

EXPLORING THE SUPPORT NEEDS OF TEACHERS IN INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Supporting teachers in inclusive schools is of paramount importance in the South African education system as it helps to enhance education for sustainable development. Supporting teachers also benefits them to get exposure to inclusive pedagogies. Even though teachers have undergone pre-service training, and some also received in-service training, it is apparent that teachers do not receive adequate support to teach in inclusive classrooms. Framed within the Transformative Learning Theory as the theoretical framework, this study sought to explore the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. By utilising transformative learning theory, the identified support needs may aid in transforming the teachers' frame of reference regarding their teaching practices so that they can transform through the realization of their support needs. The study is entrenched within the qualitative research approach and use the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism is preferred because it allows the teachers to construct their own reality of their support needs in inclusive schools. 12 participants from two (2) full-service schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District were purposively sampled. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews. Analysis of data was done through Braun's six-step of thematic data analysis method. The findings propose that the teachers in inclusive schools require in-service training and workshops that are continuous. The teaching and learning resources for the benefit of both teachers and learners were also highlighted as the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. In addition, collaboration with parents and district officials was highlighted as another support needs for teachers working in inclusive education settings. It is recommended that the school management teams, SBST and DBST ensure that teachers are trained continuously on various learner barriers and offer practical skills for completing the SNA1 referral form. Furthermore, it is recommended that SMT and SBST should encourage parents to be involved in the learners' learning.

Keywords: *Inclusive schools, instructional pedagogies, support needs, support services, teachers.*

1. Introduction and background

Globally, inclusive education (IE) was initiated as a result of the worldwide conference on Special Education that was held in Salamanca in 1994. The Salamanca conference proposed that all educational systems worldwide should be inclusive of varied learner diversity (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). Like other countries, South Africa is a signatory of the Salamanca statement and framework on special needs education (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit & Van De Venter, 2016). Inclusive education should provide equal educational opportunities for all learners, regardless of their inabilities, abilities, backgrounds, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Inclusive education policies regard a teacher as the key and primary stakeholder in implementing inclusion (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Ayaya, Makoelle & Van der Merwe, 2020; Chow, 2023).

In South Africa, the Education White Paper 6 on special needs education (Department of Education [DoE], 2001) was specifically promulgated to guide the implementation of an inclusive education system. It was in this inclusive policy that the South African Education system was divided into three categories of schools namely, ordinary or mainstream schools, Full-Service Schools (FSS), and Special Schools as Resource Centres (SSRCs) as a strategy of ensuring inclusion in schools (DoE, 2001). This means teachers should embrace inclusive practices in their instructional pedagogy. According to UNESCO (1994), inclusive schools should offer quality education for all learners, including learners with disabilities thereby enhancing education for sustainable development. However, for teachers to fully embrace inclusive education practices, their support needs should be prioritised.

International and national inclusive policies emphasise the need for teachers to be supported. For example, the Salamanca declaration (UNESCO, 1994) highlighted that teachers should be supported in inclusive educational settings. South African Education White Paper 6 also stipulates that teachers should

be supported to enhance the implementation of inclusive education practices (DoE, 2010). In addition, the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy guideline further emphasised the provision of support to teachers as an enabler of inclusive pedagogies within classrooms (DBE, 2014). Support structures such as School Based Support Teams (SBST) and District Based Support Teams (DBST) were also established to provide support to teachers and learners in South Africa (DoE, 2001; Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). However, it seems the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools are not prioritised as teachers are still challenged to maintain inclusive pedagogies.

Various studies reported the challenges of meeting the support needs of teachers worldwide. According to Chow (2023), it can be challenging to teach in an inclusive education setting if teachers do not have support and resources. Other challenges include huge workload and time constraints, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of training (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). Lack of collaboration was highlighted as the challenge in the implementation of inclusion (Ayaya et al., 2020; Chow, De Bruin, and Sharma, 2023). Van Staden-Payne and Nel (2023) reiterated that inadequate training of teachers, the ineffective functioning of the DBE, the incompetence of the school management team, lack of parental involvement, and inadequate resources contribute to ineffective instructional pedagogy that is not inclusive. The lack of resources in inclusive education settings was reported by Engelbrecht (2020). Therefore, a snapshot of the challenges outlined depicts that the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools should be explored.

2. Study objective

This study sought to explore the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. To successfully achieve this objective, this study was guided by this research question: What are the support needs of teachers teaching in inclusive schools in South Africa?

3. Theoretical framework

The transformative learning (TL) theory that was developed by Mezirow (1978) was used as a theoretical framework for this study. Mezirow defined TL as ‘learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change’ (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58-59). As a framework, the transformative learning theory explores how people evolve their understanding and worldview (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020) through critical reflection and new information that they would have received. In this study, the transformative learning theory was used to explore the challenges and the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. This means teachers’ experiences can be used as a benchmark to shape and transform practice through the realisation of their support needs. Thus, transformative learning involves epistemological change (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020) where teachers examine, and reflect on their support needs.

4. Methodology

Embedded in the interpretivism paradigm, the study sought to explore the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. Interpretivist researchers emphasise that the world could be best understood through first-hand experience of the insiders’ perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) also argue that with the interpretivist paradigm, the researchers can benefit from getting in-depth meanings from the participants. A qualitative research approach was used in this study to gain insight into the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. The qualitative research approach was preferred as it allowed the investigation of the phenomena in a real-world setting (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) which produced in-depth knowledge of the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. Purposive sampling which aims to identify participants with the same experiences as the central phenomena of the study (Patton, 2015; Thorne, 2016) was used to recruit 12 participants from two FSS in the North West province. This sampling procedure allowed for the identification of participants who contributed to the shared understanding of the required support needs of teachers in the FFS. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) argue that semi-structured interviews permit interview questions to be focused to further enhance understanding of phenomena. Semi-structured interviews were the preferred data collection method as the aim of this study was to better understand teachers’ support needs. Braun and Clarke’s (2014) six-step thematic data analysis method was used to analyse data. Ethical approval to carry out this study was granted with the ethical approval number (N W U - 0 0 4 1 3 - 2 3 - A 2), and the adherence to respect for participants, anonymity, and confidentiality was safeguarded.

5. Findings and discussion

The findings of the study are discussed in this section. Three main themes that emerged during the data analysis process are presented. Few quotations representing each theme are presented. Pseudonyms are used to safeguard the identity of the teachers. The three themes that emerged in this study included continuous training, teaching and learning resources, and collaboration.

5.1. Continuous teacher training

Teachers emphasised the need for continuous teacher training as it may assist them in effectively supporting the learners in the classrooms. This is evident in the following excerpt:

Yes there is training provided in our school, but the training is seldom, as a result, we do not feel supported enough. I think the department and the support structures can do more (Zakhele).

Siyanda also echoed the same sentiments by indicating the following:

Training is provided by the departmental education specialists, but you know the training is not enough. Last year when I went for training it was for two days only and it focussed on Autism Spectrum disorder... but we didn't know how to complete the SNA1 form from the SIAS document. I wish the training could be more frequent and be more practical (Siyanda).

From the above findings, teachers propose continuous teacher training as their support need. This means that teachers maintain that the training should not be a once-off intervention and should take place as frequently as possible. In addition, the continuous training should focus on the practical completion of Support Need Assessment Form 1 (SNA1) as embedded in the SIAS document. This support need for continuous training is congruent with the findings reported by Van Staden-Payne and Nel (2023) who reported that the training of teachers in FSS is inadequate. These findings further corroborate the findings by Chow et al. (2023) who reported continuous teacher training as the perceived support need within the inclusive education setting.

5.2. Teaching and learning resources

Teachers mentioned the need for teaching and learning resources for the learners to fully benefit in their learning experiences as expressed by Sibusiso and Bulelwa in the excerpts below:

Resources are key. As a teacher, I can do my best, but when the learner does not have an assistive device it means they may not access learning fully. So, it is a problem. At least the school management and the DBST should prioritise the assistive devices for the learners (Sibusiso).

At my school, we have many learners in the foundation phase, but there are no teaching assistants. I wish we can have these assistants so that they can assist us in supporting the learners with barriers to learning. You know if you have many learners in your classroom without a teacher assistant, you struggle to give attention to learners who may need support (Bulelwa).

The above findings depict that teachers recommend the prioritisation of teaching and learning resources to improve instructional pedagogies. This finding further recommends that the availability of teaching and learning resources should not be for the benefit of teachers only but should be available for the learners as well so that they can be able to access learning and improve their educational outcomes. This finding corresponds with the findings by Adewumi and Mosito (2019) and Engelbrecht (2020) who reported that teachers need teaching and learning resources that may enhance inclusion.

5.3. Collaboration

Teachers mentioned that they are collaborating, but they feel that the collaboration is inadequate. See below quote from Precious:

Collaboration is there... I collaborate with other teachers; I involve learners, but parents are not always available for interventions. My challenge is that the collaboration does not involve other key stakeholders like parents (Precious).

In addition, Pheliwe echoed the similar sentiments by indicating the following:

Stakeholders do not always respond to our requests. Sometimes we wait the whole year waiting for the intervention from the education specialists working at the district level (Pheliwe).

The finding above indicates the need for collaboration as a cornerstone of inclusive instructional pedagogies. Further, this finding highlights the unsatisfactory collaborative partnerships between teachers and district officials. This finding makes it clear that collaboration is critical in inclusive education settings. This finding corroborates the findings by Ayaya et al. (2020) and Chow et al. (2023) who reported that collaboration is critical for fostering inclusive practice in schools.

6. Conclusion

The study explored the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. The findings propose that the teachers in inclusive schools require in-service training and workshops that are continuous. The teaching and learning resources for the benefit of both teachers and learners were also highlighted as the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. In addition, collaboration with parents and district officials was highlighted as another support need for teachers working in inclusive education settings. It is recommended that the school management teams, SBST and DBST ensure that teachers are trained continuously on various learner barriers and offer practical skills for completing the SNA1 referral form. Furthermore, it is recommended that SMT and SBST should encourage parents to be involved in the learners' learning. This is because parents are seen as the key stakeholders in inclusive education settings. These findings should not be generalised because this qualitative study was undertaken in two FSS in the North West province of South Africa. It is proposed that further research be conducted with a focus on the efficacy of continuous training and the collaboration skills that may assist in enhancing collaboration among stakeholders working in inclusive schools.

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