

Employing inclusive teaching strategies in rural mainstream primary schools: A single case study of the Sekhukhune South District

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Abstract: Despite worldwide policy commitments, the implementation of inclusive education continues to pose challenges in many developing countries, particularly in rural schools, where structural, systemic, and contextual obstacles are prevalent. This paper investigates how teachers utilise inclusive teaching strategies in selected primary schools within the Sekhukhune South District of Limpopo, South Africa. The study is underpinned by Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Theory. An interpretivist paradigm and qualitative research approach were employed to acquire an in-depth understanding of the teachers' experiences and the realities of their classrooms. A single case study research design was utilised, involving eight purposively selected teachers from four primary schools across two circuits. Data were generated through lesson observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, and were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that primary school teachers employ a variety of inclusive teaching strategies, including differentiated instruction, cooperative learning and peer support, multimodal and contextualised teaching,

as well as parental involvement. Nevertheless, teachers also encounter structural and systemic challenges, such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching and learning resources, and curriculum rigidity. The study is limited to the experiences of eight teachers from four rural mainstream primary schools in the Sekhukhune South District; thus, the findings are context-specific and not statistically generalisable. Recommendations include providing inclusive teachers with school-based coaching on Differentiated Instruction, establishing and strengthening Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), offering regular classroom-based mentoring, modelling inclusive teaching lessons, supporting School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) in addressing learner challenges, and providing ongoing feedback to teachers.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, inclusive education, inclusive teaching strategies, rural schools, learner diversity, teacher experiences.

1. Introduction

Developing inclusive teaching strategies is crucial for the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools. Inclusive education represents an educational reform central to global education discussions, aimed at ensuring that all learners receive equal access to and meaningful participation in quality education, irrespective of their background, abilities, circumstances, or economic status. International frameworks, such as the Salamanca Statement of Principles (UNESCO, 2020), underscore the necessity for mainstream education systems to accommodate diverse learners and eradicate barriers to meaningful participation. In South Africa, inclusive education constitutes a vital element of post-apartheid educational transformation, reflecting the country's constitutional commitment to equity, social justice, and human rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

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The adoption of Education White Paper 6 in South Africa marked a significant milestone in addressing historical educational imbalances by developing an inclusive education and training system for schools (Department of Education, 2001). This policy aims to transform mainstream schools to accommodate learners with diverse learning needs within mainstream classrooms. However, despite these policy commitments, the practical implementation of inclusive education continues to pose substantial challenges for teachers (Sepadi & Themane, 2023), particularly in rural and under-resourced schools.

Research has demonstrated that teachers play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of inclusive education, as they are tasked with translating inclusive policy ideals into practical classroom practices (Toyin & Cina, 2019; Mpu & Adu, 2021). For instance, Toyin and Cina (2019) contend that teachers are expected to utilise inclusive teaching strategies that cater to diverse learners and ensure meaningful participation for all. Moreover, Mpu and Adu (2021) argue that teacher collaboration enhances inclusive teaching outcomes. However, Mpu and Adu (2021) also reported that many teachers encounter difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction due to systemic, structural, and contextual challenges, such as inadequate teaching and learning resources, overcrowded classrooms, limited training and knowledge of inclusion, and insufficient institutional support for inclusion.

While studies conducted by Mpu and Adu (2021), Sepadi and Themane (2023), Engelbrecht, Nel, and Tlale (2023a), Makoelle (2014), and Mngo and Mngo (2018) have documented the challenges associated with implementing inclusive education and identified a range of inclusive teaching strategies utilised in South African schools, less attention has been devoted to how teachers enact, adapt, and sustain these strategies within the interacting structural constraints of resource-constrained rural classrooms. Existing research has described inclusive practices and the challenges that impede them; however, it has seldom examined how overcrowding, limited teaching resources, curriculum demands, and institutional support collectively reshape teachers' pedagogical decision-making in everyday practice. This study addresses these gaps through an in-depth single case study of teachers' experiences in the Sekhukhune South District. The study elucidates how teachers exercise professional agency to navigate contextual constraints while employing inclusive teaching. To achieve this, our primary research question is: *How do teachers employ inclusive teaching strategies in their classrooms in the selected primary schools in Sekhukhune South District?*

The subsequent sections of this paper will review the literature, provide context for this study, discuss the methodology employed, align the study with the pertinent theoretical framework, and present the findings generated by the study in relation to the literature and theory guiding this research.

1.1 Literature review

This section reviews the relevant literature to provide a theoretical and empirical basis for understanding the employment of inclusive teaching strategies in rural mainstream primary schools in the Sekhukhune South District.

1.1.1 Inclusive education and global education reform

Globally, inclusive education is advancing through comprehensive, multi-level reforms aimed at transforming education systems to accommodate learner diversity. International frameworks, such as Sustainable Development Goal 4, have positioned inclusive, equitable, quality education as a global priority, prompting countries to align national policies with inclusion agendas (UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). These efforts extend beyond merely expanding access to education; they focus on ensuring learner participation, retention, and meaningful learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2024). Across various contexts, education systems are being restructured through curriculum transformation, differentiated teaching approaches, and inclusive assessment practices that address

the diverse needs of learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2019; Ainscow, 2020). Significant emphasis has been placed on strengthening teacher capacity through professional development in inclusive teaching; however, disparities persist in the provision of such training, particularly in developing countries (UNESCO, 2020). The integration of assistive technologies and digital tools has further expanded opportunities for learners with disabilities to access education, especially in the wake of increased digitalisation of learning environments (UNESCO, 2023). Moreover, targeted programmes have been implemented globally to support marginalised groups, including learners living in poverty, refugees, and linguistic minorities, as part of broader, equity-driven reforms (UNICEF, 2021). These global efforts are reinforced through partnerships among governments, international organisations, and communities, reflecting a shared commitment to the principle of “leaving no one behind” (United Nations, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Despite this progress, persistent inequalities continue to hinder the full realisation of inclusive education, particularly in under-resourced contexts, underscoring the need for context-specific strategies to bridge the gap between policy and practice (Ainscow, 2020).

Studies conducted across diverse educational contexts consistently affirm the transformative potential of inclusive education in enhancing both academic and social outcomes for learners. For instance, Zabeli et al. (2020) emphasise that inclusive education fosters improved academic achievement and promotes a sense of belonging among learners by creating participatory and supportive classroom environments. Their work highlights how inclusive practices enable learners with diverse needs to engage meaningfully in learning activities, thereby reducing exclusion and marginalisation. Similarly, Bota (2023) argues that inclusive education strengthens social cohesion by encouraging interaction among learners from different backgrounds and abilities, thus promoting empathy, mutual respect, and collaborative learning. In the South African context, Malahlela and Johnson (2024) demonstrate that inclusive education enhances access to quality education for historically marginalised learners, particularly in under-resourced schools, by advocating for differentiated teaching strategies and flexible assessment practices that accommodate diverse learning needs. Furthermore, Korkie, Mphahlele, and Khoza (2025) extend this argument by illustrating that inclusive education creates opportunities for equitable participation and long-term educational success, especially when supported by collaborative teaching practices and institutional support systems. Additionally, Walton and Engelbrecht (2024) argue that the successful implementation of inclusive education necessitates changes in policies, practical teaching practices, school cultures, policy ethos, and support systems. Collectively, these studies underscore that inclusive education is a teaching approach that significantly contributes to improved learning outcomes, social integration, and expanded opportunities for learners who have historically been excluded from mainstream education.

1.1.2 Differentiated instruction and inclusive teaching strategies

Effective implementation of inclusive education necessitates the intentional application of inclusive teaching strategies that are responsive to learner diversity. Inclusive teaching strategies, as defined in this article, pertain to classroom practices that are deliberately designed to accommodate learners with varying abilities, backgrounds, and learning needs within mainstream classrooms (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2019). These strategies are supportive techniques that represent a fundamental shift from uniform teaching approaches to flexible, learner-centred methodologies that promote equitable access and meaningful participation.

Differentiated instruction remains one of the most widely recognised approaches to inclusive teaching. As noted by Ayaya, Makoelle, and Van der Merwe (2020), differentiated instruction entails the systematic adaptation of content, teaching processes, and assessment practices to correspond with learners’ readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Studies have evidenced how this approach is operationalised within classroom contexts (Makoelle, 2014; Smets & Struyven, 2020). For

instance, research conducted in South African primary schools reveals that teachers differentiate by grouping learners according to ability levels, modifying tasks, and providing scaffolded support to those who encounter barriers to learning (Makoelle, 2014). These practices were found to enhance learner engagement and improve comprehension, particularly among learners who struggle with standardised teaching methodologies. Similarly, international studies indicate that differentiated instruction facilitates improved academic outcomes by enabling learners to engage with content at an appropriate level of difficulty, thereby reducing frustration and disengagement (Tomlinson, 2014; Smets & Struyven, 2020).

Cooperative learning has been widely recognised as an effective inclusive teaching strategy. Gillies (2021) defines cooperative learning as a structured pedagogical approach in which learners collaborate to achieve shared learning objectives. Empirical evidence indicates that, when implemented effectively, cooperative learning promotes peer support, social interaction, and cognitive development. Studies conducted in inclusive classrooms reveal that learners who engage in cooperative group activities exhibit improved problem-solving skills, increased academic achievement, and enhanced social relationships (Gillies, 2021). Within the South African context, cooperative learning is particularly valuable in overcrowded classrooms, where educators employ peer-assisted strategies to manage diversity and provide additional support to learners in need (Mngo & Mngo, 2018). However, the effectiveness of cooperative learning is contingent upon careful structuring by the educator, as poorly organised group work may inadvertently reinforce inequalities rather than mitigate them.

Multimodal teaching approaches further extend inclusive practice by incorporating diverse forms of representation, such as visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic methods, to accommodate a variety of learning styles. Empirical research suggests that the utilisation of multimodal strategies, including visual aids, storytelling, songs, and practical demonstrations, enhances learner comprehension and retention, particularly in linguistically diverse classrooms (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2019). In rural contexts, educators often rely on such approaches to compensate for limited resources, employing locally available materials and culturally relevant methods to support learning. These practices not only improve access to content but also enhance learner participation by engaging multiple senses and learning styles.

Flexible assessment strategies are also crucial in inclusive education. Educators adapt assessment methods to enable learners to demonstrate their understanding in various ways (Kurth, Miller & Toews, 2020). Research has shown that strategies such as oral assessments, project-based tasks, and extended time allocations facilitate more effective participation by learners with diverse needs in assessment processes (Kurth et al., 2020). Furthermore, these approaches have been found to reduce assessment-related anxiety and provide a more accurate representation of learners' abilities, particularly for those experiencing learning difficulties.

Despite the demonstrated benefits of inclusive teaching strategies, their effectiveness is significantly shaped by contextual factors. Studies across both developed and developing contexts indicate that large class sizes, limited access to teaching materials, and insufficient professional development constrain teachers' ability to implement differentiated and inclusive practices effectively (Toyin & Cina, 2019; Engelbrecht et al., 2023b). In many instances, teachers are required to balance curriculum demands with the need to accommodate diverse learners, resulting in partial or inconsistent implementation of inclusive strategies.

Overall, empirical evidence suggests that inclusive teaching strategies, such as differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, multimodal teaching, and flexible assessment, can significantly enhance learner participation, engagement, and academic outcomes (Toyin & Cina, 2019). However, the effectiveness of these strategies is not uniform and is heavily influenced by contextual factors such as class size, resource availability, language diversity, and the level of teacher training (Kurth

et al., 2020). Furthermore, it can be argued that in many rural and under-resourced contexts, these constraints limit the extent to which inclusive strategies can be effectively implemented, thereby highlighting the persistent gap between inclusive education policy and classroom practice. Consequently, while inclusive teaching strategies offer a powerful means of addressing learner diversity, their successful implementation necessitates teaching competence, systemic support, and enabling conditions.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Tomlinson's (2014) theory of Differentiated Instruction (DI), which provides a robust pedagogical framework for understanding how educators can effectively respond to diverse learners within inclusive classrooms. Differentiated instruction is premised on the recognition that learners differ in their readiness levels, interests, learning profiles, and socio-cultural backgrounds, which necessitates the deliberate adaptation of inclusive teaching practices to ensure equitable access to learning (UNESCO, 2023).

According to Tomlinson (2014), effective differentiation involves the modification of four key elements of instruction: content, process, product, and the learning environment. Content refers to what the learners are taught, process pertains to how learners engage with the material, product denotes how learners demonstrate their understanding, and the learning environment describes the conditions under which learning occurs. These elements are not adjusted arbitrarily but are guided by continuous assessment of learners' needs and responsiveness to classroom diversity.

Within the context of inclusive education, DI offers a shift away from one-size-fits-all teaching approaches towards responsive teaching that accommodates variability among learners (Tomlinson, 2014). Rather than viewing learner differences as barriers, DI conceptualises diversity as a resource that can enrich teaching and learning processes (Tomlinson, 2014). This perspective aligns with contemporary inclusive education discourse, which emphasises participation, access, and equity (Majoko & Dudu, 2023).

Importantly, Tomlinson (2014) posits that DI highlights the role of the teacher as an instructional decision-maker who must continuously adapt inclusive teaching strategies to respond to the varying needs of learners. This requires pedagogical content knowledge, reflective practice, and the ability to create flexible learning pathways. However, Nketsia (2020), Ndlovu (2022), and Motitswe (2025) contend that the successful implementation of DI depends on enabling conditions such as manageable class sizes, access to resources, and adequate teacher professional development. In resource-constrained rural contexts, such as Sekhukhune South District, the application of DI becomes particularly complex. While the theory assumes flexibility and responsiveness, structural and contextual constraints may limit educators' ability to differentiate effectively. Therefore, in this study, DI is examined as an inclusive teaching strategy and as a site of tension between policy ideals and real classroom challenges.

2.1 Context of the study

This study was conducted in rural primary schools within the Sekhukhune South District, located in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The district grapples with socio-economic challenges, including high levels of poverty and unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and unequal access to educational resources (Engelbrecht, Nel, & Tlale, 2023b), all of which significantly impact teaching and learning practices. Schools in this region frequently contend with overcrowded classrooms and a lack of sufficient teaching materials (Sepadi & Themane, 2023). In this context, the implementation of inclusive education, as mandated by the Department of Basic Education through Education White Paper 6, presents additional challenges for teachers who are required to support learners with diverse learning needs in under-resourced and overcrowded classrooms (Ndlovu, 2022). Furthermore, the linguistic diversity of learners and limited parental involvement further complicate

teachers' efforts (Sepadi & Themane, 2023). This study aims to examine how these contextual factors influence teachers' utilisation of inclusive teaching strategies and the challenges they encounter while doing so in rural classroom environments.

3. Methodology

This study is grounded in the interpretivist research paradigm. According to Flick (2018), interpretivism emphasises understanding human experiences and social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved. Nickerson (2022) states that within this paradigm, reality is socially constructed and knowledge is generated through interaction between the researcher and participants. The interpretivist paradigm was deemed appropriate for this study because the research aimed to understand teachers' experiences of implementing inclusive education. Understanding these experiences necessitated direct engagement with teachers and exploration of how they interpret and respond to inclusive education policies within their classroom contexts.

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to investigate teachers' experiences of implementing inclusive teaching strategies in rural mainstream primary schools in the Sekhukhune South District. A single case study was deemed suitable as it facilitated an in-depth investigation of a bounded case within its real-life context, enabling the researchers to examine the complexity of inclusive teaching as shaped by contextual, organisational, and systemic factors (Denzin, Lincoln, Giardina & Cannella, 2023). Consistent with Yin (2018), the case encompassed the implementation of inclusive teaching within the selected rural primary school context, while the participating teachers served as embedded units of analysis that provided multiple perspectives on the phenomenon.

A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore teachers' experiences in depth. Silverman (2020) and Sheppard (2021) contend that the qualitative research approach is particularly suitable for studies aiming to understand social processes, human behaviour, and the lived experiences of participants. This approach enabled the researchers to generate rich and detailed data regarding the teachers' inclusive teaching strategies, the challenges they encounter, and the support systems in place for inclusion.

3.1 Participants

Purposive sampling was utilised to identify participants who possessed direct experience in implementing inclusive teaching practices within rural mainstream primary schools. This non-probability sampling strategy was deemed appropriate as it facilitated the selection of information-rich participants capable of providing comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The study comprised eight teachers from four mainstream primary schools situated within the Hlogotlou and Glen Cowie circuits of the Sekhukhune South District, Limpopo Province. The four schools were purposively selected due to their status as rural mainstream primary institutions catering to diverse learner populations and their accessibility to the researcher. Within each school, two teachers were chosen based on predetermined inclusion criteria. Participants were required to: (i) be permanently employed Foundation, Intermediate, or Senior Phase teachers; (ii) have a minimum of three years' teaching experience; (iii) have regular responsibility for teaching classes comprising learners with diverse learning needs; and (iv) be willing to participate voluntarily in the study. The experience of teaching diverse learners was determined through consultation with the school principal, who identified teachers actively engaged in employing inclusive teaching practices within their classrooms. Furthermore, the selection of teachers from different grade phases enabled the study to capture a broader range of experiences and inclusive teaching strategies across the primary school curriculum. The purposive selection of participants ensured that the data were generated from teachers with relevant knowledge and practical experience, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of the findings. Information on the participants is presented in the table below.

Table 1: Profile of the schools and participants

Schools	Inclusive teachers (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age Category	Years of teaching experience	Number of learners in class	Language of teaching and learning	Grade
School A	Pebetsi	Female	25 – 30	5	50	Sepedi	1
	Mahlako	Female	30 – 35	7	52	Sepedi	3
School B	Hlabirwa	Male	35 – 40	7	64	English	7
	Ngwato	Male	50 – 55	26	62	English and home languages (MTbBE)	4
School C	Phogole	Male	50 – 55	25	66	English	6
	Modipadi	Female	30 – 35	6	60	English	5
School D	Mogotladi	Female	35 – 40	11	64	English	6
	Shatadi	Female	25 – 30	4	62	English	5

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected through three main methods: lesson observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions.

3.2.1 Lesson observations

Lesson observations enabled the researcher to directly observe inclusive teaching practices and provided valuable insights into how educators adapted their teaching strategies to accommodate diverse learners (Creswell & Poth, 2023). An observation schedule was utilised in this study, as it guided the identification of key aspects necessary to fulfil the study's objectives. The observed aspects included teaching and learning resources, the integration of inclusive strategies within subject content, challenges associated with the implementation of inclusive teaching methodologies, as well as the factors that both hindered and facilitated inclusion, alongside the observed benefits. During the lesson observations, notes were taken when necessary, which aided in documenting and analysing the findings. The lesson observations were conducted over a period of two weeks, with each observation lasting between one to two hours daily.

3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives in detail. This method provided flexibility for participants to express their views while enabling the researcher to probe for additional information (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). The interview schedule guided the interviews, with questions including, 'What inclusive teaching strategies have you implemented to support diverse learners in your classroom?' and 'What challenges have you experienced while employing inclusive teaching strategies?' Participating teachers received the interview schedule well in advance of the interviews, which gave them the opportunity to clarify any potential areas of uncertainty. English was used as the medium of communication. The interviews lasted between 25 and 45 minutes.

3.2.3 Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions facilitated interaction among teachers and allowed participants to collectively reflect on their experiences of inclusive education (Brinkmann, 2018). The focus group discussion was conducted last. The interview schedule guided the interviews, with questions including, "How does your school, district, or department of education support teachers in implementing inclusive teaching?" and "Do you collaborate with other teachers or parents to support inclusion? If so, how?" The focus group discussion lasted one and a half hours, allowing participants to express themselves in detail and depth.

These data collection methods enabled the researchers to gather rich and detailed information about teachers' inclusive classroom practices and experiences. Data collection took place over a month during the second school term. In the first two weeks, observations were conducted, and in the last two weeks, interviews were conducted. Carrying out the research during the school term allowed the researchers to observe normal classroom practices while minimising disruption to school activities.

3.3 Data analysis

Data were analysed qualitatively. Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the collected data. This thematic analysis followed the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022), which were (i) acquainting ourselves with the collected data, involving immersion in the data to gain both a broad overview and an understanding of the nuances and details. We read and re-read the transcripts and field notes, ensuring deep engagement with the data before coding began; (ii) generating codes, which involved examining the transcripts line by line and assigning initial codes that described what was happening in the data; (iii) developing themes, which involved clustering related codes into candidate themes, visualising connections through mind maps, tables, and other representations, and refining themes by merging, splitting, and discarding them; (iv) reviewing themes, which involved conducting an internal validity check to ensure that the themes aligned with the coded extracts. Subsequently, we conducted an external coherence check to assess whether the themes supported the entire dataset. Some themes were redefined during this phase; (v) defining and naming themes, which involved writing a detailed analysis of each theme, explaining its scope and significance, and ensuring that the themes told a compelling story about the data; and (vi) reporting, which involved communicating our analysis in a scholarly and transparent manner, presenting our discussion of the themes along with vivid data extracts, and contextualising findings in light of existing literature and the theory chosen to underpin the study.

3.4 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was enhanced by applying the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation, which involved semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, thereby enabling corroboration of findings across multiple data sources. Transferability was enhanced by providing a rich description of the rural school context, participant profiles, and research procedures, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was supported through a systematic and transparent research process, including the maintenance of an audit trail that documented methodological decisions and the application of a consistent thematic analysis procedure. Confirmability was promoted through reflexive discussions among co-authors throughout the analytical process and the use of verbatim participant quotations to ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' subjective experiences.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval and permission were obtained from the Department of Basic Education and the Institutional Ethics Review Committee, reference number 2024/10/12/000000222/05/RB. Participants received an informed consent letter outlining the expectations associated with their research participation, including the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and data usage. They were also informed of their voluntary participation and their right to decline or withdraw from the study at any time without incurring any penalties. Written consent was obtained, and pseudonyms were employed to ensure the confidentiality of participants' identities.

4. Presentation of Findings

The following themes are theory-led (Tomlinson's DI): Employment of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in practice, cooperative learning and peer support, multimodal and contextual teaching approaches, and the use of parental involvement as a teaching strategy.

4.1 Employment of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in practice

The findings indicate that participants possess a practice-oriented understanding of inclusion, operationalised through adaptive teaching strategies aligned with the principles of differentiated instruction. Rather than applying differentiation as a formally theorised construct, teachers enacted it as a responsive practice rooted in the context of their learners' immediate needs. This suggests that differentiated instruction within this context represents an emergent teaching response to learner diversity.

Participants consistently emphasised the necessity to modify teaching methods, learning materials, and assessment practices to accommodate varying learner abilities. For instance, Shatadi highlighted the utilisation of varied teaching modalities: *"Inclusive education influences me to use different methods during my lessons, such as visual aids, simplified text, and group work."* This response reflects the differentiation of content and process, where visual scaffolds and simplified materials are used to enhance accessibility, while group work facilitates collaborative learning and peer support. Such practices resonate with core principles of differentiated instruction, particularly the adaptation of teaching approaches to address learner diversity.

Similarly, Modipadi's explanation focuses on the linguistic dimension of differentiation, explaining how language is strategically used as a teaching resource: *"I use multilingualism in my teaching. For example, learners who are doing Sepedi, when is mathematics, sometimes some learners don't understand English, so I use their mother tongue to translate in order for them to understand. And by doing so, they will show much improvement in their work."* This practice demonstrates contextually responsive differentiation, where teachers leverage learners' linguistic repertoires to mediate understanding. It also reflects an implied recognition of language as a potential barrier to learning and highlights the teacher's role in mitigating this barrier through adaptive teaching.

In addition to adapting content and language, participants reported modifying assessment practices to accommodate diverse learning needs. Ngwato explained: *"I give my learners different assessments to check whether they have understood what I have taught."* This suggests an awareness of the need for flexible assessment strategies that allow learners to demonstrate understanding in different ways. Similarly, Hlabirwa noted: *"I'm able to adapt various teaching styles and methods, and then I'm also able to set different assessments to cater the learners that have challenges. And then also the policy amendments have supported us to cater for those learners who have special needs."* This response reflects a more comprehensive application of differentiation, encompassing content, process, and product, while also indicating the influence of policy frameworks in shaping inclusive practices. However, it is important to note that while the policy guidance is supportive, it may also inhibit teachers' creativity in the utilisation of teaching methodologies.

The responses from these participants indicate that teachers are actively employing differentiated instruction by adapting teaching methods, materials, language, and assessment. However, these practices appear to be largely intuitive and experience-driven, rather than systematically structured. This form of contextualised differentiation underscores both teachers' agency and the constraints within which they operate. While teachers demonstrate flexibility in inclusive teaching, the absence of formal training and structured support may limit the depth and consistency of differentiation practices.

Teachers have also reported challenges in implementing inclusive teaching strategies. Hlabirwa highlighted the lack of teaching and learning resources necessary for effective inclusion.: *"Challenges that I come across are a lack of teaching resources. So, because sometimes not all our classes have a smartboard or projectors and it disturbs the teaching and learning process."* Meanwhile, Shatadi explained the tension between policy intention and differentiation: *"CAPS provides opportunities by emphasising life skills, social justice and core competencies. However, the content-heavy structure, standardised assessments and a one-size-fits-all approach limits its inclusivity, disadvantaging learners with diverse needs."* These responses demonstrate how the lack of resources and curriculum rigidity limit the differentiation efforts. We do acknowledge that South African rural schools in which the schools are placed do have technological deficiencies; however, there are other learner-centred teaching strategies, as will be discussed in 6.2, that could be used to enhance curriculum implementation.

4.2 Cooperative learning and peer support

Cooperative learning and peer-assisted support emerged as a prominent and consistently employed inclusive teaching strategy across the participating classrooms. The findings indicate that teachers deliberately structured both learner-learner interactions and teacher-teacher collaboration as mechanisms for mediating learning, thereby operationalising inclusion through collective engagement. In this context, cooperative learning functioned as a comprehensive, inclusive teaching strategy grounded in shared responsibility for learning.

At the classroom level, participants reported utilising grouping strategies to facilitate peer support, which enabled learners with varying abilities to collaborate effectively. Ngwato's assertions demonstrate a differentiated grouping approach that allows for targeted teacher intervention: *"I put my learners into groups... there is a group of those who can work on their own... then I pay special focus to those who are struggling... I must assist them."* This practice reflects a strategic use of cooperative learning, in which independent groups of more advanced learners create a teaching space for the teacher to provide scaffolded support to those experiencing difficulties. However, the grouping acknowledges the teacher as the more experienced other but peers could also lend such assistance as Vygotsky (1978) acknowledges. Such an approach aligns with principles of inclusive education, seeking to balance collective learning with targeted intervention.

Similarly, Shatadi emphasised the social and affective dimensions of cooperative learning: *"I employ group work to encourage cooperation and mutual support. I group learners ensuring that I mix strengths and abilities. This helps learners to interact and build confidence... it promotes inclusion and communication among my learners."* This response demonstrates a better response to scaffolding than Ngwato's response. Hence, cooperative learning extends beyond academic support to include the development of learner confidence, social integration and a sense of belonging. The deliberate mixing of learners' abilities reflects an understanding of inclusion as a relational process that requires learners to learn with and from one another. Pebetsi further reinforced the value of peer interaction in smaller, more intimate groupings: *"Another thing that has worked for me is pairing the kids... grouping the kids in smaller groups and pairing them. That way they're able to share their own experience."* This practice stresses the role of dialogue and shared experience in knowledge construction, suggesting that peer-assisted learning facilitates cognitive development and the validation of learners' voices and experiences within the classroom.

The findings also reveal that cooperative learning is supported and strengthened through teacher collaboration, which, in turn, indirectly shapes classroom practice. Mahlako's views exemplify how professional collaboration enhances effective inclusive teaching: *"We share everything; we share our experiences; we share our strategies... only to find out that it works for my learners as well."* This collegial exchange of strategies contributes to the refinement and adaptation of inclusive teaching practices, including peer learning approaches. It is also reminiscent of the Ubuntu perspective of 'I am because we are'. It demonstrates that inclusive education is co-constructed not only among learners but also

among teachers, highlighting the interconnected and collegial nature of support systems within the school environment.

These findings indicate that cooperative learning and peer support operate as multi-layered, inclusive strategies that integrate both classroom-level learner interactions and broader professional collaboration among educators. Through mixed-ability grouping, peer assistance, and shared learning experiences, educators can establish participatory learning environments that cater to diverse learner needs while fostering social cohesion. Nonetheless, it is also evident that inclusive teaching practices are significantly influenced by contextual constraints, necessitating that educators exercise professional judgement and adaptability in their implementation. In summary, cooperative learning in this context epitomises a practical, contextually responsive approach to inclusive teaching, enabling educators to manage diversity in overcrowded, resource-constrained classrooms while promoting academic engagement and social inclusion.

Participants reported overcrowded classrooms as a challenge to implementing inclusion. Ngwato's views capture the extent of this challenge: *"Another challenge is overcrowding. Our school has a lot of learners in a class. You find out in a classroom we have about plus or minus 60 learners. Having such a big number, one is unable to pay individual attention to all learners."* This challenge, as Ngwato explains, constrains their efforts in making cooperative learning meaningful and engaging for all learners. Although, it must be noted that group work has been found to manage large class sizes (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024).

4.3 Multimodal and contextual teaching approaches

The findings reveal that teachers employ multimodal and contextually responsive teaching approaches to accommodate learner diversity within inclusive classrooms. These approaches are characterised by the integration of multiple modes of teaching, including visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and experiential methods, to enhance accessibility and participation. In practice, this reflects a refined use of inclusive teaching, where teachers move beyond a single teaching approach to create varied learning pathways that respond to different learning abilities, preferences, and linguistic backgrounds.

Participants indicated that the use of multimodal strategies was informed by ongoing reflection on learner responsiveness and performance. Mahlako, for example, demonstrated a data-informed approach to instructional adaptation: *"Currently the learners that I have in my class, they learn best in visual. They learn best in visual and I stick more on that one because whenever I evaluate the process or the strategies that I use, um I get positive results at the end."* This response suggests that teachers are engaging in ongoing decision-making, where the employment of inclusive teaching strategies is shaped by observed learning outcomes. The emphasis on visual modalities reflects both an awareness of learners' needs and a practical adaptation to maximise comprehension and performance.

Similarly, Hlabirwa highlighted the diversification of teaching materials to address varied learning styles: *"I also diversify the teaching and learning material to cater for those learners that learn by maybe visual or audio and so forth."* This indicates an understanding of inclusion as requiring variation in teaching methods and the provision of diverse representational formats to access the content. Such inclusive practices align with the principles of differentiated instruction, particularly the adaptation of the learning process to ensure that learners can engage with content in ways that are meaningful to them. Hlabirwa also includes audio devices to improve learning, which could have been better emphasised through videos, which she does not mention.

The views of Phogole further illustrate the breadth of multimodal strategies employed, extending into the use of technology and play-based learning: *"Sometimes I use teaching aids that are visuals, others are auditory... We do have smart boards where learners will be viewing videos. Other learners learn through*

play, you know that children learn most when they are playing." This response reflects a nuanced approach to pedagogy that integrates digital tools, sensory engagement, and experiential learning. The incorporation of play-based teaching strategies is particularly significant in primary school contexts, as it facilitates active participation and supports the development of both cognitive and social skills. Game-based learning has been shown to enhance cognitive abilities (Meeran, 2022).

These reported multimodal approaches are critical in multilingual classroom contexts, where language barriers can impede understanding. By supplementing verbal instruction with visual, auditory, and experiential supports, educators can mitigate linguistic constraints and improve learner comprehension and performance. This suggests that multimodal teaching serves not only as a strategy for accommodating diverse learning styles but also as a mechanism for addressing structural barriers to learning, such as language diversity. Collectively, the findings indicate that educators are employing contextualised multimodal teaching methods as a fundamental component of inclusive education. Furthermore, these practices are characterised by flexibility, responsiveness, and a commitment to learner participation. However, similar to other inclusive strategies identified in the study, the implementation of multimodal approaches is largely influenced by contextual realities, including the availability of resources such as teaching aids and technological tools. Therefore, multimodal and contextual teaching approaches represent a critical dimension of inclusive teaching practice in this context, enabling educators to broaden access to the curriculum while fostering active and meaningful participation among diverse learners.

4.4 The use of parental involvement as a teaching strategy

The findings indicate that participants conceptualise inclusive teaching as extending beyond the physical confines of the classroom, incorporating home-school collaboration as a critical component in supporting diverse learners. In this context, parental involvement is regarded as an essential inclusive teaching strategy through which learning is supported, differentiated, and sustained within the home environment. This broadened perspective on inclusion reflects an ecological understanding of learning, wherein multiple contexts contribute to learners' educational experiences.

Participants articulated intentional efforts to engage parents in the learning process through structured communication and shared responsibility for learner development. For instance, Mogotladi exemplified the use of digital platforms to facilitate continuous engagement: *"In case I have given them an activity, I have created a WhatsApp group for my learners and their parents to be able to share the activities that I have provided, to make it easier for the learners also to know what their activity was about. I also get to have one on one dialogue with the parents"* This practice demonstrates how teachers leverage accessible technologies to bridge the gap between school and home, ensuring that learners receive consistent support. Furthermore, it reflects an adaptive response to contextual constraints, where digital communication becomes a practical tool for sustaining inclusive teaching practices beyond the classroom. Hence, the flipped classroom approach is emphasised here as learners continue their learning at home through the medium of WhatsApp.

Similarly, Modipadi emphasised the collaborative role of parents in reinforcing foundational skills: *"I involve parents and tell them, can you please check your learner's work, teach them how to read at home, and at the school, I will do the same. We also collaborate on ideas to best help the child"* This response underscores a collective educational responsibility, wherein instruction is distributed between school and home environments. By actively engaging parents in monitoring and supporting learners' progress, teachers can provide differentiated support, particularly for those learners who require additional assistance.

These practices demonstrate that parental involvement serves as a mechanism for extended differentiation, whereby learning opportunities are adapted and sustained across various contexts. In resource-constrained schools, where individualised support within the classroom may be limited

due to large class sizes, parental involvement offers an additional layer of support that enhances learner engagement and development. Furthermore, such collaboration fosters continuity in learning, ensuring that teaching strategies employed at school are reinforced at home. Additionally, by extending educational support into the home environment, teachers enhance the inclusivity of their practices and establish more sustained and supportive learning conditions for diverse learners. This is in accordance with inclusive education principles that emphasise the role of families as active partners in the learning process.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide a refined and contextually grounded understanding of the implementation of inclusive teaching in rural classrooms. The results are interpreted through the lens of Tomlinson's (2014) theory of Differentiated Instruction (DI). The findings indicate that teachers are employing differentiation strategies that are meaningful for inclusive classrooms; however, they are structurally constrained. Tomlinson (2014) conceptualises DI as a systematic modification of content, process, product, and learning environment in response to learner diversity. The data from this study demonstrate that while teachers endeavour to implement these principles, their practices are primarily adaptive and shaped by the contextual realities they encounter. In the context of rural South African schools, Walton and Engelbrecht (2024) argue that the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa is path-dependent and influenced by contextual conditions, including resource inequalities, institutional capacity, and historical systemic constraints. They further argue that teachers' classroom practices are inseparable from the contextual realities in which they operate, with overcrowding, inadequate resources, and limited support significantly shaping the enactment of inclusive teaching approaches. Consequently, the findings suggest that differentiated instruction in rural mainstream schools should not be viewed as the systematic application of pedagogical principles but as a contextually negotiated practice through which teachers exercise professional agency to respond to learner diversity despite considerable structural constraints.

An emerging understanding from the findings is that teachers are actively employing differentiated instruction, particularly by adapting content and process. This is evident in participants' perspectives on modifying teaching methods, simplifying content, and utilising multilingual approaches to enhance comprehension. For instance, Shatadi articulated that inclusive education necessitates the use of diverse teaching methods during her lessons, such as visual aids, simplified text, and group work, while Modipadi emphasised the use of learners' home language to support understanding. These practices reflect Tomlinson's (2014) emphasis on aligning instruction with learners' readiness levels and learning profiles. Similarly, Ngwato's use of varied assessments to ascertain learners' understanding and Hlabirwa's adaptation of teaching styles and assessments exemplify attempts to differentiate both process and product. These findings resonate with Makoele and van der Merwe (2020), who contend that teachers in inclusive classrooms engage in contextualised differentiation. However, as Nketsia (2020) also suggests, the lack of formal training limits the systematic application of these strategies, resulting in disproportionate implementation.

The role of cooperative learning and peer support further reinforces the application of differentiation (DI) principles, particularly concerning process differentiation and flexible grouping. Participants such as Ngwato described the practice of grouping learners according to ability, which allows more independent learners to work autonomously while providing targeted support to those experiencing challenges. Although this approach reflects differentiation through flexible grouping, it remains teacher-centred, as the teacher retains responsibility for scaffolding learning rather than leveraging higher-performing learners as collaborative partners. This contrasts with social constructivist perspectives, which position peer interaction as a critical mechanism for learning through collaboration and shared meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, Hattie (2023) argues that

learning is enhanced when learners explain concepts to one another, provide feedback, and engage in reciprocal teaching, thereby making learning visible through dialogue and peer interaction. In contrast, participants such as Shatadi emphasised that grouping learners by mixed abilities promotes interaction and confidence, while Pebetsi noted that pairing learners enables them to share their own experiences and learn collaboratively. These practices align with Tomlinson's (2014) assertion that flexible grouping is essential for effective differentiation, enabling multiple entry points to learning. Evidently, supported by observations, Shatadi's approach to flexible grouping proved more effective and signified the principles of inclusion. The findings thus reveal variation in how teachers operationalise flexible grouping, ranging from teacher-directed ability grouping to genuinely collaborative peer-supported learning. Mahlako's notion of teacher collaboration, wherein they share experiences and strategies, further illustrates how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) support the refinement of inclusive teaching strategies. These findings resonate with the work of Gillies (2021) and Kurth, Miller, and Toews (2020), who demonstrate that cooperative and peer-assisted learning enhances academic outcomes and fosters social cohesion. In this study, cooperative learning also emerges as a practical response to contextual challenges, such as large class sizes, enabling teachers to manage diversity despite limited capacity for individualised instruction. Furthermore, Tomlinson (2014) argues that large class sizes can be effectively managed through the judicious use of group work, thereby creating a conducive learning environment for learner collaboration and development.

The utilisation of multimodal and contextual teaching approaches signifies a substantial dimension of differentiated instruction identified in the study. Educators exhibited an awareness of diverse learning needs by integrating visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic strategies into their pedagogical practices. For example, Mahlako articulated that her learners thrive on visual representations, leading her to prioritise visual strategies, while Hlabirwa highlighted the importance of diversifying teaching materials to cater to different learning styles. Similarly, Phogole's incorporation of visual aids, videos, and play-based learning exemplifies the integration of various modalities. These practices are consistent with Tomlinson's (2014) principle of varying instructional processes to enhance accessibility and engagement. Additionally, Brühwiler and Vogt (2020) endorse this approach, indicating that adaptive teaching fosters learner engagement and achievement. However, as Hlabirwa noted, the absence of technological resources, such as projectors and smartboards, limits the implementation of multimodal strategies. This finding bears implications for educational equity. UNESCO (2023) asserts that equitable education necessitates that learners have fair access to the resources and learning opportunities essential for meaningful participation in teaching and learning. Consequently, learners in well-resourced schools are more likely to benefit from digitally enriched and multimodal teaching approaches than their counterparts in under-resourced rural schools, thus perpetuating inequalities in learning opportunities and educational outcomes. The findings, therefore, suggest that the effectiveness of differentiated instruction is contingent not only upon teachers' pedagogical expertise but also upon the equitable provision of teaching resources that enable all learners to access high-quality learning experiences.

Participants articulated that parental involvement extends the scope of differentiated instruction beyond the classroom and reflects an ecological understanding of inclusive education. Mogotladi described utilising a WhatsApp group to communicate activities to both learners and parents, while Modipadi stressed the importance of encouraging parents to support reading at home. These practices align with Tomlinson's (2014) assertion that understanding learners' contexts is vital for effective differentiation. They also resonate with Magumise and Sefotho (2020), who underscore the significance of home-school collaboration in supporting learners with diverse needs. Moreover, in resource-constrained schools, such strategies serve as critical extensions of classroom practice, facilitating continuity of learning and reinforcing differentiated support.

The findings further indicate that differentiated instruction should not be perceived solely as the adaptation of content, process, and product. Rather, effective differentiation equally relies on the creation of an inclusive learning environment where learners experience a sense of belonging, participation, and emotional safety. In rural classrooms, however, the capacity to establish such environments is fundamentally constrained by overcrowding, limited resources, and insufficient institutional support. This finding extends Tomlinson's (2014) framework by illustrating how the learning environment is mediated by broader structural conditions.

These findings demonstrate that differentiated instruction in this context is implemented as a contextually mediated and adaptive practice. Teachers showed agency and commitment by employing strategies such as peer learning, multimodal teaching, and parental involvement; however, these efforts are constrained by systemic challenges. The study, therefore, extends Tomlinson's (2014) theory by illustrating how differentiated instruction is implemented under conditions of constraint, where it becomes flexible, improvisational, and influenced by context. The integration of participant voices emphasises their lived realities of inclusive teaching, revealing the tension between teaching ideals and structural conditions. The findings suggest that for differentiated instruction to be implemented effectively, there is a need for systemic interventions, including targeted professional development, improved resource allocation, and more flexible curriculum frameworks. Without such support, differentiation will remain uneven, relying on individual teacher initiative rather than being entrenched as a sustained and systemic practice.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted with eight teachers from four rural mainstream primary schools within the Sekhukhune South District of Limpopo Province. Although the purposive sample generated rich, contextually grounded insights into teachers' experiences of employing inclusive teaching strategies, the findings are context-specific and are intended to be analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable. Second, the study primarily relied on teachers' self-reported experiences, supported by classroom observations. While methodological triangulation strengthened the credibility of the findings, the teachers' views may not have fully captured the perspectives of other stakeholders involved in inclusive education. Third, although participants were multilingual, data collection was conducted in English. Therefore, while participants were proficient in English and able to articulate their experiences, the use of English may have limited the richness of some responses.

Future research could extend this work by examining the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies across multiple districts or provinces to explore how contextual factors shape teachers' adaptive practices in different educational settings. Studies that incorporate the perspectives of learners, parents, principals, School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs), and District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) would provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education as a systemic process. Longitudinal research is also recommended to investigate how teachers' inclusive practices evolve over time and to evaluate the effectiveness of the inclusive teaching strategies in diverse mainstream school contexts.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore teachers' experiences of employing inclusive teaching strategies in rural primary schools in the Sekhukhune South District. The findings indicate that, although inclusive education is firmly embedded in policy, its implementation in rural classrooms is significantly constrained by ongoing structural and systemic challenges. Drawing on Tomlinson's differentiated instruction framework, the results further demonstrate that teachers actively attempt to adapt content, processes, and assessments to accommodate learner diversity; however, these efforts are severely hampered by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, insufficient professional

development, lack of support from district and school management, and curriculum rigidity. Despite these constraints, the study highlights notable teacher agency and resilience, as participants employed strategies such as peer-assisted learning, multilingual explanations, multimodal teaching, and parental involvement to support diverse learners. Nevertheless, these practices remain largely individualised. The study recommends that strengthening inclusive teaching in rural mainstream primary schools necessitates context-specific interventions that directly respond to teachers' everyday realities. Firstly, professional development should progress beyond policy awareness workshops towards sustained, school-based coaching on differentiated instruction. Such programmes should equip teachers with practical strategies for differentiating content, learning processes, and assessments within overcrowded classrooms, while demonstrating how peer-assisted learning, flexible grouping, multilingual scaffolding, and low-cost resource improvisation can be integrated into daily teaching. Furthermore, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) involving neighbouring schools should be strengthened to enable teachers to share inclusive teaching strategies, collaboratively address classroom challenges, and enhance collaborative professionalism.

Secondly, district support should be more structured and responsive. DBSTs should implement regular classroom-based mentoring, model inclusive teaching lessons, assist SBSTs in addressing learner challenges, and provide ongoing feedback to teachers. Given the resource constraints identified in this study, priority should be given to supplying high-leverage resources that support inclusive teaching in large classes, including curriculum-aligned differentiated learning materials, multilingual visual resources, manipulatives for mathematics and literacy, and low-cost digital technologies that facilitate collaborative and multimodal learning. Finally, greater flexibility should be incorporated into curriculum implementation to allow teachers to adapt pacing, assessment, and teaching strategies to learner diversity without compromising curriculum requirements.

8. Declarations

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