

# Promoting Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education Through Human Rights to Achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the promotion of inclusive and equitable quality education through human rights, to achieve the United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs). The agenda of these goals is broad, but SDG4 has as its fundamental aim the achievement of equitable, quality education for all, without discrimination. Equitable quality education requires a more tangible emphasis on efforts to combat discrimination, especially where learners with disabilities are concerned. To date, a knowledge gap exists between inclusive and equitable quality education, and implementation in practice. To that end, the researchers explored the promotion of inclusive and equitable quality education through human rights, to achieve the identified sustainable development goal. The researchers employed a qualitative research design to gain insight into the life worlds and lived experiences of nine high schools teachers from three schools purposively selected in Mankweng Circuit, in the Capricorn district of Limpopo province. The findings revealed that the promotion of inclusive, equitable quality education is hampered by the insufficient training of teachers, and adequate school facilities – both of which discourage educators from making changes in terms of their knowledge, skills, values and attitudes when it comes to enforcing human rights and creating a just society for all. It is recommended that training and facilities be provided, for the realisation of SDG4. The researcher conclude that several fundamental and universal human rights principles are enshrined in a range of existing policy documents, but should be implemented to promote inclusive and equitable education through human rights.

**Key words:** human rights, inclusive education, quality education, sustainable development goals

## Introduction

This article explores the promotion of inclusive and equitable quality education through human rights, and the establishment of opportunities for lifelong learning, as measures to achieve sustainable development goal (SDG) number 4 of the United Nations (UN) (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>). The provision of education is deemed a fundamental right for all, without exception. Although education is the biggest social equaliser, it becomes the biggest discriminatory tool when not everyone is included judiciously, according to his or her unique needs (Cole, 2022). The agenda of the SDGs is broad with respect to equitable, quality education, and requires nations to be transformative (Fukuda-Parr, 2023). Equitable, quality education places a more tangible emphasis on efforts to combat discrimination as far as especially learners with disabilities (LWDs) are concerned (Anastasiou & Bantekas, 2023). SDG4 is comprehensively inclusive, focusing on education which envisages inclusive, quality education for all, and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all learners, with targets directed toward reaching those who are most marginalised, such as LWDs. Since inclusive and equitable quality education is at the heart of the UN's SDG4, this study sought to investigate and promote the provision of inclusive and equitable quality education through human rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>) outlines a policy framework aimed at protecting the rights of PWDs, so as to ensure their participation in all aspects of society, on an equal basis with others.

The UN's Universal Declaration on Human Rights, a fundamental document dating from 1948, states the following about education (UN 2016, p. 63):

1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. 2) Education shall be directed to the full development of human development of the human personality. 3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

The importance of the current study is to advocate for quality education that meets the needs of individual learners. For that to happen, it is imperative to continue to explore ways of realising both an equitable and inclusive education system in its truest form, whereby teachers and schools respond effectively to the needs of LWDs. The primary goal here was to explore whether and how teachers promote inclusive and equitable quality education through human rights, in an attempt to achieve SDG4.

Under the democratic constitution of the country (RSA 1996), basic education for all children became a right for the inhabitants of South Africa. Despite the need to ensure inclusive, quality education for the citizenry, many teachers have not been appropriately trained for including LWDs in their classrooms (McKenzie et al., 2023). A consideration of teacher education for inclusive education involves examining both the structural and professional barriers to training that prevent effective implementation (Tracey et al., 2024). There is a strong policy commitment in South Africa to achieve quality education for LWDs, yet progress towards realising this undertaking has been slow, with a key hindrance being that very few teacher training programmes focus specifically on learners with disabilities, who have particular support needs within the educational context (Kelly & McKenzie, 2018). Inclusive education is an approach aimed at addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of the entire learner cohort (Kelly et al., 2024).

### Literature review

In developing inclusive education with respect to LWDs, many countries have accommodated these learners in regular schools, or in closed special schools (Bombardelli, 2020; Kamran et al., 2023; Merrigan & Senior, 2023). Inclusive education is understood as an approach that realises the concept of inclusivity in teaching and learning, through valued processes and responses to diverse learner needs. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>) is a global commitment by the international community to eradicate poverty. Comprised of 17 aspirational goals, with SDG4 dedicated to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all, these guidelines are organised around a set of questions and answers. 'Unpacking' Goal 4 involves providing overall guidance, answering key questions, and identifying the implications for national and local education development efforts. Education is a crosscutting discipline that influences a variety of areas (Klein, 2022; Strimel et al., 2023) and, as such, it plays an important role in achieving any given SDG. Education was positioned as Goal 4, which reflects the concept of inclusive education, access to education, and the commitment to quality, equity, and diversity. For Nhamo and Mjimba (2020), education is key to unlocking all of the SDGs. What is needed are radical, new solutions that can deliver global access to education from anywhere in the world, and reach disadvantaged communities (Sengeh, 2023). For learners of all ages, backgrounds and learning goals, the proposed solutions have to meet the needs of both the labour market and leisure interests, tapping into people's natural curiosity to make continuous learning enjoyable (Masters, 2020). The closely related concepts of equity, inclusion, and quality of education reexamine the ways in which education should be conducted for vulnerable learners, whose learning may previously have been hindered (Salazar Montoya, 2024). Despite inclusive education being based on the concept of equity, which encompasses many issues related to policy interpretation and implementation, it is still deemed capable of improving the quality of education, and helping to develop the full potential of all LWDs (Engelbrecht, 2020).

According to Sibanda (2023), equality and equity in education can be described as follows: "equality" refers to a state in which all people are equal, while "equity" refers to the specific and unique educational treatment of people in different environments, with a view to achieving equality. To achieve equity, it is not only justifiable but also advisable to offer more support to groups who are in a disadvantaged position (Rizzo & Killen, 2020). Cole (2022) views the equity of education in terms of aspects such as gender equality, geographical conditions, income status, language, and disability. For Babundo (2023), equity in education can be interpreted from two perspectives, namely fairness/equity and inclusion/inclusiveness.

The overriding principle of the SDGs is the global eradication of disadvantage through the improvement of the situation of all people (Jackson, 2020). Social inclusion is necessarily, yet not exclusively, linked to more inclusive practices in education, that is, to the development of schools or learning environments that cater for the needs of everyone in a community (de Bruin, 2020) and respond to the diversity of learning-related needs, regardless of learners' social origin, culture, or individual characteristics (Sanger, 2020). Inclusive education makes no use of selection mechanisms of any kind, nor is it discriminatory (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). It can be understood as a theoretical contribution arising from systems theory and the constructionist perspective (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Importantly, education which is inclusive in nature seeks to transform its pedagogical proposal into ways of integrating the diversity of learners, to foster social cohesion (one of the main goals of promoting inclusive and equitable, quality education) (Hajisoteriou & Sorkos, 2023).

Since 1994, South Africa has been a democratic country with a supreme constitution. Against our country's history of segregation, discrimination, humiliation and unequal opportunities, the 1996 constitution (RSA, 1996) is regarded as being a value-driven, transformative document. Its overarching aim is to overcome the injustices inflicted on humankind in the past, and to transform this country into one that extends equal citizenship to everyone. The policy framework outlined in Education White Paper 6 on special needs education ([https://www.vvob.org/files/publicaties/rsa\\_education\\_white\\_paper\\_6.pdf](https://www.vvob.org/files/publicaties/rsa_education_white_paper_6.pdf)) sets out an inclusive education framework that aims to identify and support all LWDs who experience barriers to learning. Yet the challenges of policy implementation extend beyond exclusion, being linked to an increasing number of learners who do not participate in society, nor have access to learning without discrimination of any kind (Kanyopa, 2023). This situation means learners with unique needs tend to be excluded from society, and live below the levels of dignity and equality which they should, by rights, enjoy (Eden et al., 2024). Teaching practices are essential for creating inclusive learning environments that honour and embrace the diversity of learners, as outlined in SDG4, which advocates an inclusive perspective (Mahadew, 2021).

The monitoring of the implementation of those policies which articulate expansion with quality and equity has fostered debates on the real meaning of "quality education without exclusion" (Landsman & Lewis, 2023). Fostering inclusivity and diversity awareness in this context is essential, for several reasons, including to promote equitable access to education by acknowledging and addressing the unique needs and experiences of a diverse cohort of learners (Eden et al., 2024). Effective teaching and learning cannot be achieved without promoting inclusive and equitable quality education through human rights, as spelled out in SDG4 (Salman et al., 2023). This support is not limited to learners who experience barriers to learning, but also to extends to teachers who teach LWDs.

## Methodology

### Research design and data collection

The researcher were interested in understanding the study participants' perspectives, as educators, on promoting inclusive and equitable quality education through human rights, in a quest to reach the goals of SDG4. To that end, a qualitative research design was used that enabled the researchers to gain insight into the participants' life world or lived experiences. This was achieved through interviews with nine teachers from three high schools purposively selected in Mankweng Circuit, in the Capricorn South District, Limpopo province. The researchers, in seeking to determine how human rights were acknowledged in promoting inclusive and equitable quality education, used a phenomenological research design. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, and through document analysis (Creswell, 2012). The participants were given an opportunity to express themselves in their own words, when responding to questions in the interview schedule.

### Data analysis

Once the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, the first author read the transcripts several times, to arrive at an in-depth understanding of the participants' views. The data were subsequently thematically analysed – a process of methodically classifying, putting together and clarifying patterns or themes in a dataset – as per guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps involve reducing data, selecting significance from what appears to be less significant or vital points, and constructing a framework to reveal the real issues at hand (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was undertaken to identify the main points, notable topics and novel themes.

## Findings and discussions

The findings revealed that the promotion of inclusive equitable quality education for all is currently being hampered in the schools under study. This deduction was made based on the following three themes which emanated from the data: (1) Lack of adequate teacher training; (2) Attitudes which foster exclusion; and (3) Inadequate school facilities. In the sections which follow the themes are discussed in turn, and illustrated with verbatim quotes from the interviewees. Thereafter, a brief discussion and conclusion are presented.

### Lack of adequate teacher training

The participants expressed great disappointment at their inability to fulfil their responsibilities or fully perform their duties due to the lack of adequate teacher training.

*I lack skills and competence to teach learners with diverse needs, because I am not prepared [for] inclusive practices. Maybe short courses can make [a] differen[ce] for me to do the right thing.*

*How do I promote inclusive education when I am not trained to deal with those learners? And no one should blame me for that. We are not involved to those workshops and training, only management attend workshops and training.*

A lack of understanding and inadequate skills for effectively teaching diverse learners in inclusive classrooms both contributed to the participants' resistance to promote inclusive and equitable, quality education (see also Dube & Nkomo, 2023). This view is shared by Mahara (2024) and Fathi and Ebadi (2020), who found that

both pre-and in-service courses that address the skills and attitudes of teachers towards students who experience barriers to learning were largely inadequate. These factors jeopardise efforts aimed at attaining the goal of quality education for every learner. The current study participants expressed their frustrations in this way:

*If the department is not providing [...] skills and knowledge, nothing can be done.*

*Is not easy, I find it difficult to handle [such] learner[s] and no one should blame me. I cannot train myself – the department must take that responsibility, to ensure that I can manage learners with diverse needs.*

*When I was at university, I was not trained about inclusi[ve] education, or to teach learners with disabilities in my classroom. I don't expect anyone to tell me to do that, without the knowledge.*

Capacitating teachers is crucial for more effective LWDs inclusion in classroom settings. Teachers attribute their lack of preparedness to implement inclusive practices to having received little appropriate training (Opoku, 2022). According to Landsman and Lewis (2023), if teachers do not feel they have the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively teach diverse learners in inclusive classrooms, it creates an inevitable barrier to inclusivity. Therefore, teachers across different learning environments need to be equipped with, or upskilled in, the necessary skills and training in inclusive practices, so that a truly inclusive education system can be established (Nseibo et al., 2022).

### **Attitudes which foster exclusion**

The findings revealed the negative attitudes of the study participants, who tend not to address the needs of LWDs, and thus hinder them from receiving a quality education. The implication was that LWDs are not capable of learning like other learners, as was evident from the following responses:

*Learners with disabilities must remain [in] special schools. I cannot cope with learners with disabilities in my classroom, because it is a huge responsibility of taking care of their needs.*

*It is not my responsibility to teach learners with disabilities, and is not [i]n my job description to teach those learners. I am not compelled to include learners with disabilities in my classroom because of policies which I don't know.* Exclusion resulting from educators' attitudes present a significant obstacle to the education of these vulnerable learners, and compromise their chances of receiving equitable, good-quality education which acknowledges their human rights, in keeping with SDG4. As these responses show, there was generally a negative attitude towards, and a lack of understanding of, inclusion. The participants' obstinance in respect of being more inclusive meant they adhered to tried and tested teaching methods which were not accommodating of LWDs. As research indicates, teachers' attitudes can create further obstacles which hamper the success of inclusive education and isolate LWDs (Singh et al., 2020). Teachers' stubborn beliefs or lack of knowledge of policy pertaining to the accommodation of LWDs in regular classrooms aggravate matters, with some believing LWDs are not supposed to be in regular classrooms with their peers (Kaimara et al., 2021), but belong in special schools. The participants' negativity and refusal to accommodate learner differences create further discrimination and prejudice in schools and in society, erecting critical barriers to the learning of all children (Dube & Nkomo, 2023; Mokobane, 2024).

### **Inadequate school facilities**

Effective inclusive and equitable, quality education is unlikely to take place when school facilities are non-existent or in poor condition. The findings of this study revealed that the participants, who were teachers in mainstream schools, had limited access to resources. The shortage of suitable facilities hampered their chances of offering LWDs a chance at success, and denied them quality education. This was evident from the participants' responses:

*It is sad... This school does not have enough facilities to accommodate learners with disabilities. It is a serious challenge; we don't even have enough toilets. Learners with disabilities can be frustrated when they have to use toilets.*

*Already we are having a challenge of overcrowd[ing] in our school. How can we cope with learners with special needs? They must take these learners to special schools. [It] is not safe to combine them with [ones] with no disabilit[ies].*

*You know, they must bring good facilities if special needs learners have to learn with learners with no disabilities.*

*It is confusing everybody. Why do we have to talk about [the] promotion of inclusive education when we don't have adequate school facilities?*

The lack of proper facilities for LWDs impedes the goal of delivering effective, quality education for each learner. Clearly there is a need to acquire suitable learning resources (e.g., various devices), to develop infrastructure (e.g., ramps), and to train and recruit skilled teachers (Shikalepo, 2020).

## **Discussion**

The findings indicate that the place of LWDs in the education system remains tentative, as these learners are often taught by teachers who are not trained to meet their specific learning needs within an inclusive setting.

The ability to promote inclusive and equitable, quality education, which acknowledges the human rights of the entire learner cohort and sets out to achieve what SDG4 envisages, is dependent on teacher education institutions delivering educators who are knowledgeable about what inclusion means, and know the appropriate strategies for implementing this approach in practice. The transition process is not easy, hence teachers need to be supported to advocate and implement quality education for each learner in their care, and to pursue the best possible outcomes for each school-going child (Donaldson et al., 2023). McKenzie et al. (2023) note that there is a link between skills and attitudes, suggesting that attitudes towards inclusion may change gradually if teachers are given the appropriate tools and are upskilled to meet the gamut of learners' learning needs. The General Comment (UN 2016, p. 13) notes: "Failure to provide reasonable accommodation constitutes discrimination on the ground of disability." Such discrimination will continue unless specialised skills which can help to overcome learners' impairments are cultivated, their unique needs are developed, and suitable approaches are meaningfully applied across the education system (McKenzie et al., 2023).

In promoting inclusive and equitable, quality education which speaks to our shared human rights, and seeking to bring quality education for all, teachers need to develop positive attitudes towards LWDs (Rad et al., 2022). Studies conducted by Ainscow and Viola (2023), Landsman and Lewis (2023), and Ali et al (2024), on inclusivity and equitability in education, confirm that teachers are the most important component in this process, as the onus is on them to put into practice inclusive educational principles, strategies, and policies. As Ainscow (2020) established, teachers play a pivotal role in promoting, delivering and achieving quality education that is also equitable. To that end, their negative or hesitant attitudes must change. Some studies found that while teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education are typically positive (Lindner et al., 2023), including learners who experience barriers to learning in regular classrooms, can be challenging. According to Abdi and Metcalf (2020), teachers' attitudes not only set the tone for the relationship between educators and LWDs, it also influences the attitudes of non-disabled learners.

Without the necessary skills and knowledge, teachers feel less confident about their ability to effectively teach and include learners who struggle with barriers to learning (Parry & Metzger, 2023). A lack of knowledge and skills has thus become a systemic barrier to the implementation of inclusive education. Most teachers in mainstream schools received no pre-service training in inclusive education, and have very limited knowledge of the related policy (Vandervieren & Struyf, 2021). As a result, they know little about learners with barriers to learning, which might have been gained through formal studies during their pre- and in-service training years (Kaimara et al., 2021). Competent teachers in an inclusive context require a specific set of skills and attributes, and specialised knowledge (Walton & Rusznyak, 2020). Inclusive education is about identifying and minimising obstacles to learning, hence teachers' professional development is important (Spandagou, 2021). Many teachers in mainstream schools in South Africa were exposed to the apartheid education system, which was teacher centred. In 1995, the Ministry of Education released White Paper 6, (DoE 1995) which was meant to move away from apartheid policies and emphasise equality of access and non-discrimination. Teachers who were not trained to include LWDs or those who encounter barriers to learning, tend to have negative attitudes towards such inclusion. Materechera (2020) admits that the increasing levels of diversity among children in today's classrooms call for teacher training programmes to train educators to respond positively to related challenges.

According to Zegeye (2022), and as confirmed by this study, mainstream school teachers largely perceive themselves as being unprepared to implement inclusive education in practice, as they do not have the required skills for dealing with LWDs, having never attended specific workshops on the topic. This, in addition to dealing with large class sizes. Simpson (2024) concedes that teachers are ill-prepared by their professional training to manage and overcome inequalities in their classrooms. As a result, the re-training of teachers is a prerequisite, and has to be conducted in a theoretical and practical sense (Vereba, 2024). A lack of support from district officials and communities are other concerns among teachers (Khlaif et al., 2021). Any effective teacher, regardless of his or her context, must be sufficiently competent to address inclusion and must respect diversity, collaborate with other stakeholders, foster a positive social climate, instruct learners in ways that are conducive to inclusion, engage in inclusive instructional planning, do meaningful assessment, and foster an interest in lifelong learning (McGhie-Richmond & Haider, 2020). To put the principles of inclusive education into practice in diverse classrooms, teachers have to support all learners, and teach according to the needs and preferences of those learners dealing with barriers to learning (Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020).

Most teachers who struggle to teach LWDs have not received any formal training in addressing those learners' needs on a day-to-day basis. Teachers who have been formally trained in inclusive education do not struggle to embrace diversity. By contrast, teachers who struggle to deal with learners with barriers to learning usually received formal training which prepared them to teach in mainstream school settings (Al Jaffal, 2022). As a result, they have very little interest in practising inclusivity in their classrooms. Their understanding of what constitutes inclusive education is a narrow one, with many believing that disabilities are medical concerns which should be handled by doctors or specialists (Casey & Linehan, 2024). A study by Ocran (2022) revealed that the more teachers knew about a learning barrier, the more positive their attitudes were towards accommodating learners with that type of barrier/disability. Therefore, teacher training in the awareness of disabilities, and appropriate strategies for teaching LWDs can have a positive impact on these children's academic success.

There is a strong relationship between information and attitudes, and knowledge and attitudes (Huynh et al., 2020). For teachers to be able to teach learners with barriers to learning and those with disabilities in an inclusive school, they need to acquire appropriate skills and receive targeted training. Professional development in the form of in-service teacher training in inclusive education offers one possibility of closing the gap created by a lack of training (Resch & Schrittmesser 2023). Smith and Gillespie (2023) argue that it is important for any professional development training to be continuous, and to provide opportunities for teachers to consider, discuss, argue about, and work through the changes they are exposed to during training, which are likely to have made a lasting impact on their practice. Greater awareness of disabilities and of appropriate strategies for teaching LWDs can significantly boost academic success (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022). Kaimara et al. (2021) are of the opinion that relevant pre-service training can go a long way in shaping the attitudes of teachers in favour of learners confronting barriers to learning. It is also important to prepare teachers and help them understand their roles in implementing inclusive education in their classrooms. Professional development needs to be linked to school development, and should be school-based and context-focused (Lim et al., 2020). Teachers are key role players when it comes to implementing inclusive education, and as Kamran et al. (2023) note, their inability to guide LWDs may scupper the implementation of inclusive practices in classrooms.

### Recommendations

The findings and literature review prompted the researcher to make the following strategic recommendations to enhance teacher education that meets the learning needs of learners with diverse abilities. All programmes need to equip teachers with the skills to identify LWDs, as well as their associated support or referral needs. Teachers should adopt a flexible teaching approach that includes curriculum differentiation. In this way, they give recognition to the fact that the majority of barriers to learning can be addressed through quality, inclusive practices. Special interventions will become less urgent as teachers become more familiar with the process of meeting learners' diverse learning needs. Staff development at the school and district levels is critical for delivering inclusive, quality education for all, by supplementing successful integrated educational practices. For these recommendations to take effect, it is important to seek funding for incentives aimed at encouraging pre-service teachers to complete formal teacher qualifications in promoting inclusive and equitable, quality education. This, in recognition of the human rights of each learner, and in an effort to adhere to the guidelines set out in SDG4.

### Conclusion

This chapter highlighted some of the challenges which impede the implementation of fundamental human rights principles, in promoting inclusive and equitable education for all. The researcher conclude that several human rights are acknowledged in the process of advocating for, and promoting, quality and equitable education for each child – this, in light of SDG4 and the concepts of universality and inclusivity. The tenets enshrined in national policy documents should be implemented in promoting inclusive and equitable education for all. Notably, collaborative relationships between parents and teachers are essential for advancing learners' inclusion. The adoption of inclusive education depends critically on the attitudes and perceptions of teachers, parents and other stakeholders. This study provided insight into why inclusive and equitable, quality education is not yet implemented in any meaningful way in the schools under study, thus denying learners their human rights and falling short in terms of achieving SDG4.

### Limitations of the study

This study is not without limitations. This study was limited to exploring the promoting inclusive and equitable quality education through human rights to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4. Participants was a small sample, and that sample was limited to Sepedi language. Also, the findings may be different for participants who speak Xitsonga, English, or Afrikaans. The results of the study cannot be generalised to represent the population in South Africa or other contexts and settings. In view of this limitation, similar qualitative studies should be conducted in other districts. Further studies are needed using a quantitative approach with a large sample.

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