

# chapter 3

Disability Studies in Inclusive Education

## **Exclusion of children with disabilities from education: Roots and responses**

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## Chapter learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- ✔ Discuss the ways in which learners with disabilities may be excluded from education and what the implications are.
- ✔ Understand responses to educational needs of children with disabilities from a historical perspective.
- ✔ Analyse the guiding policies for schools and education systems in promoting the right to education for learners with disabilities.

## Preparatory activities



**WATCH: Afrika Tikkun empowerment programme**

**Creator:** Afrika Tikkun

**Date:** 2014

**Duration:** 4 minutes



**WATCH: South Africa: Children with disabilities denied education**

**Creator:** Human Rights Watch

**Date:** 2015

**Duration:** 5 minutes



**WATCH: Blind and partially-sighted pupils learn in appalling conditions in Limpopo**

**Creator:** SABC News  
**Date:** 2016  
**Duration:** 2 minutes



**WATCH: Legacy of exclusion: Disability & education in South Africa**

**Creator:** Health-e News Service  
**Date:** 2016  
**Duration:** 25 minutes



**REFLECTION**

When you have viewed all of these videos, complete the table below, thinking of at least one reason for exclusion at these different levels.

Level	Reason for exclusion
Family	
School	
Community	
Educational policy	
Other	



**READ: “Complicit in exclusion”: South Africa’s failure to guarantee an inclusive education for children with disabilities**

**Author:** Human Rights Watch

**Year:** 2015

**Estimated reading time:** 2 hours

**File size:** 1.6 MB

## Introduction

In **Chapter 2**, we thought about our own feelings towards disability and started to consider how our fears and misconceptions get played out in education. In this chapter, we will explore how exclusion happens as well as the historical roots of special education. We will then conclude with an overview of South African education policy.

## Factors affecting the exclusion of disabled children from education

Globally, children with disabilities are being excluded from education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2018) reports that some countries are making the transition to inclusion, but exclusion is still prevalent. For some, this means separate schooling systems in special education and for others this means total exclusion from education. The Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020) highlights the fact that laws in 25% of countries support providing education in separate settings or special schools and only 17% have laws that require inclusion. Even with these laws, it is still often the case that these provisions are not implemented. For example, in South Africa (as the videos show), education can be of very poor quality and some groups, such as those with multiple disabilities, stand a high chance of being left out. In the **previous chapter**, we explored the issue of understanding disability and how fear and prejudice can result in exclusion. There are also some other factors to consider:



## Identification

While some disabilities are obvious and can be identified by the lay person, others are much more difficult to detect. For example, hearing loss and autism spectrum disorders might not be picked up in the early stages, resulting in missed early intervention opportunities and the provision of appropriate support in school. This contributes to the fact that children with a sensory, physical or intellectual disability are two-and-a-half times more likely to have never been to school than their peers without disabilities.

## Financing

As countries attempt to address the issues related to disability identification, there will be more children with disabilities eligible to go to schools and the costs are likely to increase. In South Africa, the Western Cape Forum on Intellectual Disability ([Ngwena & Pretorius, 2012](#)) brought a court case against the South African government to provide financing for education for children with severe to profound intellectual disability. The judgement in this case meant that the government had to find money to grant these children their right to education as required by the Constitution. Another problem with finance is that funds tend to be allocated to special schools where a country has such schools or is in transition to inclusive education. Thus, it becomes very difficult to provide additional support in regular schools.

## Teacher education

If all children are to learn together, then it is important that we understand that this does not mean that they all learn in the same way. For example, it is clear that a learner who is blind is not going to learn about, say, the national flag in the same way as a sighted learner. This means that teachers need to know how to be flexible and adapt the curriculum, and that they need to be trained how to do this. UNESCO ([2018](#)) reports that across 10 Francophone Sub-Saharan African countries, only 8% of Grade 2 and 6 teachers had received in-service training in inclusive education. Over 50% of teachers in Brazil, Colombia and Mexico reported a high need for professional development in teaching students with special needs. This is also true in South Africa, where teachers report that they do not receive training in inclusive education in their initial teacher training.



## Impact of COVID-19

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be ignored, as we still live with some of the consequences and need to pay attention to some of the lessons learned. UNESCO (2020) points out that the disruption of education and its associated services had a negative impact – not only on learning, but also upon the mental well-being of learners. These impacts were even greater for students with disabilities and their families. For example, online learning for blind students was extremely difficult to set in motion, especially in resource-poor settings. Children with autism spectrum disorders found it very hard to adapt to new routines and those with multiple disabilities missed out on rehabilitation services that they needed on an ongoing basis. As the pandemic recedes, we need to think of both how these issues can be addressed in future scenarios of school closure as well as what has been learned by innovative teachers, communities and families in overcoming these barriers. There is also the need to make up for lost time as we recover and rebuild.

## Other barriers that result in exclusion

The Global Education Monitoring Report identifies multiple factors that result in exclusion. This report of 2020 notes that globally around 258 million children and youth were excluded from education, with poverty as the main obstacle to access. In low- and middle-income countries, adolescents from the richest 20% of all households were three times as likely to complete lower secondary school as were those from the poorest home. Barriers are based in background, identity and ability, including gender, age, location, poverty, disability, ethnicity, indigeneity, language, religion, migration or displacement status, sexual orientation or gender identity expression, incarceration, beliefs and attitudes. These barriers were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report estimates that about 40% of low and lower-middle income countries were not able to support learners experiencing these barriers during temporary school shutdowns.

In the next section, we will explore South African policy so that we can better understand where the gaps are and what our own role might be in addressing exclusion of children with disabilities.

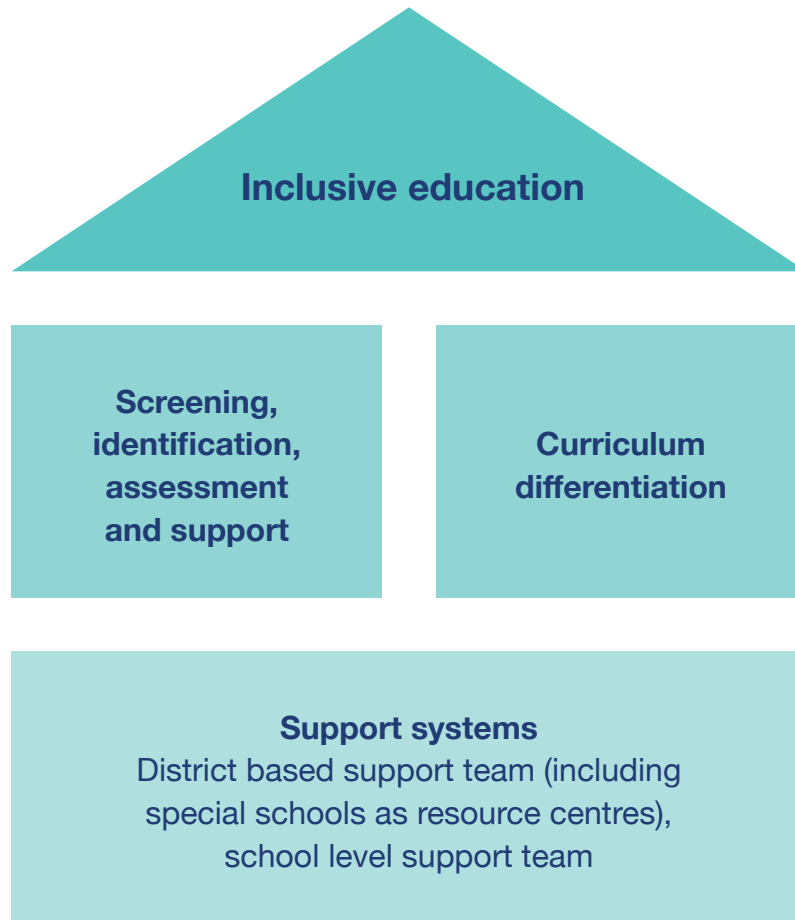


# Policy addressing the exclusion of children with disabilities from education in South Africa

In South Africa, there are 489 special schools, each of which caters for particular impairments; for example, there are schools for learners who are blind and partially sighted, D/deaf and hard of hearing, and intellectually and physically impaired (**Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2023**). There are also 813 “full-service” schools in South Africa. These schools have been set up to cater for a wide range of learning needs, including those related to disability, through teacher education and infrastructure development, and other school improvements. However, this does not mean that all children with disabilities are in school. In 2012, it was estimated that approximately 600,000 learners with disabilities were out of school (**DBE, 2023**). In 2022, there were 137,483 learners enrolled in special schools throughout the country (**DBE, 2023**), although this figure is now disputed by the DBE. In 2017 there were 11,461 learners on the waiting list for special schools (**Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2017**). Exclusion from education is at odds with the South African Constitution, and is out of line with the policy intention of *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education* (EWP6) (**Department of Education [DoE], 2001**).

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996) protects all those living in the country from any form of discrimination, including discrimination on the basis of disability (section 9(3)), and states that everyone has the right to basic and further education (section 29(1)). The South African Schools Act (Act No. 84 of 1996) (**RSA, 1996**) states that all children should be admitted to ordinary public schools, and that these schools should support children’s various educational and other support needs without any discrimination. This includes, “as far as possible”, children with special educational needs. Parents have the right to decide which type of school they would like their children to attend, including enrolment into a mainstream school instead of a special school.

EWP6 (**DoE, 2001**), which guides South African education policy regarding disability education, refers to “barriers to learning” rather than “special needs”, as inclusive education policy aims to address *all* barriers – not only disability. EWP6 is aimed at accommodating all learners’ needs, including learners with disabilities. The policy recognises that learners have diverse needs, which can result in barriers to learning and development if they are not acknowledged and addressed. These barriers arise not only from disability (as noted above), but also as a result of many additional factors, including inaccessible and unsafe environments, as well as inaccessible language of teaching and learning, among other factors. The policy was set up as a preliminary phase in the move toward inclusion over a 20-year period from 2001 to 2021. As of 2022, it has yet to be evaluated and revised.



**Figure 1:** EWP6 pillars of inclusion

The implementation of EWP6 is supported through guidelines that focus on two pillars of inclusion: (a) screening, identification, assessment and support; and (b) curriculum differentiation. Both of these pillars are built upon support structures. This is illustrated in a simplified form in Figure 1.

The *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support* (SIAS) (DBE, 2014) supports the first pillar and is the instrument that must be used for teachers to identify barriers to learning and determine the levels of support required. We will discuss this further in **Chapter 6**. SIAS identifies educational placement options for learners – in mainstream, full-service and special schools – through a systematic process of examining support needs.

Curriculum differentiation is addressed in the *Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom through Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements* (DBE, 2011), which is used in conjunction with the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements* (CAPS) adopted in 2011. The guidelines are aimed at assisting teachers to develop differentiation strategies in order to accommodate learners who face various barriers to learning in the classroom. We will examine this further in **Chapter 6** and take this important aspect further with discussions of Universal Design for Learning in **Chapters 10, 11 and 12**.





## GLOSSARY: Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to express the idea that different forms of oppression are linked to each other and that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, depending on their unique identity. We need to think of all the factors that can marginalise people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. – because none of these exist on their own. A person with a disability has a gender, race, class, etc., just as a gay person might be black or white or have a disability.

It is important that we look at disability through an intersectional lens because if we look at disability in isolation we might not see multiple causes of exclusion and could end up perpetuating injustice by ignoring systems of inequalities. "Disability" is not the only category that results in exclusion or defines relationships power. A black person with a disability might experience things differently to a white person with a disability. We know that women and girls with disabilities are almost twice as likely to experience domestic violence as women without disabilities.

The intersection between disability and poverty results in high rates of exclusion. The South African National Census of 2011 showed that persons with severe disabilities are the most disadvantaged when it comes to educational outcomes (**Statistics South Africa, 2014**). This echoes international findings which illustrate that, on average, persons with disabilities (when compared with persons without disabilities) are less likely to ever attend school, more likely to be out of school, less likely to complete primary or secondary education, and less likely to have basic literacy skills (**UNESCO, 2018**). Thus, if disability is combined with poverty (which is a leading cause of exclusion), it becomes clear that the children who are least likely to access and participate in education are children with disabilities who live in poverty.



The policy refers to disability as an “intrinsic” barrier which resides within the learner; whereas poverty, for example, would be seen as “extrinsic”, that is, external to the learner and located within the social system. This perspective is, however, problematic for two reasons:

1. Disability is not “intrinsic” to a person, but is an interaction between a person with an impairment and their environment.
2. Disability does not operate in isolation from other social markers. A person with a disability also has gender, racial and class identities (amongst others) and these interact in an intersectional way to either compound or lessen social disadvantage.

### Policy implementation

Although this policy framework is in place in South Africa, implementation lags far behind. It is clear that the quality of education that the majority of learners with disabilities receive is not up to standard, with many learners being excluded from accessing any form of schooling and many learners in special schools having limited subject choices and learning support (**Human Rights Watch, 2015**). It also appears that learners with disabilities have not been provided with reasonable accommodation to ensure that they can access education that is on an equal basis to that of their peers (**Human Rights Watch, 2015**). As noted above, one of the biggest challenges in educating learners with disabilities is the entrenched attitude among teachers and within schools that children with disabilities are not able to learn to the same standard as children without disabilities (**Human Rights Watch, 2015**). In addition, research shows that South African teachers have concerns about the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools, including being doubtful about the ability of these learners to participate academically and socially in the classroom, and being unsure of the consequences of inclusion (**Donohue & Bornman, 2014**).

Many South African teachers work from the premise that separate learning opportunities are more appropriate than inclusion in their classroom practice. This is a reflection of training that focuses on a deficit and individualised approach to barriers to learning and development (**Engelbrecht et al., 2016**). Overall, the lack of adequate teacher education for teaching learners with disabilities has been identified as a cause of poor quality education for these learners (**Human Rights Watch, 2015**).



## Responsibilities of schools

In EWP6, regular schools have the responsibility to provide education for all children by providing curriculum differentiation and becoming skilled in screening and identification of disabilities. Classroom teachers are expected to differentiate their teaching to reach a range of diverse learning needs. If they try this approach and are unsuccessful, then the classroom teacher needs to approach the school-based support team (SBST) with a record of what they have tried and what worked and what did not work. The SBST will then work with the teacher to develop further strategies which are not limited to the classroom but may, for example, include parent meetings, accessing community support or referral to a health facility.

Should the recommendations of the SBST prove ineffective, the district-based support team (DBST) may be approached for further guidance. The DBST includes district officials, members of special schools that serve as resource centres and other co-opted members as needed within the district. Should a particular child have support needs that cannot be met within their current placement, the DBST may recommend another placement (including transfer to a special school).

This framework is recommended by EWP6, but as indicated above, this is not always the reality and is only being implemented in parts. One of the issues observed is that children with less severe disabilities (or with what are sometimes referred to as “high incidence” disabilities, including attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder or learning disabilities) are more frequently catered for in regular schools, while those with severe sensory, physical or intellectual disabilities are more likely to be excluded or placed in special schools. Children who have multiple disabilities, behavioural challenges or are incontinent may find it difficult to get into any form of education at all, although this has improved somewhat as a result of the court case brought by the Western Cape Forum on Intellectual Disability asserting the right of these children to education.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed how children are excluded from the education system and some of the reasons for this exclusion. We have also examined the relevant policy for inclusion in South Africa and the responsibility that this places on schools. It became clear that schools are currently only partially meeting these responsibilities and we have emphasised the role of teacher education in perpetuating exclusion. In the **next chapter**, we will consider how the approach, Disability Studies in Education, enables us to apply a social understanding of disability to the problem of exclusion.



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