



Inclusive Education & Learning Differences

Landscape Review - Evidence Brief

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

This brief synthesizes the policy, research, and practice landscape on inclusive education and learning differences in South Africa, maps the evidence, identifies key implementation gaps, and draws out implications for the awareness and teacher capacitation work of the Khulani Schools Program, a flagship program of the Trevor Noah Foundation.

6

Evidence-based themes

BARRIERS TO LEARNING

South African policy uses "barriers to learning" as its foundational concept; a deliberate choice grounded in the social model of disability. The question is not "what is wrong with this child?" but "what in the curriculum, environment or support structure is preventing this child from learning?" Responsibility for removing barriers lies with the system, not the learner. This brief is fully grounded in that framework.

LEARNING DIFFERENCES

Used in this brief as an accessible term describing cognitive and developmental variations that affect how individuals process, understand, and express information. These are not deficits but different ways of learning that require tailored approaches.

The relationship between the two

Awareness of specific learning differences; how dyslexia, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), autism or learning challenges manifest in classroom behaviour, what they look like before identification and what responsive teaching for each requires. This is a prerequisite for the kind of barrier-removing practice the SA policy framework demands. Educators cannot respond to what they cannot recognise.

1 Why Learning Differences Matter in South Africa

South Africa's education system made significant commitments to inclusive education, anchored in Education White Paper 6 (2001) and operationalized through the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy and the Differentiated Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (DCAPS). These frameworks place substantive demand on educators, and their success depends significantly on whether teachers are equipped to identify, understand and respond to learner diversity in mainstream classrooms.

Teachers across South Africa enter classrooms with varied and often insufficient preparation to identify, understand and respond to learner diversity, including the full spectrum of learning differences encountered in mainstream, full-service and special school environments. This is not primarily a policy failure but a capacitation gap. Hundreds of thousands of learners sit in classrooms that are nominally inclusive but functionally exclusionary because the teachers in those classrooms have not been equipped to recognize or respond to the diversity of learning needs in front of them.

Learning differences, including dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, dyscalculia, hearing impairment, visual impairment and psychosocial barriers, are not rare or specialized concerns. They are present in every classroom, every school and every province. Their impact on learner outcomes is cumulative and compounding. A 2015 Human Rights Watch report titled *Complicit in Exclusion* documented the systemic gap between rights on paper and support in practice; including discrimination in admissions, absence of reasonable accommodation, and vulnerability to abuse.

The PIRLS 2021 study placed South Africa last among 57 participating countries, with 81% of Grade 4 learners unable to read for meaning in any language, up from 78% in 2016, predating COVID-19 (DBE, 2023). This is not primarily a curriculum problem. It is, in significant part, a capacitation problem: a system that has not systematically built teachers' ability to identify and respond to the learning differences that shape whether children can access the curriculum at all.

Inclusion in schools does not automatically translate into inclusion in learning. The presence of a learner in a classroom is not sufficient if the teacher cannot recognise and cater to their learning needs by designing instruction that reaches them.

2 Policy Landscape

Across South Africa's inclusive education policy framework, teachers emerge as the primary agents responsible for operationalizing inclusion in practice. Policies such as White Paper 6, SIAS and the CAPS Differentiation Guidelines all place significant expectations on teachers to identify barriers to learning, differentiate instruction and support diverse learner needs. Understanding the policy architecture, therefore, means understanding what it demands of teachers and where those demands currently go unmet.

Education White Paper 6 (2001)

White Paper 6 is the foundational policy instrument that reoriented South African education from a deficit model of disability, in which learners were classified and placed according to impairment, to a social model, in which the education system itself must change to accommodate the full range of learning needs. It established three types of schools (ordinary, full-service and special schools) and committed to the incremental expansion of full-service schools as the primary vehicle for inclusive education. Most critically, it placed teachers at the centre of the inclusive education project.

Gap: *White Paper 6 specifies the required transformation without creating the teacher development infrastructure needed to produce it. It assumes a capacitated workforce that the system has not consistently built.*

Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS, 2014)

SIAS is the operational policy that translates White Paper 6 into classroom procedure. It assigns teachers the role of case manager for every learner experiencing barriers to learning: screen all learners at admission, document concerns in the Learner Profile, implement Stage 1 differentiated interventions (Support Needs Assessment-SNA1), escalate to the School-Based Support Team when interventions are insufficient (SNA2), and refer to the District-Based Support Team for high-intensity cases (SNA3). SIAS is a sophisticated, multi-layered instrument, the most direct expression of what capacitated teachers for learner diversity are expected to do.

Gap: *SIAS is widely known in name but inconsistently implemented in practice. Evidence consistently shows that teachers are aware of SIAS as a policy but lack the specific skills to apply it, such as completing documentation, designing staged interventions, and using the process proactively rather than reactively.*

CAPS Differentiation Guidelines (Department of Basic Education-DBE, 2011)

The CAPS Differentiation Guidelines are the most practically detailed specification of what inclusive classroom practice looks like. They set out four dimensions of curriculum differentiation: content, learning environment, teaching methods and assessment, including tiered activities, flexible grouping, scaffolding, multiple intelligences frameworks, Bloom's taxonomy in differentiated assessment, alternate assessment pathways, and record-keeping systems. In effect, a complete competency profile for the inclusive teacher, but with no pathway for building those competencies.

Full-Service Schools Guidelines (2010)

Establish the standards for South Africa's dedicated inclusive schools, specifically resourced and designated to address a full range of barriers to learning. The Guidelines specify that instruction must be based on Universal Design for Learning principles, differentiated instruction and systematic data collection. They require ongoing professional development linked to change in practice and learner outcomes. A 2023 policy brief found that 51% of educators in full-service schools had not received adequate training; the most resourced schools in the system are still, by the majority, under-capacitated.

Guidelines for Special Schools and Resource Centres (2014)

Establish minimum standards for special schools and specify their dual mandate: providing quality education to enrolled learners with high support needs and functioning as resource centres for neighbouring schools. Special Schools as Resource Centres (SSRCs) are expected to provide teacher training, curriculum support and specialist services to ordinary and full-service schools but this outreach function is severely under-resourced and inconsistently implemented.

POLICY SUMMARY

Policy	Key Requirements of Teachers	Implementation Status
White Paper 6 (2001)	Remove barriers; transform practice	Aspiration widely known; practice inconsistent
SIAS (2014)	Screen, identify, support, refer all learners with barriers	Known in name; inconsistently operationalised
CAPS Differentiation Guidelines (2011)	Differentiate content, environment, methods, assessment	Rarely systematically implemented
Full-Service Schools Guidelines (2010)	UDL-based instruction, ongoing CPD, data-driven teaching	51% of FS educators inadequately trained
Special Schools Guidelines (2014)	Differentiated curriculum, SIAS compliance, outreach support	Outreach function under-resourced across most provinces

3 Current Evidence and Practice

WHY TEACHER CAPACITATION MATTERS

Teachers sit at the centre of South Africa's inclusive education framework. Every policy instrument reviewed in this brief, White Paper 6, SIAS, the CAPS Differentiation Guidelines and the Full-Service Schools Guidelines, places the teacher at the point where inclusion either becomes a classroom reality or remains an aspiration. Teachers are expected to screen all learners for barriers to learning and learner differences, design differentiated instruction across four dimensions of the curriculum, implement staged support through the SIAS process, create psychosocially safe environments, and refer learners to specialist support when their own interventions are insufficient. These are demanding, multi-dimensional, professional competencies.

Yet evidence consistently shows that most South African teachers have not been systematically equipped to meet them. Strengthening inclusive education for learners requires more than policy reform or awareness campaigns. It requires sustained teacher capacitation, structured, school-embedded development of the knowledge, skills and dispositions to identify and respond to learner diversity in real classrooms, in real time.

A synthesis of available South African research across the past decade reveals six recurring themes in how learning differences and barriers to learning are experienced and addressed — or not addressed — in SA schools.

Theme 1: Teacher Capacity

Of the six themes identified in this section, teacher capacity is not simply the most consistent finding; it is the foundational problem from which the others flow. A teacher who cannot identify learner differences cannot challenge the stigma surrounding them. A teacher who does not know how to differentiate instruction cannot bridge the gap in instruction. A teacher who cannot apply the SIAS process cannot activate the support chain. The other five themes are, in large part, the downstream consequences of this one.

Across reviewed research, teacher unpreparedness for learner diversity is the dominant finding (Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Nomtshongwana et al., 2025; Deghaye & Hanass-Hancock, 2023). Teachers report feeling ill-equipped to meet the diverse needs of their learners. They rely on whole-class, undifferentiated instruction not because they reject inclusion but because they lack the pedagogical competence to do otherwise.

The Teaching for All (T4A) project of British Council, MIET AFRICA, UNISA, DBE, co-funded by the European Union, 2016–2020, provides the most comprehensive evidence of what structured capacitation achieves in the SA context. Implemented across 10 HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in six provinces, the project reached approximately 23,000 student teachers and 86 lecturers. The CPTD (Continuing Professional Teacher Development) materials were endorsed by SACE (South African Council for Educators) at 60 CPTD points (15 per unit).

EVIDENCE BASE

Teaching for All (T4A) Project — British Council, MIET AFRICA, UNISA & DBE (2016–2020)

Impact evaluation of the ITE (Initial Teacher Education) component — Sayed, Salmon & Balie, 2020

23,000

student teachers
reached across 10 HEIs in
6 provinces

86

lecturers and HODs
involved in delivery

766+

schools to benefit if all
student teachers take up
posts

60

SACE CPTD points (15 per
unit, 4 units)

KNOWLEDGE GAINS

- +23%** SIAS knowledge and screening processes
- +15%** Differentiating instruction for diverse learners
- +15%** Social cohesion and human rights in practice
- +13%** Assessing learner performance inclusively

SKILLS GAINS

Skills gains were equally substantial: SIAS use in practice +21%; working with SEN support assistants +21%. Gains confirmed across all items; strongest shifts in SIAS use, differentiated instruction, and working with support staff (Sayed, Salmon & Balie, 2020).

EVIDENCE FINDING

Teachers who receive targeted professional development in inclusive practices are more likely to implement varied teaching strategies that enhance learner engagement. Without it, the cycle of whole-class undifferentiated instruction continues.

Theme 2: Stigma and Cultural Barriers

Learning differences carry a significant social stigma in many South African communities. Limitations may be explained through spiritual or ancestral belief systems that conflict with neurodevelopmental understandings of dyslexia, ADHD or autism. Parents may resist formal identification of learning differences, fearing labels, misunderstanding of the assessment process, or perceived shame within their community. Teachers working in rural or under-resourced contexts may face community resistance to inclusive practices or internalize stigma themselves (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011; Modisane, 2024).

This cultural dimension of learning differences is often overlooked in policy and program design. A teacher who holds a deficit-model view, seeing learner differences as permanent limitations rather than as design challenges for teaching will reproduce exclusionary practices regardless of what the SIAS form says. Changing this requires dispositional development, not just skills training.

Theme 3: Differentiated Instruction

Differentiation is formally required by CAPS, SIAS and the Full-Service Schools Guidelines. It is the central competency of inclusive teaching. Yet research consistently shows that differentiation, even when teachers are aware of the concept, is rarely implemented systematically in South African classrooms. Teachers create additional activities for learners experiencing difficulties rather than designing instruction from the outset for the full range of learners. This add-on model, providing something extra for some rather than redesigning for all, is the dominant classroom pattern (Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework reframes this: learner variability should be anticipated in lesson design as a default, not accommodated after the fact. When teachers design through UDL, considering multiple means of representation, action/expression and engagement, they create classrooms that work for all learners, including those with specific learning differences.

Theme 4: Learner Support Gaps and SIAS Implementation Reality

SIAS creates a structured three-stage support pathway. In practice, it is rarely used systematically. Evidence shows that teachers complete SNA1 forms reactively, when a problem has become severe, rather than proactively as a tool for early identification. School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) are inconsistently functional: many schools have them on paper, but they do not meet regularly or have members with sufficient expertise. District-Based Support Teams are under-resourced and over-extended, making referral of complex cases slow and often ineffective.

The result is that learners facing learning barriers who most need early intervention are the least likely to receive it. By the time formal support is initiated, significant academic and social-emotional harm may already have occurred.

Theme 5: Social Isolation and Learner Wellbeing

Insufficient teacher awareness and intervention is documented to result in social isolation and bullying of learners facing learning challenges or differences. Research in SA inclusive classrooms found teachers reporting: "I have noticed some students with difficulties left out during group activities"; "Sometimes, other students tease them" (Nomtshongwana et al., 2025). When teachers cannot proactively manage inclusion — facilitating positive relationships, designing collaborative activities that value diverse strengths, and modelling asset-based views of difference — the classroom environment can become actively harmful.

Theme 6: Implementation Realities — Structural Barriers Beyond the Classroom

Even where teachers are motivated and capacitated, implementation of inclusive practices is constrained by structural factors beyond the individual classroom. Large class sizes (often 40+ learners), inadequate learning and teaching support materials, absence of specialist support staff, inadequate physical infrastructure (ramps, acoustics, seating), and limited technology access all limit what is practically possible. Classroom acoustics alone, a dimension almost never addressed in teacher training, constitutes a significant barrier for learners with ADHD, dyslexia, autism or hearing impairment (Van Reenen & Karusseit, 2017).

Teachers cannot be fully capacitated in isolation from the structural conditions of their schools. Capacitation programs that focus only on teacher knowledge and skills, without supporting school-level conditions, will produce limited changes in practice.

4 The Stakeholder Ecosystem

Effective implementation of inclusive education requires engagement across a multi-layered stakeholder system. Understanding who the key players are and where the gaps in coordination lie is essential for strategic program positioning.

Stakeholder	Role	Current Status
Department of Basic Education (DBE)	National policy custodian; SIAS, CAPS, school guidelines; DBST oversight	Strong policy framework; challenged implementation and monitoring
Provincial Education Departments (PEDs)	Implementation of training; designation of full-service schools; DBST management	Uneven across provinces; budget constraints limit reach
District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs)	Expert support for teachers and schools; referral coordination; SIAS Stage 3	Under-resourced; over-extended; variable quality across districts
School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs)	School-level support coordination; SIAS Stage 2; learner profiling	Inconsistently functional; limited training and time
Special Schools / SSRCS	High-intensity support; outreach and resource support to ordinary schools	Outreach function largely not operationalised
Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)	Initial teacher education; inclusive education in B.Ed. and PGCE programmes	Varies across institutions; pre-service gaps persist
NGOs and Civil Society	Advocacy; training; community awareness; learner support	Important gap-fillers; fragmented; not systematically integrated
Parents / Caregivers	First line of identification; support at home; SIAS partners	Often uninformed; inconsistent engagement with school support processes
Learners	Rights holders; central to support planning	Largely absent from current research and support design

Coordination Gaps

There is important counterevidence that should inform program design. A 2020 qualitative study of five Quintile 1 rural primary schools in the Dr. RS Mompoti District (North-West Province), three of which had been awarded by their district for SBST functionality, identified the factors that make school-based support teams work in deeply under-resourced contexts. The success factors were not primarily financial: clear role understanding among SBST members, active SMT support, proactive parent engagement, strong DBST linkage, and a culture of treating learner support as an ongoing process rather than a crisis response. Functional SBSTs are therefore achievable in rural, under-resourced schools the key enablers are structural and cultural, not financial (Botha, 2020, in IESA Inclusion in Education, Vol 3).

The most significant systemic gap is the absence of a functioning continuum between initial teacher education, continuing professional development, and school-embedded support. The T4A project explicitly identified this gap: as inclusive education becomes embedded in ITE, new teachers will require CPTD assistance that builds on their existing scaffold. Student teachers leave university with improved inclusive education knowledge (the T4A evidence confirms this) but enter schools where the conditions, structures and support for enacting that knowledge are absent.

5 Key Gaps and Opportunities

The evidence reviewed above points to a set of interconnected gaps in South Africa's inclusive education system. Across all of them, teacher capacitation emerges as the critical leverage point: the T4A evidence demonstrates that structured intervention measurably shifts teacher knowledge, skills and practice across precisely the areas where teachers are least equipped.

1 Limited Teacher Confidence and Practical Skill

The dominant and most consistent gap. Teachers know what inclusion should look like, but not how to implement it. They lack specific skills in: SIAS documentation and staged intervention; UDL-informed lesson design; differentiated assessment; identifying specific learning differences (dyslexia, ADHD, autism) in classroom behaviour.

OPPORTUNITY: Structured, school-embedded, mentored teacher development programmes that build practical competence progressively, aligned to SIAS, CAPS and UDL, and accredited through SACE.

2 Limited Awareness of Specific Learning Differences

Most teachers and parents cannot identify the specific signals of common learning differences. Dyslexia, ADHD, autism, dyscalculia and sensory processing differences are often misattributed to "laziness", "behaviour problems" or "home circumstances". Early identification is therefore delayed or absent, allowing preventable learning harm to accumulate.

OPPORTUNITY: Targeted awareness campaigns and training materials that explain learning differences in accessible, practical terms for teachers, parents, school leaders and communities. Awareness is the entry point to the support system.

3 Inconsistent School Support Structures

SBSTs are inconsistently functional; SIAS is inconsistently applied; school management teams have variable understanding of their inclusion obligations. Where school leadership does not actively support inclusive practice, individual teacher capacitation efforts are undermined.

OPPORTUNITY: Capacitation of school management teams alongside teachers. Principal and SMT support as part of any teacher development programme. Support for SBST functionality as a school-level enabler.

4 No Systematic Early Identification Pathway

Learners with learning differences are most often identified late, after significant academic failure, rather than at an early stage when intervention is most effective. The SIAS Learner Profile is designed as a proactive screening tool at admission and phase entry, but it is rarely used this way. Most teachers do not have the specific observational knowledge to identify early signs of dyslexia, ADHD or processing differences in the classroom.

OPPORTUNITY: Practical screening protocols built into teacher capacitation programs. Training in the use of the SIAS Learner Profile as a proactive tool. Classroom observation checklists aligned to specific learning difference profiles.

5 Limited Evidence on What Works at School Level

South African inclusive education research is dominated by cross-sectional attitudinal studies. Longitudinal evidence of what teacher capacitation produces over time in real

classrooms is almost entirely absent. This makes it difficult to demonstrate impact, to refine programmes, and to make evidence-based policy recommendations.

OPPORTUNITY: School-embedded implementation research using portfolios of evidence, classroom observation and longitudinal M&E that generates the practice-level evidence the field lacks. The implementation of the inclusive education interventions in the Khulani Schools Program is designed to produce this evidence.

6 Fragmented Stakeholder Action — National and Global

NGOs, HEIs, district teams and schools are all working on aspects of inclusive education and learning differences, but rarely in coordinated ways. Training from one provider is not aligned with training from another. The result is an inefficient system in which significant energy and resources produce a limited cumulative impact. This fragmentation mirrors a global pattern. The [Learning for All: Our Global Vision for Inclusive Education by 2030](#) article, developed from the Education House roundtable at the 80th UN General Assembly, identifies the same pattern globally: organizations working in silos, inclusion interpreted as physical integration rather than meaningful participation, and systems that incorrectly assume existing education infrastructure is conducive to learning for children with learning differences. The 2030 Vision explicitly calls for: global learning ecosystems where teachers, researchers and students co-create and share inclusive education practices across geographies; working coalitions that advocate for systemic change; and school- and community-driven models rooted in local context but informed by global practice.

OPPORTUNITY: Building a coordinated network of practice across NGOs, schools, HEIs and district structures using shared frameworks (SIAS, CAPS differentiation, UDL), shared standards (SACE accreditation) and shared evidence goals. Global funding ecosystems also present a strategic opening to mobilize local working coalitions, amplify educator-led innovations, and generate evidence through school-embedded implementation that can be shared across the global network. An example of this is [Oak Foundation's Learning Differences Program](#) that funds a global cohort of organizations working at the intersection of learning differences, inclusive school design, and teacher development. The Khulani Schools Program is designed to be exactly the kind of catalytic, community-rooted, outcomes-focused model the 2030 Vision calls for.

6 Implications for Program Design

Because the teacher is the point at which the system either reaches learners with diverse learning needs, or fails to implement every program design implication in this section, is ultimately a question about how to build teacher capacity to identify and respond in real classrooms, with real learners, in real time. Awareness without capacitation changes attitudes; capacitation without awareness changes practice in isolation. Both are necessary; neither is sufficient alone.

The gaps and opportunities identified above translate directly into program design priorities for awareness work, teacher development and partnership strategy within the KSP design.

Awareness Priorities

-  **Primary audience:** School principals and SMTs who determine whether their schools are functionally inclusive environments
-  **Secondary audiences:** Parents and caregivers who are the first to notice learning differences but often lack the knowledge to name or act on them
-  **Community audiences:** Countering stigma around learning differences requires community-level awareness, not only school-level training

Key messages: Learning differences are common, identifiable and addressable; early identification and responsive teaching make a measurable difference. This should be accessible, multilingual, practically framed materials that avoid clinical or pathologizing language and use South African case examples.

Teacher Development Priorities

- ✚ **Foundation:** Build the three-dimensional competence that the research consistently identifies as absent: knowledge (SIAS, differentiation, learning difference profiles); skills (lesson planning, screening, intervention); dispositions (asset-based views of learner diversity)
- ✚ **Design principles:** Sustained through school-embedded; mentor-mediated; expert-content structured; SACE-accredited; evaluated longitudinally
- ✚ **SIAS sequence:** Ensure all teachers can operationalize SIAS, completing the Learner Profile, SNA1 and SNA2 documentation, designing staged interventions, and engaging the SBST appropriately
- ✚ **UDL integration:** UDL lesson planning is the pivot, it reframes differentiation from add-on to design-default, shifting teacher orientation from reactive to proactive
- ✚ **Psychosocial support:** Teachers experience significant professional stress; embedding counseling and emotional support alongside technical skills development reduces attrition and supports sustainable practice

Partnership Priorities

- ✚ **DBE alignment:** Position all work within the SIAS framework and CAPS differentiation guidelines. This ensures policy alignment and facilitates district and PED engagement
- ✚ **SACE accreditation:** Accreditation through SACE is a powerful enabler. The T4A CPTD course received 60 SACE points (15 per unit), motivating participation and creating a formal CPD recognition pathway. The multiplier effect is significant: 23,000 trained student teachers entering schools would benefit 766+ schools with teachers trained in inclusive practice
- ✚ **HEI linkages:** Partner with local universities on research, materials development and placement of student teachers in capacitation contexts, building the ITE-CPTD continuum that the T4A evidence identifies as essential
- ✚ **Specialist organizations:** Engage organizations with specific learning difference expertise (ADHD, dyslexia, autism, hearing impairment) for training materials and referral pathways
- ✚ **District structures:** Work with DBSTs as co-deliverers and resource providers, ensuring that district infrastructure supports rather than undermines school-level capacitation.

CONCLUSION

South Africa has the policy architecture for a genuinely inclusive education system. What it systematically and persistently lacks is the teacher-capacitation infrastructure that would make that architecture real in classrooms. Learning differences are present in every classroom. They are identifiable with appropriate training. And they are addressable through responsive, UDL-informed, differentiated instruction that every teacher can learn to provide.

The strategic opportunity is clear: a program that capacitates teachers to identify and respond to learner differences, grounded in SIAS, aligned with CAPS, and structured through UDL, addresses the most consistently identified gap in the SA inclusive education system. It creates measurable value for learners, schools, the education system and the partners and funders who invest in it.

EVIDENCE BASE

This brief was prepared using evidence from: Education White Paper 6 (2001); SIAS Policy (2014); CAPS Differentiation Guidelines (DBE, 2011); Full-Service Schools Guidelines (DBE, 2010); Special Schools Guidelines (DBE, 2014); British Council Teaching for All Impact Report (Sayed, Salmon & Balie, 2020); T4A Western Cape CPTD Report (Sayed et al., 2022); T4A Summary of Impact (British Council, 2020); T4A ITE Study Guides Units 1-4 (British Council / UNISA / MIET AFRICA, 2019); Engelbrecht et al. (2015); Nomtshongwana et al. (2025); Modisane (2024); Deghaye & Hanass-Hancock (2023); Van Reenen & Karusseit (2017); Lindner et al. (systematic review, 2023); Teaching Frameworks — State of Inclusive Education in South Africa.