NAVIGATING THE PROVISION OF SUPPORT TO LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN RURAL MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS: TEACHERS' CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Implementing support to learners experiencing barriers to learning in South African schools, has largely been presented with challenges which increasingly make it difficult for teachers to navigate their provision of support. Thus, the pragmatic realities show that there is a need to identify and combat such challenges. This study investigated challenges experienced by teachers in their attempt to support learners with special needs. The study is underpinned by the social constructivism research paradigm. The study used the transformative learning theory as its theoretical framework. The phenomenological qualitative research approach was employed to explore teachers' challenges in providing support to learners with special needs in mainstream rural schools. Data were collected using focus group interviews, with 36 purposively selected teachers in all 6 schools. The collected data was thematically analysed and interpreted using Braun & Clarke methods. The study discovered the following as major challenges hindering the provision of support to learners with special needs: a lack of teacher competency in managing the diverse learning needs of learners; an inability to improvise amidst the challenge of limited resources; as well as a lack of consistent and thorough training in attending to complex and severe learning disabilities. The study thereby recommended resource allocation, teacher professional development training in aspects relating to supporting learner special needs, strengthening of School-Based Support Team and initiation of collaborative networks, to be in place for the alleviation of the support challenges experienced by teachers.

Keywords: Challenges, mainstream schools, special needs, support, teachers.

1. Introduction and background

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, and the Education White Paper 6 (2015) view supporting learners' learning needs as a pivotal initiation which should promote equality in the educational setting. Both documents deem it mandatory for all learners to be supported academically regardless of their physical conditions, intellectual capacities, social standards, emotional positions, linguistic capabilities, or other conditions (UNESCO, 1994). Clear measures of support and intervention have been laid out by the Education White Paper 6 (2015), aimed at ensuring that all learners experiencing barriers to learning are educationally supported to the level of the demands of their experienced learning difficulties. Thus, the provision of support to learners with special needs is said to occur at different levels such as the initial screening guided by the learner profile; identification and assessment of barriers to learning; and supporting the identified learning needs, which is guided by the Support Needs Assessment Form 1 and 2 (Department of Education, 2014). The context of the SIAS Policy document takes into account the need for teachers to be proficient in their ability to possess a conceptual understanding and practical demands of providing support to learners with special needs. However, due to lack of support in rural schools, teachers are therefore charged with the responsibility of increasing their knowledge on aspects of support needs (Mawila, 2023).

The provision of support to learners with special needs in rural mainstream schools is challenged with frustrations and complaints from teachers, often because of the overpopulated classrooms, which makes it almost impossible to support all learners' learning needs (West & Meier, 2020; Tshangana, Nomtshongwana & Buka, 2023). On the other hand, a shortage of equipment, teaching aids, and well-suited infrastructure often poses a significant hindrance to teachers in the rural mainstream schooling system (Modikoa Pillay & Shipalana, 2023). In addition, large class sizes have been identified as a hindrance to supporting inclusive education practices (Seliane & Kgothule, 2022). Among other

contributing factors, mismanagement of disruptive behaviour is often reported as a result of overcrowding (Gagnon, Sylvester, & Marsh, 2021).

Challenges around teachers include limited access to information and training in dealing with learners with special needs (Engelbrecht, 2020). Teachers tend to demonstrate a sense of learned helplessness, which in turn, reduces conducive learning environment, further limiting levels of possible support towards learners with special education needs (Adewumi et al., 2019). This tends to position learners as referred cases to special schools, or categorised as progressed, all due to their learning needs being unidentified and thereby unsupported (George, 2019). In some cases, they are left to repeat a grade, tempering with learners' self-esteem, causing victimisation, and eventually dropping out of school. According to Traya and Lopez (2023) teachers tend to feel threatened by the demands and difficulties that lie with teaching in mainstream education settings, where they tend to doubt their ability to support learners' learning needs accordingly. Moreover, Nseibo, Vergunst, McKenzie, Kelly, Karisa, and Brian Watermeyer (2022) demonstrated such to occur because of a lack of teacher support, training, and preparation.

In mainstream rural settings, learners come from unsupported homes, where parental involvement is absent (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018). Furthermore, learners from low-income raking homes tend to perform poorly in their academic performance, as those raised by their grandparents tend to severely lack academic progress due to the lack of support at home (Owens, 2018). Moreover, some parents in rural settings seldom engage themselves in the educational affairs of their children and completely leave it to the school to carry the entire burden (Stelmach, 2020). In addition, lack of parental support makes it unbearable for teachers to function (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Despite inclusive education policies embracing values of equality and diversity (Education White Paper 6, 2015). Learners with special education needs, and those who come from impoverished households tend to be viewed by both teachers and other learners as different (Owens, 2018). Where teachers are unable to comprehend their attitudes as being discriminatory and contradictory towards the right to access education, which are negative (Muthukrishna & Pedra Engelbrecht, 2018).

2. Theoretical framework

The current study is premised on transformational learning theory by Jack Mezirow (1978). The theory focuses on changes that happens after learning (Hay, 2021). Transformative learning theory emphasise the need for effective changes in individuals' frames of reference (Fleming, 2022). In this study the transformative learning theory is used to help teachers to navigate on support services in rural schools. This may suggest that through the use of the theory teachers' perspectives will be transformed so they can navigate support services to learners who experience barriers to learning. Rodríguez and Barth (2020) argue that the transformative learning theory explores how people evolve their understanding and worldview through critical reflection. This means that teachers are supposed to reflect on their challenges in supporting learners so they can improve their teaching practices. Uddin (2019) also argues that teachers are the agents of change as they aim to make inclusive education meaningful by using suitable teaching pedagogies. This suggest that teachers can improve on the support they render to learners with special needs if their needs are attended to.

3. Methodology

The study is embedded in the social constructivist paradigm. Through the use and application of this paradigm, subjective knowledge and understanding of teachers' perspectives were investigated regarding support within mainstream schools of Mafikeng (Wahyuni, 2012). A qualitative approach which is an in-depth and subjective study that investigates people and events in their natural settings Creswell (2014). The study made use of phenomenological design to describe, interpret and make sense of the experiences of respondents about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). 36 teachers were purposively sampled from the 6 schools... his research study made use of focus group interviews, to obtain information that would answer the research questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The collected data were thematically analyzed using the six steps of Braun and Clarke (2019). The study is approved under the ethical number (N W U - 0 0 1 9 0 - 19 - A 2).

4. Data presentation and discussion

The study has accumulated rich data from over 36 research participants in all 6 schools visited in the rural settings of Mafikeng, in the North West Province, South Africa. However, only a few responses are presented as a result of the restricted number of pages for the article. Focus group interview data

shows a lack of teacher competency in catering to the diverse learning needs of learners; limited resources; as well as a lack of thorough teacher training in the development of skills and expertise, around the provision of support to learners with special needs. The results for the study are discussed under the following headings, namely, learner support needs; nature of support administered; and lack of training and resources.

4.1. Learner support needs

Table 1. Sampled responses on learner support needs.

Research Question: What learning needs do you encounter among learners in your Classroom?
Teacher 1, School A: "They can't read and if they can't read then they can't answer the questions in the examination."
Teacher 2, School B: "They can't cope in class, we have also noticed that they tend to have a low concentration span and unable to pay attention for a longer period of time."
Teacher 4, School E: "There are few who have visual problems and they can't see, in that regard, they tend to all want to sit at the front raw. They often come from abusive families, in that way if the learners already has barriers to learning it worsens the situation."
Teacher 4, School D: "Cognitive needs, for example processing new information and thinking Independently."
Teacher 3, School F: "Other learners do not have parental support, as means of assistance or internet provision to complete projects, and to some extent it is because other learners are in situations of child-headed families, where now they assume the responsibilities of caring for the younger ones."

The displayed shows how teachers are confronted with the complexities of learning barriers which they lacked the basic skills to support. Furthermore, it showed that they have not been exposed to any formal training, or preparation to be in the position of administering care and support to the learning needs of learners with special education needs. All of this alludes to the infectiveness of the District Based Support Team (DBST) in matters relating to support services rendered to schools. Teachers are concerned about the existing lack of the required resources needed to include, accommodate, and support the diverse learning needs of learners.

The posed findings resonate with that of (Engelbrecht, 2020) on issues pertaining to the helplessness there is in inclusive education practices due lack of pedagogical knowledge and teacher training thereof in dealing with learners with special needs.

Based on the above responses, factors related to the low socio-economic status of the learners and issues around them being in child-headed households contribute to teachers not knowing whether learners in question have barriers to learning, or if such barriers to learning are rather perpetuated by factors themselves. Furthermore, learners are reported to be lacking in their reading and writing abilities, where quite a substantial number have been observed to show signs of low concentration span. It is therefore reported that such learners tend to fall victim to bullying, "They are often ridiculed in class as a result of their barriers to learning or struggle", said teacher 5, of school D.

4.2. Nature of support administered

Table 2. Sampled responses on nature of support administered.

Research Question: In what ways do you include (administer care and support) learners with special education needs in your classroom?
Teacher 3, School A: *"Not having the skills to administer care and support to learners with special learning needs, I find myself helpless."*
Teacher 2, School B: *"I am not trained to perform the skills of a special needs education teacher and I am not have not being trained for that."*
Teacher 4, School E: *"We report special needs cased to the department of education, but often it does not solve the problem."*
Teacher 5, School C: *"For those who cannot see properly during examinations we prepare A3 question papers for them to see."*
Teacher 4, School D: *"It is difficult to include them with limited resources, we often want to include them, but the absence of the resources becomes the problem."*

Teachers attested to the fact that their support methods may have not been as successful and effective as anticipated. However, some maintained to have observed their methods yielding better results, while on the other hand, other teachers reported to have had no other methods to utilise. It was rather interesting to observe teachers' resilience despite their functioning in isolation, without prior training or preparation, and limited resources. Even with the intervention strategies laid out, teachers

admitted that their strategies may have not always been effective to successfully support the existing learning needs in their schools.

This reveals how teachers are confronted with extreme difficulties while attempting to supporting learners learning needs. Where in spite of the guidelines and policies formulated, clear practical direction to affect such directives are not adequately relayed. Although teachers are to assume a role of an interventionalist in their classrooms as asserted by (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban, 2016). It still remains that teacher are to be thoroughly trained and supported on how to actualise the already existing Support policy documents that should guide the process of support in their classrooms.

4.3. Lack of training and resources

Table 3. Sampled responses on Lack of training and resources.

Research Question: What learning needs do you encounter among learners in your Classroom?
Teacher 2, School B: *"Teachers need a comprehensive training with regard to inclusive education."*
Teacher 5, School C: *"There is a need for a thorough training sessions from the department of education, instead of just dumping us with the responsibilities and not teaching us on how to deal with it."*
Teacher 4, School D: *"I need to be taught how to care and support learners' learning needs, especially those with learning disabilities. As a teacher I am not capable of knowing one hundred per cent if learners have barriers to learning or not.""*

Lack of training and the unavailability of resources posed a threat. The fact that 30 teacher participants reported to have not received training of any kind on how to support learners with special education needs, depicts the strain under which both teachers and learners are functioning. The above results are in harmony with those of Hoppey (2016) as well as Nseibo et al. (2022), whom discovered a prevalence of inadequate teacher preparation and training.

5. Recommendations

Resource allocation necessary for support provision in schools should be prioritized. Furthermore, School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) should be given quarterly comprehensive training and equipped on the high demands and complexities of handling the educational needs of learners with special education needs. Moreover, teachers would need to undergo practical training where related special education methodologies and pedagogies are initiated per school in accordance with the educational needs experienced. Lastly, the essence of collaboration between different structures, systems and role-players in schools would need to be realised and strengthened for support to be affected.

6. Conclusion

From the results of the study, it is evident that teachers in rural mainstream schools of Mafikeng want to support learners with special needs. However, it is also evident that teachers are burdened and left to function in isolation, making it greatly difficult to navigate their way in fully supporting learners' learning needs. A major concern is that teachers have not been trained to navigate the demands that comes with supporting complex learning needs within inclusive education practices. The implications, therefore, show this to have considerably hindered teachers from meeting the inclusive education demands. The overall predicament ultimately places the learners in a disadvantaged position, due to lack of educational support. So long as responsible structures and stakeholders at the higher level of the education system do not engage collaboratively in resolving the existing challenges, with practical and realistic solutions, the expectation of teachers to produce the anticipated outcomes from what was never initially invested in will continue.

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