

Article

An inclusive policy within an exclusionary system: Learners with mild intellectual disabilities and inclusion in South African mainstream schools

by

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Keywords:

inclusion, mainstream schools, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, basic education, exclusion, learners with mild intellectual disabilities

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31265/v4jpsp77>



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Abstract

This paper examines the lack of meaningful inclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities in South African mainstream schools, despite the country's commitment to inclusive education through Education White Paper 6. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and employing a desktop literature review, the paper explores the underlying factors contributing to their persistent lack of genuine and meaningful inclusion. Literature published between 2001 and 2025 was reviewed and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that the causes of exclusion are systemic and institutional, operating at both the micro and macro levels of the education system. At the macro level, weaknesses in teacher education, inadequate professional development, and gaps between policy and implementation limit the effective enactment of inclusive education. At the micro level, insufficient resources, inaccessible infrastructure, limited support systems, and persistent negative attitudes toward disability constrain participation and learning. The study argues that the continued marginalization of learners with mild intellectual disabilities reflects a disconnect between inclusive policy intentions and educational practice. It concludes that meaningful inclusion requires strengthening teacher preparation, improving institutional support, enhancing resource allocation, and addressing socio-cultural barriers to disability. These measures are essential for ensuring equitable access to learning and for realizing the goals of inclusive education in South Africa.

Keywords: inclusion, mainstream schools, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, basic education, exclusion, learners with mild intellectual disabilities

Declaration

As a second-language speaker of English, I have used AI to edit my paper.

Introduction

South African basic education has comprehensive policies for inclusive education, and it would therefore be expected that all diverse learners are included in mainstream learning. In practice, however, an inclusive policy operates within an exclusionary system, and learners with mild intellectual disabilities remain not fully, genuinely, or meaningfully included in learning in South African mainstream schools (Hove & Phasha, 2024).

South Africa's basic education is guided by the policy of inclusive education in White Paper 6, Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001b), which states that every learner should be educated in their local mainstream school (DoE, 2001b); accordingly, all diverse learners with mild disabilities are expected to have access to learning in local mainstream schools (Vlok, 2016). Yet despite the policy's aim of including all diverse learners with mild disabilities in mainstream schools, Ngcobo and Muthukrishna (2011) found that many were not meaningfully included, which limited their access to learning compared with that of their able-bodied peers.

Learners with mild intellectual disabilities are those who do not have severe or profound cognitive disabilities (Raymond, 2014) and can therefore access learning alongside their able-bodied peers in their local mainstream school. This paper focuses on learners with mild intellectual disabilities because, once barriers within the broader school system and within the classroom are removed, this category of learners can participate in learning and succeed just as other mainstream learners, as their learning needs can also be met by regular teachers (Pather, 2014).

Looking at the inclusion of all diverse learners in the Australian context, it is evident that inclusive education policies have been implemented effectively, resulting in an education system and set of practices that are inclusive of all learners. South Africa can learn from the Australian experience that a policy of inclusive education alone does not translate into the inclusion of learners in the mainstream; rather, the system and its practices must themselves be transformed to become inclusive of all diverse

learners. South Africa can also draw on the successes achieved by Botswana—an African country that shares similar challenges.

Background

Inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools in South Africa

The inclusion of learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools in South Africa is expected to occur because the policy of inclusive education stipulates that they should be included in mainstream schools within their localities (DoE, 2001b). South Africa has disadvantaged mainstream schools in both rural and urban areas, where diverse learners, including those with mild intellectual disabilities, are expected to be included so that they may access learning. Although efforts to include all diverse learners through inclusive education are being made across basic education in mainstream schools (Walton, 2011), inclusive education is least implemented in rural areas, and more often in rural mainstream schools in particular. The underlying causes are contextual and include language issues and a lack of teacher training, compounded by a high teacher–learner ratio. Although the ineffective implementation of inclusive education cuts across all provinces in South Africa, the situation is worse in rural areas and in mainstream schools in Mpumalanga province (Department of Basic Education, 2022; Makoelle, 2014). Mpumalanga is used as an example here because inclusive education is least implemented in this province, with the result that learners with mild disabilities are more excluded. The province has a unique educational landscape, with acute socio-economic challenges that differ from those in other provinces in South Africa, and it has the highest learner-to-teacher ratio in the country (Department of Basic Education, 2022). Unlike provinces such as Gauteng and the Western Cape, Mpumalanga has poor infrastructure (Engelbrecht & Green, 2018), limited resources, diverse languages and cultural orientations, and a lack of support structures for inclusive education in mainstream schools (Makoelle, 2014). This negatively affects inclusive education broadly, and classroom practice specifically, and thereby excludes learners with mild intellectual disabilities from mainstream schools.

Thus, although the inclusive education policy (EWP, DoE, 2001b) requires that all diverse learners, including those with mild disabilities, be given access to learning in their local mainstream schools, systemic and institutional barriers continue to limit the effective implementation of inclusive education, such that even learners with mild intellectual disabilities are still not genuinely and meaningfully included. At present, the reality on the ground and the policy on paper are at variance, which negatively affects learners with mild disabilities: although they are placed in local mainstream schools, they cannot fully access learning alongside their able-bodied peers. In essence, although mainstream schools are expected to meaningfully include all diverse learners in teaching and learning, learners with mild intellectual disabilities, particularly in rural schools, continue to be excluded (Chirowamhangu, 2024). As already noted, Mpumalanga is a province with rural mainstream schools that are mostly disadvantaged (Department of Basic Education, 2022), and it therefore serves as an example in which the limited inclusion of learners with mild disabilities from learning is exacerbated.

It could be argued that this situation violates the right to education of learners with disabilities, while at the same time contradicting and undermining the very idea of inclusive education as a system whose policy is meant to enforce the inclusion of all diverse learners. It is in this respect that the paper draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to explore the layers in which the underlying causes of limited inclusion are located. This is done in order to identify where the less visible underlying causes lie, and then to propose ways in which they might be addressed so as to dismantle the limitation. It is hoped that, as classroom teaching and learning exist within an exclusionary system informed by an inclusive policy, practice can be improved so that it becomes more inclusive of all diverse learners, including those with mild disabilities.

The international perspective

Inclusion of learners with mild disabilities in mainstream schools in Australia

Tracing the history of inclusive education in Australia from the early 1980s to 2020 reveals that the country faced challenges in including learners with disabilities broadly, and those with mild disabilities specifically, in mainstream schools. As

reported in the Western Australian Beazley Report (1984), inclusive education was not fully implemented to meet the needs of this specific category of learners (Walsh, 2012), owing to challenges associated with the national-level implementation of inclusive education (Gow Report, 1985). There was also no legal mandate to formalize inclusion, as disability was not clearly defined in the policies of the day. This lack of clear policy and the consequently ineffective implementation of the inclusive education system hindered the inclusion of learners with disabilities, including those with mild disabilities.

As the years passed, however, Western Australia in particular transitioned from excluding learners with disabilities from mainstream schools to a point where learners with high and profound support needs began to be included within their local inclusive mainstream schools. Australia aligned itself with international legal instruments and declarations, and informed its education system through national legislation and a local policy of inclusive education, which led to change and improvement (Chambers & Forlin, 2021). The inclusion of all diverse learners continued to improve as new policy amendments and wider opportunities for inclusion were successively introduced between 2000 and 2020 (Chambers & Forlin, 2021). Although Australia initially encountered challenges in including learners with disabilities within its mainstream school system, it ultimately succeeded in including even those with profound disabilities. This suggests that policies, structures, and practices were put in place and effectively implemented to enable an inclusive education system that includes all diverse learners.

Inclusion of learners with mild disabilities in mainstream schools in Botswana

Like other African countries, Botswana is making efforts to implement inclusive education so as to include learners with mild disabilities in mainstream schools. It has been argued that teachers prefer to include learners with mild disabilities rather than those with severe and profound disabilities (Nthitu, 2011), and that other learners tend to accept learners with disabilities to a high degree (Hopkin, 2004). Denbow and Thebe (2006) attribute this to Botswana's history of diversity and its culture of embracing regional ethnic differences. This acceptance and tolerance suggest that learners with and without mild disabilities can learn alongside one another without discrimination or segregation by their peers. Although efforts toward inclusive

education are being made, particularly in South-Central Botswana, there remain concerns regarding the inadequate training of teachers, a lack of resources, and a high student–teacher ratio, all of which act as barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive education (Mukhopadhyay, Nenty & Abosi, 2006). It could be argued that, although more advanced in inclusive education, Botswana also faces challenges that are common to other African countries.

Research question

Why does South Africa’s inclusive education policy not consistently result in the meaningful inclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools?

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory

Bronfenbrenner’s theory presents a multidimensional model of human development (Mitchell, 2005), in which layers at different levels—namely the micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystems—interact to influence the development of the child at the center (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner described the environment as a “set of nested” structures (micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystems), all of which influence learners’ development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Urie Bronfenbrenner is credited with advancing understanding of human development within the natural and social environments in which the child grows, rather than within a clinical laboratory setting (Anderson & Boyle, 2014). Bronfenbrenner (2005) further explained that each of the systems or environments surrounding the child affects their functioning. It could be argued that the more stimulating the environment, the better the child develops physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively, and vice versa.

The microsystem layer

The microsystem constitutes a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations that are experienced by individuals within the systems in which they actively participate, such as the family, the school, or the peer group. These relationships can be described as bidirectional, in that adults influence a learner’s development and vice versa (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). At this level, the nature and quality of

relationships that children have at home or among their peers have been shown to carry over into, and influence, their behavior at school.

The macrosystem layer

The macrosystem layer refers to the attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and values that are inherent in the systems of a particular society and culture, which are influenced by the micro, meso, and exosystems within which the child is growing (Landsberg et al., 2019), and which in turn influence those same layers. The macrosystem can be understood as the national government itself, together with stakeholders in the system, including government representatives within relevant structures, education authorities, and support staff, such as district-based support teams. Although these stakeholders do not directly affect the learner, their influence is significant to the efficient operation of the system's structures that enable the child's learning (Mulisa, 2019). It is at this level that white papers and policies are designed, developed, and enacted to ensure that the system's aims, goals, and objectives are achieved. For learners with mild intellectual disabilities specifically, their inclusion depends on the policies formulated at the macro level and on how inclusive these policies are.

Methodology

A qualitative literature review method was adopted. This approach synthesizes and interprets existing studies in order to build conceptual understanding, identify patterns and gaps, and generate theoretical insight (Snyder, 2019). It was used to collect data from the current literature available on the phenomenon under study. The online databases, specifically EBSCO, JSTOR, SAGE, ResearchGate, and Taylor and Francis Online, were searched for the period 2021–2025, during which democratic change in government broadly influenced inclusive education in the system and the enactment of inclusive education policy. Specific search terms, including learners with mild disabilities, South African schooling, mainstream teachers in schools, inclusive education, and inclusive education policy, were used to search the databases.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they addressed the inclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities in South African basic education. Studies focusing on other disability groups, or on educational contexts outside South Africa, were excluded. Only peer-reviewed studies published on peer-reviewed platforms, such as books, book chapters, and journal articles, were selected. The review included studies published between 2001 and 2025. This time frame was chosen because it covers the period following the introduction of South Africa's inclusive education policy by the democratic government through the Department of Basic Education, which aimed to include all learners, including those with mild disabilities, in mainstream schools. The application of these criteria yielded publications from various online databases that focused on the exclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools, as well as on inclusive education and its governing policy.

Identification of relevant literature

The initial search strategy was broad and identified over 1,214 publications of possible interest, including duplicates. After duplicates were removed, 301 publications remained. The titles and abstracts of 121 journal articles were then used to determine their eligibility according to the inclusion criteria. Where an article provided sufficient information, the entire article was retrieved and examined; of those identified, 50 were shortlisted for further review. The objective was to retrieve existing literature on the exclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities and on the underlying causes of their exclusion in mainstream schools. Literature on inclusive education policy was also retrieved, as policy influences inclusion. The literature selected for review therefore comprised studies that focused specifically on mainstream schools in South Africa, the exclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities from mainstream schooling in the South African context, inclusive education in South African basic education, and the policy of inclusive education. After duplicates were removed and quality selection criteria applied, limiting the review to peer-reviewed journals, books, and book chapters, 50 articles were shortlisted for review. Further quality screening resulted in 14 peer-reviewed studies being reviewed in full.

The thematic data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019; 2021) steps. This process enabled the identification of codes relating to the phenomenon and their labelling throughout the selected literature. Codes were then grouped together and further analyzed to identify recurring patterns, trends, and minor themes emerging from the data. These minor themes were abstracted and interpreted as reflecting the limited inclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities from schooling in South Africa (Hove & Phasha, 2024). The micro and macrosystems were accordingly prioritized in order to understand where limited inclusion exists within the system, with teacher training systems (macro) and classroom-level practices (micro) forming the key layers of analysis.

Findings of the study

The thematic analysis identified "learners with mild intellectual disabilities and limited inclusion from mainstream schools" as an overarching theme across the reviewed studies. The findings suggest that limited inclusion was described at multiple levels of the education system and was reflected in both systemic and institutional factors. Two interrelated subthemes were identified: systemic and institutional limited inclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities.

Limited inclusion at the systemic level

The thematic analysis identified limited inclusion at the systemic level as a recurring pattern in the reviewed studies. One manifestation of limited inclusion at the systemic level concerned teacher education, which was described as providing limited preparation for inclusive education (Ndlovu, 2024). Several studies also reported that inclusive education was often offered as an elective rather than a compulsory component of teacher education programs (Rusznayak & Walton, 2019). The studies further described inclusive education as commonly located within Curriculum Studies or Educational Psychology, rather than existing as a dedicated department within higher education institutions. Collectively, these findings indicate that limited inclusion at the systemic level was reflected in the way in which teacher education addressed the preparation of student teachers to teach diverse learners, including those with mild intellectual disabilities.

Teacher education was also identified as a factor that limited the inclusion of learners with intellectual disabilities. The reviewed studies suggested that teachers themselves may not always be adequately prepared for inclusive practice. Scholars in the disability field, such as Walton (2011) and Ndlovu (2024), have argued that South Africa's teacher education system is limited in its capacity to prepare teachers, both with and without disabilities, to implement inclusive education effectively in mainstream schools. As an effort toward transformation, Walton (2013) argued that even the workshops provided to in-service teachers who are not trained in inclusive education are inadequate to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to include all diverse learners in mainstream schools. Even after having received professional learning through such workshops, teachers' accounts indicated that these workshops alone were insufficient to provide them with a full understanding of inclusive education and how to implement it effectively for diverse learners, including those with mild intellectual disabilities (Walton, 2013). Although this observation was made some time ago, no effective workshops appear to have since been introduced that might have shifted the teachers' perspectives or equipped them with the necessary knowledge and skills. It is evident that learners with mild disabilities, particularly those with mild intellectual disabilities, have continued to be excluded even years later (Venter, 2021).

Furthermore, Ndlovu's (2017) study revealed that student teachers with disabilities preferred to teach in special schools rather than in mainstream schools. If all teachers, including those with disabilities, were well-equipped with the knowledge to teach diverse learners, they would be better positioned to include all diverse learners, including those with mild intellectual disabilities, in mainstream schools. In essence, the reluctance of student teachers with disabilities to teach in mainstream schools suggests that the higher education teacher education system is limited, as a stronger system would produce teachers with disabilities who are equally capable of teaching in mainstream schools. Thus, although the basic education system advocates for inclusive education and has a policy to enforce it, this is undermined by the absence of a strong teacher education foundation in higher education as the starting point.

Limited inclusion at the institutional level

The thematic analysis identified limited inclusion at the institutional level as a recurring theme across the reviewed studies. These studies described mainstream schools as not always providing the conditions necessary to support effective inclusive in education for learners with mild intellectual disabilities. Reported barriers included inadequate physical infrastructure for both teachers with disabilities and learners with mild physical disabilities (Ndlovu, 2017), as well as insufficient teaching resources to support the inclusion of diverse learners, particularly in rural schools (Ndlovu, 2017). The studies also highlighted limited collaboration between district-based support teams and school-based support teams, which reduced the support available to classroom teachers (Fourie, 2017). Furthermore, several studies reported that learners with mild intellectual disabilities were often identified late, owing to limitations in screening processes and instruments (Deghaye, 2023). The review also found that reliable data on learners with mild intellectual disabilities who are identified late, or who remain out of school, are limited (Deghaye, 2021). Collectively, these findings suggest that institutional factors were described in the reviewed studies as shaping the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools.

Discussion

This study primarily aimed to explore how and why South Africa's inclusive education policy often fails to ensure the inclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools. Drawing on two specific layers of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, the discussion below examines the study's findings in relation to its research questions.

Learners with mild intellectual disabilities and limited inclusion in mainstream schools

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, limited inclusion at the macro level is rooted in a challenge at the macrosystem level: the lack of trained teachers capable of teaching diverse learners, including those with mild intellectual disabilities, in mainstream schools. The macro level of the education system is the government, which provides a comprehensive policy for inclusive education (DoE,

2001b) but does not create a strong teacher education and professionalisation system in higher education that is capable of equipping every trained teacher to work with all diverse learners in the mainstream, including those with mild intellectual disabilities. From this theoretical perspective, the lack of knowledge needed to implement effective inclusive education in mainstream schools does not lie with teachers themselves but with government at the macro level, which thereby undermines its own policy of inclusive education. Although a policy of inclusive education exists, it does not serve its intended purpose of enforcing the inclusion of all diverse learners in the mainstream, including those with mild intellectual disabilities, because of poor implementation (Mpu & Adu, 2021). It could be argued that the gap between policy and practice results in the exclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities from the mainstream school system in particular. This is especially true of schools with limited resources, untrained teachers in inclusive education, and in-service teachers who were trained before inclusive education was introduced into the school system—a situation further compounded by inaccessible physical infrastructure.

Limited inclusion at the micro and institutional levels

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecology, the limited inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities from mainstream education within their localities can be attributed to the micro level system, the immediate environments of the child, which interact to influence children with disabilities negatively. At the micro level, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory includes the immediate family, the school and the local community, all of which are in turn shaped by the chronosystem, understood here as the broader societal culture in which, because of myths and African traditional beliefs, disability is portrayed negatively across the South African context. Consequently, learners with mild intellectual disabilities face low expectations both from their immediate family at home and from teachers at school whose beliefs about such learners are similarly shaped by societal stereotypes and negative attitudes toward disability, resulting in low expectations of their performance in class (Mokobane, 2024). Thus, although in principle these learners are included in the mainstream to learn alongside their able-bodied peers in local mainstream schools,

the underlying cause of their limited inclusion originates at home, at school, and within the community, where disability, even when mild, is viewed negatively.

With little motivation from home, school, and community, as shaped by the broader chronosystem, mainstream schools themselves hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education that would also include learners with mild disabilities. Although learners with mild intellectual disabilities are placed in mainstream schools, as required by the inclusive education system and policy, negative attitudes on the part of family, school, and community mean that they remain excluded from learning.

It has been argued that learners with mild disabilities are not truly included but merely accommodated and integrated into mainstream schools (Deghaye, 2021), and learners with mild intellectual disabilities are no exception. Thus, although the education system at the macro level had good intentions in including all diverse learners in local mainstream schools, learners with mild intellectual disabilities will continue to be limited in terms of genuine inclusion if barriers were to be removed at the micro level. It could be argued that the South African basic education system moved too quickly toward inclusive education, driven by the pressing need for inclusivity for those who were historically disadvantaged under apartheid. There was, however, little consideration of the transformation required in teacher training, infrastructure, resources, and funding, or of the change in perceptions of disability, which takes considerably longer to achieve. This has produced an inclusive policy within an 'exclusive' system of education, in which genuine and meaningful inclusion for learners with mild intellectual disabilities remains a matter of principle rather than reality, as Hove and Phasha (2024) have noted.

Way forward: An inclusive approach

As the literature shows, barriers within the school system operate at both macro and micro levels, and the way forward is therefore to address them where they are located. As other scholars have argued, including Ndlovu (2024), government, through its basic education structures, should improve the teacher education system in higher education so that the teachers it produces acquire the knowledge and skills needed to implement inclusive education effectively for all diverse learners, including

those with mild disabilities. It is widely accepted that the genuine and meaningful inclusion of learners with mild disabilities in mainstream schools should begin with teacher education, which is the pillar of inclusive education and of the inclusion of all diverse learners. Unlike previous discussions, this paper proposes that the enhancement of teacher education in the South African context should draw on successful teacher education systems from both the Global South and the Global North that have effectively facilitated inclusive education. Such an approach may contribute to the development of teachers who are better equipped to respond to the diverse learning needs of all learners in mainstream classrooms. Ndlovu (2024) has already suggested adopting the German teacher education model, which involves “mentoring individual student-teachers by the knowledgeable other during teaching practice” (p. 154). Other successful teacher education systems in the Global South should also be explored and emulated, so that ideas from the Global North and South Africa can be brought together and contextualized for the South African schooling system. In this way, the gap between policy and practice on the ground can be minimized, as the exclusion of learners with mild disabilities does not stem from policy itself. In terms of policy on paper, South Africa is said to have the best and most comprehensive policies among African countries (Chataika, 2007), but implementation remains slow (Engelbrecht, 2016). Emulating successful teacher education systems from both the Global South and the Global North could accelerate the slow implementation of this otherwise sound policy, which currently does not fully enable effective inclusive education, thereby limiting the full inclusion of, and access to learning for, learners with mild disabilities in their local mainstream schools in South Africa.

Within the school system, a further underlying cause of the limited inclusion of learners with mild intellectual disabilities is the need to improve funding and the provision of adequate resources and accessible infrastructure. Chataika (2016) and Chataika and Hlatywayo (2019; 2022) have already engaged with inclusive education policies in various African countries and have succeeded in embedding disability within national policies in countries such as Ethiopia, Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. As South Africa already has a comprehensive policy of inclusive education, the issue lies in its implementation, which needs improvement. A bottom-up approach, in which persons with disabilities who have a lived experience of disability

engage with policy, could make a meaningful difference to implementation. It could be argued that improving teacher education should itself be informed by more effective policy implementation.

Although negative perceptions of disability persist, growing disability advocacy efforts and awareness campaigns within South African society have contributed to a gradual shift toward more inclusive attitudes and practices. At the schooling level, broad efforts are being made to change negative attitudes toward learners with disabilities through the Afrocentric model of inclusion (Mokobane, 2024), and learners with disabilities are increasingly given the opportunity to speak out, with their voices being listened to and heard even at school level (Ayaya, 2021). If more voices could be heard, including those of learners with mild intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools, this could go a long way toward ensuring their meaningful inclusion in learning, as they are the ones who are living with a disability and who know precisely what they need for their learning. This suggests that addressing negative attitudes toward disability, strengthening teacher education programs, and enhancing the provision of accessible infrastructure and educational resources are critical prerequisites for the effective implementation of inclusive education in South African mainstream schools. Such interventions would promote genuinely inclusive classroom practices in which learners with mild disabilities are meaningfully included and afforded equitable access to learning opportunities alongside their non-disabled peers.

Limitations of the study

The study relied primarily on existing literature, which was reviewed to extract findings. A limitation of this approach is that it did not capture the experiences or perceptions of teachers with first-hand experience of teaching learners with mild intellectual disabilities in mainstream South African schools. As the study is conceptual rather than empirical, its conclusions are therefore grounded in the work of other researchers rather than in direct experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an inclusive education policy exists within South Africa's basic education system; however, the school system and the policy are at variance, to the extent that learners with mild intellectual disabilities continue to be excluded and have limited access to learning in their local mainstream schools. Illuminated by Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) ecological theory, the underlying causes of limited inclusion lie in the macro and microsystems, manifesting as systemic and institutional barriers, respectively. Thus, although South Africa has a strong inclusive education policy, its ineffective implementation at the systemic and institutional levels continues to marginalize learners with mild intellectual disabilities. Only when these specific barriers, challenges, and setbacks are addressed can effective inclusive education, encompassing all diverse learners, including those with mild intellectual disabilities, be realized within the South African basic education system, thereby achieving genuine inclusion.

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