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**“Lessons for leaders and educators: An exploration into the
affordances and constraints of inclusive practices in South African
independent schools”**

A Research Project submitted by:

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وَمَا تَوْفِيقِي إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ

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The people of Palestine are forever in my heart. They are a nation whose resilience and courage inspire countless hearts worldwide. May we never cease to amplify their voices and advocate for their liberation. From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!

I anticipate this research contributing to the academic discourse on inclusion and servant leadership and inspiring future scholars to explore meaningful ways to create transformative educational spaces. May it serve as a stepping stone for others to build upon and a reminder that education can drive change.

As I reflect on this journey, I look forward to the culmination of this academic pursuit leading to the red gown, representing the ultimate milestone of a PhD. Moreover, through it all, I find solace and faith in the words: *“The pens have been lifted, and the pages have dried”*- what is destined for me will indeed find its way.

#Here’s to Unlocking NQF level 10 – I’m coming for you!

Abstract:

South Africa is a second-generation adopter of inclusive education and eagerly responded to the vision set out in the Salamanca Statement of 1994. Inclusive Education has come to be seen not merely as a concept but as a universal right. This study investigates how school leaders in two religiously affiliated independent schools in Gauteng, South Africa, afford or constrain inclusive practices. This research study employs a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews with four principals and six educators across both research sites. Through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, this study examines the intricate interplay between leadership practices, institutional expectations, teachers' pedagogical responses, and the broader socio-cultural and socio-economic context, examining how these factors either constrain or afford inclusive education and educator's ability to be pedagogically responsive to a range of different learning needs.

Key findings reveal both affordances and constraints in promoting inclusivity. Four major themes emerged, a prominent theme being (1) The impact of Servant Leadership on inclusivity. School leaders, inspired by Islamic values of compassion, demonstrated proactive engagement with educators, fostering an environment conducive to inclusivity. However, challenges remain, notably in (2) Balancing dual curriculum demands (South Africa's National Curriculum (secular) and Islamic), (3) Managing high parental expectations for academic excellence, and (4) Addressing inadequate teacher preparedness for inclusive teaching. These educators faced additional constraints due to a lack of specialised training from their initial formal teacher education at university, leaving them underprepared to be pedagogically responsive to various learning needs.

The implications of this study underscore the need for a focus on lifelong learning in the formal, informal, and non-formal spheres for educators that reconcile the gap between theory and practical, inclusive strategies. Moreover, the study highlights the role of school leadership in developing, implementing, and sustaining inclusionary schools. Furthermore, the findings from this study suggest that Servant Leadership practices could serve as a leadership strategy model for institutions with a diverse learning population seeking to integrate the ideals of academic excellence with inclusive values. The findings advocate for greater collaboration between independent school leaders and their partners in education (educators) to revolutionise communities of practice and professional development opportunities, ensuring that inclusive practices are sustainable and aligned with the religious context of the school.

Chapter One

1.1 Introduction to the Research Study:

“Addressing barriers to inclusive education seems to be less about clearing successive hurdles in a steeplechase race and more about understanding the complex ecology of education systems, and the various actors and socio-cultural, historical and economic processes that constitute these systems” (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022, p.14)

South Africa’s trajectory toward inclusion is profoundly shaped by its unique socio-political history. As an early adopter of the principles outlined in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the country’s approach to inclusive education extends beyond providing access for learners with (dis)abilities or rectifying past injustices and bell curve teaching. Instead, it represents a paradigm shift, along with these objectives, aimed at dismantling systemic inequalities entrenched during colonial rule and nearly five decades of racial segregation. Inclusive education in South Africa seeks to transform schools into spaces championing equity, diversity, and racial justice.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the role of school leadership in fostering inclusive practices within the unique context of Muslim independent schools. Leadership in these schools is critical for shaping inclusive practices and navigating the intersection of religious values and educational policy. By focusing on these schools, this study highlights how leaders interpret, negotiate, and implement ideals of inclusion within faith-based environments, adding a distinct dimension to the discourse on inclusion in South Africa.

Efforts towards inclusive education have advocated for including learners with various educational needs by nurturing them and creating a sense of belonging (Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel, & Tlale, 2015). This research study explores the constraints and affordances leaders face in implementing inclusive teaching strategies in South African independent schools. Grounded and through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory (Anderson, Boyle & Deppler, 2014), this study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted systems within the educational arena. This framework will function as a lens to interpret the study findings more accurately. A nuanced understanding of the barriers to learning will be provided, highlighting the influence of broader socio-political and economic contexts.

Responding to international developments regarding inclusive education (Engelbrecht et al., 2015), Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) outlined a national strategy for addressing barriers to learning in South Africa. Andrews, Walton, and Osman (2021) affirm that Education White Paper 6 (WP6) aims to distance itself from practices founded on a medical deficit approach. In this manner, inequalities in all schools should be eradicated. To achieve an inclusive education system, recognition of learner diversity, accommodating learners who experience barriers to learning, and capacitating educators to enable them to address these barriers in mainstream schools are outlined within the guidelines of WP6 (Oswald, 2007). Despite the guiding principles of WP6, the practical implementation of inclusive teaching remains inconsistent. This study, therefore, addresses the critical question: “What constraints do educators and principals face in implementing inclusive teaching strategies in South African schools?”

Several key issues underpin this research question. Focusing on the Global South, conditions exist that hinder inclusive practices, which entail poverty and the legacies of colonialism (Walton, 2018). Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2022) contend that a praxis-orientated approach is required to scrutinise prevailing inclusive practices that take cognisance of the sociopolitical realities within the South African context. This is done by challenging hegemonic ideologies and their influence on implementation.

A substantial amount of research exists globally concerning legislative reforms in education. Historical injustices are recognised and greatly supported by its commitment to achieving the Fourth Sustainable Goal (SDG4), which aims to provide lifelong learning opportunities under various targets (UNDP, 2015). However, a broader scope of research must be conducted to promote inclusivity that informs the discourse of inclusive education for scholars in the Global South (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2022). This study can influence broader leadership and teaching practices in South African mainstream, independent, and religious Islamic schools. This study illuminates the requirements for implementing, sustaining, and developing resilient, inclusive practices by addressing the interconnected factors that hinder the implementation of inclusive teaching practices.

The educational landscape continues to grapple with the lingering effects of its apartheid history, where systemic racial inequalities and exclusionary policies shaped the trajectory of schooling for decades. Despite progressive policy frameworks, many disadvantaged communities remain stark reminders of these historical injustices (Engelbrecht, 2020).

Furthermore, the legacy of apartheid and the Bantu education era continues to manifest in the education system. Many educators remain underqualified, and traditional teaching practices often align with a medicalised, deficit-orientated perspective, perpetuating exclusion (Andrews et al., 2021). This study situates itself within this context, focusing on the pivotal role of school leadership in driving inclusive practices. Specifically, it explores how leaders in Muslim independent schools can leverage formal and non-formal professional lifelong learning methods to challenge these entrenched inequalities. The study argues that school leaders play a crucial role in fostering a culture of continuous professional development that equips educators with the skills and mindset needed to implement inclusive education effectively. By addressing these path dependencies, leaders and educators can contribute to creating and sustaining schools that embrace social justice.

1.2 Problem Statement:

A mismatch between policy aspirations for inclusive education and deep-seated beliefs about diversity are difficult to shift in South African schools (Andrews, Bischof, Emmerich, and Osman, 2023). Educators continue to face persistent challenges about the effective implementation of inclusive teaching practices. School leaders are pivotal in driving the transformation toward inclusive practices, yet their role in implementing and sustaining them within independent schools is under-researched (Timothy & Agbenyega, 2018). Specifically, Muslim independent schools' unique context poses opportunities and constraints that require further exploration.

The problem lies in the insufficient professional development and strategic guidance for school leaders to navigate the complexities of inclusion. Mahlangu and Mtshali (2024) indicate that the guidelines of the Education White Paper 6 (2001) may outline principles for creating a humane society but do not furnish instruction on how to adjust to meet the needs of all learning styles; hence, educators are struggling with creating an inclusive classroom or in other words being pedagogically responsive to learner difference. Current practices often reflect a medicalised, deficit-based perspective perpetuating exclusion (Engelbrecht et al., 2015), while professional development for leaders remains sporadic and lacks contextual relevance. This creates a gap in knowledge about how school leaders can champion inclusion, sustain inclusive school cultures, and align these efforts with the school's broader missions.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how school leaders in Muslim independent schools conceptualise and implement leadership strategies to develop and sustain inclusive

education. By focusing on their strategies, challenges, and successes, the research offers critical lessons for leaders to consider when implementing inclusion. Andrews et al. (2021) advocate for strengthening ethical school leadership to advance school equity, emphasising the importance of leaders who prioritise care, justice, and critical engagement when navigating policy demands.

The pressing need for this research is evident in the disparities among learners. Engelbrecht (2015) highlights the need to transform society regarding its values to eradicate exclusion and discrimination. This drives the purpose of this current research study, which will be further developed in the purpose statement of this project.

1.3 Purpose Statement:

The purpose statement of this study not only identifies the primary focus—exploring the affordances and constraints of inclusive practices in Muslim independent schools—but also outlines the critical role of school leaders in implementing strategies for developing, implementing, and sustaining inclusive teaching practices and fostering a pedagogical responsive mindset in the school. The purpose thereby integrates the study's aim of contributing to the leadership-focused discourse on inclusion and its objectives, creating a cohesive framework for the research.

The purpose of this research is to investigate factors that constrain and afford inclusive practices in South African schools through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory. The broad goal of the study is to identify factors that constrain and afford inclusive practices within the context of the purposively selected research sites to inform school leaders on the scope of the problem at hand and to suggest possible best practices to develop and sustain inclusion.

Aims of the study

The thesis of this study aims to show how various constraints to inclusive teaching are influenced by different ecological systems, including inadequate policies, poor quality teacher education, inaccessible schools and curricula, and financial provision (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022).

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To identify the constraints educators face in implementing inclusive teaching practices within independent schools
- To explore the affordances that enable educators to effectively implement inclusive teaching practices within independent schools
- To investigate leadership strategies that school leaders can use to develop and sustain inclusive practices within their schools
- To evaluate how school leadership practices influence the implementation and success of inclusion
- To identify best leadership practices for fostering inclusive teaching within schools
- To explore strategies that support the sustainability of an inclusive teaching environment

Furthermore, the study evaluates how school leadership practices influence the implementation and success of inclusive education. It assesses educators' perceptions of inclusive practices and their preparedness and professional development. The study also identifies best leadership practices evident in fostering inclusive teaching and explores strategies that support the sustainability of an inclusive teaching environment. Finally, it analyses factors within the school context that contribute to or afford the development and sustainability of inclusive practices.

This study is expected to contribute to the ongoing discourse on inclusive education, supporting the General Comment 4 of the UN (2015) Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD):

“The right to inclusive education encompasses a transformation in culture, policy, and practice in all formal and informal educational environments to accommodate the differing requirements and identities of individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility”(p.3)

The objective will be achieved by addressing the Research Question and Sub-Research questions posed:

1.4.1 Main Research Questions:

1. What possible constraints do educators face in implementing inclusive teaching practices within the context of Islamic faith independent schools in South Africa?
2. What affordances do educators face in implementing inclusive teaching practices within the context of independent Islamic faith schools, in South Africa?
3. How do school leadership practices possibly influence the implementation and success of inclusive practices in South African schools?

1.4.2 Sub- Research Questions:

- a) How do educators perceive their preparedness and professional development about implementing inclusive practices?
- b) What possible best leader practices are evident in inclusive teaching?
- c) What possible leadership strategies are evident that support the development and sustainability of an inclusive teaching environment?
- d) What factors within the school context possibly afford the development and sustainability of inclusive practices?

1.5 Rationale of the Study:

The importance of this study lies in the need for school leaders to play a proactive role in developing and sustaining inclusion. While inclusive education has become a policy imperative, its successful implementation depends on effective leadership understanding the challenges and opportunities for fostering equity in diverse environments (Neves et al., 2023; Shields & Hesbol, 2020; Gurley et al., 2015). School leaders are in a position to influence teaching practices, support educator development, and shape school culture to embrace inclusive values. This study examines how leaders in Muslim independent schools can learn to navigate these challenges, adopt best leadership practices, and implement strategies that address inclusion and maintain academic excellence.

“Inclusive education needs daily upkeep as it entails locating and eliminating obstacles and the construction of a solid foundation for inclusive practices” (Mahlangu & Mtshali, 2024, p.168). Having matriculated from a top-performing independent school (religious affiliation), I have observed firsthand disparities in educational opportunities for all learners. This firsthand

observation underscores the imperative of proactive measures to ensure equitable access to quality education. This awareness fuels my commitment to exploring and addressing the complexities of inclusive education within a similar educational context.

My interest in inclusive practices (in Educational Management and Leadership) has driven me to pursue a Master's in this area as I advance through the National Qualifications Framework (Singh & McDonald, 2024). This study will provide an innovative opportunity to investigate first-hand experiences of educators and principals faced with the potential challenges of implementing and sustaining inclusive classroom practices, particularly in the case of leaders. These leadership strategies support pedagogical responsiveness to learners with different learning needs. Despite the absence of teaching experience in a school setting, conducting research allows me to enter independent schools and observe how educators encounter and navigate the challenges that hinder inclusive practices. By immersing myself in these environments, I will gain valuable insights into the lived experiences of professionals in the field with years of experience and training. These discoveries will not only transform my research but may contribute to improving teacher training programs at the higher education level, particularly at Wits University. This aligns with my passion for contributing to the scholarly discourse and development of tertiary education. To conclude Chapter One, I will briefly outline what to expect in Chapters Two to Seven. The next chapter delves into the literature review, examining existing research studies that inform the research, setting the stage for understanding inclusive practices within the South African educational arena.

1.6 Outline of the Chapters of this project:

Chapter One: Introduction to the Research Project

Chapter One introduces the research project by outlining the rationale for exploring the affordances and constraints of inclusive practices in South African independent schools, emphasising the need for further attention. It provides a brief historical context of inclusive education and introduces the main research questions and sub-questions, framing the study's purpose. This chapter also highlights the theoretical framework guiding the research and explains the selection of a qualitative methodology, emphasising its suitability for capturing the complexity of inclusive practices. Additionally, it reflects on the personal motivation for undertaking this study, setting the foundation for the more detailed exploration in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter reviews prominent literature on inclusive practices, identifying recurring themes within the South African context and exploring leadership practices employed to support inclusion. It demonstrates how each article was meticulously selected based on its relevance to the research topic, the credibility of its findings, and its alignment with the research objectives to ensure an insightful literature review. It draws connections between South African findings and international studies, highlighting commonalities and differences. The complex nature of inclusive practices is unpacked, focusing on the constraints school leaders and educators face. This chapter establishes the foundation for the study's argument, demonstrating the challenges and affordances inherent in sustaining inclusive ideas.

Chapter Three: Utilising Bronfenbrenner's–Bio-Ecological Systems Theory as a Theoretical Framework

Chapter Three presents the study's theoretical framework, emphasising the importance of understanding the complexity and fragility of social interactions between learners and their relationships with external forces. It highlights how this framework allows for considering multiple, interconnected factors that influence a child's inclusion, recognising the various elements at play in shaping their educational experience. This chapter provides a foundation for analysing the factors that impact inclusive practices, providing the reader with an understanding of how these factors interact and affect inclusion in independent schools.

Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter presents the research design and methodology employed for this study, focusing on using a qualitative approach. I thoroughly explained the coding process and how I collected and analysed the data. The chapter also describes the two purposively selected research sites, offering a detailed account of the environment of each institution and background information on the chosen participants, including the type of education they received. I outlined the steps to ensure reliability and trustworthiness in my research, noted my completion of ethics courses, and included relevant protocol numbers to demonstrate my adherence to ethical guidelines and standards.

Chapter Five: Findings and Discussions

In this chapter, I present the findings, focusing on the four key themes from the data analysis concerning my central research question and sub-questions. I confidently identify and unpack

the constraints to inclusive practices, providing an understanding of the challenges faced. I also highlight the affordances of inclusive practices, drawing on insights from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and Bronfenbrenner's systems theory. These findings and discussions are framed appropriately, linking the data to the literature and the theoretical framework.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I consolidate the findings from the semi-structured interviews and the data analysis process. I also explore the study's strengths and limitations, offering a balanced reflection on the research process. Towards the end, I present recommendations that tie the study together, ensuring a clear and cohesive (golden) thread runs throughout the project. These recommendations aim to address the key findings and provide actionable insights for practice.

Chapter Two

2. Literature Review

Hart (as cited in Cronin, Ryan & Coughlan, 2008) describes a literature review as “an objective, thorough summary and critical analysis of research that is available and non-research literature”. The primary purpose of this literature review is to explore the affordances and constraints of inclusive practices in independent schools, provide valuable lessons for school leaders and educators, and identify existing gaps in the field. Cronin et al. (2008) assert that such a systematic review will use a rigorous criterion of “identifying, critically evaluating and synthesising” all the literature on this specific topic (p.38).

The literature used for my study was primarily sourced from Google Scholar, Wits Wired Space, and the Wits Education Library. Keywords such as “Inclusive practices”, “Educational Leadership”, “Teacher support and training programs”, “constraints to Inclusive teaching”, “Inclusive education strategies” and “leading for inclusion in schools in South Africa” were used to identify relevant literature. To further ensure the accuracy and relevancy of my study, I selectively only considered articles published between 2015-2024 and filtered out and excluded those that present research findings that pre-date 2015; however, some earlier articles were included as they framed the history of apartheid and were seminal writings about inclusive education policy development both internationally and locally. Consequently, several articles were filtered out (n=34) and excluded from consideration due to their lack of direct relevance to the South African context. These excluded articles encompassed topics that were divergent from the scope of the study or employed methodologies that did not align with my research objectives. For example, they presented empirical data from developed countries in the global north and those that did not focus on inclusive education within the context of school leaders, teachers, and learners in South African schools.

As Cronin et al. (2008) emphasise, “Regardless of whether a review is part of a study, all source material must be acknowledged” (p.43). Therefore, all in-text references are carefully formatted according to the APA guidelines and included within the reference list towards the end of my study. Thus, the conventional literature review was meticulously chosen to summarise existing literature findings that critically examine inclusive practices. I rigorously followed the comprehensive process guidelines proposed by Cronin et al. (2008, p.39) for conducting a literature review. This process involved several key steps, starting with selecting

the review topic, followed by an extensive search of relevant literature. Once the literature was gathered, I carefully analysed the chosen sources to ensure they aligned with the research objectives. The findings were then compiled into a coherent review, and finally, appropriate references were included to support the review's conclusions.

The literature review will discuss qualitative, quantitative, and systemic reviews investigating various dimensions of the issue. Each section will link the findings from the articles to the central research question and sub-questions, creating a cohesive narrative identifying the challenges and potential solutions. This approach will justify the choice of literature and ensure a comprehensive topic explanation. These studies were chosen for their relevance and depth in addressing the contextual, systemic, and individual factors that influence inclusive pedagogy.

2.1 Addressing the unique complexities of Inclusive Education in South Africa:

This section examines the complexities of inclusive education in South Africa, focusing on the historical and educational challenges. The review will explore key themes, including the impact of apartheid and challenges in implementation.

The establishment of democracy in South Africa brought significant and transformative changes. In light of the country's oppressive apartheid history, all policy initiatives needed to prioritise and uphold a strong foundation of human rights (Naicker, 2007). Education policies were deliberately designed to perpetuate the socio-economic disparities of apartheid, with vastly unequal funding and resources allocated to schools for white learners compared to those of colour.

Inclusive education was virtually non-existent during this period, as the education system adhered strictly to the medical model of disability (Engelbrecht, 2020). This model viewed learners with differences as handicapped and positioned them as the problem rather than addressing systemic barriers. Andrews et al. (2023) maintain that these remnants of the past have slowed the traction of inclusive education over the post-Apartheid years (p.98).

This discriminatory system marginalised learners, reinforcing a narrative that they could not contribute to society. The medical models focus on deficits and individualised shortcomings created an environment in which inclusive practices were neither understood nor prioritised (Naicker, 2007). The legacy of this model continues to affect perceptions and implementation of inclusion in post-apartheid South Africa.

Inclusive education is an intricate and dynamic concept often interpreted differently by various role players rooted in the objectives they aim to achieve. Andrews et al. (2023) confirm this notion by alluding to the history of the apartheid legacy, which casts a long shadow over initiatives that advocate fundamental human rights. A systematic review of literature conducted by Engelbrecht (2020) reveals the evolution of Inclusive Education as a human rights and social justice issue. In addition, Walton and Ruznayk (2014) recognise that the education system under apartheid divided learners according to their race and (dis)ability by providing well-furnished schools that were separate from mainstream schools for white learners who had impairments to learning. This is why Schwab (2019) advocates for inclusion to remove barriers to learning for all instead of placing learners in specialised schools.

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (UN General Assembly, 1948), significant recognition has been given to inclusive education, which ensures the right to education for all (Schwab, 2019). In the following years, the concept of inclusion has developed globally, becoming more diverse by embracing all learners to assert their right to access mainstream education, irrespective of their limitations. Mariga et al. (2014) notice how this notion is displayed in various international instruments such as the Dakar Framework (2000), the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities (1993), and the Salamanca statement (1994). To date, the Salamanca Statement is the most important document in inclusive education. It has continuously influenced the movement toward a more inclusive system worldwide, often acting as a key document that drives the creation of new policies and legislation. Thus, quoting the Salamanca statement is appropriate to reflect the perspectives of international organisations on inclusivity: “Mainstream schools with an inclusive orientation combat discriminatory practices effectively by creating a welcoming community and providing effective education to the majority of learners” (Ainscow et al., 2019,p.671). Therefore, it is clear that international organisations’ legislations primarily focus on a human rights approach supplemented by educational and social justifications (Ainscow et al., 2019).

A study investigating the realities of inclusive education that educators experience in South Africa was conducted by Materechera (2020), which sheds light on the South African policy documents that affirm rights-based education for all. In South Africa, 1994 marked the end of the oppressive apartheid regime and the beginning of a new political era founded on fundamental human rights for all. This was manifested in the 1996 constitution, which recognised all people as equal citizens with equal human rights, including the right to basic education (RSA, 1996). The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996) aimed

to provide quality education to all learners without discrimination, to ensure that schools were democratically governed and to provide compulsory education for all learners aged 7 to 15, to focus on issues of equity and leaders by prioritising funding to previously disadvantaged groups. Despite having these policy documents in place, Andrews et al (2021) set an argument forth which indicates the contradictory nature of the education policies as they do not align well with one another, nor do they allow for successful traction of inclusive education. Subsequently, Engelbrecht (2020) also suggests that tension exists between policy and practice. Engelbrecht (2020) concludes that by recognising both the challenges that hinder implementation and the positive developments that promote it in unique contexts, scholars can contribute to shaping thinking, policy, and practice for the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Adewumi and Mosito (2019) note how the government has established regulations to facilitate the inclusion of all learners. However, the authors note that there remains ambiguity regarding the implementation of these policies by educators to guarantee universal access to all. Donohue and Bornman (2016) maintain that it is for this reason that educational policies continue to be characterised by ambiguity and a conflict of ideas. A qualitative study by Pather (2019) also highlights the unclear and inconsistent definitions of inclusive education in policy frameworks, ultimately impacting the practice and implementation thereof. These barriers have resulted in disparities in how inclusive education is realised across schools, with some making notable progress while others struggle to accommodate learners with diverse needs. Without a clear legal framework, the ambitious goals of WP6 (2001) remain largely aspirational. Therefore, De Jure (2016) stresses that for the complexities of inclusive education to be addressed, “the policy of White Paper 6 must be converted into legislation” (p.92).

2.1.2 Challenging Bell Curve Thinking in Inclusive Education:

Under the sub-theme of addressing the unique complexity of inclusive education, the concept of bell-curve teaching and the medical deficit model highlights significant barriers to achieving true inclusivity. Kashyap (2019) notices how using the bell curve, particularly in societal contexts, has sparked considerable debate. The author argues that both genetic and environmental factors heavily influence human intelligence and serve as a strong predictor of various personal outcomes. A doctoral dissertation by Andrews (2020) warns against a deterministic approach to assessing a child’s learning ability, cautioning that it can lead educators to assume that a child’s future learning is solely based on their current performance.

This mindset risks causing educators to view a learner's present academic abilities as fixed, limiting their perception of their capacity for future growth.

Kim and Ballin (2023) describe how students in general education are often labelled as “typically developing” (p.351), with parents informed about their child’s performance relative to grade-level standards. The authors continue to explain that gifted students are viewed as above average. At the same time, those with deficits are seen as below average, placing them at opposite ends of the bell curve and categorising them as exceptional. Bekker and Carrim (2022) expand on this idea, arguing that traditional deterministic views of ability, which assume that learning potential is fixed and predetermined, align with this concept of Bell curve thinking. Florian and Walton (2017) also align bell curve thinking, which categorises most learners as average, with only a few at the extremes needing specialised approaches. This leads to the assumption that lessons should be tailored to the average to accommodate the majority. However, this perspective marginalises learners who fall outside the average distribution, labelling them with deficits and setting them apart from their peers, which ultimately leads to exclusion.

Andrews et al. (2021) argue for a shift from this deficit-based approach to one that embraces learner diversity as an asset. The authors maintain that inclusion requires learner-centered curricula that are flexible, accessible, and responsive to diverse needs. To move beyond the limitations of bell-curve teaching, schools must foster an inclusive culture supported by effective leadership and professional development for educators. This approach challenges traditional notions of normalcy and ensures that all learners are supported to achieve their full potential.

This gap between policy and practice is further exacerbated by insufficient pre-teacher training. Many teachers lack the necessary skills and knowledge to implement inclusion effectively, highlighting a critical need for targeted professional development. Engelbrecht (2020) suggests that strategies at the system level include a focus on sufficiently trained educators to accommodate learner diversity in meaningful ways. Building upon this observation, the subsequent section will delve into the critical issue of inadequate pre-service teacher training.

2.2 Lack of preservice teacher training for diverse learning contexts:

A qualitative study conducted by Andrews et al. (2021) identifies and discusses four objects of school activity that are not aligned with inclusive education through a Cultural Historical Activity Theory Lens. The authors notice that much effort is placed into researching the factors

constraining inclusive education. However, little is known about factors contributing to teachers' ability to teach inclusively. Yeboah, Aloka, and Charamba (2023) point out that educators are the fundamental implementers of any educational policy, which essentially means that the implementation of any given policy relies on the teachers' effectiveness. Engelbrecht (2020) raises awareness of the role of educators as influential role players in the development of inclusive practices and stresses their attitudes as a contributing factor. Consequently, Florian (2015) notices how educators embrace bell-curve thinking.

Educators often lack the knowledge, expertise, and continuous professional development necessary for effectively instructing students with diverse needs in mainstream classrooms. This perspective is supported by Lindsay et al. (2016), who highlight instances where educators mention their challenges in managing behavioural disruptions and unstructured periods/field trips. A quantitative research study conducted by Mahlangu and Mtshali (2024) aimed to explore inclusive education strategies to enhance the learning of educators, as there is a "need to upskill teachers to cope with all dynamics of inclusive classrooms" (p.167). This desire to elevate educators' proficiency is created as Engelbrecht (2020) notices how educators are caught in a dilemma between their beliefs and the complex realities of the schools they are situated at. Materechera (2020) also confirms this notion of being unable to respond to a diversity of learning as a sense of fear is created in aligning the general belief 'in the ideals of the Constitution with the provision of quality education for all' (Engelbrecht, 2020, p.225). Materechera (2020) believes that a professional focus on inclusive education training may be the answer to providing support.

Andrews et al. (2021) posit that the remedy for this problem, for most educators, is to have learners who experience learning difficulties be removed from mainstream classes and sent to special support classes to cope with their specific needs. However, Engelbrecht (2020) calls for enhancements to the teacher education program to feature culturally responsive teaching strategies by integrating a social justice framework. This systematic review showcases how, through the aforementioned, educators can challenge dominant values and actions that might perpetuate exclusion. This enhancement not only builds on their practical competencies but also allows educators to engage with issues of oppression. Yeboah et al. (2023) also single out the lack of inclusive education in teacher training programs and identify this as "a personal barrier to the implementation of inclusive practices" (p.113). Walton and McKenzie (2020) propose that the critical diversity framework (CDL) be used in teacher training programs as it

provides opportunities for educators to foster an analytical mindset in comprehending the intersectionality of power and privilege.

Additionally, Engelbrecht et al. (2015) make it evident in qualitative research studies that preservice teacher training programs tend to be short-term and fragmented, focusing on a deficit-oriented learning approach. Bell et al. (2023) emphasise meaningful experiences' role in shaping educators' understanding of diversity, arguing that the quality and nature of service learning significantly impact educators' conceptions of inclusion and diversity. They caution against the simplistic view that mere participation in service equates to meaningful learning, stating that “service does not equal learning” (Bell et al., 2023, p.131). This underscores the challenges posed by the unequal provision of pre-service teacher training, where opportunities to engage deeply with inclusive practices are inconsistently offered across teacher education programs. Such disparities contribute to the varying levels of preparedness among educators, ultimately hindering practices of inclusion.

Policy documents in many developing countries highlight the importance of principals developing their schools' capacity for inclusion. However, a study by DeMatthews, Kotok, and Serafini (2020) reveals that many principals lack the knowledge and skills to lead inclusive schools effectively. Additionally, limited resources often hinder efforts to create supportive learning environments. Researchers from the Global South highlight principals' need to embrace innovative strategies to make inclusion a reality. However, leaders and educators often exhibit resistance to change. Materechera (2020) argues that adapting to the evolving demands of contemporary society requires moving beyond traditional values, yet he acknowledges that the change process is inherently challenging. DeMatthews et al. (2021), in their concluding statements, emphasise the importance of researchers from different countries comparing and critiquing standards, policies, and practices to deepen the understanding of inclusive leadership and foster collaboration among international experts. The authors advocate for continued global dialogue to refine the concept of inclusive school leadership and improve principal preparation across diverse contexts. They express optimism that sustained international collaboration can enhance inclusive education and create schools that benefit all learners (DeMatthews et al., 2020)

2.2.1 Unequal Teacher Training Opportunities

Another primary concern is that numerous novice teachers enrol at universities offering distance learning, such as the University of South Africa (Unisa). These institutions lack face-

to-face interactions with instructors and course materials (Mokoena, 2017). For this reason, Engelbrecht et al. (2015) criticise teacher education students who complete their training without interacting with these courses or with students who experience barriers to learning. Teacher training programs tend to sway away from what Loreman (2010) calls ‘essential outcomes’ for inclusive education programs. The lack of focus on these outcomes includes a deep understanding of inclusive education, skills to collaborate with stakeholders, engagement with inclusive instructional planning, and responsiveness to high-priority needs (Watkins, 2012).

Open and distance learning (ODL) in teacher education is designed to make training more accessible and flexible for individuals who face barriers such as professional commitments or geographical distance (Olaniran, 2022). Ag-Ahmad (2020) concludes that while many higher education institutions in Malaysia had already incorporated online learning to complement traditional face-to-face teaching, the pandemic necessitated a complete transition to open and distance learning, eliminating physical classes. In South Africa, ODL-based pre-service teacher training programs have been celebrated as a significant solution to addressing teacher shortages, providing opportunities for aspiring teachers lacking formal qualifications to receive training without leaving their jobs (Olaniran, 2022).

Despite its advantages, ODL faces challenges that must be addressed to ensure its efficacy. In his study, Olaniran (2022) concludes that quality assurance is a key concern, necessitating systematic management and assessment practices to monitor performance and improve outcomes. The author further highlights the disparities between ODL and traditional university modes, foregrounding the need for equal and robust support systems across all modes of teacher education (Olaniran, 2022).

Andrews et al. (2023) maintain that a gap in literature presents itself as there is a great need to interrogate the theoretical underpinnings of what comprises inclusive education curricula at higher education institutions in South Africa. Although teachers in South Africa favour principles of inclusion, the South African education system prevents them from implementing these practices (Engelbrecht et al., 2015). Walton and Engelbrecht (2023) are pretty hopeful in their study that through the recognition of a diversity of learning needs, the capacity of teachers and school leaders will improve, ideally in ordinary classrooms. The rigid structure of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) does not allow the flexibility needed to

adapt teaching methods and materials to accommodate diverse learners effectively. This issue will be further explored in the next section.

2.3 An inflexible and fast-paced curriculum:

Qualitative studies have shown that curriculum is vital to implementing inclusive practices within mainstream schools. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was implemented in 2012 by the Department of Basic Education, replacing the previous Outcomes Based Education (OBE) system. According to Ojo and Mathabathe (2021), CAPS significantly emphasises course content, teaching methods, and learning strategies. This curriculum aims to enhance students' knowledge and skills while providing educators with a clear structure on what to teach and assess, organised by grade and subject. Ajani (2021) concludes that educators, as the primary implementers of the CAPS curriculum in schools, encounter various constraints that hinder the achievement of learning outcomes. Despite these difficulties, the DBE and other stakeholders often blame educators for students' failure to meet the expected academic performance on learning goals.

This is substantiated by a study conducted by Andrews et al. (2021), whose findings show that educators tend to find the curriculum to be stringent, unflexible, and an overreliance on content knowledge and assessments inconsistent with inclusive practices (p.1510). Msibi and Mchunu (2013) also reveal that the prescriptive approach to policy requirements restricts educators from addressing the needs of their learners. Moreover, curriculum differentiation and assessment are important strategies in mainstream schools. This is consistent with the statement made by the Directorate for Inclusive Education: "Curriculum differentiation should not be an exception, but rather a central method that ensures access in all schools" (DoE, 2005, p.35).

However, findings from a qualitative research approach conducted by Engelbrecht et al. (2015) present the pressing need that CAPS does not support the requirements of a flexible curriculum as documented in WP6 (2001). Furthermore, Du Plessis (2016) draws on the notion that guidelines for mainstream schools indicate that "an inclusive school should differentiate the curriculum and it should be responsive to the needs of all" (p.90).

Andrews et al. (2021) also highlight the motives of CAPS, which expect educators to adhere to the requirements of the curriculum under pressure to conform to that curriculum. Subsequently, Deng (2017) argues that learners with learning barriers possess distinct instructional requirements that present a genuine obstacle for general education teachers. Consequently, inclusive teaching involves adapting both the current curriculum and the

methodologies employed for its implementation. Therefore, a deductive analysis by Walton and Engelbrecht (2023) contends that an inclusive curriculum 'should be aware of the complexities of how exclusion is being created and maintained and should be infused with principles of social and environmental justice.

In religious institutions, integrating dual curricula- such as secular and religious education (Islamic Education)- allows various challenges to emerge that reflect broader issues of curriculum inflexibility. Kelman, Horwitz, and Ahmed (2023) acknowledge a dual curriculum's inherent challenges and tension but emphasise that this interplay between general studies and faith-based education fundamentally defines a school's identity. Davids and Waghid (2021) argue that Muslim-based schools in South Africa have shifted from being exclusive centres of religious education to actively contributing to the democratisation of society. These schools now emphasise inclusivity and engage with multicultural communities, aligning their practices with the democratic transformation agenda while maintaining their religious identity and traditions (Davids & Waghid, 2021). These challenges are rooted in balancing distinct priorities, often leading to curriculum tensions. A dual curriculum requires covering secular and religious subjects, leading to compressed instructional schedules. However, Kelman et al. (2023) highlight that while a dual curriculum poses challenges, it also offers significant benefits by encouraging students to navigate different modes of thinking. They argue that such a curriculum supports preparation for advanced studies and enhances students' readiness for higher education.

In addressing the evolving educational needs of young Muslims, it is essential to reclaim the critical and reflective educational heritage of Islam that shapes its devotional spirituality. This, as highlighted by Sahin (2018), will enable Muslims to develop strong Islamic literacy, cultivate mature faith, and engage creatively with their surroundings. This underscores the importance of a dual curriculum that balances both religious and secular education, fostering a holistic development that meets the demands of society while preserving cultural and spiritual identity. Abdi (2017) maintains that an integrated education system encourages students to study Islamic and secular knowledge simultaneously. This approach aligns with Islam's rejection of the separation between religion and science, the world and the Hereafter, and virtues and vices, as it views natural and empirical sciences as holding the same religious significance as theology or divine philosophy (Abdi, 2017).

Despite the importance of a dual curriculum in fostering holistic development, various challenges and constraints emerge, limiting educators' ability to promote inclusion effectively. A dual curriculum requires covering secular and religious subjects, leading to compressed instructional schedules. Educators are often forced to prioritise content delivery over in-depth learning, resulting in a lack of time for learner-centred approaches. Consequently, Materechera (2020) maintains that the demands of inclusion are an added burden due to the lack of time. This challenge is particularly significant in independent religious institutions, where the limited time allocated to each subject hinders comprehensive coverage of both curricula objectives (Reddy, 2017).

The demand for specialised educators and materials for both curricula can overwhelm schools. Educators often lack the training to navigate and integrate dual curricula effectively, complicating implementation. Bertram, Mthiyane, and Naidoo (2021) concluded that large-scale reform efforts must recognise that the challenges they address often hinder their resolution. Factors such as educator confidence, professional judgment, and the necessity for adaptable pacing are critical yet difficult to quantify. These elements must be considered to alleviate educators' difficulties in effectively managing and implementing dual curricula. Furthermore, in a dual curriculum setting, the rigid structure leaves little room for accommodations, disproportionately affecting students with learning barriers. The emphasis on meeting dual requirements often sidelines inclusive practices, creating environments where learners with diverse needs struggle to access equitable opportunities.

Additions to the curriculum call for recognising sign language as an academic subject. McKenzie (2020) also proposes a three-stream model that adds vocational and occupational pathways for students who do not intend to pursue an academic focus but rather employment opportunities. Negative teacher attitudes and dispositions towards inclusive teaching can hinder the implementation of necessary modifications to the existing curriculum, which are crucial for meeting the unique instructional needs of children. This will be explored in the next section.

2.4 Negative teacher attitudes towards inclusive teaching:

Florian (2015) asserts that inclusive pedagogy aims to dismantle conventional teaching methods for learners with additional needs, challenging the notion that these students require something “extra to” what is typically offered to all students. It questions the fixed beliefs and attitudes that curriculum and pedagogy should be tailored to learners' characteristics, promoting

strategies and practices that address their educational needs. Florian (2015) highlights the importance of educators' practical expertise in executing inclusive strategies. As highlighted by Booth and Ainscow (2016), the inclusion standards reveal that for inclusive education to gain traction, we should reflect and plan on all aspects of the program: how we teach, what we teach, and how we assess and evaluate learning.

Dally et al. (2019) believe that for the successful implementation of inclusive practices, educators require knowledge, inclusive attitudes, and, most importantly, the capacity to support and execute such strategies to address the needs of all learners. Engelbrecht et al. (2015) believe that how educators respond highly depends on the type of training they have received – which alludes to the sub-section before this. Ainscow (2020) asserts that educators must adapt their instructional methods to accommodate the needs of their students and develop inclusive activities that are mindful and sensitive to diverse learning needs. This aligns with the findings from a study conducted by Yeboah, Aloka, and Charamba (2023), which suggests that personal barriers among educators regarding inclusive practices contribute to reduced teacher resilience, diminished self-efficacy, negative attitudes, and insufficient training. These factors collectively impede policy implementation.

A comparative mixed methods project conducted in Finland and South Africa centres around the involvement of educators in inclusive education. According to Engelbrecht (2020), the findings indicate that even though South African educators support inclusive education, doubts about their self-efficacy in its implementation are created. A quantitative study by Mahlangu et al. (2024) reveals the same issue and portrays 'self-efficacy' as a strong predictor of willingness to teach in inclusive classrooms. Yeboah et al. (2024) recognise this variable of self-efficacy as "a teacher's belief in their capability to attain the envisaged outcome among learners" (p.113). With this being said, educators with a high sense of self-efficacy develop an interest in academics and a high commitment to school activities. They do not lose hope when faced with obstacles as they continuously welcome setbacks to launch into the pursuit of success (Cherry, 2020). Additionally, overcrowded classrooms are one of the most persistent challenges faced by education systems worldwide, significantly impeding the implementation of inclusion. The next sub-topic will delve into this constraint.

2.5 Overcrowded schools – A constraint to inclusion

The challenge of overcrowded schools poses a barrier to implementing inclusive education effectively. Materechera (2020) highlights that large class sizes undermine the ability to provide

individualised instruction, a cornerstone of inclusion. Educators in his study expressed concerns that overcrowded classrooms hinder the practical application of inclusive education principles. These sentiments are echoed by Andrews et al. (2021), who assert that limited human resources and excessive class sizes further restrict the adoption and success of inclusive education initiatives.

Adding to this, Engelbrecht et al. (2015) underscore the growing apprehension among educators regarding their capacity to support learners effectively. They note that many educators feel inadequately trained and lack access to essential resources and conducive learning environments, exacerbating the challenges posed by overcrowded classrooms. This inability to meet the diverse needs of learners due to structural and resource limitations amplifies the struggle to create an inclusive setting.

Despite these constraints, Engelbrecht (2020) provides a more optimistic perspective, emphasising the value of teacher agency in overcoming contextual challenges. She concludes that there are inspiring examples in the literature of individual schools enabling educators to respond positively to inclusion demands. These cases demonstrate how fostering teacher empowerment and adaptive strategies, even in overcrowded settings, can mitigate some obstacles and support the effective implementation of inclusion. Together, these studies underline the pressing need for systemic reforms to address overcrowded classrooms and empower educators with adequate structural resources, training, and support. Without addressing these structural barriers, the vision of inclusive education risks remaining unattainable in practice.

Apart from overcrowded classrooms and time constraints, Materchera (2020) unpacks negative attitudes exhibited by some educators, which can be attributed to the reluctance to change their methods. Engelbrecht (2020) echoes the notion of negative teacher attitudes in the broader school community and categorises this as an interrelated cultural-historical challenge. However, a recent article by Walton and Engelbrecht (2023) notices how teachers adapt to a changing policy environment by creating alternative approaches to inclusion. A study conducted within the Limpopo province revealed that despite the lack of resources and other constraining factors, the findings prove that teachers are collaborating to adapt their pedagogy (Themane & Thobejane, 2019). The establishment of such inclusive initiatives that prioritise empowerment and involvement holds significant implications for leadership strategies, which leads us to the next section of this literature review

2.6 The role of school leaders in Delivering best practices for Inclusion:

A critical aspect of successful inclusive education initiatives lies in the leadership provided by school leaders. This section explores the pivotal role of school leaders in delivering best practices for inclusion.

A qualitative approach conducted through semi-structured interviews with school leaders explores effective leadership strategies to manage diversity in schools in the Philippines (Kilag et al., 2024). The authors note that most research on school leadership in maintaining diversity is done in Western countries. Hence, this specific study aims to fill the gap in multicultural settings. Four themes emerged from the study: building inclusive school culture, promoting collaborative leadership, addressing educational equity, and fostering effective communication. The study by Kilag et al. (2024) further emphasises the role of school leaders in fostering inclusive cultures that value diversity and equity. It highlights the importance of collaborative leadership in addressing challenges such as resistance to change, resource limitations, and cultural biases while promoting shared goals and effective communication to manage diversity in schools. The author's findings hold significant implications for leaders in developing these strategies.

A systematic review conducted by Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2022) contends that school leaders ‘need to reimagine their role in driving a social justice approach to building inclusive schools’ (p.66). The authors assert that this type of leadership agenda will influence various layers of the school, such as the ethos and culture, policies, curricular decisions, and accountability mechanisms (Muthukrishna et al., 2022). In light of this movement, Makoelle and Burmistrova (2020) argue for a participatory process that includes school leaders in allocating funds. Inequalities are being reproduced with the current process, which entails the allocation of funds made by provincial departments to schools (Muthukrishna et al., 2022).

Despite the progress in promoting inclusive education, challenges persist in translating policies into practice (Andrews et al., 2021). Kilag et al. (2024) identify challenges school leaders face in promoting inclusion: resistance to change, cultural biases, and limited resources. Future research within the Global South should identify effective leadership practices to overcome these and advance inclusive education.

Building on exploring leadership’s role in sharing best practices, this section delves into servant leadership as a model that exemplifies ethical and inclusive practices, emphasising its potential to transform schools into manifesting as a beacon of stewardship and benevolent guidance.

Greenleaf (1970) introduces servant leadership as a transformative theory that emphasises the natural desire to serve first and then aspire to lead. It has gained significant attention for its potential to create empowering and collaborative environments. This section examines the theoretical underpinnings of servant leadership and explores its relevance to the affordances and constraints of inclusive practices.

Swart, Pottas, and Maree (2021) argue that servant leadership within private schools is pivotal in fostering a positive organisational climate. They further suggest that a genuine servant leader's identity is rooted in serving and addressing the needs of others, which can impact the climate of underperforming schools (Swart et al., 2021). This framework has been expanded, positioning servant leadership within broader ethical leadership paradigms while distinguishing it through its holistic focus on follower development (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, Van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019). The authors further maintain that the concept of servant leadership, despite its paradoxical nature, can advance research if it incorporates three key elements. These elements include a **motive**, which involves a firm commitment to move away from self-centeredness; a **mode**, which encourages leaders to focus on the unique behaviours of their followers; and a **mindset**, characterised by the qualities of a trustee who nurtures their followers responsibly. By adopting these features, servant leadership can address the differences between dominant leadership models within the educational arena (Eva et al., 2019).

Mahembe, Engelbrecht, and Dannhauser (2016) argue that effective leadership is essential for a successful organisation, aligning well with the principles of Servant Leadership. This leadership approach offers a new way for school leaders to view educators in schools. According to Van Dierendonck (2017), educators are not seen as opportunistic employees but as individuals capable of achieving goals within a culture of trust. Mahembe et al. (2016) further suggest that school leaders who embrace servant leadership values are more likely to engage in coaching and development, all of which are critical for inclusive practices. Servant leaders create environments where educators feel valued and supported, thereby enabling the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies. Specific contributions of servant leadership include *empowering educators, prioritising equity, and building trust and empathy* (Eva et al., 2019).

Servant leadership aligns closely with Islamic values, which emphasise compassion and stewardship. According to Von Fischer and DeJong (2017), the primary goal of servant leaders

is to empower individuals to achieve their goals and realise their full potential. Key traits associated with this leadership style include humility, empowerment, authenticity, stewardship, and accountability (Van Dierendonck, 2017). A qualitative study conducted by Gotsis and Grimani (2016) reveals that empowering, supporting, and guiding individuals to realise their potential through coaching and acceptance fosters inclusion among employees with varying access to resources. The study emphasises that these practices signal the institutions' commitment to diversity and the active integration of unique attributes into organisational processes. Furthermore, servant leadership behaviours enhance perceptions of inclusion by appreciating diversity instrumentally and humanely, promoting proactive engagement.

Despite its promise, the application of servant leadership faces several barriers, including resistance to change, entrenched school cultures, and lack of awareness or understanding of the philosophy of servant leadership. Chan (2017) highlights additional challenges, such as conflicting views on ethical behaviour, which may complicate implementation. Spears (2002) also argues that servant leadership is overly idealistic and context-dependent and risks fostering passivity or serving misguided causes. Eva et al. (2019) also showcase how existing studies on servant leadership focus primarily on business and organisational psychology, with limited empirical research in education. Future studies should examine the mechanisms through which servant leadership fosters inclusivity, its intersection with cultural and religious frameworks, and its long-term impacts on school outcomes. Swart et al. (2021) explored servant leadership in South African private schools and found that participants were familiar with the concept of servant leadership. Participants specifically linked it to religious values, stating that servant leadership is akin to leading from a place of service to others, much like serving the Lord in a church context. This aligns with the broader understanding of servant leadership as a model that emphasises service and support for others, which is crucial for creating a positive school culture.

To overcome these obstacles, the Batho Pele Policy (1997) offers a practical framework for “putting people first” by promoting a community-centred and service-driven approach in schools. This civic-oriented approach aligns with servant leadership principles such as listening, healing, and community building (Chan, 2017). School leaders play a critical role in modelling these values to gain stakeholder consensus. By leading with servant leadership qualities, they can inspire a ripple effect, motivating others to adopt and spread these practices. As Blanchard and Zigarmi (2010) suggest, focusing on the greater good and improving the world requires a specific type of leader: a servant leader!

Building on this notion of servant leadership, Muslim schools in South Africa provide a unique context where education is deeply intertwined with values of service and morality, rooted in historical and religious foundations. This will be explored briefly in the following section:

2.7 Muslim schools in South Africa – Historical Context, mission and Vision

The establishment of Muslim schools in South Africa reflects a unique interplay between historical, cultural, and educational imperatives. These schools serve as spaces where Islamic traditions, rituals, and values are integrated into the education framework, allowing learners to acquire religious and secular knowledge. Davids and Waghid (2021) note that the emergence of Muslim schools signifies the internalisation of education for Muslims while highlighting the divide between the private and public spheres. Historically, Muslim schools were seen as insular enclaves that prioritised Islamic teachings, often disconnected from broader societal developments (Haron, 2015).

A central feature of Muslim education in South Africa is the dual focus on spiritual and rational knowledge. As Davids and Waghid (2021) explain, these schools often maintain a dichotomous approach, emphasising the teachings of the Quraan and Sunnah alongside knowledge from the natural, applied and social sciences. This integrated model is informed by both public (state-funded) and private (donor-funded) orientations. Haron (2015) adds that the essence of Islamic education lies in shaping moral character and behaviour, known as Tarbiyyah, which seeks to merge faith with learning. Schools' open-door policies reinforce this moral and educational mission, which, according to Haron (2015), have enhanced their environments by welcoming religious and other minority communities.

In democratic South Africa, Muslim schools face the challenge of moving beyond the legacy of apartheid, which was marked by exclusion and marginalisation. Davids (2023) emphasises that the ethos of these schools must reject isolation and embrace justice, as inspired by the Quraan and Sunnah. The focus on justice and democratic values aligns with an Islamic philosophy that promotes peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. However, Davids (2023) observes that these schools often lack diversity among educators and students, presenting a missed opportunity for learners to engage with different perspectives. In such cases, the curriculum becomes the primary avenue for fostering critical engagement with diverse ways of thinking and being.

The contribution of Muslim schools to South African society extends beyond their religious mission. Haron (2015) acknowledges the transformative impact of these schools on the Muslim

community, noting their role in shaping religious identity and fostering a democratic outlook. Schools such as Al-Nur Muslim School have supported the development of Islamic values and enriched the broader educational landscape by promoting citizenship and inclusivity within democratic contexts (Haron, 2015).

Muslim schools in South Africa thus embody a complex interplay between tradition and modernity. While they continue to uphold their religious ethos and emphasise Tarbiyyah (nurturing/educational development), they are increasingly called upon to address issues of inclusivity and integration within a democratic society (Davids, 2023). Their dual mission of faith-based and secular education positions them as important socialisation and moral development agents.

While Muslim schools strive to uphold values of inclusion, traces of neoliberal thinking, such as the pursuit of excellence and competition, can also be found within these institutions. This dynamic will be explored in the next section.

2.8 Neoliberal thinking and the ideal of excellence as a challenge for school leaders developing inclusive schools.

The rise of neoliberal ideologies in education has introduced significant challenges for school leaders striving to develop and sustain inclusive schools. Mintz (2021) introduces neoliberalism as a framework that has profoundly influenced economic and social structures, including education. He argues that neoliberal principles provide an essential lens for analysing the emergence of the “student as customer model” within education (p.81). Neoliberalism emphasises market-driven principles such as accountability, performativity, and competition, which often conflict with the goals of inclusive education.

A qualitative study by Mutouta (2024) highlights the tensions between providing inclusive education in mainstream schools and market-driven neoliberal values, such as academic success and rankings. The author explores how neoliberal principles, including testing for accountability, parental choice and inter-school competition, undermine inclusive education by promoting exclusionary practices and altering how schools and educators function. Similarly, a doctoral dissertation by Larson (2023) uses a phenomenological collective case study to highlight the conflicts between the lived experiences of educators and families and the decisions imposed by neoliberal priorities, particularly when striving to act in the best interest of students with diverse learning needs.

In South Africa, the tension between neoliberal ideals and the need for inclusion is particularly acute. A study by Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2018) discusses how neoliberal education policies in post-apartheid South Africa have influenced inclusive education practices. The authors argue that while neoliberal policies aim to improve efficiency and accountability, they can also perpetuate exclusionary practices that constrain inclusion development.

These studies underscore the complexities that school leaders face in balancing the demands of neoliberal policies with the imperative to create and sustain inclusion. The emphasis on competition and measurable excellence can inadvertently marginalise students who require additional support, thereby challenging the ideals of inclusion. To navigate these challenges, school leaders may need to adopt critical and transformative leadership approaches that prioritise inclusivity, perhaps foregrounding the ideals of servant leadership discussed in the subsection above. This involves redefining excellence to encompass diverse learner achievements and advocating for inclusive policies.

In conclusion, this section sought to review prominent literature that foregrounded this research project's direction. The central arguments and counterarguments are highlighted by critically examining the qualitative and quantitative studies. Identifying gaps in the literature justifies the need for future research to understand the contextual influences on inclusive practices. This project aims to encourage future studies to address these gaps, contributing to a complete understanding of the challenges and opportunities for cultivating compassionate leaders through inclusive education. Chapter Three now delves into the theoretical framework that guides the study, providing a structured lens for analysis and interpretation.

Chapter Three

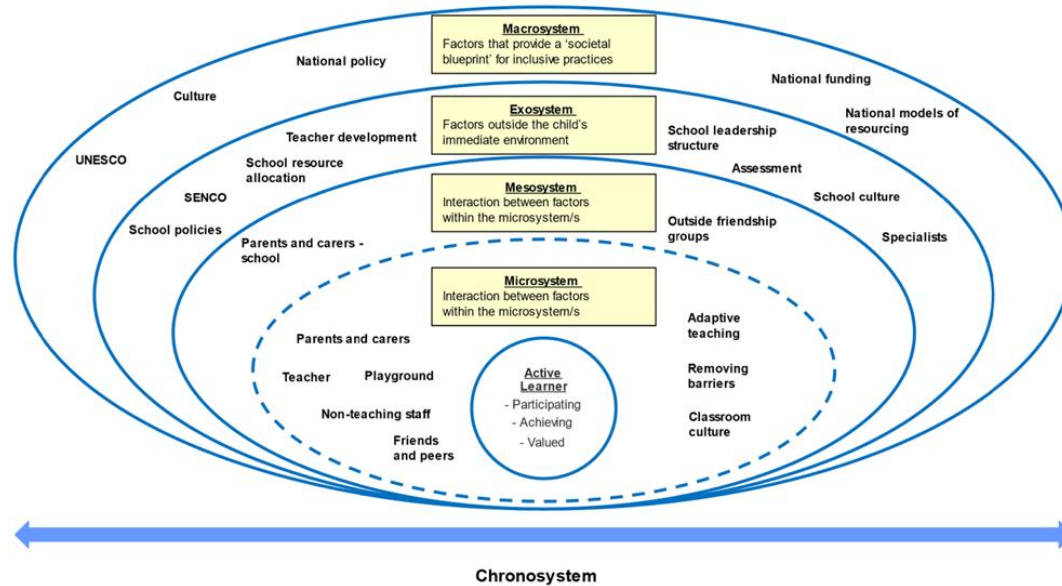
3. Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework for this project is anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), which aims to provide a comprehensive lens for examining the multiple interacting layers of context that influence the implementation and traction of inclusive practices in South African schools. This theory illuminates how each environmental system contributes to or constrains the development and implementation of Inclusive education practices.

3.1 Overview of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory:

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) created the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) concerning human development, whereby Kamenopoulou (2016) argues that each individual can be perceived as embedded in nested systems in which the development is caused by complex interactions between the individual and systemic factors that are constantly influencing each other. This theory was then revisited in 1990 to formulate the term 'bio-ecological' systems, emphasising the biosystem's influence on development. Tahir, Doelger, and Hynes (2019) assert that the four systems will describe the interwoven transaction networks for children exposed to learning barriers. Tahir et al. (2019) echo this by arguing that the different members within the system can and will affect the developmental outcomes of a learner. These systems include:

Figure 1: The ecology of inclusion (Adapted by Dobson et al. (2024) from Anderson et al. (2014))



Using Figure 1 above, Kaushik and Gard (n.d) coin the following systems as follows:

Microsystem – The immediate environment, which includes the school, family, and peers

Mesosystem- The interactions that occur between the microsystem

Exosystem – External development influences such as policies

Macrosystem- Influences of culture and society

Chronosystem – Transitions in development and time

This is why Kamenopoulou (2016) validates the usage of EST as a theoretical framework for research on inclusion, as it allows for examining various internal and external factors that may interact with and impact inclusion. Moreover, it aids the researcher in focusing on the context of the phenomenon under study. The author further highlights the importance of understanding the complexity and fragility of social interactions between learners' relationships with external forces. Therefore, Kamenopoulou (2016) substantiates that this is an appropriate framework that 'is suitable for the exploration of inclusion in education systems as it permits the consideration of multiple interconnected/interdependent factors that are related to the child, which may influence their inclusion' (p.523).

Although Dobson and Jorgensen (2024) argue that children should be recognised holistically through different ecologies, Kamenopoulou (2016) notices how much pressure it may place on researchers in terms of having to consider multiple factors. Sontag (1996) echoes this challenge by classifying the investigation of multiple systems and their intricate connections as a challenging endeavour.

3.2 Using EST as a lens to interpret findings:

As discussed earlier, the framework consists of five interconnected systems. Each of these layers will be utilised to interpret the data and findings of this study within independent religious institutions, offering a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play.

Anderson, Boyle, and Deppler (2014) notice how various other systems influence each factor within the systems of ecology. The degree of influence that each system has on Inclusive Education practices depends on where the systems are positioned. The **macro-system** is considered the most extensive system, determined by national and global contexts; no single participant is responsible for factors located within. Systemic elements like mandated curricula and professional standards can influence these factors. This study will analyse how these broader policy environments impact the implementation of inclusive practices in independent schools. By understanding the influence of these macro-system factors, I aim to identify the constraints and affordances that impact leaders' and teacher's ability to create an inclusive educational environment.

Other levels of influence within the **micro and exosystems** (see Figure 1) are determined by those responsible for these environments. The responsibility for these systems is quite clear: the exosystem involves school-wide practices managed by school leadership, while the micro-system encompasses the classroom that educators directly control. Decisions made at the exosystem (school-wide processes), including resource allocation and timetabling, will indefinitely impact the microsystem. In turn, educators then influence factors such as the setup of the physical space and their pedagogical practices. This research study will utilise these systems to explore how school leadership decisions at the exosystem affect classroom practices within the microsystem.

The ecological approach offers researchers a framework to comprehend the various factors influencing inclusive practices and the interrelationships and connections among these factors and their respective environments.

3.3 Possible Examples:

If the findings reveal that educators struggle with differentiating instruction due to a lack of training, this will be interpreted as a constraint within the **microsystem** affecting inclusive practices.

In addition, if the data indicates that strong collaborative practices between educators and school leaders give rise to more effective inclusion strategies, this positive dynamic within the **mesosystem** will be highlighted as an affordance.

In conclusion, by using Bronfenbrenner (1979) as a lens, this study will comprehensively understand the multifaceted factors influencing the traction and constraints of inclusive practices in independent/religious schools. This framework will guide the exploration of how different nested systems interact to support or hinder the implementation of inclusive education. Despite the above critiques of this model, as a young researcher, I will use this framework to adopt an open-minded approach to studying the inclusion of all learners in South African schools.

Following the above exploration, Chapter Four will introduce this study's carefully crafted research design and methodology. This chapter outlines the qualitative approach and data collection methods employed to address the research questions effectively.

Chapter Four

4. Research Methodology:

4.1 Introduction:

This section will provide the research design and methodology, offering insight into the rationale behind these specific methodological decisions. Additionally, it will outline the sampling strategy and techniques, along with the data collection methods. It offers perspectives on data analysis and interpretation while also addressing ethical considerations.

4.2 Research Paradigm:

Research paradigms represent diverse belief systems' foundational assumptions (Hatch, 2002). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the research paradigm guiding the researcher, which includes their assumptions, ideologies, and beliefs shaped within a specific paradigm that aligns with a particular worldview.

By adopting an **interpretive** approach, there is a great need to comprehend the world through the contextual perspectives of the subjects studied. This necessitates employing a **qualitative** research methodology concerned with experiences and gaining insight into those experiences is more valuable than focusing solely on the outcome (Merriam et al., 2003). This design is essential for my study because it facilitates a deep understanding of educators' complex and nuanced experiences in top-performing independent Islamic schools in Johannesburg, Gauteng. This approach was utilised to acquire additional insights into the limitations of inclusive pedagogy, highlighting educators' unique constraints and affordances (Babbie, 2013). Yin (2008) posits that using an interpretative paradigm that adopts a descriptive and exploratory approach will allow for an in-depth analysis of factors that constrain implementing inclusive practices.

The main research question pertains to the constraints and affordances encountered by school leaders and educators when integrating inclusive teaching methods. It acknowledges that participants' contextual viewpoints and lived experiences will contribute significance to these interpretations. By employing an interpretivist epistemology, this study acknowledges that the formation of meaning evolves within a specific context (independent, religiously affiliated schools), highlighting the importance of understanding and interpreting this context.

4.3 Research Design:

Yin (2003) identifies three types of case study research: exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive. Although Yin (2003) regards them as distinct types, an overlap is noticed between them. This study uses the exploratory and descriptive design to gain insight into implementing inclusive practices in independent religious institutions. Yin (1998) distinguishes between exploratory and descriptive case study designs, emphasising their specific roles in research. Exploratory case studies are suited for contexts with limited knowledge, allowing researchers to investigate phenomena without predefined frameworks while identifying key research propositions. In contrast, descriptive case studies aim to provide a detailed account of a phenomenon, requiring a clear research focus and theoretical base to avoid being overly broad. Both approaches demand careful design to ensure trustworthiness and relevance in research (Yin, 1998).

Yin (2012) asserts that “case study research presumes that examining the context and complex issues related to the case is integral to grasping and understanding the case” (p.4). The significance of context in case study research aims to underscore a broader scope that moves beyond the examination of individual variables and emphasises the interconnected intricacies within a specific contextual phenomenon. Case study research offers a methodological alignment with Ecological Systems Theory in exploring inclusive practices. I can uncover how diverse environmental systems interact to shape practices by thoroughly examining particular contexts. This approach emphasises understanding inclusive practices within its social and cultural contexts, revealing the intricate relationships between factors at different levels of the ecological framework. Ebneyamini and Moghadam (2018) argue that case study research is the approach for a holistic view of the process of deep data analysis.

4.4 Purposive selection of research sites and participants:

This study used purposive sampling to select research sites and participants. The chosen sites are two independent secondary schools located in Johannesburg. Both of these schools are independent and have a strong religious affiliation. Peterson and Llaudet (2006) define an independent institution as operating independently from the government, which can cater to individualised attention and personal instruction instead of full-service schools. These schools were selected for their academic excellence and relevance to the study’s focus on inclusive practices within a religious educational setting. Additionally, both schools were easily

accessible to the researcher, ensuring the feasibility of conducting on-site research. Presented below is a table outlining the selected research sites and participants chosen for this study:

4.4 Proposed Research Sites and Participants

Institution Site 1	Institution Site 2
Top Performing Islamic and Secular School	Independent School (Semi-religious)
Located in an Urban Settlement (Grade 9-12)	Located in an Urban Settlement (Grade 9-12)
38 Staff Members (Secondary)	15 Staff Members (Secondary)
Established in 1988	Established in 2015

Semi-structured interviews (as shown in the appendix) were conducted with carefully selected participants from each school to gather rich and insightful data. The purposive sampling strategy moves away from random sampling and intends to ensure that specific cases are included in the research study (Campbell et al., 2020). This strategy ensures that the participants are professionals who can provide valuable perspectives on implementing inclusive teaching strategies. This selection includes **two principals** from each school, who can offer a comprehensive overview of the schools' ethos and administrative support for inclusive practices. In addition, **three educators** from each school were interviewed (Grades 9-12). For participant selection, I approached all staff members from the two selected sites and invited them to participate in the study. The first three individuals from each school who agreed to be interviewed were selected as participants. This approach allowed for a focused and manageable group of educators willing to share their experiences and insights regarding inclusion. By choosing the initial volunteers, I gathered a range of perspectives while maintaining the integrity and feasibility of the study. The principal participants are labelled as P, while the teacher participants are labelled as T.

4.5 Participant Profiles:

<u>Participant Pseudonyms</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Qualifications</u>	<u>Subjects</u>	<u>Grades</u>
Fatima (T1)	Female	Bachelor of Arts PGCE	English	10 and 11
Faieza (T2)	Female	Bachelor of Education	English	12
Faried (T3)	Male	Islamic Studies Bachelor of Education	Islamic Curriculum Life Orientation	9 and 10
Jamielah (T4)	Female	Complementary Medicine – Master's degree Currently doing a PGCE	Life Science Physical Science	12
Ahmad (T5)	Male	Bachelor of Education	Afrikaans	9,10 and 11
Soraya (T6)	Female	Bachelor of Accounting Science PGCE	EMS	7 and 8
Dollie (P1)	Female	Bachelor of Science PGCE Bachelor of Education with Honours (ELPS)	Life Science	10-12
Talhah (P2)	Male	Bachelor of Economics and Politics	Business and Physical Science	10-12

		Post Grad in Business Management and Administration		
		PGCE		

4.6 Data Collection Methods and Data Analysis:

Yin (2009) advocates for the effectiveness of employing a case study methodology when engaging participants in their authentic real-life environments. The participants were interviewed as a form of data collection. Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix) were conducted with each participant to explore their attitudes toward inclusive pedagogy. Adams (2015) asserts that if a researcher needs to ask open-ended probing questions, semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate method to know the independent thoughts of each individual. Interviews occurred in the independent institutions' boardroom or any available classroom/ waiting room. Each participant responded to a carefully prepared set of questions crafted by the researcher. Adams (2015) warns researchers of the demanding nature of conducting semi-structured interviews as they require a high level of interviewer skill, which requires them to be composed, sensitive, and adaptable to the relevant topics. Conducting these types of interviews necessitates significant time and effort, specifically when analysing a large volume of notes and the tedious hours of transcribing them correctly (Adams, 2015).

All interviews were **audio-recorded** with the participant's consent to ensure accuracy during **transcription** and analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to capture the richness and nuances of each participant's responses. Irvine, Drew, and Sainsbury (2013) assert that using semi-structured interviews will be most beneficial as they are crucial in obtaining data and allowing for clarification during transcription.

Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data. In this study, the transcribed interview data were subjected to thematic content analysis to uncover recurring themes and patterns directly related to the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding inclusive pedagogy. By using this method, I was able to gain deeper insights into how school leaders and educators perceive and

implement inclusive practices. This approach allows for the organisation of the data in a meaningful way, highlighting critical factors that both support and constrain inclusion. Through this analysis, I am to identify key themes that can inform future interventions and improve the understanding of inclusive education within South African independent schools.

In addition to primary data collection methods, this study aims to incorporate document analysis to enrich the findings of this research. Karppinen and Moe (2012) encourage the researcher to constantly interact with documentary evidence or materials to support their research objectives by situating them in the institutional context. Specifically, key school documents were analysed, including the vision and mission statements and policies related to inclusion and learner diversity. As Proposed by Karppinen et al. (2012), this type of document analysis aims to contextualise the research within each school's stated values and principles. The need for this type of analysis is reflected in the letters requesting permission to conduct research, emphasising the research study's alignment with the school's foundational practices and policies. In practice, the researcher interacted with documentary materials to place specific statements in a context for a deeper understanding (Karppinen et al., 2012)

Lastly, Motulsky (2021) asserts that **member checking** is employed in qualitative research to enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of findings by involving the individuals from whom the data was initially collected. Additionally, member checking allows participants to verify the accuracy of the data and its interpretation, ensuring that their perspectives are authentically represented. This process not only strengthens the trustworthiness of the research but also fosters a collaborative relationship between the participants and the researcher, reinforcing the ethical responsibility to honour their voices (Candela, 2019).

As Vithal and Jansen (2008) proposed, an inductive data analysis was employed to understand the collected data comprehensively. This approach involved examining the data without preconceived theories, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data instead of trying to prove an existing hypothesis (Vithal & Jansen, 2008). The data analysis process included the following:

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 1. | { | • Preparation and organization of Data |
| 2. | { | • Coding and classification of data |

1. Raw data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and meticulously transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcribed data undergoes scrutiny to pinpoint any inaccurate or irrelevant information. The data then undergoes a refinement process to remove hesitations and filler words to enhance the readability. The original language and voice of the participants will remain unchanged throughout the process (Vithal & Jansen, 2008).
2. The data is sorted according to patterns and similarities and grouped to form emerging themes. This manual process will involve iterative refinement and redefinition of the themes, as Vithal and Jansen (2008) recommended.

4.8 Coding:

Coding is crucial in qualitative data analysis by enabling data reduction and organisation. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) explained, codes serve as labels or tags to assign meaning to the descriptive or inferential information collected during a study. These codes can represent various units of information, such as paragraphs or words, and are used to identify commonalities and differences within the dataset (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996)

Codes may emerge inductively during the analysis or be predetermined before data collection. Inductive coding, recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967), allows researchers to explore data without pre-imposed constraints. I also opted not to use predetermined codes in my analysis to maintain the flexibility and openness needed to analyse the data thoroughly. Predetermined codes could constrain the analysis's scope by imposing pre-existing frameworks that might overlook critical insights from the participant's responses. Miles and Huberman (1994) advocate for using a provisional code list based on initial research questions, which could introduce bias, as it risks guiding the data toward a predetermined outcome rather than allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the dataset that might skew the findings naturally.

This inductive approach ensures that the findings remain grounded in the participants' lived experiences and contextual realities.

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, guided by sensitising concepts derived from the research questions (Bryman, 2012). The initial step involved segmenting data into codes as indexing tools to locate and compare similar data segments across interviews (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, Milstein, 1998). These codes were then grouped into categories and eventually collapsed into four broader themes.

To facilitate my analysis, I visually organised the data using a whiteboard and a pinboard, where I showcased the responses and highlighted key sections with eight different coloured highlighters. This method allowed me to identify patterns quickly, compare responses among participants, and spot any similarities or contradictions (this will be attached in the Annexures provided at the end). This approach provided me with a tangible and interactive method to explore the data, enabling me to identify patterns and connections across responses. I could dynamically adjust and refine my coding process by visually mapping the data, allowing for deeper insights into the emerging themes. As Punch and Oancea (2014) emphasised, presenting data visually aids in organising and compressing information, making it easier to draw more precise conclusions. This method also allowed for easier comparison between participants' responses and across interviews, ensuring a thorough analysis. The use of multiple highlighters further facilitated the identification of recurring themes and helped me differentiate between various categories. This approach ensured flexibility in categorising the data and aligned closely with my research objectives, particularly in understanding the complexities of inclusion. By visually organising the data, I could highlight significant patterns that were key to addressing my research objectives.

In conducting my coding, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to thematic analysis to ensure a detailed process. First, I familiarised myself with the data by reading and re-reading the dataset, noting initial ideas and observations to gain a thorough understanding. Next, I generated initial codes by systematically identifying key features across the data, ensuring that all relevant patterns were captured. Once the initial coding was complete, I began searching for themes by grouping related codes into broader categories and organising them into potential main themes and sub-themes. I then reviewed these themes to ensure they cohered with the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole, refining them as needed to ensure they accurately represented the data. Following this, I defined and named the themes,

identifying the essence of each and ensuring that they collectively told a meaningful story about the data with the research questions. Finally, I prepared for the reporting phase by selecting vivid and relevant data extracts to illustrate each theme, embedding these within an analytical narrative. This process allowed for a rigorous approach to coding, providing a transparent foundation for the subsequent analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.9 Ethical Considerations:

Govil (2013) affirms that the research report should contain detailed information on “how the data was collected, analysed and interpreted,” enabling a professional assessment of the findings. This will ensure that the findings are readily available for reinterpretation as needed. This study will involve human participants, which is essential when considering ethical considerations.

Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of participants. Only the researcher can access the raw data, ensuring anonymity and privacy per the ethical guidelines (Silverman, 2016). Before participation, the participants were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, procedures, and rights. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the commencement of interviews. Participants had the right to withdraw at any given stage without penalty.

In ensuring the quality of research within an interpretive paradigm, it is crucial to focus on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Orb et al., 2001). Credibility is achieved through accurately representing participants' perspectives and will be validated through member checking. Transferability is achieved by providing rich, detailed descriptions that allow the reader to determine applicability to other contexts. Dependability is ensured through a consistent research process, whilst confirmability focuses on maintaining researcher bias (Orb et al, 2001). Although no interactions exist with learners in independent schools, minimising risks remains essential. Overall, being sensitive to the comfort and well-being of all participants is necessary.

Before the commencement of the research, ethical clearance was sought from the University of the Witwatersrand (WSoE). Engelbrecht (2020) offers guidance on adhering to established ethical guidelines and principles, safeguarding the rights and welfare of all participants involved in the study. A protocol number with an ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the WSoE Ethics Committee. The protocol number is as follows: **2024ECE038M**. In addition, I have completed an ethics course, **Module 1: Introduction to Research Ethics**,

through the **TRREE organisation** and have obtained a certificate of completion. Both the ethical clearance certificates will be attached in the annexures.

4.10 Possible limitations of the study:

Given the constraints of time and resources, conducting comprehensive observations within the proposed study may prove challenging. The limited timeframe allotted for data collection may restrict the opportunity for extensive observational research. Moreover, obtaining access to research sites and recruiting participants, specifically from independent religious schools, may have posed a challenge.

Having outlined the research design and detailed how the data was collected, Chapter Five will present the findings and discussions. This chapter explores the key emerging themes, analysing and grounding them within the theoretical framework and literature review.

Chapter Five

5. Findings and Discussions:

5.1 Introduction:

The analysis of the data, gathered from interviews with school leaders and educators, revealed several findings related to inclusive practices. Through a careful examination of their experiences, **four key themes** emerged, highlighting various factors, from leadership strategies to teacher preparedness and the constraints they face in implementing inclusivity. The following discussion will explore each theme in detail, supported by evidence from the transcribed interviews. This will illustrate how school leaders and teachers successfully implement inclusive strategies or encounter challenges.

Emergent Themes:

NO:	Emergent Themes:
1	Leadership as a Catalyst for Inclusivity
2	Educator Confidence Crisis – Preparedness to teach Inclusively
3	The Impact of Dual Curriculum on Inclusive Practices
4	Educator Intentions and Parental Priorities on Inclusive Practices

5.2 Leadership as a Catalyst for Inclusivity:

This theme explores the role of leadership in shaping inclusive practices within both research sites. The data highlights various actions and decisions taken by school leaders that influenced the school's approaches to inclusivity. By examining these practices, this section seeks to unpack how leadership interacted with the ethos and priorities of the institution to create opportunities for inclusive education. The principals in both schools embodied proactive and a sense of servant leadership, directly fostering an environment where teachers felt supported in their efforts to address the diverse needs of learners. This leadership style, rooted in compassion, foresight, and service, was a foundational element that enabled inclusive practices to flourish. Neves, Almeida, and Ferreira (2023) indicate that successful leadership requires emotional and cognitive understanding and clear standards and values. Mahembe et al. (2016) also argue that effective leadership is fundamental to the success of any organisation, offering a new perspective on how principals view and engage with educators in schools.

5.2.1 Proactive and Servant Leadership Across both schools

In both research sites, principal and educator participants repeatedly highlighted proactive school leadership. These leaders did not wait for issues to escalate before intervening; instead, they took preventative measures to ensure that educators and learners were supported before challenges became unmanageable. This anticipatory approach reflects the microsystem, where leaders directly shape the classroom environment by interacting with staff and students. Fatima (T1) from site 1 explained:

“I find encouragement in the support I receive from leadership; our principal is always on top of things. He ensures that we have regular meetings to discuss academic progress and how we support learners who might be struggling. He empowers us to proactively address learning needs to develop our kids holistically.”

Similarly, Faieza (T2) from the second research site noted:

“The leadership here is extremely hands-on. They frequently check in with us to ensure the necessary resources are in place. They are always thinking ahead, especially regarding learners with barriers. We never feel like we’re handling these issues alone.”

These statements reveal that proactive leadership was not an isolated trait but a consistent practice across both schools. The findings illustrate how proactive leadership played a role in anticipating challenges. For example, T2 elaborates on the ‘hands-on’ leadership role as she notices how leaders implemented a structured intervention program tailored to support learners. They referred to this as the “*intervention booklet*”, demonstrating foresight and commitment to inclusivity. By actively engaging with teachers and their needs, school leaders created an environment that pre-emptively addressed the potential barriers to inclusion, ensuring no learner was left behind. Walker (2004) highlights that proactive leaders consistently exhibit an unwavering belief in their capacity to drive positive change, not only in the immediate experiences of their students but also in addressing systemic issues. Similarly, Mahembe et al. (2016) assert that effective leaders support individuals in achieving their highest potential and fostering independence by acknowledging their unique strengths. Northouse (2016) further emphasises that this empowerment process is driven by building educators' self-confidence, offering mentorship, and inspiring trust within the school. These leaders maintain a forward-looking and optimistic approach when navigating significant challenges and pursuing meaningful impact.

McCabe (2011) suggests that being proactive stems from a heightened self-awareness. This mindset empowers them to focus on what they can influence rather than reacting passively to

situations beyond their control. This concept is central to Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, where proactivity forms the foundation for personal and professional effectiveness (McCabe, 2011). By responding consciously to circumstances, participants embraced responsibility for their actions, which resonates with Covey's (1990) broader philosophy of habit formation, emphasising the importance of self-master and intentional decision-making.

5.2.2 Servant Leadership Rooted in Islamic Values:

Servant leadership was a defining characteristic of both research sites, where management teams demonstrated a deep commitment to the well-being of educators and learners. This form of leadership, inspired by the **Islamic values** of compassion and service, was central to the inclusive practices observed. This type of leadership, according to participants, was evident in how leaders put the needs of others first, creating a culture that permeated the schools. This aligns as it focuses on the relationship between different stakeholders within the school environment- in this case, the relationship between leaders and their staff (partners in education) and how that relationship influences the broader school culture. Faried (T3) from site 1 remarked:

“The principal always says that her role is to serve us so that we can effectively serve our learners. This mindset makes a huge difference because we feel valued and supported throughout. It allows us to focus on each child's individual and unique needs, knowing that we have the backing of management at all times.”

Jamielah (T4) from the second research site expressed a similar sentiment:

“Our management team models compassion and humility. They lead by serving, and it's obvious in the way they interact with everyone. And you know with Islamic values; we are aware that we are answerable to the Almighty. In Islam, we express a term called Amaanat (trust), whereby we are given the duty to shape each learner holistically, spiritually, and academically, despite their learning abilities. She also sets a tone of respect that we all try to follow.”

In both research sites, servant leadership triggered significant changes where the compassion and care modelled by management influenced teachers' attitudes toward learners. This dynamic, grounded in Islamic values, provided a moral and ethical framework for inclusivity, where nurturing every child – regardless of their learning challenges- became a shared responsibility among the staff. Eva et al. (2019) highlight that traditional leadership styles prioritise hierarchical structures, relying on power-based authority and top-down relationships.

As the findings revealed, servant leadership strongly emphasises ethical and moral behaviour driven by a genuine and altruistic desire to serve others wholeheartedly.

A hallmark of the leadership in both research sites was the **open-door policy** that principals and management maintained. Haron (2015) noted that this approach strengthens the schools' moral and educational mission by creating an inclusive environment that welcomes religious and other minority communities. DeMatthews et al. (2020) also support this notion, emphasising that educators and principals worked comfortably together to enhance instructional quality and cultivate a stronger sense of belonging. It also indicates whether educators are viewed as collaborative partners in the institution or merely as employees with restricted rights. This is consistent with the Eva et al. (2019) perspective, which emphasises a servant leadership approach that encourages taking an active interest in the unique behaviours of followers and adopting a trustee-like mindset to nurture their growth responsibly (mode). Educators consistently said they felt comfortable approaching school leaders with concerns about classroom management, inclusive practices, or specific learner challenges. This accessibility was not only a leadership style but a critical factor in building trust between staff and management.

Ahmad (T5) from the school explained:

“I’ve never had to wait to raise an issue. I can always go to the principal, and she’ll listen. It doesn’t matter how busy she is, she makes time for us. This makes it easier to deal with issues as they arise because we know we have her continuous support.”

The same practice was highlighted at the second research site whereby T1 and T4 felt *“that management never makes them feel like a burden, whether it is a personal concern or not. That kind of openness is so important for maintaining an inclusive environment.”*

Communication between educators and the school principal alludes to a mesosystem and microsystem interaction. The open door policy reflects the microsystem (the immediate relationship between leaders and educators) and influences the mesosystem by facilitating communication between all stakeholders, including parents and students. This level of direct accessibility creates a culture of transparency, where concerns about inclusive practices can be addressed swiftly and collaboratively. Tahir et al. (2019) maintain that the various forms of collaboration among key individuals were identified as the most crucial factors in promoting student learning at both the microsystemic and mesosystemic levels, fostering inclusive practices.

5.2.3 Building Communities of Practice and Teacher Support:

Research site 1 emphasised the importance of building strong communities of practice where teachers could collaborate, share resources, and support one another in their efforts to create inclusive classrooms. All the participants contend that school leadership played an integral role in facilitating these communities, providing both formal and informal opportunities for educators to connect. This perspective aligns with Townley's (2020) view that professional learning communities operate on the front lines, where members actively collaborate by sharing strategies, practising techniques, and continuously reflecting on data to offer students the most effective learning experiences across various subjects.

In one of the interviews, Jamielah (T4) notes:

“Our management really encourages us to work together. We have regular meetings to discuss inclusive practices that the School Based Support Team has come up with, share these strategies, and support one another. The principal often joins these discussions and makes sure we have the time and resources to do this work.”

This emphasis on collaboration amongst educators reflects the mesosystem, where relationships between management and educators are strengthened through ‘shared best practices’. Leaders fostered an environment of continuous professional development, where educators were not only encouraged but expected to learn from one another. *“It feels like we are all in this together, and that starts from the top”*. This statement by Dollie (T6) closely aligns with the idea that learning communities of practice (COPs) are essential in education, highlighting the inherently social aspect of the human learning process. The servant leadership approach to building communities of practice also ties within the exosystem, as the school leaders sought external professional development opportunities for teachers and advocated for district-level workshops to further enhance their ability to manage inclusive classrooms. This concurs with Kilag et al. (2024), who assert that school leaders should prioritise fostering opportunities for team building and collaboration, promoting open communication and active listening, and ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making processes. Additionally, leadership's efforts to connect with external resources reflect the ecosystem's influence. By seeking out opportunities for growth and advocating for external support, leaders extend the school's capacity to manage inclusion beyond its immediate environment.

5.3 Educator Confidence Crisis – Preparedness to teach Inclusively

Teaching inclusively presented a daunting challenge for many educators, who felt underprepared by their university training and overwhelmed by the practical demands of supportive, diverse learners. While educators expressed a genuine desire to embrace inclusive practices due to their Islamic background, they were often hindered by inadequate preparation during their tertiary education, leading to insecurity in their abilities. A study by Stites, Rakes, Noggle, and Shah (2018) found that preservice teachers did not clearly understand inclusion. It felt they required further development, both in their coursework and through practical field experience. Many reflected on how their university education offered limited exposure to real-life inclusive teaching scenarios, leaving them feeling ill-equipped for the complexities of the classroom. Despite their best intentions, this “confidence gap” made it difficult to effectively implement inclusive practices, creating tension between their aspirations and practical abilities. The following section presents these remarks as a narrative, focusing on the sub-categories merged into this theme.

5.3.1 Experiences in preservice courses for inclusive teaching

One of the most striking findings from the interviews was the overwhelmingly brief and surface-level treatment of inclusive education during tertiary education training. Both research sites echo this sentiment, as many educators reported that inclusive education modules (teacher training) were allocated very little time within the broader curriculum, often spanning only a few weeks, making it difficult for them to grasp the full scope of inclusive teaching practices. As T1 noted:

“No, I remember we had a two-week module on inclusive education, and that was it. There was no time to fully engage with the content, and it felt more like a checkbox exercise than something meaningful; I graduated from a top institution that did not facilitate online learning like the rest of my colleagues.”

This lack of time allocation in teacher training modules left teachers feeling ill-prepared, as they were only introduced to the basics of inclusive education without being given the tools to apply it effectively in real classroom settings. This notion aligns with Engelbrecht et al. (2015) as they indicate that research studies focusing on inclusive education programs are often fragmented and short-term in nature. Mahlangu and Mtshali (2024) also contend that a sense of self-efficacy in inclusive teaching is a key factor in determining the preparedness to teach inclusively. The simplicity of these modules contributed significantly to educators' insecurity in their roles. With such limited exposure, many felt they were thrown into complex teaching

environments without the necessary training or strategies to support learners with diverse needs. The experience was summarised by T6, who shared, *“We barely touched on what inclusive education entails, and it was hard to feel confident when we had so little time to grasp it.”*

The majority of the educators not only criticised the short duration of the inclusive education modules but also expressed frustration over the poor quality of the content they were taught. Many felt that the theoretical aspects of inclusive education (principles of inclusion and diversity) were covered, but there was little to no focus on practical application. This created a disconnect between the knowledge gained during their training and the realities they faced in the classroom. Educators often struggled to implement inclusive practices because they lacked practical experience. As T2 reflected:

“It’s one thing to learn about the different theories of inclusion, but how do you apply that when you have 45 students with different learning needs? We weren’t given any practical examples or strategies, and that’s where I feel we were let down.”

Deficiency in content was a common theme in the semi-structured interviews, with many educators expressing that their training focused too much on abstract concepts and not enough on real-world application. This refers to the lack of practical, hands-on training and relevant strategies in preservice teacher training. While abstract concepts were addressed, there was little focus on equipping educators with concrete tools or real-life scenarios to manage diverse classrooms effectively. This gap left many educators feeling underprepared to implement inclusive practices in their teaching. Florian and Camedda (2020) share a similar perspective, asserting that greater emphasis must be placed on how educators are prepared and supported to operate in inclusive environments. The lack of support and mentorship led to feelings of inadequacy and frustration among educators, who wanted to be inclusive but didn’t know how to navigate the challenges that arose in the classroom. Engelbrecht (2020) additionally argues that learners completing their teacher training without meaningful, ongoing interaction with learners facing barriers to learning and development may struggle to effectively apply and implement their training in mainstream classroom settings, leaving their practical application or readiness in question. As T6 mentioned, *“It’s hard to feel confident”*. They felt unsupported in creating an inclusive learning environment without concrete examples or methods to follow.

We can utilise Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) bioecological systems theory further to explore the teacher's under-preparedness for inclusive practices. The educators’ experiences of insecurity and hesitation in inclusive classrooms can be linked to the microsystem, where the classroom

dynamics and interactions are significantly affected by their lack of preparation. As T3 noted: *“I want to be inclusive, I really do, but I’m not sure what to do,”* illustrating how this insecurity impacts their confidence and their ability to foster inclusive practices. Materechera (2020) confirms that the lack of professional training is a massive constraint since educators often harbour negative perceptions of their profession, which could result in diminished confidence and performance quality. Additionally, Materechera (2020) believes it may influence their willingness or ability to advocate for inclusion. These subthemes underscore educators' challenges in developing the confidence and skills necessary for inclusive practices, emphasising the need for more practical and well-supported training programs at the tertiary level.

5.4 The Impact of Dual Curriculum on Inclusive Practices

Another concern raised by all the participants in this study at both research sites was that curriculum constraints emerged as a significant barrier for educators attempting to cater to diverse learner needs. Research Site 1 utilises a dual curriculum- comprising both the Islamic curriculum and the national CAPS (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement). Research Site 2 utilises the CAPS and GED (General Education Development) curriculum. Focusing on Research Site 1, the Islamic curriculum creates tension and imbalance for educators. Participants(T1-T3) expressed that while both curricula are essential to the identity and educational goals of the school, the challenge lies in effectively integrating these frameworks within the limited time available. Many educators expressed concern about the rigid structure of the CAPS curricula, which often prioritises academic excellence over the flexibility needed to accommodate all learners. As T1 articulated:

“We have so much content to cover in a short time. It feels like there’s no room to adapt lessons for those who need additional support”.

This sentiment reflects a common struggle among the educators from this study, who all feel caught between adhering to curriculum requirements and addressing the needs of students with learning barriers. Andrews et al. (2021) highlight how curriculum constraints are tied to the extensive teaching content that must be covered, the nature of assessments, and the rapid pace of instruction. This challenge is further compounded in dual curriculum settings, where the added pressure to accommodate both curricula significantly limits the time available for inclusive practices and personalised support for learners. It is for this reason that an inclusive curriculum should not only focus on access but also on creating meaningful participation for

all. According to all three teacher participants (T1-T3) at research site 1, the dual nature of the curricula can lead to competing priorities, where the expectations of the Islamic curriculum reduce the time available for completing the requirements of CAPS set out by the DBE. For instance, the Islamic Hifz program (memorisation of the Holy Quraan) demands significant time and focus. Principal (P2) Talhah noted:

“The Hifz program is so important for our learners, but it takes away time to complete the CAPS syllabus and cater to all learning needs”.

This highlights the tension between maintaining religious values and fostering an inclusive educational environment. Moreover, the dual curriculum demands significant time investment, leaving educators with little opportunity to develop lesson plans that cater to all. As stated by P2, *“Time is our biggest constraint; with two curriculums to teach, we just don’t have enough hours in the day to accommodate everyone’s needs”*. This lack of time affects educators' ability to plan effectively and contributes to significant burnout and frustration. Reddy (2017) cautioned that the formal integration of dual education into the school curriculum could result in watered-down versions closely tied to rigid, predetermined outcomes. The findings revealed that when significant portions of the curriculum are not actively covered due to excessive content and time limitations, it has a detrimental effect on teaching and learning. I agree with this finding, as an overloaded curriculum with an additional Islamic curriculum can hinder educators’ ability to provide in-depth instruction, leaving students with a superficial understanding of key concepts. This affects knowledge retention and reduces opportunities for engaging and meaningful learning experiences. Balancing content coverage with sufficient time for mastery is essential for effective teaching and learning. Mongkhonvanit (2017) also cautions that dual curricula rely on qualified teachers with experience and ongoing professional development to meet evolving demands. Without these supports, integrating dual systems risks overburdening educators, limiting inclusivity, and compromising instructional quality. Materechera (2020) further highlights a growing concern known as the “erosion of the profession” stemming from increased workloads and insufficient time to meet curriculum demands. This concept refers to the declining value of the teaching profession, heightened external interference, and ongoing educational changes.

The participants at Research Site 2 expressed concern about the curriculum content, emphasising that it does not adequately consider the diverse learning needs of all their students. The pace of the ATPs limits time to work with children who may need a slower pace. T6 voiced her frustration, noting that CAPS offers no alternative to imposed standardised assessments.

However, she acknowledges the support of the school leadership, which allows her to create individualised intervention booklets tailored to each learner's needs. She stated:

“The leadership here is very understanding. They have given us the freedom to design intervention booklets for each learner; and management has trained us on how to do this. Without this support, I don’t think I would have managed to meet the needs of all my students, especially with how intense the curriculum is.”

This statement highlights the interplay between transactional and pedagogical instructional leadership in fostering inclusion. The participant's acknowledgement of the management's role in providing autonomy and targeted training illustrates a balanced leadership approach. Transactional leadership is evident in the structured support and accountability measures, such as creating intervention booklets tailored to each learner (Shields, 2023). Simultaneously, pedagogical instructional leadership is reflected in the focus on professional development and capacity building among educators. This dual approach is a critical lesson for school leaders aiming to sustain inclusionary schools, demonstrating that empowering educators through guided autonomy and ongoing training can effectively address diverse learner needs.

The smaller class sizes make this process more manageable and highlight the effectiveness of leadership in guiding educators toward inclusive practices. These findings are congruent with Sullivan's (2019) assertion that strong leaders take proactive steps to support the growth and development of their subordinates while consistently striving for excellence.

The constraints posed by the Dual Islamic curriculum create a significant challenge for educators striving to implement inclusive practices. The balancing act between meeting the curriculum demands and addressing the needs of all students requires innovative strategies; however, the current framework limits their ability to do so. This study's findings indicate the Islamic curriculum constraints and advocate for adjustments for a more inclusive experience within independent top-performing schools.

4.5 Lifelong learning for inclusive teaching:

The findings from this study also highlight the role of school leaders in providing non-formal lifelong learning initiatives to enhance the inclusive teaching practices of their partners in education. These school leaders actively promote informal professional development opportunities, such as in-house workshops and partnerships with external organisations. This is evident in research site 1, where T2 shared that:

“Not forgetting, when members of the School Based Support Team (SBST) would go out for training or attending external workshops, our principal would organise a team building afternoon where those educators could discuss and exchange best practices for inclusive teaching that they found valuable, we would then connect with them, wow it's such an enriching experience.”

This informal approach provided a supportive space for educators to learn from each other and refine their strategies. All teacher participants from research site 1 recounted regular staff meetings where they addressed challenges collaboratively, working towards solutions that could be directly applied in the classroom. This data further reveals that these school leaders exhibit servant leadership qualities by prioritising their staff's professional development and creating a community of shared purpose. Values such as Amaanat (trust) and Tarbiyyah (nurturing growth) are found in their efforts. These educators clearly expressed a sense of ownership over their professional development, attributing this to the non-hierarchical approach adopted by their school leaders.

The findings align with Davids's (2023) assertion that Muslim schools in South Africa balance their religious ethos, particularly the emphasis on Tarbiyyah (nurturing development), with the demands of inclusivity in a democratic context. The principal's initiatives to foster lifelong learning reflect this dual commitment, as they uphold the values of trust and growth while addressing the diverse needs of their staff and learners. This balance underscores the school's ability to merge tradition with modern educational imperatives, ensuring that inclusivity is practical and Islamically grounded.

The findings reflect the emphasis of Engelbrecht et al. (2015), who highlight that professional development should challenge educators' understanding of barriers to learning and reshape their beliefs about effective practices for supporting diverse learners. The principal's non-formal lifelong learning initiatives demonstrate this by enhancing educators' capacity to address barriers and implement inclusive teaching strategies.

5.5 Educator Preparation and Parental Priorities on Inclusive Practices

In this theme, we will explore the conflicting perspectives of educators and parents on inclusivity within independent schools that emerged from my data at the particular schools that were purposively selected for this study. Educators frequently expressed that inclusivity is a virtuous act and is part of Islam's teachings, motivated by a sense of ethical responsibility to support them. They referred to this act as “Amaanat” - a trust bestowed upon them by their creator to acknowledge every learner and fully support them through their journey (Herijanto,

2022). However, many parents viewed the primary purpose of these top-achieving schools as preparation to enter the best academic programs in tertiary education. This perspective reflects the findings of Mutouta's (2024) study, which underscores the tension between fostering inclusive ideals and the competing pressures of market-driven neoliberal values, such as academic performance and school rankings. Educators felt that the lack of support from parents alludes to the prioritisation of academic excellence over inclusivity. This divergence presents unique challenges in fostering an inclusive environment, as educators feel supported by their management but are very limited in implementing inclusive practices with broader parental buy-in. This contrast between teachers' and parents' perspectives emerged consistently across both research sites, with educator participants describing inclusivity as a moral commitment to their Almighty, with Islamic values of compassion and kindness. T1 participant noted:

For me, Islam educates us to be compassionate in our lifestyle, ensuring that every learner feels valued and reaches their full potential as a flag barrier of Islam firstly, and secondly, a successful and independent individual in the world of work. I am very passionate in this regard to include every learner; at the same time, I am getting rewarded for it- it is a win-win situation for us"

This dedication reflects the intrinsic motivation from their religion and culture to nurture a supportive and inclusive environment. In contrast, educators felt that parents pride themselves, mostly expressing concerns that inclusive practices will compromise the academic rigour of the institution. These educators and leaders encountered numerous instances where parents voiced their frustrations about additional time spent supporting learners with barriers because they mainly chose independent schooling as an easy pathway to entrance to university. P2 deeply expressed:

"The parents here often tell us, We are paying for excellence, not for other students to slow down the pace of progression."

This feedback underscores the tension between educators and parental expectations. It also highlights the complex interplay between individual beliefs at the microsystem level (immediate interactions with students) and the macrosystem (parental and societal expectations) within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological theory. The microsystem in this study encompasses the dedication of educators to shaping inclusivity within the classroom, while the macrosystem reflects parental expectations. Many of these parents are motivated by significant financial investment in their children's education and often prioritise academic success as the only avenue toward stability and success. The conflict between these two

systems places teachers in a challenging position where they must meet academic expectations and inclusive ideals without adequate support to balance the two.

Moreover, all educator participants expressed frustration due to the lack of parental support. One participant (T4) even noted, *“It is challenging to implement inclusive practices when parents are just so resistant to the idea, but we don’t have a say as they form members of the board at the end of the day”* These challenges have led educators to rely more heavily on SBST teams and management for encouragement.

This finding aligns with Andrews et al. (2021), whose study highlights an elitist or competitive ethos as a driver for success. The authors maintain a fundamental contradiction between the goal of teaching inclusively and the pursuit of competitive academic achievement. Tornqvist (2019) stated that these types of schools are perceived as a transmitter of goodwill that prioritises academic excellence. The findings of this study highlight the unique pressures educators face in independent religious schools as they attempt to reconcile inclusive values with parental expectations for academic rigour. Materechera (2020) observed that some educators' negativity toward inclusion stems partly from a reluctance to embrace change. However, he emphasises the importance of moving beyond traditional values to adapt to the demands of an ever-evolving contemporary society, acknowledging that change is often challenging.

This theme addresses the main research question about the constraints of inclusive practices within top-performing independent schools. These findings also suggest that while teachers are committed to inclusivity as a virtuous, noble deed, their efforts are often constrained by parental expectations and a reluctance to change. This divergence underscores the need for discourse between parents and educators to foster a mutual understanding of inclusive practices and their long-term benefits.

Following the presentation of the findings and discussions, Chapter Six will conclude the study by consolidating the key insights gained. It will reflect on the research’s strengths and limitations while offering recommendations to address the challenges identified, ensuring a cohesive study wrap-up and the final golden thread.

Chapter Six

6.1 Conclusion

For schools to effectively embrace inclusive teaching, leaders must align the motives behind school activities with inclusive education's core values and goals (Andrews et al., 2021). The findings of this study highlighted how independent schools in Gauteng leverage servant leadership and Islamic values as a foundation to sustain inclusive practices within their schools. Andrews et al. (2021) advocate for the enhancement of ethical school leadership, and this research study confirms that leaders who adopt servant leadership and a proactive approach demonstrate this enhancement. However, the journey toward inclusion should not be a linear process. For educators to implement sustainable, inclusive practices, the dynamic interaction between teacher education systems, policies, and funding must be recognised as a critical factor. The conclusions in this section are derived from the study's findings, addressing each research question and sub-question. These are structured and presented as follows:

Constraints Educators and school leaders face in inclusive practices.

My first research question asked, “What possible constraints do educators face in implementing inclusive teaching practices”. This study concludes that educators in top-performing independent Islamic schools face several constraints, including limited training in inclusive education, resistance from parents prioritising academic excellence, and inadequate institutional support from school leaders in some cases. These challenges highlight the need for systemic reform to address teacher preparedness gaps and align school policies with inclusive goals.

Affordances Supporting Inclusive Practices

My second research question asked, “What affordances do educators face in implementing inclusive teaching practices”. The affordances presented in this study include supportive parental involvement through tailored intervention programs and the firm ethical grounding provided by Islamic values. These factors create a foundation of trust and compassion, fostering inclusion despite the systemic challenges.

Influence of leadership on inclusive practices

My third research question asked, “How do school leadership practices possibly influence the implementation and success of inclusive practices”. The study concludes that servant

leadership significantly influences the successful implementation of inclusion in Islamic schools. Leaders who prioritise the well-being and development of their partners in education (staff) and students create an environment of collaboration and trust. By embodying servant leadership principles such as empathy, commitment to the growth of others and listening, these leaders create a foundation for inclusivity that aligns with ethical values and educational goals. Their approach empowers educators and enhances the overall capacity of the school to sustain inclusive practices.

Educators' Preparedness and Professional Development

My third research question asked, “How do school leadership practices possibly influence the implementation and success of inclusive practices?” The findings of my study revealed that many educators perceive themselves as underprepared to foster principles of inclusion, stemming from insufficient training during their formal pre-service teacher training. However, participation in continuous professional development programs has shown promise in redefining their competencies. Through the lens of the mesosystem, it becomes evident that school leadership plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between educators' pre-service training and their preparedness for inclusive practices. Leaders who actively establish and nurture relationships with external organisations, such as local NGOs and professional development providers, create opportunities for educators to access continuous learning and mentoring opportunities. These collaborations enable schools to align internal needs with these various external resources, addressing the deficiencies in pre-service practical training many educators face. By leveraging these external partnerships, school leaders foster an interconnected system that equips educators with the strategies needed for inclusion and builds a culture of continuous professional growth.

Best practices for inclusive leadership

Inclusive leadership in this study reflects servant leadership principles rooted in the Islamic values of “Amaanat” (trust) and Tarbiyyah (nurturing growth). Leaders foster trust by empowering their partners in education and collaboratively addressing challenges, while Tarbiyyah focuses on holistic development, combining academic excellence with moral and spiritual growth. This approach cultivates a culture of inclusivity as a shared responsibility grounded in ethical practice.

Sustaining inclusive practices through leadership

Sustainability hinges on strategic leadership initiatives such as stakeholder engagement, regular evaluation of inclusive practices, and mentoring programs. Principals should emphasise the integration of inclusive ideals into the broader school vision and ensure that efforts are aligned with community values and expectations.

I argue that the evolution of inclusive practices should not be viewed as a linear process but rather as an interactive one. It is not enough to solely focus on addressing the barriers or constraints to inclusion as identified in this study. We must also understand the complex ecology of independent schools, considering the roles of various stakeholders, such as school boards, parents' values and intentions for sending their children to top-performing schools, and the economic processes that shape these systems. As Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) noted, these elements create ripples of hope. Leadership must recognise that each school context is unique and complex, demanding a tailored approach.

Interpreting inclusion through Bronfenbrenner's lens

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provided a valuable conceptual lens to interpret the data and examine the interconnected relationships between various levels of the educational system. While the findings revealed that school leaders nurtured growth and educators felt supported – a clear affordance within the mesosystem – there was still a noticeable dissonance between the mesosystem and the microsystem. Despite leaders fostering professional development opportunities for growth, the lack of alignment between broader systemic initiatives and the practical realities of classroom implementation limited the full traction of inclusive practices. This emphasises the importance of strengthening communication across systems to ensure that external support translates effectively into daily teaching.

Ultimately, this research acknowledges both the affordances and constraints of inclusive practices within these unique religious contexts. It aligns with the views of Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2022), who suggest that we must reconsider dominant ideologies and discourses to establish genuinely inclusive schools. This could involve foregrounding Islamic values as a guiding force in overcoming the dilemmas surrounding the “what” and “how” of inclusive education. The dichotomy between striving to meet inclusive ideals and determining the best path to achieve them has led many educators to adopt a middle-ground approach, unsure of their role in sustaining inclusive practices.

Therefore, this study calls for re-evaluating these challenges, offering new insights into the ways forward, but also recognises that achieving meaningful inclusion requires ongoing reflection and action. The limitations of this research will be discussed in the next section.

6.2 Limitations of this study:

One limitation of this study is that it uses only two research sites purposively selected based on their accessibility and my familiarity with the context. While this allowed for in-depth exploration, the small sample size of research sites may limit the generalisability of the findings. A broader range of sites could provide more insights into the inclusive practices in independent schools. Only six educator participants and two principals were involved in the study. While the data gathered from them was rich, the limited number of participants could impact the comprehensiveness of the findings, as it may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across different schools and contexts.

Another limitation stems from my familiarity with the participants, which could have introduced bias into the data collection process. As I made my commitment to the project known, there is a possibility that participants might have been influenced by my views, consciously or unconsciously, leading to responses that align with my expectations. As a young researcher in training, I acknowledge this potential bias and will consider it when conducting future research. Furthermore, time constraints may have limited the scope of data collection, preventing a deeper exploration of the subject matter. These limitations provide valuable lessons for improving research practices in subsequent studies.

6.3 Recommendations of this Study:

Building on this study's findings and limitations, future research should be conducted on a broader scale, encompassing various schools to ensure a holistic understanding of inclusive practices across different educational settings. This would address the current study's limitations of focusing on only two research sites, allowing for greater generalisability and insight into diverse educational arenas.

Professional development for educators remains a crucial area for improvement. Future research should explore these programs' impact and the role of collaboration in teaching. Collaborative practices among educators foster a culture of mutual support and innovation. While this study highlights the value of servant leadership in promoting and affording inclusive practices, further research should delve into how Muslim school leaders, specifically, afford

and sustain these inclusive environments. A dedicated investigation into how Islamic values influence leadership approaches to inclusion could provide unique insights into the intersection of faith and education, potentially serving as a model for other religious contexts.

Enhancing higher education training programmes also warrants significant attention. Future research should focus on collaborative investment in teacher training programmes, emphasising partnerships between schools, district authorities at the national and provincial levels, and universities. These collaborations could ensure that training is contextually relevant and well-supported by resources and educational policies.

As a starting point for future studies, Afrocentric approaches must be prioritised to inform school research and transformation. Abdulrahman, Adebisi, Nwako, and Walton (2021) contend that a continuous and deliberate effort to critically engage and thoughtfully integrate African knowledge is essential while actively rejecting the tendency to regard diverse knowledge systems as inferior instinctively. Researchers can identify culturally responsive strategies for inclusive education by exploring Indigenous and localised frameworks. This could lead to developing policies and practices that resonate with South African schools' unique challenges and opportunities.

By pursuing these avenues of research, we can contribute to a richer understanding of inclusive education and work towards meaningful, culturally responsive transformations in school leadership, management, and policy implementation.

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Appendix 1- Masters Research Schedule:

Date (2024 Guideline)	Process
10th May – 15th June	Drafting of Proposal
16th June	Submission of proposal to supervisor
19th June	Feedback from Supervisor
22nd June	Re-submission to Supervisor
24th June	Appointment of a critical reader
27th June	Presentation done to the committee.
28th June	Await Feedback/ Approval from the committee
30th June	Final Submission to Supervisor
30th July	Apply for Ethics
1 August – 15th August	Collection of Data at research sites
16th August – 29th August	Analysis of data, transcribing, etc
1st September- 30th November	Compilation of Research Report
1st December- 5th December	Feedback from supervisor
6 December -10th December	Working through edits and track changes
11th December – 15th December	Reviewing changes made
15th December – 20th December	Editing of Research Report
21st December	First draft submission to supervisor (final)
30th December	Second draft submission to supervisor (final)
8th January 2025	Published an article (from this research) - INTED
10th January 2025	Third draft submission to supervisor (final)
15th January 2025	Generate Turn it in Report
1st February – 28th February 2025	Editing and preparing report for submission
15th March	Final submission of the report to WSoE

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

The following semi-structured interview questions are designed for **school principals** and **deputy principals** to explore their perspectives on the affordances and constraints of implementing inclusive teaching strategies within top-performing independent religious schools in South Africa. These questions aim to gather in-depth insights into leadership roles, support structures, challenges, and future aspirations related to inclusive education.

1. What is your understanding of inclusive education?
2. Tell me about the schools' vision in terms of the moral/spiritual development of children. Do these values articulate into inclusive teaching?
3. What do you perceive as the main challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive teaching strategies within your school? How do you address these challenges?
4. Can you describe your role in promoting and implementing inclusive education within your school?
5. What professional development programs or training opportunities does your school provide to support teachers in implementing inclusive practices?
6. What strategic plans or initiatives has your school developed to assist in supporting struggling students?
7. Could you elaborate on the internal policies your school has in place to support inclusive education?
8. Does your school employ specialist staff (counsellors, special ed teachers, educational psychologists) to support inclusive education? If so, how are they integrated into the broader teaching team?
9. How are teachers encouraged to collaborate and share best practices for inclusive teaching within your school? Are there specific structures for this purpose?
10. How do you (as a principal) know how effective your teachers are at including every child in lessons?
11. How are your school's finances directed to supporting learners with different learning needs?

The following **semi-structured interview** questions are designed for **teacher participants** to explore their perspectives on implementing inclusive teaching strategies within independent religious schools in Gauteng. These questions aim to gather in-depth insights into teachers' dispositions, support structures, educational preparation, and personal experiences related to inclusive practices.

1. What is your understanding of inclusive education?
2. What are you finding very difficult with teaching in today's classrooms?
3. What are your strategies to help these students cope?
4. In what ways does your school support you in your efforts to implement inclusive teaching strategies? Can you provide specific examples?
5. How do you collaborate with your colleagues in assisting learners who are struggling to learn?
6. How do you feel about teaching students with diverse learning needs in your classroom? What is your disposition towards inclusive education?
7. Can you share a personal experience where you faced a challenge in addressing different learning needs in your classroom? How did you handle the situation?
8. What factors do you believe constrain your ability to implement inclusive practices effectively? Conversely, what factors afford or enhance your ability to do so?
9. How well did your university teacher education program prepare you for teaching in an inclusive classroom? Were there any specific courses or experiences that were particularly helpful?
10. Do you feel competent in your ability to meet the diverse learning needs of all your students? What areas, if any, do you feel need further development?
11. What professional development opportunities have you participated in that focus on inclusive education? How have these opportunities impacted your teaching practices?

Appendix 3: Example of a Coding Table

This appendix presents the raw coding of the interview data collected from the principal of research site 1, an Islamic institution. The extract below outlines the questions posed and the corresponding responses, which have been coded for thematic analysis. These codes reflect key themes and insights relevant to the study's exploration.

* Yellow - Dual curriculum? (eg)
* Black - possible codes
* Pink - Respect for diversity
* Green - constraints (time)

Interview Process conducted on 28/08/2024 at Research Site 1

Principal Investigator: Ammaarah Maal

Participant: **Principal 1** (Islamic institution)

1. Understanding of Inclusive Education:

Involves accommodating for all types of learners in a school, without separating them into different classrooms. It involves catering for learners with barriers to learning (we don't call them learners with disabilities). The different challenges they experience to fit into mainstream education. Also, IE is accommodating for all types of learners that are bullied, or psychologically not ready for a particular grade and getting them to fit into mainstream education

2. Schools vision in terms of moral/spiritual development of children – do these articulate into inclusive teaching?

Our vision and mission is very broad. The main point is where the school tries to prepare every learner at the school holistically, not only academically, but we also focus on their emotional, Physical and spiritual development. We try to incorporate all these aspects into the daily curriculum. As far as spiritual development, our school has a dual curriculum (Islamic and Secular). The Islamic education caters for the spiritual development of the child. But what is good about our system is that the Islamic curriculum is not seen in isolation to the secular aspect. They are integrated and that in itself is for the holistic development of the child

3. Main challenges/opportunities in implementing teaching strategies

The main challenge is time, because in dealing with learners that have barriers to learning. The curriculum from the department is so tight packed, it mainly focuses on the assessments and the paperwork, so although my teachers are encouraged to deal with all learners inclusively, time is our biggest concern

The second challenge I have is not every educator comes from an educational background where they extensively studied the White paper and inclusive education as a whole. They are not fully aware, so during workshops and staff meetings- we try to identify these learners from primary school level. And here's the challenge: if the barriers to learning are not picked up from an early stage, our kids often enter high school with this barrier and then it is too late to remedy - Possibly because of the lack of experience of our teachers to pick up on this. But we do guide them. To assist us, we have hired on site ed psychologists and an occupational therapist. This has made a great improvement as teachers can refer to the OT for recommendations. The OT then assists the teachers with guidance on what to do in such a situation to allow learners to refrain from exclusion.

4. Your role in promoting/implementing IE

As a principal, my key responsibility is to ensure that every learner gets the best educational help and the best teaching strategies to help them cope. However, we do

* Acknowledgement
* barrier / constraint
* Respect for diversity
* Dual curriculum
* Integration
* Barriers to inclusion
* Time as a factor
* ran out of class
* new theme
* Islamic ethos coming through
* underpreparedness of teachers? (refer back)
* could she be suggesting medical model or extra support system?

* constraints coming through - major theme
* Academic success slowly coming through

⑤ Bell-curve thinking (check for more)

acknowledge that we have the high flyers and the weaker learners, but my goal (the things I want to achieve), the educators buy into this goal. So irrespective of the challenges, we treat all children alike and give them the same attention. I work with the teacher to make the appointment with the OT and psychologist, I then work closely with the parents to see how best we can assist this child.

⑥
Support
Structures
evident

5. What training programs does your school provide to support teachers in implementing inclusive practices?

* SBST - support structures in place?

There aren't specific programs, but the School Based Support Team is the one that deals with learners who face barriers to learning. Now I have a fantastic SBST both in primary and Secondary school. There are actively involved, attend all departmental meetings, meet regularly and here's the best part: the training that they receive, the come back to the school and share it with the other staff members (not just their department). The resources that they get from this training, it is always shared with the rest of the staff to ensure we are all on the same page. Then we also have guest speakers that come to address both my teachers and learners. Example: the school psychologist recently addressed a group of my matriculants who were not coping with the pressure and this has a great effect on their confidence and improvement levels.

* initiative
taken
additional
support
measures

→ Evidence of bell-curve? (not certain as yet)
6. What plans has your school developed to assist in supporting struggling students?

We have an intervention programme that stretches from grade 7 to matric. Previously, we only concentrated on intervention for grade 12 learners, but then we realized that that by the time learners come to grade 12, intervention is too late. So the initiative we have taken is to start these classes from an earlier grade. What we noticed is that our intervention classes for the entire grade was not effective, so now we have strategized and asked teachers to identify learners, and if they are not capable of doing so, all the teachers in a particular grade will get together and identify them together. And then we have the intervention classes specifically for those learners to best support their learning.

7. Elaborate on internal policies in place to support IE:

Advocating for human rights
↑ + respect for diversity

Our admission policy is pretty straightforward, we do not discriminate against race, disability, socio economic background, we are quite inclusive in that sense. Another one is our bursaries. 30% of our school are on bursaries. So affordability is not a reason why we exclude learners (they are all given an opportunity). Our policy on bullying and disciplinary policies to protect vulnerable learners are quite effective.

8. Does your school employ specialist staff? How are they integrated into the broader teaching team?

Yes we have, the 2 professional that we have on site are the educational psychologist and the OT. The OT works primarily with the primary school to remedy issues before they enter high school. My teachers are fully aware of the services provided by the specialist staff. They don't work in isolation or just come to school in their fancy office, but they work very closely with the teachers. First, the teachers collaborate with one another to find out everything about

↓
* Find out about an in-house psychologist (term often used)
support structure? Fully prepared, confident in these answers

medical detail?

↑ confusing nature.

a child, this report is then given to the OT to assess, feedback is then given to the teacher that is concerned, and if it is highly confidential, the OT discusses with me as the principal and I take the necessary action. This is all done in collaboration with the parent so that they don't feel violated in any sense. This is what we call team work

9. How are teachers encouraged to collaborate and share their best practices for Inclusive teaching? (7)

* Best practices for leaders (Leadership practices)

This will be in the school based support team, when they meet, they will discuss the different challenges they are experiencing. When they brief the educators in different phases, best practices are shared in these meetings and this is done in a very dignified manner and not to encourage teachers to isolate learners. Whatever is discussed in these meetings is for the betterment of the child, never to belittle the child and never to bring negative attention to my children.

(5) * Academic focus prevalent

10. How do you as a principal know how effective your teachers are at inclusion?

If you look at the performance of the learners, I go by results. But I also observe the children on the playground and within the classrooms to see how are performing. But most of my information comes from the results. This tells me the following: the OT is not helpful, the teacher is not using different teaching styles to bring out the best in that child. For example, if the teachers only form of assessment is only writing and the child continues to perform poorly, I will question the teacher if they are adopting a different strategy to analyse that child. And our results speaks for itself, we don't turn away children from entry into our schools, and what speaks volumes is that we always maintain 100% pass rate at the end of the year, we don't have a policy that states 'if you don't pass a grade you need to take a transfer'

(8) academic focus

11. How does Islamic values assist you in including every child?

You know Islam, it's the most compassionate religion. For us, academic excellence is celebrated, but for me and most of the teachers, the joy lies in taking a child that was struggling to get from one grade to the next, and seeing them excel with both minor/major improvements. And for me, I practice this throughout my life, I would prefer to teach those learners who are struggling in every aspect and help them grow into achieving success.

compassion

12. How are the schools finances directed to supporting learners with different learning needs?

↑ well equipped (resources + structural support)

If we identify a particular resource or a learning need that is helpful to learners with different learning needs, the board never refuses us. For example, if there is a need for a cyberbullying workshop that is justified and is in the best interest of the child, we are never refused

(3)
* Islamic ethos
* Compassion prevailing
↓
Leadership practices

Grounds for servant leadership For Findings?
Refer back to this

Appendix 4 : Ethical Clearance



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 2024EC E038M

PROJECT TITLE

"Lessons for leaders and teachers: An exploration into the affordances and constraints of inclusive practices in South African schools."

INVESTIGATOR

Ammaarah Maal.

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR

Wits School of Education.

DATE CONSIDERED

25 July 2024.

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Approved unconditionally.

RISK LEVEL

No Risk.

EXPIRY DATE

Date of submission of the Research Report.

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE

25 July 2024.

CHAIRPERSON

Dr. Lawan Abdulhamid

cc: Dr. Douglas Andrews.

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and ONE COPY returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature

21 / 08 / 2024

Date

Appendix 5: Ethics Training Certificate

	Zertifikat Certificat	Certificado Certificate
Promouvoir les plus hauts standards éthiques dans la protection des participants à la recherche biomédicale Promoting the highest ethical standards in the protection of biomedical research participants		
Certificat de formation - Training Certificate		
Ce document atteste que - this document certifies that		
	Ammaarah Maal	
a complété avec succès - has successfully completed		
Module 1 (2023) - Introduction to Research Ethics		
du programme de formation TRREE en évaluation éthique de la recherche of the TRREE training programme in research ethics evaluation		
Release Date: 2024/07/18 CID : mFW2PM4puU		 Professeur Dominique Sprumont Coordinateur TRREE Coordinator
 Programmes de formation continue (2 crédits) Continuing Education Programs (2 credits)	 Programmes de formation postgraduée et continue	
Ce programme est soutenu par - This program is supported by : European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP) (www.edctp.org) - Swiss National Science Foundation (www.snf.ch) - Canadian Institutes of Health Research (http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/fr/2891.html) - Swiss Academy of Medical Science (SAMS/ASSM/SAMW) (www.samw.ch) - Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (www.kfpe.ch)		

Appendix 6: Plagiarism Report

Research Project - 28 Jan .docx			
ORIGINALITY REPORT			
8%	7%	5%	%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS
PRIMARY SOURCES			
1	wiredspace.wits.ac.za Internet Source		1%
2	uir.unisa.ac.za Internet Source		<1%
3	vital.seals.ac.za:8080 Internet Source		<1%
4	ujcontent.uj.ac.za Internet Source		<1%
5	publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de Internet Source		<1%
6	scholar.sun.ac.za Internet Source		<1%
7	link.springer.com Internet Source		<1%
8	sajournalofeducation.co.za Internet Source		<1%
9	ijor.co.uk Internet Source		<1%