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## Exploring Pedagogical Practices for Diverse Learners in Foundation Phase: A Case of a Combined Suburban School in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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### Abstract

This article explores pedagogical practices for diverse learners in the foundation phase at a combined suburban school in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The problem addressed is the challenge of ensuring effective teaching strategies that support literacy development among learners from varied socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The article aims to evaluate the effectiveness of current pedagogical practices and identify strategies to enhance literacy outcomes for these diverse learners. The theoretical framework guiding the study is based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and differentiated instruction. The research adopts a qualitative method approach within a case study design, using qualitative data collection methods, including interviews, focus groups, classroom observations. The article's population consisted of teachers and learners at the school, with purposive sampling used to select participants who could provide relevant insights. Data were gathered from 10 Foundation Phase teachers. The data analysis was conducted through thematic coding for qualitative data. The study is delimited to one suburban school in Limpopo Province of South Africa and focuses specifically on the foundation phase. The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study. The study found that differentiated instruction is limited by large class sizes, scarce resources, and the impact of socioeconomic status and home literacy environments on students' literacy development. Based on these findings, the study recommends enhancing teacher professional development, improving resource allocation, strengthening home-school partnerships, and addressing classroom management challenges. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of adapting pedagogical practices to support diverse learners and improve literacy outcomes, advocating for continued efforts to ensure inclusive and effective education.

**Keywords:** *Pedagogical practices, Diverse learners, Literacy development, Differentiated instruction, Inclusive education*

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### 1. Introduction and Background

The foundation phase is essential for a child's academic development as it provides the foundation for acquiring key literacy skills. This phase is critical for building the foundational blocks necessary for lifelong learning. However, in

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diverse educational settings such as suburban schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa, teachers face significant challenges due to varying socioeconomic backgrounds, diverse cultural differences, and different levels of parental involvement. These challenges can make it difficult to provide high-quality education that meets the diverse needs of all learners, particularly in terms of literacy development.

This article explores how pedagogical practices can be adapted to support the learning needs of students in these diverse environments. The focus is on a combined suburban school in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, with an emphasis on differentiated instruction as a strategy to address the varied learning needs of students. By examining how teachers in this setting implement differentiated instruction, the study aims to identify strategies that could enhance literacy outcomes and improve teaching practices. The goal is to provide practical insights and recommendations for policies and strategies that promote effective, inclusive, and equitable education in classrooms that cater to diverse learners.

In this article, diversity encompasses various aspects, including race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, learning styles, and cultural differences. These elements significantly influence the educational experience and must be considered in the classroom. The recognition that diversity extends beyond race is crucial, as factors such as language, religion, and economic background also shape how students learn and engage in the classroom. These ideas align with current educational policies in South Africa, which emphasize inclusive and equitable practices in education ([Department of Basic Education, 2020](#)).

The South African government has committed to inclusive education through policies such as the Inclusive Education Policy ([DoE, 2015](#)), which ensures that all learners, regardless of their background or ability, have the right to quality education. While significant progress has been made towards implementing inclusive education, many teachers still face challenges due to a lack of specialized training and limited resources. As a result, despite the existence of policies, the implementation of inclusive practices in classrooms often falls short, making it difficult for teachers to effectively meet the diverse needs of their learners.

The school under study reflects a high level of diversity, with learners from a range of backgrounds and differing learning needs. These include learners with special educational needs, learners with limited English proficiency, gifted learners, and those considered at risk for various reasons. The diversity is further complicated by the presence of multiple languages and religions, as South Africa recognizes eleven official languages, each with its own cultural significance. This diversity presents a challenge for teachers who must address the individual needs of each student while maintaining an inclusive environment that supports all learners. Research has shown that many schools inadvertently fail to address the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, particularly through assessments that do not recognize home languages and teaching practices that do not build on students' cultural strengths ([Pillay, 2022](#)). Traditional instructional methods may not always align with the learning styles and preferences of diverse learners, which can hinder their academic success. Large class sizes make it harder for teachers to give each student the individual attention they need to succeed. This study aims to explore the challenges and opportunities in adapting pedagogical practices to better support diverse learners in the foundation phase, with a particular focus on improving literacy outcomes. By investigating the strategies employed by teachers in a suburban school in Limpopo, the study aims to offer recommendations that will enhance teaching effectiveness and ensure all students, regardless of their backgrounds, can achieve academic success.

## 2. Problem Statement

In South African suburban schools, particularly in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, teachers in the Foundation Phase face significant challenges in addressing the diverse learning needs of students. These challenges are exacerbated by factors such as large class sizes, limited resources, varying levels of parental involvement, and the socio-economic and cultural differences among learners. While differentiated instruction is widely recognized as a key strategy for accommodating these diverse needs, many teachers struggle to implement it effectively due to a lack of adequate training, resources, and support. Consequently, students in such settings often face barriers to their literacy development, which can hinder their academic progress and long-term educational outcomes. This study seeks to explore how pedagogical practices, specifically differentiated instruction, can be optimized to support diverse learners in the Foundation Phase and enhance literacy development in these challenging educational environments.

### 3. Aim of the Article

This article explores and evaluates the pedagogical practices used to support diverse learners in the foundation phase at a combined suburban school in Limpopo Province, South Africa. It seeks to identify strategies to enhance literacy development and improve teaching practices to meet better the varied needs of learners from different socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

### 4. Research Questions

- How do teachers in the foundation phase adapt their teaching methods to cater to the diverse needs of learners in a suburban school in Limpopo Province?
- What are the challenges faced by teachers when implementing differentiated instruction for diverse learners in the classroom?
- How do socioeconomic status and home literacy environments impact literacy development in foundation phase learners?
- What strategies can be recommended to improve teaching practices and support diverse learners in the foundation phase?

### 5. Conceptualization of Differentiated Instruction

*Differentiated Instruction* is an approach to teaching that involves adapting content, processes, and products based on students' individual needs, interests, and learning profiles. The goal is to ensure that all students, regardless of their academic level or background, have access to appropriate learning experiences that support their growth and development. Differentiated instruction considers the diversity of learners, including differences in abilities, prior knowledge, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. In classrooms with diverse learners, such as those in the Foundation Phase, differentiated instruction is particularly important for addressing the challenges posed by large class sizes, varying levels of resources, and the need to support students from multiple socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Tomlinson, 2021).

This teaching strategy is designed to promote inclusivity by providing multiple pathways for students to access learning and express their understanding, thus fostering an environment where all students can succeed. By employing differentiated instruction, teachers can create more equitable learning opportunities, helping to bridge gaps in literacy development and address the specific needs of each learner, particularly in diverse educational settings such as suburban schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2020).

Differentiated instruction is not a one-size-fits-all method; rather, it is a flexible approach that considers factors like students' readiness to learn, their interests, and how they engage with the material. Teachers who use this approach adjust their teaching strategies to meet the varied needs of their students, whether through varied groupings, diverse instructional methods, or different types of assessments. This approach ensures that all learners, regardless of their background or ability, are given opportunities to reach their full potential (Subban, 2022a).

### 6. Theoretical Framework

This article draws upon several key theories that emphasize the importance of inclusive education and effective pedagogical practices for diverse learners. The primary theoretical framework guiding this research is *Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning* (Vygotsky, 1978), which highlights the importance of social interaction and cultural context in the learning process. Vygotsky's theory posits that learning is a social process, and it is through interactions with more knowledgeable others (such as teachers and peers) that learners internalize new knowledge. In a diverse classroom setting, where students come from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, Vygotsky's concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* plays a critical role. Teachers must identify students' current levels of understanding and scaffold instruction to help them move toward higher levels of proficiency, which can be facilitated through differentiated instruction.

In conjunction with Vygotsky's theory, this study also incorporates *Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Model* (Tomlinson, 2014), which provides a practical framework for tailoring instruction to meet the varied learning needs of students. Tomlinson emphasizes that teachers should modify content, processes, and products based on learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In the context of the Foundation Phase in Limpopo Province, this model supports the notion that individualized teaching strategies can help bridge gaps in literacy development and create more

inclusive learning environments. Differentiated instruction, therefore, enables teachers to address the diverse needs of learners while fostering an equitable and supportive classroom environment.

This research is grounded in the principles of Inclusive Education, particularly the framework outlined in the South African Inclusive Education Policy (Department of Education, 2015). This policy promotes the inclusion of all learners, regardless of their background, abilities, or challenges, in the general education system. The policy's emphasis on equity, access, and support for diverse learners aligns with the goals of differentiated instruction, which seeks to ensure that all students, regardless of their starting points, can succeed academically. As such, the theoretical foundation for this study integrates the perspectives of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Tomlinson's differentiated instruction model, and the principles of inclusive education, aiming to offer practical solutions for effective teaching practices in diverse Foundation Phase classrooms.

## 7. Literature Review

This literature review focuses on differentiated instruction in diverse classrooms, especially in the Foundation Phase. It also examines how this strategy adapts teaching methods, content, and assessments to meet students' varied needs, including differences in abilities, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. The review highlights the benefits and challenges of implementing differentiated instruction, particularly in relation to South Africa's inclusive education policies. It also explores how teachers' perceptions of classroom diversity influence their ability to implement inclusive teaching practices effectively.

### 7.1. Differentiated Instruction in Diverse Classrooms

Differentiated instruction (DI) is a teaching approach that adjusts teaching methods, learning materials, and assessments to meet the diverse needs of learners. In the Foundation Phase, DI is important because students have different abilities, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. Tomlinson (2021) explains that DI involves changing content, teaching methods, and learning outcomes to provide the best learning experiences for all students. According to Florian and Black-Hawkins (2020), DI helps improve student engagement and academic success by offering personalized learning experiences.

In South Africa, especially in the Limpopo Province, applying DI brings both challenges and opportunities. Mabasa-Manganyi (2023) studied how Foundation Phase teachers in rural areas understand and use inclusive teaching strategies. The study found that teachers' knowledge of inclusive teaching is influenced by their understanding of teaching methods, professional training, reflective teaching, and lesson planning. However, the study also showed that the lack of teacher training workshops and low parental involvement make it difficult to apply DI effectively. The study suggests regular teacher training and involving parents to improve inclusive teaching in rural schools.

Similarly, Mnyamana *et al.* (2024) investigated the knowledge and understanding of DI among Grade 6 teachers in the O.R. Tambo Inland District of South Africa. The study found that many teachers do not fully understand DI or how to use it in their classrooms. This highlights the need for comprehensive training and professional development to help teachers more effectively address learner diversity.

Sibanda (2021) explored the views of Foundation Phase teachers on DI in a school in the Tshwane South District of Gauteng Province. The study found that although teachers understood the importance of DI due to the diverse student population, they faced several challenges. These challenges included a lack of resources, large class sizes, and limited training. The study recommends providing more support to teachers to help them apply DI effectively.

Mabasa-Manganyi *et al.* (2022) examined how primary school teachers in Limpopo Province create learning environments to support diversity. The study found that although teachers knew about inclusive education policies, their understanding was based on the medical model of disability rather than the social model. The study recommends improving teachers' understanding of inclusive education and promoting cooperation among parents, teachers, and other stakeholders.

These studies highlight the need for continuous teacher training and support to implement DI successfully in the Foundation Phase. Overcoming these challenges is important to create inclusive learning environments that meet the needs of all students.

### 7.2. Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Despite the benefits of differentiated instruction, teachers face several challenges in its implementation, such as large class sizes, limited resources, and a lack of professional development opportunities. These challenges hinder their

ability to provide tailored instruction to each learner (Subban, 2022b). Large class sizes make it difficult for teachers to give individual attention to students and design personalized learning experiences (Smith *et al.*, 2021). Limited resources, including teaching materials and technological support, further constrain teachers' ability to differentiate instruction effectively (Jones and Brown, 2020).

In the South African context, factors such as socio-economic disparities and infrastructure challenges exacerbate the difficulties faced by teachers in implementing DI. A study by Khumalo and Muthukrishna (2023) found that teachers in underprivileged schools struggle to access adequate teaching resources and support, which affects their ability to cater to diverse learning needs. The study emphasizes the need for government intervention and resource allocation to support effective DI practices in disadvantaged areas.

Professional development opportunities for teachers remain inadequate, with many teachers lacking the necessary training and knowledge to implement DI strategies effectively (Maringe and Moletsane, 2021). The absence of ongoing professional learning programs leaves teachers ill-equipped to adapt to the changing needs of their students and apply effective differentiation strategies in their classrooms.

Another significant challenge is the resistance to change among teachers, who may prefer traditional teaching methods over differentiated approaches. Research by Banda and Mokhele (2024) indicates that some teachers view DI as time-consuming and complex, leading to reluctance in its adoption. The study recommends fostering a positive attitude towards DI through mentorship programs and collaborative learning initiatives.

Parental involvement also plays a critical role in the success of DI. However, limited parental engagement in children's education can pose challenges for teachers trying to implement differentiated strategies (Ndlovu, 2023). Parents' lack of awareness or understanding of DI may hinder collaboration between teachers and families, impacting the effectiveness of personalized learning interventions.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including enhanced teacher training, improved resource allocation, and stronger collaboration between stakeholders. By overcoming these barriers, schools can create more inclusive and effective learning environments that support all learners' unique needs.

### **7.3. Inclusive Education Policies in South Africa**

The Inclusive Education Policy (DoE, 2015) mandates that all learners, regardless of their backgrounds, should have equal access to quality education. This policy aims to address educational disparities and create an inclusive learning environment that accommodates diverse learners, including those with disabilities, learning difficulties, and socio-economic challenges. However, despite the progressive intentions of the policy, its implementation faces numerous challenges, primarily due to insufficient support structures and inadequate teacher training. Engelbrecht and Oswald (2019) argue that while the policy provides a solid framework for inclusive education, practical application is hindered by obstacles such as inadequate resources, limited teacher preparedness, and administrative inefficiencies.

One of the key provisions of the Inclusive Education Policy is the adoption of inclusive teaching practices that recognize and accommodate the diverse needs of learners. However, Prinsloo (2021) highlights that many schools, particularly those in suburban areas, struggle with limited funding and infrastructure, making it challenging to implement inclusive education effectively. Financial constraints often result in a lack of essential learning materials, assistive technologies, and accessible facilities, which are critical for supporting learners with special needs. A shortage of trained personnel worsens the problem, as teachers may lack the necessary skills and knowledge to implement differentiated instruction effectively.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2020) outlines that schools are required to establish support structures such as special needs units and learning support programs to cater to students with varying abilities. These support systems are intended to provide individualized assistance and foster an inclusive learning environment. However, research by Makoelle (2023) indicates that these structures are often underdeveloped or entirely absent in many suburban schools, limiting the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives. Schools often face logistical and financial barriers that hinder their ability to provide tailored interventions for learners with special educational needs.

Teacher training is a critical component in the successful implementation of inclusive education policies. Eloff and Kgwete (2022) emphasize the importance of continuous professional development to equip teachers with the skills required to address learner diversity. However, in many cases, teachers report feeling unprepared to handle the complexities of inclusive classrooms due to inadequate pre-service and in-service training programs. The lack of professional development opportunities further impedes the ability of teachers to adopt inclusive pedagogical approaches effectively.

Du Plessis (2023) identifies administrative barriers as a significant hindrance to policy implementation. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of coordination between stakeholders, and unclear policy guidelines contribute to inconsistencies in the application of inclusive education principles across schools. Schools often struggle with conflicting priorities, making it difficult to allocate sufficient resources and attention to inclusive education initiatives.

To address these challenges, it is essential to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach involving government agencies, teachers, parents, and community organizations. Maringe and Moletsane (2021) suggest that fostering collaboration between these stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness of inclusive education practices. Strengthening policy implementation through targeted funding, improved teacher training, and enhanced support structures can help bridge the gap between policy intentions and practical application.

#### **7.4. Teacher Perspectives on Classroom Diversity**

Teachers' perceptions of classroom diversity significantly shape their instructional practices, particularly in how they approach differentiated instruction. Research has demonstrated that teachers who value diversity are more inclined to implement inclusive teaching strategies and create positive learning environments for all students (Landsberg *et al.*, 2021). This perspective is crucial in ensuring that all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, are given the tools to succeed in an educational setting.

However, despite these positive perceptions, some teachers face challenges when addressing cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity in their classrooms. One of the major barriers is the limited availability of culturally responsive teaching materials and adequate support. Mahlo (2020) highlights how teachers often struggle with integrating diverse perspectives into the curriculum due to a lack of resources or training in multicultural education. The gap in resources and training makes it difficult for teachers to apply inclusive teaching strategies that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of their learners.

In the South African context, Walton *et al.* (2022) note that teachers often encounter diverse classrooms that include learners from various socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. While many teachers acknowledge the enriching potential of such diversity, they also express concerns about their ability to manage these differences effectively. The study suggests that many teachers feel unprepared to address the full spectrum of diversity in their classrooms, citing gaps in their professional training and support. The authors argue that professional development programs are essential for equipping teachers with the skills needed to embrace diversity and incorporate inclusive practices into their teaching.

The impact of teacher attitudes towards diversity is also significant. Nel *et al.* (2021) emphasize that teachers' perceptions of classroom diversity play a crucial role in their willingness to implement inclusive practices. Teachers with positive attitudes toward diversity are more likely to create inclusive classroom environments, offering differentiated instruction that caters to the varying needs of students. Conversely, teachers with negative perceptions may find it challenging to adapt their teaching strategies to meet the needs of a diverse student body. This discrepancy underscores the importance of fostering positive attitudes toward diversity within the teaching profession. The study also suggests that school leadership plays a pivotal role in creating an inclusive school culture by providing teachers with the necessary support and resources to address diversity effectively.

Several challenges arise from biases, stereotypes, and insufficient exposure to multicultural education. Maringe and Moletsane (2021) identify these factors as key obstacles that can hinder the successful implementation of differentiated instruction strategies. Teachers may unconsciously perpetuate inequalities in the classroom when they rely on stereotypes or biases in their teaching practices. To address these issues, the authors recommend targeted interventions such as diversity training workshops and mentorship programs to support teachers in overcoming these challenges.

Teachers' perceptions of classroom diversity significantly affect the effectiveness of inclusive education. While many teachers recognize the benefits of diversity, their ability to implement inclusive practices often depends on their attitudes, preparedness, and access to training and resources. Efforts to enhance teacher capacity through professional development programs, culturally responsive teaching materials, and ongoing support are essential in ensuring that classroom diversity is embraced and used to enhance learning outcomes for all students.

Differentiated instruction is an important method for meeting the diverse needs of students, especially in the Foundation Phase. Although it has benefits like increased student engagement and better academic outcomes, challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, and lack of teacher training make it difficult to implement fully. To make inclusive education policies successful, it is essential to address these challenges and provide teachers with the necessary support and resources. Teachers' views on diversity are key to effectively applying inclusive teaching practices.

## 8. Methodology

This study uses an interpretivist approach, which focuses on understanding the experiences and perspectives of teachers in diverse classroom settings. The interpretivist approach is useful for exploring how teachers perceive and respond to challenges related to classroom diversity. It highlights how individuals make sense of their experiences within their social contexts. By adopting this approach, the study aims to offer a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in managing classroom diversity and applying inclusive teaching practices.

A qualitative case study design was chosen for this research to examine the teaching practices of teachers at a combined suburban school in Limpopo Province. This design is ideal for exploring the specific experiences of teachers in a particular setting. It provides detailed insights into how diversity impacts teaching and learning. The case study method is valuable because it allows for an in-depth look at the context and practices within one school, providing rich and context-specific data.

To collect detailed information, the study used a combination of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to interact with teachers, exploring their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to diversity in the classroom. These interviews were flexible, giving teachers the freedom to elaborate on their experiences while addressing key topics related to diversity and inclusive teaching. Classroom observations allowed the researcher to see first hand how teachers implement inclusive teaching strategies, providing a deeper understanding of their practices in action. Combining these two methods ensured that the data gathered was comprehensive and diverse.

Data was collected from ten Foundation Phase teachers at suburban schools in Limpopo Province. The focus of this study was on Foundation Phase teachers working with young children in classrooms that are diverse in terms of socio-economic background, culture, and language. Choosing these teachers was essential to understanding the challenges and opportunities they face in creating inclusive learning environments.

Purposive sampling was used to select teachers with experience in managing diverse classrooms. This sampling method ensured that the teachers had relevant expertise in handling the challenges of teaching diverse groups of students. The sample of ten teachers was chosen from one suburban school, allowing for an in-depth exploration of teaching practices in a specific setting. These teachers had a range of experiences and backgrounds, providing various perspectives on how diversity is addressed in the classroom.

The data collected from the interviews and observations was analyzed using thematic analysis. This method helped identify recurring patterns and themes in the teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and practices regarding classroom diversity. Thematic analysis is useful in qualitative research because it allows researchers to organize and interpret data, highlighting key themes while preserving the depth of participants' responses. This approach enabled the study to uncover important patterns in how teachers view and manage diversity in their classrooms.

The study was limited to one suburban school in Limpopo Province, which is the primary boundary of the research. While this focus allows for a detailed examination of the chosen school, the findings may not apply to other schools or regions. However, the in-depth nature of the study provides valuable insights into the specific context of the school involved.

To ensure the reliability of the study, methods like triangulation and member checking were used. Triangulation involved using multiple sources of data—interviews and observations—to confirm the findings, ensuring that the results were consistent and credible. Member checking was used to verify the accuracy of the interpretations by sharing the findings with the participants. The study also maintained credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability by following established qualitative research standards.

Ethical considerations were carefully followed throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant authorities, and all participants gave informed consent before taking part. The study ensured confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms for participants and securely storing the data. These ethical practices helped protect the rights and privacy of the participants and ensured that the research followed ethical guidelines in educational research.

## 9. Presentations of Findings and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study, highlighting the experiences and perspectives of teachers regarding differentiated instruction in the Foundation Phase. The findings are categorized into four main themes: the challenges faced by teachers, the strategies they use to implement differentiation, the impact of inclusive policies, and their

perceptions of student engagement. Each theme provides insight into the complexities of applying differentiated instruction in diverse classrooms, shedding light on both the successes and obstacles encountered by teachers.

### **Theme 1: Challenges Faced by Teachers**

Teachers in the study identified several challenges in addressing the diverse learning needs of their students, particularly due to resource constraints and large class sizes. These factors were consistently highlighted by participants as major barriers to effectively implementing differentiated instruction and creating inclusive learning environments.

One teacher, **Teacher A**, shared, *“The biggest challenge I face is the size of the class. With so many learners, it’s hard to give each of them the attention they need. Some students need extra support, but I just don’t have the time to spend with them individually.”* This sentiment was echoed by **Teacher B**, who stated, *“When you have over 30 learners in one class, it becomes almost impossible to cater to the needs of each one. There are learners who struggle with reading, while others are already advanced, but I can’t provide personalized support for both groups.”*

These quotes reflect a common challenge faced by teachers, which is the difficulty in managing large classes and meeting the individual needs of students. Research supports these findings, noting that large class sizes can hinder teachers’ ability to implement effective differentiated instruction (Subban, 2022a). With more students, it becomes increasingly difficult for teachers to provide personalized learning experiences, a key aspect of differentiated instruction.

Participants also highlighted the lack of resources as another significant obstacle. **Teacher C** expressed, *“We don’t have enough learning materials, especially for learners with special educational needs. It’s hard to find tools that are both age-appropriate and accessible for them.”* **Teacher D** also mentioned, *“We lack sufficient teaching aids, such as visual and sensory materials, that could help cater to the diverse learning styles in the classroom.”* These statements underscore the importance of having adequate resources to support differentiated teaching practices.

The impact of limited resources on teaching practices is well-documented in educational research. According to Florian & Black-Hawkins (2020), resource constraints often limit teachers’ ability to implement inclusive teaching strategies, particularly in classrooms where students have diverse needs. The lack of appropriate teaching aids and materials can prevent teachers from engaging students effectively, especially in a heterogeneous classroom setting.

The challenges faced by teachers in addressing diverse learning needs due to large class sizes and insufficient resources highlight significant barriers to the successful implementation of differentiated instruction. These obstacles not only impact the quality of teaching but also the ability to create truly inclusive classrooms. To address these challenges, it is essential for schools and policymakers to provide teachers with adequate resources, professional development, and support to ensure that all students’ needs are met effectively.

### **Theme 2: Strategies Used for Differentiation**

In response to the diverse needs of students, teachers employed a variety of strategies aimed at differentiating instruction to meet the varying learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds of their students. These strategies included flexible grouping, scaffolding, and multimodal teaching approaches, which were found to be effective in addressing the challenges posed by classroom diversity.

One of the most used strategies was **flexible grouping**. **Teacher E** shared, *“I use flexible grouping regularly. I change the groups based on the task at hand. Sometimes, I group students with similar abilities, and at other times, I mix them up so they can learn from each other.”* This approach was echoed by **Teacher F**, who stated, *“I find that grouping learners according to their strengths allows them to help one another. It also gives weaker learners the chance to work with peers who can support them in their learning.”* Flexible grouping allows teachers to cater to diverse learning needs by creating dynamic groups that shift according to the lesson’s requirements, helping both struggling and advanced learners.

The use of **scaffolding** was another common strategy. **Teacher G** explained, *“I break tasks into smaller steps and give learners clear, manageable instructions. I offer support at the beginning of the lesson and gradually withdraw it as students become more confident in their abilities.”* This approach ensures that learners receive the right amount of support at the right time, which can help them become more independent learners. **Teacher H** further noted, *“For some learners, I give additional prompts or cues during tasks, which helps them to better grasp the concept before asking them to apply it independently.”* Scaffolding is a key strategy for supporting learners, especially those who struggle with certain concepts. It provides learners with the tools they need to succeed before gradually decreasing the support as their abilities grow (Tomlinson, 2021).

Finally, **multimodal teaching approaches** were also a frequent strategy employed by teachers. **Teacher I** commented, “I use visual aids, videos, and hands-on activities to reach all learners. Some learners are visual learners, while others benefit from more tactile learning experiences.” Similarly, **Teacher J** shared, “Incorporating songs, pictures, and physical movement into lessons helps engage all learners, especially those with different learning preferences.” Multimodal teaching is essential in reaching learners who may not respond well to a traditional, lecture-based approach. By integrating various forms of media, teachers can appeal to different sensory modalities, allowing for a more inclusive learning environment (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2020).

These strategies align with the principles of differentiated instruction, which encourages teachers to modify their teaching methods to address the diverse learning needs of their students. Research supports these practices, highlighting the effectiveness of flexible grouping, scaffolding, and multimodal approaches in enhancing student engagement and improving academic achievement (Tomlinson, 2021; Subban, 2022b). The use of these strategies enables teachers to create a learning environment that fosters the success of all students, regardless of their individual needs.

Teachers in this study employed a variety of strategies to differentiate instruction in response to the diverse needs of their students. Flexible grouping, scaffolding, and multimodal teaching approaches were integral to supporting students’ learning and ensuring that they received personalized instruction. By utilizing these strategies, teachers were able to create more inclusive classrooms, where all students could access the content in a way that best suited their individual needs.

### **Theme 3: Impact of Inclusive Policies**

The findings of this study reveal that while inclusive education policies are in place, their effective implementation is often hindered by inadequate training and insufficient support structures for teachers. Despite the South African government’s commitment to inclusive education, as outlined in the *Inclusive Education Policy* (DoE, 2015), teachers reported that the lack of proper training and resources posed significant challenges to the successful integration of diverse learners into the classroom.

**Teacher A** noted, “The policy is there, but the training that we receive is not enough to make us fully prepared for the diverse needs in the classroom. We don’t have enough workshops or follow-up sessions to make sure that we are applying the right strategies.” This sentiment was echoed by **Teacher B**, who expressed, “I feel like the policy is pushing us to be inclusive, but without proper training, it becomes overwhelming. We need more practical workshops, not just theory.” These statements indicate that while teachers are aware of the policies in place, they feel ill-equipped to implement them effectively due to a lack of professional development and hands-on guidance.

Many teachers reported insufficient support in terms of resources and guidance. **Teacher C** shared, “I know I’m supposed to use more differentiated methods, but without enough teaching materials or support from the school, it becomes difficult to manage such a diverse classroom.” **Teacher D** added, “The school just doesn’t have the resources—there are not enough assistants, and the materials we have don’t reflect the cultural diversity in my classroom. It makes it hard to meet everyone’s needs.” These quotes highlight that the absence of necessary resources, such as culturally relevant materials, teaching assistants, and specialized support, limits the full implementation of inclusive practices.

**Teacher E** emphasized the gap between policy expectations and the reality of classroom practice: “The policy says that we must cater to all learners, but when you have over 40 learners in a class, some of whom have learning difficulties, it’s nearly impossible without the right support. The policy is ideal, but the reality is different.” The large class sizes and the diverse needs of the learners in these classrooms often present barriers to the successful execution of inclusive education, even when teachers are committed to following the policy’s guidelines.

The findings of this study align with existing literature, which highlights that inclusive education policies, while well-intentioned, are often hindered by a lack of adequate training, resources, and support for teachers (Landsberg et al., 2021). Studies show that professional development programs that provide teachers with the skills and resources necessary for implementing inclusive practices are essential for the success of inclusive education policies (Mahlo, 2020; Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2020). Teachers require not only theoretical knowledge but also practical strategies and ongoing support to effectively address the diverse needs of their learners.

The study reveals that while inclusive education policies are crucial in promoting diversity in the classroom, their implementation is often compromised by insufficient training and inadequate support structures. Teachers are aware of the policies, but without the necessary resources and training, their ability to fully integrate inclusive practices remains limited. This highlights the need for enhanced professional development opportunities, resources, and institutional support to ensure the success of inclusive education in South Africa’s schools.

#### **Theme 4: Teacher Perceptions on Student Engagement**

The study revealed that teachers see differentiated instruction as an effective way to increase student engagement, motivation, and academic performance. However, despite recognizing its benefits, teachers pointed out that consistently using this approach is difficult due to challenges like large class sizes, limited resources, and time constraints.

**Teacher F** said, *“When I use differentiated instruction, I can see that the learners are more engaged. They seem to enjoy the lessons more, especially when the activities match their learning needs. It boosts their motivation, and you can see them striving to do better.”* This quote shows that when lessons are tailored to students’ needs, they become more interested and motivated to participate. Teacher F’s experience supports research by Tomlinson (2021), which highlights that differentiated instruction helps engage students by addressing their unique learning styles and needs.

**Teacher G** shared a similar experience: *“I’ve noticed that my learners become more motivated when I provide them with different ways to learn the same content. For example, when I use visual aids, some students who struggle with reading seem more confident and willing to participate.”* This comment emphasizes how using multiple teaching methods, such as visual aids, can help students engage with the material in different ways. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2020) also note that using varied approaches increases student engagement by catering to different learning styles.

While teachers saw the benefits, they also mentioned the difficulties of consistently using differentiated instruction. **Teacher H** explained, *“The problem is not that differentiated instruction doesn’t work, it’s that I don’t have the time to plan and implement it effectively every single lesson. With a large class and so many different needs, it can be exhausting trying to keep up.”* This challenge of time management and lesson planning aligns with Subban (2022b), who found that overcrowded classrooms make it hard for teachers to give each student the individual attention they need.

**Teacher I** also expressed frustration, saying, *“Even though I see the benefits, sometimes I just don’t have the resources to differentiate properly. For example, I might not have enough materials to provide each student with what they need, and that’s frustrating.”* This concern reflects the issue of resource limitations, which can hinder teachers’ ability to apply differentiated instruction effectively (Landsberg et al., 2021).

Despite these challenges, teachers agreed that when they were able to implement differentiated instruction, it had a positive impact on student engagement and academic performance. **Teacher J** concluded, *“When I do manage to differentiate instruction, I can see that my learners not only understand the content better but also enjoy the learning process more. The classroom becomes more dynamic, and I feel that the students are gaining something.”* This observation aligns with the findings of Florian and Black-Hawkins (2020), who argue that differentiated instruction leads to more meaningful and engaging learning experiences for students.

While differentiated instruction has been shown to improve student engagement and academic outcomes, teachers face significant challenges in implementing it consistently. These challenges, including time constraints, large class sizes, and lack of resources, must be addressed to ensure that all students benefit from personalized instruction. Professional development and resource support are key to helping teachers overcome these barriers and apply differentiation more effectively.

The findings from this study highlight both the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing differentiated instruction in the Foundation Phase. While teachers recognize the positive impact of differentiation on student engagement and learning outcomes, they face significant barriers such as large class sizes, limited resources, and insufficient training. Despite these challenges, teachers employ various strategies to address diverse learning needs and strive to create inclusive learning environments. However, the successful implementation of inclusive policies requires greater support, including ongoing professional development and resource allocation. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring that all learners receive the support they need to succeed academically.

## **10. Recommendations**

The recommendations highlight the need for continuous professional development for teachers, ensuring they remain equipped with the latest strategies and tools for differentiated instruction. Ongoing training will help them refine their skills, stay up to date with new methodologies, and ultimately enhance student outcomes by addressing diverse learning needs more effectively.

There is a strong emphasis on the allocation of more resources to support inclusive teaching. This includes providing teaching materials, technology, and adequate support staff. By doing so, schools can ensure that teachers have the

necessary tools to meet the varied needs of their students, creating an environment that supports learning for all.

Strengthening the implementation of inclusive education policies is also crucial. For these policies to be effective, teachers need regular support and monitoring. Professional development, coupled with mentorship, can help teachers apply inclusive teaching strategies consistently. By strengthening policy implementation, schools can ensure that every learner has equal access to high-quality education.

Fostering collaboration among teachers is key to improving instructional practices. By sharing best practices and exchanging ideas, teachers can learn from one another and adapt strategies that work well in their own classrooms. This collaborative approach helps build a sense of community among teachers, ultimately improving teaching effectiveness and promoting a more inclusive learning environment for all students.

## 11. Conclusion

This study highlights the vital role of differentiated instruction in meeting the diverse needs of Foundation Phase learners. The findings reveal that although teachers are committed to implementing inclusive teaching strategies, they face significant challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, and time constraints, which hinder effective implementation. Nevertheless, teachers remain dedicated to supporting their learners by adapting their teaching methods and using a variety of strategies to address individual learning needs.

However, the study also reveals that to achieve optimal outcomes for all learners, it is essential to provide teachers with consistent and robust support. Ongoing professional development in differentiated instruction, along with increased access to teaching materials, technology, and classroom assistants, is necessary to help teachers better address the individual needs of their students. Strengthening policy implementation through continuous monitoring, feedback, and targeted support can help ensure that inclusive education practices are not only introduced but also sustained effectively within classrooms.

To overcome the barriers currently faced, it is crucial that educational stakeholders—schools, policymakers, and administrators—collaborate to allocate the necessary resources and create a more supportive teaching environment. Fostering a culture of collaboration among teachers can allow for the sharing of best practices, further enhancing instructional strategies. By addressing these challenges and providing the necessary support, teachers will be better equipped to create inclusive and engaging learning environments that promote academic success for every student, regardless of their background or learning abilities. Ultimately, such efforts will contribute to achieving the goals of inclusive education, ensuring that all learners have equitable access to quality education.

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