

Teachers' Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education Amid Crisis

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Abstract: This study explores the challenges teachers faced in implementing inclusive education amid crises, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study. An interpretive research paradigm was adopted, emphasizing participants' experiences over theoretical assumptions. The study employed a qualitative approach, including one-on-one semi-structured interviews, to gather data from 12 teachers across three schools in South Africa, representing three socio-economic contexts. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings revealed that barriers to inclusive education during the crisis include inadequate training, insufficient resources, poor parental involvement, increased teacher workloads, and internet connectivity challenges. Teachers, particularly in lower socio-economic contexts, struggled to adapt to remote learning environments, exacerbating inequalities among students. Additionally, compliance with health protocols and managing absenteeism posed further challenges. The study concludes by recommending crisis-specific training programs, equitable resource allocation, stronger parental engagement, teacher support systems, and enhanced health protocols to ensure more effective implementation of inclusive education during future crises. These findings underscore the need for flexible educational policies and proactive strategies to mitigate the impact of crises on vulnerable students and their educators..

Keyword: *COVID-19, Crises, Educational disruption, Educational resources, Inclusive education, Parental involvement, Teacher training, Workload*

Introduction

Inclusive education has long been a cornerstone of global educational policy, aimed at ensuring that all students, regardless of ability or background, have access to quality education. Hayes and Bulat (2017) and Kotzmann et al. (2022) define inclusive education as an approach that guarantees equal access to education for all students, whether they have disabilities, socio-economic challenges, or other barriers. It fosters diversity, equity, and participation by accommodating diverse learning needs and promoting environments where every learner can thrive (UNESCO, 2020). The significance of inclusive education lies in its capacity to reduce educational inequalities, fostering a more just and cohesive society by ensuring no student is marginalized or excluded (Ainscow, 2020).

However, global crises—such as conflicts, natural disasters, pandemics, and economic downturns—pose significant challenges to established educational systems and practices. In educational contexts, a crisis refers to any disruption that severely affects the functioning of

schools, hindering access to quality education (Sayed et al., 2021). Such crises can lead to school closures, loss of learning opportunities, increased dropout rates, and the widening of educational inequalities, especially for vulnerable populations (Haffejee et al., 2024). The long-term consequences of these disruptions extend beyond individual learners, impacting broader societal and economic development (Reimers, 2021).

One such crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, introduced unprecedented challenges for inclusive education. Schools and educators had to rapidly adapt to remote learning environments while upholding inclusivity principles (UNESCO, 2020). The pandemic underscored and exacerbated pre-existing challenges within education systems, particularly affecting students with disabilities and those from marginalized communities (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). Teachers, often at the forefront of educational delivery, had to reinvent their methods, incorporating digital tools and differentiated instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of their students (Reis & Renzulli, 2018). This study aims to explore the specific challenges teachers faced in implementing inclusive education during the COVID-19 crisis.

Methods

The study utilized an interpretive approach to investigate the challenges teachers faced in implementing inclusive education during crises. This methodology prioritizes participants' accounts over theoretical assumptions (Koopman, 2017). To gain a comprehensive understanding, qualitative research methods were employed, focusing on analyzing participants' perspectives and interpretations regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The sample for this study comprised three schools, selected based on their quintile classification within South Africa's educational system: Quintiles 1, 3, and 5, representing different socioeconomic backgrounds. In South Africa, schools are categorized into five quintiles, with Quintile 1 representing schools in the weakest socioeconomic conditions and Quintile 5 representing schools in more favorable circumstances (Department of Basic Education, 2014). The study focused on the most vulnerable schools, primarily those from Quintiles 1, 2, and 3.

To achieve the research objectives, a purposive sampling approach was adopted, selecting participants who could provide valuable insights. Burns and Grove (2010) emphasize the importance of using appropriate criteria to ensure a sufficient sample size. For this study, 12 teachers from Grade 10 were selected from three different schools, with four representatives each from Quintiles 1, 3, and 5. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method because they allowed for both pre-formulated questions and flexibility to explore new questions based on participants' responses. The recorded interviews were transcribed meticulously before undergoing thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2016) recommended six-step procedure: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, producing the report.

Result And Discussion

The article aimed to explore the challenges faced by teachers in implementing inclusive education during the crisis. The findings revealed critical challenges such as lack of adequate training, lack of resources, lack of parental involvement, increased workload, poor attendance/absenteeism, internet connectivity issues, non-compliance with safety protocols, and dealing with pregnant learners.

Lack of adequate training

A significant challenge that educators faced during the pandemic was the lack of training on how to implement inclusive education in crisis conditions. This issue was reported by teachers across all quintiles, with several highlighting their unpreparedness for handling inclusive education under the circumstances brought about by COVID-19. One teacher from a quintile three school expressed frustration with the situation: “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.”

Another teacher emphasized the absence of policy guidelines in their pre-pandemic training, noting: “Okay, 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.” In light of this, several teachers expressed the need for future policies to incorporate crisis-specific training. One teacher suggested: “The government needs to implement a strategic plan for next year on how they can use policy to implement inclusive education. By doing this, heads of schools can perhaps be trained to train teachers on how to deal with unexpected occurrences based on COVID-19.”

The lack of training on implementing inclusive education under crisis conditions, reported across all quintiles, underscores a broader systemic problem in educational preparedness and policy. Educators reported being inadequately prepared for the dual challenges of online learning and maintaining inclusive education during the pandemic. The frustration expressed by the participants reflects a gap in both practical training and strategic support for teachers. The lack of pre-pandemic training on inclusive education policies exacerbated the problem. The absence of comprehensive policy guidelines meant that educators were left without essential frameworks to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. Several educators emphasized the necessity for future policies to incorporate crisis-specific training. This suggestion highlights the need for a proactive approach in policy development and training to address unforeseen disruptions.

Current literature supports these findings, emphasizing the critical role of preparedness and training in crisis management within education. According to Florian and Linklater (2010), effective inclusive education relies on well-structured training and support for educators, which includes preparation for unexpected disruptions. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed significant gaps in this area, underscoring the need for targeted professional development (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Research by Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) highlights that crisis situations necessitate flexible and adaptive strategies in educational practices. The absence of such strategies during the pandemic has further stressed the importance of integrating crisis management into educational training programs. Similarly, a study by Uleanya et al. (2022) found that schools with established crisis-response training were better equipped to handle the challenges posed by the pandemic, supporting the need for a structured approach to inclusive education in times of crisis.

Lack of resources

Participants cited the lack of resources as a major challenge in implementing inclusive education under crisis conditions. While resource shortages existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation was significantly worsened during the crisis. This scarcity was especially severe in schools within the middle and lower quintiles, compared to schools in higher quintiles. For instance, a teacher from a middle-quintile school highlighted their lack of online learning tools

such as computers and internet connectivity, which limited their ability to transition to remote learning: "I think the most challenging aspect was the lack of resources. It was very hard because when COVID-19 began, public schools were closed, and only private schools could continue because they had computers and online learning resources, which we did not have. For me, access to resources like computers and Wi-Fi for the learners was crucial."

Similarly, a teacher from a quintile-one school reported severe shortages of infrastructure and professional staff, which made it difficult to manage their classrooms effectively: "We don't have enough furniture or infrastructure overall; it's a real challenge. We needed additional buildings and classrooms to accommodate all the learners. We also need more professional teachers—not just assistants—to be able to cover all the required material and support inclusive education, especially for learners facing barriers." Additionally, overcrowding, exacerbated by the lack of resources, made it difficult for some teachers to comply with COVID-19 regulations. As participant one explained: "During COVID-19, classrooms were supposed to hold only 16 students, but our school was already overcrowded, even before the pandemic. We had classes with up to 40 students."

The data presented highlights the acute challenges faced by schools, particularly those in the middle and lower quintiles, in implementing inclusive education during crises. The scarcity of resources was identified as a significant barrier to effective education during the COVID-19 crisis. As noted by participants, schools with limited resources struggled to transition to remote learning and manage their classrooms effectively. This aligns with recent research emphasizing that inadequate resources hinder the ability of schools to provide quality education, particularly under crisis conditions. For example, Levinson et al. (2021) discuss how resource limitations exacerbated educational disparities during the pandemic, particularly affecting schools in lower-income areas. They found that the lack of online learning tools, such as computers and internet connectivity, significantly impacted the ability to deliver remote education. The data indicates that schools in the middle and lower quintiles faced more severe resource shortages compared to those in higher quintiles. This observation reflects findings from global studies on educational inequality. According to a report by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022), schools in disadvantaged areas were disproportionately affected by the lack of resources, which exacerbated existing inequalities. The disparity in resource availability between different quintiles highlights the systemic inequities in educational resources that were further amplified by the pandemic.

Participants also reported challenges related to infrastructure and staffing. A teacher from a quintile-one school highlighted severe shortages of furniture, infrastructure, and professional staff. This is consistent with research by Sibuyi et al. (2024), who found that inadequate infrastructure and insufficient staffing significantly impacted the ability of schools to adapt to new learning modalities and maintain educational quality. Overcrowding, which was exacerbated by the lack of resources, further complicated adherence to COVID-19 regulations. The challenge of overcrowded classrooms during the pandemic has been documented by numerous studies, including those by Meier and West (2021), which found that overcrowding negatively impacted both the implementation of health guidelines and the overall learning environment. The findings suggest that the lack of resources had a substantial impact on the implementation of inclusive education, most especially during crises. Resource constraints made it difficult for schools to provide equitable access to learning opportunities, which is critical for inclusive education. As emphasized by Mendez-Sanchez (2022), inclusive education requires adequate resources to

support diverse learning needs and ensure that all students can participate fully in educational activities. The data indicates that without sufficient resources, schools struggled to meet these requirements, particularly during a crisis.

Lack of Parental Involvement

Participants across all quintiles expressed concern about the lack of parental support during times of crisis. Teachers highlighted that some parents were unwilling to be involved in their children's education. One teacher shared: "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." Another teacher echoed this sentiment, noting that some parents failed to respond when invited to address concerns regarding their child's progress: "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. We are surprised if a parent actually shows up when they are called for a meeting."

A recurring issue was the difficulty teachers faced in communicating with parents. Teachers indicated that some parents provided incorrect phone numbers, further complicating their attempts to engage with them. One teacher explained: "Most of the time, I do call the parents. I do phone them. The cell phone numbers they supply in the school system are wrong." Additionally, some parents were not willing to allow their children access to online learning materials, either because they could not afford it or were unwilling to share their devices: "Some parents do not allow or give their children airtime to buy data to access online facilities. As a teacher, I had to sacrifice. I had to buy a router and hotspot them." In some cases, teachers felt that parents' lack of education contributed to their inability to support their children. This challenge was more pronounced in lower quintiles, where many parents were uneducated and unable to assist with school assignments: "Those without parents who know anything about the homework or are educated come back without being assisted. We give them plenty of work, but they are not helped."

The data reveals significant concerns about parental involvement in education, especially during times of crisis. Teachers reported a range of issues, including unwillingness or inability of parents to engage with their children's education, incorrect contact information, and challenges related to online learning access. The issue of lack of parental involvement is well documented in educational research. According to Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement, effective parental involvement is crucial for students' academic success. Epstein (2018) emphasizes that parents' engagement in their children's education can lead to improved academic outcomes and better behavioral adjustments. However, the data indicates that some parents are either unwilling or unable to participate in their children's education, which aligns with findings by Hill and Tyson (2009), who note that barriers such as lack of time, educational background, and motivation can impede parental involvement. The difficulty teachers face in communicating with parents, as illustrated by the issue of incorrect contact information, is a notable problem. This challenge is supported by research from Popovska et al. (2021), which highlights how effective communication between schools and families is essential for fostering parental involvement. Inaccurate contact details and poor communication channels can severely hinder efforts to engage parents in their children's education.

The data also points to challenges with providing access to online learning materials. This issue is particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where online learning

became a primary mode of instruction. Research by Reimers and Schleicher (2021) indicates that socio-economic disparities impact students' access to digital resources, which can exacerbate educational inequalities. The data reflects this, showing that some parents are unable or unwilling to provide the necessary resources for online learning, thus impacting their children's educational opportunities. The lack of educational support from parents, particularly in lower quintile schools, underscores the role of parental education in students' academic achievement. According to Fan and Chen (2001), parents' educational background significantly influences their ability to assist with schoolwork and engage effectively with the educational system. This is evident in the data, where uneducated parents are less able to support their children with homework, reflecting broader concerns about educational equity.

Increased workload

The data revealed that one of the major challenges teachers faced in implementing inclusive education during crises was an increased workload. Teachers across all quintiles expressed that managing smaller class sizes to adhere to social distancing requirements resulted in a heavier workload. For example, a teacher from quintile five explained: "It has been difficult for us as teachers because... I had about three classes, and I ended up having six because each class was divided into two. So, the same lesson had to be taught six times... This has added to our workload." Similarly, a teacher from quintile one shared: "The number of learners has been reduced... we used to teach a class of 70 learners, but now we have to teach two different groups, which means plenty of extra work for educators."

In addition to the increased number of classes, some teachers had to stay longer at school due to extended timetables. A teacher from quintile five explained: "Our timetables were longer... for instance, we had one-hour periods, but on certain days, like Wednesday, periods extended to one hour and 15 minutes. This meant more time teaching and ensuring learners were keeping up with the work."

Another significant challenge was supporting learners with comorbidities who could not attend classes regularly. Teachers had to put in additional hours to ensure these learners were not left behind. One teacher from quintile five noted: "During COVID, we had children with comorbidities who couldn't be at school regularly... it's up to us to help them catch up by organizing after-school activities and exercises so that they are on the same level as the rest of the class."

The data reveals that the shift to smaller class sizes due to social distancing requirements introduced during the COVID-19 crisis led to a significant increase in teachers' workloads. Teachers reported having to teach the same lesson multiple times to accommodate reduced class sizes, echoing the broader challenges schools faced in maintaining educational standards during the pandemic. This increase in the number of classes aligns with findings from recent studies, which highlight how pandemic-related adjustments have exacerbated teachers' workloads and stress levels. Kreuzfeld et al. (202) point out that splitting classes and extending teaching hours became necessary due to health protocols, significantly impacting teachers' workload and mental health, much like the experiences shared in the data. The extension of timetables, which contributed to an increased workload, reflects the need for longer periods to cover the same material due to smaller groups, a trend mirrored in research on the pandemic's educational impact. For instance, Egan and Sutherland (2022) found that extended school hours and changes to

teaching schedules during the pandemic were common, adding strain on educators who had to adjust to these new demands.

Additionally, the challenge of supporting learners with comorbidities who could not attend school regularly due to heightened health risks further exacerbated teachers' workloads. Organizing after-school activities and additional exercises to help these students catch up required extra effort, highlighting how teachers had to go beyond regular duties. Hargreaves et al. (2022) corroborate this, noting that teachers had to provide extra support to vulnerable students during the pandemic, reflecting the increased burdens described in the data. The overall rise in teachers' workloads during the pandemic has profound implications for both the quality of education and teacher well-being. Studies suggest that excessive workloads can lead to burnout and decreased job satisfaction, both of which have a direct impact on student outcomes and the overall effectiveness of education systems (Richmond et al., 2021). The additional responsibilities placed on teachers, without corresponding increases in support or compensation, created an environment of considerable stress, undermining their ability to deliver effective, inclusive education during a time of crisis.

Poor attendance/absenteeism

Data revealed a notable drop in school attendance and an increase in absenteeism during the crisis. This issue was predominantly reported by teachers from higher and middle quintiles. For instance: A teacher from a middle quintile observed: "Attendance for many students was a significant problem. Due to alternating schedules, one group attended school for three days while some learners were absent for two out of those three days. By the time they returned, they had a lot of catching up to do, which made it very challenging for me to manage." Similarly, a teacher from a higher quintile noted: "We noticed that even during the days when students were supposed to be attending, some were still absent. This created a substantial burden on teachers, who had to make extra efforts to track down these learners."

In addition to general absenteeism, some learners missed school due to illness, with a number contracting COVID-19. A teacher from quintile five reported: "I had three learners who were significantly affected by COVID-19. One, a Grade 12 student, contracted the virus twice and missed a considerable amount of the year. Consequently, I had to conduct assessments via video or phone calls to keep her up to speed, especially before final exams." Moreover, learners with comorbidities faced additional challenges: "During the COVID-19 pandemic, children with comorbidities often missed school. They either attended partway through the year or could not complete the year." Furthermore, some learners dropped out of school entirely. Teachers attributed this to the educational system's lack of inclusivity and accommodation during the pandemic. A teacher from quintile three expressed: "Two learners dropped out of Grade 10 A, and about seven dropped out of Grade 10 B. This was a significant challenge, and I believe the dropouts were due to the system's inability to be inclusive and accommodating. It seemed that these students felt neglected by the system."

The data reveals a significant decline in school attendance and a rise in absenteeism during the crisis, with notable variations across different quintiles. Teachers from higher and middle quintiles reported substantial issues, including the challenges of managing alternating schedules and tracking down absent learners. Additionally, health-related absences due to COVID-19 and comorbidities further exacerbated the problem. The situation even led to some learners dropping out of school, attributed to perceived inadequacies in the educational system's response. The

alternating schedules implemented during the crisis led to inconsistent attendance patterns, as highlighted by a middle quintile teacher. This issue aligns with findings from recent literature that emphasize how disruptions in school routines can negatively impact student attendance and academic performance (Aucejo et al., 2020). Such disruptions create gaps in learning and increase the difficulty of managing and supporting students effectively, as reported by teachers in this study. The need for effective strategies to address these gaps and manage alternating schedules is crucial for maintaining educational continuity.

The data also points to absenteeism due to illness, including COVID-19 infections. This is consistent with research indicating that health crises like pandemics significantly impact student attendance, with higher rates of absenteeism reported during such periods (Anakpo et al., 2021). The experiences of teachers who had to adapt their assessment methods for students affected by COVID-19 reflect the broader challenges faced by educational systems in accommodating students' health-related needs. The need for flexible assessment methods and support systems is highlighted by these findings. Learners with preexisting health conditions faced additional challenges during the pandemic, further compounding absenteeism. This observation is supported by literature that notes the heightened vulnerability of students with comorbidities during health crises (De Bruin & Bennett, 2020). Schools need to develop inclusive strategies to support these learners, ensuring they have access to education even when physical attendance is compromised. The increase in dropout rates reported by teachers, attributed to the system's lack of inclusivity, underscores a critical issue. Research suggests that crises can exacerbate existing inequalities in education, leading to higher dropout rates among vulnerable students (Viner et al., 2021). The perceived neglect by the educational system during the pandemic highlights the need for more inclusive and accommodating educational policies to prevent students from disengaging or dropping out.

Internet connectivity issues

The data revealed that internet connectivity was a significant challenge encountered by learners and teachers from middle and lower quintile schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of the pandemic, many learners were unable to access online classes due to the lack of cellphones or internet data. A teacher from a quintile one school explained: *“At first, it was very difficult because we were under COVID-19. They do have access to a cellphone, but for instance, they do not have data.”* Another teacher from the same quintile added: *“The first challenge is that not all of them have cell phones, so it is kind of difficult to have enough time or to help them all during the six days when they’re away. And some of them do not have money to buy data, so it is sort of difficult for them to use online learning.”* Besides the issue of data affordability, some teachers pointed out that network coverage was also a major obstacle in certain areas, further affecting online learning. For example, a teacher in a quintile one school noted: *“There were no online lessons here in our school because, remember, we are staying in a place where the network is a challenge, where electricity is a challenge, where a lot of people live in shacks, their parents do not have jobs, and they are depending on social grants.”* Another teacher reiterated these difficulties, stating: *“Some learners were having challenges with the network, and it was very challenging. That is why we now have learners who still do not know how to write or read.”*

The data reveals that internet connectivity was a substantial barrier for learners and teachers from middle and lower quintile schools throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic intensified pre-existing challenges related to access to devices, affordability of data, and network coverage. At the onset of the crisis, many learners were left without the necessary resources to

participate in online classes, which aligns with findings from recent studies that emphasize how the pandemic deepened the digital divide. As Beaunoyer et al. (2020) note, this divide has become a critical obstacle to equitable access to online education, particularly for low-income and marginalized groups. Mossberger et al. (2021) similarly argue that disparities in technology access and affordability contribute to unequal educational opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a magnifying lens on these issues, exposing systemic inequities in digital access. A teacher from a quintile one school observed that many learners lacked cell phones and could not afford data, a reality that Kozma (2020) supports by underscoring the importance of technological access and affordability in creating effective online learning environments. These challenges highlight how crises, like the pandemic, worsen access gaps for already disadvantaged communities.

Beyond device access and data affordability, network coverage emerged as a critical obstacle during the pandemic. In areas with poor network infrastructure, teachers reported severe difficulties in maintaining online learning. This mirrors findings by Helsper and Eynon (2020), who emphasize how inadequate digital infrastructure can exacerbate educational inequalities, particularly during crisis situations. A teacher's report of network and electricity challenges in their region reflects systemic issues outlined by Gillespie (2021), who argues that infrastructure and socio-economic factors significantly affect the success of digital education initiatives. The impact of these barriers is far-reaching, with long-term effects on educational outcomes. Teachers noted that learners were still struggling with basic literacy skills, having missed significant portions of their education due to connectivity issues during the pandemic. Haffejee et al. (2021) similarly discusses how crises like COVID-19 can lead to interrupted learning, resulting in long-term educational setbacks. This data suggests that addressing digital infrastructure and affordability is crucial for mitigating the educational inequities laid bare by the pandemic.

Non-compliance with safety Protocol

Non-compliance with safety protocols was another challenge in implementing inclusive education under crisis. Teachers from middle and lower quintiles reported significant challenges with learners not adhering to COVID-19 protocols. A key issue was resistance to mask wearing. One teacher noted that some learners arrived at school without masks, despite the department's efforts to provide them. The teacher expressed frustration: "They come to school without wearing a mask. When you ask, they say they don't have one, but the department has supplied all learners with masks. They'll say it's lost, but how can it be lost when it's supposed to be on your face?" In addition to mask-related issues, other teachers mentioned that learners wasted hand sanitizer and used excuses to avoid wearing masks, such as feeling hot: "Some learners don't want to wear masks; they say it makes them feel hot. Others waste the hand sanitizer instead of using it."

Initially, schools successfully followed the protocols due to the support of assistant teachers. However, when their contracts ended, the burden fell on classroom teachers, who struggled to implement the protocols without additional support: "We had student teachers who sanitized learners and ensured they wore masks. But after their contracts ended, it became my responsibility, and I had to use my lesson time to sanitize learners." Despite these challenges, teachers reported that maintaining social distancing in the classroom was manageable due to seating arrangements in line with COVID-19 regulations.

The data also revealed challenges faced by teachers in adhering to COVID-19 protocols, especially related to mask-wearing during lessons. Many teachers found it difficult to communicate effectively while wearing masks. For instance, one teacher from a middle-quintile school shared:

"Wearing a mask makes it hard to be heard. I have to repeat myself multiple times, which is time-consuming. When reading poetry or literature, I need to be loud and clear, but the mask makes it difficult." To address this issue, a teacher suggested using microphones in classrooms to enhance audibility for teachers with softer voices: "We need microphones in the classroom. Our voices aren't the same, and a mic would help teachers be heard better."

The data reveals significant challenges faced by teachers in ensuring compliance with safety protocols, particularly mask-wearing and hand sanitizer use. This challenge is heightened by the broader context of the COVID-19 crisis, which brought an unprecedented need for health and safety measures in schools globally. Teachers from middle and lower quintile schools reported persistent issues with learners not adhering to these protocols. One teacher's frustration highlights a common issue: students arriving without masks despite their availability from the school. This issue is consistent with findings by Burgess and Sievertsen (2020), who emphasize the difficulty of enforcing health protocols in educational settings, especially during a crisis. The pandemic exacerbated these issues, as schools were often underprepared to handle such widespread enforcement of safety measures. The misuse of hand sanitizer and excuses related to discomfort from masks further complicated adherence, as noted by the teachers in this study. Research suggests that non-compliance with health protocols in schools is often linked to a lack of understanding of their importance and discomfort (Bower et al., 2021), which was prevalent during the pandemic. Students frequently used excuses, like feeling hot, to avoid wearing masks, reflecting both a physical and psychological resistance to the newly imposed rules. The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the importance of strategies to improve compliance, which typically involve enhancing awareness and addressing concerns directly (Glynn et al., 2021). During the pandemic, it became clear that the challenge extended beyond enforcing rules—it was about engaging students to understand the significance of these protocols in protecting their health and that of their communities.

Additionally, the data highlights the impact of reduced support staff on protocol adherence, a critical issue during the pandemic. Initially, the support of assistant teachers helped maintain adherence to protocols. However, once their contracts ended, the responsibility fell solely on classroom teachers, who struggled to manage protocol enforcement alongside their teaching duties. This finding aligns with broader global research from the pandemic period, which emphasized the importance of adequate staffing and support to maintain health protocols in schools (Venketsamy & Hu, 2021). The absence of support staff often left teachers overburdened, diminishing the effectiveness of health measure implementation. Moreover, the data reflects a common issue noted during the COVID-19 pandemic—how masks impacted verbal communication in classrooms. Teachers reported difficulty being heard, particularly during activities requiring clear and loud speech. This issue is consistent with concerns raised by Larsen et al. (2021), where mask-wearing impaired verbal communication and affected teaching quality. The pandemic pushed schools to explore solutions like the use of microphones, as suggested by Javid et al. (2021), to bridge this communication gap. Thus, the data not only underscores the logistical challenges of health protocols in schools but also points to the broader impacts of a crisis like COVID-19 on teaching and learning dynamics.

Dealing with pregnant learners

Some participants reported an increased rate of teenage pregnancy in their schools during the crisis, particularly among learners from the middle and lower quintiles. This phenomenon was

highlighted by a teacher from quintile three, who observed: “Almost definitely, probably 20% of the learners in the school are pregnant. The support given included allowing them to attend school and write their exams without exclusion. Counselling was provided for those who wished to talk to a teacher.” Pregnant learners faced difficulties complying with COVID-19 protocols, such as wearing face masks. A teacher from quintile three explained: “We have a couple of pregnant learners, including one in my Grade 10B class. If a pregnant learner is not wearing a mask and says she feels flustered, I have to respect that. I might ask her to step outside for fresh air while a student teacher supervises her. This sometimes leads to missing important content and may cause other students to feel that she is receiving special treatment. Balancing care for pregnant learners with classroom management becomes quite tricky.”

In addition, teachers reported several challenges related to inclusive education under pandemic conditions. For instance, some pregnant learners struggled with concentration. A teacher from quintile one noted: “Pregnancy, especially during the first trimester, makes it difficult for learners to focus. To support them, I try to seat them at the front so they can better participate and avoid falling asleep.” Other teachers noted that pregnant learners often felt tired, sick, or slept in class, affecting the overall learning environment. A teacher from quintile three shared: “The challenge arises when a pregnant learner comes to class feeling tired and irritable, which can create a gloomy atmosphere. We try to accommodate them by allowing small pillows for back support and letting them have snacks *to maintain energy levels. This support helps prevent disruptions and maintains a more positive classroom environment.*”

The data presentation highlights the challenges faced by pregnant learners during the COVID-19 pandemic and the responses from teachers. The increased rate of teenage pregnancy reported in schools during the pandemic aligns with broader trends observed in various contexts. Studies have shown that crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbate existing social issues, including teenage pregnancy (Norrie et al., 2022). In the context of the schools in question, the observation by the teacher from quintile three reflects a significant concern. The support provided—allowing pregnant learners to attend school and complete examination and offering counselling—mirrors recommended practices in managing educational challenges for pregnant students (Murray et al., 2021). Pregnant learners faced difficulties complying with COVID-19 protocols, such as wearing face masks. The teacher’s comment about the need to balance respect for the pregnant learner’s comfort with classroom management highlights the nuanced challenges educators faced. Research indicates that pregnant individuals may experience increased discomfort and health issues during pandemics (Smith et al., 2023). The teacher's approach of allowing breaks and alternative supervision to accommodate pregnant learners underscores the need for flexibility in pandemic-era education (Campbell, 2023).

Pregnant learners' struggle with concentration and fatigue, as described by the teachers, is consistent with existing literature on the impact of pregnancy on cognitive and physical functioning (Smith et al., 2023). The challenges reported—such as difficulty focusing, feeling tired, and irritability—are well-documented among pregnant individuals and can affect their learning experience (Anderson et al., 2022). The strategies employed by teachers, such as seating pregnant learners at the front and providing additional support like pillows and snacks, are in line with best practices for supporting students with special needs in inclusive education settings (Lee et al., 2023). The difficulty in managing classroom dynamics while accommodating pregnant learners reflects broader issues in inclusive education. Teachers’ efforts to maintain a positive classroom

environment despite these challenges align with recommendations for creating supportive learning environments for all students (Harris & Adams, 2024). Providing individualized support and making accommodations are crucial in maintaining inclusivity and ensuring that pregnant learners can continue their education without undue disruption (Clark et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The challenges of implementing inclusive education amid crisis, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reveal significant systemic issues within education systems globally. The lack of adequate training, insufficient resources, and poor parental involvement, exacerbated by the crisis, highlighted major gaps in educational preparedness. Teachers were thrust into managing inclusive education without sufficient crisis-specific training, leaving them underprepared for the dual challenges of maintaining educational quality and inclusivity in the face of sudden disruptions. The absence of comprehensive policy frameworks and training mechanisms has underscored the need for educational institutions to adopt more proactive and flexible approaches to crisis management.

Resource limitations, especially in middle and lower quintile schools, further compounded the difficulties of delivering inclusive education. These schools, already struggling with inadequate infrastructure, were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The digital divide, a lack of necessary learning tools, and the poor quality of existing infrastructure hampered effective online education, deepening inequalities among students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, the increase in teachers' workloads, driven by social distancing measures and smaller class sizes, resulted in heightened stress levels and burnout. Teachers had to take on additional duties, such as supporting learners with comorbidities or managing absenteeism, which further strained their ability to provide inclusive and effective education.

Parental involvement also emerged as a critical issue, with many parents either unwilling or unable to engage in their children's education during the pandemic. Poor communication, exacerbated by socio-economic challenges, hindered collaborative efforts between teachers and families, leaving students without the necessary support to succeed in a crisis setting. Additionally, compliance with health and safety protocols was difficult, with schools facing non-compliance issues that worsened without adequate support staff.

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