

P O L I C Y B R I E F

DANE ISAACS; TLOU MILLICENT RAMOROKA; NARNIA BOHLER-MULLER; PRECIOUS TIRIVANHU;
NONCEDO MAPHOSHO; MOKHANTSO MAKOAIE

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Effectively responding to persistent barriers impacting on the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa's schools for learners with special educational needs

Key messages

- The Department of Basic Education (DBE) should prioritise the successful implementation of School-Based Support Team (SBST) policies and host policy dialogues to ensure continuous training of teachers with regards to inclusive education for learners with special educational needs (SEN).
- The DBE should develop short- and medium-term monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track progress on inclusive education goals and ensure accountability of key stakeholders for inclusive education implementation, such as the District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs).
- The DBE, in collaboration with the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DWYPD), Department of Social Development (DSD), disability advocacy groups, organisations, experts, and academics should host policy dialogues to improve the involvement and support of parents/caregivers/guardians in inclusive education for learners with SEN.
- The DBE should develop a policy that regulates equitable resource allocation to schools for learners with SEN in South Africa.
- The DBE should develop a regulatory framework to ensure the timely admission of learners with SEN into special needs schools.

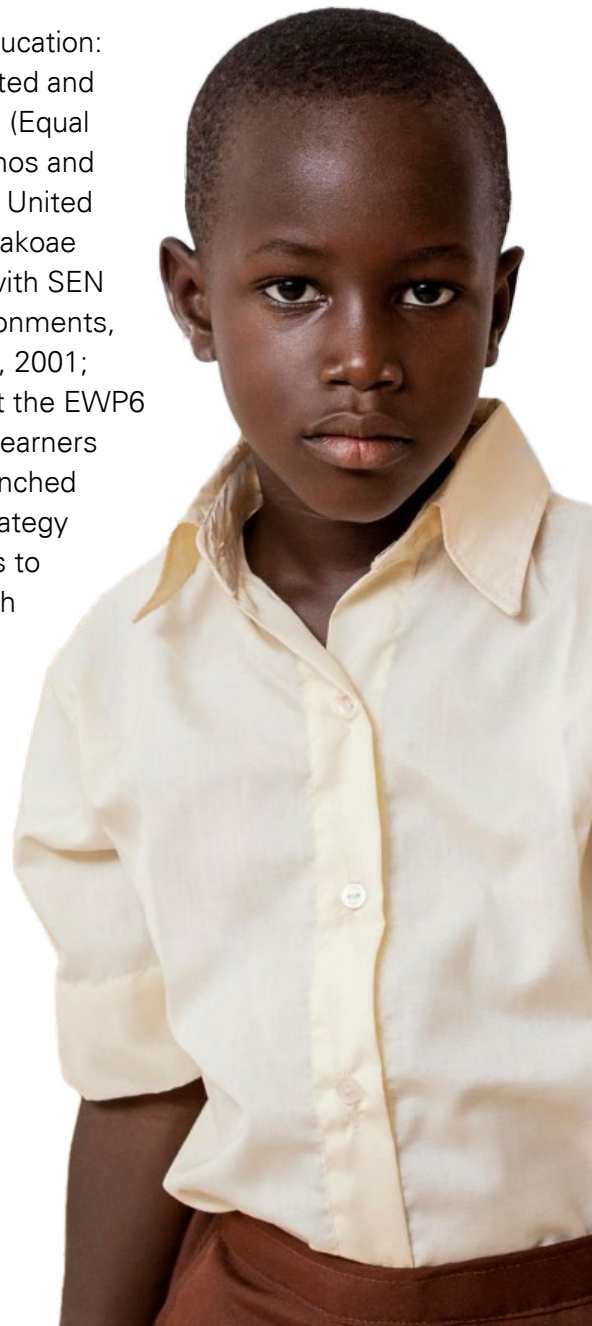
Background and policy context

Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasises the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, n.d.)¹. Inclusive education has attracted global attention in recent years (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022) and has also been prioritised in South Africa. During the apartheid era, a small percentage of learners with disabilities had access to special needs education and support (Department of Education (DE), 2001). This percentage consisted largely of White learners with disabilities who had access to higher quality educational support and resources (DE, 2001; Veriava et al., 2016). The curriculum and education system of that time did not adequately address the diverse needs of the wider population of learners, which resulted in massive dropouts and failures (DE, 2001). The post-apartheid government transformed this unequal and oppressive system of education by admitting learners with diverse needs and from diverse racial backgrounds through inclusive education (DE, 2001).

In 2001, The Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) (Special Needs Education: Building an inclusive education and training system) was formulated and acts as a policy framework for inclusive education in South Africa (Equal Education Law Centre, n.d.). The EWP6 corresponds with the ethos and principles of inclusive education as contained in Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Makoae et al., 2023). It provides for the education of children and youth with SEN through the building of enabling, supportive and accessible environments, provision of learning methodologies, and training of teachers (DE, 2001; McKenzie et al., 2018). Until 2013, a key limitation lodged against the EWP6 was its inability to provide a strategy for identifying and profiling learners with learning barriers (Makoae et al., 2023). In 2014, the DBE launched the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) strategy as a mandatory and legislative process for provincial departments to follow when addressing and identifying the needs of learners with learning barriers (Makoae et al., 2023; McKenzie et al., 2018).

Despite the positive developments in policy for inclusive education in South Africa, the implementation of the EWP6 and SIAS strategies continue to be weakened and challenged by persistent barriers. These barriers have been found to result in learners with SEN typically enduring poor education and not receiving adequate support in South Africa's schools.

The aim of this policy brief is to outline and discuss these persistent barriers impacting on the implementation of inclusive education for learners with SEN and provide recommendations towards the effective implementation of this type of education in urban, as well as rural, schools in South Africa.



1. SGD Country report (2023) indicates mixed results for SGD 4 in South Africa (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2023). For example, participation rate and the quality of ECD programmes accessed by younger children, aged 0-4 years, remains a concern (Stats SA, 2023). However, learners living with disabilities who attend an educational institution, increased from 87,8% in 2015 to 88,4% in 2021 (Stats SA, 2023).

The research evidence

A recent HSRC study (conducted between 2022 and 2023), alongside previous studies, have assessed the implementation of EWP6 in selected South African schools for more than a decade. These studies have either specifically focused on the implementation of inclusive education for learners with SEN or examined this form of education more broadly, with particular implications for learners with SEN. While some of these studies have shown improvement in the implementation of EWP6 over the years with regards to teacher support (Matela, 2007), increased implementation of the SIAS strategy, and access to financial resources (Makoae et al., 2023), several of these studies have brought to light persistent barriers to the effective implementation of inclusive education for learners with SEN within South African schools. These barriers include:

- (1) the inadequate training of teachers
- (2) the lack of professional and non-professional support
- (3) the lack of parent/caregiver/guardian involvement and support
- (4) inadequate resources.

Inadequate training of teachers

The EWP6 identifies teachers as important actors in the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa (DE, 2001). It emphasises the training and development of teachers in inclusive education – both on a school and district level (DE, 2001). Yet, studies have consistently outlined the lack of, or incorrect, implementation of inclusive education by teachers due to inadequate training. Teachers were typically described as unqualified and under-qualified, possessing inadequate skills, and lacking specialised knowledge to adequately respond to learning barriers (Agulhas, 2021; Jali, 2014; Lebona, 2013; Makoae et al., 2023; Matela, 2007; Mpu & Adu, 2021; Nel et al., 2016). As a result of inadequate training in special education, Mpu and Adu (2021) found that learners with disabilities endured poor education and experienced feelings of neglect and dissatisfaction.

Lack of professional and non-professional support

The EWP6 prioritises professional support for teachers to effectively address the educational needs of learners (DE, 2001). This professional support is made up of two support teams, namely, (1) District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) and (2) School-Based Support Teams (DE, 2001). The focus of DBSTs is to evaluate programmes, diagnose their effectiveness, suggest modifications, and build capacity within the school-setting with regards to adequately responding to and accommodating learners with severe disabilities and learners with other learning needs (DE, 2001). The function of SBSTs is to co-ordinate teacher-learner support services (DE, 2001). DBSTs are mandated to provide SBSTs with expansive education support services, which include professional development in curriculum and assessment (DE, 2001). However, studies have cited the inadequate resources and support SBSTs commonly receive from DBSTs (Agulhas, 2021; Jali, 2014; Lebona, 2013; Maphumulo, 2019; Mpu & Adu, 2021). In her study, Agulhas (2021) highlighted the heavy demands on SBSTs and the failure of DBSTs to provide support – specifically specialist support from social workers and educational psychologists. Likewise, Lebona (2013) found that DBSTs in his study did not monitor progress nor provide support to SBSTs or to referred learners. While Makoae and colleagues (2023) also highlighted some challenges with DBSTs, they further highlighted the lack of non-professional support personnel available to teachers to provide adequate care to learners who require intensive support. This was due to inadequate budget allocations (Makoae et al., 2023).

Instead, teachers in full-service schools were required to provide support to learners with severe disabilities in big classes without the specialised and necessary support (Makoae et al., 2023). Even in smaller classes, teachers had reported struggling to cope with the high-level demands of learners with severe intellectual disabilities (Makoae et al., 2023).

Lack of parent/caregiver/guardian involvement and support

Similarly, to teachers, the EWP6 also highlights the role of parents in inclusive education (DE, 2001). This role includes providing support for learners with disabilities or chronic illnesses and being actively involved in the planning and implementation of inclusive education activities (DE, 2001). However, studies have consistently outlined the lack of parent/guardian/caregiver involvement and support as a barrier for inclusive education (Adewumi & Mositoa, 2019; Jacobs & Govender, 2020; Landbrook, 2009; Matela, 2007; Nel et al., 2016). In these studies, parents of learners with SEN were described as lacking knowledge about inclusive education, being abusive, dismissive, in denial, not accountable or responsible for the learning needs of learners with SEN, which included seeking specialised support (from psychologists, speech therapists and occupational therapists) (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Landbrook, 2009). The stigma associated with special schools was also found to inhibit parents from exploring suitable pathways of support for learners with disabilities (Makoae et al., 2023). Such action was found to typically result in delays in assessments allowing learners access to inclusive education (Makoae et al., 2023). It was also found to result in learners with disabilities dropping out of school (Makoae et al., 2023).

Inadequate resources

Furthermore, despite the EWP6 prioritising the provision of resources (i.e., both material and human resources) in the implementation of inclusive education, studies have identified inadequate resources as another barrier (Agulhas, 2021; Jali, 2014; Lebona, 2013; Mpu & Adu, 2021; Zungu, 2014). These studies, for example, described school buildings as not being accommodative to learners with physical disabilities (Makoae et al., 2023; Mpu & Adu, 2021). In the HSRC study, teachers reported a shortage of special schools for learners with moderate to profound learning disabilities (Makoae et al., 2023). Due to long waiting lists of admissions into special needs schools, learners with disabilities were forced to attend full-service schools – not receiving adequate support (Makoae et al., 2023). Studies also reported a shortage of learner–teacher–support material, which included specialised projectors, assistive devices, and educational resources, such as textbooks, and computer laboratories (Lebona, 2013; Makoae et al., 2023; Mpu & Adu, 2021). The inaccessibility of supportive resources for learners with disabilities was also apparent during the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Kamga, 2020). In his study investigating the impact of the pandemic in the implementation of inclusive education, Kamga (2020) found that the online platform, study materials, and other numerous resources were in an inaccessible format to learners with disabilities (Kamga, 2020).

Recommendations

Based on research findings, the following policy actions are recommended:

- Institutions of higher learning in South Africa have begun addressing the skills gap of teachers by developing courses and qualifications in special needs education. DBE should prioritise the successful implementation of SBST policies to address the incorrect implementation of inclusive education among teachers. DBE should further host policy dialogues to ensure the continuous training of teachers in inclusive education for learners with SEN.
- The DBE should develop short-and medium-term monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track the progress on inclusive education goals and ensure the accountability of key stakeholders for inclusive education implementation, such as DBSTs. Provincial education administrations in collaboration with DBSTs should report to the national government on a regular basis.
- The SIAS policy does provide clear directives in terms of the roles and responsibilities of parents /caregivers in inclusive education. DBE should collaborate with DWYPD, DSD, disability advocacy groups, organisations, experts, and academics to further host policy dialogues with parents/guardians/caregivers to improve their involvement and support in the implementation of inclusive education for learners with SEN. These dialogues should particularly be aimed at addressing issues of stigma, cultural stereotypes, and advance attitudes that are supportive of inclusive education for learners with SEN.
- The DBE should develop a policy that regulates equitable resource allocation to schools. Teachers require specialised, non-professional support and material resources to effectively deliver on the demands of the curriculum and adequately support learners with SEN in the classroom.
- The DBE should strongly address the implications of long waiting lists (Makoae et al., 2023), particularly for learners with SEN gaining access to special needs schooling early into their schooling career. Accordingly, it is recommended that the DBE develop a regulatory framework to ensure the timely admission of learners with SEN into special needs schools.

Conclusion

Realising social equity and guaranteeing that every learner has the chance to reach their full potential in education depends on the successful implementation of inclusive education in South Africa. A complex strategy involving more funding, infrastructure development, training educators, improving parent/guardian/caregiver involvement and support, and effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks are needed to overcome the enduring obstacles. It is also important to improve the quality of education and support learners with SEN receive in the South African schooling system.

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Authors

Dane Isaacs, PhD; Senior Research Specialist, Human Sciences Research Council

Tlou Millicent Ramoroka, D.Admin; Professor of Development Planning and Management, University of Limpopo

Narnia Bohler-Muller, LLD; Divisional Executive, Human Sciences Research Council and Research Associate at the Centre for Gender and African Studies, University of the Free State

Precious Tirivanhu, PhD; Senior Research Specialist, Human Sciences Research Council

Noncedo Maphosho, MA; PhD Research Trainee, Human Sciences Research Council

Mokhantso Makoe, PhD; Research Director, Human Sciences Research Council

Enquiries to: Dr Dane Isaacs: DHIsaacs@hsrc.ac.za

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