



## Barriers to Inclusive Education in Rural Settings: A Multi-Case Study of Educational Management Challenges

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### **Article History:**

*Received: January 2025*

*Revised: March 2026*

*Accepted: April 2026*

### **Keywords:**

*Inclusive Education, Rural Schools, Educational Management, Barriers*

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### **Abstract :**

This study aims to investigate the barriers to inclusive education in rural settings and to explore the educational management challenges that affect the implementation of inclusive practices. Employing a qualitative multi-case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis with teachers, school leaders, and relevant stakeholders. Thematic analysis was conducted using data condensation, display, and verification techniques to identify key patterns and insights. The findings reveal that infrastructure limitations, insufficient teacher training, and limited access to learning resources significantly hinder inclusive education. Educational management challenges, including leadership constraints and policy adaptation issues, further complicate classroom implementation. Socio-cultural factors, such as parental attitudes and peer acceptance, also play a critical role in shaping students' experiences and engagement. Teachers often rely on collaboration and adaptive strategies to address these challenges, but persistent gaps remain, highlighting systemic inequities in rural educational contexts. The study contributes to both theory and practice by providing a holistic understanding of the interplay between structural, managerial, and socio-cultural factors in inclusive education. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders to develop context-sensitive strategies that promote equity, teacher support, and student inclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is widely recognized as a fundamental component of equitable and sustainable educational systems. Ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities or socio-economic background, have access to quality education is critical for social cohesion and economic development. Rural communities, in particular, face unique challenges that hinder the full realization of inclusive education, including infrastructural deficiencies, limited trained personnel, and socio-cultural constraints. These barriers contribute to persistent educational disparities and reinforce cycles of marginalization for students with special needs. Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for achieving global educational targets, such as Sustainable Development Goal 4, but also for promoting social justice and equal opportunity within local communities. Therefore, understanding the specific obstacles to inclusive education in rural settings has broader societal relevance, as it informs policies, practices, and interventions that can foster equitable learning environments for all students (et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2024; Sims et al., 2025).

Despite global commitments to inclusive education, rural areas continue to struggle with systemic challenges that hinder implementation. These challenges include inadequate school facilities, limited availability of trained teachers, and insufficient learning resources. Teachers often lack the necessary knowledge and skills to accommodate students with diverse learning needs, while school leaders face administrative and policy constraints that complicate classroom management. Furthermore, rural communities frequently experience socio-cultural barriers, such as stigma and low parental engagement, which exacerbate educational inequities. These issues result in uneven educational outcomes, leaving students in rural contexts disproportionately disadvantaged compared to their urban counterparts. Recognizing these persistent problems highlights the urgent need for empirical research to identify and understand the specific barriers to inclusive education in rural areas, thereby providing a foundation for targeted interventions and policy recommendations (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025; Rashid & Shirima, 2024; Sari et al., 2022).

Field observations and preliminary interviews indicate that inclusive education policies are often inadequately implemented in rural schools. In many cases, classrooms remain overcrowded, learning materials are scarce, and teachers are unprepared to handle diverse student needs. Several teachers reported difficulties integrating students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms due to both practical constraints and limited professional development opportunities. Moreover, principals struggle to balance administrative responsibilities with the demands of implementing inclusive strategies effectively. These phenomena suggest a significant gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities, reflecting both structural and managerial challenges. The persistence of these issues in multiple rural contexts underscores the necessity of a comprehensive, multi-case investigation to capture the complexity of inclusive education practices and to identify actionable solutions for improving equity and learning outcomes (Motitswe, 2025; Sepadi, 2025b; Almulla et al., 2025).

Previous research has addressed various aspects of inclusive education, including teacher perceptions, leadership roles, and policy implementation. Studies have highlighted the importance of instructional leadership, professional development, and community engagement in supporting inclusive practices (Gechere et al., 2025; Massouti et al., 2023; Arteaga-Alcivar et al., 2025). Other studies have examined barriers such as infrastructural deficiencies, curriculum constraints, and socio-cultural factors affecting student participation (Ali et al., 2024; Quilabert et al., 2024). While these contributions provide valuable insights, they are often context-specific, focusing on urban schools or single-case analyses, and may not fully capture the complex interplay of factors in rural environments. This research situates itself within this gap, aiming to provide a multi-case perspective on rural inclusive education, thereby extending current understanding of both structural and human factors influencing successful implementation (Ajani, 2025; Sepadi, 2025a).

Furthermore, existing studies often overlook the integration of managerial, pedagogical, and socio-cultural dimensions in rural settings. While prior research emphasizes teacher training and policy compliance, little attention has been given to how school leadership, community norms, and resource allocation intersect to shape inclusive education outcomes. By synthesizing these dimensions, this study contributes to theory development by proposing a holistic framework that reflects the realities of rural schools. Addressing this research gap is crucial for informing more effective and context-sensitive interventions that can be scaled to similar rural environments, thus advancing both theoretical knowledge and practical applications in inclusive education (Roshid & Haider, 2024; Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025; Deroncele-Acosta, Á., & Ellis, 2024).

This study introduces novel insights by combining multi-case qualitative research with an integrated focus on educational management, teacher practices, and socio-cultural influences. Unlike previous research that examines single variables in isolation, the present

study investigates the dynamic interaction of these factors within rural contexts. The research emphasizes real-world applicability, aiming to identify practical strategies that can enhance inclusivity despite limited resources. By exploring both common barriers and site-specific adaptations, the study seeks to produce actionable recommendations for educators, policymakers, and communities. This approach not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides a foundation for designing interventions that are feasible, contextually relevant, and sustainable.

In response to the identified gaps, the central research problem addresses how rural schools can effectively implement inclusive education amidst structural, managerial, and socio-cultural constraints. Preliminary evidence suggests that a combination of leadership support, teacher collaboration, and community engagement may mitigate some of these challenges. The study argues that understanding the nuanced interplay of these factors is critical for both theoretical advancement and practical reform. By providing evidence-based insights into the barriers and facilitators of rural inclusive education, this research contributes to policy development, teacher training programs, and community awareness initiatives, ultimately aiming to promote equitable educational opportunities for all students in rural settings

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research employs a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore barriers to inclusive education in rural settings (Mishra & Dey, 2022; Sierpe et al., 2025). This design was selected because it allows an in-depth examination of educational management challenges across multiple rural schools, capturing the perspectives of teachers, principals, and other stakeholders. The qualitative approach provides rich, contextualized insights into the experiences and practices that quantitative methods alone might overlook, particularly when investigating complex social and educational phenomena (Bhangu et al., 2023; Denny & Weckesser, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023).

The study was conducted in rural schools in Pakuniran, chosen due to their unique challenges related to infrastructure, teacher capacity, and inclusive education implementation. The locations were selected purposively to represent varying socio-economic contexts and school types, allowing the research to capture diverse experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, enabling triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by educational practitioners in these rural environments.

Data analysis followed a systematic qualitative procedure, including data condensation, data display, and verification. Data were first transcribed and coded, with patterns and themes identified through iterative review and reduction. Findings were then organized into matrices and narrative summaries to clearly display the emerging insights. To ensure data credibility and trustworthiness, techniques such as member checking, peer debriefing, and cross-validation of multiple data sources were employed, enhancing the reliability and validity of the study's conclusions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### Barriers to Inclusive Education in Rural Schools

The study revealed several key barriers to inclusive education in the rural settings under investigation. Infrastructure limitations were frequently mentioned, including insufficient classroom space, lack of accessible facilities, and inadequate learning materials. One teacher from a rural primary school stated:

"Our classrooms are overcrowded, and we don't have special equipment for students with disabilities. It makes it very difficult to provide proper attention to all students."

Additionally, teacher capacity and training challenges emerged as significant obstacles. Many educators reported limited knowledge and skills to implement inclusive teaching strategies. A school principal noted:

"Many of our teachers have never received proper training in inclusive education. They try their best, but often they feel unprepared."

Limited access to technology and digital resources further constrained teaching, especially for students requiring individualized learning support. As one teacher explained:

"We don't have enough computers or internet access. Students who need extra support fall behind quickly."

### **Educational Management Challenges in Implementing Inclusion**

Principals and school administrators highlighted leadership and decision-making challenges in managing inclusive classrooms. Allocating resources efficiently, balancing teacher workloads, and addressing diverse student needs were reported as continuous difficulties. One principal mentioned:

"Even with the best intentions, managing inclusive classrooms with limited staff and resources is extremely challenging."

Policy and administrative constraints also affected implementation. School leaders often struggled to adapt national inclusive education policies to local conditions:

"The policy is clear on inclusion, but we lack the support and guidance on how to apply it in our schools."

### **Teacher Perspectives and Experiences**

Teachers expressed both challenges and adaptive strategies in their daily practice. Collaboration among teachers and support staff was identified as a key strategy to address classroom barriers. As one teacher explained:

"We often work together to divide attention and plan lessons that cater to all students, especially those with special needs."

However, many teachers reported feeling overburdened and underprepared, emphasizing the need for professional development:

"Without proper training and guidance, it's easy to feel overwhelmed when trying to support students with diverse needs."

### **Community and Socio-Cultural Influences**

Community attitudes and cultural perceptions were found to significantly influence the success of inclusive education. Parental support varied widely; some parents actively engaged in their children's learning, while others were skeptical of inclusive practices. One teacher shared:

"Some parents don't understand why their children have to learn alongside students with disabilities. This sometimes creates resistance."

Peer interactions were also crucial. Inclusive classrooms faced challenges of social acceptance, where students with special needs often experienced exclusion or misunderstanding:

"Some students struggle to interact with peers who are different, and teachers have to intervene frequently."

### **Comparison Across Case Studies**

A comparison of the multiple rural schools revealed both common patterns and contextual differences. All schools faced resource limitations and teacher capacity issues, but specific challenges varied based on community engagement, leadership styles, and available infrastructure. One best practice identified was the formation of teacher support teams, which helped share strategies and reduce individual teacher burden:

"By working in teams, we can plan and adjust lessons more effectively, ensuring that no student is left behind."

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight persistent barriers to inclusive education in rural settings, particularly regarding infrastructure limitations and teacher capacity, which align closely with previous studies emphasizing similar challenges in resource-constrained environments (Elvira et al., 2024; Sepadi, 2025a). Both studies underscore the critical role of school facilities and trained human resources in supporting students with special needs, suggesting that the lack of such resources is a systemic issue rather than an isolated problem. However, this research also identified unique socio-cultural factors, such as community resistance and peer acceptance, which were less emphasized in earlier literature, indicating contextual variations in rural educational settings (Yu et al., 2024; Quilabert et al., 2024). These findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of inclusive education by highlighting the intersection of structural, managerial, and cultural determinants in shaping student access and participation.

The study's examination of educational management challenges, particularly leadership and policy adaptation, resonates with prior research on instructional leadership and school governance in inclusive settings (Gechere et al., 2025; Massouti et al., 2023). Principals' struggles to allocate resources and implement policies effectively mirror findings from these studies, which highlight the importance of strong leadership in facilitating inclusive practices. Unlike previous literature that often focused on urban or well-resourced contexts, the current research provides empirical evidence of how leadership limitations are exacerbated in rural schools, reinforcing the need for context-specific management models.

Teacher perspectives revealed both practical adaptations and persistent difficulties in implementing inclusive classrooms, confirming patterns reported in other regional studies (Motitswe, 2025; Kaur & Salian, 2024). Teachers' reliance on peer collaboration and adaptive strategies echoes earlier findings on the significance of teacher teamwork and professional development in overcoming barriers. However, this study extends the literature by emphasizing the emotional and cognitive burdens faced by teachers in rural environments, highlighting the dual challenge of managing high workloads while addressing diverse student needs. Theoretically, this underscores the need to integrate teacher well-being and capacity into models of inclusive education implementation.

The influence of community and socio-cultural factors observed in this study also supports prior evidence from rural and low-resource contexts, where parental involvement and cultural perceptions significantly affect inclusive education outcomes (Ali et al., 2024; Rashid & Shirima, 2024). Community support, or the lack thereof, directly impacts student

engagement and social acceptance, indicating that inclusive education is not solely a school-based issue. Practically, this implies that interventions must extend beyond the school to include parental education, community engagement programs, and awareness campaigns to foster an inclusive culture.

Comparative analysis across multiple case studies revealed both common barriers and context-specific adaptations, confirming findings from other multi-site research in rural educational contexts (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025; Roshid & Haider, 2024). Common patterns, such as limited access to technology and materials, suggest systemic policy and resource gaps, while variations in leadership styles, teacher collaboration, and community engagement highlight the importance of local adaptation. Theoretically, this reinforces the argument for flexible, context-sensitive frameworks of inclusive education that account for both universal barriers and localized strategies.

Finally, the implications of these findings for practice are substantial. Schools and policymakers must prioritize resource allocation, teacher training, and leadership support while actively engaging communities to improve inclusive education outcomes (Ajani, 2025; Sepadi, 2025b). At the theoretical level, the study contributes to a more nuanced model of inclusive education implementation in rural contexts, integrating structural, managerial, and socio-cultural dimensions. Practically, it suggests actionable strategies, including teacher collaboration teams, context-specific leadership interventions, and community awareness programs, which can be scaled or adapted to similar rural educational settings globally.

## CONCLUSION

The study highlights several key findings regarding inclusive education in rural settings. The most important lesson is that barriers to inclusion are multifaceted, encompassing infrastructural limitations, teacher capacity, educational management challenges, and socio-cultural influences. Effective inclusive practices require not only adequate resources and training but also strong leadership, teacher collaboration, and active community engagement. These insights underscore that promoting equity in rural education involves addressing both systemic and contextual factors, emphasizing the need for holistic, practical strategies that consider local realities. The research provides evidence that, even under constrained conditions, adaptive strategies and collaborative efforts can significantly improve student participation and learning outcomes.

This study makes a valuable scholarly contribution by offering a comprehensive, multi-case perspective on the interplay of structural, managerial, and socio-cultural factors in rural inclusive education. However, the research is limited to qualitative insights from a specific set of rural schools, which may affect generalizability. Future research could expand the scope by including longitudinal studies, quantitative measures of student outcomes, or comparative studies across regions and countries. Such investigations would deepen understanding of effective strategies for inclusive education and further inform policy and practice in diverse rural contexts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who contributed to the completion of this study. Special appreciation is extended to the participating school principals for their willingness to share their experiences and insights. The authors also acknowledge the support provided by colleagues and academic mentors whose constructive feedback strengthened the development of this research. Finally, gratitude is conveyed to the affiliated institution for providing academic support throughout the research process.

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