

School-based support teams insupporting the implementation of inclusive education practices: Teachers' perspectivesof rural contexts in South Africa

By

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the challenges encountered by the School-Based Support Teams in supporting the implementation of inclusive education practices in the rural secondary schools of Limpopo province. The study applied a qualitative research approach, wherein a case study design was utilised. Ten teachers from the rural-based schools were purposively selected from five schools in Lebopo Circuit. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document review. The data were analysed through themes. The study was underpinned by the theory of Archer to better assess the credibility of the School-Based Teams in supporting the implementation of inclusive education, hence the implementation is substandard. The results of the study presented that the School-Based Teams lack integrity and comprehensive skills in the application of the policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS). Furthermore, the study revealed the inappropriateness of learner profiling. In addition, the study discovered that there is a lack of clear criteria to measure the quality and standardised practices of inclusive education. Lastly, the study discovered the problem of the curriculum as a barrier. We recommend that there should be strong monitoring between the District-based support teams and the School-Based Support Teams to enable quality implementation of inclusive education practices in schools.

Keywords: Inclusive education practices, School-Based Support Teams and diverse needs

Introduction and background of the study

The implementation of inclusive education policy is moving at a snail's pace in most South African schools. Even with the efforts taken by the Department of Basic Education to establish the School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) to ensure proficient implementation of inclusive education practices, the implementation process in schools is substandard. The School-Based Support Team is an important structure meant to provide critical skills to prepare teachers in implementing inclusive education practices effectively Bagree and Lewis (2013:22). The structure has to plan and support teachers with resources that would enhance the quality of education for all learners even those with special educational needs. As mandated in the Education White Paper 6. According to Mahlo (2017:43), the policy of inclusive education was introduced to accommodate every learner in mainstream schools, regardless of their learning differences. In South Africa, even after several years of the introduction of inclusive

education, many learners with diverse needs are still encountering challenges that hinder their progress in reaching their full potential in education (Bagree and Lewis, 2013:12).

Nxumalo and Lukhele (2011:8) utters that inclusive education has been globally recognised as a philosophy for attaining equity, justice and quality education for all children, especially those who have been traditionally excluded from mainstream schools for reasons such as disability, ethnicity, gender and other characteristics. Vrasmus and Gerghut (2018:23) connotes that in countries like Scotland, inclusive education is regarded as the framework that support learners with disabilities. It is unlike in the South Africa context where all children, young people and adults have the right to benefit from the education that will meet their basic learning needs irrespective of their diverse needs.

Unlike most countries that put much focus on teachers on the implementation of inclusive education practices, the South African National Department of Education lay the responsibility on School-Based Support Teams of ensuring the successful implementation of the practices. However, it is a pity that schools are grappling with the implementation process with the presence of the school-based support teams. In 2014, the policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) was introduced in South African schools, to improve the practices of inclusive education and to streamline the duties of the School-Based Support Teams. Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support policy provides opportunities for remedial support to improve the learners' participation and also to enhance the quality of inclusive education practices in schools. The School-Based Support Team carries the responsibility to assess and identify learners' barriers and develop a plan to counteract such barriers. In terms of implementing the practices of inclusive education, this implies that the SBSTs are responsible for finding out the barriers that inhibit the quality and standard of the implementation of inclusive practices. Both learners and teachers should then have access to the plan because it would encourage them to be involved in the practices of inclusive education.

Dreyer (2017:13) critiques that the support for School-Based Support Teams in inclusive practices has been overlooked up to this far in terms of resources. Dreyer (2017:13) further articulates that schools would be the most enabling environments if the SBSTs were provided with the necessary resources to execute their duties with diligence. According to Ileri, King'edo and Thuraniira (2019:4), effective resources can foster an inclusive environment with opportunities to participate and allow for strategies to accommodate learner diversity. However, there are yet learners who are excluded from general education, some are referred to special schools and some even drop out of the education system. Studies were conducted regarding the support provided by school-based support teams for inclusive education. However, most of them focused on the school-based support teams addressing the needs of learners with disabilities. Hence, this study focused on evaluating the credibility of the SBSTs in enhancing quality practices of inclusive education in the rural schools of Limpopo Province.

Research question

What are the challenges faced by the School-Based Support Teams in supporting the implementation of inclusive education practices?

Literature review

Inclusive education in South Africa like in any part of the world is not a new phenomenon. Without going back to its long history, which the scope of this chapter will not

cover, suffice it to say that it is concerned with the eradication of injustices in schools, and focuses on building a democratic society where social justice reigns. Slee (2011:15) indicates that inclusive education has been internationally recognised as a philosophy for achieving equity, justice and quality education for all learners, especially those who have been excluded from mainstream education because of disability, ethnicity, gender or other characteristics. While inclusive education has been implemented successfully in some countries, most of developing countries are still grappling to achieve success in this goal. South Africa is among the countries trying to implement inclusive education without success. School-based support teams play an imperative role in supporting the implementation of the practices of inclusive education. Roberts, Chambalain and Kasari (2013:11) utter that teacher preparation and education are essential since their understanding, ethos and expertise play an important role in ensuring that any initiative in schools takes root. Therefore, transforming the education system and emphasizing inclusive practice is what both the school-based support teams and teachers have to do.

The role of school-based support teams in supporting the implementation of inclusive education practices

Florian (2015:22) explain the School-Based Support Team is an important structure meant to provide critical skills to prepare teachers in implementing inclusive education practices effectively. The structure has to plan and support teachers with necessary resources that would enhance the quality of education for all learners even those with diverse educational needs. As mandated in the Education White Paper 6 that schools should have school-based support teams which will ensure that inclusive practices are executed with diligence. DBE (2014:26) outlines three categories of portfolios which are within the roles of the school-based support team: firstly, is the Whole School Development (WSD) which determines the needs of the whole school, secondly, the Learner Support Portfolio (LSP) which is responsible for the early identification of needs and provision of exact interventions for all learners encountering learning barriers and lastly, the Educator Support Portfolio Committees (ESPs) is responsible to equip teachers with necessary skills to assist in eradicating the barriers in the process of teaching and learning (DBE, 2014:11). The committees use the policy of Screening Identification Assessment and Support to ensure that all learning barriers are identified and taken care of.

In addition, Hockings, Brett, and Terentjevs (2012:18) point out that the school-based support teams have to fulfil the role of providing support to learners with various educational needs. This implies that learners have to be given opportunities to reach their potential regardless of their learning challenges. Nxumalo and Lukhele (2011:68) argue that teachers still grapple with diagnosing learners with learning difficulties and addressing their challenges effectively. Thus, teachers tend to say learners are unteachable, hence in some cases, teachers end up punishing learners who need support. In this regard, Vrasmus and Greght (2018:37) asserts that in other schools, learners resort to dropping out of school because of lack of support from teachers and a lack of access to facilities. In this cases, it means the role of the school-based support teams are not fulfilled up to par.

Challenges faced by school-based support teams in the rural schools

Supporting teachers in the implementation of inclusive education practices is a way to enhance the quality and standard of education in general in the classrooms (DBE, 2014:8). Furthermore, it also relieves teachers from the pressures of dealing with the daily needs of learners alone. It is, therefore, imperative that the school-based support teams develop policies and working practices which enable teachers to succeed in supporting learners with their emerging academic needs when implementing inclusive education. Alhassan and

Awunin(2017:34) pointed out the following factors as challenges that teachers are faced with in the implementation of inclusive education:

Inadequacies from the education districts officials

The School-Based Support Teams in schools follow the district support programmes when implementing the practices of inclusive classrooms as directed by the policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support. This implies that the District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) support the school-based support teams considered to be paramount in ensuring standardized and quality practices of inclusive education practices. However, McCall (2016:6) connotes that the support that the school-based support teams get from the district was considered trivial. Teachers feel burdened because policies are brought to them and put a lot of work on their shoulders, and they are expected to carry on with the implementation. The study also showed that the district-based support teams do not play a satisfactory role in terms of provisioning in rural schools, and this impact negatively on the well-being of both teachers and learners. Teachers are the custodians and agents of the implementation process who make sure that learners' needs are taken care of and that learners feel safe and secure.

Attitudes

Bubpha (2014:8) describe attitudes as internal representations of various aspects of the social or physical world. The notion of 'representation' connotes affective reactions to the object and a wide range of cognitions about thoughts, beliefs and judgments. In the case of inclusive education, Mahlo (2017:4) states that many teachers are still sceptical to accept learners with disabilities, and this hampers the effective practices of inclusive education. Moreover, Moletsane (2013:32) showed that teachers feel they are obliged to implement policies about which they were not consulted. As such, teachers do not have a clear understanding of the demands and changes they must implement and often lack adequate time to prepare for the practice.

Funding

Forlin (2013:5) explains that lack of funding is the greatest challenge to inclusive education in rural schools. Webster (2014:11) attributes the lack of adequate resources in the classrooms to the lack of funds to purchase the resources in the rural-based mainstream schools. Furthermore, McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy (2013:103) claim that the unfortunate part of the lack of funding is that when the Department of Basic Education allocates funds for the 'norms and standards', it provides categories of how the schools must spend—to which provisions for inclusive education are not allocated. Forlin (2013:5) concurs that huge attention is given to special schools and not the mainstream schools where the practice of inclusive policy is emphasised. The reviewed studies show that special schools are continuously being provided with adequate resources and enough support than mainstream schools

Theoretical Framework

The study was underpinned by Archer's three theoretical lenses of culture, structure and agency. According to Archer (1999:2), the social realist theory explains how the morphogenetic approach delivers an understanding of culture, structure and agency. Morphogenesis is a notion that explains Margaret Archer's social realist theory. According to Archer (1999:2), "morphogenesis refers to change (-genesis) in the shape of things (morpho-), thus, a change in the agency, or culture or structure." The morphogenetic cycle is an analytical

framework, which follows the course of time. The concepts of structure, culture and agency were deemed as the most important theoretical lenses in this study.

Archer's theory (1999:1) demonstrates the connection between culture, structure and agency in the social context, when dealing with human beings, more especially in the school environment wherein inclusive education practices are implemented. The centre of this study was at the morphogenesis of teacher agency aimed at exploring implementable measures to equip the School-Based Support Teams with the necessary skills to execute their duties in the implementation of quality and standardised practices of inclusive education. Below is the application of the three theoretical lenses to the implementation of inclusive education practices in schools.

Culture

Archer (1995:4) elucidates that culture integrates the cultivation of people, i.e., empowering them with the ethical aspects that will direct them to practical conduct. In this study, culture signifies the collaboration between school-based support teams and teachers in the implementation of inclusive education practices in schools. School-based support teams and teachers offer the forces of social life by interacting with each other in the school context to ensure that the objective of achieving quality and standardised practices of inclusive education is attained. In this study, quality and standardised implementation of inclusive education practices require both the school-based support teams and teachers who are keen and ready to address the needs of all learners, irrespective of their learning differences (White Paper 6, 2001:35).

According to Sigh (2012:14) culture is an existing asset in all human beings. This implies that all institutions have their own cultures that motivate the motivation of implementing the practices of inclusive education in schools. In essence, culture brings school-based support teams and teachers together to ensure the success of the implementation of inclusive education practices.

Structure

Geyer and Walton (2015:17) refers to structure as "the factors of influence, e.g. social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, ability and customs that limit an agent and their decisions. The description stated by Geyer and Walton (2015:17) implies that in the implementation of inclusive education practices, teachers face different learners from various backgrounds (social classes), cultures and religions. It is therefore the responsibility of the school-based support teams to ensure that all learners are provided with equal opportunities in schools, since failure to do so may result in the worthless implementation of the practices of inclusive education. In addition, Sigh (2012:31) designates that inclusivity in schools means accommodating learners from different spheres of life, i.e., religion, ethnicity, customs and beliefs. Furthermore, Bagree and Lewis (2013:12) connotes that the implementation of inclusive education practices needs buildings (which are classrooms) and resources (which are policy documents and guideline manuals). In the case of this study, school-based support teams together with teachers need guidelines such as the White Paper 6 and the Screening, Identification and Support (SIAS) policy as necessary resources to put the implementation into better practice.

Archer (1999:4) utters that structure is pertinent to ensure the success of any policy implementation. In this case, the researchers held the view that schools should have appropriate

classes and enabling environments for conducive teaching and learning, and to cater for the diverse needs of various learning difficulties. The DBE (2013:11) states that for schools to be prepared for the implementation of inclusive education practices, the building structures should accommodate all type of learners, e.g. learners who are physically impaired, and this is laid on the shoulders of the school-based support teams.

Agency

Archer (1999:3) emphasises that agents are ‘people’ in the socio-cultural system, who pursue the same objective. Moreover, Moore (2016:36), is of the opinion that agency is the degree to which individuals have the power of influence in any situation. In this study, school-based support teams and teachers have the agential power to ensure that the implementation of the practices of inclusive education becomes successful in schools.

Methodology

The qualitative research approach was followed in this study. The qualitative research approach was deemed pertinent to this study as it enabled the researchers to get an in-depth understanding of the feelings and judgements of the School-Based Support Teams about how inclusive education practices are executed in rural secondary schools. An interpretive paradigm was also useful and assisted in the evaluation of the School-Based Support Teams’ daily practices of inclusive education to determine the quality and standardised implementation. The case study design provided an opportunity for the researchers to understand the challenges that the School-Based Support Teams encounter in supporting the practices of inclusive education in the Lebopo Circuit as a case. The data was collected directly through semi-structured interviews with individual participants to observe and know their feelings regarding the implementation of inclusive education practices. Documents were used to gather additional data to complement the information provided by participants. The data were analysed through themes.

Results

Teachers are the custodians of the implementation of inclusive education practices. The study focused on the teachers’ perspectives on the practices of inclusive education in secondary schools. The teachers were interviewed on the perspectives of the practices of inclusive education. The following sub-themes and issues were raised: School-Based Teams lack integrity and comprehensive skills in the application of the policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS), the inappropriateness of learner profiling, there is a lack of clear criteria to measure the quality and standardised practices of inclusive education and the curriculum as a barrier. The sub-themes and issues raised were used to guide the discussions below and Archer’s theory assisted to clarify the findings.

Discussion of findings

The themes in this study emerged as follows: School-Based Teams lack integrity and comprehensive skills in the application of the policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS), curriculum barrier, and inadequacy of resource provisioning by the education districts. The sub-themes and issues raised were used to guide the discussions below and Archer’s theory assisted to clarify the findings. The themes are discussed below:

School-Based Support Teams lack integrity and comprehensive skills

The study showed that school-based support teams are an important structure to direct the quality implementation of inclusive education practices. Naicker (2019:15) utters that school-based support teams have the responsibility to provide support for the needs of the schools, teachers and learners. In essence, the school-based support teams have the mandate to execute their functions to ensure that inclusive education practices in schools are executed. This implies that the existence of school-based support teams in schools could bring about solutions to the challenges encountered during the teaching and learning process. Themane (2019:5) signifies that the presence of school-based support teams makes the school environments more welcoming and free from toxicities. However, the participants in this study revealed that schools continue to face problems due to school-based support teams lacking integrity and sufficient skills to apply the policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS). (DBE, 2014:6) emphasises that the policy for screening, identification, assessment and support provides opportunities for remedial support to improve learner participation to enhance the quality of inclusive practices in schools. The researcher made an effort to enlighten the school-based support teams by unpacking the application process of the policy for screening, identification, assessment and support.

The application of Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy

The findings of this study revealed that the SIAS policy is an important tool in the implementation of inclusive education practices because it provides opportunities for remedial support to improve the learners' participation and to enhance the quality of inclusive practices in schools. However, in this study teachers appeared to have a lack of sufficient knowledge regarding the application of the SIAS forms to ensure that learners get appropriate support. The DBE (2011:2) outlines a variety of common disabilities, learning difficulties and medical conditions in children, ways on how teachers can recognise these and strategies of dealing with them. This study indicated that if schools were adhering to the policy with comprehensive knowledge, most of the challenges encountered in schools such as bullying, sexual abuse, drug abuse, harassment and murder, could be minimised. Woolfolk (2013:3) asserted that some learning difficulties or barriers can be found within the learners, and which emanate from their social context. Nel, Nel and Hugo (2012:4) found that poor provisioning leads to a shortage of required skills and knowledge but it also contributes to the system which is incompetent to diagnose the problems that learners have that lead to the learners involved in unacceptable behaviours.

The issue of the knowledge base is very sensitive in terms of ensuring success in the implementation of any educational policy because the entire process is determined through the application. In this sense, it means if the practices of inclusive education fail at the schools, then the policy is declared unsuccessful. Mabaso (2019:14) advocates the appreciative inquiry model, which was established by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987:3), who is of the notion of paying much attention to the positive aspects when dealing with problems in the education system. In this context, the positive aspect would be the productive strategies, the SIAS policy brings to assist teachers in the effective implementation of quality practices of inclusive education. Chimhenga (2016:12) designated the fact that using Screening Identification Assessment and Support together with the consultation of parents provides concrete information for teachers to understand the types of learners they are dealing with and their learning barriers. Schools followed the positive intervention strategy of applying the policy of Screening Identification Assessment and Support appropriately and to establish virtuous relationships with parents or guardians of the learners and the community police forums (CPF)

who will serve as representatives of both schools and the parents. This would benefit both the schools and the learners who need support.

The inappropriateness of learner profiling

The study found that most schools do not profile learners correctly. It is challenging for teachers to know their learners and identify those with diverse needs and plies that the learners' needs are not met. Walton and Nel (2012:13) reiterate that learner profiling plays a vital role in inclusive education, since it allows teachers to do pre-planning, and discover suitable teaching methods for learners who experience learning breakdowns or have diverse needs. In addition, Shah, Das, Desai and Tiwari (2014:8) acknowledge learner profiling as a process that assists learners in becoming among others; inquirers, critical thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, and reflective. According to the DBE (2014:1), learner profiling assists teachers in building positive relationships with learners and understanding their perspective of the curriculum. This includes planning, classroom arrangements, timetabling and support in terms of remedial lessons to enable learners to partake and contribute to the classroom activities.

The findings further revealed that most teachers in rural schools do not have knowledge of the support needs assessment forms (SNA) to profile the learners as required by the policy for Screening Identification Assessment and Support. The participants regarded the process of learner profiling as time-consuming and complex. However, the study found that there are few schools that acknowledge the importance of applying the process of learner profiling forms to minimise challenges that emerge from the side of learners, and to understand their social status. Bourdieu's theory (1979:4) indicates that for teachers to be able to shape the learner's behaviour in classrooms, the teachers have to understand the social background of the learners. Slee (2011:23) also said that achieving success in inclusivity does not only refer to learners with learning challenges but also to be considerate to learners who have suffered poor psychosocial support, i.e. learners with aggression, bullying and behavioural disorder. Teachers realized that they were not doing justice to the learner profiling process and considered embarking on it at the beginning of every academic year to uplift the standard of inclusive education practices. The participant in this case elucidated the process of profiling learners as important as required in the SIAS policy, because it simplifies the process of identifying learners with diverse needs. Nevertheless, it is not employed in the schools because it is regarded to be time consuming and complex.

School curriculum as a barrier

The study found that the school curriculum does not cater for diversity, in the sense that the programmes that are followed by teachers do not accommodate remedial programmes. In concurrence, Dreyer (2017:9) affirms that in the current state, schools do not have a clear curriculum that incorporates inclusive education programmes in practice. In addition, the participants in this study revealed that teachers follow a curriculum that is rigid and does not allow for experimentation and gives little room for universal design learning. A view can be shared in this regard that learners with learning challenges need different amounts of attention based on their different challenges. The learners are not given enough attention because teaching is aligned with the annual teaching plans (ATPs) and work schedules. In concurrence, Slee (2011:2) notes that most curriculum materials that are used in regular schools disregard learners with learning challenges. Archer (1999:5) argues that agents are 'people' in the socio-cultural system, who pursue the same objective. Archer (1999:3) emphasises that the school curriculum should be aligned in a sequence, pace and relations with other subjects, including the remedial programmes for learners with learning challenges. The researcher's view is that the school curriculum should be focused on the type of learners that the school serve. This

means that when there are learners with special needs, the curriculum should be designed in accordance to accommodate them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study also found that there are still more hindrances to the implementation of inclusive education practices. The study, therefore, concluded that the school-based support teams in rural schools lack comprehensive skills to apply the policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS). The collaboration between the district-based support teams and school-based support teams is inadequate. Furthermore, the provision of support is an indispensable factor called for by successful implementation. On every level, inclusion should be based on the need for support. In addition, the study decided that the school curriculum is a barrier to the implementation of inclusive education, since it is not incorporated between the annual teaching plans (ATPs), work schedules and the inclusive education practices. The study further concluded that the Department of Basic Education should review its criteria to measure the quality and standardised implementation of inclusive education practices in schools.

Furthermore, the provision of support is an indispensable factor called for by successful implementation. On every level, inclusion should be based on the need for support. It is about maximizing the participation of all learners and minimizing barriers. The study was pursued to provide relevant intervention strategies to address the concerns that schools have regarding the implementation of inclusive education. The study yearned to provide guidance that will enlighten the Department of Basic Education with respect to the significance of inclusive education in rural public schools. Thus, the Department of Basic Education needs to put rigorous efforts into working with the school-based support teams to enhance the quality and standard of the practices and to ensure that all teachers are able to deal with the learners' diverse needs, from linguistically, culturally, religiously and educationally diverse family backgrounds, with no exception to those with disabilities.

Recommendations

- Collaboration between the school-based support teams and district-based support teams: the study discovered that there is inadequacy in collaboration between the school-based support teams and district-based support teams. The study recommends strong interaction between the school-based support teams and district-based support teams to avoid slow progress in the success of the implementation of inclusive education practices.
- Establishment of clear criteria to measure the quality and standardised practices of inclusive education: the study revealed that there are currently no clear measures for quality and standardised implementation of inclusion practices. The study recommends the establishment of appropriate measures to ensure that the implementation of inclusive education practices is of better quality and to an acceptable standard.
- The implementation of the policy of SIAS: the study found that the school-based support teams do justice in the implementation of the SIAS policy, hence the inappropriateness of learner profiling. The study, therefore, recommends that the Department of Basic Education should work together with the school-based support teams, and continuous monitoring to ensure that all teachers apply the SIAS policy sufficiently. This will enable teachers to know the type of learners they have and to fulfil their learning needs. Furthermore, schools will be safe environments for teaching and learning.

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Authors' contributions

I.B wrote the abstract, introduction and background of the study, the research questions, theoretical framework, methodology and conclusion, K.S wrote the recommendations of the study and the discussion of the findings.

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