

Chapter 13

Transformative Leadership for Inclusive and Equitable Learning Environments in South Africa

Medwin D. Sepadi

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7537-5566>

University of Limpopo, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how transformative leadership can advance inclusive and equitable learning environments in South Africa by addressing persistent gaps between policy and practice, leadership capacity constraints, and socio-economic inequalities. Drawing on a qualitative interpretivist approach, the chapter integrates document analysis, secondary literature, and empirical insights from diverse school contexts to examine how leadership practices shape inclusion. Anchored in transformative leadership, distributed leadership, Freirean pedagogy, and Ubuntu, the discussion positions leadership as a moral and systemic force for change. The chapter argues that inclusive education depends on visionary, collaborative, ethical, and context-responsive leadership that empowers teachers, engages communities, and challenges structural barriers. It concludes by proposing a practical capacity-building framework to support school leaders in fostering equitable, participatory, and sustainable inclusive education.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-7842-8.ch013

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has increasingly been recognised as a cornerstone of equitable schooling globally, emphasising access, participation, and meaningful learning for all learners irrespective of ability, socio-economic status, or cultural identity (Dewa, 2023). In South Africa, this commitment is reflected in progressive policy frameworks such as the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001), which envisaged a systemic transformation of education to accommodate learner diversity. However, more than two decades after its adoption, the implementation of inclusive education remains uneven and constrained. Historical legacies of apartheid, coupled with persistent socio-economic inequalities, continue to shape educational access and outcomes, particularly in rural and under-resourced provinces such as Limpopo (Ramango & Naicker, 2022; Spaull, 2013).

Empirical evidence from South African studies and policy evaluations indicates that the gap between policy intent and classroom practice is not merely a function of school-level challenges, but reflects broader systemic constraints within the education system. Institutional mechanisms designed to support inclusion remain weak or inconsistently implemented. For example, School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs), which are central to coordinating inclusive education at school level, are frequently dysfunctional. The Auditor-General of South Africa (2019) reported that approximately 78% of SBSTs in full-service schools were either not established or not functioning adequately, thereby undermining the planning, implementation, and monitoring of inclusive education. Furthermore, many educators and SBST members lack the necessary training and expertise to implement inclusive practices effectively, with studies indicating that a significant proportion of educators have not received adequate professional development in inclusive education (Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Department of Basic Education, 2015).

At the same time, District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs), which are intended to provide specialised support and oversight, often engage inconsistently with schools, offering limited and infrequent support. Evidence suggests that schools frequently experience inadequate access to specialist services and professional guidance, contributing to professional isolation among educators and weakening the systemic support required for inclusive education to function effectively (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Department of Basic Education, 2016). These institutional weaknesses are further compounded by structural constraints, including high learner-teacher ratios, limited infrastructure, and insufficient financial and human resources, all of which place significant strain on schools attempting to implement inclusive practices (Department of Basic Education, 2016; Spaull, 2013). Additionally, weaknesses in data systems and monitoring processes hinder effective planning and accountability,

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