

Inclusive Education as a Pathway to Enhancing the Mental Health and Well-Being of Learners with Disabilities in South African Schools

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ABSTRACT

The mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities remain critical concerns in South African schools despite efforts to advance inclusive education. Learners with disabilities often experience exclusion, stigma, discrimination, and inadequate support, which can undermine their psychological well-being and educational experiences. Guided by the Learner Integration Wheel (LIW): Theory of Practice, this study explored how inclusive education promotes the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities in South African schools. The LIW theory emphasises collaborative engagement among teachers, parents, peers, school management teams, and support professionals, arguing that learners thrive when schools foster acceptance, participation, support, and equitable access to learning opportunities. Situated within an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative multiple case study design. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and reflective writing activities with participants involved in inclusive education and were analysed thematically. Findings revealed two major themes: inclusive practices that promote learners' mental health and well-being, and challenges that constrain such efforts. The study concludes that inclusive education extends beyond academic access to encompass learners' psychological, social, and emotional well-being. It recommends

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he Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). strengthening stakeholder collaboration, enhancing teacher capacity, expanding school-based psychosocial support, and developing inclusive school cultures that uphold dignity, participation, and well-being.

Keywords: Inclusive education, inclusive practices, mental health, well-being, learners with disabilities, Learner Integration Wheel.

Introduction and Background

Mental health and well-being have increasingly become central concerns within contemporary educational discourse. This issue is particularly important for learners with disabilities, who often face multiple barriers to participation, learning, and social inclusion. Mental health encompasses an individual's emotional, psychological, and social well-being, influencing how people think, feel, and interact with others (WHO, 2022; Aji, 2025). Within school contexts, positive mental health and well-being are associated with improved academic achievement, self-esteem, resilience, social relationships, and overall quality of life (Pressman et al., 2020; Lawrance et al., 2022). For learners with disabilities, however, experiences of exclusion, discrimination, stigma, bullying, and inadequate support frequently undermine their mental health and well-being, limiting their opportunities to participate meaningfully in educational and social activities (Visser et al., 2020; Huus et al., 2021).

Globally, inclusive education has emerged as a key strategy for promoting equitable access to education and fostering the holistic development of all learners, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or learning needs. International frameworks such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Salamanca Statement, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities advocate for educational systems that embrace diversity and create environments where all learners can participate, learn, and flourish (Nel & Grosser, 2016; Samuels et al., 2020). Indeed, inclusive education extends beyond physical placement in mainstream classrooms; it

encompasses the creation of welcoming, supportive, and responsive learning environments that recognise and value learner diversity (Westwood, 2018; Lawrance et al., 2022). Thus, the inclusive education doctrine implies that school environments worldwide have the potential to enhance learners' sense of belonging, self-worth, social connectedness, and emotional well-being.

In South Africa, the transition to democracy brought renewed commitments to equality, social justice, and educational transformation. These commitments are reflected in policy frameworks such as Education White Paper 6 and SIAS, which promote the development of an inclusive education and training system capable of accommodating diverse learner needs (Debasu & Yitayew, 2024; Sharma, 2024). Despite significant policy advancements, literature reported that the implementation of inclusive education remains uneven across schools (Pedrosa et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021). Guellil et al. (2026) and Lindsay et al. (2026) report that many learners with disabilities continue to encounter challenges such as inadequate support services, limited teacher preparedness, insufficient resources, inaccessible infrastructure, and persistent negative attitudes towards disability. Consequently, these challenges not only affect educational participation and achievement but also have profound implications for learners' mental health and well-being.

Additionally, research has consistently demonstrated that learners with disabilities are more vulnerable to social isolation, marginalisation, anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional distress than their peers without disabilities (Guberina, 2023; Arouri et al., 2025). Thus, schools that fail to provide inclusive and

supportive learning environments may accidentally reinforce feelings of exclusion and inadequacy. Conversely, schools that embrace inclusive practices can create conditions that promote positive mental health outcomes by fostering acceptance, participation, peer support, and meaningful engagement in learning activities (Visser et al., 2020; Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). Therefore, understanding how inclusive education contributes to the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities has become an important area of inquiry within educational research.

While most existing studies have explored barriers to inclusive education, limited attention has been given to its role in promoting the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities, creating a need for further investigation. This gap is significant because educational experiences shape not only learners' academic trajectories but also their emotional and psychological development (Motitswe, 2025; Sepadi, 2025). Hence, investigating this relationship is essential for informing policies and practices that support the holistic development of learners with disabilities. Against this background, the present study explores how inclusive education serves as a pathway to enhancing the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities in South African schools.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework: Learner Integration Wheel (LIW): Theory of Practice

This study is framed by the Learner Integration Wheel (LIW hereafter) theory of practice, which conceptualises learner integration as a collaborative and dynamic process involving multiple stakeholders within the educational ecosystem. The theory is founded on the assumption that effective inclusion cannot be achieved by schools alone but requires coordinated efforts among teachers, school management teams, parents, support professionals, peers, and the broader community

(Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024a). The LIW further assumes that learners experience meaningful integration “when educational environments provide equitable opportunities for participation, acceptance, support, and achievement” (Kanyopa, 2022, p. 280). Through the interconnectedness of three dimensions, schools, community, and curriculum developers, the learning context can foster not only academic success but also the social, emotional, and psychological well-being of learners with disabilities (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024b). The theory, therefore, provides a useful lens for understanding how inclusive educational practices influence mental health and well-being outcomes within school settings.

Related Literature

Inclusive Education and Learners with Disabilities

Inclusive education has become a central principle of educational reform globally. It advocates for the participation and achievement of all learners regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or learning needs (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024; Sharma, 2024). The concept of inclusive education is grounded in principles of international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which reinforced the need for educational systems that accommodate learner diversity and remove barriers to participation (Mitchell, 2016; Arouri et al., 2025). Inclusive education, therefore, extends beyond physical placement in mainstream classrooms and encompasses the creation of learning environments that value diversity, promote participation, and respond to individual learner needs.

In the context of this study, inclusive education gained prominence following the country's democratic transition and the adoption of Education White Paper 6, which advocates for the development of an inclusive education and training system. Practically, the policy seeks to

address historical inequalities and ensure that learners experiencing barriers to learning receive appropriate support within mainstream schools (Rinquest & Simba, 2024). Despite these policy commitments, research continues to reveal challenges in implementing inclusive education in school contexts. Consequently, many learners with disabilities continue to experience exclusion and marginalisation within educational settings (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Masunungure et al., 2025). Mental health and well-being are thus relevant for these learners.

Mental health and well-being among learners with disabilities

Mental health and well-being are increasingly recognised as essential components of educational success and learner development. Mental health refers to an individual's emotional, psychological, and social well-being (WHO, 2022). Lindsay et al. (2026) defines well-being as a broader dimension that encompasses life satisfaction, belonging, resilience, and positive functioning. Thus, within school contexts, positive mental health and personal well-being contribute to improved academic performance, healthy relationships, self-confidence, and social participation (Kim et al., 2021; Rinquest & Simba, 2024). However, literature on learners with disabilities often mentions additional risks that negatively affect their mental health and well-being. For example, these learners are more likely to experience social isolation, bullying, stigma, discrimination, and low self-esteem than their peers without disabilities, as reported in studies by Samuels et al. (2020) and Guellil et al. (2026). Consequently, such experiences may lead to anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and reduced engagement in learning activities (Carmona & Montanero, 2025). Furthermore, Kanyopa (2018) argued that barriers present within school environments can intensify learners' feelings of exclusion and inferiority, negatively affecting their personal development and psychological well-being.

To support learners with disabilities, research suggests that schools play a crucial role in promoting mental health by providing safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments (Pedrosa et al., 2020; Guberina, 2023). In addition, Aji (2025) claimed that when learners feel accepted, respected, and valued, they are more likely to develop positive self-concepts and emotional resilience. This claim implies that inclusive education has increasingly been viewed as a mechanism for supporting not only academic achievement but also the holistic well-being of learners with disabilities.

The relationship between inclusive education and mental health has received growing scholarly attention. Existing literature indicates that inclusive educational environments contribute positively to learners' emotional and psychological well-being by fostering a sense of belonging, social connectedness, and participation (Pressman et al., 2020; Lawrance et al., 2022). Indeed, belongingness is particularly important for learners with disabilities, as it influences their self-esteem, identity formation, and overall school experience. Learners who feel accepted within their school communities are more likely to demonstrate confidence, motivation, and positive emotional outcomes. Thus, to address the limited research on how inclusive education influences the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities across diverse school contexts, this study explored the experiences and perspectives of teachers and learners.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study was situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand how individuals construct and interpret their lived experiences within specific social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The interpretivist paradigm was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the role of inclusive education in enhancing the mental health and

well-being of learners with disabilities. Through this paradigm, the researchers gained an in-depth understanding of how teachers and learners make meaning of inclusive practices and the challenges associated with promoting learner well-being within South African schools.

Research Approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research enables researchers to explore complex social phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them (Leavy, 2022). The approach was suitable for this study, as it facilitated a rich, detailed exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and understandings of inclusive educational practices and their influence on the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities.

Research Design

A multiple case study design was adopted to explore the phenomenon across different educational contexts (Adams et al., 2022). Multiple case studies allow researchers to investigate a contemporary issue within its real-life setting while comparing experiences across various sites. The design enabled the researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive education is implemented across different schools and how such practices contribute to or hinder the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities.

Selection of Research Sites

The study was conducted in four schools selected from two different educational contexts. Two

schools were located in township communities, comprising one primary school and one high school. These schools in the township are based on quantiles 1 and 2, with most learners from rural or previously marginalised communities.

The remaining two schools were situated in suburban areas and consisted of one primary school and one high school. Further, these schools in the suburbs are based on quantile 4, whereby most learners' parents can afford to pay fees and top-up costs. Thus, these schools from two different contexts were selected because they implemented inclusive education practices and enrolled learners with disabilities. The inclusion of both primary and high schools across different contexts provided diverse perspectives on inclusive education and learner well-being.

Selection of Participants

A total of 8 participants took part in the study. The sample consisted of four teachers and four learners with disabilities drawn from the selected schools. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling enabled the researchers to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience in inclusive education and learner support. Convenience sampling was used to select participants who were readily accessible and willing to participate in the study. Teachers were selected for their involvement in implementing inclusive educational practices, while learners were selected for their experiences of learning in inclusive school environments. Table 1 below presents participants' profiles.

Table 1: participants' profiles.

Pseudonym	School Location	School Type	Gender	Age between
Teacher 1	Suburban	Primary	Female	1384-1399 years
Teacher 2	Suburban	High school	Female	1384-1399 years
Teacher 3	Township	Primary	Male	1384-1399 years
Teacher 4	Township	High school	Male	1384-1399 years

Learner 1	Suburban	Primary	Female	1384-1399 years
Learner 2	Suburban	High school	Male	1384-1399 years
Learner 3	Township	Primary	Female	1384-1399 years
Learner 4	Township	High school	Female	1384-1399 years

Data Generation

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and reflective writing activities. Semi-structured interviews provided participants with opportunities to share their experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding inclusive education and its influence on mental health and well-being. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a one-to-one format to allow each participant to share their experiences and contribute their perspectives freely. Each interview session lasted 30 to 45 minutes. Furthermore, participants were asked to write reflections on the practices and implementation of inclusive education in their schools. Reflective writing activities complemented the interviews by allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences in a more personal and reflective manner. The use of multiple data generation methods enhanced the depth and richness of the data collected.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. This process involved familiarisation with the data, coding meaningful segments, identifying recurring patterns, and developing themes that reflected participants' experiences and perspectives (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis enabled the researchers to systematically organise and interpret the data while highlighting key issues related to inclusive educational practices and the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities.

Data Presentation and Findings

Theme 1: Inclusive practices that significantly improve learners' mental health and well-being

The findings revealed that inclusive education practices play a significant role in enhancing the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities in South African schools. Participants indicated that when schools create environments characterised by acceptance, emotional support, meaningful participation, and collaboration, learners with disabilities experience increased confidence, a sense of belonging, and improved emotional resilience. This theme is presented through five sub-themes: supportive teacher-learner relationships, peer acceptance, collaborative support structures, learner participation, and the creation of welcoming and inclusive learning environments.

1.1. Supportive teacher-learner relationships

Participants emphasised that positive relationships between teachers and learners were fundamental in promoting the emotional well-being of learners with disabilities. Teachers described their role as extending beyond academic instruction to include emotional encouragement, understanding, and psychological support. In particular, learners valued teachers who demonstrated patience, empathy, and recognition of their individual abilities rather than focusing on their disabilities.

A teacher from a township high school explained:

"For learners with disabilities, the relationship they have with the teacher matters a lot. When they know that the teacher cares about them and understands their challenges, they become more confident and willing to participate in class. Some of them come from situations where they feel rejected, so school becomes a place where they feel valued." (Teacher 4)

Similarly, a teacher from a suburban high school indicated that building trust with learners helped

reduce anxiety and emotional barriers. She commented;

"I always try to know my learners personally. Before I can teach them, I need to understand their fears, their strengths, and what makes them comfortable. When they feel safe with you, they become happier and more engaged in learning." (Teacher 2)

In addition, learners also highlighted the emotional impact of supportive teachers. One learner from a township high school reflected:

"My teacher always tells me that I can do things like other learners. Before, I thought I was different and could not succeed, but now I feel proud because my teacher believes in me." (Learner 4)

These findings suggest that caring teacher-learner relationships contribute significantly to learners' self-esteem, confidence, and sense of belonging, which are important dimensions of mental health and well-being.

1.2. Peer acceptance and social belonging

The findings further revealed that peer acceptance positively influenced learners' mental health and well-being. Participants indicated that inclusive classrooms where learners interacted, collaborated, and supported one another reduced feelings of isolation and promoted social connectedness.

A learner from a township primary school explained:

"At my previous school, some learners laughed at me because of my disability. Here, my classmates include me in group work and activities. I feel like I belong, and I am not alone." (Learner 3)

Moreover, a teacher from a suburban primary school also highlighted the importance of developing peer understanding:

"We encourage learners to work together because inclusion is not only about the teacher helping the learner with a disability. Other learners must also

understand and accept one another. When peers support them, they become more confident." (Teacher 1)

Collaboratively, participants noted that peer acceptance created opportunities for learners with disabilities to form friendships, participate socially, and develop a positive identity within the school community. This demonstrates that inclusive education contributes to mental health by reducing social exclusion and strengthening learners' sense of belonging.

1.3. Collaborative support structures

Furthermore, participants identified collaboration among teachers, parents, school management teams, and support professionals as an important factor in promoting learner well-being. Effective collaboration ensured that learners received academic, emotional, and social support according to their individual needs.

A teacher from a township primary school stated:

"Supporting learners with disabilities cannot be the responsibility of one person. We need parents, teachers, and support teams to work together. When everyone contributes, the learner receives better support and feels cared for." (Teacher 3)

Additionally, learners also acknowledged the value of coordinated support. One learner from a suburban high school shared:

"When I struggle, my teacher talks to my parents and helps me find ways to improve. Knowing that people are working together to help me makes me feel supported." (Learner 2)

The findings from this sub-theme indicate that collaborative support systems create a safety network around learners with disabilities, enabling them to overcome challenges and experience greater emotional stability.

1.4. Learner participation and inclusion in school activities

Participants revealed that opportunities for meaningful participation enhanced learners' confidence and psychological well-being. When

learners with disabilities were actively involved in classroom discussions, extracurricular activities, and decision-making processes, they developed a stronger sense of agency and belonging.

A learner from a township high school stated:

"I like participating in class because my teachers allow me to share my ideas. I do not feel like I am different from other learners anymore." (Learner 4)

A teacher supported this view by explaining:

"We make sure that learners with disabilities are not only present in the classroom but are actively involved. Inclusion means allowing them to contribute and showing them that their voices matter." (Teacher 4)

These findings demonstrate that participation is an important element of inclusion, as it enables learners with disabilities to develop confidence, independence, and positive emotional experiences in school environments.

1.5. Creation of welcoming and inclusive learning environments

Another aspect of this theme focused on the importance of creating school environments where diversity is recognised and valued. Participants described inclusive schools as spaces where learners felt respected, protected, and accepted regardless of their abilities.

A teacher from a township primary school explained:

"The environment of the school influences how learners feel about themselves. When the school promotes respect and acceptance, learners with disabilities do not see themselves as outsiders; they see themselves as part of the school." (Teacher 3)

In addition, a learner from a suburban primary school reflected:

"I feel happy coming to school because teachers and learners treat me well. I know that I am accepted here." (Learner 1)

Overall, the findings from the first theme demonstrate that inclusive practices create

conditions that promote positive mental health and well-being among learners with disabilities. Through supportive relationships, peer acceptance, collaborative support structures, meaningful participation, and welcoming environments, schools become spaces where learners experience dignity, belonging, and emotional security. These findings align with the assumptions of the LIW theory of practice, which emphasises that effective learner integration requires interconnected support systems that address learners' academic, social, and emotional needs.

Theme 2: Challenges that undermine efforts to promote the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities in South African schools

Although participants acknowledged the positive contribution of inclusive practices to learners' mental health and well-being, the findings also revealed several systemic and contextual challenges that continue to undermine efforts to achieve meaningful inclusion. Participants indicated that the implementation of inclusive education remains constrained by inadequate teacher preparation, limited psychosocial support services, insufficient resources, negative attitudes towards disability, and inconsistencies in the implementation of inclusive education policies. These challenges often result in learners with disabilities experiencing emotional distress, reduced participation, and feelings of marginalisation within school environments.

2.1. Inadequate teacher training and preparedness

A significant challenge identified by participants was the limited preparation of teachers to effectively support learners with diverse disabilities and emotional needs. Participants explained that although teachers are expected to implement inclusive education, many lack the specialised knowledge and skills required to adapt teaching strategies, provide appropriate support, and address learners' psychosocial challenges.

A teacher from a township high school expressed concern about insufficient professional preparation:

"Many of us want to support these learners, but sometimes we do not have enough training. We receive learners with different disabilities, but we are not always equipped with the strategies to meet their individual needs. This can affect the learner because they may feel that they are not being understood." (Teacher 4)

Similarly, a teacher from a suburban primary school explained:

"Inclusive education requires specific skills, but most of our training was focused on teaching the general classroom. We need continuous development because every learner is different, and without proper knowledge, we may unintentionally exclude some learners." (Teacher 1)

Nevertheless, learners also experienced the consequences of limited teacher preparedness. One learner from a township primary school stated:

"Sometimes teachers do not understand how I learn. When they explain once and move on, I feel left behind. It makes me feel like I am not as capable as other learners." (Learner 3)

Conversely, these findings suggest that inadequate teacher preparation can negatively influence learners' emotional experiences by limiting their access to meaningful learning opportunities and reducing their sense of competence and belonging.

2.2. Limited psychosocial support services

Participants further identified inadequate access to psychosocial support services as a barrier to promoting the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities. While schools recognised the importance of emotional and psychological support, participants indicated that specialist services such as counselling, psychological support, and therapeutic interventions were often unavailable or insufficient.

A teacher from a township primary school highlighted this challenge:

"Some learners come to school carrying emotional problems, but we do not always have professionals who can assist them. Teachers try their best, but we are not counsellors or psychologists. More support services are needed within schools." (Teacher 3)

Notwithstanding, a learner from a township high school explained the emotional impact of limited support:

"There are times when I feel stressed because of my challenges, but there is no one at school I can always talk to. Sometimes I keep my feelings to myself." (Learner 4)

Participants' contributions indicated that the absence of adequate psychosocial support structures may leave learners vulnerable to emotional difficulties, particularly when they experience stigma, academic challenges, or social exclusion.

2.3. Resource constraints and limited accessibility

Another challenge identified across the different school contexts was the shortage of resources required to effectively implement inclusive education. Participants cited limited assistive devices, inadequate learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient infrastructure as factors that restrict schools' ability to provide equitable support.

A teacher from a suburban high school explained:

"We have learners who require additional resources, but sometimes those resources are not available. Teachers have to improvise, and this affects the quality of support we can provide." (Teacher 1)

Furthermore, a learner from a township primary school shared a similar experience:

"Sometimes I struggle because the materials I need are not available. When other learners are working, and I cannot follow, I feel frustrated and different from them." (Learner 3)

Thus, these findings demonstrate that resource limitations can negatively affect learners' participation and emotional well-being by creating unequal learning experiences and reinforcing feelings of exclusion.

2.4. Negative attitudes towards disability

Going further, participants also identified negative attitudes and misconceptions about disability as persistent barriers to inclusion. Although some schools promoted acceptance, participants reported that stigma and misunderstanding from certain teachers, learners, and community members continued to affect learners' confidence and sense of belonging.

A learner from a suburban primary school explained:

"Some learners still think that because I have a disability, I cannot do the same things they can do. Sometimes their words hurt me, and I do not want to participate." (Learner 3)

To support, a teacher from a suburban high school further explained:

"Changing attitudes is one of the biggest challenges. Some people still see disability as an inability. We need to continue educating everyone because inclusion starts with how people perceive learners with disabilities." (Teacher 2)

Indeed, participants' responses emphasised that negative attitudes contribute to emotional harm by reinforcing stereotypes, limiting social interactions, and affecting learners' self-confidence.

2.5. Inconsistent implementation of inclusive education policies

The findings further revealed concerns regarding the gap between inclusive education policies and their implementation at the school level. Participants acknowledged that South Africa has established policies supporting inclusive education; however, practical implementation remains inconsistent due to variations in resources, training, monitoring, and institutional commitment.

A teacher from a township high school stated:

"The policy talks about inclusion, but what happens in schools is sometimes different. Schools have different capacities, and some do not have enough support to fully implement what the policy requires." (Teacher 4)

Another teacher from a suburban high school added:

"Inclusive education is a good idea, but it needs proper structures. Without monitoring and support, it becomes difficult for schools to translate policy into practice." (Teacher 2)

Conversely, participants' experiences indicate that policy-practice gaps continue to limit the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives and reduce schools' capacity to support learners' mental health and well-being.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that while inclusive education provides opportunities for enhancing the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities, several structural and contextual barriers continue to undermine these efforts. These challenges reflect the assumptions of the LIW theory of practice, which emphasises that successful learner integration requires interconnected support systems, research-based processes, positive attitudes, consistency, and accountability among all stakeholders. Without addressing these systemic barriers, inclusive education may remain an aspiration rather than a fully realised practice capable of promoting the holistic well-being of learners with disabilities.

Discussion

This study explored the role of inclusive education in enhancing the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities in South African schools. The findings revealed that inclusive educational practices can significantly contribute to positive mental health outcomes, while several systemic and contextual barriers continue to undermine these efforts.

Findings from the first theme support existing literature that positions inclusive education as

more than academic access (Pressman et al., 2020); rather, it is a mechanism for fostering social inclusion, emotional security, and psychological well-being among learners with disabilities.

Moreover, research has consistently demonstrated that positive teacher-learner relationships contribute to learners' self-esteem, resilience, and sense of belonging, all of which are essential for mental health (Arouri et al., 2025; 2023). Furthermore, it has been reported that teachers who demonstrate empathy, patience, and understanding create safe spaces where learners feel valued and supported, thereby reducing anxiety and feelings of exclusion (Engelbrecht, 2020; Guberina, 2023).

Similarly, the findings regarding peer acceptance align with studies such as that by Arouri et al. (2025), which indicate that social connectedness and positive peer interactions play a critical role in promoting psychological well-being. Indeed, learners with disabilities who experience acceptance and friendship are less likely to experience loneliness, isolation, and emotional distress. Nevertheless, the literature supports the view that inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for meaningful social interaction, helping learners develop confidence and positive self-identities (Sharma, 2024). Likewise, this finding is consistent with previous studies that identify belongingness as a key determinant of learner well-being and successful inclusion (Murungi, 2015; Kanyopa, 2018).

The study further revealed that collaborative support structures involving teachers, parents, school management teams, and support professionals enhance learners' emotional and educational experiences. Existing literature highlights that inclusive education is most effective when support is shared among multiple stakeholders (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024; Guellil et al., 2026). This implies that collaboration ensures that learners' academic, social, and emotional needs are addressed holistically. This finding strongly resonates with

the assumptions of the LIW theory of practice, which posits that learner integration is a collective responsibility requiring interconnected support systems (Kanyopa, 2022).

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that learner participation and inclusive school cultures contribute positively to psychological well-being. Previous studies like that by Engelbrecht (2020) and Guberina (2023) have shown that when learners with disabilities are actively involved in classroom activities and decision-making processes, they develop greater self-confidence, independence, and motivation. Consequently, active participation enables learners to view themselves as capable contributors within their educational communities rather than passive recipients of support (Arslan et al., 2022; Lindsay et al., 2026). Similarly, welcoming and inclusive learning environments promote feelings of acceptance, dignity, and emotional safety, which are essential for healthy psychological development (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2026).

Despite these positive outcomes, the second theme revealed several challenges that undermine efforts to promote the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities. One of the most significant barriers identified was inadequate teacher training and preparedness. Participants reported that many teachers lacked specialised knowledge and skills to effectively support learners with diverse disabilities. This finding corroborates existing literature, which identifies teacher preparedness as one of the most persistent challenges facing inclusive education in South Africa and other developing contexts. Scholars like Adewumi and Mosito (2019) argue that insufficient training often leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed and inadequately equipped to address both the academic and psychosocial needs of learners with disabilities. Consequently, learners may not receive the support necessary for their emotional and educational development.

Furthermore, this study also found that limited psychosocial support services negatively affect

learner well-being. Participants reported insufficient access to counselling, psychological services, and specialist support. This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the shortage of mental health professionals and support services within many South African schools (Carmona & Montanero, 2025; Guellil et al., 2026). This implies that learners with disabilities may experience vulnerability to stress, anxiety, bullying, and social exclusion due to the absence of adequate psychosocial support, which can have serious implications for their mental health.

Additionally, resource constraints emerged as another significant challenge. Participants highlighted shortages of assistive devices, learning materials, and accessible infrastructure, which hinder effective inclusion. Existing literature similarly identifies resource limitations as a major obstacle to the successful implementation of inclusive education (Mitchell, 2016; Masunungure et al., 2025). Indeed, schools that lack adequate resources often struggle to accommodate diverse learner needs, thereby limiting meaningful participation and creating conditions that may contribute to frustration, low self-esteem, and feelings of exclusion among learners with disabilities (Rinquest & Simba, 2024).

Nevertheless, negative attitudes towards disability were also identified as barriers to promoting mental health and well-being. Participants reported instances of stigma, stereotyping, and discrimination that negatively affected learners' confidence and social experiences. These findings align with previous studies suggesting that attitudinal barriers often pose greater challenges than physical barriers to achieving meaningful inclusion (Kanyopa, 2018; Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024). This study maintains that negative perceptions of disability can undermine learners' sense of self-worth and belonging, resulting in adverse psychological outcomes. Therefore, fostering positive attitudes towards disability remains a critical component of inclusive education.

Additionally, participants highlighted inconsistencies in the implementation of inclusive education policies. Although South Africa has established progressive policies to promote inclusion, participants reported gaps between policy intentions and their practical implementation. These findings echo previous studies that have identified disparities in resources, support structures, and institutional capacity across schools (Engelbrecht, 2020; Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024b). Consequently, the existence of policy-practice gaps limits the ability of schools to provide consistent support for learners with disabilities and consequently affects their mental health and well-being.

Taken together, the findings suggest that inclusive education has considerable potential to enhance the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities when implemented effectively. However, realising this potential depends on the availability of supportive relationships, collaborative structures, adequate resources, trained educators, and positive school cultures. The findings affirm the central assumptions of the LIW Theory of Practice, which emphasises that successful learner integration requires coordinated efforts among stakeholders and the creation of environments that address learners' academic, social, emotional, and psychological needs. This study believes that strengthening these interconnected dimensions is essential for ensuring that inclusive education becomes a meaningful pathway towards improved mental health and well-being for learners with disabilities in South African schools.

Conclusion

This study explored how inclusive education serves as a pathway to enhancing the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities in South African schools. The findings revealed that inclusive practices, including supportive teacher-learner relationships, peer acceptance, collaborative support structures, meaningful learner participation, and welcoming school

environments, contribute positively to learners' emotional well-being, sense of belonging, and overall mental health. These practices create opportunities for learners with disabilities to participate meaningfully in educational and social activities while fostering confidence, resilience, and positive self-esteem.

However, the study also revealed several challenges that undermine these efforts, including inadequate teacher training, limited psychosocial support services, resource constraints, negative attitudes towards disability, and inconsistent implementation of inclusive education policies. These barriers continue to limit the effectiveness of inclusive education and hinder the holistic development of learners with disabilities. Drawing on the LIW theory of practice, the study concludes that promoting the mental health and well-being of learners with disabilities requires a collaborative, systemic approach that involves teachers, parents, school management teams, support professionals, policymakers, and communities. Inclusive education should therefore be viewed not only as a means of providing access to education but also as a critical strategy for fostering psychological well-being, social inclusion, and educational success. Thus, strengthening inclusive practices and addressing existing barriers are essential for creating school environments where all learners can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness was addressed through the principle of *credibility*, which was strengthened by semi-structured interviews and reflective writing. Multiple data-generation methods provide participants with different opportunities to articulate their experiences regarding the researched issue. Member checking was undertaken by sharing participants' interpreted accounts or emerging interpretations with participants, where appropriate, to allow them to clarify, confirm, or contest the researcher's understanding of their experiences. The principle of *dependability* was ensured by maintaining an

audit trail documenting the major stages of the study, including participant selection, data generation, data management, coding decisions, development and refinement of themes, and methodological decisions made during the research process (Adler, 2022).

Additionally, the principle of *confirmability* was addressed by ensuring that the findings were derived from participants' accounts rather than from the researcher's personal assumptions or preferences. The researcher maintained reflexive notes throughout the research process to critically examine personal assumptions, expectations, positionality, and potential influences on the interpretation of participants' experiences. Lastly, *transferability* was ensured by ensuring that the study does not permit statistical generalisation due to its qualitative multiple-case design and small, purposively selected sample. Instead, transferability was supported through a thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, sampling criteria, and institutional settings.

Ethical Considerations

In adherence with ethical consideration, the study obtained permission from the GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC), with Ethical Clearance number: UFS-HSD2024/1990. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all participants, while parental consent and learner assent were secured for participants under the age of eighteen. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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