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# Teacher Support for Curriculum Adaptation and Inclusive Assessment in Rural South African Secondary Schools

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## Abstract

Inclusive education depends on teachers' capacity to adapt curriculum and assessment to accommodate diverse learner needs. However, teachers in rural South African schools continue to experience significant challenges arising from limited institutional support, inadequate professional development, and resource constraints. Despite policy commitments to inclusive education through White Paper 6, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), and the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy, limited empirical attention has been given to the specific support teachers require to implement inclusive curriculum and assessment practices in rural secondary schools. This study explored the support that teachers require regarding curriculum and assessment to facilitate the implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools in the Sekhukhune District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative case study design. Purposive sampling was used to select six secondary school teachers from three rural schools with experience in implementing inclusive education. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 min, supplemented by field notes. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed inductively using thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability strategies. Four interrelated themes emerged from the analysis: inadequate inclusive support systems, limited stakeholder collaboration, limited curriculum support, and structural constraints and limited flexibility in assessment practices. Participants described insufficient resources, limited collaboration with parents and specialist support personnel, inadequate context-specific professional development, and inflexible assessment practices as constraining their capacity to implement inclusive education effectively. Participants identified continuous professional learning, collaborative partnerships, differentiated curriculum support, and flexible assessment strategies as important for strengthening their inclusive practices. However, whether addressing these support needs would improve teacher capacity or learner outcomes requires further investigation. Participants' accounts suggest that effective implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools may require coordinated institutional, professional, and collaborative support. Strengthening teacher professional development, enhancing stakeholder collaboration, improving curriculum resources, and promoting inclusive assessment practices may be necessary for translating inclusive education policy into meaningful classroom practice. The findings may inform teacher professional development, school leadership, and policy initiatives aimed at enhancing inclusive education implementation within resource-constrained educational contexts.

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Academic Editors: Marnie Best and Foteini Pasenidou

Received: 3 September 2026
Revised: 30 September 2026
Accepted: 6 October 2026
Published: 8 October 2026

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**Keywords:** inclusive education; curriculum adaptation; inclusive assessment; teacher support; stakeholder collaboration; rural secondary schools

## 1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a global educational priority aimed at ensuring equitable access, participation, and meaningful learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of disability, socioeconomic background, language, or other forms of diversity. It is founded on the principle that education systems should accommodate learner differences by removing barriers to learning and providing appropriate support within mainstream classrooms (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Rather than focusing solely on the placement of learners with disabilities in ordinary schools, inclusive education promotes curriculum flexibility, differentiated assessment, collaborative support systems, and teaching practices that enable all learners to participate and succeed (Woodcock & Anderson, 2025).

Internationally, many countries have adopted inclusive education policies; however, translating policy into classroom practice remains a persistent challenge. Studies from Ethiopia (Taddese et al., 2025), Kenya (Chumo, 2024), Afghanistan (Naeemy & Yoneda, 2025), and the Czech Republic (Pivarč, 2026) have reported that inadequate teacher preparation, limited teaching resources, weak institutional support, and insufficient professional development constrain the effective implementation of inclusive education. However, these studies differ in educational phase, policy context, and research design, and their findings should not be treated as directly equivalent. Collectively, they suggest that policy commitment alone is insufficient and that sustained support for teachers may be necessary to facilitate inclusive teaching and learning.

South Africa has similarly embraced inclusive education through Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), which seeks to redress historical educational inequalities by ensuring that all learners receive appropriate educational support within an inclusive schooling system. Although the policy provides a comprehensive framework for inclusive education, its implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in rural schools where teachers often work under challenging conditions characterised by limited infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, shortages of specialist support services, and inadequate access to teaching resources (Chitiyo et al., 2026; Mpu & Adu, 2021). These contextual realities may contribute to a gap between policy intentions and classroom practice.

A critical policy tension further complicates this landscape. While White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) provides the policy foundation for inclusive education, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education, 2011) establishes prescriptive content, rigid pacing, and high-stakes assessment requirements that may conflict with the flexibility inclusive education demands (Sepadi, 2025). This friction between the inclusive aspirations of White Paper 6 and the standardized accountability logic of CAPS forms a critical contextual tension that shapes teachers' curriculum and assessment practices in rural schools. Teachers are required to cover content at pace while also accommodating diverse learners, a tension that is intensified in rural schools where resource constraints and large classes make differentiation particularly challenging. Additionally, the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (Department of Basic Education, 2014) provides the operational framework for implementing inclusive education, mandating the establishment of Institutional-Level Support Teams (ILSTs) and requiring teachers to document curriculum differentiation, assessment accommodations, and individual support plans. However, in rural schools, ILSTs are often non-functional or under-resourced, leaving teachers without the institutional scaffolding SIAS envisages

(Chitiyo et al., 2026; Sepadi, 2025). This gap between policy mandate and operational reality further compounds the challenges teachers face in implementing inclusive curriculum and assessment practices.

Teachers play a pivotal role in implementing inclusive education because they are responsible for creating learning environments that accommodate diverse learner needs through appropriate curriculum delivery and assessment practices. Effective inclusion therefore depends not only on teachers' commitment but also on their knowledge, professional competence, and access to continuous institutional support (Burak et al., 2026; Woodcock & Anderson, 2025). In rural schools, these responsibilities are often intensified by contextual challenges that require teachers to adapt teaching strategies, differentiate learning activities, and implement flexible assessment approaches with limited professional guidance (Nomtshongwana & Manyakaza, 2025). Rural schools in South Africa are also characterised by geographical dispersion, limited transport infrastructure, and language diversity, all of which shape how teachers access support and collaborate with stakeholders (Mankgele, 2024; Makofane et al., 2023).

Recent South African studies indicate that many teachers continue to experience difficulties in translating inclusive education policy into effective classroom practice. These challenges include limited understanding of inclusive education, inadequate curriculum differentiation, insufficient professional development, and restricted access to specialised support services (Chitiyo et al., 2026; Sepadi, 2025). Similar findings have been reported internationally, where teachers express willingness to implement inclusive practices but identify curriculum adaptation, assessment accommodation, and ongoing professional learning as essential requirements for successful inclusion (Lapidot-Lefler, 2025; White & Fletcher, 2026). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that teacher support extends beyond policy awareness and requires practical guidance that responds to the realities of classroom implementation.

Although previous research has substantially advanced understanding of barriers to inclusive education, much of the literature focuses broadly on teacher preparedness, attitudes, resource constraints, or policy implementation (Basister et al., 2025; Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024; Fitriyah, 2025). Comparatively less attention has been given to the specific support teachers require to implement curriculum and assessment within rural inclusive classrooms. Curriculum adaptation and assessment accommodation are central components of inclusive pedagogy because they determine how learners access instruction, demonstrate learning, and participate meaningfully in classroom activities. However, the nature of teacher support required to strengthen these practices in rural South African schools remains insufficiently explored. The rural context warrants particular attention because schools frequently operate under conditions that differ markedly from those in urban settings. Limited access to specialised personnel, professional learning opportunities, instructional resources, and support services may influence teachers' capacity to implement inclusive curriculum and assessment practices effectively (Govender et al., 2023; Sepadi, 2025). Understanding these context-specific support needs may inform the development of practical interventions that strengthen teacher capacity while improving inclusive education implementation in resource-constrained schools.

### *1.1. Problem Statement*

Despite South Africa's progressive policy commitments to inclusive education through White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), SIAS (Department of Basic Education, 2014), and the constitutional guarantee of the right to education for all learners, implementation in rural secondary schools remains inconsistent and fragmented. Teachers in rural contexts continue to face significant challenges in adapting curriculum and assess-

ment to accommodate diverse learner needs, yet little empirical evidence exists regarding the specific support they require to implement inclusive curriculum and assessment practices effectively.

The problem is threefold. First, there is a policy–practice gap: while White Paper 6 and SIAS mandate inclusive practices, CAPS imposes prescriptive content coverage and standardized assessment requirements that constrain teachers' capacity to differentiate instruction and assessment (Sepadi, 2025). Second, rural schools face systemic resource constraints including limited specialist support, inadequate teaching materials, and insufficient professional development that are not adequately addressed by current support structures (Chitiyo et al., 2026; Mpu & Adu, 2021). Third, existing research has focused predominantly on teacher attitudes, preparedness, or barriers to inclusion, with limited attention given to the specific curriculum and assessment support needs of teachers in rural secondary schools (Basister et al., 2025; Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024; Fitriyah, 2025).

This study therefore investigates the support that teachers require regarding curriculum and assessment to facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools in the Sekhukhune District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. By examining teachers' experiences and perspectives, the study contributes empirical evidence on the institutional, professional, curricular, and assessment-related support required to strengthen inclusive practice in rural schools.

### *1.2. Research Questions*

The study is guided by the following primary research question:

What support do teachers require regarding curriculum and assessment to facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools in the Sekhukhune District, Limpopo Province?

The following sub-questions further guide the inquiry:

1. How do teachers in rural secondary schools describe their current practices of curriculum adaptation for learners with diverse educational needs?
2. How do teachers in rural secondary schools describe their current assessment practices in inclusive classrooms?
3. What institutional, professional, and collaborative support do teachers identify as necessary to strengthen curriculum adaptation and inclusive assessment practices?
4. How do teachers' accounts of support needs relate to the policy frameworks of White Paper 6, CAPS, and SIAS within the rural context?

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Introduction*

This chapter reviews literature relevant to teachers' support needs for curriculum and assessment in the implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools. The review is organised into five main sections. First, it examines the global and South African policy context for inclusive education, including the tensions between White Paper 6, CAPS, and SIAS. Second, it explores the role of teachers in curriculum adaptation for inclusive classrooms. Third, it examines assessment practices in inclusive education. Fourth, it reviews literature on teacher support for effective implementation. Fifth, it discusses stakeholder collaboration in rural contexts. The chapter concludes by identifying the research gap that this study addresses.

### 2.2. Inclusive Education in Rural Schools: Policy Context and Challenges

Inclusive education seeks to provide equitable learning opportunities by ensuring that all learners, irrespective of their abilities or learning needs, participate meaningfully in mainstream education. Although many countries have adopted inclusive education policies, implementation remains uneven, particularly in rural and resource-constrained schools where systemic, institutional, and contextual barriers continue to limit effective practice (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Research across diverse educational contexts demonstrates that rural schools often experience shortages of specialised personnel, inadequate infrastructure, limited instructional resources, and insufficient professional support, making the implementation of inclusive education considerably more challenging than policy frameworks suggest (Chumo, 2024; Naeemy & Yoneda, 2025; Taddese et al., 2025).

In South Africa, Education White Paper 6 provides the policy framework for developing an inclusive education system that accommodates learner diversity within mainstream schools (Department of Education, 2001). Despite this policy commitment, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in rural communities where teachers frequently encounter overcrowded classrooms, limited specialist support, and inadequate access to teaching resources (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Recent studies further indicate that many rural teachers continue to experience uncertainty regarding inclusive practices because policy expectations are often not matched by sufficient professional support or practical implementation strategies (Chitiyo et al., 2026; Sepadi, 2025). Consequently, rural schools present a unique context in which the success of inclusive education depends not only on policy implementation but also on sustained support that responds to local educational realities.

#### Policy Tensions: White Paper 6, CAPS, and SIAS

A critical tension exists between South Africa's inclusive education policy and its national curriculum framework. While White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) mandates curriculum differentiation, flexible pacing, and assessment accommodation, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education, 2011) establishes prescriptive content coverage, rigid pacing requirements, and high-stakes standardized assessment protocols (Sepadi, 2025). This policy friction creates a fundamental dilemma for teachers: they are required to cover content at pace while also accommodating diverse learners, a tension that is intensified in rural schools where resource constraints and large classes make differentiation particularly challenging.

The Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (Department of Basic Education, 2014) provides the operational framework for implementing inclusive education. SIAS mandates the establishment of Institutional-Level Support Teams (ILSTs) and requires teachers to document curriculum differentiation, assessment accommodations, and individual support plans. However, research indicates that in rural schools, ILSTs are often non-functional, under-resourced, or staffed by teachers who lack specialised training in inclusive practices (Chitiyo et al., 2026; Hlalele et al., 2020). The gap between SIAS mandates and rural operational realities leaves teachers without the institutional scaffolding the policy envisages.

Ledwaba and Sefotho (2024) argue that curriculum adaptation for learners with diverse learning needs in South African rural schools remains fragmented because teachers lack the necessary training and support to interpret CAPS requirements through an inclusive lens. Similarly, Mankgele (2024) found that teachers in Limpopo rural schools struggled to reconcile the standardized assessment requirements of CAPS with the differentiated approaches inclusive education demands. These findings suggest that policy coherence aligning White Paper 6, CAPS, and SIAS is essential for enabling effective inclusive practice.

### 2.3. Teachers' Role in Curriculum Adaptation for Inclusive Education

Teachers are central to the implementation of inclusive education because they determine how curriculum content is planned, adapted, and delivered to accommodate diverse learner needs. Effective curriculum adaptation requires teachers to differentiate instructional strategies, modify learning activities, provide appropriate learning materials, and create classroom environments that promote participation for all learners (Woodcock & Anderson, 2025). However, these responsibilities require knowledge, confidence, and continuous professional development, particularly in schools serving diverse learner populations.

Studies consistently report that many teachers experience difficulties adapting the curriculum for inclusive classrooms because of inadequate training and limited opportunities to develop inclusive pedagogical knowledge (Burak et al., 2026; Fitriyah, 2025). Within the South African context, teachers have reported uncertainty regarding curriculum differentiation and practical implementation of inclusive education, particularly in rural schools where institutional support is often limited (Chitiyo et al., 2026; Sepadi, 2025). Ledwaba (n.d.) found that teacher training guidelines for curriculum differentiation in Foundation Phase programmes were often not implemented in rural schools due to resource constraints and lack of ongoing support. Adewumi et al. (2017) similarly reported that curriculum adaptation for learners with special education needs in selected primary schools in the Fort Beaufort District was hindered by inadequate teacher preparation and limited access to specialist support.

These findings suggest that curriculum adaptation is not solely a teacher responsibility but also a function of the professional, institutional, and policy support available to educators. Hlalele et al. (2020) argue that support team members in rural South African schools often lack a shared understanding of curriculum differentiation, resulting in inconsistent implementation. This underscores the need for coordinated professional development that builds collective capacity for curriculum adaptation.

### 2.4. Assessment Practices in Inclusive Classrooms

Assessment is an essential component of inclusive education because it determines how learner achievement is recognised and how teaching is adjusted to accommodate diverse learning needs. Inclusive assessment extends beyond traditional testing by incorporating flexible, continuous, and differentiated approaches that provide equitable opportunities for learners to demonstrate their knowledge and skills (Lindsay, 2019; Tai et al., 2023). Such approaches recognise learner diversity while maintaining appropriate academic standards.

Despite growing recognition of inclusive assessment, teachers continue to report challenges in designing and implementing assessment practices that accommodate learners with diverse educational needs. Research indicates that many teachers require greater support in developing differentiated assessment tasks, adapting assessment criteria, and interpreting learner performance within inclusive classrooms (Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020; White & Fletcher, 2026). Şahin and Şentürk (2025) found that teachers' positive beliefs about student-centred, learning-oriented assessment are frequently constrained in practice by systemic barriers such as rigid curriculum pacing, time limitations, and overcrowded classrooms. This finding resonates with the South African context, where CAPS assessment requirements and large class sizes may limit teachers' capacity to implement the flexible, differentiated assessment practices they value.

Sibanda and Mathwasa (2020) argue that promoting inclusivity through quality assessment in rural secondary schools requires a shift from standardized testing towards continuous, formative assessment practices that inform instructional decision-making. However, such approaches require teachers to have access to assessment tools, training, and support that are often unavailable in rural contexts. These challenges are often more

pronounced in rural schools, where limited professional development opportunities and restricted access to specialist support reduce teachers' capacity to implement equitable assessment practices effectively.

### 2.5. Teacher Support for Effective Implementation of Inclusive Education

The successful implementation of inclusive education depends on sustained support that strengthens teachers' professional capacity and promotes collaborative practice. Such support extends beyond formal policy directives and includes continuous professional development, instructional resources, school leadership, collaboration among educators, parental involvement, and access to specialist support services (Basister et al., 2025; Kaushik, 2024). Professional learning opportunities that are context-specific and responsive to teachers' classroom realities have been shown to improve confidence and competence in implementing inclusive practices (Govender et al., 2023; Lapidot-Lefler, 2025).

Tepe and Olcars (2026) found a positive relationship between school administrators' proactive, learning-oriented, and development-oriented role-modelling behaviours and teachers' overall personal and professional development. This suggests that supportive and proactive school leadership is not merely a bureaucratic preference but a vital institutional resource that directly conditions teachers' professional capacity and motivation to implement inclusive curriculum and assessment practices in demanding educational environments. In rural South African schools, where district support is often distant, the principal's advocacy may function as a critical mediating resource (Mankgele, 2024).

#### 2.5.1. Institutional Support

Institutional support encompasses the resources, leadership, and professional development that schools provide to enable inclusive practice. Research indicates that schools with strong leadership, adequate resources, and a culture of collaboration are more likely to implement inclusive education effectively (Basister et al., 2025; Kaushik, 2024). However, in rural South African schools, institutional support is often fragmented. Makofane et al. (2023) found that secondary schools in rural areas struggled to implement inclusive education due to limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient specialist support. Mpu and Adu (2021) similarly reported that South African schools faced significant challenges in implementing inclusive education, including limited funding, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient support from district officials.

#### 2.5.2. Professional Development

Professional development is a critical component of teacher support for inclusive education. Research consistently demonstrates that teachers require continuous, context-specific training to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for curriculum differentiation and inclusive assessment (Govender et al., 2023; Lapidot-Lefler, 2025). However, professional development opportunities in rural South African schools are often infrequent, generic, and insufficiently responsive to local realities (Sepadi, 2025). Ledwaba and Sefotho (2024) argue that teacher training guidelines for curriculum differentiation are often not implemented in rural schools due to resource constraints and lack of ongoing support. This suggests that professional development must move beyond one-off workshops towards sustained, school-based learning communities that enable teachers to collaborate, reflect, and develop contextually relevant practices.

#### 2.5.3. Professional Scaffolding: An Analytical Extension

While Vygotsky's (1978) concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding were originally formulated to explain child cognitive development, this study

extends these concepts analytically to teachers' professional learning. We use the term professional scaffolding to refer to the structured support that teachers receive from district officials, school leaders, peers, and specialists support that enables them to develop the knowledge and confidence required to implement inclusive curriculum and assessment practices. This is an analytical extension, not a direct application of Vygotsky's original formulation, and it is offered as a heuristic for interpreting teachers' accounts rather than as a validated theoretical proposition. In rural schools, where social mediation is constrained by geographical isolation and limited access to specialist personnel, professional scaffolding may be weak or absent, leaving teachers without the support they need to develop inclusive practices.

### *2.6. Stakeholder Collaboration in Rural Inclusive Education*

Collaboration among teachers, parents, school leaders, community members, and specialist support personnel is widely recognised as essential for effective inclusive education. Research demonstrates that collaborative partnerships enhance learner support, strengthen teacher confidence, and facilitate the implementation of inclusive practices (Govender et al., 2023; Kaushik, 2024; Lapidot-Lefler, 2025; Remorosa et al., 2024). However, in rural South African schools, collaboration is often informal, inconsistent, or insufficiently structured (Makofane et al., 2023; Mankgele, 2024).

#### 2.6.1. Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in rural South African schools is shaped by structural factors including migrant labour, long distances, low formal literacy levels, and language barriers (Govender et al., 2023). Rather than interpreting limited participation as "hesitancy" or lack of interest, it is more accurate to recognise these as systemic barriers that constrain meaningful school–family collaboration. Spamer et al. (2021) argue that family involvement in life skills development in primary school learners is essential for inclusive education, but rural parents often face significant barriers to participation. Schools should therefore develop flexible, multilingual communication mechanisms that accommodate the realities of rural family life.

#### 2.6.2. Specialist Support and Community Partnerships

Access to specialist support personnel including educational psychologists, therapists, and special needs specialists is limited in rural South African schools (Chitiyo et al., 2026; Sepadi, 2025). This shortage places additional pressure on teachers to address diverse learner needs without adequate professional backup. Partnerships with community organisations, NGOs, and local health services can help bridge this gap by providing additional expertise and resources (Kaushik, 2024). However, such partnerships require structured coordination and sustained commitment to be effective. Schoonen et al. (2021) argue that building a vision for social justice praxis through service-learning can strengthen teacher education and community collaboration, but this requires institutional commitment and resource investment.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### *3.1. Introduction*

This study is underpinned by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasises that learning is a socially mediated process shaped by interaction, collaboration, and the cultural context in which learning occurs (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory posits that learners construct knowledge through engagement with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers, peers, parents, and other educational stakeholders. Consequently, effective learning depends

not only on individual ability but also on the quality of instructional support and the learning environment.

However, applying sociocultural theory to teachers' professional learning and institutional support requires careful conceptual clarification. Vygotsky's original formulations focused on child cognitive development; extending these concepts to teachers' professional contexts involves analytical work that should be made explicit rather than assumed. This section therefore distinguishes between three conceptual levels instructional scaffolding, professional scaffolding, and institutional support and explains how the theory informed the study's methodology and analysis.

### *3.2. Core Concepts of Sociocultural Theory*

#### 3.2.1. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

A central concept of Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the difference between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with appropriate guidance and support (Vygotsky, 1978). Within inclusive classrooms, this concept highlights the importance of differentiated teaching, collaborative learning, and instructional scaffolding to accommodate learners with diverse educational needs. Teachers therefore play a crucial role in identifying learners' developmental needs and providing appropriate curriculum adaptations and learning support that enable meaningful participation in classroom activities.

#### 3.2.2. Scaffolding

Closely related to the ZPD is the concept of scaffolding, whereby teachers provide structured support that is gradually withdrawn as learners develop greater independence (Wood et al., 1976; Fogarty, 1999). Although learners require different levels of assistance, effective scaffolding enables them to access the curriculum, develop confidence, and demonstrate learning through appropriate assessment opportunities. In inclusive classrooms, scaffolding extends beyond instructional strategies to include differentiated learning activities, adapted teaching resources, and flexible assessment practices that respond to individual learner needs.

#### 3.2.3. Social Interaction and Mediation

Vygotsky emphasised that cognitive development is mediated through social interaction and the use of cultural tools such as language, symbols, and artifacts (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is not an individual process but a collaborative one, in which knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and shared activity. In inclusive education, this perspective highlights the importance of peer collaboration, teacher-student interaction, and engagement with the broader community in creating supportive learning environments.

### *3.3. Three Conceptual Levels: A Clarifying Typology*

A key contribution of this study is the analytical distinction between three levels at which sociocultural concepts operate. This distinction addresses the risk of conflating the scaffolding that teachers provide to learners with the professional support that teachers themselves receive.

This Table 1 enables the study to examine how support operates at different levels and how weaknesses at one level may compound challenges at another. For example, inadequate institutional support may limit opportunities for professional scaffolding, which in turn constrains teachers' capacity to provide instructional scaffolding to learners.

**Table 1.** Three Conceptual Levels: A Clarifying Typology.

| Level | Focus | Key Actors | Examples |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Instructional Scaffolding | Teacher → Learner | Teachers, peers | Curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, flexible assessment, visual aids, verbal cues |
| Professional Scaffolding | District/Specialist → Teacher | District officials, subject advisors, specialists, peers | Training, mentoring, peer learning, expert guidance, coaching |
| Institutional and Collaborative Support | School System → Teacher | School leaders, parents, community, district | Leadership advocacy, resource provision, stakeholder collaboration, funding |

### *3.4. Professional Scaffolding: An Analytical Extension*

While Vygotsky's (1978) concepts of the ZPD and scaffolding were originally formulated to explain child cognitive development, this study extends these concepts analytically to teachers' professional learning. We use the term professional scaffolding to refer to the structured support that teachers receive from district officials, school leaders, peers, and specialists support that enables them to develop the knowledge and confidence required to implement inclusive curriculum and assessment practices.

This is an analytical extension, not a direct application of Vygotsky's original formulation. Vygotsky did not explicitly theorise adult professional learning, and the concept of professional scaffolding is offered as a heuristic for interpreting teachers' accounts rather than as a validated theoretical proposition. The extension is justified on the grounds that teachers, like learners, develop new competencies through social interaction, guided practice, and access to more knowledgeable others. However, the structural conditions that enable or constrain professional scaffolding in rural schools differ markedly from the dyadic interactions Vygotsky originally described.

### *3.5. Social Mediation in Rural Contexts: Structural Constraints and Collective Agency*

Applying sociocultural theory to rural South African schools requires critical attention to how structural conditions mediate or hinder collective teacher agency. In urban or well-resourced schools, teachers may have regular access to district officials, subject advisors, and specialist personnel who function as more knowledgeable others. In rural schools, however, geographical isolation, limited transport infrastructure, and shortages of specialist personnel mean that opportunities for professional interaction are severely constrained.

These structural conditions shape the nature of social mediation in three ways. First, they limit access to expert guidance. When district officials visit rural schools infrequently, teachers have fewer opportunities to engage in the guided practice that professional scaffolding requires. Second, they constrain peer collaboration. When teachers are isolated from one another whether by distance, workload, or lack of shared planning time the collaborative learning that Vygotsky saw as central to development is difficult to sustain. Third, they undermine collective agency. When teachers feel unsupported and overwhelmed, their capacity to act collectively to improve inclusive practices is diminished.

This analysis suggests that social mediation is not simply a matter of individual interaction but is shaped by institutional and structural conditions. In rural schools, the absence of supportive structures may mean that teachers are left to navigate inclusive education alone, without the professional scaffolding that would enable them to develop effective practices. This perspective helps explain why teachers in rural schools may experience

greater difficulty implementing inclusive education than their urban counterparts, even when they are equally committed to inclusion.

### *3.6. Theory and Analysis: Methodological Alignment*

The theoretical framework informed the study's methodology in two ways. First, it guided the development of the semi-structured interview schedule by directing attention to teachers' experiences of support, collaboration, curriculum implementation, and assessment practices within their school contexts. Questions were designed to elicit accounts of social interaction, professional support, and contextual constraints, reflecting the study's sociocultural orientation.

Second, the theory provided a lens for interpreting the findings during data analysis. However, the analysis remained inductively open, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being imposed from predetermined categories. The four themes that emerged inadequate inclusive support systems, limited stakeholder collaboration, limited curriculum support, and inappropriate assessment practices were subsequently interpreted through the lens of sociocultural theory, but the theory did not predetermine their content.

This approach is consistent with the study's interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises participants' meanings and experiences while acknowledging the researcher's role in interpreting those meanings through a theoretical lens. The theory therefore functioned as a sensitising framework rather than a deductive coding scheme, enabling the study to move beyond describing teachers' experiences towards explaining how supportive educational environments facilitate inclusive teaching and learning in resource-constrained rural schools.

The Figure 1 is framed by Vygotsky's principles of social interaction, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development, collectively fostering an inclusive learning environment in resource-constrained rural schools. However, the relationships depicted are those described by participants, and the map should be understood as a tool for organising and interpreting their accounts rather than as a statement of empirical causality.

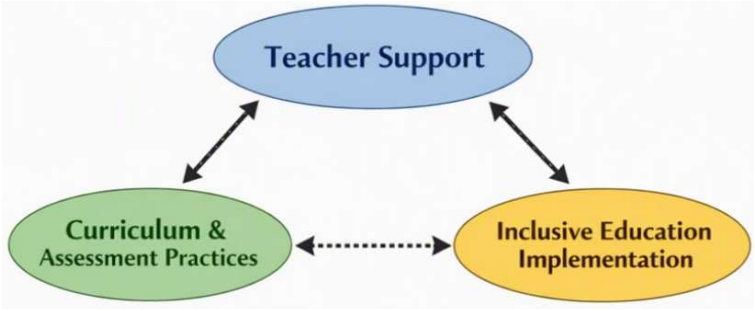



**Figure 1.** An interpretive Conceptual Map of Teacher Support for Inclusive Curriculum.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides a coherent framework for understanding how teacher support, collaboration, curriculum adaptation, and assessment practices collectively influence the implementation of inclusive education. By distinguishing between instructional scaffolding, professional scaffolding, and institutional support, the study avoids conflating the support teachers provide to learners with the support teachers themselves receive. By attending to the structural conditions that mediate social interaction in rural schools, the study acknowledges that professional scaffolding is not simply a matter of individual interaction but is shaped by institutional and contextual factors. The theory therefore enables the study to move beyond describing teachers' experiences towards ex-

plaining how supportive educational environments facilitate inclusive teaching and learning in resource-constrained rural schools.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the research paradigm, approach, design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and quality criteria used to investigate the research questions. The study explored the support that teachers require regarding curriculum and assessment to facilitate the implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools in the Sekhukhune District, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

### 4.2. Research Setting: Contextual Profile of Sekhukhune District

The study was conducted in the Sekhukhune District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Sekhukhune is one of five districts in Limpopo and is predominantly rural, with the majority of its population residing in villages and small towns (StatsSA, 2022). The district faces significant socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment rates, widespread reliance on social grants, and limited access to basic services such as healthcare, transport, and digital infrastructure. Many households are headed by women, and migrant labour remains a common livelihood strategy, with adults leaving for extended periods to seek work in urban centres (Govender et al., 2023).

Educational indicators in the district reflect these broader socio-economic realities. Many schools are classified as Quintile 1–3 (no-fee schools), serving communities with low average income levels. Learner–teacher ratios frequently exceed 40:1, and infrastructure backlogs are common, with some schools lacking adequate classrooms, sanitation, electricity, and teaching materials (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Access to specialist support services including educational psychologists, therapists, and special needs specialists is severely limited, with district-based support teams serving vast geographical areas and often unable to visit schools regularly (Chitiyo et al., 2026; Sepadi, 2025).

The rural context shapes inclusive education implementation in distinctive ways. Geographical dispersion and limited public transport make it difficult for teachers to access professional development opportunities, for parents to attend school meetings, and for district officials to provide regular support. Language diversity with Sepedi, isiNdebele, and English spoken across the district adds complexity to communication with learners and families. These factors collectively create conditions that differ markedly from urban schools and justify the study's focus on this specific rural context.

### 4.3. Research Design: Qualitative Case Study

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm using a qualitative case study design to explore the support teachers require regarding curriculum and assessment for the effective implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools. An interpretivist approach was considered appropriate because it seeks to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The choice of case study design rather than phenomenology reflects the study's focus on a bounded case: the implementation of inclusive curriculum and assessment practices in rural secondary schools in the Sekhukhune District, as experienced by six teachers. The case is bounded by geographical location (one district), educational phase (secondary schools), and role (teachers with experience in inclusive classrooms). The study sought to understand the case in depth, drawing on multiple data sources (interviews, field notes) to generate rich contextual insights.

Operational definitions. For the purposes of this study:

- Inclusive classroom refers to a mainstream secondary school classroom that includes learners with identified barriers to learning, including disabilities, learning difficulties, and socio-economic disadvantage, as outlined in White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001). Learners with diverse educational needs may include those with physical disabilities, sensory impairments, intellectual disabilities, specific learning difficulties (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia), attention difficulties, and emotional or behavioural challenges.
- Diverse educational needs refer to the range of learning support requirements present in inclusive classrooms, including needs arising from disability, language, socio-economic status, and prior educational experiences. Teachers in the participating schools identified learners with visual impairments, hearing impairments, physical disabilities, learning difficulties, and behavioural challenges in their classrooms.
- Curriculum adaptation refers to the modifications teachers make to content, methodology, and assessment to accommodate diverse learner needs within the framework of CAPS (Department of Basic Education, 2011).
- Inclusive assessment refers to flexible, continuous, and differentiated assessment approaches that provide equitable opportunities for learners to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, including formative assessment, continuous observation, and where applicable, individualised assessment planning (Lindsay, 2019; Tai et al., 2023).

The case study design enabled an in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences within a specific rural educational setting, allowing the researchers to gain rich contextual insights into the challenges and support needs associated with implementing inclusive education.

### *4.4. Participating Schools*

Three rural secondary schools in the Sekhukhune District were selected to participate in the study. The schools were purposefully selected based on the following criteria:

1. Rural location within the Sekhukhune District (classified as Quintile 1–3).
2. Enrolment of learners with diverse educational needs in mainstream classrooms.
3. Willingness of the school principal and teachers to participate in the study.

Two teachers were selected from each school, yielding a total of six participants. This distribution ensured that the data reflected experiences across multiple school contexts rather than a single institutional perspective. The three schools shared similar characteristics: all were no-fee schools, all had learner–teacher ratios exceeding 35:1, and all reported limited access to specialist support services. However, they differed in size, infrastructure quality, and proximity to district offices, enabling the study to capture some variation within the rural context.

### *4.5. Population and Sampling*

The target population comprised teachers employed in public secondary schools within the Sekhukhune District who had experience teaching in inclusive classrooms. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and practical experience of implementing inclusive education. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research because it enables the selection of information-rich participants who can provide detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Inclusion criteria required participants to:

1. Be qualified teachers employed in rural public secondary schools within the Sekhukhune District.
2. Have experience teaching learners with diverse educational needs in mainstream classrooms.

3. Have at least three years of teaching experience.
4. Be willing to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent.

Teachers without experience in inclusive classroom practice or those employed outside the selected schools were excluded from the study.

Sample size rationale. Six teachers were selected to participate in the study. While the sample size is modest, qualitative research prioritises depth and richness of data rather than statistical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample size was informed by the concept of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), which holds that the sufficient sample size depends on the specificity of the research question, the quality of participant experience, the use of established theory, and the strength of dialogue. In this study, the research question was narrowly focused, participants had direct and relevant experience, and the theoretical framework provided analytical direction factors that supported a smaller sample. The selected participants had direct experience with curriculum implementation, learner assessment, and inclusive teaching practices within rural schools, enabling them to provide detailed accounts of the support required to implement inclusive education effectively.

Saturation. Data collection continued until no substantially new codes emerged from subsequent interviews. After the fourth interview, no new codes were generated; interviews five and six confirmed existing codes without producing new conceptual categories. This point was considered indicative of code saturation the point at which no new codes are identified rather than meaning saturation, which refers to the full exploration of each code's nuances across the dataset. We acknowledge that meaning saturation may not have been achieved with six participants, and this limitation is discussed further in Section 4.9.

### *4.6. Participant Profiles*

Table 2 presents a demographic profile of the six participating teachers. Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality. All participants were qualified teachers registered with the South African Council for Educators (SACE). Their teaching experience ranged from 14 to 22 years, and all had experience teaching Grade 10 learners. Class sizes ranged from 38 to 47 learners. While all participants had some exposure to inclusive education through workshops or in-service training, none had received formal specialised training in special needs education.

**Table 2.** Participant Demographic Profile.

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Subject(s) | Grades | Years Teaching | Years in Inclusive Classrooms | Class Size | Qualification | Inclusive Training | Disability Profiles in Classroom |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T1 | Male | 42 | Sepedi, Life Orientation | 10–12 | 16 | 8 | 42 | B.Ed; B.Ed Hons (Management & Leadership) | Workshop (1 day) | Visual impairment, learning difficulties |
| T2 | Female | 48 | Sepedi (HOD) | 10–12 | 22 | 12 | 38 | B.Ed | In-service workshop | Hearing impairment, learning difficulties |
| T3 | Female | 45 | English, Life Sciences | 10–12 | 20 | 10 | 45 | B.Ed; Diploma in Adult Education | Workshop (2 days) | Physical disability, learning difficulties |
| T4 | Male | 47 | Mathematics, Physical Sciences | 10–12 | 21 | 9 | 47 | B.Ed | None | Learning difficulties, attention difficulties |

**Table 2.** *Cont.*

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Subject(s) | Grades | Years Teaching | Years in Inclusive Classrooms | Class Size | Qualification | Inclusive Training | Disability Profiles in Classroom |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T5 | Female | 39 | Life Sciences, Agricultural Sciences | 10–12 | 14 | 6 | 40 | B.Ed; B.Ed Hons (Curriculum Studies) | Work-shop (1 day) | Visual impairment, learning difficulties |
| T6 | Male | 43 | History, Geography | 10–12 | 18 | 7 | 39 | B.Ed | In-service workshop | Hearing impairment, behavioural challenges |

Note. Years in inclusive classrooms refers to the number of years participants reported teaching learners with identified diverse educational needs in mainstream classrooms. Disability profiles refer to the categories of learner needs participants identified in their classrooms, as reported by teachers; these were not independently verified through diagnostic assessment.

### *4.7. Data Collection*

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author during the study period. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided sufficient flexibility to explore participants' experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interview guide comprising open-ended questions was developed from the study objectives and the theoretical framework to explore teachers' experiences of curriculum support, assessment practices, stakeholder collaboration, and institutional support for inclusive education.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 min and was conducted at a venue convenient to the participant within the school environment. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure an accurate record of the discussions. Field notes were also maintained to document contextual observations and non-verbal responses that complemented the interview data.

#### 4.7.1. Field Notes

Field notes were compiled during and immediately after each interview. They recorded (a) contextual observations, such as classroom conditions, availability of teaching materials, and school infrastructure; (b) non-verbal responses, such as hesitation, emotional expressions, or visible discomfort; and (c) the researcher's emerging reflections on the interview process. These field notes were used to contextualise participants' accounts and are integrated into the findings section where relevant.

#### 4.7.2. Interview Language and Transcription

Interviews were conducted in English, which was the language of instruction in the participating schools and the language in which all participants reported professional proficiency. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were checked against the audio recordings for accuracy before analysis. No translation was required, as participants chose to respond in English. Two participants occasionally used Sepedi phrases to express particular concepts; these were translated by the first author, who is a Sepedi speaker, and the translations were checked by a colleague for accuracy.

### *4.8. Data Analysis*

The interview transcripts were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the six-step approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). An inductive approach was adopted because it allowed themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being

imposed from predetermined categories. However, the theoretical framework functioned as a sensitising lens rather than a deductive coding scheme, directing attention to experiences of support, collaboration, and contextual constraints without predetermining the specific content of themes.

The analysis followed these steps:

Familiarisation: Repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to achieve immersion in the data.

Initial coding: Generation of codes identifying meaningful units of information relevant to the research questions.

Theme development: Grouping related codes into broader categories and candidate themes.

Reviewing themes: Comparing candidate themes across all transcripts to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between themes.

Defining and naming themes: Refining theme definitions and selecting concise, descriptive names.

Interpretation: Interpreting the final themes in relation to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and the existing literature on inclusive education.

This analytical process resulted in four overarching themes that explain the support teachers require for effective curriculum implementation and assessment within inclusive rural classrooms.

### *4.9. Reflexivity and Limitations*

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews and field notes. It did not include classroom observations or document analysis (e.g., review of adapted lesson plans, modified rubrics, or support folders). Claims about practices particularly one participant's reference to using Individual Education Plans (IEPs) should therefore be understood as perceived practices rather than verified classroom realities. The use of IEPs is mandated by SIAS (Department of Basic Education, 2014), but their systematic use in under-resourced rural secondary schools is atypical; this account is interpreted accordingly.

Second, the study is vulnerable to social desirability bias. Participants may have presented their practices in a favourable light, particularly regarding inclusive practices and collaboration with parents. The first author had no prior relationship with participants, but as a researcher affiliated with a South African university, she may have been perceived as an authority figure, potentially influencing responses. To mitigate this, participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time, and the interview guide included open-ended questions that invited critical reflection.

Third, the sample of six teachers from three schools in one district limits the transferability of the findings. The findings are context-specific and cannot be generalised to all rural secondary schools in South Africa. However, the detailed contextual description provided enables readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

Fourth, power relations between the researcher and participants should be acknowledged. The first author is a Sepedi-speaking woman and an Honours student at a South African university. While this positioned her as an insider in terms of language and cultural context, it also created a potential power asymmetry, as participants may have viewed her as more knowledgeable or as an evaluator. Regular debriefing sessions with the research supervisor helped the researcher reflect on these dynamics.

Fifth, code saturation rather than meaning saturation was achieved. While no new codes emerged after the fourth interview, the study may not have fully explored the nuances

of each code across the dataset. This limitation is acknowledged and suggests that further research with larger samples could deepen understanding of the support needs identified.

### 4.10. Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants during face-to-face interviews and by using verbatim quotations to accurately represent participants' perspectives. The use of field notes provided contextual corroboration of participants' accounts.

Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and study procedures, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a transparent audit trail documenting the research procedures, data collection, coding, and theme development.

Confirmability was promoted through reflexive note-taking and careful adherence to the interview data during analysis, thereby ensuring that the findings reflected participants' experiences rather than researchers' assumptions.

Recognising that the first author conducted the interviews and analysis, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process by critically reflecting on potential researcher influence during data collection and interpretation. Regular discussions among the research team further strengthened the consistency and credibility of the analytical process.

### 4.11. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Limpopo ethics committee (TREC/850/2024: PG) before data collection commenced. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the Limpopo Department of Education and the participating schools. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before the interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used during transcription and reporting, while all interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the research team.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings derived from semi-structured interviews and field notes collected from six teachers in three rural secondary schools in the Sekhukhune District. The findings are organised around four themes that emerged from the inductive thematic analysis:

1. Inadequate Inclusive Support Systems
2. Limited Stakeholder Collaboration
3. Limited Curriculum Support
4. Structural Constraints and Limited Flexibility in Assessment Practices

Each theme is presented with (a) an analytic summary, (b) longer verbatim excerpts from participants, (c) analytic commentary linking the excerpt to the support need, and (d) a synthesis table mapping barriers to corresponding support needs. Field note observations are integrated where relevant. Pseudonyms (T1–T6) are used throughout.

Note on language. The findings report what participants described. Terms such as "participants described," "participants perceived," and "participants identified" are

used deliberately to reflect the study's qualitative, interpretive orientation and to avoid overclaiming causal relationships.

### *5.2. Coding Tree and Theme Development*

To demonstrate transparency in the thematic analysis process, Figure 2 presents a simplified coding tree illustrating how initial codes were grouped into categories and then developed into themes.

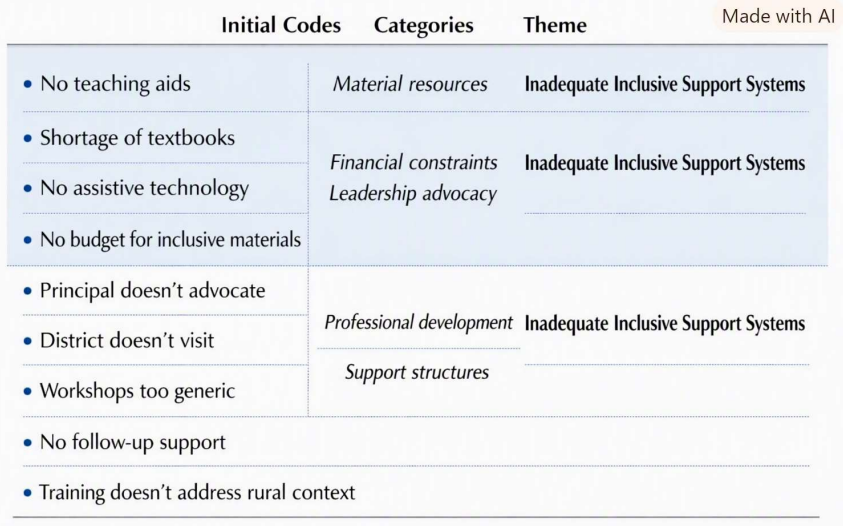



**Figure 2.** Coding Tree Example (Theme 1: Inadequate Inclusive Support Systems).

This coding tree illustrates how codes that initially appeared disparate ranging from material resources to leadership advocacy were grouped into broader categories that collectively described a fragmented support system. The theme captures a latent meaning that transcends individual codes: that teachers experience support as episodic, generic, and disconnected from their rural realities.

### *5.3. Theme 1: Inadequate Inclusive Support Systems*

Participants described institutional support as fragmented and insufficient. They identified three interrelated support needs: (a) practical teaching resources, (b) context-specific professional development, and (c) active leadership advocacy. While Theme 1 focuses on institutional resources, leadership, and professional development, Theme 2 (presented below) focuses specifically on the communication and participation mechanisms through which collaboration occurs or fails to occur.

#### 5.3.1. Teaching Resources

Participants consistently reported that the absence of basic teaching materials constrained their ability to differentiate instruction. T1 explained:

> "We need more teaching aids and training workshops that are practical and relevant to our rural context. The workshops we attend are designed for urban schools with resources we don't have. We need someone to show us how to adapt what we have how to make a plan with nothing."

This account suggests that teachers' support needs are not simply for "more resources" but for contextually relevant guidance on how to differentiate instruction with limited materials. T1 does not merely request resources; they request practical strategies for resource-scarce environments. This distinction is important: while material resources are necessary,

teachers also require professional guidance on how to adapt instruction when resources are unavailable.

Field notes recorded that during the interview at T1's school, the classroom had no functioning electricity, and textbooks were shared among groups of three to four learners. These contextual observations corroborate participants' accounts of resource scarcity.

#### 5.3.2. Leadership Advocacy

T2 described the principal's role in mediating access to district support:

> "Support from school leadership is crucial. We need them to advocate for our needs at a district level. When the principal speaks for us, the district listens. When we speak alone, nothing happens. It's like we don't exist."

This account points to a support need for leadership-mediated advocacy a form of institutional scaffolding that connects teachers to district-level resources. T2's statement that teachers "don't exist" without leadership advocacy suggests that support is not distributed equitably but depends on individual principals' willingness and capacity to advocate. This finding resonates with Tepe and Olcars (2026), who found that administrator role-modelling behaviours directly shape teachers' professional development.

#### 5.3.3. Financial Constraints

T5 emphasised the structural nature of funding limitations:

> "Funding is a big issue. We cannot implement any innovative programs without financial backing. It is important for everyone involved including teachers, parents, and community members to understand inclusive education, not just the teachers. But how do we do that without money for meetings, for transport, for materials?"

This account illustrates that sustainable implementation of inclusive education depends on adequate financial investment and a shared understanding of inclusive principles among all stakeholders. T5 recognises that improving teacher capacity alone is insufficient if schools lack the financial resources required to procure teaching materials, provide professional development, and establish effective support programmes (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Barriers and Corresponding Support Needs (Theme 1).

| Barrier | Support Need |
| --- | --- |
| Limited teaching aids | Practical, context-relevant resource adaptation guidance |
| Generic professional development | Context-specific, continuous training |
| Weak leadership advocacy | Leadership training in inclusive advocacy |
| Financial constraints | Ring-fenced funding for inclusive resources |
| No follow-up support | Ongoing mentoring and coaching |

Viewed through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these findings demonstrate that teachers require supportive social and institutional environments to facilitate inclusive teaching and learning. The emphasis on leadership, collaboration, professional development, and access to resources reflects the importance of social mediation in strengthening teachers' capacity to support learners with diverse educational needs.

### *5.4. Theme 2: Limited Stakeholder Collaboration*

Participants described collaboration as an essential component of implementing inclusive education. However, they indicated that collaboration among teachers, parents, school

leadership, community members, and specialist support personnel was often inconsistent and inadequately structured. While Theme 1 focused on institutional resources, leadership, and professional development, Theme 2 focuses specifically on the communication and participation mechanisms through which collaboration occurs or fails to occur.

#### 5.4.1. Collaboration with Parents and Specialists

T1 highlighted the benefits of collaboration with parents and specialist professionals:

> "When we collaborate with parents and specialists, we can create a more supportive environment for our students. But the specialists are far away. We see them maybe once a term, if we're lucky. And parents many work in the cities and only come home at month-end. So we're on our own most of the time."

This account suggests that teachers recognise inclusive education as a shared responsibility that extends beyond the classroom. However, T1's reference to specialists being "far away" and parents working in cities points to structural barriers that constrain collaboration geographical distance, migrant labour patterns, and limited specialist availability.

#### 5.4.2. Parental Involvement: Structural Barriers, Not Hesitancy

T6 described the challenges of engaging parents:

> "I encourage open dialogue with parents, but many are hesitant to participate. Some don't understand the curriculum they didn't finish school themselves. Others speak different languages. We have a supportive community, but there is a need for structured collaboration with local organizations."

Rather than interpreting this as parental "hesitancy" or lack of interest, T6's account points to structural barriers: low formal literacy levels, language diversity, and the absence of structured mechanisms for engagement. The phrase "they didn't finish school themselves" suggests that parents may feel intimidated by secondary-school curriculum content, while "different languages" points to communication barriers that schools have not adequately addressed. This finding suggests that schools need to develop flexible, multilingual communication mechanisms rather than placing responsibility on parents to overcome these barriers alone.

#### 5.4.3. Peer Collaboration

T5 described the value of peer collaboration but noted its limitations:

> "I collaborate closely with my colleagues, but we need to involve parents more in the process. We share ideas during break, but it's informal. We don't have structured time for planning together, and the district doesn't facilitate anything."

This account highlights that professional collaboration within schools alone is insufficient for effective inclusive education. While informal peer collaboration provides some support, the absence of structured planning time and district facilitation limits its potential. T5's account suggests a support need for formalised collaborative structures scheduled planning time, district-facilitated professional learning communities, and structured mechanisms for sharing expertise (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Barriers and Corresponding Support Needs (Theme 2).

| Barrier | Support Need |
| --- | --- |
| Specialists distant | Mobile specialist support; regular visits |
| Parents working away | Flexible meeting times; multilingual communication |
| Parental literacy barriers | Accessible communication; community liaison roles |
| Informal peer collaboration only | Structured planning time; professional learning communities |
| No district facilitation | District-supported collaboration mechanisms |
| No formal community partnerships | Formalised school–community partnership agreements |

Viewed through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these findings demonstrate that learning and development are strengthened through social interaction and collaboration among multiple stakeholders. However, in rural contexts, structural conditions constrain the social mediation that Vygotsky saw as central to development. When specialist personnel are distant, parents are absent due to migrant labour, and structured collaboration mechanisms are absent, teachers are left without the collective expertise that would enable them to address diverse learner needs.

### *5.5. Theme 3: Limited Curriculum Support*

Participants consistently reported that limited curriculum support constrained their ability to implement inclusive education effectively. Although some teachers had attended professional development programmes, they perceived these opportunities as infrequent, generic, and insufficiently responsive to the realities of teaching in rural inclusive classrooms. Participants emphasised the need for continuous, practical, and context-specific training.

#### 5.5.1. Generic Professional Development

T1 reflected on the limited relevance of previous training:

> "I attended a workshop last year, but it didn't address the unique challenges we face in our rural school. They showed us videos of well-resourced classrooms with smartboards and teaching assistants. I came back and looked at my 45 learners sharing 12 textbooks and thought how does this apply to me? It felt like a waste of time."

This account indicates that teachers value professional development but question its effectiveness when it is not tailored to the contextual realities of rural schools. Generic workshops appear to provide limited practical guidance for addressing the curriculum challenges associated with learner diversity. T1's reference to "videos of well-resourced classrooms" suggests a disconnect between training content and rural realities that leaves teachers feeling ill-equipped.

#### 5.5.2. Need for Practical, Ongoing Support

T3 emphasised the need for practical rather than purely theoretical training:

> "Theoretical knowledge is not enough. We need hands-on experience and ongoing support. Someone to come into my classroom and show me how to adapt a lesson for a learner who can't see the board. Not just tell me it's important show me how."

T4 added:

> "There are few professional development opportunities in our area. It often feels like an afterthought like we're at the end of the list. The district focuses on urban schools first, and we get whatever is left over."

These accounts suggest that teachers require sustained professional support rather than one-off training initiatives. Practical learning experiences, mentoring, and continuous guidance were viewed as essential for developing the confidence and competence needed to implement inclusive curriculum practices effectively. T4's reference to being "at the end of the list" points to a perception of systemic neglect of rural schools in professional development planning.

#### 5.5.3. Collaborative Professional Learning

T5 recognised the value of collaborative professional learning:

> "We learn collectively as a team through sharing experiences and challenges. But it's not enough. We need someone from outside someone who knows more than us to guide us. Otherwise we're just reinforcing each other's mistakes."

This finding illustrates that informal peer collaboration provides opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas, but it has limits. T5's reference to "reinforcing each other's mistakes" suggests that without access to more knowledgeable others curriculum specialists, subject advisors, or expert mentors, teachers may lack the guidance needed to develop effective inclusive practices (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Barriers and Corresponding Support Needs (Theme 3).

| Barrier | Support Need |
| --- | --- |
| Generic workshops | Context-specific, practical training |
| No hands-on support | Classroom-based mentoring and coaching |
| Few professional development opportunities | Regular, scheduled training in rural areas |
| Informal peer learning only | Expert guidance from curriculum specialists |
| No follow-up support | Ongoing professional learning communities |
| Training does not address CAPS–inclusion tension | Guidance on differentiating CAPS content |

Viewed through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these findings demonstrate that teachers' professional learning is strengthened through social interaction, collaboration, and guidance from more knowledgeable others. Professional development workshops, mentoring, peer learning, and expert support function as forms of professional scaffolding that enable teachers to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for implementing inclusive curriculum practices. Where such support is limited as in rural school teachers' capacity to respond effectively to learner diversity is constrained.

### *5.6. Theme 4: Structural Constraints and Limited Flexibility in Assessment Practices*

Participants indicated that existing assessment practices were often insufficiently responsive to the diverse learning needs of learners in inclusive classrooms. They emphasised the need for flexible and learner-centred assessment approaches that recognise individual strengths, monitor learner progress, and inform differentiated instruction. The theme was renamed from "Inappropriate Assessment Practices" to reflect the finding that teachers are not using inappropriate practices but are constrained by structural factors CAPS requirements, large class sizes, and limited support that limit their flexibility.

#### 5.6.1. Standardised Assessment and Learner Diversity

T1 expressed concern that conventional assessment approaches do not adequately accommodate learner diversity:

> "Current assessment methods often overlook the unique strengths and challenges of each learner. We have to follow CAPS the schedules, the formal tasks, the exam requirements. But when I have a learner who can't write because of a physical disability, and the exam requires writing, what do I do? I'm told to accommodate, but the system doesn't allow it."

This account suggests that standardised assessment practices may not provide equitable opportunities for all learners to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. T1's reference to the tension between CAPS requirements and the need for accommodation points to a policy-practice gap that teachers experience as a structural constraint rather than a pedagogical failure.

#### 5.6.2. Formative Assessment and Continuous Monitoring

T2 and T5 described using continuous classroom observations and informal assessment strategies to monitor learner understanding:

> "I pay close attention to how all learners interact during lessons. Their engagement levels are a good indicator. I use quizzes and informal assessments to see how well all students understand the material. It's not formal I can't record it the way CAPS wants but it tells me what I need to know." (T2)

> "I encourage my students to express their feelings regarding classroom activities. Their feedback is invaluable. I track each student's progress over time to see if they are improving not just their marks, but their confidence, their participation." (T5)

These accounts demonstrate that teachers rely on formative assessment to monitor learner participation and understanding throughout the teaching process. Classroom observation, quizzes, and informal assessments enable teachers to identify learning difficulties early and adjust instruction to better support diverse learners. However, T2's comment that "I can't record it the way CAPS wants" points to a tension between the formative assessment teachers value and the summative, recorded assessment requirements of CAPS.

#### 5.6.3. Individual Education Plans: Perceived Practice

T4 reported using Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to guide assessment:

> "I rely on IEPs to guide my assessments and tailor instructions for students with specific needs. I have a folder for each learner with their plan, their progress, what I've tried. It helps me stay organised."

Caveat: while IEPs are mandated by SIAS (Department of Basic Education, 2014), their systematic use in under-resourced rural secondary schools is atypical. This account should be interpreted as a perceived practice rather than a verified systemic reality. The study did not include document analysis to verify the existence or quality of IEPs, and T4's account may reflect individual initiative rather than school-wide practice.

#### 5.6.4. Collaborative Assessment

T6 advocated for collaborative evaluation:

> "Working with my colleagues to assess the overall inclusivity of our practices is key. It allows for diverse perspectives. We sit together after exams and ask: did this assessment allow all learners to show what they know? Often the answer is no—but at least we're asking."

This account demonstrates that assessment is strengthened through professional collaboration, enabling teachers to share expertise, reflect on classroom practice, and develop more inclusive approaches to evaluating learner progress. T6's reference to asking whether assessments allowed all learners to demonstrate knowledge suggests a reflective, inquiry-oriented approach to assessment that aligns with inclusive principles (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Barriers and Corresponding Support Needs (Theme 4).

| Barrier | Support Need |
| --- | --- |
| Standardised assessment overlooks diversity | Flexible assessment frameworks; alternative formats |
| CAPS requirements constrain accommodation | Guidance on balancing CAPS and inclusion |
| Formative assessment not recognised | Assessment policy that values formative evidence |
| IEP use is individual, not systemic | Training and support for IEP development |
| Large class sizes limit individual assessment | Additional support staff; smaller classes |
| No moderation of inclusive assessment | Professional learning communities for assessment moderation |

Viewed through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these findings suggest that assessment should function as a supportive process that informs learning rather than merely measuring achievement. Continuous observation, learner feedback, collaborative evaluation, and the use of IEPs represent forms of instructional scaffolding that enable teachers to identify learners' developmental needs and provide appropriate support within their Zone of Proximal Development. However, CAPS requirements and large class sizes constrain teachers' capacity to implement these approaches consistently.

### *5.7. Field Note Integration*

Field notes recorded across the three schools provided contextual corroboration of participants' accounts:

- School A: The classroom observed had broken windows, no ceiling boards, and a single power outlet that was not functional. Textbooks were shared among groups of three to four learners. These observations corroborated T1's account of resource scarcity and T2's reference to being "at the end of the list" for district support.
- School B: The interview venue was a small office adjacent to the staffroom. During the interview, two teachers interrupted to ask for assistance with a learner who was experiencing a behavioural crisis. This observation contextualised participants' accounts of feeling "stretched too thin" and lacking support to address diverse behavioural needs.
- School C: The school had a ramp at the entrance but no accessible toilets, and the ramp led only to the administration block, not to classrooms. This observation contextualised T1's account of physical accessibility challenges and the gap between policy commitments (SIAS) and infrastructure realities.

These field note observations are integrated into the findings to provide contextual depth and to triangulate participants' accounts.

### *5.8. Summary of Findings*

The four themes presented in this chapter describe a coherent picture of the support teachers require for inclusive curriculum and assessment in rural secondary schools. Inadequate inclusive support systems, limited stakeholder collaboration, limited curriculum support, and structural constraints in assessment collectively constrain teachers' capacity to respond effectively to learner diversity. Each theme maps barriers to corresponding support needs, and field note observations provide contextual corroboration.

The findings suggest that effective inclusive education in rural schools requires coordinated institutional, professional, and collaborative support. Teacher professional development, stakeholder collaboration, curriculum resources, and inclusive assessment practices are essential components of a supportive ecosystem. However, these components are currently fragmented and insufficiently aligned with the rural realities teachers face. The discussion chapter that follows interprets these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature.

## 6. Discussion

### *6.1. Introduction*

This chapter interprets the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature. The discussion is organised around the four themes presented in the findings, followed by a synthesis that examines how rural institutional isolation and centralized curriculum prescriptions interact to constrain inclusive curriculum and assessment practices. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the study's contribution and limitations.

### *6.2. Theme 1: Inadequate Inclusive Support Systems*

Participants described institutional support as fragmented, episodic, and insufficiently aligned with rural realities. They identified three interrelated support needs: practical teaching resources, context-specific professional development, and active leadership advocacy. These findings suggest that inclusive education policy commitments are not matched by the institutional conditions necessary for implementation.

The finding that teachers require practical, context-relevant resource adaptation guidance rather than simply "more resources" aligns with Ledwaba and Sefotho's (2024) argument that curriculum adaptation in South African rural schools remains fragmented because teachers lack the training to interpret CAPS requirements through an inclusive lens. Participants in this study did not merely request materials; they requested guidance on how to differentiate instruction with limited materials a distinction that has implications for professional development design.

Participants' emphasis on leadership advocacy resonates with Tepe and Olcars' (2026) finding that school administrators' proactive, learning-oriented role-modelling behaviours are positively associated with teachers' professional development. In this study, T2's statement that "when the principal speaks for us, the district listens" suggests that leadership functions as a mediating resource that connects teachers to district-level support. Where leadership advocacy is absent, teachers may be left without access to the resources and support they need. This finding is particularly significant in rural schools, where district offices are often geographically distant and teachers may have few opportunities to advocate for themselves directly.

The finding that financial constraints shape inclusive education implementation supports Chitiyo et al.'s (2026) and Mpu and Adu's (2021) observations that inadequate funding and resource limitations continue to hinder inclusive education in South African schools. However, participants in this study extended this observation by noting that funding constraints affect not only material resources but also the capacity to build stakeholder understanding as T5 noted, "how do we do that without money for meetings, for transport, for materials?" This suggests that financial investment is necessary not only for procurement but also for the relational and communicative work that inclusive education requires.

Viewed through the lens of professional scaffolding, these findings illustrate that teachers require structured support from district officials, school leaders, and specialists to develop inclusive practices. However, in rural schools, this scaffolding is often weak or absent. The absence of leadership advocacy, contextualised professional development, and

adequate resources means that teachers are left to navigate inclusive education largely on their own without the social mediation that Vygotsky (1978) saw as central to development.

### *6.3. Theme 2: Limited Stakeholder Collaboration*

Participants described collaboration as important but inconsistent and inadequately structured. They identified support needs for formalised collaborative mechanisms, including scheduled planning time, district-facilitated professional learning communities, multilingual communication with parents, and structured partnerships with external organisations.

The finding that parental involvement is constrained by structural barriers migrant labour, low formal literacy levels, language diversity, and geographical distance supports Govender et al.'s (2023) observation that rural parental engagement is shaped by factors beyond individual motivation. Rather than interpreting limited participation as "hesitancy," this study suggests that schools need to develop flexible, multilingual communication mechanisms that accommodate the realities of rural family life. T6's account "some don't understand the curriculum they didn't finish school themselves" points to the intimidating nature of secondary-school curriculum content for parents with limited formal education, a factor that has received limited attention in the literature.

Participants' accounts of informal peer collaboration ("we share ideas during break") suggest that teachers value collegial support but lack structured opportunities for collaborative planning. T5's statement that "we don't have structured time for planning together, and the district doesn't facilitate anything" points to a gap in institutional support for collaboration. This finding extends Kaushik's (2024) and Remorosa et al.'s (2024) work on stakeholder collaboration by showing that collaboration requires not only willingness but also structural enablement time, facilitation, and institutional commitment.

Viewed through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these findings demonstrate that social mediation is constrained by structural conditions. When specialist personnel are distant, parents are absent due to migrant labour, and structured collaboration mechanisms are absent, teachers are left without the collective expertise that would enable them to address diverse learner needs effectively. This finding illustrates how rural institutional isolation shapes the possibilities for collaborative learning.

### *6.4. Theme 3: Limited Curriculum Support*

Participants described professional development as infrequent, generic, and disconnected from rural realities. They identified support needs for context-specific, practical training, classroom-based mentoring, expert guidance, and ongoing professional learning communities.

The finding that generic workshops fail to address rural challenges supports Sepadi's (2025) and Govender et al.'s (2023) observations that professional development in South Africa is often designed for urban, well-resourced contexts. T1's account "they showed us videos of well-resourced classrooms with smartboards and teaching assistants" illustrates a disconnect between training content and rural realities that leaves teachers feeling ill-equipped rather than empowered. This finding suggests that professional development must be contextualised designed with and for rural teachers, addressing the specific constraints they face.

Participants' emphasis on hands-on, classroom-based support ("someone to come into my classroom and show me") resonates with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, applied here to teachers' professional learning. Teachers require guided practice with more knowledgeable others curriculum specialists, subject advisors, or experienced mentors who can model inclusive practices in real classroom contexts. The absence of

such support in rural schools means that teachers may be left to develop inclusive practices through trial and error, without the scaffolding that would enable effective learning.

T5's observation that "we're just reinforcing each other's mistakes" points to the limits of peer learning when teachers lack access to expert guidance. While collaborative learning is valuable, it requires input from more knowledgeable others to avoid reproducing ineffective practices. This finding supports Hlalele et al.'s (2020) argument that support team members in rural schools often lack a shared understanding of curriculum differentiation, resulting in inconsistent implementation.

The finding that professional development is perceived as "an afterthought" (T4) points to a systemic neglect of rural schools in professional development planning. This perception aligns with Mankgele's (2024) observation that rural schools in Limpopo struggle to access the support they need to implement inclusive education effectively. It suggests that professional development must not only be redesigned but also equitably distributed across urban and rural contexts.

### *6.5. Theme 4: Structural Constraints and Limited Flexibility in Assessment Practices*

Participants described assessment as constrained by CAPS requirements, large class sizes, and limited support for flexibility. They identified support needs for flexible assessment frameworks, guidance on balancing CAPS and inclusion, recognition of formative assessment, and training in IEP development.

The finding that standardised assessment overlooks learner diversity supports Lindsay's (2019) and Tai et al.'s (2023) arguments that traditional assessment methods may not adequately reflect the capabilities of students in inclusive settings. However, participants in this study extended this observation by pointing to a policy-practice gap: T1's account "I'm told to accommodate, but the system doesn't allow it" illustrates the tension between SIAS mandates for accommodation and CAPS requirements for standardised assessment. This finding resonates with Şahin and Şentürk's (2025) finding that teachers' positive beliefs about student-centred, learning-oriented assessment are frequently constrained in practice by systemic barriers such as rigid curriculum pacing, time limitations, and overcrowded classrooms.

Participants' use of formative assessment classroom observation, quizzes, informal assessment, learner feedback, and progress monitoring demonstrates that teachers are already implementing inclusive assessment practices. However, T2's comment that "I can't record it the way CAPS wants" points to a misalignment between the formative assessment teachers value and the summative, recorded assessment requirements of CAPS. This finding suggests that assessment policy needs to recognise and value the continuous, formative evidence that teachers gather, rather than relying solely on standardised measures.

The finding that T4 uses Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to guide assessment should be interpreted as a perceived practice rather than a verified systemic reality (Reviewer 1). While IEPs are mandated by SIAS, their systematic use in under-resourced rural secondary schools is atypical. T4's account may reflect individual initiative rather than school-wide practice. However, it does suggest that when teachers have access to structured planning tools, they can use them to support inclusive assessment a finding that has implications for training and support.

Viewed through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these findings suggest that assessment should function as instructional scaffolding a supportive process that informs learning rather than merely measuring achievement. Continuous observation, learner feedback, and collaborative evaluation enable teachers to identify learners' developmental needs and provide appropriate support within their Zone of Proximal Development. However,

CAPS requirements and large class sizes constrain teachers' capacity to implement these approaches consistently.

### 6.6. The Interaction Between Rural Isolation and Centralized Curriculum Prescriptions

The findings suggest that the challenges teachers experience are not isolated pedagogical failures but reflect a systemic tension between rural institutional isolation and centralized curriculum prescriptions. CAPS establishes prescriptive content coverage, rigid pacing, and standardised assessment requirements that leave little room for the flexibility inclusive education demands. At the same time, rural schools face geographical isolation, limited specialist support, and weak institutional infrastructure that make it difficult for teachers to access the professional scaffolding they need to implement inclusive practices.

These two factors interact in ways that compound teachers' challenges:

1. CAPS pacing requirements leave little time for the differentiated instruction that inclusive education requires. Teachers in rural schools, who often have larger classes and fewer resources, experience this tension more acutely than their urban counterparts.
2. Standardised assessment requirements constrain teachers' capacity to implement the flexible, formative assessment practices they value. The tension between SIAS mandates for accommodation and CAPS requirements for standardisation is experienced as a policy contradiction that teachers must navigate without adequate guidance.
3. Rural isolation limits access to the professional scaffolding expert guidance, mentoring, collaborative planning that would enable teachers to develop contextually relevant inclusive practices. The absence of specialist support means that teachers are left to interpret and implement policy alone.
4. Weak institutional support limited leadership advocacy, inadequate resources, and insufficient professional development means that teachers lack the institutional backing they need to navigate these tensions.

This synthesis suggests that addressing the support needs identified in this study requires attention not only to individual teacher capacity but also to the structural conditions that shape what teachers can do. As Şahin and Şentürk (2025) argue, teachers' positive beliefs about inclusive assessment are frequently constrained by systemic barriers that are beyond their individual control. Similarly, participants in this study described a system that expects inclusion but does not provide the conditions necessary to achieve it.

### 6.7. Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education by demonstrating that teacher support is multidimensional and that institutional support, stakeholder collaboration, curriculum adaptation, and inclusive assessment are mutually reinforcing components of effective inclusive practice. The study's findings suggest that addressing these interconnected dimensions is essential for strengthening inclusive education in rural schools and for ensuring that policy aspirations are translated into meaningful classroom experiences for all learners.

The study also contributes to the literature by illustrating how Vygotsky's concepts may be analytically extended to teachers' professional learning. The concept of professional scaffolding the structured support that teachers receive from district officials, school leaders, peers, and specialists provides a heuristic for understanding how teachers develop inclusive practices through social interaction and guided practice. However, this is an analytical extension, not a validated theoretical proposition. The study does not claim to "extend" Vygotsky's theory; rather, it illustrates how his concepts may be heuristically applied to teachers' professional learning.

Finally, the study contributes by demonstrating the policy-practice gap in rural South African schools. The tension between White Paper 6's inclusive aspirations, CAPS's standardised requirements, and SIAS's operational mandates creates a policy contradiction that teachers must navigate without adequate support. This finding has implications for policy coherence and for the design of professional development that helps teachers navigate these tensions.

### *6.8. Limitations*

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported data from six teachers in three schools in one district. The findings are context-specific and cannot be generalised to all rural secondary schools in South Africa. Second, the study did not include classroom observations or document analysis, limiting the empirical validity of claims about classroom practices. Third, code saturation rather than meaning saturation was achieved, suggesting that further research with larger samples could deepen understanding of the support needs identified. Fourth, the study did not include the perspectives of learners, parents, or district officials, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education implementation.

These limitations notwithstanding, the study provides rich contextual insights into the support needs of teachers in rural secondary schools and contributes empirical evidence on the institutional, professional, curricular, and assessment-related support required to strengthen inclusive practice.

## 7. Conclusions

This study explored the support that teachers require regarding curriculum and assessment to facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools in the Sekhukhune District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The findings demonstrate that the successful implementation of inclusive education depends on a coordinated system of institutional, professional, and collaborative support rather than on teachers' individual efforts alone. Inadequate inclusive support systems, limited stakeholder collaboration, insufficient curriculum support, and inappropriate assessment practices emerged as interconnected barriers that constrained teachers' ability to respond effectively to learner diversity.

The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education by demonstrating that curriculum adaptation and inclusive assessment are inseparable components of teacher support within rural schooling contexts. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the findings further illustrate that teachers' professional learning is strengthened through collaboration, continuous professional development, leadership support, and engagement with parents and specialist support personnel. These forms of professional scaffolding enhance teachers' capacity to create inclusive learning environments that promote equitable participation and achievement for all learners.

The findings have important implications for policy and practice. Education authorities should prioritise sustained, context-responsive professional development, strengthen school-based support systems, improve access to curriculum and assessment resources, and establish structured partnerships among schools, families, communities, and specialist support services. Such interventions are essential for translating inclusive education policy into effective classroom practice, particularly in resource-constrained rural schools.

Although the study provides valuable insights into teachers' experiences, it was limited to six participants from rural secondary schools in one district of Limpopo Province. Consequently, the findings are context-specific and cannot be generalised to all schools or provinces. Future research should include a broader range of participants, educational

phases, and geographical contexts to examine how teacher support for curriculum and assessment differs across diverse educational settings. Comparative studies involving urban and rural schools could also provide deeper understanding of context-specific strategies for strengthening inclusive education implementation.

Overall, the study underscores that meaningful inclusive education requires sustained investment in teacher support, collaborative partnerships, and responsive curriculum and assessment practices. Strengthening these interconnected dimensions will enhance teachers' capacity to provide equitable learning opportunities and improve educational outcomes for learners with diverse educational needs.

## 8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education in rural secondary schools.

First, the Department of Basic Education should strengthen institutional support by ensuring that rural schools receive adequate teaching and learning resources, assistive technologies, and financial support necessary for implementing inclusive education. School leaders should also establish inclusive support structures that provide continuous guidance and mentoring for teachers responsible for curriculum implementation and assessment.

Second, professional development should move beyond generic workshops towards continuous, context-specific training that equips teachers with practical knowledge of curriculum differentiation, differentiated instruction, inclusive assessment, and classroom management strategies. District-based support teams and subject advisors should provide ongoing coaching and mentoring to reinforce professional learning within schools.

Third, schools should strengthen collaboration among teachers, parents, specialist support personnel, community organisations, and district education officials. Formal partnerships should be established to facilitate regular communication, shared decision-making, and coordinated learner support. Such collaborative structures would enhance the implementation of inclusive education by drawing on the expertise and resources of multiple stakeholders.

Fourth, assessment practices should become more flexible and responsive to learner diversity. Teachers should be supported to use formative assessment, continuous learner monitoring, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and differentiated assessment strategies that recognise individual learning needs and inform instructional decision-making. Professional learning communities should also be encouraged to promote collaborative moderation, reflective practice, and the sharing of inclusive assessment strategies.

Finally, future research should extend this study by including larger samples across multiple provinces and educational phases. Comparative studies involving rural and urban schools would provide a broader understanding of contextual differences in teacher support for inclusive education. Further research should also examine the effectiveness of targeted professional development programmes and collaborative support models in improving teachers' curriculum implementation and inclusive assessment practices.

Implementing these recommendations has the potential to strengthen teacher capacity, improve curriculum delivery and assessment practices, and enhance equitable learning opportunities for all learners in inclusive rural secondary schools.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, K.M. (Katlego Magabane), M.S. and K.M. (Karabo Molapo); Methodology, K.M. (Karabo Molapo); Validation, M.S.; Formal analysis, M.S.; Investigation, K.M. (Katlego Magabane); Resources, K.M. (Katlego Magabane); Data curation, K.M. (Katlego Magabane) and M.S.; Writing—original draft, K.M. (Katlego Magabane); Writing—review & editing, K.M. (Karabo Molapo); Supervision, M.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the University of Limpopo and was approved by the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC), University of Limpopo (protocol code TREC/850/2024: PG) on 20 May 2024. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the Limpopo Department of Basic Education and the participating schools.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy restrictions. The study involved a small number of teachers from identified rural schools, and making the interview data publicly available could compromise participant confidentiality. Data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical restriction.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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