EXAMINING TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATORS

Mziwonke Luningo, Christabel Dudu Mantlana, & Limkani Sincuba
Faculty of Education, Walter Sisulu University (South Africa)

Abstract

The study examines the perspectives of South African educators on inclusive education, focusing on their experiences and challenges in implementing inclusive practices in primary schools. Employing a qualitative research methodology within an interpretive paradigm, the research involved six teachers from two mainstream primary schools selected through purposive sampling to provide rich insights into their experiences. Meaning that the study interpreted what the SBSTs were saying. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of teachers' views on inclusive education. The theoretical framework for the abstract examining teacher perspectives on inclusive education is Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key themes from the data, revealing that while teachers generally support inclusive education, they face significant challenges such as inadequate training, limited resources, and large class sizes. Many educators expressed a need for more professional development opportunities such as training sessions, teacher workshops on effective teaching methods for inclusive education like differentiation, accommodation and adaptation to address diverse learning needs effectively. The findings highlight the critical role of teacher empowerment in fostering an inclusive classroom environment. Recommendations include enhancing in-service training focused on inclusive practices, promoting educator collaboration, and improving communication with parents and communities. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of School- Based Support Teams (SBST) and District-Based Support Teams (DBST) in providing necessary support for both teachers and learners. The research contributes valuable insights into the complexities of implementing inclusive education in South Africa, underscoring the need for systemic changes that support educators in their roles. Ultimately, it aims to inform policy and practice to enhance educational experiences for all learners in inclusive settings.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, educator perspectives, professional development, support team.*

1. Introduction

In the contemporary educational discipline, the concept of inclusive education has emerged as a beacon of hope and progress, particularly within the Foundation Phase (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022). The paradigm asserts that education is a universal right, transcending barriers of difference, and mandates that every child, irrespective of their unique backgrounds or abilities, is entitled to receive an education that is not only accessible but also free and equitable. Inclusive education faces challenges such as inadequate teacher training, lack of resources, and insufficient parental involvement, all needing to be addressed to reach its full potential (Materechera, 2020). Effective implementation of inclusive education necessitates well-prepared teachers, as highlighted by various scholars. (Vaughn et al., 2024) Parental involvement is another crucial aspect of inclusive education. Parents often possess unique insights into their children's needs, making active participation in the educational process essential (Sijuola & Davidova, 2022). Despite these frameworks, challenges persist due to overcrowded classrooms and insufficient teacher training (Segooa & Molise, 2023). This study deals with the importance of support systems that should be employed for effective implementation of inclusive education. It explores various support systems and aims to inform policy and practice to enhance educational experiences for all learners in inclusive settings.

2. Literature review

Educational policies highlight the role of School-Based Support Teams (SBST) in fostering inclusivity, with ongoing teacher training and community involvement being vital for its success (Morgado

et al., 2024). Despite their critical role, SBSTs encounter significant challenges, including inadequate training, lack of resources, and insufficient collaboration with parents (Tsotetsi & Omodan, 2020).

Parental engagement is also critical to the success of SBST initiatives, as strong home-school relationships improve educational outcomes for learners with barriers to learning (Mpanza & Govender, 2022). Literature emphasises the vital role of parents in their children's education. It shows that lack of parental involvement negatively affects academic performance, student behaviour, and teacher morale. Teachers are enthusiastic about Inclusive Education (IE), but research shows a significant gap in addressing the needs of Learners with barriers to Learning (LEBL) (Banoo, 2021). This shortfall is attributed to insufficient training, as highlighted in a study by Carballo et al., 2021.

3. Theoretical framework

Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory takes the view that for professional development to get realized, the teacher should participate in social activities and groups (Johnson & Golombek, 2020). The teacher's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as a learning space between his/her present level of teaching knowledge consists of his/her content (theoretical) and pedagogical knowledge and skills and his next (potential) level of knowledge to be attained with the support of others as in the case of inclusive education whereby some teachers only have theory but are grappling with the practical part on how to support learners with barriers to learning(Vaughn et al., 2024) The teacher trainer, as a more knowledgeable partner, may provide the scaffolding, and they engage in mutual professional change. The program designer of professional development should identify the needs and goals of the teacher trainees so that the less knowledgeable trainees could move up through higher stages of ZPD functioning under the supervision of more knowledgeable trainers, which in this case are the effective teaching methods in an inclusive setting (Margolis, 2020). Mentoring and peer coaching are the examples of procedures through which the novice teachers could experience professional development under a more significant other's supervision and collegiality (Walters et al., 2020). The school principals and authorities in the ministry of education could have second thoughts on designing specific professional development programs during which novice teachers are given opportunities to benefit from one another's contributions, knowledge, and experiences (Sancar et al., 2021). Such specific professional development programs may include some specific learning barriers like linguistic or dyscalculia (Kunwar, 2024).

4. Methodology

The study utilised a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm using a case study research design to describe and explain the experiences of SBSTs from their perspectives, focusing on their beliefs and meaning systems. This method emphasises how participants interpret their experiences and construct their worldviews, making it relevant for understanding SBSTs' challenges in supporting Foundation Phase teachers (May & Perry, 2022). The emphasis was on their viewpoints, as insiders, in understanding the social realities.

4.1. Research design
The research design used was a case study, since the study was exploring two cases in two different natural settings, using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time (Hancock et al., 2021). The study attempted to understand the SBST`s experiences and challenges in providing support to FP teachers.

4.2. Data collection
The research was descriptive, exploratory and inductive with data collected in natural settings i.e., at schools through interviews, observations and document analysis (Morgan, 2022). Focus groups of six SBST were used for interviews. The interviews were voice- recorded with the SBST permission.

4.3. Data analysis
This research design enabled thematic analysis of the collected data. To make sense of the information gathered on learners` experiences in inclusive education from the learners' perspective, data was categorized and coded into themes for interpretation (Lochmiller, 2021).

4.4. Population and sampling

The chosen strategy for this research was purposeful sampling of two mainstream primary schools, with the sample composed of participants who have the most characteristic and typical attributes for the topic under study. These schools were chosen through identification from prior information to enhance data quality (Campbell et al., 2020).

4.5. Data presentation and treatment

The information was then taken back to the participants to verify if their written responses reflected what they said (Motulsky, 2021). The final results were the general description of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Maxwell, 2021). After the verification of the data by the participants, theory was generated.

4.6. Ethical consideration

Letters requesting access to conduct the study at the sampled schools were forwarded to the school principals and the Department of Education (DoE). The principals and DoE responded to the letter in writing giving permission for research to be conducted. Participants were given consent letters requesting permission to participate in the study. The SBST participated freely and gave the information needed. They were informed of their rights to quit participation anytime they wished. They were also informed that they might refuse to be tape recorded. Participation was done voluntary with no coercion, force, threat or intimidation to give information to the researchers (Aragonés Calleja & Sánchez Martínez, 2023).

5. Findings and discussions

Findings revealed the insight into the teachers' perspectives on inclusive education. The following themes emerged from the collected data: insufficient training, lack of parental involvement and the importance of SBST and DBST in implementing IE.

5.1. Insufficient training

One challenge the SBST raised, was the inadequate training they received. The findings indicated that SBST believed that not all teachers understood the concept of IE because they were not trained enough to specialise in LEBL. They further mentioned that even those who were trained often lack sufficient specialisation. To make things worse, they believe that teachers struggle even to understand the inclusive education policy (SIAS) despite their training, lacking the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively address learners' challenges with learning barriers (LEBL). They further stated that because of this deficiency in knowledge and skills, they received assistance from the social workers when they had to refer learners. While they were willing to support all students, they lacked confidence in implementing the IE policy, leading to frustration. They took the view that the current situation would improve if all teachers could be trained and capacitated in IE, especially in dealing with LEBL.

The philosophy of inclusion in the South African education system is rooted in the Constitution and emphasises human dignity, equality, and human rights. SBST faces several challenges, including inadequate training that limits its ability to support learners with barriers (Dlamini, 2022). Despite their limited knowledge, SBST is willing to help learners through trial and error. Teachers feel the DBST's training for SBST could have been more effective, as the lack of skills and knowledge has hindered the implementation of Inclusive Education (IE) (Nong, 2020).

5.2. Lack of parental involvement

SBST indicated that there was no collaboration among teachers to enhance communication between parents and the community as the result parents do not want to attend school or cooperate with SBST. They further showed that some parents were even ashamed of their children's disabilities, and this posed a challenge to parental involvement. SBST indicated that learners must be helped by their parents with reading at home, assist them in writing words and doing mathematical calculations at an early stage.

The lack of involvement of parents and the community in school activities and the general support of children's education hurts the implementation of IE, as a lack of understanding, communication, and support hinders its practical implementation (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). The parents or caregivers of learners are the source of information about the child. Studies reveal that (Wilder, 2023) learners who perform well at school are those whose parents showed interest in their education at the early stages of their education and who engaged in supporting learning activities such as rhyming and shared book reading.

5.3. Importance of SBST and DBST

SBST believed that they should play a vital role in IE as they are responsible for screening, identifying, and supporting teachers, learners, curriculum, and institution as a whole. After identifying LEBL, they should provide individual attention and guide FP to complete support needs assessment forms (SNA 1) with inputs from parents or caregivers. This is done so that the DBST can complete SNA 2 in case some learners need intervention. Despite that, SBST noted that teachers had not grasped the concept of inclusive education (IE).

The primary role of the School-Based Support Team (SBST) is to identify and address barriers to learning (Agulhas, 2021). They also interact with the District-Based Support Team (DBST) to provide specialised services for teachers facing these challenges. To enhance its effectiveness, it is essential to adopt best practices from schools that excel in inclusive education and to hire experts who can demonstrate support strategies in classrooms (Gahutu, 2024). Pre-service training in inclusive education for future teachers is also recommended (Makhalemele & Tlale, 2020).

6. Conclusion

From the research findings, it is apparent that SBST had inadequate knowledge and skills for helping LEBL and, as a result, did not adequately support LEBL. There is no collaboration among educators and no communication with the parents and communities. Lastly, the SBST and DBST are not providing the necessary support to the teachers and learners.

7. Recommendations

To ensure effective implementation of inclusive education, the following recommendations were made:
- All schools and districts should establish the School Based Support Teams (SBST) and District Based Support Teams (DBST), ensure their functionality to drive the programme of implementing inclusive education (IE) and ensure that the necessary support is provided for both teachers and learners. Without these structures, IE will remain a dream. This structure should be made of dedicated members as envisaged by the department of education.
- All SBST and DBST should undergo in-service training on inclusive practices so that they know how to support teachers and learners to deal with the learners experiencing barriers to learning. Attending in-service workshops, language teaching education (LTE) course rooms, and conferences could serve as a crucible for the novice teachers to continually test and change their emerging pedagogical concepts and practices and in this way, sustain their professional development.
- Inclusive education needs collaborative efforts, therefore, collaboration among educators must be promoted, coupled with improved communication with parents and communities. Additional to that, parents should be urged to start giving the information about the children so that the SBST and DBST could know exactly which areas need support.

8. Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of the study was that it could not be generalized because it was dealing with cases in the two schools. To overcome this limitation, the focus was on gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. Another limitation was time because, during the data collection, schools were busy with music and exams, so there was not enough time to gather more data. To overcome this limitation, teachers were interviewed during break time. Money was also another challenge, especially during the data collection, because everything was done using money, including internet costs, photocopying, transport costs, etc. To overcome this challenge, personal budget had to be sacrificed.

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