

Beyond Multicultural Education: Integrating Intercultural Education and Ethical Leadership for Inclusive South African Schools

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Abstract. Despite numerous post-apartheid policy reforms, South Africa's education system continues to grapple with deep-rooted inequalities that disproportionately affect historically marginalized communities. Although multicultural education has been promoted as a solution, it has not sufficiently addressed these disparities. The study explores how the combination of intercultural education and ethical leadership can transform South African schools into truly inclusive environments. It identifies a research gap in the limited exploration of how intercultural education, when combined with ethical leadership, can drive systemic transformation, an area overlooked in existing studies on multicultural education. Drawing on Banks's Comprehensive Multicultural and Intercultural Education Theory, Shields's Transformative Leadership Theory, and Ainscow's Inclusive Education Theory, the study employs a conceptual research methodology to combine educational research findings (1994-2024) and policy documents with theoretical frameworks to establish an educational transformation model. Findings highlight the need to move beyond superficial cultural recognition, foster ethical leadership for social justice, and create robust support structures to sustain change. Evidence indicates that combining intercultural education with ethical leadership results in enhanced student performance at schools, particularly for disadvantaged learners. This research advances inclusive education discourse by proposing a framework that unites intercultural education principles with ethical leadership, offering evidence-based strategies for educational leaders and policymakers seeking systemic transformation in the post-apartheid context.

Keywords: multicultural education, intercultural education, ethical leadership, inclusive schooling, South Africa

Introduction

The lasting impact of apartheid continues to generate educational disparities among South African learners, which remain evident in achievement gaps that follow racial and socioeconomic divisions (Soudien, 2020; Jansen, 2019). National assessment results show educational outcomes vary significantly between racial groups, leading to students from Black and Coloured communities facing larger educational attainment gaps than their wealthier peers (Department of Basic Education, 2023; Spaull & Kotze, 2015). Students attending under-resourced schools in South Africa perform worse than their peers from wealthier institutions (Amnesty International, 2020). Inequalities in educational access and outcomes persist due to differences in resource distribution (Fataar, 2018). Even after several policy changes, educational disparities can be seen in quantifiable indicators, such as literacy levels, math abilities, completion rates, and higher education accessibility, primarily impacting historically marginalized groups (Spaull & Kotze, 2015).

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The South African education system has undergone several policy changes since 1994 to address educational inequalities, but their effectiveness is debatable (Christie, 2020; Fataar, 2018; Langeveldt, 2024). Despite attempts to establish inclusive teaching methods, fundamental educational disparities persist (Christie, 2020). These inequalities manifest in various ways, with many rural schools experiencing a lack of basic teaching and learning facilities (Amnesty International, 2020). The national Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (2011), known as CAPS, promotes inclusive education, yet does not integrate intercultural education or recognize its vital role in resolving systemic challenges (Spaull & Jansen, 2019; Meier & Hartell, 2009). Vandeyar's (2010) study indicates various educational institutions utilize distinct approaches to manage diversity and inclusion. According to Vandeyar (2010), diversity initiatives tend to be limited to cultural events and programs, but fail to address deeper systemic power imbalances and structural injustices. Current diversity management approaches fail to remedy basic inequalities because they lack comprehensive and integrated solutions (Meier & Hartell, 2009).

This study aims to explore how the integration of intercultural education and ethical leadership can transform South African schools into truly inclusive environments that move beyond the limitations of current multicultural education approaches. Specifically, the research seeks to identify the gaps in existing multicultural education practices, examine how intercultural education can address these limitations, and investigate the role of ethical leadership in fostering systemic transformation within the post-apartheid educational context. By combining Banks's Comprehensive Multicultural and Intercultural Education Theory, Shields's Transformative Leadership Theory, and Ainscow's Inclusive Education Theory, this study develops a conceptual framework that offers evidence-based strategies for educational leaders and policymakers committed to achieving educational equity and social justice in South African schools.

Problem Statement

Despite apartheid having ended, ongoing educational issues are stubbornly embedded in the system (Sayed & Soudien, 2005; Christie, 2020). Three decades of democracy in South Africa have not eliminated gaps in educational access and equity issues (Spaull & Jansen, 2019). Educational disparities remain evident across racial, economic, and geographic lines, which demonstrate the ongoing effects of apartheid-era policies on the educational system.

Multiple interrelated problems exist: Curriculum frameworks tend to be disconnected from students' real-world experiences, resulting in poor academic performance, especially in underfunded schools (Christie, 2020). Language policies create substantial learning obstacles because students learn through a language different from their native tongue, which affects their cognitive growth and understanding (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016). Historically marginalized communities remain excluded from educational leadership roles, which sustains systemic inequality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

We must pursue transformational strategies that tackle deep-rooted inequalities instead of mere surface-level diversity programs. Educational evaluations and academic studies reveal that achievement gaps remain connected to socioeconomic backgrounds (Spaull & Jansen, 2019). The lived experiences of marginalized communities, as documented in qualitative studies, align with the numerical evidence of inequality in education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Structural obstacles add layers of complexity to these issues, which block the success of reform implementation.

Research Questions

Main Research Question

How can the integration of intercultural education and ethical leadership help create inclusive schools in South Africa beyond the scope of multicultural education?

Sub-Research Questions

1. What are the limitations of current multicultural education in South African schools?
2. How can intercultural education address the limitations of multicultural education in South African schools?
3. What role can ethical leadership play when combined with intercultural education to foster inclusive schools in South Africa?

Theoretical Framework

This study has three key theoretical lenses: Banks's Comprehensive Multicultural and Intercultural Education Theory, Shields's Transformative Leadership Theory, and Ainscow's Inclusive Education Theory.

Banks's Comprehensive Multicultural and Intercultural Education Theory

Banks (1995) advocates for an educational framework that transcends superficial multicultural approaches. He emphasizes the importance of integrating multiple cultural viewpoints throughout educational programs. His Comprehensive Multicultural and Intercultural Education Theory highlights three key areas: curriculum transformation, teacher readiness, and institutional policies. These framework elements work toward creating true cross-cultural comprehension. Banks argues that simply acknowledging diversity does not fulfill educational goals. Education should help students develop critical awareness. By adopting this approach, students can engage meaningfully with different cultures (Banks, 1995). Recent studies build on Banks's ideas. According to Shields (2014), educational knowledge structures must be redesigned to achieve fair treatment for all. This view supports Banks's belief that multicultural education needs to evolve beyond basic inclusion efforts. Hajisoteriou and Angelides (2013) conducted research to understand how school leaders perceive intercultural education. The researchers emphasize leadership strategies which build deeper cultural understanding. Their findings back Banks's (1995) claim that real intercultural engagement requires schools to undergo transformation.

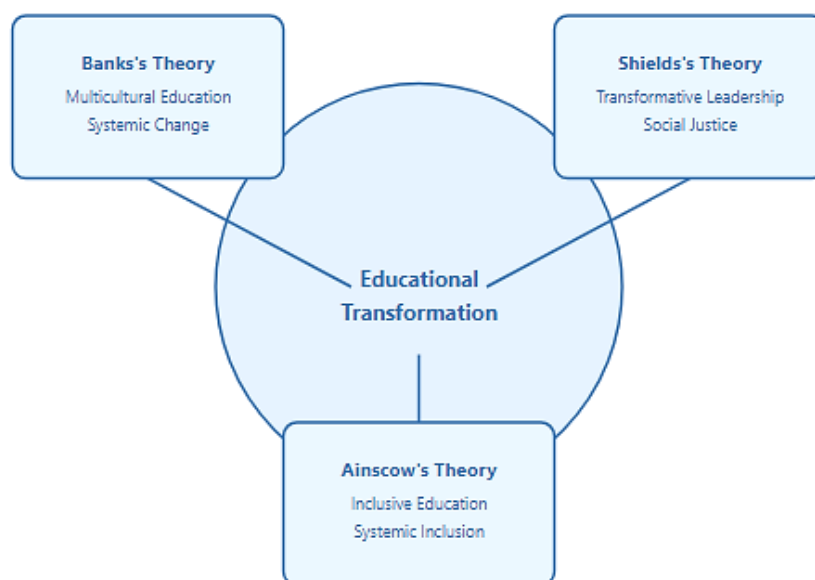
Shields's Transformative Leadership Theory

The Transformative Leadership Theory developed by Carolyn Shields in 2010 provides an educational leadership model that seeks to eliminate inequities and advance social justice (Shields, 2010). The theory promotes equitable outcomes through ethical responsibility and democratic involvement, while supporting school leaders who confront cultural and socioeconomic complexities (Shields, 2010). Shields' 2014 work builds on her earlier theory by stating that intentional actions combined with critical reflection are essential to tackle systemic inequalities and achieve educational equity (Shields, 2014). According to Shields and Hesbol (2019), transformative leadership principles direct leaders toward establishing educational settings that embrace diversity and ensure equity. Educational leaders who master transformative leadership skills and learn to implement social justice can build inclusive educational systems (Opiyo, 2019). Moreover, transformative leadership plays a crucial role in building educational systems that encourage intercultural inclusion (Opiyo, 2019).

Ainscow's Inclusive Education Theory

The core objective of the Inclusive Education Theory (Ainscow, 2005) is to eliminate educational participation barriers, which creates equal learning opportunities for all students. Ainscow identifies strong educator partnerships, supportive educational policies, and effective teacher development as essential elements for inclusive education (Ainscow, 2005). In the South African context, educational inclusion depends on effective administrative systems, resource management and cultural elements within schools (Ainscow, 2005). Recent studies support his ideas. Opiyo (2019) maintains that the implementation of Ainscow's systemic change theory into inclusive practices demands authoritative leadership for achieving genuine inclusivity. The development of inclusive educational environments depends greatly on inclusive leadership (Bourke & Titus, 2020). Educational transformation through systemic inclusion owes much to Ainscow's framework.

These three theoretical frameworks provide a complementary lens for understanding how intercultural education and ethical leadership can work synergistically to foster inclusive schools in South Africa. Banks's Comprehensive Multicultural and Intercultural Education Theory, Shields's Transformative Leadership Theory, and Ainscow's Inclusive Education Theory each contribute essential perspectives to this integrated approach. Figure 1 illustrates the integration of these frameworks and their interconnected components in addressing educational transformation.



*Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework for Educational Transformation in South African Schools
(Banks, 1995; Shields, 2010; Ainscow, 2005)*

As seen in Figure 1, these three frameworks explain how intercultural education and ethical leadership work together to foster inclusive schools. When combined, multiple theoretical frameworks can create an inclusive model which seeks to resolve educational disparities in South Africa.

Methodology

This study uses a conceptual research methodology. Jabareen's (2009) methodological framework demonstrates the effectiveness of conceptual analysis by examining complex ideas across different academic disciplines. Using this approach, the research explores how various theoretical perspectives can illuminate both the challenges and opportunities associated with

integrating intercultural education and ethical leadership practices in South Africa. Figure 2 illustrates the systematic conceptual research approach employed in this study, outlining the key stages from literature review through to framework development.

A comprehensive review of existing literature is a key element of the research design. The study assesses components of multicultural education, while analyzing intercultural education and ethical leadership principles. The research methodology facilitates the examination of intercultural education's connection with ethical leadership in post-apartheid South African schools.

The study gathered data from diverse sources, such as academic journals, books, policy documents and additional scholarly resources. Hart's (2018) selection criteria guided the choice of source material, emphasizing relevance, methodological rigor, and theoretical contribution. Through an extensive literature review spanning from 1994 to 2024, the study examines scholarly perspectives on multicultural education, intercultural education, and ethical leadership. The authors performed a search through ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar using terms such as "multicultural education," "intercultural education," "ethical leadership," "inclusive schooling," and "South Africa" to collect current studies and diverse perspectives.

The study examines educational standards at both national and provincial level, focusing on curriculum guidelines and teacher development resources. It employs a systematic content analysis of educational policies and teaching materials to assess how ethical leadership training is integrated with intercultural educational development within South Africa's educational policy framework. Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis served as the analytical framework. The research team followed its structure process: reviewing the data, conducting initial coding, identifying key themes, and producing the final report based on thematic interpretation. This approach enabled the researchers to extract core themes from the educational literature, highlighting the interplay between curriculum diversity, teacher empowerment, and inclusive leadership in schools.

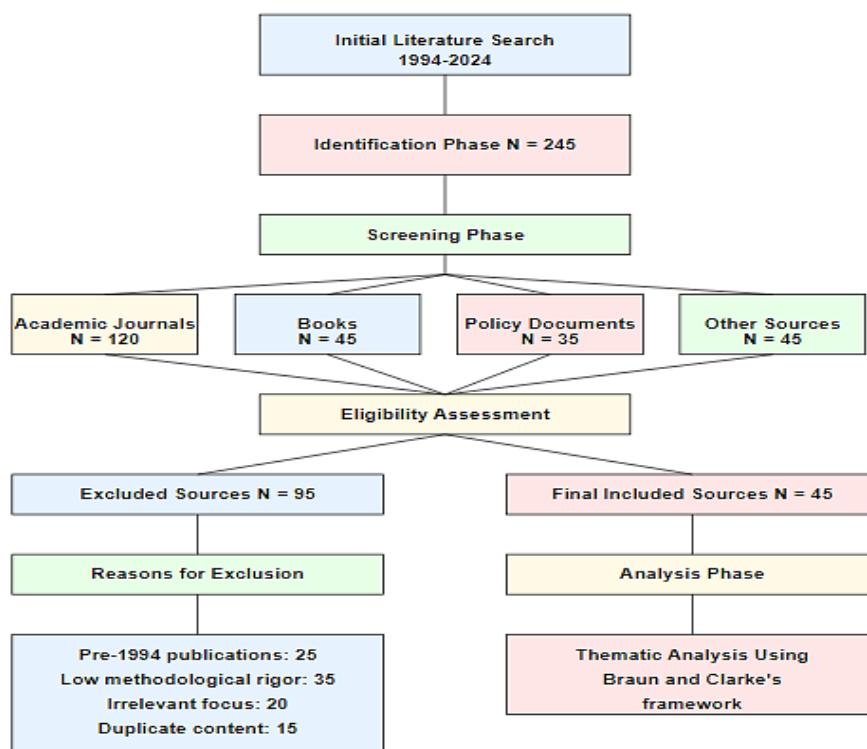


Figure 2. *Conceptual research approach (the authors)*

Ethical foundations remain essential for conceptual research, even when no human participants are directly involved. The research exhibited its dedication to academic honesty and property protection through exact source citations, following the American Psychological Association (2020) standards. The study uses strict objectivity and transparency standards with thorough procedures to minimize analysis bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research collected data from academic books and articles, while consulting policy documents and various scholarly materials. Furthermore, the study acknowledges its limitations: The research restricts its findings to South Africa due to its reliance on secondary sources, which limits the demonstration of the full range of theoretical applications (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

The study uses various methods to ensure its findings are validated and reliable. For instance, it applies triangulation to confirm the accuracy of literature sources and uses thematic-analysis peer review to ensure rigor, while also conducting external audits of research findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The employed methods ensured a transparent research process, which yielded reliable and consistent results.

For this study, we analyzed educational policy documents, curriculum guidelines, and training materials. Our analysis reveals how intercultural education principles merge with ethical leadership frameworks, according to Bowen's 2009 study. The research team applied methods presented by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) to examine national and provincial educational policies, school implementation documents, and teacher training materials. The method enabled us to evaluate how educational policies and practices influence learning outcomes. Figure 3 presents the structured thematic analysis framework that guided the systematic identification and interpretation of key themes throughout this research.

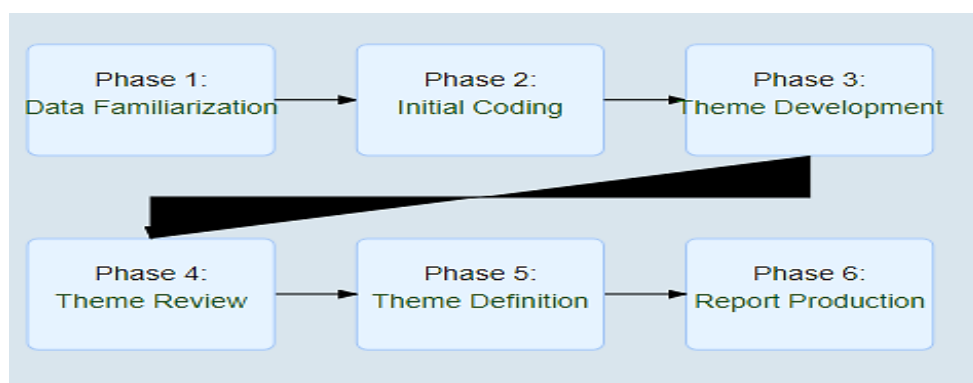


Figure 3. Thematic analysis framework (the authors)

The study employs thematic analysis of multiple sources to uncover critical insights into the application of theory to enhance inclusive education practices in South Africa, contributing to reforms aimed at better serving diverse learners in the post-apartheid era.

Results

The literature review examines three key areas: It looks at how multicultural education functions and its limitations within South Africa, while exploring intercultural education's transformative possibilities and ethical leadership's contribution to inclusive educational settings.

Multicultural Education

Multicultural education research often highlights cultural celebrations, while overlooking deeper issues of institutional discrimination. In post-apartheid South Africa, multicultural education is promoted as a means to address historical educational inequalities and serve the country's diverse population (Vandeyar, 2010). Meier and Hartell (2009) describe it as an approach that values cultural diversity and aims to create inclusive learning environments for all learners. Its chief objective is to enhance understanding and expand opportunities across ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups (Soudien, 2020).

Implementing multicultural education in South Africa post-1994 has faced numerous obstacles. As a key policy document, CAPS supports inclusive education in principle, but lacks explicit support for multicultural education. Spaull and Jansen (2019) confirm ongoing educational disparities that persist in disadvantaged communities due to apartheid's enduring legacy, such as divides in race, economic status, and geographical location (Soudien, 2020; Jansen, 2019).

Multicultural education is one means to address educational inequalities, but its success remains under scrutiny. Soudien (2020) and Fataar (2018) observe that initiatives tend to target events such as cultural festivals, instead of tackling fundamental problems like racism and inequality. Multicultural education helps increase awareness between different racial groups, but fails to correct systemic power imbalances, according to Fataar & Subreenduth (2023).

The confines of multicultural education become evident through educational performance metrics. According to Christie (2020), current strategies have made minimal progress in bridging these educational gaps.

The profound mismatch between instruction language and students' native languages represents a fundamental barrier to effective learning. Most students face education in a language that was not their mother tongue. This language disconnect creates multiple challenges: It obstructs fundamental understanding of academic material, while simultaneously reducing class participation and academic confidence, which further perpetuate educational disparity. Students who learn through non-native languages achieve significantly lower comprehension scores than those who learn in their mother tongue (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016). Educational systems that prioritize English and Afrikaans send a message to students that indigenous languages lack academic worth, which reinforces historical power structures and psychological learning obstacles (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016).

Teacher training also faces challenges. Programs featuring cultural awareness modules frequently fail to address racial discrimination and social inequity, according to Barnett and Teise (2024). Research about diversity programs demonstrates mixed outcomes (Van der Berg et al., 2016). There has been a measure of improvement in cultural representation and communication at schools, yet persistent challenges, such as racial bias, remain unresolved (Vandeyar, 2010).

South African multicultural education faces significant difficulties because of the "hidden curriculum," which includes unwritten and unofficial lessons about values and perspectives students learn unintentionally. Fataar (2018) and Soudien (2020) argue that institutional routines, educational resources, and teacher expectations operate together to subtly encourage predominant cultural values through the implicit curriculum. Fataar (2018) has shown how classroom seating arrangements, as well as teacher attention practices and assessment methods, unintentionally benefited students from dominant cultural backgrounds. Soudien (2020) argues that educational materials labeled as "multicultural" mainly emphasized Western knowledge systems, while treating non-Western knowledge as less important. The hidden curriculum supports established power structures and social divisions, which oppose multicultural education goals, despite the fact that official educational policies support equality and inclusion.

The persistence of hidden curricula demonstrates why standard multicultural education methods fail to generate substantial improvements in student learning results.

To achieve an effective multicultural education in South Africa, a framework needs to be established that integrates social justice principles with critical pedagogy (Soudien, 2020; Vandeyar, 2010). Through the critical pedagogy framework established by Paulo Freire and applied to South African teacher education by Langeveldt, Pietersen and Van Wyk (2023), students gain the necessary skills to identify and oppose established power structures. Classroom settings should support students in evaluating knowledge-production methods and identifying curricular prejudices, while building their capabilities to confront systemic disparities. Vandeyar's (2010) research in desegregated South African schools revealed that teachers who implemented critical pedagogical strategies enabled students to thoroughly investigate diversity issues and understand structural inequality during textbook analysis and discussions about power dynamics. Critical pedagogy recognizes cultural distinctions, while seeking to transform power structures that preserve the status quo.

Despite these challenges, some initiatives show promise. According to Vandeyar (2010), teacher programs centered on social justice lead to classrooms where inclusivity flourishes. Similarly, student experiences and community involvement have been shown to enhance multicultural education (Van der Berg et al., 2016). To create a unified strategy for educational transformation, policymakers, school leaders, and teachers must broaden their current efforts. South Africa's post-apartheid educational system has improved cultural diversity understanding through multicultural education, but still faces challenges in delivering equal educational results for every student. According to Soudien (2020), to transform South African education demands a deep reevaluation of multicultural educational practices within our post-apartheid environment, rather than just surface-level reforms.

Intercultural Education

Studies demonstrate positive effects of intercultural education programs for both students and teachers. South African education has recently started shifting its focus to intercultural educational methods. The transition extends beyond existing multicultural approaches because it delves into foundational and systemic problems. This educational approach strives to repair historical inadequacies, while at the same time creating improved communication between different cultural communities (Meier & Hartell, 2009). Whereas multicultural education focuses on representation, interdisciplinary education requires student engagement and analyzing existing power structures.

Research has shown that intercultural educational practices are advantageous for both students and teachers. Banks (2016) explains that this educational approach creates communication links between cultural and linguistic groups, which lead to a deeper understanding from multiple perspectives. Using intercultural educational methods, learners develop the ability to examine how historical and societal factors, such as colonialism and apartheid, lead to educational disparities (Soudien, 2020). On balance, intercultural education proves more effective than multicultural education for tackling inequality because it examines how power structures interact with cultural dynamics inside educational systems.

Recent educational studies demonstrate that South Africa's educational system is moving away from traditional multicultural methods toward new intercultural strategies designed to address deep-rooted systemic challenges. Following a more strategic approach, educational systems can address former limitations, while promoting authentic interactions between diverse cultural groups (Meier & Hartell, 2009). Multicultural education centers on representation and recognition, while intercultural education requires active cross-cultural engagement and analysis of power structures.

Undoubtedly, there are hurdles to implementing intercultural education. Meier and Hartell (2009) identify the main challenges as inadequate teacher-training resources, resistance to change, and persistent socioeconomic inequalities. Inadequate funding for teacher development prevents educators from effectively applying intercultural teaching methods (Van der Berg et al., 2016). Effects from the country's divided past continue to influence existing institutional frameworks and educational systems, with these effects compounding current problems.

Despite intercultural education facing numerous barriers, educators continue to innovate with creative solutions. Meier and Hartell (2009) show that teacher mentorship programs and community partnerships generate positive results when supported by equity and inclusion-based policy changes. They assert that achieving intercultural educational goals requires both steady political support and the strategic allocation of resources. Despite ongoing challenges, they argue that effective progress is attainable when all necessary elements unite.

South Africa must allocate resources to teacher-education programs and build institutional support, while encouraging community involvement with intercultural teaching approaches. Deploying this strategy will go some way to address fundamental disparities present in educational systems. Meier and Hartell (2009) state that ongoing transformation requires unwavering commitment, adequate resources, and periodic assessments. Educational reforms generate significant progress toward educational equity that coincides with social justice by following these outlined steps.

Ethical Leadership

Educational leadership in South Africa relies on fairness, integrity, and social justice principles for managing power dynamics and cultural differences (Tapala, 2021). The lasting effects of apartheid and present-day socioeconomic inequalities create a vital need for ethical leadership to address institutional wrongs and promote inclusive practices (Pietersen et al., 2025). Pietersen and Langeveldt (2025) further show that gender-based violence remains embedded in South African education, underscoring that ethical leadership must actively confront discrimination in all its forms. Leaders with strong ethical values need to address these issues actively to build an education system that functions both equitably and justly (Engelbrecht, 2005).

Trust, respect, and transparency are fundamental components of ethical leadership (Tapala, 2021). These core values shape school culture and stakeholder relationships, which play a pivotal role in breaking down historical and systemic inequalities (Buchanan, 2021). Trust allows for the restoration of damaged relationships and creates unified goals (Buchanan, 2021), while respect toward cultural diversity guarantees that learners feel valued (Connerley & Pedersen, 2005). Transparency fosters accountability, which acts as a necessary mechanism for resolving power imbalances (Tatan & Davoudi, 2019). Effective ethical leadership surpasses traditional management methods by actively working to eliminate inequalities through the fair distribution of resources and inclusive decision-making processes (Connolly, James, & Fertig, 2017).

Meaningful school reform in South Africa requires the integration of ethical leadership with intercultural education (Engelbrecht, 2005). Ethical leaders need to develop the requisite skills to overcome systemic barriers and establish inclusive learning spaces that support students from varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (McLaughlin et al., 1999). Ethical leaders who build a respectful atmosphere, encourage intercultural conversation, and oppose discrimination use these approaches to bring about meaningful change (Buchanan, 2021). Culturally responsive educational materials and teaching methods make education available to every student, while honoring South Africa's diverse cultural background (Movchan & Zarishniak, 2017).

While ethical leadership offers important advantages for South African schools, it faces development and implementation difficulties due to restricted leadership resources and organizational resistance to change (Connerley & Pedersen, 2005). School leaders can address these challenges by implementing policy changes and increasing resources dedicated to leadership development, while establishing supportive networks for administrative staff (Tapala, 2021). The development of ethical leadership requires collaboration between schools, communities, and policymakers to establish supportive environments (Connolly, James, & Fertig, 2017).

Framework for Implementing Intercultural Education and Ethical Leadership

This framework integrates intercultural education and ethical leadership practices into South African schools, drawing on research that explores post-apartheid challenges and the urgent need for transformative change (Fataar & Subreenduth, 2023; Meier & Hartell, 2009). Advancing meaningful progress in South African education requires deep, systemic transformation rather than superficial or incremental improvements. Fataar and Subreenduth (2023) argue that effective curriculum reform requires the integration of various viewpoints, as well as the transformation of existing educational materials and teaching strategies. To prevent the continuation of Eurocentric narratives, we need to elevate marginalized voices by incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). Nkosi and Mashaba (2025) posit that IKS has an irreplaceable value as it guides, restores, and reshapes our perspectives about fundamental historical, social and environmental issues. According to Meier and Hartell (2009), South African educational systems must redefine valuable knowledge to represent student diversity and historical backgrounds.

Teacher development is another critical aspect to consider if students are to benefit from culturally responsive teaching (Langeveldt & Pietersen, 2023). According to Geneva Gay (2010), culturally responsive teaching allows students to integrate their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences with their individual perspectives, which improves educational relevance and effectiveness. This educational model functions to actively recognize student cultural backgrounds, which aids in understanding diversity, while addressing systemic inequalities (Langeveldt et al., 2023). Professional development programs need to exceed conventional teaching methods by educating teachers on recognizing their biases and establishing inclusive classroom atmospheres (Barnett & Teise, 2024). Teacher preparation programs must develop educators who establish meaningful cross-cultural student interactions and tackle systemic educational differences.

Successful policy creation and implementation require the development of support structures that promote intercultural educational methods alongside ethical leadership practices. Langeveldt et al. (2023) suggest that educational policies should focus on creating an inclusive school culture that goes beyond simple resource distribution. South Africa's educational policies need to tackle structural inequalities to provide equal access to educational resources and opportunities for everyone. To accomplish this, Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2020) identify effective ethical leadership which combines strong conflict-resolution abilities with coordinated decision-making, teamwork, and systems-thinking capabilities. Educational institutions need this kind of leadership to implement social justice and equity effectively.

Within this framework, community engagement operates as a fundamental component. Meier and Hartell (2009) stress that community participation plays a vital role in the success of educational reform. School curriculum development depends on active parental involvement, which should include community feedback and consistent, transparent communication between schools and the surrounding community. Through school–community partnerships, educational

institutions gain valuable insights into community needs by involving affected groups in shaping educational approaches.

According to Sefotho (2018), educational systems require comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess both community participation levels and reform success. Research on student achievement in schools and community participation environments requires evaluation systems that incorporate both quantitative analysis and qualitative narratives.

Multiple learning components unite to create a unified educational framework which transforms educational systems. This method achieves inclusive learning by blending intercultural training approaches with ethical leadership, which advances beyond conventional multicultural educational systems (Langeveldt et al., 2023). The educational system succeeds when dedicated teachers, policymakers, parents, and community members create fair and inclusive practices that reflect South Africa's social and cultural diversity. Figure 4 presents a comprehensive conceptual framework that synthesizes the key components of intercultural education and ethical leadership necessary for creating inclusive schools in South Africa. The framework illustrates how curriculum transformation, teacher development, policy implementation, community engagement, and monitoring mechanisms work together to achieve systemic change.

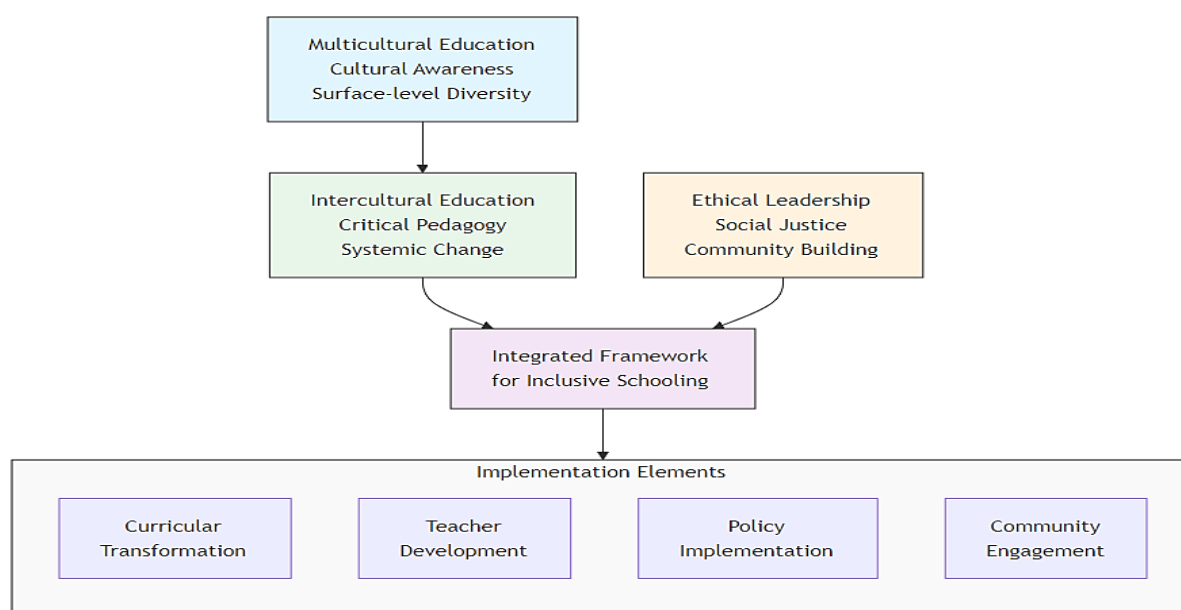


Figure 4. A conceptual framework for inclusive schooling in South Africa (the authors)

As illustrated in figure 4, the proposed framework represents a comprehensive approach to educational transformation in South Africa. The framework demonstrates that achieving inclusive schooling requires the simultaneous implementation of multiple interconnected strategies: transforming curriculum to incorporate diverse knowledge systems, developing teachers' capacity for culturally responsive pedagogy, establishing supportive policies that promote equity, fostering meaningful community engagement, and implementing robust monitoring and evaluation systems. This integrated approach moves beyond superficial diversity initiatives by addressing the systemic inequalities that persist in post-apartheid education. Successful implementation of this framework depends on ethical leadership that champions social justice, adequate resource allocation, and sustained commitment from all stakeholders. By combining intercultural education principles with ethical leadership practices,

South African schools can create truly inclusive learning environments that honor diversity while promoting equitable outcomes for all learners.

Discussion

This article explores the implementation of intercultural educational methods alongside ethical leadership principles in South African schools. The research reveals complex interactions and barriers that stand in the way of developing inclusive learning environments. Studies conducted show educational progress, but highlight ongoing difficulties in realizing complete transformation (Spaull & Kotze, 2015). South African schools can demonstrate successful diversity management by combining multicultural and intercultural educational approaches. An intercultural educational approach brings about more meaningful change in schools because although multicultural education promotes cultural diversity, it fails to address systemic power imbalances and structural inequalities.

Educational institutions often implement hidden curricula that uphold dominant cultural values and marginalize students from minority backgrounds. Multicultural education alone cannot address South Africa's educational challenges and social imbalances because they originate from colonialism and apartheid's long-lasting impact. Intercultural education aims to break down existing power structures through the development of authentic understanding and mutual respect between individuals. These methods result in success when schools possess adequate resources and leaders show strong dedication.

Educational institutions struggle to implement these programs due to resource constraints and staff members who lack adequate preparation (Fataar & Subreenduth, 2023). Ethical leadership establishes the essential foundation required for effective integration of diverse cultural approaches. Recent research shows that principals who focus on social justice and systemic transformation achieve higher student retention rates among traditionally underrepresented populations. Ethical school management in South Africa results in superior inclusion practices that improve student retention and academic success (Edwards, Schmidt, & Mestry, 2023). Appropriate training is essential for principals to effectively handle complex cultural and social justice issues.

School leaders acknowledge they are not well-equipped to manage intercultural conflicts, which highlights the need for targeted professional development programs. The proposed framework has several shortcomings. The framework assumes a level of resource availability in many rural South African schools, which is not always the case. Recent surveys indicate that rural schools still lack the fundamental infrastructure necessary for executing intercultural programs effectively (Van der Berg et al., 2016).

The proposed framework faces resistance from established educational hierarchies because it requires significant systemic changes. When combined with intercultural education and ethical leadership, multicultural education shows potential to effect change in schools, but needs to be adjusted according to specific contextual needs. Success is built on effective leadership, sufficient resources, and community support.

The study exposes existing implementation strategies as having multiple weaknesses. Insufficient teacher training, limited resources, and inconsistent policy enforcement hinder the success of intercultural education. Research shows that many schools do not provide sufficient professional development for intercultural education (Van der Berg et al., 2016). The gap between theoretical frameworks and their practical implementation calls for enhanced support structures and more effective resource-allocation techniques.

Implementing educational transformation in South African schools demands a thorough analysis of existing frameworks to create actionable implementation strategies. Successful

transformation will only happen if it addresses structural inequalities and cultural dynamics, while offering proper support for ethical leadership development.

Conclusions

This study explored how the integration of intercultural education and ethical leadership can help create inclusive schools in South Africa beyond the scope of multicultural education. The findings reveal that current multicultural education approaches face critical limitations that prevent meaningful educational transformation. These limitations include a focus on superficial cultural celebrations rather than addressing systemic power imbalances, the persistence of hidden curricula that perpetuate dominant cultural values, significant language barriers affecting most learners, who are taught in non-native languages, and inadequate teacher preparation for addressing structural inequalities. Multicultural education raises awareness of diversity but fails to transform the underlying power structures that cause educational exclusion.

In contrast, intercultural education offers transformative potential by requiring active engagement with diversity and critical examination of power structures. It moves beyond representation to incorporate decolonization principles, integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and develop culturally responsive teaching practices. Evidence indicates that intercultural education, when properly implemented, produces enhanced student performance, particularly for disadvantaged learners, by connecting students' cultural backgrounds with learning content and fostering authentic cross-cultural communication.

Ethical leadership serves as the essential foundation for successful implementation of intercultural education. Leaders who demonstrate moral integrity and commitment to social justice create organizational cultures that value diversity and actively challenge discrimination. Research demonstrates that ethical leaders who champion policy reforms, ensure equitable resource allocation, and facilitate inclusive decision making achieve higher student retention rates among traditionally underrepresented populations. Their conflict resolution abilities and transformative vision enable navigation of complex cultural challenges while implementing intercultural education effectively.

The integration of intercultural education and ethical leadership provides a comprehensive framework for transforming South African schools into truly inclusive environments. This framework supplies practical steps for linking curriculum reform with leadership development and community participation. To effect this transformation, the following key recommendations should be considered:

- Integrate decolonization principles and ensure that curricula reflect diverse knowledge systems beyond Western centric perspectives.
- Equip educators with the skills and pedagogical tools necessary to implement intercultural education effectively.
- Establish equitable resource allocation mechanisms to support historically disadvantaged schools.
- Invest in programs that cultivate ethical leadership, emphasizing social justice, conflict resolution, and inclusive decision making.
- Strengthen collaboration with parents and community members to reinforce inclusive practices within schools.
- Develop comprehensive assessment tools to measure the effectiveness of intercultural education initiatives and adjust strategies accordingly.

Ultimately, achieving educational equity in South Africa requires a fundamental shift in how diversity and inclusion are conceptualized and implemented in schools. Advancing South Africa's future demands a firm commitment to intercultural education combined with ethical

leadership, an essential foundation for redressing historical injustices and ensuring meaningful educational outcomes for all learners.

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