



Systemic and Socio-Cultural Barriers to Learner Support in Delareyville Mainstream Primary Schools

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ABSTRAK

Pendidikan inklusif di sekolah dasar reguler di Afrika Selatan didukung oleh kerangka kebijakan yang luas, namun ketersediaan kebijakan tidak serta-merta diterjemahkan menjadi dukungan peserta didik yang tepat waktu dan efektif. Artikel ini mengkaji hambatan sistemik dan sosio-kultural yang memengaruhi dukungan peserta didik di dua sekolah dasar reguler di Delareyville, provinsi North West. Artikel ini menggunakan data kualitatif dari disertasi magister. Wawancara semi-terstruktur dilakukan dengan empat guru, empat anggota Tim Dukungan Berbasis Sekolah dan dua anggota Tim Dukungan Berbasis Distrik, sementara dokumen sekolah yang relevan juga ditelaah. Analisis tematik menghasilkan tiga sub-tema: penundaan birokrasi dan administratif, asal-usul eksternal hambatan belajar, serta penyangkalan dan penolakan orang tua. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa keterlambatan dalam rujukan dan persetujuan dapat membatasi respons di tingkat sekolah, sementara hambatan yang berasal dari konteks keluarga dan komunitas mungkin tetap sulit untuk diatasi oleh sekolah. Keengganan orang tua untuk mengakui hambatan belajar dapat semakin mempersulit proses asesmen, rujukan, dan penempatan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa dukungan peserta didik yang efektif memerlukan keselarasan yang lebih erat antara prosedur kebijakan dan praktik di tingkat sekolah, dukungan distrik yang responsif, dan pelibatan keluarga secara hormat. Artikel ini menyumbangkan bukti spesifik konteks tentang kesenjangan kebijakan-praktik dalam pendidikan inklusif di lingkungan pedesaan Afrika Selatan.

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education in South African mainstream primary schools is supported by an extensive policy framework, yet the availability of policy does not necessarily translate into timely and effective learner support. This article examines systemic and socio-cultural barriers that affected learner support in two mainstream primary schools in Delareyville, North West province. The article draws on qualitative data from a master's dissertation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teachers, four School-Based Support Team members and two District-Based Support Team members, while relevant school documents were also examined. Thematic analysis generated three sub-themes: bureaucratic and administrative delays, external origins of learning barriers, and parental denial and resistance. The findings indicate that delays in referrals and approvals can restrict school-level responses, while barriers originating in family and community contexts may remain difficult for schools to address. Parental reluctance to acknowledge learning barriers can further complicate assessment, referral and placement processes. The findings suggest that effective learner support requires closer alignment between policy procedures and school-level practice, responsive district support, and respectful engagement with families. The article contributes context-specific evidence on the policy-practice gap in inclusive education in a rural South African setting.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education in South Africa is grounded in the principle that learners should participate in education without being excluded because of disability or other barriers to learning. Education White Paper 6 established a framework for transforming the education system towards inclusion (Department of Basic Education, 2001), while the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy provides procedures for identifying learner support needs and mobilising appropriate assistance (Department of Basic Education, 2014). The existence of these policy instruments, however, does not by itself guarantee that support will reach learners when it is required. Recent South African research continues to document a gap between policy expectations and what teachers and support structures can accomplish in everyday school settings. This gap is increasingly important because delayed or inadequate support may affect learners' participation, engagement, progression and opportunities to experience meaningful inclusion. Understanding the conditions that interrupt the movement from identifying a learner's needs to providing appropriate support is therefore an important concern for inclusive education research and practice.

That gap is particularly important when learner support is understood as a system rather than as an activity located only within the classroom. Teachers may identify a learner's learning barrier, but a subsequent response can depend on the functioning of the School-Based Support Team (SBST), the District-Based Support Team (DBST), specialist services, administrative processes and family participation. Maree et al. (2023) found that teachers experienced challenges implementing SIAS partly because of administrative demands and inadequate preparation. Their study demonstrates that policy implementation can become an additional workload when teachers are not adequately supported to translate policy requirements into classroom practice. Nseibo et al. (2022) similarly show that teacher preparation for disability inclusion is affected by structural conditions, including time pressures, large classes and limited access to assistive technology.

Evidence from mainstream primary schools also indicates that contextual constraints can restrict inclusion even where teachers are willing to support learners. Hove and Phasha (2023) reported that overcrowding, time constraints and limited parental involvement affected the inclusion of learners with learning disabilities in the Vaal Triangle. Their findings are relevant to the present study because they show how barriers located beyond the immediate teacher-learner

relationship can shape what becomes possible in the classroom. More recent work on SBSTs reinforces this point. Hadebe et al. (2025) found that delayed district responses, resource shortages and sociocultural barriers affected the capacity of SBSTs to implement inclusive education in township schools. Moyo and Hove (2025) likewise identified workload and the need for sustained in-service support as issues affecting the functioning of SBSTs in mainstream primary schools.

Family and community contexts are also important. Learner support can be complicated when families interpret disability or learning barriers differently from school personnel. Mabaso (2024) found that misconceptions about mild intellectual disability could hinder parental support for children requiring additional assistance. This does not mean that parents should be positioned as the source of educational problems. Rather, parental responses need to be understood within wider social meanings attached to disability, available information, previous experiences with schools and concerns about their children's educational futures. Kern (2025) further demonstrates that parents participating in school governance may hold partial understandings of inclusion, which can influence decisions concerning access and participation. These findings suggest that systemic barriers cannot be examined separately from the social and cultural contexts in which learner support is negotiated.

Despite this growing body of research, an important gap remains. Much of the South African literature has examined particular components of inclusive education implementation, such as teacher preparedness, SIAS implementation, SBST functioning, resource constraints or parental participation (Yeboah et al., 2023). Although these studies provide valuable evidence, less attention has been given to how systemic and socio-cultural barriers interact across the learner support process in mainstream primary schools. In particular, there is limited context-specific evidence showing how administrative procedures, institutional support structures, circumstances beyond the school and parental responses collectively shape the availability and continuity of support for learners experiencing barriers to learning. This is significant because barriers may not operate independently. For example, inadequate resources may become more consequential when district responses are delayed, while administrative requirements may place additional pressure on teachers already working in overcrowded classrooms. Similarly, parental responses may be influenced by broader understandings of disability and previous

experiences with educational institutions. Examining these relationships can provide a more comprehensive understanding of why policy commitments to inclusion do not always translate into effective learner support.

The need for such evidence is particularly pressing in contexts that are less represented in the recent inclusive education literature. Research conducted in metropolitan, urban and better-resourced settings may not fully capture the experiences of mainstream schools operating within smaller or geographically dispersed communities. Delareyville in the North West province provides a context in which systemic capacity, school resources, institutional support and community understandings of disability may intersect in distinctive ways. Generating context-sensitive evidence is therefore important not only for understanding the experiences of individual schools but also for considering how inclusive education policies are interpreted and enacted in diverse South African settings.

The present article focuses on Theme 3 of the master's dissertation, namely systemic and socio-cultural barriers to effective learner support. The theme emerged from participants' accounts of how administrative procedures, circumstances outside school and parental responses influenced the support available to learners experiencing barriers to learning. The article contributes to existing scholarship by bringing these dimensions together rather than treating them as isolated implementation challenges. Its novelty lies in examining systemic and socio-cultural barriers through the experiences of teachers in mainstream primary schools in Delareyville, North West province, and in interpreting how these barriers shape the practical provision of learner support. By foregrounding the interaction between institutional processes and socio-cultural conditions, the article extends existing discussions beyond the question of whether inclusive education policies are implemented to consider how support is enabled, delayed or constrained in everyday school contexts.

The article addresses the following question: What systemic and socio-cultural barriers influence the provision of support to learners experiencing barriers to learning in mainstream primary schools? The purpose is to interpret the three sub-themes identified in the dissertation in relation to recent scholarship on inclusive education and learner support. The article therefore seeks to contribute context-specific evidence to ongoing discussions about strengthening learner support and translating South Africa's commitment to inclusive education into more responsive school-level practice.

2. Materials and Methods

This article is derived from a qualitative master's dissertation that explored teachers' support for learners experiencing barriers to learning in Delareyville mainstream primary schools in the North West province of South Africa. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, perceptions and explanations of learner support within their everyday institutional context. The analysis reported here concentrates specifically on Theme 3 of the dissertation and does not reproduce the findings of the other themes.

The study was conducted in two mainstream primary schools, referred to as School A and School B to preserve confidentiality. The study was conducted in March 2024. Ten participants were included: four classroom teachers, four members of the School-Based Support Teams and two members of the District-Based Support Team. Participants were identified using codes: TR for teachers, SB for SBST members and DB for DBST members. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain detailed accounts of the barriers affecting learner support. Document analysis was also undertaken to provide contextual evidence concerning learner support structures, referrals and school-level procedures.

The interview data were transcribed and analysed thematically. The researcher and research assistant examined the interview material for recurring patterns, developed codes and grouped related codes into themes and sub-themes. The present article focuses on the three sub-themes constituting Theme 3: bureaucratic and administrative delays; external origins of learning barriers; and parental denial and resistance. Document analysis was used as a supplementary source to contextualise participants' accounts. Credibility was supported through member checking, while an audit trail and reflexive documentation contributed to confirmability and dependability.

Ethical approval for the original study was obtained from the University of South Africa Ethics Committee before data collection. Permission was also obtained from the relevant education authorities and participating schools. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and participant identities were protected through pseudonymous codes. The findings are presented using verbatim extracts from the original dissertation data. No participant quotations have been invented or reconstructed for this article.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings show that learner support was influenced by processes operating beyond the

immediate classroom. Participants described situations in which school staff recognised learner needs but could not always act immediately because they depended on other levels of the education system. They also described barriers originating in family and community circumstances. Finally, some participants reported that parental reluctance to acknowledge learning barriers complicated support processes. These findings are discussed below.

Bureaucratic and administrative delays

The first sub-theme concerned delays in administrative and referral processes. Participants described a situation in which school personnel could identify a learner's needs but remained dependent on approval or intervention from officials beyond the school. TR2 explained:

"The problem that could emanate or that could arise is when the people who are given the responsibility or the officials who are given responsibilities, drag their feet when addressing barriers that learners have... without their approval, we cannot be able to give those learners special treatment or support..." (TR2)

This account points to a distinction between recognising a need and having the institutional authority or resources to respond to it.

The finding is significant because SIAS is intended to establish a coordinated process through which learners are screened, identified, assessed and supported. When administrative processes become slow, the policy pathway can inadvertently create a waiting period between identification and intervention. Maree et al. (2023) similarly found that teachers experienced the SIAS process as burdensome and that inadequate training affected implementation. The present finding extends that concern by showing how delays may be experienced at school level as a loss of responsiveness: teachers and SBST members may know that support is required, but their action can remain contingent on decisions elsewhere in the system.

Recent research on SBST capacity provides a similar interpretation. Hadebe et al. (2025) reported delayed responses from district structures alongside resource constraints in township schools. Moyo and Hove (2025) also found that SBST members performed screening, identification and referral functions but identified a need for stronger capacity and reduced workload. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of school-based support cannot be separated from the responsiveness of the wider support system. A school may have an active SBST,

yet the intervention pathway can still be weakened if referrals, specialist assessments or departmental decisions are delayed.

The administrative problem should not, however, be reduced to individual officials being unwilling to act. Bureaucratic delay can arise from workload, limited specialist capacity, competing priorities, incomplete documentation or communication problems between institutions. The evidence from the present study therefore points to a structural issue: the learner support pathway contains dependencies that can slow down intervention. Nseibo et al. (2022) show that inclusive education requires more than teacher goodwill because teachers need organisational and professional conditions that enable them to respond to diverse learner needs. In this sense, administrative responsiveness is part of the practical infrastructure of inclusion.

The implication is that policy implementation needs to be examined at the point where procedures meet school realities. If teachers are required to complete documentation, wait for approvals and communicate through several levels of the system, each additional procedural step can affect the time available for intervention. Maree et al. (2023) found that administrative demands contributed to teachers' disengagement from SIAS. The present study adds a complementary perspective: delays can also constrain the agency of school-based actors who are attempting to secure support for particular learners. Strengthening communication channels and establishing clearer timelines for referrals may therefore reduce the distance between identification and intervention.

External origins of learning barriers

The second sub-theme concerned barriers that originate outside the school. Participants recognised that some learners' barriers could not be fully explained by classroom factors. SB4 stated:

"Some of the barriers are affecting learners' performance... if you dig deep into them, they usually start outside the school." (SB4)

This account positions learning barriers within a wider social environment. It suggests that teachers may encounter the educational consequences of circumstances that are shaped by family, community and socioeconomic conditions.

This finding is consistent with research showing that inclusion is affected by conditions surrounding the school. Hove and Phasha (2023) found that factors such as overcrowding, time constraints and limited parental involvement constrained the inclusion of learners with learning disabilities. Their findings demonstrate that

classroom inclusion is shaped by conditions that teachers cannot resolve through pedagogy alone. Nseibo et al. (2022) likewise identify structural pressures such as large classes and limited time as constraints on teachers' ability to accommodate learners with disabilities.

The finding also has implications for how barriers to learning are conceptualised. A narrow school-based interpretation may locate the problem within the learner, whereas the participants' accounts suggest that learning barriers can be connected to circumstances surrounding the learner. Such circumstances may include poverty, family disruption, abuse, limited access to services and other community-level barriers. The purpose of recognising these external influences is not to transfer responsibility from schools to families. Instead, it highlights the need for support systems capable of responding to multiple dimensions of learners' lives.

The social inclusion perspective used in the dissertation is useful here because it shifts attention from individual deficits towards participation and access within social systems. When a learner's participation is affected by circumstances beyond the classroom, effective support may require coordination with structures beyond the school. Hadebe et al. (2025) found that SBSTs operate within contexts where special educational needs intersect with poverty, poor health, abuse and trauma. Their findings reinforce the argument that learner support needs to be responsive to the social conditions in which schooling takes place.

The Delareyville findings therefore suggest that teachers may function as the first point of recognition for problems that have wider origins. This places considerable interpretive and practical demands on teachers. They must distinguish between barriers that can be addressed through classroom adaptation and circumstances requiring referral or collaboration with other services. Without functioning referral networks, teachers may identify complex needs without having an effective route through which those needs can be addressed. The problem is consequently not simply that barriers exist outside school, but that the boundaries between educational, social and support services may limit the school's capacity to respond.

A coordinated approach would require schools to establish relationships with families and relevant support services while avoiding deficit assumptions about communities. The evidence from the present study supports a contextual understanding of learner support in which teachers, SBSTs and district structures work with families rather than treating external circumstances as fixed explanations for

learning barriers. Such an approach is consistent with recent scholarship that emphasises collaboration and system-level support in inclusive education (Moyo & Hove, 2025).

Parental denial and resistance

The third sub-theme concerned parental responses to the identification and support of learners experiencing barriers to learning. SB2 stated:

"Parents are afraid to admit that their children have barriers... they want their kids to be in a mainstream school... and they fail to understand that those learners are also capable of learning somewhere else." (SB2)

The quotation reveals a tension between parental aspirations for mainstream education and school personnel's interpretations of the support required. Importantly, the finding should not be read as evidence that parents are inherently resistant to inclusion. Rather, it indicates that different understandings of disability, placement and educational opportunity can create disagreement between families and schools.

Recent research supports a more nuanced understanding of parental perspectives. Mabaso (2024) found that misconceptions about mild intellectual disability could affect how parents understood their children's support needs. Such misconceptions may arise from limited information, social meanings attached to disability or uncertainty about what a diagnosis means for a child's educational future. The issue identified in the present study can therefore be interpreted as a communication and meaning-making challenge as well as a matter of parental cooperation.

Kern (2025) provides further evidence that parents' understandings of inclusion may differ from policy definitions. In her study of parent members of school governing bodies, some participants conceptualised inclusion mainly in terms of who should be admitted or excluded, rather than the broader transformation of educational structures and practices. This is relevant to the present finding because parental concern about placement may reflect a particular understanding of what constitutes appropriate schooling. A family may perceive mainstream placement as protection against stigma or exclusion, while school personnel may perceive an alternative placement or specialised intervention as a route to more appropriate support.

The finding also needs to be considered within the South African history of educational exclusion. For many families, access to mainstream schooling represents an important social and

educational opportunity. Consequently, resistance to a referral or recommendation should not automatically be interpreted as ignorance or unwillingness to support a child. It may reflect fear that a child will be labelled, separated from peers or denied future opportunities. A supportive response therefore requires schools to communicate the purpose of assessment and referral carefully and to recognise parents as participants in decision-making.

The evidence also points to the importance of trust. If families experience schools as institutions that identify deficits without explaining available support, they may be less willing to cooperate with assessment or referral processes. Conversely, when teachers and support teams explain the learner's strengths, needs and possible support options in accessible language, families may be better positioned to participate in decisions. Hove and Phasha (2023) found that parental involvement was an important factor in inclusion, while Nseibo et al. (2022) emphasised the importance of collaborative relationships between parents and teachers.

The findings consequently suggest that parental engagement should be treated as part of the support process rather than as an administrative requirement. Parent engagement can include clear explanations of assessment findings, opportunities to ask questions, discussion of different support options and follow-up communication. This is particularly important where disability carries social stigma or where families have limited access to specialised information. Hadebe et al. (2025) similarly recommend culturally responsive parental engagement as part of strengthening inclusive education.

Across the three sub-themes, the findings indicate that systemic and socio-cultural barriers are interconnected. Administrative delays can prolong situations in which learners remain without appropriate support. External circumstances can increase the complexity of the learner's needs, while disagreements with families can make referral or intervention more difficult. These processes can reinforce one another. A learner whose support is delayed may experience continuing difficulty, while a family that does not understand the purpose of referral may be less willing to engage with the process. The problem therefore requires a system-level response rather than an intervention directed at one actor.

The broader policy-practice gap identified in the literature is visible in the present study. South Africa has established an inclusive education policy framework, yet implementation depends on the capacity of institutions and relationships that connect policy to learners. Maree et al. (2023)

demonstrate that policy procedures can be difficult for teachers to implement when training and organisational support are inadequate. Hadebe et al. (2025) similarly show that SBST capacity is shaped by structural and sociocultural conditions. The present study contributes to this literature by illustrating how these issues were experienced in mainstream primary schools in Delareyville.

The findings also have implications for the interpretation of learner support. Support should not be understood solely as a classroom intervention delivered by an individual teacher. It is better understood as a process involving identification, communication, referral, decision-making and sustained collaboration. When any part of this process becomes weak, the learner may experience reduced access to appropriate assistance. Strengthening inclusive education therefore requires attention to the organisational relationships that surround classroom practice.

For practice, the findings support clearer referral pathways, timely responses from district structures and ongoing capacity development for school-based support personnel. Parent engagement should be designed as a relational process that acknowledges family concerns and different understandings of disability. These measures should complement, rather than replace, classroom-level strategies. The purpose is to make the wider support system more responsive so that teachers are not left to manage complex barriers without appropriate institutional assistance.

These findings also suggest an area for future empirical work. Further research could follow individual referral cases from initial identification through to intervention in order to establish where delays occur and how communication changes over the process. Such research could include the perspectives of learners and parents, who were not the principal focus of the present study. A case-tracking approach may provide more detailed evidence about how policy procedures operate in practice and where system-level adjustments could have the greatest effect.

The cross-cutting finding is that inclusive education is implemented through relationships between levels of the education system. Classroom teachers, SBST members, DBST personnel, families and specialist services occupy different positions within the support pathway. The learner's experience depends partly on how effectively these actors communicate and coordinate. Consequently, strengthening learner support requires more than adding another policy or form. It requires attention to the functioning of the existing system and to the social relationships through which support is negotiated.

The practical response should therefore combine procedural improvement with relationship-building. Administrative systems need clear referral pathways and feedback mechanisms, while schools need opportunities to communicate with families before and after referrals. Such communication should explain why a particular support process is being proposed, what the learner's strengths are, what forms of support are available and how parents can participate. This approach may reduce uncertainty and make support decisions more collaborative.

Another important issue is the language used to describe families. The term 'parental denial' emerged from the participants' accounts and accurately reflects the coding framework used in the dissertation. Nevertheless, the concept should be interpreted cautiously. Describing parents as resistant can unintentionally place the entire responsibility for a difficult support relationship on families. The evidence from Mabaso (2024) shows that parental understandings of disability can be shaped by misconceptions and social meanings. Kern (2025) also demonstrates that parents may conceptualise inclusion differently from education policy. These findings suggest that disagreement between schools and families may sometimes be a consequence of different knowledge systems rather than simple unwillingness to cooperate.

SBSTs occupy an important position between classroom practice and district-level support. They can coordinate identification, documentation, referral and communication, yet their effectiveness depends on whether they have the knowledge, time and institutional authority to fulfil these functions. Hadebe et al. (2025) found that SBSTs in township schools were affected by weak structures, inconsistent training and delayed district support. Moyo and Hove (2025) similarly identify the need for ongoing training and manageable workloads. The evidence from Delareyville adds the issue of administrative responsiveness to this discussion, suggesting that strengthening SBSTs should be accompanied by improvements in the systems to which SBSTs refer learners.

The findings also raise questions about where responsibility for inclusion is located. Teachers are central to classroom implementation, but expecting teachers to solve systemic problems can obscure the responsibilities of district structures and other services. Maree et al. (2023) demonstrate that teachers can become disengaged from policy procedures when implementation is associated with additional administrative work without adequate support. Nseibo et al. (2022) further argue that teacher development must be considered alongside structural and professional

conditions. The present study reinforces this point by showing that teachers' capacity to support learners is partly dependent on decisions and resources beyond their immediate control.

From a social inclusion perspective, the findings draw attention to the conditions required for participation. Inclusion is not achieved simply by placing a learner in a mainstream classroom. The learner must also have meaningful access to teaching, assessment, relationships and support. When institutional procedures delay intervention, when external social conditions remain unaddressed, or when family-school communication breaks down, physical placement may not result in meaningful inclusion. Kern (2025) similarly distinguishes broader inclusion from a narrow focus on who is admitted to a school, emphasising the importance of structures and practices that enable participation.

The three sub-themes are analytically distinct, but the participant accounts indicate that they operate within the same support ecology. Bureaucratic delay can make an externally generated barrier more difficult to address because a school may identify the concern without being able to secure timely assistance. At the same time, parental uncertainty can become more pronounced when families receive delayed or inconsistent communication about assessment and referral. The barriers should therefore be understood as interacting processes rather than isolated problems.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

This article examined systemic and socio-cultural barriers affecting learner support in two mainstream primary schools in Delareyville. The findings centred on bureaucratic and administrative delays, external origins of learning barriers, and parental denial and resistance. Together, these sub-themes show that the provision of learner support is shaped by institutional processes and social relationships beyond the classroom.

The findings indicate that policy implementation can be weakened when schools depend on slow referral and approval processes. They also show that some learning barriers are connected to circumstances outside school, requiring collaboration beyond ordinary classroom practice. Parental responses can further influence support when families and schools hold different understandings of disability, placement or intervention. These findings are consistent with recent South African research documenting the continuing gap between inclusive education policy and implementation.

The study suggests that education authorities should strengthen the responsiveness of district

support structures and monitor referral timelines. Schools should strengthen SBST capacity through sustained professional development and establish consistent communication with families. Parent engagement should provide accessible information about assessment, support and placement while recognising families' concerns and aspirations. Future research could examine how these processes operate across different rural districts and could include learners' and parents' perspectives alongside those of teachers and support personnel.

The study was situated in two mainstream primary schools in one locality and therefore the findings should be interpreted contextually rather than treated as representative of all South African schools. Nevertheless, the study provides useful evidence about how systemic and socio-cultural conditions can shape the practical delivery of inclusive learner support. Its contribution lies in showing that improving inclusion requires attention not only to what teachers do in classrooms, but also to the institutional and social conditions that enable or constrain that work.

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