



Strategies for creating inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive learning compels all public schools to accommodate all learners and implement curricula that meet their needs. This study explored strategies for creating inclusive learning for learners who experience barriers to learning. Most of the literature on inclusive learning in schools has discussed the tension between theoretical approaches and the practical achievements of inclusive learning during teaching and learning. Furthermore, the local literature has demonstrated that educators try to modify and differentiate the existing curriculum with no tangible results for learners experiencing barriers to learning and not comprehending the content of the curriculum. This generic interpretive qualitative case study was conducted in the uMgungundlovu District (KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa), using semi-structured interviews with four teachers selected from four primary schools. Observations were conducted during teaching and learning, and documents were reviewed. The themes were derived and used through thematic data analysis to yield the study findings and draw conclusions. The study results indicated a shift toward inclusive learning, whereby learners experiencing barriers to learning can learn and better comprehend the curriculum's content through role-play, constructing objects, and drawing. Therefore, learners experiencing barriers to learning felt part of the teaching and learning process and could transform their contextual affordance into actions, which sheds light on their education journey.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Salamanca Framework, inclusive education incorporates the proven principles of sound pedagogy that should create inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning to benefit from teaching and learning (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusive education is defined initially as schooling in which all children have access to regular classrooms by providing adequate support (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement recognizes that the education system should be designed, and education programs implemented to suit the vast diversity of children in schools (UNESCO, 1994). Other international policies, such as the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) and Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (UNESCO, 2009), added strength and urgency to the countries worldwide on implementing inclusive education. These legislative frameworks developed action plans, which included (1) the recognized need for access to education for all persons globally, (2) the recognized need for equity in educational rights and opportunities, and (3) the recognized right to receive adequate and appropriate accommodation and support for all students (UNESCO, 2000; 2009). These legislative frameworks are driven by the notion that inclusive learning strategies and the actual implementation of inclusive education are critical for the success of all learners (Dalton et al., 2019). As a signatory of the Salamanca Agreement, the South African government developed policies recognizing inclusive learning. The

democratic government in South Africa was elected in 1996 after many years of apartheid inequalities and discrimination, and inclusive education appeared for the first time in education policy. The *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education. Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (Department of Education, 2001) came as a new inclusive education system, recognizing that learning needs may arise from stereotypes, negative attitudes, inaccessible environments, and inadequate policies and support services (Dalton et al., 2019). According to Engelbrecht et al. (2016), inclusive education promotes the right of all learners to receive appropriate education that caters to their specific learning needs. In this regard, schools are expected to be welcoming and inclusive to all learners, including those experiencing different abilities. Therefore, providing quality education for all children is a global agenda (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

Zabeli et al. (2021) argued that inclusive education should not be treated as an issue of aspiration but as an obligation of countries to include all children, regardless of their differences. This suggests that several factors must be in place to make inclusive learning practices real during teaching and learning and ensure that learners experiencing barriers are catered to honestly. According to Anderson and Boyle (2019), inclusive education has been implemented at the feet of all schools to fulfil the principles of inclusive learning. This suggests that teachers are essential in creating inclusive school learning (Mampane, 2020). Anderson and Boyle (2019) add that teachers have been the focus of many studies on inclusive education. This resonates with the notion that teachers are fundamental in creating inclusive learning in classroom settings. Domagała-Zyśk and Knopik (2022) opine that the involvement of teachers in the area of inclusion depends considerably on their beliefs and attitudes about inclusive education. Therefore, teachers' attitudes toward learners determine the successful implementation of inclusive education. Kourkoutas et al. (2017) argue that implementing inclusive education poorly results in severe school challenges and negatively affects learners' performance. Therefore, inclusive education is only possible when schools implement all relevant policy elements that control the implementation process (Schuelka, 2019). Successful creation of inclusive learning requires schools' transformation and system change for learners to achieve quality education (Ireru et al., 2020). In inclusive practices, a single lesson represents a different experience for each learner; therefore, teachers should ensure that learners can engage in meaningful lessons (Florian & Beaton, 2018). While South African policies outline the preference and need for inclusive learning through the promulgated policies, the literature has shown that practical implementation is still challenging (Dalton et al., 2019; Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2020; Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018; Walton et al., 2019).

Aim of the Study

This study explored strategies for creating inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning. This study aimed to answer the following research question: What are the strategies for creating inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning?

Literature Review

Exploring strategies for creating inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning involves meeting their educational needs in a classroom environment, whereby they can learn and be on par with their peers. Inclusive learning encourages and challenges educators to design and apply various instructional strategies to assist the learning processes of all students (Kurniawati, 2021). Tomlinson (2017) opines that, when implementing inclusive learning, a strategy must match learning objectives, be informed by continuous evaluation, and eventually respond to student readiness. The challenge is that most curricula are rigid and learning objectives do not accommodate learners experiencing barriers to learning, leaving educators with little or no room to maneuver. Hence, this study sought to contribute to the scientific knowledge on creating inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning. Multilevel teaching and curriculum differentiation strategies are acceptable interventions that respond to the various educational needs of students (Tomlinson, 2017). However, multilevel teaching does not reach the level of all learners

experiencing barriers to learning because it is conducted within a policy framework that eventually leaves some learners behind. Therefore, this study addressed the gap found when teaching learners experiencing barriers to learning. Once the curriculum accommodates the learners, their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and confidence become receptive; hence, it is easier for educators to engage in inclusive learning. [Pit-ten Cate et al. \(2019\)](#) found that efficacy and confidence were essential when implementing inclusive learning.

[Page et al. \(2022\)](#) conducted a study in the Cook Islands and found that after staff received thorough professional development, they could positively impact students with barriers to learning. The study found that instead of following the curriculum, teachers allowed students to learn life skills from one another. According to this study, students with disabilities would teach each other dance, crafts, work, and activities that allowed them to be recognized by their community. Thus, once inclusive education is implemented effectively, the skills that students learn can restore their sense of belonging. However, the study highlighted the positive strategies in implementing inclusive learning; the social desirability of the participants' responses was noted as an issue, given that prosocial behaviours are highly valued in the Cook Islands ([Page et al., 2022](#)). In addition, the study underlined how vital indigenous methods were for implementing inclusive learning but did not show how such methods could effectively assist students experiencing barriers to learning. Given the above study, teachers' competencies, specific abilities, and innovative methods can determine how effectively they can deliver instruction to learners and foster the learning required to implement inclusive education in their classrooms ([Pit-ten Cate et al., 2019](#)). Furthermore, [Kilinc et al. \(2017\)](#) found that when students were characters in the learning process, they understood the content more accessible.

Similarly, a study by [Brennan et al. \(2021\)](#) exploring support for inclusive pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland found that educators allowed students to express themselves through their own choices to simulate the lesson. A study found that when students expressed themselves, they comprehended the lesson's content, named differentiation by choice. The methodology employed by the teachers eventually allowed all students to achieve their best abilities as they engaged in their teaching and learning freely, creating a more inclusive learning environment. The literature has found that strategies for implementing inclusive education should shift from the theoretical and traditional methods of the curriculum to a more creative approach, such as role-play and visible and constructive objects that allow students to participate actively in the teaching and learning process ([Hankebo, 2018](#); [Zulfiqar et al., 2018](#)).

[Adom et al. \(2019\)](#) argue that if educators involve learners in a more flexible teaching and learning process using methods such as outdoors, learners can comprehend lessons and develop their potential. However, the study does not clarify what the learners perform or whether they comprehend what is done outdoors. The current study adds to the body of knowledge by outlining what is performed outdoors and how learners comprehend lessons learned outside. Similarly, [Walton \(2018\)](#) posits that educators should differentiate instruction in a manner sensitive to diverse learner needs. In this regard, the literature posits that all learners during the lesson using the same curriculum ([Hlalele et al., 2020](#); [Majoko, 2019](#); [Florian & Beaton, 2018](#)). Therefore, strategies to implement inclusive learning cannot be one size fits all; different techniques should be employed to meet the educational needs of every learner. Using various techniques and strategies to implement inclusive education creates collaboration between learners and educators and among learners, thus supporting an inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, when all learners are involved in teaching and learning, they feel accommodated and supported, and consequently, their self-esteem is activated.

[Forlin and Sin \(2017\)](#) suggest that teachers should consider four factors to implement inclusive learning in their classrooms successfully: value a different type of learner, assist all learners, allow learners to work with others, and work on their personal and professional growth. The literature has demonstrated that the above factors allow inclusive teaching practices, whereby all learners can participate and establish a rich learning community ([Casserly et al., 2019](#)). The literature

has suggested that for the effective implementation of IE, teachers' attitudes need to be favourable toward IE, thus resulting in learners' achievements (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2019; Dorji et al., 2021; Kuyini et al., 2020).

METHOD

This was an interpretive study; hence, a qualitative research approach was employed to determine an in-depth strategy used by educators to create inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning. The aim of using a qualitative approach was to gain insight into and elicit the strategies used by educators to create inclusive learning strategies for learners experiencing barriers to learning. Scholars have confirmed that the qualitative approach provides an in-depth and detailed understanding of meaning and observable and non-observable actions in natural settings (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). In addition, Creswell (2013) states that the qualitative approach is a way of knowing that assumes the researcher uses his/her eyes or ears to gather, organize and interpret information. Therefore, employing a qualitative approach afforded the lens to explore strategies for creating inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning.

This study aimed to gather information from educators and hear about the strategies for creating inclusive learning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain empirical data from four educators from four primary schools in the uMgungundlovu District (KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa). According to Cohen et al. (2011), a semi-structured interview is a more powerful type of interview for qualitative research because it allows gathering critical insights from participants to acquire in-depth information while considering the focus of the study. In this regard, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to follow up on leads if and when required. For this study, four educators from four different schools were interviewed. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was face-to-face in each participant's school. Interviews were recorded with a digital tape recorder and then transcribed. All study participants were selected purposively because they were teaching learners experiencing barriers to learning and were able to provide rich data on their experiences to create inclusive learning strategies. Purposive sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research that involves identifying and selecting individuals who are knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. All ethical considerations were taken into account for this study. For example, participants signed an informed consent prior to their interviews. This means participants were informed about the purpose of the study. According to Cohen et al. (2011), ethical considerations have a particular resonance in qualitative research studies. Observations were also conducted in the classroom setting during teaching and learning to understand how the participants conduct their lessons and how actively engage in activities in which they are involved. du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) postulate that observation is the systematic description of social settings' events, behaviours, and artefacts. Data were further generated through a document review to contribute to or refute the findings gathered through semi-structured interviews and observations. Cohen et al. (2011) state that document review involves the study of existing documents to understand their substantive content or illuminate deeper meanings. In this study, curriculum policy, teachers' files, and learners' books were reviewed during the research process.

Content analysis was employed to analyze the data. Content analysis aims to systematically transform a large amount of text into a highly organized and concise summary of key results (Cohen et al., 2011). The data content and context of the documents were analyzed, and themes were identified with the researcher, focusing on how the themes were presented and meanings that reflected the research topic.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section provides a detailed explanation of strategies for creating inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning. Participants' responses indicated that understanding learners experiencing barriers to learning is essential when delivering the lesson. They mentioned that they engage learners in creative activities and play outdoors, whereby they demonstrate through singing and create fun for learners. Furthermore, they indicated that they used constructs, objects, and pictures to explain the concepts and allowed learners to express themselves through drawings. In addition, participants echoed that they used learners' mother tongue to relate to something new to them. The main findings of this study indicate that learning through play, demonstrations, and visual materials is critical in creating inclusive learning strategies for learners experiencing barriers to learning. The results revealed that using demonstrations in the form of playing and graphical objects involved learners experiencing barriers to learning during lessons. In this way, learners obtained a clearer view of the lesson content, which allowed them to learn. This was evident in the participants' responses, as they mentioned that creating inclusive learning through demonstrations was critical for learners experiencing barriers to learning. Consequently, they clearly understood the content, making the lesson more straightforward to comprehend.

Learners who experience barriers to learning learn at a different pace and understand things differently than other learners. Some learn through texture, while others enjoy creativity. Therefore, as teachers, one must be flexible when implementing IE. For example, I know these learners want creativity, such as drama and playing outdoors, rather than being confined in the classroom. Consequently, I will make something fun for them or act out the scenario as if they were watching a movie. I would do this act or demonstration, and they will feel like oho; it is okay; this is what you meant rather than writing on the board where they could not relate this to a real-life situation. The happiness of these learners is impressive when they understand the concept. I notice that this works for these learners because, when you relate, they do not want things to be written; they want things to be relative to real-life situations to comprehend (T5, School D).

The above extract showed that inclusive learning was implemented through teachers' flexibility and creativity as they delivered the lesson content. The participants mentioned that using creativity as a pedagogical strategy helped convey messages to learners experiencing barriers to learning. According to these findings, these IE implementation methods require teachers to be flexible during teaching and learning. Likewise, T3 from School B echoed similar views; singing to teach the curriculum and using concrete objects as learner support materials gave the teacher confidence that the lesson's content was well imparted. A participant stated:

I use songs to explain the concept of the subjects I am teaching, allowing me to create fun or play for learners to understand. Also, I use toys and legos daily as I teach maths to show them, especially when dealing with space and shapes, depending on the section I am teaching. I feel confident as I teach when using these constructs to explain the concept to learners experiencing barriers to learning. Again, it is tedious to learn through chalkboards and exercise book writing, teachers' time talking, and learners, you know, have to do writing and stuff. Sometimes, they need more time to listen and play, and they prove what they have done in their exercise books. I use colourful charts in other subjects, and I will explain the instructions very slowly repeatedly to learners experiencing barriers to learning; therefore, as they see, they can understand the concept clearly (T3, School B).

These findings also revealed that the concept was easily understood when teachers used songs, play, and legos to teach learners experiencing barriers to learning. The findings showed that when those learners learned through various strategies and methods, their educators became

optimistic about creating inclusive learning. In addition, the findings revealed that using these teaching materials allowed teachers to explain the content to the learners gradually. T1 shared similar views from School C, who mentioned that visuals allowed learners to be motivated and stimulated during the teaching and learning processes.

For my learners experiencing barriers to learning, understanding them is very important. I prepare a lesson using various media (visual) such as pictures that I take time and collect from home and request from other people I know or work with. I also allow learners to express themselves through drawings. I do this to meet all the learning needs of my learners, irrespective of whether they experience barriers to learning or not. I also allow learners to express their knowledge of the content I am teaching through demonstrations and expressions whereby I create fun for the learners. As we all enjoy the fun, that is when they comprehend the content of the lesson. I have created learning opportunities that motivate and stimulate learners according to their backgrounds and interests. (T1, School C).

The above findings revealed that using visuals such as pictures to implement IE facilitated meeting the learning needs and motivating and stimulating them. The findings further revealed that learners experiencing barriers to learning were provided with a platform to express their interests and understand how they interpreted lesson content during teaching and learning. Another participant mentioned that understanding the learners' language assists in knowing how to teach and plan lessons to help them grasp the content. The following excerpts support this view:

Teaching starts with understanding the learners and how much they know. I use their knowledge to bring something new to them, starting with their mother tongue. I use the vowels from their mother tongue to blend sounds. I use pictures and flashcards relating to their knowledge of letters. I always encourage learners to copy a lot from the board- as they copy, we communicate and sing what they are writing. In addition, we form words by picking up letters from the box and forming sentences. As learners like drawing, I encourage them to narrate the story through drawings, which they greatly enjoy (T2, School A).

The above findings showed that learners experiencing barriers to learning were allowed to use their language to learn something new. Furthermore, learners could learn freely using drawings to express themselves during teaching and learning.

Discussion

Interviews with the participants corroborated their observations and refuted the reviewed documents. For instance, during discussions, the participants highlighted that using the “learn through play” method to capture the interest of learners experiencing barriers to learning made learners understand the content taught. In addition, during lesson observations, I witnessed teachers reciting the words on the charts as singing and learners following the words the teachers were singing, creating a good, well-structured, and conducive learning environment in which all learners participated and enjoyed. Furthermore, when the teachers removed the charts in front of the learners, the latter could recall them when they asked questions. In addition, there were many songs and storytelling by the teachers that learners could follow during the practical lessons.

I also observed how happy learners were experiencing barriers to learning and where and how they quickly participated in the lesson. During lesson observation, there were good interactions between the teachers and all learners, stimulating the lessons. The lesson observations resonated with what the participants reported during the interviews, namely that when learners experiencing barriers to learning understood something taught, joy could be seen on their faces. The joy and happiness on their faces suggested that they understood the lesson concept using the learning method through play. It was further noticed that in most classrooms, there were pictures and toys that the teachers used to illustrate the content of the lessons to learners. In addition, in

some classrooms, teachers used indoor plants to teach learners, whereas other teachers taught their learners outdoors, using plants as part of the lessons. Other learners were at the teachers' car parking lot, learning different colours using teachers' cars.

The research findings from the reviewed curriculum documents refuted those from the interviews and observations. Upon perusing the lesson plans from the teachers' files, none indicated that the teachers should or were using songs and plays as teaching and learning methods. The teachers did not suggest using pictures as support materials in all lesson plans. During the interviews, the participants mentioned using images, and teachers were observed using them during their lessons. However, no marks from the teachers' assessment sheets or the rubric showed that the "learn through the play" method was used to capture learners' patterns. When perusing learners' books, most learners had drawings of well-known singers that seemed to resonate with how they enjoyed learning through singing and drawing.

The participants' responses indicated that creating inclusive learning required flexibility for learners to overcome barriers to learning. There was an interconnection between the participants' findings and the lesson observations regarding how they successfully created inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to comprehending the concepts they were teaching. For instance, participants stated that they created inclusive learning by acting on the lesson's ideas, which involved singing or playing and using concrete objects that created fun for learners experiencing barriers to learning. While learners experiencing barriers to learning witnessed and followed the demonstrations, the concept of the lesson was easily understood. These findings are congruent with the study of [Kilinc et al. \(2017\)](#), who asserted that including learning and playing in lessons aimed at unpacking the components of traditional ways of teaching and promoting an inclusive space ensured that all learners had the opportunity to learn and participate in lessons and were valued for their diverse abilities. The successful implementation of inclusive learning requires various instructional approaches that promote engagement in learning through play activities, which break barriers to learning and create a sense of belonging ([Hankebo, 2018](#)). Similarly, [Adom et al. \(2019\)](#) asserted that teachers must actively involve learners experiencing barriers to learning in flexible teaching and learning activities, such as outdoor activities, to develop their potential.

How involved learners were in the lessons was observed when there were excellent interactions between the teachers and learners, whereby words were recited through singing. The participants also discussed their strategies for creating inclusive learning, whereby they constructed objects such as legos, pictures, and charts to explain to learners the lesson concept. In line with the findings of implementing inclusive learning using construct objects, [Kilinc et al. \(2017\)](#) posited that using toys and concrete objects to convey the lesson concept to learners experiencing barriers to learning made them feel a part of the lesson, as it allowed them to connect fully and understand the idea of the lesson without difficulty. The participants also mentioned that they used texture for learners experiencing barriers to learning to understand the lesson's content.

Furthermore, the participants mentioned that when creating inclusive learning, they ensured they were flexible and related to real-life situations, in line with the content they delivered. This is consistent with the findings of [McKenzie \(2021\)](#). This scholar asserted that teachers should provide teaching methods or presentations that can be modified to meet various learning needs. [Hankebo \(2018\)](#) added that adapting a curriculum for learners experiencing barriers to learning from its theoretical form to an actual activity using approaches such as role-play, songs, and look and say placed learners at the center of the curriculum delivery and enhanced their cognitive levels. Furthermore, [Kilinc et al. \(2017\)](#) suggested that when learners experiencing barriers to learning involved in role-play, they performed meaning-making by expanding the context of their role-play and connecting it to their own experiences by participating in various ways.

The findings revealed that involving learners experiencing barriers to learning in outdoor activities brought hope and positivity and that teachers were satisfied. These findings indicate that when learning through play was practiced, teachers were confident that they had imparted the lesson's content, given how learners comprehended it. Furthermore, these learners understood the

concept as they could provide feedback to teachers, which was exciting. These findings corroborate those of Hankebo (2018), who found that different subject teachers could explain their understanding through outdoor play activities and objects to make their lessons understandable to learners experiencing barriers to learning. Similarly, behavioral control seemed to be the component to predict most significantly behavioral intention and accepted behaviour in the context of outdoor activities found in this study, as displayed by the participants' attitudes. Thus, it is the best predictor of the intention toward involving learners experiencing barriers to learning in a lesson.

The findings further revealed that when learners experienced barriers to learning practiced in the way the teachers demonstrated, they understood the content. In addition, there was considerable contentment on their faces. This was evident from the participants' responses during the observations: when the learners understood the lesson's content, signs of pleasure were seen on their faces. These findings corroborate those of Brennan et al. (2021), who found that when learners experiencing barriers to learning chose the content they enjoyed, they engaged in classroom activities and displayed an understanding of the content, creating an inclusive learning environment. Spratt and Florian (2015) concurred with this study's finding that inclusive pedagogy is an action that provides evidence of inclusive learning, as it begins with planning that responds to learners' outcomes by avoiding the marginalization of some learners in the classroom community.

The researcher suggests that future research should be conducted to develop a conceptual model to assist educators in teaching learners experiencing barriers to learning. Furthermore, future research should focus on using learners' mother tongue and local culture to enhance teaching and learning. Lastly, the study recommends that future studies gather more strategies to support learners experiencing barriers to learning during teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study's findings suggest that educators create strategies best suited for learners experiencing barriers to learning during teaching and learning. This is done to prevent these learners from being left behind. The findings revealed that learners learned better in a flexible environment through play and demonstrations. The study findings also showed that using visual objects and other tangible items assists teachers in influencing the lesson content for learners experiencing barriers to learning, thus allowing them to comprehend and grasp the lesson. Furthermore, the strategies used by educators were seen as bringing joy to learners experiencing barriers to learning, contributing to inclusive learning. Moreover, the study findings revealed that positive attitudes from educators facilitated the creation of strategies for inclusive learning for learners experiencing barriers to learning; hence, they were able to prepare lessons according to the abilities of these learners. Finally, the least expected of the study findings was that using learners' mother tongue assisted learners experiencing barriers to learning to understand lessons easily.

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