

Curriculum and assessment for learner diversity in the South African foundation phase: A neurodiversity view

**Author:**Ben de Souza¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Secondary and Post-School Education, Faculty of Education, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Ben de Souza,
ben.souza@ru.ac.za

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Background: Inclusive education in South Africa has been prioritised. Still, research has shown that neurodivergent learners in the foundation phase continue to experience exclusion. Meanwhile, policy has not been adequately examined through a neurodiversity perspective that recognises cognitive difference as a natural human attribute.

Aim: The study analysed the *Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom through the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* using neurodiversity theory to determine their implications for curriculum and assessment in the foundation phase.

Setting: The study was situated in the South African public basic education policy environment, with a specific focus on curriculum and assessment in the foundation phase.

Methods: A qualitative theoretical document analysis was conducted on the Guidelines. The text was thematically coded and interpreted through a neurodiversity perspective to identify how learner differences, curriculum differentiation and assessment flexibility were construed.

Results: The analysis revealed that the Guidelines strongly promote curriculum differentiation and flexible assessment, whilst rejecting narrow views of intelligence. However, learner differences are largely framed in terms of barriers and support needs, and not as positive neurocognitive variation. This leaves neurodivergence only implicitly recognised.

Conclusion: Whilst the Guidelines support inclusive practices in principle, they have not fully embraced a neurodiversity-affirming understanding of learner diversity. As such, greater conceptual clarity and explicit recognition of neurodevelopmental variability are recommended.

Contribution: The study links the national curriculum and assessment policy to neurodiversity theory in the foundation phase. This effort results in a conceptual argument for advancing inclusive, equitable and responsive early childhood education, which can potentially help in policy reform.

Keywords: assessment for learner diversity; curriculum differentiation; foundation phase; inclusive education; neurodiversity.

Introduction

Inclusive education is globally recognised as both a human right and a key driver for equitable social participation. South Africa's commitment to this ideal is firmly articulated through Education White Paper 6: *Special Needs Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (Department of Education 2001), which mandates that the education system transform to accommodate the full range of learning needs, dismantle barriers to access and maximise participation for all learners regardless of ability or background. These guidelines entail that curriculum content, teaching approaches, assessment practices and classroom organisation should be responsive to learner diversity if inclusion is to be realised in practice. Despite this strong policy emphasis, there is growing evidence that inclusive practice falls short during the foundation phase (Grades R–3), a critical period when learners are developing foundational cognitive and socio-emotional competencies (Jama & Lunga 2024; Mahlo 2017). Ndou-Chikwena and Sefotho (2025) noted that early identification and support for diverse learning needs such as developmental language disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum conditions, dyslexia and other neurodevelopmental differences are delayed or insufficient as a result of limited training, inadequate resources and diagnostic challenges in young children. This problem is exacerbated in contexts with high variability in socioeconomic

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conditions and resource allocation, which may further limit educators' ability to enact responsive and inclusive curriculum practices (Nthontho & Naidoo 2025).

Therefore, young learners who are neurodivergent or whose learning profiles do not resonate with neurotypical standards are at risk of underachievement, disengagement and marginalisation if early educational support is not effectively implemented. The early years of schooling are critical for shaping long-term academic trajectories (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] 2020). This entails that exclusionary practices during this foundational period can lead to cumulative disadvantage across the lifespan.

Meanwhile, most inclusive education research in South Africa is oriented towards general policy analysis. Less attention is given to examining how national guidelines are construed through a neurodiversity perspective in early education contexts. This research lacuna risks perpetuating deficit-based understandings of learner differences instead of foregrounding approaches that celebrate and leverage cognitive diversity for all learners. In light of this lacuna, this study is a conceptual analysis that bridges learner diversity guidelines with neurodiversity theory. According to Chapman (2021), the neurodiversity perspective posits that variations in neurological development and cognitive functioning represent natural and important differences in the human population, and not conditions to be remedied. The concept was first articulated through dialogues amongst autistic self-advocates and scholars in the late 1990s and has since evolved into a broader advocacy and theoretical approach that emphasises value-neutral recognition of thinking and learning differences (Botha et al. 2024).

Aim and objectives

This study aims to conduct a document analysis of the *Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom through the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)* (Department of Basic Education 2011) by interpreting these guidelines through the neurodiversity perspective to establish their practicalities and implications in the foundation phase. The study's objectives are to:

- Critically analyse how learner diversity is conceptualised in the CAPS guidelines.
- Examine the extent to which these guidelines accommodate neurodivergent learning profiles.
- Identify strengths and limitations of the guidelines in inclusive pedagogy and assessment.
- Highlight areas for policy and pedagogical development informed by neurodiversity theory.

Literature review

Neurodiversity in educational thought and practice

Over the past three decades, the concept of neurodiversity has emerged as one of the most influential perspectives

reshaping educational thought and practice (Cook 2024; Dawson 2022; Dyosini 2025).

Neurodiversity views neurological differences, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia or developmental language differences, as natural expressions of human diversity (Botha et al. 2024; Chapman 2021). This shift challenges long-standing medical and deficit-oriented models that have historically positioned neurodivergent learners as problems to be fixed and not as learners to be supported through responsive environments. Cook's (2024) conceptual study synthesised policy, pedagogical and curriculum literature to argue that inclusive education systems remain overly reliant on categorical and diagnostic frameworks that inadvertently reproduce exclusion. Cook (2024) concluded that:

Further research is needed to increase our understanding of prevailing conceptions and misconceptions of neurodiversity within the education landscape. By challenging societal assumptions of 'normalcy', future research should provide conceptual and pedagogical tools to advance understanding of the barriers to inclusive practice in schools and increase teachers' capacity to embrace a more inclusive pedagogical approach. (p. 627)

Cook demonstrated that even well-intentioned inclusion policies continue to centre 'normal' development as the standard against which all learners are measured. In contrast, a neurodiversity perspective repositions learning differences as variations in cognitive style, sensory processing, attention and communication. This requires educational systems to become more flexible and responsive, and not more diagnostic and corrective. Importantly, Cook (2024) argued that inclusive education would only become meaningful when curriculum design, assessment practices and teaching strategies are fundamentally reorganised around learner variability instead of learner deficits. This argument resonates with international debates about inclusive education. Whilst inclusive schooling has been widely endorsed as a human right, the practical implementation remains constrained by assumptions about ability, intelligence and normalcy (De Beco 2018). As Dawson (2022) put it, neurodiversity challenges these assumptions by asserting that diversity in thinking, learning and processing is not an obstacle to education but a central feature of humanity. From this perspective, education should not normalise learners but create environments that can accommodate and nurture differences.

Neurodiversity-informed transformation of curriculum and pedagogy

A central theme in neurodiversity-informed education is the transformation of curriculum and pedagogy (Ndou-Chikwena & Sefotho 2025). Traditional curricula are typically designed around linear, age-based and standardised models of learning progression, which assume that all learners should reach the same outcomes in the same ways and at the same time. Neurodiversity research has demonstrated that this assumption disadvantages learners whose cognitive

profiles do not agree with dominant norms. For example, Rebecchi's (2025) international narrative review offered an important synthesis of alternative pedagogical models that are more compatible with neurodiversity. The review examined frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Montessori education and the Reggio Emilia approach by analysing their potential to support neurodivergent learners. Rebecchi found that these approaches share a common commitment to learner autonomy, multiple pathways to learning and respect for individual developmental trajectories.

For example, Montessori environments emphasise self-paced learning and hands-on engagement, whilst Reggio Emilia supports expression through multiple symbolic languages such as art, movement and storytelling. These features were found to be particularly supportive for learners who struggle in highly structured, text-based or teacher-centred classrooms. However, Rebecchi also identified a worrisome gap in the literature. Whilst these pedagogical approaches are widely celebrated in theory, there is limited empirical evidence of their systematic implementation in mainstream public education systems, including in French-speaking contexts. A recent policy conceptual analysis in Southern Africa (De Souza 2025) also found that the Montessorian pedagogy is limited to private schooling settings that do not embrace inclusivity. The findings of De Souza (2025) are relevant for policy-driven contexts such as South Africa, where national curriculum and assessment statements strongly shape classroom practice. The implication is that neurodiversity-affirming pedagogy cannot rely solely on alternative education models but should be integrated into mainstream curriculum frameworks (Nthibeli, Griffiths & Bekker 2025).

The UDL framework has become especially influential in this regard. According to Wilson (2021), UDL was developed to address the inherent exclusion created by standardised teaching methods by advocating for multiple means of representation, expression and engagement. Instead of adapting lessons after learners struggle, UDL promotes proactive design that anticipates diversity from the outset. Research shows that when UDL is implemented, neurodivergent learners benefit from flexible materials, varied assessment formats and multiple entry points into learning tasks (see Flood 2025). Importantly, UDL does not only support learners with identified needs. It also enhances learning for all learners by recognising that variability is universal and not exceptional. Thus, UDL operationalises the idea that difference should be expected, planned for and valued in the curriculum itself (Cologon & Lassig 2020).

Neurodiversity research across the educational lifespan

Although much neurodiversity research has focused on early schooling, studies in higher education provide important insights into how exclusionary systems continue across the educational lifespan. Butcher and Lane's (2025) empirical

study of autistic and ADHD students in higher education revealed that systemic barriers remain deeply entrenched, even in contexts where inclusive policies are in place. Their research documented difficulties related to rigid curriculum, inflexible assessment practices and limited staff understanding of neurodiversity.

Students reported that although accommodations were sometimes available, they were largely framed as exceptional adjustments and not as part of a universally accessible learning environment. This finding is highly relevant to the foundation phase education. If neurodivergent learners encounter rigid and deficit-oriented systems from their earliest years of schooling, these patterns are likely to continue and intensify over time.

Conversely, if early education adopts flexible and neurodiversity-affirming approaches, learners may develop stronger academic identities, greater engagement and increased self-efficacy. Thus, research in higher education gives evidence on the importance of getting inclusion right from the beginning.

In the South African context, research on neurodiversity and inclusive education has grown significantly, particularly in relation to early childhood and foundational learning. The research highlights both the promise of inclusive policy and the challenges of implementation in a highly unequal and resource-constrained education system (see Sepadi 2025). Nthontho and Naidoo's (2025) conceptual analysis of the right to education for neurodivergent learners in South Africa provided a critical overview of national commitments and practical realities. Drawing on international human rights frameworks and local policy documents, they argued that whilst South Africa has formally committed to inclusive education, neurodivergent learners are largely invisible in data systems, curriculum design and teacher education. Their study demonstrated that inclusive education policies tend to adopt broad disability categories without adequately addressing neurodevelopmental diversity. As a result, learners whose differences are subtle, emerging or non-categorical are particularly vulnerable to being overlooked in the early years of schooling. In the same vein, Dyosini's (2025) qualitative research with early childhood teachers added an important practitioner perspective. The study found that educators were generally committed to inclusion and expressed a desire to support neurodiverse learners. However, they also reported worrisome gaps in both their conceptual understanding of neurodiversity and their practical skills in differentiation, classroom management and collaborative support.

Teachers described feeling uncertain about how to adapt curricula, assess learning fairly or engage families and specialists effectively. These findings highlight a critical tension in South African education. Inclusive policy exists, but the professional capacity to implement it in neurodiversity-affirming ways is almost absent.

Patilima's (2025) comparative study further complicated this picture by examining the intersection of neurodiversity and trauma in early childhood. Conducted across high-income and low-resource contexts, including South Africa, the study demonstrated that neurodivergent children exposed to adversity were particularly vulnerable to exclusion when rigid curriculum and standardised expectations dominated classroom practice. Patilima argued that trauma-informed and neurodiversity-affirming pedagogy should go hand in hand, especially in contexts shaped by poverty, inequality and social instability. This finding is relevant for the South African foundation phase, where many learners experience both developmental differences and socioeconomic adversity.

Also, Ndou-Chikwena and Sefotho's (2025) regional study of Zimbabwean and South African stakeholders provided further insight into how inclusive education is conceptualised at policy and community levels. They found that despite the language of inclusion, most policies and practices continued to be shaped by medical and social models of disability that focus on deficits and barriers. Stakeholders reported that these models fail to capture the lived experiences of neurodiverse learners, whose strengths, interests and alternative ways of learning are rarely recognised. The study argued for a shift towards a neurodiversity perspective that repositions neurological differences as variations and not disadvantages in order to contextualise international rights-based approaches in local policy.

Beyond school-based research, Nthibeli et al.'s (2025) conceptual critique of South African education policy adds a socio-political dimension to the neurodiversity debate. Their analysis demonstrated that national policies marginalise neurodivergent communities by framing neurological difference in deficit-based and medicalised discourses. The study argued that this framing intersects with race, class and historical inequality, thereby reproducing exclusion in subtle but pervasive ways.

They called for Afrocentric and intersectional policy reforms that would mainstream neurodiversity affirmation in broader struggles for social justice by drawing on international human rights instruments such as the Salamanca Statement and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This critique entails that neurodiversity is not merely an educational issue but a political and ethical one. How societies define and respond to difference reflects deeper values about who belongs, who is valued and whose ways of being are accepted.

Nthibeli et al.'s (2025) study and all other studies reviewed here tell one story: Inclusive education for neurodivergent learners requires more than access to mainstream classrooms. It requires a fundamental rethinking of curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and policy through a neurodiversity-affirming perspective. Frameworks such as UDL (Wilson 2021) provide practical tools for designing flexible learning environments. However, a critical gap remains in how national curriculum and assessment policies are analysed

and interpreted through neurodiversity theory. Whilst many studies focus on teacher attitudes, learner experiences or alternative pedagogies, far fewer examine how official curriculum guidelines themselves shape what is possible in classrooms. Therefore, this study analyses South Africa's CAPS Guidelines through a neurodiversity perspective to offer a conceptual bridge between what inclusion promises and what it can deliver in everyday classrooms.

Neurodiversity as a theoretical framework

This study is theoretically framed in neurodiversity theory to examine how curriculum and assessment policy guidelines conceptualise learner differences. Neurodiversity theory provides a critical conceptual perspective through which learner differences can be examined. In this perspective, diversity in cognition, attention, sensory processing and communication is understood as an expected feature of the human population (Botha et al. 2024; Chapman 2021). Educational difficulty is therefore not located in the learner, but in environments, curriculum and assessment systems that are designed around narrow assumptions of normal development and ability. According to Cook (2024), the theory challenges education systems to move beyond remedial and compensatory approaches and instead transform learning environments so that they are flexible, accessible and responsive to a wide range of cognitive profiles from the outset.

Whilst the social model of disability has been instrumental in shifting education away from purely medicalised explanations of difficulty, scholars argue that it can still implicitly frame difference as a problem that must be accommodated and not as a form of variation that should be valued (Botha et al. 2024; Chapman 2020). In educational contexts, this distinction is important. Several scholars in educational research have used neurodiversity theory to interrogate curriculum, pedagogy and policy. Armstrong's (2012) work on neurodiversity in the classroom demonstrated how traditional curriculum encourages certain cognitive strengths whilst marginalising others. The study argued for curriculum design that recognises multiple intelligences and diverse learning pathways. His work has been influential in repositioning differentiation as a universal design principle and not a remedial response. At the policy level, Nthibeli et al. (2025)'s critical analysis of South African education policy related to autism and ADHD revealed that, despite strong rhetorical commitments to inclusivity, neurodivergent learners are largely framed through deficit-based and medicalised discourses. Therefore, the neurodiversity theoretical framework affords a critical perspective to surface the underlying assumptions about learning, ability and normalcy that may either enable or constrain inclusive practice.

Research methods and design

This study employed a qualitative research approach. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (eds. 2018), this is a research approach that seeks to understand and interpret phenomena from a particular perspective, typically using

non-numerical data such as interviews, observations and texts. This study specifically used document (text) analysis to examine how learner diversity is conceptualised in the South African curriculum and assessment policy guidelines for the foundation phase. Karppinen and Moe (2019) defined document analysis as a systematic method of examining and interpreting texts (documents) as data in order to understand social, political or institutional processes, meanings and contexts. Karppinen and Moe (2019) also warned that:

The convenience of using existing material produced by public or private institutions can make the use of such documents seem relatively straightforward. However, the selection of relevant documents, their availability, collection and analysis also present methodological problems that researchers need to be aware of. (p. 249)

Qualitative document analysis is well-suited to studies that seek to interpret policy texts, uncover underlying assumptions and analyse meanings featured in official documents (Bowen 2009). In this study, the CAPS Guidelines document was approached as a socially constructed text that reflects particular epistemological, ideological and pedagogical positions regarding learner diversity and inclusion. Therefore, the research design for this study was interpretive and analytical, and not evaluative. An interpretive research design (in the context of document analysis) is a particular worldview that examines documents to understand how meanings, perspectives and social realities are constructed and communicated in texts and their contexts (Yanow 2014).

The study was situated in the South African public basic education system, with a specific focus on the foundation phase (Grades R–3). This phase represents the earliest formal schooling context and is currently governed nationally by the CAPS (2011). The policy environment is shaped by South Africa's constitutional commitment to inclusive education, as articulated in Education White Paper 6 and subsequent policy instruments. Therefore, the setting for this study is best understood as the policy and regulatory space in which foundation phase teaching and assessment occur. This space is characterised by linguistic diversity, socioeconomic inequality and wide variation in access to learner support services, all of which influence how learner diversity is interpreted and addressed in early schooling.

The study employed a structured document analysis guided by an analytic reading protocol. The protocol was developed prior to analysis and operationalised into five focal categories: (1) definitions and descriptions of learner diversity; (2) references to disability, barriers to learning and support; (3) curriculum differentiation strategies; (4) assessment accommodations and flexibility; and (5) implicit or explicit assumptions about normative development and learning. The Guidelines document was systematically read, and relevant excerpts were identified and extracted according to these categories.

In the first phase of analysis, an inductive open coding process (see eds. Chandra & Shang 2019) was applied to the

extracted data. Segments of text were coded line-by-line to identify key concepts and recurring patterns related to learner diversity and inclusion. These initial codes were then compared and iteratively grouped into broader thematic categories. In the second phase, a deductive interpretive coding process (see Azungah 2018) was conducted using neurodiversity theory as an analytical framework. The previously developed themes were re-examined and refined in relation to four core neurodiversity principles, as reported in Cherewick and Matergia (2024): (1) difference versus deficit framing; (2) strength-based versus remediation-oriented approaches; (3) flexibility in curriculum and assessment; and (4) recognition of variability in learning trajectories. This phase involved interpreting how the identified themes aligned with, or diverged from, these principles across the dataset.

As the study involved the analysis of publicly available policy document and did not include human participants, personal data or sensitive information, ethical approval was not required. According to established Rhodes University research ethics guidelines, studies based solely on public documents are exempt from institutional ethical review.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results

The analysis reveals how learner diversity is conceptualised in the CAPS Guidelines and the extent to which these conceptualisations speak to or diverge from a neurodiversity perspective, particularly in the foundation phase. Four themes emerged from the document analysis of the CAPS Guidelines:

- Conceptualisation of learner diversity.
- Framing of learner difference: Deficit versus difference.
- Curriculum differentiation as the primary response to diversity.
- Assessment flexibility and accommodation.

Table 1 summarises these themes and their neurodiversity resonance.

Conceptualisation of learner diversity

The CAPS Guidelines (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011) adopt an expansive understanding of learner diversity. The Guidelines position learner diversity as a defining feature of South African classrooms.

TABLE 1: Summary of themes emerging from the document analysis.

Theme	Policy emphasis	Neurodiversity resonance
Learner diversity	Broad, categorical diversity	Partial
Difference framing	Barriers and support needs	Limited
Curriculum differentiation	Adaptation and flexibility	Strong
Assessment practices	Flexible, alternative assessment	Moderate

Diversity is framed as multidimensional, encompassing socioeconomic status, language, culture, religion, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, health, disability and ability. The document states:

[W]hen we look into our classrooms, we will observe that there are learners from different socioeconomic, language, cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientation, ability groups, etc. All these learners come to school with different experiences. We therefore can see that we have rich diversity in the learner population. (DBE 2011:3)

This framing is important because it recognises diversity not as an anomaly but as a normative condition of schooling in South Africa's highly heterogeneous society. From a neurodiversity perspective (Chapman 2021), this acknowledgement is a necessary starting point, as neurodiversity theory likewise asserts that human difference is natural and not exceptional. The recognition that classrooms are inherently varied creates conceptual space for flexible pedagogy and differentiated curricula.

However, closer analysis reveals an important limitation. Although diversity is described in broad and inclusive terms, the Guidelines do not explicitly conceptualise neurocognitive diversity as a form of human variation. Instead, neurological and learning differences are subsumed under the category of diverse learning needs: 'In all classrooms learners have diverse learning needs. If teachers are not responsive to these needs and provide the necessary support learners may experience barriers to learning' (DBE 2011:3). This phrasing subtly shifts diversity from a neutral or positive attribute to a potential source of difficulty. Learner difference is not presented as something that enriches the classroom, but as something that should be managed to prevent barriers to learning. From a neurodiversity standpoint (Cook 2024), this is a critical conceptual tension. Neurodiversity theory rejects the assumption that difference is inherently problematic.

Instead, it locates barriers in inflexible systems and not in learners themselves. When learning differences are framed as needs that should be responded to, the Guidelines risk reproducing a support-deficit logic instead of a difference-affirming one. Again, this distinction is important in the foundation phase, where developmental variability is the norm and not the exception.

Deficit-oriented versus difference-affirming framings

The Guidelines contain a striking internal contradiction between progressive critiques of narrow educational norms and the continued use of deficit-oriented language. On the one hand, the document explicitly challenges traditional systems of intelligence and ability:

[M]any schools operate with an evaluation system that rewards only a certain number of abilities ... This often gives rise to an early and mistaken separation of those considered 'bright' and those considered not intelligent. (DBE 2011:3)

This critique strongly speaks to neurodiversity perspective (Dawson 2022), which has long argued that dominant models of intelligence privilege particular cognitive styles, typically linguistic and logical-mathematical, whilst marginalising others such as visual, spatial, kinaesthetic or divergent thinking. The document's rejection of narrow evaluation systems represents an important move towards epistemic justice, as it acknowledges that learners are differently able instead of unequally able. Nonetheless, this progressive stance is undermined by how learning differences are subsequently described.

Neurodivergent learners are listed primarily in terms of deficits: 'Learners who have difficulty in reading and writing; learners with hearing, visual and coordination difficulties; learners experiencing difficulties in remembering what has been taught' (DBE 2011:3). Here, neurodivergence is represented almost exclusively through the language of difficulty, limitation and impairment. From a neurodiversity perspective, such language is not neutral. It shapes how learners are perceived and treated. In the foundation phase, where many children are still developing basic literacy, memory, attention and motor coordination, this deficit framing risks medicalising normal developmental variability. It may also encourage early labelling, despite the Guidelines' stated opposition to premature categorisation. This tension reflects a broader contradiction in inclusive education policy as systems may critique rigid standards whilst still relying on deficit-based descriptors to justify support. Neurodiversity theory suggests that this contradiction should be resolved by shifting from a 'what learners lack' model to a 'how learners learn' model. Whilst the Guidelines gesture towards this shift, they do not fully enact it at the level of language and conceptual framing.

Curriculum differentiation as the central mechanism for inclusivity

One of the strongest points of agreement between the Guidelines and neurodiversity theory lies in their emphasis on curriculum differentiation. The document states unequivocally: 'One of the key strategies for responding to diversity is curriculum differentiation' (DBE 2011:4). Differentiation is described not as an optional agenda but as the primary mechanism through which inclusivity is realised. The Guidelines define it as: 'Processes of modifying, changing, adapting, extending and varying teaching methodologies... [that] take into account learners' ability levels, interests and backgrounds' (DBE 2011:4). This conceptualisation resonates powerfully with neurodiversity principles. Neurodiversity argues that because learners process information differently, education should provide multiple pathways to knowledge instead of enforcing a single normative route (Dyosini 2025).

The Guidelines advocate this by rejecting the idea that differentiation means lowering standards:

[T]his should not be seen as a watering down of the curriculum but rather as a graded process where learners are taken by a different route to a similar endpoint. (DBE 2011:4)

This language is especially important for neurodivergent learners, who are mostly subjected either to remediation (which lowers expectations) or to exclusion (which denies access altogether).

Since the Guidelines assert that all learners can work towards similar outcomes through different routes, they support a core neurodiversity principle of equity lies in flexibility and not uniformity (Cherewick & Matergia 2024). However, the effectiveness of this commitment depends on how differentiation is interpreted and implemented by teachers. Without explicit neurodiversity framing, there remains a risk that differentiation will be used primarily as a remedial strategy for 'weak' learners and not as a universal design principle for all learners.

The Guidelines explicitly reject the assumption that all learners are developmentally ready to engage with content in the same way: 'We cannot assume that all learners can learn easily at an abstract level' (DBE 2011:5). They further state: 'Certain learners might need to work with objects... before they are ready to work with abstract numbers' (DBE 2011:5). This recognition is particularly important in the foundation phase, where developmental differences are usually most visible.

Neurodivergent learners may show advanced abilities in some areas (such as pattern recognition or visual reasoning) alongside difficulties in others (such as working memory or expressive language). The document's acknowledgement of diverse readiness agrees closely with neurodiversity theory, which emphasises that learning trajectories are not linear or uniform.

The Guidelines encourage teachers to adjust abstraction, pacing and representation. Therefore, the Guidelines support a developmental and strengths-based approach to learning. However, the absence of explicit reference to neurodevelopmental diversity means that these principles may not always be interpreted as applying to neurodivergent learners in particular.

Differentiated assessment and alternative demonstrations of competence

The Guidelines adopt a progressive stance towards assessment. They reject a one-size-fits-all evaluation: 'Differentiated assessment is based on the thinking that the needs of learners cannot all be met in the same way' (DBE 2011:12). They further affirm: 'Every child can show what knowledge and skills he or she has learned in creative ways' (DBE 2011:12). Examples of alternative assessment include oral presentations, visual representations, practical demonstrations and the use of assistive technologies. This approach resonates strongly with neurodiversity principles by decoupling intelligence and competence from written language, which disproportionately disadvantages many neurodivergent learners in early schooling. In the foundation phase, where literacy is still developing, this

flexibility is particularly crucial. Neurodivergent learners may understand concepts deeply but struggle to demonstrate this understanding through conventional written tasks (Chapman 2021). The Guidelines legitimise multiple modes of expression. This creates space for more accurate and equitable assessment. Although the Guidelines apply to Grades R–12, their particular implications for the foundation phase are self-evident.

They recognise the need for flexibility in early schooling: 'Learners who experience significant barriers to learning must also have the possibility of straddling grades' (DBE 2011:19). This provision acknowledges that developmental differences in early childhood do not conform neatly to age-based grade structures. For neurodivergent learners, whose developmental trajectories may be asynchronous, such flexibility is essential. However, the absence of explicit reference to neurodiversity means that the success of these provisions depends on teacher knowledge, attitudes and training.

Discussion

This study found that the *Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom through the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* (Department of Basic Education 2011) demonstrate a strong policy commitment to inclusion through curriculum and assessment flexibility, particularly via curriculum differentiation and differentiated assessment. The Guidelines recognise learner variability, caution against narrow constructions of intelligence and promote multiple pathways to achieving curriculum outcomes. However, the analysis also revealed that learner difference is predominantly framed through the language of barriers, support needs and accommodation, and not as a natural and valuable form of neurocognitive diversity. Neurodivergence is implicitly addressed but not explicitly conceptualised. This leaves a room for deficit-based interpretations, especially in the foundation phase where developmental differences are fluid and usually not formally diagnosed.

The emphasis on curriculum differentiation as the primary response to learner diversity agrees closely with inclusive education discourse, which identifies flexible curriculum design as a cornerstone of equitable education (UNESCO 2020). The Guidelines' insistence that differentiation should not constitute a 'watering down' of the curriculum resonates with UDL principles, which advocate for high expectations alongside multiple means of engagement, representation and expression (Flood 2025; Wilson 2021). From a neurodiversity perspective, the policy's recognition that learners access content at different levels of abstraction and complexity supports the view that cognitive variability is normative and not exceptional (Armstrong 2012). In the foundation phase, where diverse developmental profiles are common, this flexibility is particularly important. Research in early childhood education shows that rigid and standardised curricula disproportionately disadvantage neurodivergent learners, including those with emerging language, attentional or sensory differences (Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman 2014).

However, the findings also reveal a conceptual tension in the Guidelines. Whilst they critique narrow definitions of intelligence and advocate for multiple intelligences, they simultaneously rely on a barrier to learning cliché rooted in the social model of disability. Although the social model marked a critical shift away from purely medicalised explanations of disability, neurodiversity scholars argue that it still positions difference as a problem to be mitigated and not as a form of human variation to be valued (Botha et al. 2024; Chapman 2020). The absence of explicit neurodiversity language in the Guidelines reflects a broader trend in education policy, where inclusivity is mostly operationalised procedurally (through differentiation and accommodation) without a corresponding shift in underlying epistemological assumptions about learning and ability (Slee 2018). This shortfall is especially consequential in the foundation phase, where early pedagogical interpretations shape long-term learner identity, self-concept and educational pathways (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011).

A key strength of this study lies in its theoretically informed document analysis, which enabled a critical interrogation of CAPS Guidelines through an emerging but increasingly influential neurodiversity theory. Through the analysis, the study contributes conceptual depth to discussions of inclusive education policy in South Africa.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study analysed a text and not classroom practice, and therefore cannot make claims about how the Guidelines are enacted by foundation phase teachers in diverse contexts. Secondly, the analysis focused on a single national guideline document, albeit contextualised in broader policy frameworks such as Education White Paper 6. Thirdly, as with all interpretive qualitative research, the findings are shaped by the theoretical perspective employed. It is possible that alternative theoretical frameworks can end in different emphases. As such, the findings should be interpreted as conceptual and analytical and not as evaluative of implementation outcomes.

Conclusion

This study analysed the CAPS Guidelines through a neurodiversity perspective, with a specific focus on the foundation phase. The findings suggest that whilst the Guidelines provide a strong structural framework for inclusive practice, they would benefit from explicit integration of neurodiversity-affirming language and principles. Policy revisions could move beyond the notion of accommodating difference towards recognising neurodivergent learners as integral contributors to classroom diversity. Explicit reference to neurodevelopmental variability, particularly in early childhood, would strengthen conceptual coherence and reduce the risk of deficit-based interpretations. For foundation phase educators, the findings are the evidence of the importance of interpreting differentiation not merely as

remediation, but as proactive design for variability. Teacher education and professional development programmes should incorporate neurodiversity theory to support educators in recognising strengths, interests and alternative learning pathways in young learners, even in the absence of formal diagnoses.

Equally, future research should examine how foundation phase teachers interpret and implement the Guidelines in practice. It should also investigate how neurodivergent learners experience curriculum and assessment in early grades. Again, further research should explore the impact of neurodiversity-informed professional development on inclusive pedagogy.

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CRediT authorship contribution

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The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

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