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From Diversity to Belonging: Leadership Strategies for Inclusive Schools

Udu Jafari Kayamba , Emmanuel Amofo Kotoko

JW Saints Technical College, South Africa

Abstract

South African schools increasingly serve learners from diverse cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. However, the presence of diversity does not automatically create an environment in which all learners feel valued, respected and able to participate fully. This study explores how school leadership can foster belonging and strengthen inclusive practices in selected secondary schools in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The problem identified is the gap between the principle of inclusive education and its practical implementation, particularly with respect to language barriers, cultural differences, limited teacher preparation and insufficient support for diverse learners. A qualitative research design was employed within an interpretive framework. Twelve teachers from three mainstream secondary schools in Gauteng Province were purposively selected because of their experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Data were collected through semistructured individual interviews and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and strategies for strengthening inclusion. The findings indicate that effective inclusion requires more than policy compliance. Teachers highlighted the importance of culturally responsive teaching, professional development, open communication, respectful relationships and leadership support. The findings further suggest that learners are more likely to participate and engage when schools recognise their cultural and linguistic identities and create opportunities for meaningful interaction. However, inadequate teacher preparation, language challenges and limited institutional support continue to restrict the development of genuinely inclusive environments. The study recommends that school leaders strengthen teacher development programmes, promote culturally responsive pedagogies, support multilingual approaches, involve learners and families in decision-making, and establish school-wide practices that promote equity and participation. These strategies can help Gauteng schools move beyond simply accommodating differences towards creating environments where every learner experiences dignity, recognition and belonging.

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