

# Engaging Learner Integration Wheel Theory of Practice to Promote Inclusion in South African Rural Schools

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## Abstract

*This study explores the application of the Learner Integration Wheel (LIW) theory of practice as a strategic framework to promote inclusion in South African rural schools. The LIW theory, developed as a social tool to foster effective learner integration, emphasizes transformative practices, programs, and attitudes aimed at addressing the diverse needs of learners. Rural schools in South Africa face unique challenges, including resource limitations, socio-economic disparities, and cultural diversity, which can hinder inclusive education efforts. Using a qualitative research approach, the study examines how the LIW theory can be implemented to overcome these barriers and foster an inclusive environment. Findings highlight the potential of the LIW framework to guide educators, administrators, and communities in reshaping their practices to ensure equitable access to education for all learners. Recommendations include targeted teacher training, community engagement, and policy alignment with the LIW principles. The study underscores the importance of a collaborative approach in leveraging the LIW theory to transform rural schools into inclusive learning spaces, contributing to the broader goals of educational equity and social justice in South Africa.*

**Keywords:** Inclusion, Exclusion, Learner, Learner Integration Wheel, Rural School

## INTRODUCTION

Exclusion in rural educational contexts is a social challenge that can no longer be ignored. Lack of an effective inclusion leads to an unsafe learning environment to diverse learners (Kanyopa, 2023). Body of literature shows that there are various causes including lack of resources, limited training, and cultural and social challenges (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2021). However, there are limited studies that researched the nature of educational stakeholders' relationships as the major cause for ineffective inclusion in South African rural (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024b; Ngubane & Nzima, 2023). Unhealthy relationships among the school, community and curriculum developers is mentioned to manifest challenges in implementation of inclusive education in rural schools (Engelbrecht, 2020; Zwane & Malale, 2018), in most cases it has been reported that parents and families feel unwelcomed in schools while teachers and other school staff feel like parents are not taking full responsibilities towards their children's education (Hlalele & Makoelle, 2023; Mpu & Adu, 2021).

Given the context and the nature of inclusion in South African rural schools, literature affirmed that rural schools have been experiencing poor academic achievements, high dropout rates and lack of motivation for both teachers and learners (Nembambula, Ooko & Aluko, 2023; Suich & Schneider, 2022). The dropout rate was restated by Department of Basic Education (DBE) on its annual report of the year 2020 that number of out of school children and youth in South Africa increased up to 5% of 14 year olds and 10% of 16 year olds (DBE, 2020; Knipe, 2022). In this context, the rural school dropout rate is particular concern because it has been mentioned that most learners who drop out of school prematurely will experience lack of sense of belonging, alienation and exclusion from their peers in school (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2021; Taole, 2020). Thus, this study sustains that unhealthy relationship between the community, school, and curriculum developers leads to ineffective inclusion in South African rural schools. The study evokes LIW theory of practice to reframe relations among these stakeholders in order to mitigate exclusion in South African rural schools.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Inclusive Education in South African Rural Schools**

Various scholars like Murungi (2015); Nkomo and Dube (2022) have gone to great lengths to expose the underlying causes of ineffective inclusion in South African rural schools. While it may not be the jurisdiction of this study to repeat their findings, it is relevant to point out that, unfortunately, serious problems continue to exist at school regarding the low level and poor quality of education and academic achievements learners facing till this century. Knipe (2022); Ngubane and Nzima (2023) stated that it is over 20 years of apartheid, still, rural education remains engrossed in challenges of diverse nature of exclusion in school contexts. In addition, lack of parental involvement was mentioned in various studies as main challenge on realizing effective inclusion in rural schools (Mahadew & Hlalele, 2022). Literature also revealed negative attitudes among teachers and learners as another aspect that contribute to the poor inclusion in rural schools (Kanyopa, 2023). Poor management and unaccountability of some school leaders also was mentioned to foster ineffective inclusion in South African rural schools (Hlalele & Makoelle, 2023).

After that being reported, we argue that educational stakeholders (community, school staff, curriculum developers) who revolved to be the main force gear towards inclusion in rural schools need to rebuild their relationships, communications, trust to each other, and work hand in hand towards the implementation of inclusive education in rural schools. Research showed that inclusion and diversity are important factors to consider in teaching and learning contexts in order to provide quality and relevant education to all learners (Suich & Schneider, 2022; Taole, 2020). Thus, this study believes that the using of LIW theory of practice will rebuild health relations in rural schools by enhancing effective communication, while, at the same time mitigating inclusion challenges to these schools.

In an attempt to acknowledge and recognize the need to address the causes of inclusion challenges in South African rural schools, (Nembambula et al., 2023, p. 5) asserted that “inclusion in rural school contexts is under reported, thus, schools tend to blame parents and families for not assisting and being irresponsible for their children’s education”. Hence, authors of this article insist that there is a need to transform South African rural schools into safe havens and to achieve high quality education for all. As we started to think about this, the question of how can this transformation be achieved in these schools came to our minds. Then, we realized that by using LIW theory of practice, we can contribute to the desire change. Accordingly, this study introduces, outlines and explains the LIW as the theory of practice in addressing the challenges that rural schools face with the implementation of inclusive education. The study demonstrates that the LIW theory of practice if utilised as a vehicle for the dissemination of the implementation process of inclusive education will not only benefit learners but also teachers and the whole school community in rural contexts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **LIW theory of practice: Contextualizing its Relevance for Inclusion in Rural Schools**

Tracing its development, LIW theory was developed from a larger study as an alternative theory to change the fundamental practices, programs, policies and peoples’ attitudes toward learner integration and inclusion in educational contexts. Kanyopa (2022; 2023); Kanyopa and Mokhele-Makgalwa (2024a) presented similar views that LIW theory of practice emerges as an encouraging framework poised to mitigate and navigate learner integration and inclusion in educational contexts. Practically, the theory offers concrete inspiration that provides a structure for the dynamic strategies on how to enhance inclusion in diverse learning contexts (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2023; Macrine, 2020). Further, it is believed that the using of LIW theory of practice would improve overall schools’ administration and leadership, since the theory insists on the shared responsibility as a main strategy in enhancing inclusion in educational settings (Kanyopa, Hlalele & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024a; Nkomo & Dube, 2022).

Essentially, LIW theory of practice has three basic interconnected foundations which are; self-concept theory, democratic ethos, and Critical Emancipatory Research theory (CER). In order to promote effective inclusion in South African rural schools, this study contextualizes LIW as a relevant theory by engaging its’ three relateable foundations as follows.

### **Self-Concept Theory**

Self-concept is the theory that explains the images of how people view themselves (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024a). The self-concept is influenced by many factors including personal beliefs, interactions with others as well as engaging in important events of our lives (Carter & Vartanian, 2022). Kanyopa and Mokhele-Makgalwa (2024b, p. 505) alludes that “self-concept is an individual’s knowledge of who they are”. It is the theory that focuses mainly on a persons’ emotional, spiritual, physical, and social aspect. Therefore, this foundation contextualizes the LIW theory with the notion that, enhancement of positive self-concept can contribute to inclusion of learners at school by promoting their optimistic and higher academic expectations which result to the good academic achievements. Furthermore, self-concept theory supplements the LIW theory with comprehensive motives towards the implementation of inclusive education in rural school settings by promoting learners’ inner motivations and enhancing their optimal functioning ability (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024b). Besides, the LIW theory views self-concept as a multifaceted aspect that helps learners in rural schools to learn, and maintain full awareness of the existing diversity in their learning settings (Kanyopa, 2022; Knipe, 2022).

### **Democratic Ethos**

This is an institutional form that enables cooperatives to legitimately decide what they want, when and how (Bond, 2019). It is the foundational theory that enhances positive conviction among the collectives for active engagement and participation into the decision making process. Bond (2019, p. 20) mentioned that “it is the set of practices that challenges an authoritarian leadership in any organisation”. Thus, democratic ethos tends to promote freedom and fairness to the people in South African rural contexts (Kanyopa, 2023). This foundation contextualizes the LIW theory with the deliberative involvement of educational stakeholders and insisting on the importance of shared responsibilities (Kanyopa, 2022). With democratic ethos principles, the use of LIW theory in implementation of inclusion in South African rural schools would be benefited with programs that accommodate existed diversity fairly.

### **Critical Emancipatory Research (CER)**

The CER is the transformative theory that focuses on how educational settings, systems, programs, policies can be better, to fit the diverse socioeconomic background of the learners in the learning settings (Dube & Hlalele, 2018; Author, 2022). The main aim of CER in education is to regain equality and reduce the barriers in learning contexts, and help those who come from disadvantaged communities by demolishing educational challenges facing them (De Barros, 2020; Macrine, 2020). Therefore, the CER theory contextualizes the LIW theory on inclusion of learners in rural schools by improving the current situation of inclusive education and enhancing its implementation. With CER principles, the LIW theory of practice intends to give educational stakeholders an inherent knowledge of emancipation and empowerment that open spaces for everyone in school settings to be seen essential (Kanyopa, 2022). Indeed, these three pertinent foundation theories made the LIW theory of practice to be as one of the most potent means of creating and promoting inclusive learning environment in South African rural schools, to help the learners to attain positive academic achievements.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Leavy (2022) explains that "methodology details a researcher’s approach to the research to ensure reliable, valid findings that address the aims and objectives of the study" (p. 58). Methodology serves as a framework for outlining how research is conducted, ensuring that the process aligns with the study’s purpose and objectives. Similarly, Kanyopa (2018) describes methodology as a logical and systematic plan developed to solve a research problem, offering a structured approach to answering research questions. This study employs a qualitative case study design, an approach well-suited for exploring complex phenomena within their natural settings (Adler, 2022). Grounded in the interpretive research paradigm, the study acknowledges the existence of multiple realities as perceived and constructed by individuals in their specific contexts. This paradigm enables the researcher to delve deeply into the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants, aiming to uncover rich, contextualized insights on the promotion of inclusion in South African rural schools.

The research was conducted in South African rural school contexts, a setting marked by unique socio-economic and educational challenges that influence inclusion practices. A total of 130 participants contributed to the study, providing valuable data through their responses to questionnaires. These participants represented diverse voices within the rural education system, including teachers, learners, and possibly other stakeholders, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The data generated was analyzed thematically, a method that involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis allowed for a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives, aligning with the study's qualitative and interpretive orientation. By systematically coding and categorizing the data, the researcher could draw meaningful conclusions that address the study's aims and objectives. This methodological approach underscores the importance of selecting appropriate strategies for data collection and analysis, ensuring that the findings are both valid and reliable (Adler, 2022; Nasri, 2023). Furthermore, the choice of a qualitative case study design within an interpretive paradigm highlights the researcher's commitment to exploring the complexity of human experiences in specific, real-world contexts.

## RESULTS

### LIWs' domains as a hybrid for inclusion in South African Rural Schools

Participants responses indicated that the LIW theory of practice reports the systematic and responsible framework for the successful promotion and implementation of inclusive education in rural school contexts. Findings indicated that the LIW is a suitable and flexible theory of practice which aims to examine how the issue of inclusion is socially constructed while “demonstrating a systemic understanding of the issue within the rural school contexts” (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2023, p. 12). This study corresponds to numerous research like that by McCabe and Ruppap (2023) that reported on the challenges of inclusion particularly in rural school settings. Grounded on the nature of qualitative interpretive approach, this article then, seeks to explain the issue of inclusion and provide a means for its successful promotion and implementation in the South African rural school contexts. This will be supported by three domains of LIW theory of practice which enriches the process with active engagement and participation of the educational stakeholders. More important, the analogy of a “wheel” suggests the idea that the educational stakeholders continuously acting systematically in a circle motion, while, undertaking self-reflections on schools' daily routines to support the implementation of inclusive education.

Figure 1 below presents an illustration of the LIW theory of practise.

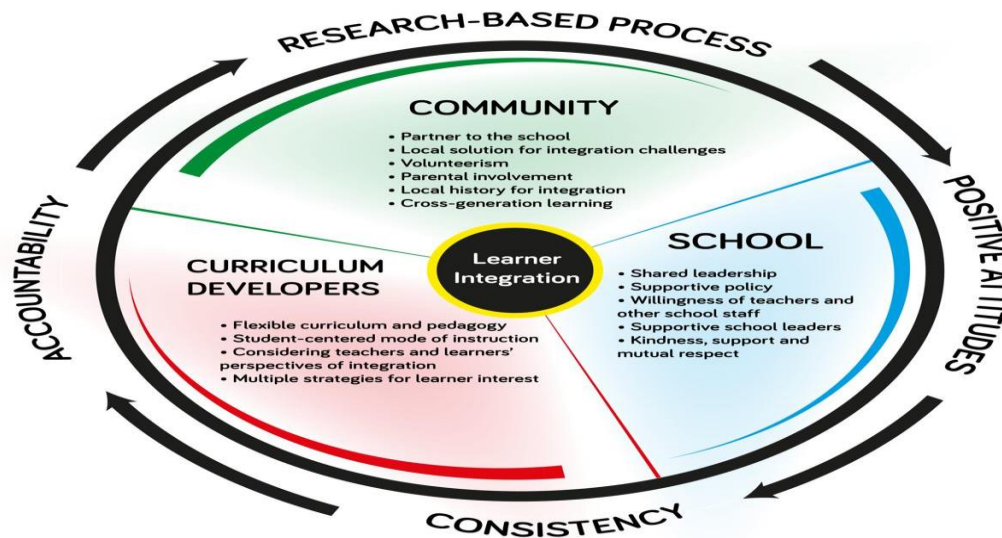


Figure 1: An illustration of LIW theory of practice (adopted from Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024a, p. 441)

Practically, the LIW theory of practice emphasises on three main domains that exist in every school, which are; *the school, curriculum developers and community*. These are the key players towards the success on the realisation of inclusion in any school environment (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024a). Certainly, findings of the study revealed that the LIW theory offers concrete, practical and successful ways to accomplish its' stated purpose. The theory insists that the school cannot do it on its own to ensure an effective inclusion of learners, rather, it needs the Department of Education through the curriculum developers, and the community that it serves, to come together to work collaboratively toward the realisation of a successful inclusion in any school contexts.

In the promotion of inclusion in rural schools, the three domains are viewed as the “*rim*” when illustrating the reality of the wheel. “The rim is deep in the centre and shallow at the outer edges that supports the rotation and motion of the wheel” (Kanyopa, 2022, p. 289). Thus, with the wheel illustration of this theory, it shows the process of going forward towards the promotion and realisation of successful inclusion in the rural school environment. Hence, the following sections explain three domains of the theory as a hybrid for inclusion in South African rural schools.

### **Curriculum Developers**

In order to achieve a successful inclusion in South African rural schools, the LIW theory suggests that curriculum developers should make sure the curriculum is flexible, and all the contents should be grounded in both the classroom and learners' real-world contexts (Blignaut, 2020; Kanyopa, 2022). The theory insists that it is important for the curriculum modification and adaptation to take place for effective inclusion in rural schools. Findings of the study affirmed that, the process of modifying and adapting the curriculum to cater to learning needs, should not be seen as a threat to the teachers and school authorities, rather it should be seen as a crucial strategy for promoting equality, democracy and equity in the school contexts.

### **Community**

For successful inclusion in rural schools, the LIW theory of practice confirms that the partnership between the school and the community is crucial. The community members should knowingly assist the school to operate effectively in supporting the necessary roles towards the successful inclusion. Findings of the study also alluded that with community involvement in the promotion and realisation of inclusion in schools, this will promote an effective parental involvement which is an essential element for the learners' academic achievement. De Raat (2014, p. 60) mentions that “it takes a village to raise a child”. The study also maintains that the community and school partnership is vital for successful inclusion in South African rural schools.

### **The School**

Findings of the study indicated that school is the main domain for implementation of Inclusive education. Therefore, with the LIW theory schools' authorities would operate in shared leadership model whereby the responsibilities are shared from the management level to the learners (Kanyopa, 2022). In addition, schools need to have a supportive resources and leadership that embraces diversity in school contexts (Kanyopa & Hlalele, 2023). Moreover, findings also suggested that culture of mutual respect, care, trust and kindness should be the pillars for everyday routines at school. People within the school should also embrace positive attitudes towards the inclusion, as this aspect will nurture the learning environment with peace and harmony to all regardless their diverse (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024b; Knipe, 2022).

### **LIW's Elements to Mitigate Exclusion Challenges in Rural Schools**

Findings of the study also stipulated that promotion of inclusive education in rural schools would more effective with four elements of LIW theory (*positive attitudes, accountability, consistency, and research-based process*). With the wheel illustration of the theory, these elements are viewed as an outer edge of the wheel. In essence, with the focus on the four elements of LIW theory that reinforce the findings of the study to contribute on the ongoing debate on how to eradicate exclusion challenges in South African rural schools. Participants of the study highlighted various barriers and challenges facing the implementation process of inclusive education in South African rural schools. Literature like that by Engelbrecht (2020) also mentions that inclusive education in rural schools is hindered with inadequate training for the teachers, and the study recommends action researchers to

play their critical role in provision of informal training on how to implement inclusive education in rural schools, when involving these teachers as their participants in their research studies. Additionally, Mpu and Adu (2021) postulates that it is hard to implement inclusion in rural schools as the classrooms are overcrowded, schools are lack materials as well as a poor teaching and learning environment. They go further and recommend that educational sponsors should provide these schools with potential resources to help teachers to implement inclusive education in this context.

Nkomo and Dube (2022) asserted that shortage of qualified teachers in South African rural schools is the main challenge. They go further and mention that teachers in the rural schools experiencing "...lack of support and resources, as well as the prevailing negative attitudes towards diverse abilities..." (Nkomo & Dube, 2022, p. 267). Their study also recommends that teachers and other school staff to develop positive attitudes and embrace diversity. Nevertheless, Nembambula et al. (2023) mentions the aspects such as; poor policy implementation, poor government commitment and in adequate infrastructure as the hindrance factors for inclusive education in South African rural schools. The article goes further to recommend that the South African government should strengthen educational support services especially at the district level and in schools to eliminate barriers for the implementation of inclusive education.

Given these studies that reported on the challenges and various recommendations towards the solutions on the implementation of inclusive education in rural schools. This paper then, contends that LIW theory of practice when used in this context has the impetus to transform the school environment into a more inclusive haven. In this light, the following sections explain LIW's elements and their applicability on mitigating exclusion challenges in rural schools.

### **Positive Attitudes**

Findings affirmed that positive attitudes are the central to the promotion and implementation of inclusive education in rural school contexts accomplishment. The theory concurs with other scholars who have maintained that positive attitudes of educational stakeholders towards diversity allow and promote effective inclusion in any educational setting (Mahadew & Hlalele, 2022). With positive attitudes, the LIW theory affirms that the implementation of inclusive education is unavoidable and will surely promote the sense of belonging to everyone in the school setting (Kanyopa & Mokhele-Makgalwa, 2024b).

### **Accountability**

Findings of the study explained accountability as the perspective of oversight on the responsibility of each one in an organization that ensures higher performance of the allocated tasks (Ngubane & Nzima, 2023). In rural educational contexts, accountability is viewed as an "obligation of the educational institution to report to its community about the quality of the services it offers" (Fox, 2023, p. 34). With accountability, the LIW theory provides the rural schools with an opportunity to collect valuable information about its performance from the community, while, considering their recommendations on improving every social aspect including inclusion.

### **Consistency**

Research by Kanyopa (2022, p. 287) asserts that "consistency is a fundamental element for the successful implementation of learner integration and inclusion in schools". Zwane and Malale (2018); Suich and Schneider (2022) mentioned that consistency ensures substantial inclusion in schools while enhancing the likelihood of a 'no child is left behind' agenda. Findings of this study enriched LIW theory of practice with arouses that the school stakeholders should remain dedicated towards the inclusion goals, staying focused on the programs, and practices are intentionally promoting inclusion in rural school environment.

### **Research-based Process**

Findings also insisted that it is crucial for any process at school to be collective reviewed time to time, authors believe that this will always promote sense of belonging and well-being to the learners. This element helps schools to be able to determine the functioning level of each aspect within the school and its impacts to the learners' well-being (Nkomo & Dube, 2022). Findings also contended on the consideration or diverse perspectives on formulation of programs, practices or events at schools to promote unity among the

stakeholders. Also, Kanyopa and Mokhele-Makglawa (2024a) affirms that continuously research-based process tend to improve social aspects in school contexts and pave the ways for effective inclusion. Thus, the LIW theory maintains that rural schools would gain a remarkable significance in meeting social, emotional and educational needs of each learner when employing the research-based process element in its function.

## **DISCUSSION OF THE ARGUMENTS**

The strength of this study is that it engages with LIW theory in attempting to develop strategies to alleviate inclusion challenges in South African rural schools. While, previous studies have made numerous recommendations that foster solutions to this issue, we believe this study is unique because it theorises inclusion in rural school contexts through the LIW theory of practice and transform its' elements and domains into possible solutions for enhancing inclusion in these school contexts. Another strength is that, it calls for transformation not only in schools, but also in communities and curriculum developers. The study holds in the heart that changing of programs, policies, practices, and peoples' attitudes will surely promote inclusion in South African rural schools. This study argues that inadequate training of the teachers and lack of resources play a significant role in hindering inclusion in South African rural schools. We hope that, through this article the district-based support together with school-based support teams will pay close attention to these and enacted solutions that emphasis successful inclusive education practices in this school contexts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

However, a notable weakness of this article is its reliance on a single data generation method, namely the use of questionnaires. While questionnaires are valuable tools for collecting data from a large group of participants efficiently, their sole use limits the depth and richness of the insights obtained. By depending on this method alone, the study missed the opportunity to triangulate data, which is a critical approach that enhances the reliability and validity of research findings by combining multiple methods to corroborate results (Leavy, 2022). Thus, we are recommended the future research to employ a mixed approach that could provide both qualitative and quantitative data to address the inherent challenges of rural education settings, including socio-economic disparities, resource limitations, and cultural attitudes, by capturing a broader spectrum of voices and experiences on the promotion of effective implementation in South African rural schools.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, this study makes a significant contribution to the ongoing debate on how to promote inclusion in South African rural schools, emphasizing the importance of enhancing communication and fostering stronger relationships among educational stakeholders. By focusing on collaborative and inclusive practices, the research highlights the potential for meaningful change when stakeholders work together toward a common goal. The authors of this study argue that grounding these relationships and dialogues within the framework of the Learner Integration Wheel (LIW) theory of practice offers a practical and systematic approach to achieving successful inclusion in South African rural schools. The LIW's structured methodology approach, which integrates its three domains and four elements serves as a foundation for fostering a more inclusive environment in rural schools. We believe that when these domains work collaboratively and interdependently, the likelihood of mitigating exclusionary practices and addressing barriers to inclusion in rural schools increases significantly.

Furthermore, the study underscores that the promotion of inclusion in South African rural schools is not solely the responsibility of educators or policymakers but requires the collective effort of all stakeholders, including parents, community members, and learners themselves. This holistic approach is particularly crucial in rural contexts, where socio-economic challenges, resource constraints, and cultural factors often compound the complexities of implementing inclusive education. The article also invites other researchers to build on these findings by exploring additional strategies and models that could enhance the promotion of inclusive education in rural schools. Future research could investigate innovative approaches, alternative theoretical frameworks, or context-specific interventions that address the unique challenges faced by rural schools in South Africa. By fostering a broader dialogue and integrating diverse perspectives, the field can advance toward more effective and sustainable inclusion practices.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in the study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data collected for this study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality restrictions.

**Conflict of Interest statement.** Both authors declare no conflict of interest.

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