

DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE PRAXIS AMONG TEACHER TRAINEES ON INCLUSIVE PRACTICES THROUGH ENGAGEMENT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Pateka Pamella Jama

*COMBER, School of Psychosocial Education, Faculty of Education,
Potchefstroom Campus (South Africa)*

Abstract

The provision of learner support services to learners that are experiencing barriers to learning is continuing to be a matter of concern. Among the challenges that impede support provision is inadequacies in learner support teacher training which leads to inconsistencies between theory, pedagogies and classroom practices. The aim of this study is to bridge the gap between learner support theory and its application through professional learning communities formed by learner support teacher trainees and learner support lecturers. Methodologically, this study employed PALAR design within a transformative paradigm and photovoice was used as a data generation method to first establish how does module content currently capacitates teacher trainees with the ability to apply learner support in real-life situations. A voluntary purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 25 learner support student trainees. Findings revealed 1) identifiable gaps between what the content says and how to apply it; 2) A need for in-service opportunities while still in training and 3) practical collaborative initiatives where different stakeholders work together for the benefit of learners experiencing barriers to learning. This study highlighted the invaluable students' voice on the content embedded in their training materials.

Keywords: *Inclusive praxis, inclusive practices, PALAR, professional learning.*

1. Introduction and background

The ideology underlying education systems globally have changed from the medical model that was preoccupied by deficit to a socioecological model as from the adoption of the Salamanca Statement in 1994. The Salamanca Statement is a landmark that advocates for governments around the world to prioritize inclusive education to cater for different learning needs of all learners regardless of the barriers they experience (UNESCO, 1994). However, many experienced teachers, with some in managerial positions, are influenced by their historical experiences of differentiation and intervention and are likely to influence the younger generation of newly qualified teachers trained in learner support (Maree, Condy, & Meda, 2023). In the South African education context, learner support refers to the range of educational, psychosocial, and administrative interventions provided to help learners succeed academically—especially in a system shaped by inequality and diverse learning needs. Learner support is grounded in national policy frameworks such as the Education White Paper 6 (2001) and SIAS (2014) on Inclusive Education.

According to Hay (2021), the medical model is deficit-focused, hence it had to give way to the socioecological model that recognises the role of the social context in supporting learners experiencing barriers to learning. This deficit model further contributes to the beliefs of some experienced teachers that they cannot set the support of learners in motion, because they are not skilled to carry out their support role (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). The current concern about implementing inclusive practices including the screening, identification, assessment, and support (SIAS) process is that there are different qualification levels, different levels of knowledge and commitment to inclusive pedagogical practices among teachers (Lopes & Oliveira, 2021). This dissonance tends to confuse newly employed teachers, even those trained in learner support whose focus is on looking at the learning needs of different learners as well as employing different strategies to accommodate different learning needs.

In a comparative study about inclusive education among in-service teachers and pre-service student teachers, better inclusive attitudes were identified from pre-service teacher when compared to in-service teachers (Antonio Rodríguez Fuentes et al., 2024). We are of the view that the theoretical content of learner support provided must be combined with professional learning communities to ground pre-service teachers for them to withstand any persuasion to dominating beliefs they will find in schools in relation to inclusive practices. As Msane, Hlongwane and Kent (2023) assert that many preservice teachers struggle to provide learner support once employed as teachers due to inadequate training that does not prepare them for application for the application of inclusive practices. Hence, in this study, professional learning communities (PLCs) seemed well-suited to attend to the disconnect between what theory mandates and what practice and pedagogical practices entail.

PLCs refers to coming together as a group of people with the intentions of developing their individual and collective capacity to improve outcomes through engagement in systematic, regular, and sustained cycles (Brodie, 2021). As learner support lecturers and learner support students we formed PLCs to take heed to a challenge posed by Matolo and Rambuda (2021), who said that higher education institutions must capacitate aspiring pre-service teachers for education support services towards learners experiencing barriers to learning. Scholars recommend professional learning communities for their ability to 1) allow participants to have access to practices that adequately support partnerships in the implementation of different policies Almacky and Alqahtani (2021), 2) PLCs foster shaped socialisation between different role players Woulfin and Jones (2021) and Brodie (2021), and 3) create a safe space needed to address their fears (Kgothule et al., 2021). Based on the above, as lecturers of one of learner support modules which is offered from 1st year to 4th at different levels, together with those students who granted permission agreed to formulate PLCs to answer the question, how does Learner support content currently equip pre-service teachers for inclusive practices?

2. Design and data generation method

This study used Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) as a design. PALAR is grounded in a transformative paradigm and democratic values that acknowledge input of all co-researchers (Wood, 2020). This paper reports on the findings that emerged from cycle 1 of the participatory action research and action learning (PALAR) larger project that had 3 iterative cycles. A transformative paradigm was used as a framework due to its characteristic of bringing about change, promoting openness through collaborative and participatory forms of knowledge generation (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2020). The paradigm is based on four key philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological (Guba & Lincoln, 2011). Regarding ontology, the transformative paradigm recognises reality as historically bound and ever-changing due to social, political, cultural, and power-based factors. A voluntary purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 25 Learner support pre-service student teachers, doing levels 1 and 2. The choice of these participants is based on the fact that these students are already exposed to the framework that is grounding learner support theory and they will also be with us for 2-3 years, when the strategies developed in the project will be applied to see if they bring the expected outcomes or not in the application of the theory. To attend to power relations, the independent recruiters were invited to explain the purpose of the project and let each student decide whether they would like to be part of it or not, without being coerced. Yeo and Woolmer (2022) emphasise that when a faculty member wishes to conduct research ethical issues attending to issues of power and coercion of students to give consent needs to be addressed. Photovoice was used as data generation method as it affords a platform to make powerful statements about the issue with the aim of bringing lasting change and giving a voice to all participants (Miller, & Kurth, 2022). Photovoice was suitable in this cycle for getting insights Wood (2019), into how Learner support content is currently preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive practice. ShoWed method was used to analyse photovoice generated data. ShoWed is a data analysis method that supports photographs and discussions related to them (Shaffer, 1979). Switzer and Flicker (2021) assert that ShoWed provides rich data while also avoiding the influence of power relations in photovoice data analysis. ShoWed allows co-researchers to answer the following questions, 1) S- what do you see here? 2) h- what is happening here? 3) o- how does this relate to our lives? 4) W- why does this situation exist? 5- e- how could this image educate the class? 6) d- what can we do about it? (Wang & Burris, 1997).

3. Objective

The objective that this study reports on is to determine whether the Learner support content currently equips pre-service teachers for inclusive practices.

4. Data presentation and discussion

This section presents photovoice taken out of a number of photovoice from pre-service student teachers who participated in the first cycle of the bigger project where they were responding to the question on how Learner support module content equips them for inclusive practices.

Theme 1: A cry for intervention to enable us to reach our potential

Pre-service teachers trained in learner support are of the view that the content is insufficient and therefore it cannot make them reach a full potential as learner support teachers.

The Learner support content that we have been teaching for years proved to have some gaps thus affecting pre-service student teachers' learning which we would have not known about if we did not involve our students in the PLC and allow them space to voice their concerns.

Figure 1 is a picture of a building under construction with workers on top of the scaffold who are looking at the top of the building, with one individual at the bottom also looking upwards.

Figure 1. A students cry for intervention: Google picture construction.



The top of the building is the aim, the overall completion of the building and roofing the building to close everything off, which represents the general knowledge. The person at bottom represents our lecturers and those in the middle of the building represent students.

*Through assistance of our lecturers scaffolding content for us, we are in the middle of the building, but the part above can be filled with application of the content. Application of the theory is a missing requirement for me to reach my full potential which can be demonstrated by the overall completion of the building. I went to a special school this year and to be honest, theoretically, I knew how to manage classroom, but it was in the application when I realized that I do not have skills necessary for a classroom for the deaf. There was instance where I was left with learners that I could not communicate with as they use SASL, such that they were forced to write down, and I also respond in writing.
[Photovoice 1- P1]*

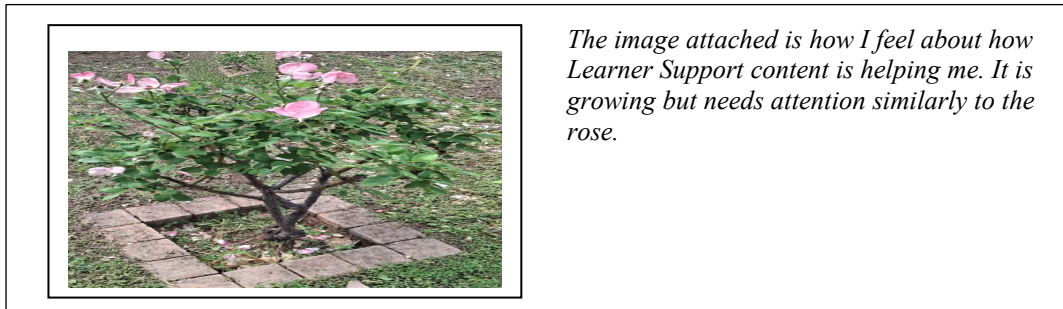
Teacher efficacy is said to be an important ingredient to the implementation of inclusive education implementation as it builds confidence needed in building an inclusive mindset leading to identifying as inclusive professional (Edstrom & Cervantes, 2025). It is evident that pre-service teachers view full implementation of inclusive education as far fetched as long as the training provided to them does not incorporate application skills. Theory proved its insufficiency in the four weeks of work integrated learning where a student was placed in school for the deaf, where he did not have even basic skills needed to communicate with a deaf community. This is in line with Walton and Engelbrecht (2022), when asserting that provision of learning support is affected by limited knowledge and skills which are necessary for teacher efficacy.

Theme 2: Dual practice calls for dual opportunities while still in training

Learner support is crafted for practice, although much focus is on theory which is expected to be only applied fully after completion of the studies. A mitigation associated with mismatch between inclusive education policies and what it was intended to achieve in practice Motitswe (2025), is also evident in the training provided to pre-service students who will be future teachers. Having teachers trained in Learner support who feel inadequately trained is detrimental to the academic success of learners experiencing barriers to learning and a proof enough to inadequate teacher preparation and training (Madiba & Masunungure, 2025).

Figure 2 is a rose that is surrounded by a square of paving bricks, there are also fallen petals on the lawn nearby.

Figure 2. The rose.



Inclusive education application is said to be cumbered by gaps including the one between what teachers do when compared to what learners expect for their learning to take place (Makhalemele, Mayimele & Jama, 2025). By selecting this rose, the participant communicates the idea that progress and flourishing occur alongside constraints and boundaries as represented by the bricks surrounding the rose. Although the rose illustrates how pre-service Learner support students' progress through stages of growth when provided with learner support theory but the thorns along the stem represent the structural barriers that often challenges the application in real life classroom context. This finding affirms Maree, Condy and Meda's (2023) assertion, where in-service teachers' influence tends to influence newly appointed teachers, as they tend to overlook the provision of learner support to learners who depend on it before they can attain learning. The image therefore invites critical engagement with the dualities inherent in lived experiences and encourages Learner support lecturers to consider the interplay between how content and practice are both valued, for pre-service teachers to be fully prepared for application. Within the photovoice framework, the rose serves as both an aesthetic object and a conceptual tool, enabling deeper insight into how pre-service student teachers interpret their environments, negotiate challenges, and construct meaning in their everyday lives.

5. Implications of the study

Professional learning communities are a safe platform that bridges power relation boundaries among members. Pre-service student teachers' concerns were first communicated when pre-service student teachers saw that their input is sought for as each one was given an opportunity to inform both content taught in Learner support modules and its shortcomings in preparing them for its application. Professional learning communities can provide a safe space for different stakeholders in support provision contrary to blame shifting that has been the status quo when it comes to hinderances in the implementation of inclusive education, where different stakeholders would blame district support team and support services for failing them. The experience we had in the PLC was that of identifying our challenges to come with workable solutions without blame shifting.

6. Conclusions

Hindrances to inclusive practice can be traced back to teacher education where theory is not balanced with actual practice. When theory is not balanced with practice pre-service teachers trained in Learner support leave the higher education institutions with uncertainty on how to apply Learner support theory. This calls for revision as it impairs the support expected to be provided to learners experiencing different barriers to learning as some of Learner support pre-service teachers are employed specifically for providing support to learners experiencing barriers not as subject specialists. Collaborative approach plays a crucial role in increasing confidence to different stakeholders on expressing their fears thereby calling for interventions as pre-service teachers used PLC platform to express their concerns.

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