

Refiguring Schooling in South Africa: Inclusive, Compassionate, and Transformative Pedagogies for Deep Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the need for teachers to use compassionate methods to create inclusive classrooms that address the diverse needs of students, considering South Africa's apartheid history. The research question is: How can South African schools be reconfigured to create inclusive and compassionate learning environments that meet the diverse needs of all learners, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds? The study adopted a qualitative approach and a case study design to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of its objectives. Six teachers were purposely selected for interviews, and forty-six students participated in focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions served as the data collection methods, while thematic analysis was employed to identify the patterns and themes that emerged from the data. From the interviews, teachers emphasised the importance of compassion and empathy in meeting students' diverse needs, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Classroom observations revealed limited student engagement and reliance on teacher-centred pedagogies, hindering active participation and failing to address diverse learning preferences. These findings suggest a disconnect between teachers' expressed values of compassion and empathy and the observed classroom practices, which rely heavily on traditional, teacher-centred methods that may not effectively engage diverse learners. This disconnect shows the need for professional development and support to implement inclusive education strategies to address the needs of students. This study highlights a gap between teachers' perceived value of compassion and empathy and their classroom practices, emphasising the need for professional development in inclusive education strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of South African schools, creating inclusive and compassionate schools is crucial, especially given the historical injustices stemming from apartheid. Building caring classrooms is not just a nice idea but necessary for establishing school environments that reflect diversity and promote equity (Adewale, 2023). This study, titled "Refiguring Schools in an Age of Inclusivity: Creating Compassionate Classrooms in South African Schools," aims to investigate various dimensions of inclusivity within these

educational settings. This study explores the need for teachers to adopt compassionate teaching methods that address the diverse needs of all learners.

This research aims to explore the existing policies, practices, and experiences of teachers and students to highlight ways to create a more inclusive classroom environment in schools. The core issue being addressed is the ongoing challenges that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive Education in South Africa, despite the legislative framework established after 1994, which includes the South African Schools Act and the White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education (Moosa & Bekker, 2021). Despite these policies and frameworks, significant challenges persist and hamper effective teaching and learning. These challenges include inadequate teacher training, insufficient resources, and persistent negative social attitudes towards disability and diversity (Mosito et al., 2020).

This research is important because it could have a tangible impact on educational policy and practice. Specifically, it aims to shed light on building truly inclusive schools and classrooms that embrace compassion, respect, ubuntu, and a sense of belonging for all. (Seiko, 2023). While there is an increasing understanding that schools need to be more inclusive, school leaders and teachers are still far from implementing these ideas into practice in schools. While many studies have documented the theoretical foundations of inclusive Education and emphasised the necessity for teacher training programs (Moosa & Bekker, 2021; Mpu & Adu, 2021), comprehensive research examining the lived experiences of teachers and students reveals that inclusive education settings still face significant challenges (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022).

The intersection of cultural contexts and educational practices that promote inclusivity is an underexplored area in South African schools, particularly regarding the Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises interconnectedness and community (Adewale, 2023; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). This study aims to fill that gap by delving into how to create compassionate classrooms in South African schools. The study used a qualitative approach to gather data from participants who shared their insight into the obstacles and benefits of inclusive Education. The findings will enhance educational practices and offer recommendations for policy reforms focusing on inclusivity and equity in South African schools (Makoelle & Burmistrove, 2020; Sayed et al., 2020). This study seeks to advance conversations on inclusive Education by connecting theory and policies with what happens in schools. The objective is to foster a conducive and caring learning environment in schools.

The legislative and policy framework on inclusive Education in South Africa

The legislative and policy framework for implementing inclusive Education in South African schools is built on a commitment to equity, social justice, and the right to Education for all students, especially those with disabilities. This commitment is reflected in key policy documents such as the Constitution of South Africa, the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996, and, importantly, the White Paper 6 on Education from 2001 (Nel et al., 2023). White Paper 6 aims to establish an inclusive educational system that accommodates all students and addresses the imbalances in the schooling system resulting from apartheid (Mosito et al., 2020). This policy framework stresses the need for schools to adapt to students' diverse needs by creating an environment where every student can excel, irrespective of their background or abilities (Nel et al., 2023).

Although South Africa has strong policies and laws supporting inclusive Education, putting them into practice is proving difficult. Research shows a consistent disconnect between what the policies intend and what is happening in schools, mainly due to a lack of resources, insufficient teacher training, and limited support (Nel et al., 2023). Many teachers often express concerns about their readiness to meet the diverse needs of students, which can lead to feelings of unease and reluctance to adopt and implement inclusive practices (Moosa & Bekker, 2021). Furthermore, socioeconomic disparities exacerbate these challenges, as many schools lack the necessary infrastructure and materials to support inclusive Education effectively (Legodi-Rakgalakane & Mokhampanyane, 2022). This situation raises questions about the sustainability and

effectiveness of inclusive education policies in achieving their intended outcomes (Legodi-Rakgalakane & Mokhampanyane, 2022).

Research and discussions surrounding inclusive Education in South African schools highlight the critical need for ongoing professional development for teachers and systemic changes to support inclusive practices. Studies indicate that initial teacher education programs should incorporate practical strategies to address the learning needs of all students, particularly those with disabilities (Moosa & Bekker, 2021). Additionally, there is an increasing demand for more funding and resources to ensure sufficient support for inclusive Education is available in schools (Weisbrot & Ryst, 2020). As South Africa works to implement inclusive Education, policymakers, teachers, school leaders, parents, and communities must work together. This collaboration is key to creating fair and equitable learning environments for every student (Arkorful et al., 2020).

Research Question

The following research question was used to examine the objectives of the study:

How can South African schools be reconfigured to foster inclusive and compassionate learning environments that address all learners' diverse needs and experiences, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is Critical Pedagogy, which was first proposed by Paulo Freire in his landmark work entitled "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" in 1968 (Kincheloe, 2004). Paulo Freire's theory, critical pedagogy, is an educational philosophy grounded in empowering students by fostering a critical consciousness and influencing them to query and challenge norms and injustices in society (Shih, 2018). This theory is an approach that emphasises the need for dialogue, reflection, and action as a strategy and a tool to engage with the world critically (Shih, 2018; Kincheloe, 2004).

Freire's theory critiques the "banking education" model, which views students as passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, this theory promotes a problem-posing model that encourages active participation and critical engagement with the subject matter (Shih, 2018; Shudak & Avoseh, 2015). The main objective of pedagogy as an approach is not only to enhance academic learning but also to foster a sense of agency among students. An understanding of agency empowers students to be able to identify and challenge the power dynamics that influence their lives (Darder et al., 2023).

Integrating critical pedagogy into teaching and learning practices requires educators to adopt a reflective stance, examining their own biases and the sociopolitical contexts of their instructional methods (Gulo & Deloy, 2022). Developing this reflective attitude is essential for creating an inclusive learning environment that recognises and supports diverse perspectives (Kim, 2024; Pant, 2024). Research indicates that when teachers incorporate students' lived experiences into the curriculum and prioritise equity, they establish a more supportive environment for all students, especially those from marginalised backgrounds (Courville-Myers & Flores, 2020; Uddin, 2021).

Furthermore, critical pedagogy urges educators to challenge the status quo and advocate for social justice, transforming classrooms into spaces of empowerment and activism (Giroux, 2014; Isrow, 2021). The transformative potential of critical pedagogy is particularly significant in today's educational contexts, where inequality and exclusion remain pressing issues. The transformative nature of critical pedagogy is effectively illustrated in the work of Darder et al. (2023), which highlights the interconnectedness between personal development, teaching for transformation, and addressing inequality, as depicted in Figure 1 (the interconnectedness of critical pedagogy).

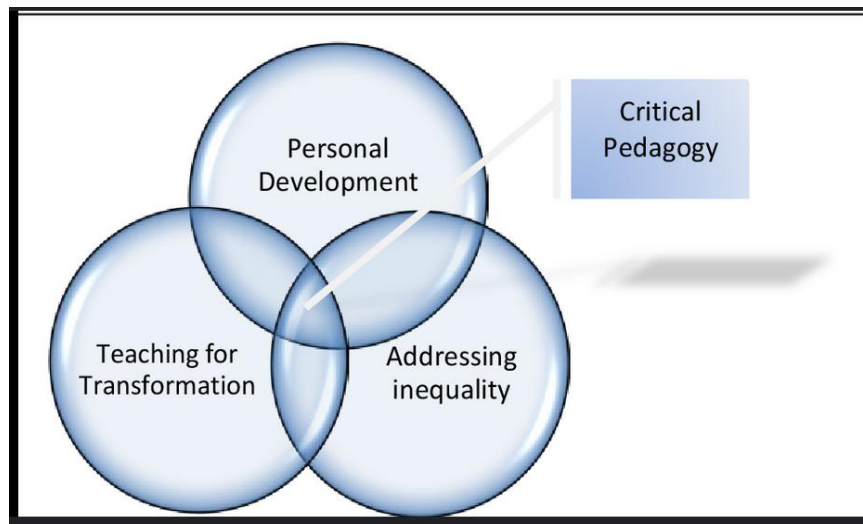


Figure 1: The Interconnectedness of Critical Pedagogy (Darder et al., 2023)

The diagram shows how the key parts of Critical Pedagogy connect. At the centre is Personal Development, which encourages teachers' and students' growth and self-reflection. This personal growth is essential for Teaching for Transformation, where Education empowers people to question existing power structures and work towards social justice. This transformative approach tackles inequality head-on, striving to build inclusive learning environments that break down the systemic barriers faced by disadvantaged learners. As illustrated in Figure 1, these elements are interconnected: personal development strengthens transformative teaching, ultimately leading to greater equity. Notably, the diagram highlights Critical Pedagogy's focus on individual and social transformation through Education.

Literature Review

Fostering an inclusive learning environment

It is key to addressing the different learning styles and needs of students. Literature findings have revealed that inclusive pedagogies, such as personalised learning and collaborative activities, can boost student engagement and improve academic outcomes (Li et al., 2022). Wang (2024), for instance, demonstrated the benefits of small group work for fostering classroom collaboration. This approach fostered better interactions, both among students and between students and teachers (Wang, 2024). This finding aligns with Li et al.'s (2022) findings, which highlight the importance of listening to students to adapt teaching to meet diverse learning needs.

Research indicates that teacher training in inclusive practices is essential because many teachers feel unprepared to address the challenges of diverse classrooms (Ntlhare & Mukuna, 2022; Brussino, 2021). This lack of preparation can impede the implementation of inclusive strategies, highlighting the need for comprehensive professional development programs that enhance teachers' skills in managing diverse learning environments (Ntlhare & Mukuna, 2022). Conversely, some studies suggest that many teachers believe they are not adequately equipped to effectively apply inclusive practices in schools (Larious & Zetlin, 2023). This research emphasises that the primary goal of preservice teacher training should be to boost self-efficacy, enabling future educators to foster a positive attitude toward inclusive Education rather than merely addressing teachers' perceptions of their preparedness (Larious & Zetlin, 2023).

Kaur and Bhatia (2024) emphasise that, despite the challenges in implementing inclusive Education, the primary focus should be on fostering a mindset that values diversity and equips educators to meet the needs of all learners. Educators can develop the necessary skills and attitudes for inclusive practices with appropriate training and support. Kianinezhad (2024) notes that ongoing professional development and teaching experience can greatly enhance teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. This study suggests that rather

than feeling unprepared, teachers can thrive through continuous learning that challenges their perceptions and promotes inclusive practices. In contrast, Yeaboah et al. (2023) report that many South African teachers maintain positive attitudes toward inclusive Education, even though they face issues such as overcrowded classrooms and insufficient training. These findings indicate that while support is essential, the situation may not be as bleak as described by other researchers, who argue for systemic backing rather than a complete overhaul of teacher training.

Promoting compassion and empathy in schools

Creating a supportive learning atmosphere in schools requires fostering attitudes of compassion and empathy. Research indicates that a culture of compassion within schools enhances students' well-being and performance (Shulekina et al., 2021). Shulekina et al. (2021) found that inclusive educational settings contribute to better behaviour, essential for nurturing a caring environment. The role of teachers in demonstrating compassion and care is also crucial, as they are often the primary source of support for students facing social and emotional challenges (Bernier et al., 2022). Furthermore, studies show that teachers who adopt inclusive teaching practices enhance learning for all students and promote a sense of ownership and acceptance in the classroom (Guberina, 2023). Thus, it is vital to cultivate a school environment that centres around empathy and compassion to support inclusive Education and meet the diverse needs of all students.

Recent research highlights the significance of structured training programs for fostering empathy in school settings, enhancing emotional intelligence among students and teachers (Aldrup et al., 2022). A systematic literature review indicates that interventions, such as student-centred learning and experiential exercises, effectively improve empathy levels among medical students (Engbers, 2020). This finding suggests that teaching methods used in schools can positively contribute to inclusive Education. Additionally, an empathy-based curriculum encourages compassion and understanding, strengthening the engagement and relationships between learners and educators (Baugh & Hu, 2020). These findings align with Guberina's (2023) studies, which advocate for incorporating empathy into the professional training and development of teaching programs to ensure that teachers can exemplify caring behaviour.

School policies are essential for creating a caring environment in educational settings. Research indicates that promoting empathy leads to improved student well-being and enhances learning experiences (Lyon et al., 2022). Establishing a supportive school culture benefits students and educators, helping to reduce burnout and increase job satisfaction (Ortan et al., 2021). Several studies highlight community engagement initiatives as a key method for fostering empathy and compassion within schools. Community service programs help cultivate social responsibility and empathy by allowing students to engage with and learn from diverse populations (Afzal & Hussain, 2020). Guerrettaz et al. (2022) assert that participating in such activities enables students to gain a deeper understanding of others' challenges. This insight promotes empathetic interactions within the school environment.

Reconfiguring the school culture and practices for transformation

Reconfiguring structures and practices within schools is essential to ensure equitable access to Education. School principals and management must implement evidence-based practices that promote inclusive Education (Lyon et al., 2022). For example, Corbin et al. (2024) argue that the School Improvement Leadership Scale (SILS) can be a helpful guide for school leaders to carry out practical initiatives and prepare teachers for transformation. Similarly, Oberg et al. (2020) assert that integrating various pedagogical strategies, such as code-switching and culturally responsive instruction, enhances student interactions and leads to positive outcomes. Findings by Prayitino (2024) demonstrate that schools adopting a holistic approach, which values cultural and linguistic diversity, can foster a more inclusive environment. Additionally, Zhang et al. (2022) emphasise that monitoring and evaluation are crucial for the effectiveness of these

practices in schools. By embracing these transformative practices, schools can better address the diverse needs of their students and promote inclusivity.

One effective way to reconfigure school culture is by integrating character and value training focused on environmental care (Casinader, 2021). As we prepare future leaders to become agents of transformation, it is crucial to instil in them a sense of obligation to care for the environment from a young age (Prayitno, 2024). Wamsler (2020) suggests that implementing programs that incorporate environmental Education teaches students about sustainability and fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility. Furthermore, Baugh et al. (2020) argue that initiatives like zero-waste programs can enhance school environmental stewardship, motivate students to take pride in their environment, and promote cleanliness and sustainability. Conversely, Luevanos et al. (2022) emphasise that reshaping school culture and practices requires promoting collaboration and building relationships among stakeholders to create a supportive school environment. Engaging stakeholders in decision-making can strengthen their sense of ownership and develop collaborative partnerships.

On the other hand, McCabe et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of service learning by connecting students to the broader community. In contrast, Mehta et al. (2024) highlight the significance of internal dynamics within schools, stressing the need for collaborative relationships among educators, management, and other key stakeholders for effective transformation. These perspectives underscore that genuine change in school culture requires the involvement of both internal and external stakeholders, along with strong partnerships within schools. Conversely, the literature indicates that reconfiguring school culture and practices for transformation requires a multifaceted approach (Tsarkos, 2024). According to Tsarkos (2024), this reconfiguration involves more than merely implementing new programs or adopting different pedagogical strategies. Grimm (2024) argues that true transformation requires deep reflection on the underlying values, beliefs, and assumptions shaping the school environment. This insight suggests that achieving meaningful change entails fostering a culture of teamwork and shared decision-making among all stakeholders.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore how inclusive and transformative pedagogies contribute to creating compassionate classrooms in South African schools. The research design was informed by an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the subjective experiences of educators and learners within the dynamic social contexts of school environments. Given the study's focus on deep learning, inclusivity, and pedagogical transformation, a case study method was deemed most appropriate, allowing for an in-depth examination of teaching practices, classroom interactions, and institutional frameworks within selected schools.

Data were collected through multiple methods to ensure triangulation and enhance credibility. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, school leaders, and curriculum specialists to gain insights into their pedagogical strategies, values, and challenges in fostering inclusive learning environments. These interviews were guided by a flexible protocol that probed emergent themes while ensuring participant consistency. In addition, classroom observations were carried out using a structured observation guide adapted from prior studies on inclusive pedagogies (Slee, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). These observations focused on teacher-learner interactions, culturally responsive teaching materials, and evidence of compassionate classroom management strategies.

Document analysis was also employed to examine school policies, mission statements, and curriculum frameworks that reflect institutional commitments to inclusivity and transformative education. This method enabled the researcher to contextualise classroom-level practices within broader systemic structures. All collected data were subjected to thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach,

which facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and the construction of meaning from participants' narratives and observed behaviours.

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, credibility was enhanced through member checking, whereby participants reviewed and validated the transcriptions and interpretations of their responses. Transferability was supported by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context. At the same time, dependability and confirmability were maintained through a detailed audit trail of methodological decisions and reflexive memos throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical considerations were rigorously observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical clearance was secured from the institutional review board. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants were maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage protocols.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The analysis of the collected data revealed several key themes derived from both the semi-structured interviews conducted and the observations of Grade 12 students in the classroom setting. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the student's experiences and interactions within the learning environment.

1. Themes that emerged from interviews

Theme 1.1: The role of compassionate and empathetic teachers

Teachers' compassion and empathy were major themes that emerged from data analysis regarding student learning and well-being. Teachers consistently mentioned the importance of students' feelings and their need to feel heard and valued. Participant ED1 explained how students feel disregarded by pointing out that;

ED1: "I have observed that some teachers ignore the students' individual needs and only focus on the class as a group. We as teachers often do not pay much attention to ensure that students as individuals gain a full understanding of what we are teaching."

Contrastingly participant ED4 mentioned that;

ED4: "In my teaching experience, building a strong interaction with students is very important to ensure their needs are addressed. I try to make time to engage students to understand their needs".

Similarly, participant ED5 reiterated the need to share genuine care for students by saying that;

ED5: Demonstrating care for underprivileged students helps motivate them to succeed. When they are valued and heard in class, they engage with peers and learn more in the process. "

Participants highlighted that teachers' empathy and compassion are essential for fostering a supportive environment where students thrive. They emphasised the importance of recognising students' needs to enhance their learning experiences. This outcome suggests that demonstrating empathy and compassion in schools and classrooms helps create an inclusive atmosphere.

Theme 1.2: The importance of using a culturally responsive pedagogy

Theme 2 highlights the importance of employing a culturally responsive pedagogy to create inclusive and engaging learning environments that address the diverse needs of all students. By incorporating students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives into the curriculum and teaching methods, teachers can develop a meaningful and relevant educational experience. Participant ED expressed concern about the national curriculum by saying that;

ED2: "I feel the curriculum incorrectly aligns with learning outcomes. Moreso, the curriculum is disconnected from reality because it fails to reflect on the experiences that students and we teachers live in".

Participant ED3 shared a similar sentiment by simply saying that;

ED: "I feel that students learn more and are motivated when they see themselves reflected in the curriculum".

On the other hand, participant ED5 explained how the incorporation of stories can enhance the curriculum. He said;

ED5: "In my class, I try to infuse traditional stories and examples in my teaching and make lessons relevant to encourage students' participation".

This theme highlights the essential role of culturally responsive pedagogies in creating inclusive and supportive learning environments. Most participants emphasised the importance of teaching methods that connect with students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. These findings suggest that adopting culturally responsive pedagogies is critical for enhancing the teaching and learning environment.

Theme 1.3: The influence of socioeconomic barriers

Theme 3 highlights the significant impact of socioeconomic barriers on student learning and well-being. Factors such as poverty, food insecurity, and limited access to educational materials and resources can create systemic obstacles to the academic success of many students. Participant ED1 pointed out how Education becomes difficult for students when they have to worry about food by saying that;

ED1: "It becomes difficult for students to concentrate in class when worried about home, where to stay, and what to eat. These socioeconomic issues distract students from paying attention".

In support, participant ED5 shares a similar sentiment by acknowledging that many students come to school with social and emotional challenges that affect their learning. He said;

ED5: "It seems that many students come to school with different social and emotional needs that affect their performance and chances of excelling."

To motivate students with social issues, participant ED6 said,

ED6: "Teachers and school leaders need to make supportive services available, such as counselling by social workers and other experts. This gesture can help find solutions for students' needs from marginalised communities".

The findings reveal the influence of socioeconomic challenges on students from marginalised backgrounds. They show that students from such disadvantaged communities struggle to focus on their Education because of socioeconomic factors like food and shelter, which negatively impact students' learning.

Theme 1.4: Fostering collaboration and community engagement

Theme 4 emphasises the importance of collaboration and building community partnerships to create inclusive learning environments. Establishing strong connections between the community, parents, and schools supports students and enhances their educational experiences. Participant ED2 expressed concern about the lack of partnerships, stating that;

ED2: "As a school, we have been working in silos. We have not done enough to form a collaboration between the community, parents, teachers, and the school. This situation prevents us from fostering a positive climate to support teaching and learning".

Contrastingly, Participant ED3 found that the community provides support to students by mentioning that;

ED3: "Our partnership with the community and parents has been crucial to teaching and learning, especially as such partnerships provide the needed support for students' learning".

Participant ED4, on the other hand, agreed with the important role of forging partnerships with the community by saying,

ED4: "We need to encourage partnership because when the community is involved in the school management, it helps in creating a stronger sense of belonging for all stakeholders".

The findings based on theme 4 emphasised fostering collaboration and community engagement to build an inclusive and supportive learning environment. While some participants pointed out how the lack of cooperation between the school, parents, and the community can adversely affect the school, others emphasised the need for schools to build more partnerships with stakeholders. These findings highlight the crucial role of community engagement and how it enhances learning experiences.

2. Themes that emerged from the Observation

The following themes emerged from observing teaching and learning in grade 12 classrooms and students;

Theme 2.1: Limited Student Engagement

Classroom observations revealed that, except for a few students who actively engage and participate, most students remain completely disengaged and silent during class. These outcomes indicate that the classroom environment may not have been fully optimised to address the needs of all students, thereby hindering the achievement of inclusive Education.

Theme 2.2: The use of teacher-centred pedagogies

Most teaching approaches used in schools are primarily teacher-centred pedagogies. While this approach is flexible, it provides limited opportunities for active student participation and collaboration with peers. Furthermore, it does not effectively address the diverse needs and preferences of all students.

Theme 2.3: Lack of culturally relevant content and curriculum

The curriculum, teaching materials, and approach to teaching are not aligned only with the learning outcomes. Still, they also do not appear to reflect the students' different cultural settings and experiences in the classroom.

Theme 2.4: Limited access to teaching and learning resources

The classroom lacked essential teaching and learning resources, such as technology and various learning materials. The lack of teaching tools and resources could affect the learning experience for students. In addition, the lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials makes it challenging for students to engage fully with the curriculum and achieve learning outcomes.

Discussions

To enhance inclusive and compassionate learning environments in schools, leaders must prioritise the roles of empathetic teachers, responsive pedagogies, and community partnerships. The semi-structured interviews revealed that compassion and empathy are essential for meeting the diverse needs of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Participants emphasised the importance of recognising each student's unique needs and building a supportive environment where they feel valued and heard. This insight aligns with the findings from Li et al. (2022) and Wang (2024), which emphasise the positive impact of empathy on student engagement and academic success. By equipping teachers to develop compassionate approaches and actively engage with students, schools can foster an atmosphere that promotes emotional well-being and improved educational outcomes (Ntlhare & Mukuna, 2022; Brussino, 2021).

Integrating culturally responsive pedagogy is an alternative strategy for reconfiguring schools to meet the diverse needs of students. Participants expressed concerns about the disengagement between the curriculum and students' cultural backgrounds. This indicated that a reflective curriculum could significantly enhance students' experience, motivation, and interaction (Kaur & Bhatia, 2024; Yeaboah et al., 2023). Literature supports this notion that demonstrates that culturally relevant teaching practices do not only enhance students' performance but also develop a sense of belonging (Kianinezhad, 2024; Shulekina et al., 2021). Teachers can foster an inclusive environment that empowers students' learning by incorporating cultural identities into the curriculum and employing pedagogies that resonate with students' experiences (Bernier et al., 2022; Guberina, 2023).

Lastly, promoting collaboration and community engagement is necessary to provide a supportive school ecosystem. Teachers emphasised the need for stronger cooperation between schools, parents, and the community to support and motivate students (Aldrup et al., 2022; Engbers, 2020). Literature findings indicate that community involvement in schools can improve learning outcomes and a more improved school atmosphere (Baugh & Hu, 2020; Lyon et al., 2022). By partnering with the community and other stakeholders and allowing them to participate in the decision-making process, school leaders can influence a sense of ownership and belonging among all stakeholders. Such partnership and collaboration can lead to an inclusive and compassionate school environment (Ortan et al., 2021; Afzal & Hussain, 2020). Consequently, this leads to reconfiguring schools to embrace these measures to address the different needs of students and foster a culture of empathy and collaboration, which is vital to student success.

To induce an inclusive and compassionate learning environment in schools, it is critical that the limitations observed in the schools, like a lack of student engagement, pedagogy, curriculum alignment, and resources, are addressed. Observations in classrooms highlighted low student engagement, with many students who are passive and disengaged. This finding is aligned with Corbin et al. (2024) and Oberg et al. (2020), who showed that active student engagement is essential for reconfiguring the classroom for active participation, democracy, and collaboration, which contributes to enhancing inclusivity. In addition, the prevalence of the use of teacher-centred methods limits the opportunity for student engagement (Prayitino, 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). Lack of student engagement and the prevalence of teacher-centred pedagogies necessitate a move away from learner-centred pedagogies. As critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2004) recommends, advancing interaction and dialogue in the classroom can help create an inclusive experience for marginalised students, particularly (Shih, 2018; Kincheloe, 2004).

The lack of culturally relevant curriculum content and teaching materials posed a significant challenge for inclusive Education. Classroom observations revealed that the resources and teaching methods used often did not reflect the students' diverse cultural backgrounds. Hence, this neglect contributes to feelings of alienation on the part of students (Nel et al., 2023). Literature findings emphasise that culturally responsive pedagogy improves engagement by incorporating the cultural experiences of students in learning (Moosa & Bekker, 2021). Similarly, Darder et al. (2023) claim that many schools lack resources like technology and learning materials. This resource shortage, as highlighted by Giroux (2014) and Isrow (2021), can significantly impact student engagement. Therefore, providing equitable access to learning materials and ongoing professional development for teachers is essential for fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment where all students can succeed.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the factors contributing to inclusive and compassionate classroom environments in South African schools. The findings underscore the critical role of empathetic and culturally responsive teachers in fostering a sense of belonging and improving student engagement and well-being. Consistent with previous literature, the results demonstrate that recognising individual student needs and incorporating their cultural backgrounds into pedagogy are essential for meaningful learning experiences. The study also revealed significant barriers to inclusive education, including the dominance of teacher-centred pedagogies, limited student engagement, and a lack of culturally relevant content and learning resources. These limitations highlight the need for systemic interventions at the school and policy levels. In particular, school leaders must prioritise teacher development in empathy and cultural responsiveness, ensure equitable access to learning materials, and promote student-centred practices. Therefore, it is recommended that schools adopt inclusive policies, implement culturally responsive pedagogies, and engage with stakeholders and communities to build strong support networks. Furthermore, educational authorities should increase funding for inclusive initiatives, develop quality standards for

inclusive teaching practices, and advocate for policies that cultivate empathy and compassion in schools. Although this study contributes to a deeper understanding of inclusive education, its findings are limited by focusing on a single context, which restricts generalisability. Future research should explore diverse educational settings to broaden the understanding of how effective inclusive and caring learning environments can be implemented.

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