

TEACHER'S CAPACITY TO SUPPORT NEURODIVERSE LEARNERS IN RURAL SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS: SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract

The implementation of inclusive education in South African rural schools is shown to be lacking, despite transformative policies in place. Numerous studies have shown how teachers cannot support neurodiverse learners' educational needs. Additionally, literature revealed rural school-based teachers to be rarely equipped with instructional accommodation strategies tailored to advance the learning of neurodiverse learners. This study investigated teachers' capacity to support neurodiverse learners in rural South African schools. It is underpinned by the social constructivist research paradigm and employs transformative learning theory as its theoretical framework. A phenomenological qualitative research approach was adopted. Data were collected through focus group interviews involving 36 purposively selected teachers across six schools. The data were thematically analysed and interpreted using Braun and Clarke's method. Lack of specialised training and comprehensive knowledge on neurodiversity among rural school-based teachers has been identified in the study as a major challenge standing in the way of not only supporting neurodiverse learners, but also screening, identifying, and assessing learners for potential neurodivergent. The study recommended that teachers in rural school settings be provided with specialised training on neurodiversity, secondly, that actionable measures be taken in actualising the SIAS policy protocols to create procedures for neurodivergent trait screening and evaluation. Lastly, that instructional accommodation strategies be contextualised to neurodivergent learners in the rural setting.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, neurodiversity, teacher capacity, rural schools, instructional accommodation.*

1. Introduction

Inclusive education remains a central focus in South Africa's post-apartheid reforms. Policies such as the Education White Paper 6 and the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy emphasise integrating learning with barriers to learning into mainstream learning environments (Department of Education, 2001; Department of Basic Education, 2014). However, translating these policies into practice remains inconsistent, especially in rural schools where infrastructural and professional hurdles persist (Pillay & Tlale, 2024; Ntseto et al., 2024). Neurodiverse learners whose cognitive skills differ from those of others, often face exclusion in mainstream classrooms due to teachers lacking adequate knowledge and preparation in attending to neurodiverse learners' needs in rural school settings (Nthontho & Naidoo, 2025). These challenges are compounded by shortages of specialist support, limited professional development opportunities and resource limitations that impede effective policy implementation (Maharaj & Chauke, 2025; Wills, 2023).

This study presents a qualitative analysis of rural teachers' capacity to support their neurodiverse learners and shows essential intervention areas to enhance their inclusive practices. By highlighting teachers' perspectives, the research sheds light on their lived experiences as they implement inclusive education amid systemic inequalities.

2. Inclusive education and neurodiversity in rural contexts

Inclusive education in South Africa is guided by progressive policies such as Education White Paper 6 and the SISA framework. Both of which emphasise the integration of learners with barriers to learning into mainstream schooling (Department of Education, 2001). However, literature consistently reveals that translating these policies into practice remains uneven, particularly in rural schools where structural inequalities persist (Pillay & Tlale, 2024; Ntseto, Kgothule, Ugwuanyi and Okeke (2024).

Scholars highlight that teacher preparation programmes provide only generic inclusion modules, leaving educators with limited diagnostic literacy, and inadequate knowledge of neurodiversity conditions such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorder and dyslexia (Nthontho & Naidoo, 2025). This lack of specialised training contributes to misidentification of learning difficulties and reliance on behavioural explanations (Neurodiversity Centre, 2025). Research further highlights systemic challenges in policy implementation, noting that SIAS procedures are frequently perceived as bureaucratic, with weak district-level support undermining timely interventions (Iturralde, 2024; Ntseto et al., 2024). In addition, studies emphasise the impact of contextual constraints, including overcrowded classrooms, scarce assistive technologies, and insufficient resources which hinder effective instructional accommodations (Maharaj & Chauke (2025). Collectively, the literature calls for context-sensitive interventions that combine professional development, clear policy accountability and sustained resource provision to strengthen inclusive practice in rural education (Nthontho & Naidoo, 2025; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025).

3. Conceptual and theoretical framing

This study adopts a social constructivist paradigm, recognising that teachers' comprehension of neurodiversity develops through social interaction, professional discourse and other contextual factors (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996). Instead of simply transmitting knowledge of inclusive practices, teachers construct it themselves. Their interpretations of neurodiversity are fluid and change over time through dialogue, reflection and exposure to different learners' learning needs (Schunk, 2012; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). With transformative learning theory as the guiding framework, their focus is on critical reflection and changing perspectives (Mezirow, 2002; Cranton, 2023). To support neurodiverse learners effectively, teachers must question deficit based beliefs and reform their teaching methods (Florian, 2015; Slee & Tomlinson, 2018). This approach helps shift teachers from just complying with inclusive policies to providing thoughtful and learner-centred support (Walton, 2025). This framework is especially relevant in rural areas, where teachers often depend on improvisation and peer support due to limited access to specialists (Maharaj & Chauke, 2025; Ntseto et al., 2024).

4. Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research approach to examine teachers' lived experiences in supporting neurodiverse learners (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thirty-six teachers from six rural mainstream schools were purposefully selected to capture a range of overviews from different grades, levels and subjects. For the purpose of promoting shared reflection and collective understanding, focus group interviews were employed (Krueger, 2014). In this exercise, both personal frustrations and collaborative strategies were shared, highlighting the communal aspect of rural teaching (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis was used to analyse data, which assisted in systematically identifying common patterns and interpreting teachers' narratives more deeply (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Ethical approval was secured, and throughout the study, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were upheld (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The study is approved under the ethical number (N W U - 0 0 1 9 0 - 19 - A 2).

5. Findings and discussion

Three themes rose from the data, each highlighting the limitations, both the constraints and adaptive approaches of rural teachers.

5.1. Limited knowledge and specialised training on neurodiversity

Participants consistently noted they were inadequately prepared to support neurodiverse learners. Most teachers felt that their pre-service training did not sufficiently cover neurodiversity, leaving them ill-equipped to respond to meet varied learning needs.

One participant stated: "As teachers, we have not been shown or taught how to screen neurodiverse learners. If there were training sessions on how to do this, it would be much easier. But what are we to do if not trained?"

Another teacher explained:

"A lot of these learners would learn like all the other learners if they behaved in class, especially those who can't read or write. I don't know how to classify which one has ADHD or dyslexia, I mean, I even think the real problem with these learners is behaviour misconduct, since they exhibit much of such behaviour. They often seem disinterested, which makes it very difficult to keep them engaged".

These responses highlight a gap in teachers' diagnostic literacy. The habit of blaming behavioural problems for learning difficulties indicates limited familiarity with the neurodiversity model. Teachers' dependence on guessing what the real problem is stems from a lack of formal training in identifying early signs of conditions like as ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, or dyslexia.

Literature affirms that teachers often lack diagnostic literacy and specialised training in neurodiversity, leaving them reliant on behavioural interpretations rather than evidence-based identification (Nthonto & Naidoo, 2025). Studies, including that of the Neurodiversity Centre (2025), highlight the need for pre-service and in-service programmes that explicitly address ADHD, autism and dyslexia, supporting the findings that current preparation remains insufficient.

These accounts from an interpretive perspective emphasise the emotional strain on teachers who feel ineffective in their professional roles. The frustration caused by misidentifying learners' needs highlights the urgent need to include neurodiversity modules in teacher education curricula.

5.2. Challenges in screening, identification, and SIAS implementation

While participants knew about the SIAS policy, they faced notable challenges in executing its procedures. Teachers found the process to be as complicated and felt there was inadequate support from the district level.

A participant noted: "Yes, I am well aware of the SIAS policy document, however, I am not clear about a lot of things, e.g. I don't know what processes to follow when reporting the learner who exhibits signs of barriers to learning."

Another teacher added: "We have been poorly supported by the district in this matter, especially in rural areas. We have a lot of cases that have not been attended to, although proper paperwork has been done."

These accounts highlight a gap between policy and practice. Teachers view SIAS as bureaucratic rather than supportive, with delays in referrals hampering prompt intervention. The absence of district-level responsiveness fuels ongoing frustration: teachers follow policy requirements but notice not much progress for learners.

Research by Iturralde (2024) concurs that policy frameworks like SIAS frequently falter in practice due to bureaucratic complexity and weak district-level support. Ntseto et al. (2024) and Pillay and Tlale (2024) note that rural schools face systematic accountability gaps, with delays in referrals undermining timely intervention. This aligns with findings that teachers experience frustrations when policy promises fail to translate into action.

Interpretively, this reflects a systemic accountability failure. Teachers indicate that although SIAS is conceptually strong, it performs poorly in rural areas. The lack of feedback mechanisms diminishes teachers' trust in the system and leads them to depend on informal, improvised methods.

5.3. Contextual constraints and instructional accommodation practices

Participants highlighted large class sizes, limited resources, and insufficient assistive devices as key obstacles to implementing instructional accommodations. Nonetheless, some teachers showed flexible approaches.

One teacher explained: "We have a lot of learners in classrooms which makes it difficult for us to attend to each learner's learning needs as we should. Even those whom we are mandated by the Department of Education to support after following the SIAS process, we are not able to because there is a lack of technological devices in our school."

Another participant reflected: "We then depend on the use of peer support among our learners to get the lesson moving. We then also repeat lessons, by also bringing the lesson to the lowest level so that all learners get to understand simple concepts in lesson. It is not easy; in fact, it is rather frustrating without proper support or individual diagnosis of these learners."

These responses show both resilience and frustration. Teachers use methods like peer support, differentiated pacing, and task simplification, but these are often improvised rather than systematically organised. While this improvisation highlights their creativity, it also exposes their vulnerability, as they are unsure about how effective their interventions are.

Existing literature concurs that large class sizes, limited resources, and inadequate assistive technologies hinder effective instructional accommodations in rural contexts (Wills, 2023; Wassermann, 2024). A Study conducted by Maharaj and Chauke (2025) emphasise that while teachers demonstrate resilience through peer support and differentiated strategies, these improvisations remain fragile without systematic investment. This supports the finding that structural inequalities exacerbate inclusion challenges in resource-constrained schools.

Interpretively, this theme highlights the structural inequities in rural education. Large classes and limited resources worsen inclusion difficulties, turning accommodation into a survival issue rather than a

creative process. While teachers' improvisation shows their agency, without systematic support, these efforts are fragile and difficult to sustain.

6. Recommendations

The findings highlight that enhancing teacher capacity requires a comprehensive approach combining professional development, policy enforcement, resource support, and transformative education. Training programmes should be customised to cover neurodiversity, inclusive assessment, and instructional accommodation, especially in rural areas.

This training must go beyond generic inclusion models to address specific conditions and practical classroom strategies, enabling teachers to meet diverse learner needs effectively. On the policy front, clear guidelines and district accountability are vital to ensure SIAS protocols are implemented and translated into timely, meaningful support for students.

Equally, providing resources, such as assistive devices, classroom aides, and reduced learner-teacher ratios, is essential for effective accommodations. Lastly, embedding transformative learning within professional development encourages reflective practice that challenges deficit-focused beliefs and promotes learner-centred pedagogies, thus fostering sustainable, inclusive education.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that teachers in rural South African schools face major obstacles in supporting neurodiverse students, despite the presence of progressive inclusive education policies. Challenges such as limited training, weak policy enforcement, and local contextual factors hinder effective support. To overcome these issues, targeted professional development, improved policy implementation, and the adaption instructional strategies to local contexts are essential. Improving teachers' skills is key to promoting inclusive education and providing equitable learning opportunities for neurodiverse learners in rural areas. Ultimately, rural teachers' voices remind us that inclusive education is more than just a policy goal, it is a real, ongoing challenge. Their resilience, creativity, and dedication highlight both the opportunities and the urgent need for systematic change.

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