

Challenges of Implementing Inclusive Education Amid Crisis: Exploring Grade 10 English Language Teachers' Experiences in Johannesburg Schools

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Abstract

The global onset of the crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated preexisting challenges within educational systems, highlighting substantial barriers to implementing inclusive education. Crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, and socio-political upheavals often disrupt educational processes, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups and those from low-income backgrounds. As educational institutions abruptly transitioned to online modalities, multiple logistical and emotional obstacles emerged. Furthermore, the mental health of both students and educators suffered due to heightened stress and anxiety, further complicating learning outcomes. This study explored these multifaceted complexities, providing an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of Grade 10 English language teachers in Johannesburg, South Africa, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focused on teachers' challenges in South Africa, where the educational landscape is divided into quintiles representing different socio-economic contexts. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this research identified critical issues such as connectivity issues, inadequate access to technology and other educational resources; lack of proper educator training and increased workloads; unsupportive parenting, absenteeism and dealing with pregnant learners. It also proposes strategic recommendations to enhance the efficacy of inclusive education in crisis conditions, emphasising the importance of governmental support in providing ICT resources, incentivising parental involvement, revising teacher training curricula to include crisis management, and developing robust infrastructure in under-resourced schools to bridge the educational inequality gap.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Crises, Educational Disruption, Inclusive Education, Teachers' Experience

Introduction

The primary goal of inclusive education is to offer equitable educational opportunities regardless of students' various backgrounds, abilities, and requirements (Ainscow et al., 2019). Inclusive education has become generally accepted as a fundamental human right that ensures all learners receive support in an environment where they can thrive (Mabele, 2024; Cruz, Firestone & Love, 2024; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)/United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), (2007)). Nevertheless, crises like natural disasters or socio-political upheavals present obstacles to successfully implementing inclusive learning strategies.

Reimers and Schleicher (2020) define a crisis as an abrupt, chaotic event that requires swift action to restore normalcy. When it comes to education, crises can cause substantial disruptions in learning environments and accentuate existing inequalities among students. These

interruptions often impact marginalised groups, such as those with disabilities or from low-income backgrounds, disproportionately. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic escalated preexisting disparities within society by impeding advancement towards inclusive education (Gouédard, 2020). As schools shifted online during this period, many pupils faced technological barriers due to inadequate access and support while also lacking a suitable study environment (Aimua & Paul, 2021; Bozkurt et al., 2022).

During times of crisis, quick and adaptable action is required, which can put pressure on already limited educational resources and infrastructure. Educators are forced to quickly adopt new teaching methods and tools without proper training or support, potentially leading to a decline in education quality that affects disadvantaged student groups more significantly (Bozkurt et al., 2022). Additionally, maintaining the emotional well-being of both students and educators becomes increasingly challenging during crises due to higher levels of anxiety, Connectivity issues, lack of parental involvement, depression, and burnout caused by uncertainty and stress of dealing with pregnant learners- ultimately hampering learning outcomes (Arndt et al., 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

Amid the difficulties, crises also offer prospects to reimagine and pioneer new educational approaches. It is essential to construct robust education systems that can adjust to and rebound from crises so that inclusive education can prevail without interruption. These entail utilising technology as a means of creating accessible learning environments, nurturing community alliances aimed at aiding vulnerable students, as well as designing exhaustive crisis management strategies (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020).

This article delves into the various complexities of incorporating inclusive education during crises, particularly analysing teachers' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and suggesting potential solutions to guide educators, policymakers and other concerned parties in navigating challenges related to implementing inclusive education amid times characterised by ambiguity.

Statement of the problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for educational systems worldwide, revealing and exacerbating existing inequities, particularly in inclusive education (Adewunmi, 2024). Inclusive education aims to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or socioeconomic status (Cruz et al., 2024). However, crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, and socio-political upheavals disrupt educational processes, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups.

South Africa's educational landscape is stratified into quintiles representing varying socioeconomic contexts (Sithomola, 2021). The pandemic has amplified the challenges schools face, particularly those in the lower quintiles. As educational institutions swiftly transitioned to online learning, numerous logistical and emotional obstacles emerged, including inadequate access to technology, lack of proper training for educators, and increased workloads. These hurdles have further complicated the ability to deliver inclusive education effectively.

Many studies have been conducted on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in South Africa and globally (Dhawan, 2020; Mahaye, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020; Mishra et al., 2020). There is also a growing body of literature on the implementation of inclusive education (Adewunmi, 2024; Slee, 2018; Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Alhassan, 2014; Mooij & Smeets, 2006) as well as the difficulties of implementing inclusive education under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions (Di Domenico, et al., 2021; Mathebula & Runhare, 2021; Mohamed, 2021; Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020). However, attention has not been paid to teachers' experiences in implementing inclusive education in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of that, examining these challenges from educators' perspectives will offer valuable insights into the systemic factors that contribute to educational inequalities and help formulate policies that foster

educational equity during and beyond times of crisis. This study, therefore, focuses on the lived experiences of Grade 10 English language teachers in Johannesburg, South Africa, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It identifies key challenges by examining schools from different quintiles and proposes strategic recommendations to enhance inclusive education during crises. Particular attention is paid to the major obstacles, including logistical and emotional challenges, connectivity issues, non-compliance with health and safety protocols, increased workloads, lack of adequate training for educators, poor student attendance and absenteeism, supporting pregnant learners, parental involvement, and resource scarcity.

Objective of the study

This study investigated the challenges Grade 10 English language teachers face in implementing inclusive education in Johannesburg, South Africa, amid crisis conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It examined the logistical and emotional obstacles, connectivity issues, non-compliance with protocols, increased workload, lack of adequate training, poor attendance, absenteeism, handling pregnant learners, parental involvement, and resource scarcity. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study identifies critical issues and proposes strategic recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of inclusive education during crises.

Materials and Methods

The study utilised an interpretive approach to investigate the challenges of implementing Inclusive Education amid crisis. This methodology prioritises participants' accounts over theoretical assumptions (Koopman, 2017). To gain a comprehensive understanding, qualitative research methods were employed, which involved analysing participants' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Creswell, 2018).

The sample for this study comprised three schools selected based on their quintile designation within South Africa's educational system. Quintiles 1,3 and represented different socioeconomic backgrounds. Schools are classified into five categories known as quintiles, with Quintile 1 having weak socioeconomic conditions while quintile-5 institutions have favourable circumstances (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Those most vulnerable at school belong to groups designated by classifications assigned as belonging primarily to those from Quintiles one through three (1-2-3). In order to achieve the research objective, a purposeful sampling approach was used to select relevant participants who could provide valuable information. Burns and Grove (2010) suggest using appropriate criteria to choose an adequate sample size. For this study, six English language teachers in grade 10 were selected from three schools - two representatives each from quintiles 1, 3 and 5.

Semi-structured interviews served as the data collection tool because they allowed both pre-formulated questions and new queries during the interview process that reflected some participant's perspectives. The recorded interviews were transcribed meticulously before further analysis utilising Thematic Analysis. Braun & Clark's recommended seven-step procedure: familiarisation with data; generating initial codes; searching themes across all collected materials, intensively reviewing themes identified; defining and naming themes, refining themes and finally, preparing report based on findings obtained can better reflect these insights gleaned through extensive examination of available information sources.

Results and Discussion

Challenges in implementing inclusive education under COVID-19 pandemic conditions

Teachers revealed during the interview that they encountered many challenges in implementing inclusive education under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions. Some of these challenges were experienced prior to the Covid-19 pandemic but were exacerbated during the pandemic. These

challenges included connectivity issues, learner non-compliance with COVID-19 protocol, increased workload, the lack of adequate training, poor attendance/absenteeism, dealing with pregnant learners, parental involvement and lack of resources.

Connectivity issues

Interview data revealed that connectivity was a serious challenge encountered by learners and teachers from the middle and lower quintiles during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, some learners could not gain access to online classes because they did not have a cellphone or internet data. For example, a teacher from quintile one noted that:

“At first, it was very difficult because we were under COVID-19. They do have access to a cellphone, ... for instance, they do not have data” (P2)

Another teacher from quintile one added that:

“The first challenge is that not all of them have cell phones, so it is difficult to have enough time or to help them all during the six days when they are away. And some of them do not have money to buy data, so it is sort of difficult for them to use online learning” (P1)

On the other hand, besides the data challenges, some teachers highlighted that they had a network coverage challenge in their area, which affected online learning. For instance, a teacher in quintile one said:

“There were no online lessons here in our school because, remember, we are staying in where the network is a challenge, where the electricity is a challenge, where many people are staying in the shack, their parents do not have jobs, they are depending on social grant” (P1).

The teacher in quantile one continued:

“Some learners were having network challenges b, then it was very much challenging. That is why, now we end up having learners who still do not know how to write or to read” (P1)

Connectivity has remained a major challenge in implementing inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for schools in the middle and lower quintiles.

Non-compliance with Covid-19 Protocol

This theme explores both learner's and teachers' experiences of non-compliance with COVID-19 protocol. It will start by exploring learners' non-compliance, and then it will present some challenges that teachers faced in adhering to the Covid-19 protocol.

Non-compliance by learners: During the interviews, teachers from the middle and lower quintiles highlighted that they experienced a lot of difficulties with learners not adhering to COVID-19 protocol. For example, a teacher from a lower quintile highlighted how some learners did not like to wear their masks. She said:

“There is now the issue of Covid-19. They just come to school without wearing a mask. When you ask the learner, they say they do not have a mask. But I think the department has tried. The department has supplied all learners with masks. Unfortunately, the learners don't wear it. They decided to wear the mask inside the school premises, not outside. They will just tell you that it is lost. How can it be lost when they are supposed to put it on their mouths? That means these children are not afraid of COVID-19” (P1).

Another teacher added that learners gave different excuses for not wearing masks, and some wasted the hand sanitisers. For instance:

“It is kind of difficult, or it is challenging to maintain all the COVID-19 protocols because some of the learners do not want to wear masks. They say they are feeling hot, and some

of the learners do not sanitise in some of the classes. They will just waste the sanitiser”
(P2)

Notwithstanding, some teachers acknowledged that at the start of the pandemic, the school was effective in following the Covid-19 protocol put in place because they had assistant teachers who were contracted to assist. However, as the contracts ended, teachers did not have the time to continue implementing the protocols effectively. The teacher explained:

“So, we actually have student teachers at the gates, and their job is to actually sanitise the learners and make sure that they keep their masks on during class time. However, as time went on, their contracts ended, the student teachers’ contracts ended, and it became my job to make sure that I sanitised the learners. Unfortunately, there was no extra time given for us teachers to actually sanitise the learners, so I would have to use time from my own lesson to sanitise the learners. Every now and then... it has become a norm, every now and then you need to tell one or two learners to put their masks back on” (P3).

Notwithstanding, some teachers pointed out that maintaining social distancing while in class was not a problem because of the seating arrangements. For instance, a teacher explained that:

“In terms of them maintaining social distancing, we did not have many problems. Because even the way their seating arrangement was actually made in accordance with the COVID-19 regulation. So, each seat was 1.5 meters apart; they are now 1 meter apart as per the new COVID-19 regulations” (P3)

Non-compliance by teachers: Interview data revealed how some teachers also struggled to adhere to the COVID-19 protocols during lessons. Teachers from all the quintiles highlighted the difficulty they had with communication in class while wearing a face mask. One of the teachers from a middle quintile explained that wearing a face mask made it difficult for learners to hear her when reading. For example:

“I think the challenge that we encountered was that when you are wearing a mask, you are not as audible as before, so you have to repeat a lot of times, which is also time-consuming. Because if I have to continuously repeat it constantly because learners cannot hear me because of the mask. Another issue was that the learners felt hurt. We have to read literature to them, poetry, which needs you to be loud and audible” (P3).

However, in dealing with the above challenge, another teacher suggested that microphones should be used in the classroom by the teacher. This will enhance the voice of teachers with tiny voices. For instance, participant 1 explained:

“Then the most important thing they are supposed to do to strengthen this is to mount a speaker inside the classroom. Remember, the voices of all educators are not the same. The educators are supposed to be given microphones, which they could use inside the classroom. Inside the classroom, we are supposed to have all those speakers” (P1).

Therefore, wearing a facemask was not only challenging for learners but also challenging for teachers in all the quintiles as they struggled to teach while wearing a mask.

Increased workload

Teachers from all the quintiles explained that they experienced increased workloads when implementing inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was because more classes were created to address issues of social distancing at some of the schools. For example, a teacher from quintile five said that:

“It has been difficult for us as teachers; for instance, I had about three classes. So, I ended up having six because each class was divided into two. So, the same lesson had to be taught six times and imagine if learners are not coping because of this pandemic. Then,

you repeat it even more than six times. So, you have to go over the work. So, it has added to our workload” (P5)

Another teacher from quintile one added that:

“The number of learners per class has been reduced and split into two because we used to teach a class with 70 learners. Then, after the number has been reduced, there is plenty of work on the educator's side because you now must teach two different groups” (P1).

Furthermore, a teacher from quintile five added that their timetable was more extended in terms of the number of hours they were expected to stay at school, meaning they had to stay longer on certain days to cover the workload. This situation meant they had to work more hours and take on some extra load. For instance, one of the teachers said:

“Our timetables were longer, which is more work, for instance, we have one hour..., on Wednesday, it is even more time, it is one hour 15 minutes. So, on those days when periods are a bit longer, we would go over the work and make sure that learners are coping and doing work in class under my watch. So that was how we managed” (P5)

In addition, during the pandemic, learners with comorbidities could not attend classes as required, and to bring them up to speed with other learners, teachers had to put in extra work hours. For instance, one of the teachers from quintile five explained that:

“Often, especially during COVID, we have children that have had comorbidities and could not physically be at school. So, they found themselves either coming halfway through the year or not finishing a year. So, it is up to us to help them catch up on work and pay special attention to them by having after-school activities, exercises, etc., so that they are on the same level as the entire class. So COVID-19 has impacted the weaker learners because they don't come every day; they are coming every second day” (P5).

The challenge of increased workload was reported by teachers from all the quintiles but mostly by teachers from schools in the higher quintiles because they had the resources to split classes, which meant more work for the teachers.

Lack of adequate training

Lack of adequate training was a challenge that plagued educators prior to and during the pandemic. Teachers from all the quintiles reported this challenge. Some teachers from quintile three highlighted that they were not prepared on how to implement inclusive education under crisis conditions such as covid-19. One of the teachers explained that:

“Educators have not been trained during this COVID-19 process, both for how to approach online learning and how to adapt to COVID-19 in a classroom to promote inclusive education. I would say we need more of a top-down approach” (P3).

Another teacher added that there were no policy guidelines in their training prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to help them implement inclusive education in times of crisis. The teacher noted that:

“Okay, so, the other way to get it perhaps is when we think of policy and how policy influences inclusive education. For instance, throughout my experience, we have not been trained” (P4).

Therefore, some teachers felt that it is important to include teachers' training in crisis in a policy document for the coming year, as noted by a teacher:

“The government needs to implement a strategic plan for next year on how they can use policy to implement inclusive education. By this, heads of schools can perhaps be trained to train teachers on how to deal with the unexpected occurrences based on COVID-19” (P2).

The above quotations are examples of how some teachers highlighted their need for more training in order to be able to deal with crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this need was greater for teachers from the lower quintile than those from the higher quintile.

Lack of resources

During the interview process, most teachers mentioned the lack of resources as a main challenge in implementing inclusive education under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions. Although resources have always been a challenge, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, this lack of resources was worse for schools in the middle and lower quintiles than schools in the higher quintile. For example, a teacher in a middle quintile highlighted their lack of online learning materials such as computers and internet connectivity. For instance:

"I think that was the most important; what was very challenging was the lack of resources. It is very hard because when COVID-19 began, remember that public schools were closed, and only those in private schools would go to school because they had computers; they have had online learning where we did not have any resources. So, I think we definitely have access to the resources and tools, allowing the government to give us at least some computers, some Wi-Fi for the learners" (P3).

Another teacher in quintile one added that they lacked resources in terms of infrastructure, extra classrooms, and extra professional teachers to enable them to conduct teaching successfully. For example:

"We do not have enough furniture; we do not have enough infrastructure as a whole; it is a challenge. We needed an extra building and extra classrooms so that we would be able to accommodate all the learners. We need extra professional teachers, not assistant teachers, for us to be able to cover everything that we are supposed to cover and accommodate learners who have barriers in everything" (P2).

In addition, the lack of resources led to the overcrowding of classrooms, making it challenging for some teachers to comply with COVID-19 regulations. For example, participant one explained that:

"I remember learners during this COVID they were supposed to be only 16 inside the classroom, and our school had overcrowding learners even before the issue of Covid, then learners were forced to attend the class in the number 40 in the classroom" (P1).

Therefore, lack of resources has always posed a challenge to the effective implementation of inclusive education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for schools in the lower quintile.

Parental Involvement

Here, the involvement of parents in implementing inclusive education is discussed. Some of the parents were supportive towards their children's education while most were not. Teachers raised the issue of parental involvement from all the quintiles. We will start by exploring the responses on the supportive parents before exploring those of the unsupportive parents.

Supportive parenting. During the interview process, teachers revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some parents became more involved in their children's education.

"Yes, there was some parental involvement because what we did was that we sent out some newsletters to the learners... I mean to the learners' parents to ensure that, or to allow them... to allow their students to come for extra lessons, to make them understand that when a learner comes back home, at three o'clock or five o'clock, it is not because

they are roaming around the streets, but it is because of the extra lessons. So, the parents allowed the students to come through, and because of the changes, we had to explain that it was no longer the same. So, through that understanding, and sending of those letters, there was some parental involvement” (P6).

Another teacher added that some parents were so supportive to the extent that they would go to the class teacher to enquire how they could continue assisting the learner at home. For instance, a teacher noted that:

“Some were supportive because they usually come to our office. So, some parents will come and say, my child’s performance is not good in English. What can we do to help my child?” (P2).

Another teacher added that:

“Then you find that other learners have parents who are supportive who want to know how they can support their children at home” (P5).

Unsupportive Parenting. While some of the parents were supportive, some were simply not involved in their children’s learning. For example, a teacher noted that:

“There are some parents who are not willing to be involved in the learning of their children’s schoolwork. So, it is kind of difficult. There is a lack of parent involvement” (P2)

Another teacher added that some parents do not show up at school when called in to address a concern affecting their child. For instance:

“What also proves to be very difficult for me is the parents. I do not know why, in this school in particular, I have a problem with parents when I call them. Usually, they do not come in. So, we are usually surprised if a parent actually comes in when they are called for a meeting for us to intervene and try to get to the root of the problem of whatever it is that the child is experiencing” (P3)

Another teacher noted that:

“Parents are not responsible enough. I think they are so busy with their own work that they neglect the learners” (P5).

Some teachers also felt that parents provided the wrong cell number at school, although the reason for doing so is unclear. A teacher had this to say:

“Most of the time, I do call the parents. I do phone them. The cell phone number they supplied in the school system is wrong” (P1).

In addition, some parents were so uninvolved that they would not allow their children to use their (parents’) smartphones or internet data to access assignment instructions online. Some parents could not afford to give their children money to buy data. One of the teachers explained that:

“So, some parents could not allow or give their children some airtime or buy data to access their online facilities. As a teacher, you have to sacrifice. I had to buy a router, I had to make sure that I hotspot them” (P6).

On the other hand, interview data revealed that some uninvolved parents, especially from the middle and lower quintiles, were uneducated and unable to assist their children with assignments when necessary. For instance, a teacher highlighted that:

“Those who do not have parents who know anything about the homework or are educated come back without being assisted.” (P3).

Therefore, in all the quintiles, uninvolved parenting ranged from parents who were just not interested in their children’s schoolwork to those who refused to report to school when requested by the teachers to do so. In the lower and middle quintiles specifically, there were those parents who refused to provide data to enable their children to do online assignments, and finally, uneducated parents who did not have the knowledge to assist their children at home.

Poor attendance/absenteeism

Interview data with teachers revealed that school attendance dropped and absenteeism increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers from higher and middle quintiles mainly reported this situation. For instance, a teacher from a middle quintile noted that:

“Attendance for a lot of the students was a big problem. And so, you would find that because they are alternating, one group would have to come to school for three days, and then you will find some of the learners being absent for two out of the three days that they are supposed to be in school. By the time they come back, they have a lot of catching up to do. So, it was very difficult for me having to run after learners” (P3).

Another teacher from a higher quintile added that:

“We picked up that some of the learners, even during these few days that they were supposed to come to school, were absent. So we were having a very difficult time because it puts so much burden on a teacher’s shoulders when you have to run around and get these learners who are not coming to class” (P5).

However, the absenteeism for some learners was due to sickness, as some of the learners contracted the COVID-19 virus. A teacher from quintile five noted:

“I actually had three learners who had COVID. Out of the three learners, one of them had COVID twice. And it was actually a grade 12 learner. So, she was out of school for quite a long time. So, it means that I had to do a lot of her assessments via video or phone calls to get her up to speed, especially before final exams” (P6).

Furthermore, some learners could not come to school during the COVID-19 pandemic because they suffered from certain comorbidities. For instance:

“Often, especially during COVID, we had children that have had comorbidities, so they were not coming to school. So, they found themselves either coming halfway through the year or not finishing a year” (P4).

To add to the above, some learners were not just absent from classes, but they even dropped out of school completely. Some teachers felt that the dropouts were caused by the educational system’s lack of inclusivity or accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the teachers from quintile three explained that:

“Two learners dropped out of grade 10 A, and about seven have dropped out in grade 10 B. So that was a huge challenge, and I feel like they dropped out because we were not inclusive in terms of accommodating all of them. I think maybe somehow, they felt neglected by the system” (P3).

The above quotations pointed out that some learners had a challenge attending school as required during the COVID-19 pandemic, either due to sickness as a result of contracting the virus or learners with comorbidity. Unfortunately, some learners, especially in the lower quintiles, were not just absent from school; they dropped out completely during the pandemic.

Dealing with pregnant learners

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some teachers said that they experienced an increased rate of teenage pregnancy in their schools. This phenomenon was mainly reported by teachers from the middle and lower quintiles. For instance, one of the teachers from quintile three said:

“Almost definitely, probably 20% of the learners in the school are pregnant. I think the support that they could have given them was allowing them to come to school to write their exams, so the pregnant learners were coming, were not excluded, no questions were asked, but counselling was provided so that if any wants to talk to any teacher, they were most welcome to” (P6).

The pregnancy made it challenging for the pregnant girls to comply with the COVID-19 protocol of wearing a face mask. For example, a teacher from quintile three highlighted that:

“We do have a couple of pregnant learners. Actually, I have one pregnant learner in my grade 10 B class. With a pregnant learner, it is a bit different because, for instance, if my pregnant learner is not wearing a mask and I tell her ‘mask back on’, and if she says me she is feeling flustered, I have to actually respect that, or I have to ask her to just go outside and get some fresh air. During that time when she is getting her fresh, maybe I would ask a student teacher to actually supervise her for me. So, during that time, she is obviously missing out on some important content in the class right, and maybe the other students would also feel like I am giving special treatment for her allowing her not to wear a mask in class. So, it becomes very tricky when it comes to the pregnant ladies because we really need to treat them with extra care” (P3)

In addition, teachers also cited other challenges they experienced with pregnant learners while implementing inclusive education under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions. For example, some teachers explained that it was particularly challenging for pregnant learners to concentrate in class. A teacher from quintile one said:

“What I can say about pregnancy is that some of the learners or some of the individuals, when they fall pregnant, in the first trimester, it is difficult to cope. They cannot focus. There is a lack of focus there is a lack of concentration. So, I tried to put those learners at the front, so that they can manage to be the part of the classroom, and not fall asleep” (P2)

Other teachers explained that some pregnant learners always felt tired, sick, or sleepy in class, which affected other learners as they also felt sleepy. This situation sometimes negatively affected the learning environment in the classroom and made it difficult for learners to learn. For example, one of the teachers from quintile three noted that:

“The challenge comes when the pregnant learner comes into class and they feel tired, sleepy, and their back hurts. So, they are quite irritable, which also creates a gloomy environment in the classroom. Because she is tired, she falls asleep or wants a more comfortable chair. Through that shift we then allow them to at least bring a small pillow just to support their back. We also allow them to have food during the time slots before break habits just so that the energy levels come high because if we have a learner that is tired and that is sleeping, it then creates an environment that also will allow or make the other learners to feel sleepy and gloomy. Hence, giving them that support like providing pillow help and support their back, and allowing them to have little snack keep their energy levels high” (P6).

Handling pregnant learners was a challenge in implementing inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic and was reported mainly by teachers from the middle and lower quintiles.

Discussion of the Findings

This article aimed to explore the challenges faced by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and findings showed that wealthier and more privileged schools could continue education with minimal disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic, while schools in lower quintiles struggled significantly. Particularly, teachers in quintile five schools experienced fewer challenges as they had access to better resources, stable internet connectivity, and prior exposure to digital technology. These educators could easily transition to online learning, demonstrating that affluence played a crucial role in mitigating the disruptions caused by the pandemic. On the contrary, schools in quintile one and some in quintile three could not provide basic teaching and learning due to the severe impact of the pandemic. Limited access to online resources, a lack of internet connectivity, and a lack of proper training among teachers significantly hindered their ability to participate in remote learning.

Furthermore, the study uncovered various logistical and emotional challenges, including teacher and learner non-compliance with COVID-19 protocols. On the one hand, Teachers had challenges teaching with their masks on. On the other hand, they also had challenges getting the learners to wear their masks and wash their hands frequently. This was attributed to the learners' feeling of discomfort, especially the pregnant learners, coupled with the absence of class assistants whose contracts elapsed in the middle of the period of the pandemic. Another reason for the low compliance of learners was inadequate time for the class teachers to monitor the learners since there was an increase in their workloads. These findings corroborated with that of Rasivhetshele, (2023), who also found that learners in secondary schools of Vhumbedzi Circuit, South Africa, had low compliance with COVID-19 protocols, including wearing of masks, frequent washing of hands, using of hand sanitisers, etc.

Another finding from the study was that of teacher burnout due to increased workloads resulting from the creation of more classes to address the issue of social distancing and the struggles of dealing with pregnant learners and those with comorbidities. This finding aligned with Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius's (2023) submission that teachers faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, which were associated with the stresses and strains they experienced in their work.

Teachers' lack of adequate training in handling crisis conditions was also revealed in the study to have further complicated the implementation of inclusive education. Teachers were not prepared on how to implement inclusive education under crisis conditions such as COVID-19 as indicated in their responses to interview questions.

It is particularly striking to note that these challenges were more pronounced in the lower quintile schools. The teachers in higher quintiles had fewer obstacles, as their schools were better equipped to handle the transition to online learning. These findings lay bare the discrimination and inequalities in the educational system in South Africa. They align with existing literature on the challenges faced by educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly regarding issues of inequality, lack of connectivity, and disparities in access to online learning (Sayed, Cooper & John, 2021; Mudaly & Mudaly, 2021). They also suggest that external and socioeconomic factors contribute to barriers that affect teacher's and learners' educational experiences and, ultimately, impact the implementation of inclusive education, confirming previous literature that factors such as infrastructure, socioeconomic conditions, school location and school type contribute to barriers that affect learners' educational experiences (Kraft et al., 2020; Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the multifaceted challenges Grade 10 English language teachers faced in Johannesburg, South Africa, as they navigated the complexities of implementing inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research highlights that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in the educational system, particularly

between wealthier and lower-quintile schools, thus intensifying the difficulties in providing equitable learning opportunities for all students. Connectivity issues, a lack of resources, increased workload, inadequate training, and poor parental involvement emerged as significant obstacles which call for immediate, strategic interventions to bolster educational equity

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are therefore provided for educators, parents and policymakers to foster a more inclusive and resilient education system, particularly in times of crisis:

- It is imperative that the government steps in to assist schools by providing ICT technology and internet connectivity. This will bridge the inequality gap and promote inclusivity in education
- Parental involvement in a child's education should be incentivized. Parents' should, as a matter of necessity monitor their learning at home and engage with the child's teacher to ensure that the child is learning at school.
- Teacher's training in curriculum content should be revised to include teaching and learning under crisis conditions such as COVID-19.

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