (4th ed.). Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2003). *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2006). *Handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Donohue, D., & Bornman, J. (2015). The challenges of realising inclusive education in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 35(2), 1–14.
- Engelbrecht, P., & Savolainen, H. (2018). Inclusive education in South Africa and Finland: Responding to challenges in schools. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 33(5), 1–15.
- Engelbrecht, P., & Swanepoel, C. (2013). Knowledge construction in inclusive education. *South African Journal of Education*, 33(2), 23–35.
- Geldenhuys, J., & Wevers, N. (2013). Ecological aspects influencing the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream primary schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 33(3), 1–18.
- Gomm, R. (2008). *Social research methodology: A critical introduction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Lebona, M. (2013). Parental involvement in inclusive education. *South African Journal of Education*, 33(1), 72–84.
- Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2010). *Practical research: Planning and design* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Makhalemele, T. (2011). Resource constraints in inclusive education. *South African Journal of Education*, 31(1), 20–48.
- Mahlo, D. (2011). Experiences of learning support teachers in inclusive classrooms. *South African Journal of Education*, 31(1), 83–96.
- Masha, R. (2015). Parental involvement in inclusive education. *Journal of Education Studies*, 12(3), 291–305.
- Masha, R. (2017). Community accountability and inclusive schooling. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(2), 29–45.
- Neuman, W. L. (2006). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Ntombela, S., & Ramatea, M. (2026). Barriers and enablers of inclusive education in South African higher education institutions. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 40(2), 112–128.
- Roberts, B. (2011). *Biographical research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (2003). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. London: Sage.
- Tlale, L. (2024). Inclusive education policy as an enabler of access to quality schooling in South Africa. *Journal of Education Policy*, 39(3), 355–370.
- Walton, E. (2022). Inclusive education in South Africa: Policy, practice, and challenges. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(7), 789–805.
- Walton, E., & Engelbrecht, P. (2024). Complexity and path dependency in inclusive education policy in South Africa. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(5), 623–640.

Acknowledgements

The researcher gratefully acknowledges the University of South Africa (UNISA), College of Education Research Ethics Committee, for granting ethical clearance to conduct this study. Appreciation is extended to the

KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and the Zululand District Office for granting permission and facilitating access to participants. Special thanks are due to the District-Based Support Team members (DBST) from the Special Needs Education Services (SNES) directorate, whose willingness to share their experiences and insights made this research possible. The researcher also acknowledges the support of colleagues and mentors who provided guidance during the research process. No external funding was received for this study.

Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this dissertation is my own original work and has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other institution. All sources used or quoted have been duly acknowledged in accordance with APA 7th edition referencing guidelines. I further confirm that there are no conflicts of interest related to the conduct, findings, or reporting of this study.