

EXPLORING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SUPPORT SERVICES IN ENHANCING TEACHERS' INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

Effective implementation of support services depends on the enhancement of inclusive teacher pedagogies. However, principles of the medical model predominate traditional teacher pedagogies hence a need for teacher training that promotes inclusive practices. This study aimed at exploring teachers' pedagogical practices for effective support provision within mainstream schools. Using a qualitative approach in an interpretivist paradigm we employed a case study design to collect data through lesson observations and semi-structured interviews, from 8 teachers and 6 school leaders (Head of department, deputy principal and school principal) in two South African mainstream schools who were purposively sampled [7 participants from each school]. Data was analysed using thematic data analysis because it provides a flexible yet rigorous approach for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The findings revealed that the 1) inequitable classroom engagement inhibits inclusive pedagogical practices; 2) multigrade classroom intensifies the complexity of inclusive teaching and 3) the effect of insufficient in-service training and monopolised leadership roles on support provision. Significance of this study is on how systemic collaboration or lack thereof affects improved pedagogical practices and inclusive learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Inclusive practices, pedagogical practices, support services.*

1. Introduction and background

The effective implementation of learner support services in mainstream schools is closely linked to the enhancement of inclusive teacher pedagogies (Brennan, King & Travers, 2021). Inclusive pedagogical practices require teachers to adopt approaches that accommodate diverse learning needs; however, traditional pedagogies in many contexts remain shaped by the medical model of disability, which locates learning difficulties within the learner rather than within systemic, pedagogical, and environmental barriers (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Engelbrecht & Green, 2018). This misalignment underscores the need for targeted in-service teacher training and professional development programmes that promote inclusive, learner-centred practices consistent with the social and inclusive models of support (Ainscow, 2020).

Moreover, inclusive pedagogies require teachers to shift from deficit-oriented perspectives to approaches that recognise learners' strengths, interests, and contextual realities (Pirzada, 2025). This is because when teachers rely heavily on the medical model, they may unintentionally perpetuate exclusion by focusing on diagnosis, labelling, and categorisation rather than on adapting teaching strategies to reduce learning barriers (Slee, 2019).

In contrast, insufficient teacher training on inclusive pedagogies that include differentiated instruction, universal design for learning (UDL), and collaborative problem-solving, disempower teachers from creating flexible learning environments that respond to diverse learner profiles (CAST, 2018). Implementation of support services depends on teacher efficacy on these mentioned strategies which will capacitate them to allow all learners to participate meaningfully and access the curriculum on equitable terms. Furthermore, ongoing professional development is essential for equipping teachers with the competencies and confidence required to implement inclusive education effectively. Evidence shows that professional development initiatives that incorporate mentoring, reflective practice, and classroom-based coaching significantly improve teachers' attitudes and skills for working with diverse learners (Forlin, 2012; Sharma & Loreman, 2016). Such training, when grounded in the social model of disability, enables teachers to interrogate their assumptions and adopt pedagogical strategies that address systemic and environmental barriers rather than individual deficits (Florian, 2015). Social model of disability draws on

redirecting attention to how systemic and environmental factors impair different-abled learners. This study therefore aims to explore teachers' pedagogical practices to strengthen the provision of support services within mainstream schools as a way to contribute to the broader goal of developing inclusive and responsive learning environments.

In addition, the successful operationalisation of inclusive support services depends on teachers' willingness and ability to collaborate with support specialists, parents, and other stakeholders. Research demonstrates that collaborative inquiry and team-based problem-solving strengthen teachers' understanding of learner diversity and enhance their capacity to provide responsive pedagogical support (Hornby & Graham, 2013). Collaboration also broadens professional knowledge and encourages teachers to shift away from traditional instructional routines toward more reflective, inclusive, and contextually grounded practices (Walton, 2018). Conversely, different stakeholders in support services continue to work as separate entities, which continues to hinder successful implementation of inclusive practices (Jama & Lunga, 2024). As a result, developing strong professional learning communities within schools becomes critical for sustaining inclusive teaching approaches.

2. Design

This study aimed at exploring teachers' pedagogical practices for effective support provision within mainstream schools in one South African province. Our focus on the paper is on teachers' pedagogical practices for effective support provision within mainstream schools. Qualitative approach embedded in an interpretivist paradigm was employed to carry out this study as we wanted to understand how teachers make sense of their pedagogical practices while enhancing support services in their classrooms (Rose, 2020). A case study design in which two schools in the North West province was purposively sampled as research sites. A total of 14 participants were purposively sampled comprising 8 teachers and 6 school leaders (3 from each school) which include heads of departments, deputy principals and principals.

3. Objectives

The main objective that guided this study was to explore teachers' pedagogical practices for effective support provision within mainstream schools in one South African province.

4. Methods

Data was collected through observations that were followed by semi-structured interviews to complement field notes taken during the observations as we wanted to better understand teachers' detailed understanding of support services and pedagogical practices related to inclusive practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In our first visit to schools, before they signed informed consent, we explained that we will also have lesson observations. This data generation method helps to capture what participants do in relation to the research question than on what they say. As researchers we were involved from the beginning of the lesson, to observe inclusive related pedagogical practices during a lesson when the teacher is teaching and having to support those learners whose learning needs additional support. To mitigate the influence of Hawthorne effect on participants' behaviours, we triangulated through semi-structured interviews with follow up questions based on the observations during the lesson. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to provide nuanced qualitative data in which perspectives are shared in a conversational manner but guided by research questions (Quintela, Vinuesa, Dembélé, & Ayotte-Beaudet, 2024). Data collected through semi-structured interviews tends to provide in-depth exploration that leads to rich and detailed data. Thematic analysis was used following Braun and Clarke's phases to describe teachers' pedagogical practices as was observed in their classes in relation to their individual perspectives as was captured through semi-structured interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

5. Data presentation and discussion

We present data that emerged from the two data generation methods that we used in this study and as a way to differentiate data from the two methods, P and a number was used to identify data that emerged from semi structured interviews while LO stands for data that emerged from lesson observations.

Inequitable Classroom Engagement that inhibits inclusive pedagogical practices

The narratives suggest that failure to give opportunities to all learners tends to obscure learning needs of those learners who might be experiencing barriers to learning as identification of misinformation, or misunderstanding can only be found when a learner is given an opportunity to show whether learning took place or not

The teacher only provided those who raised their hands with opportunities to respond to questions, while ignoring those who did not volunteer to respond. [LO 1]

Learner engagement is one important aspect of learning, in a case where it is not encouraged equitable for different learners it becomes an additional barrier. According to Dontagon et al. (2024), a lack of equitable classroom engagement poses significant challenges for both teachers and learners, largely due to inadequate preparation, training, and professional support. These limitations hinder teachers' ability to implement inclusive pedagogical practices effectively, particularly in complex teaching contexts such as multigrade classrooms. Moreover, a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient for addressing the unique demands faced by multigrade teachers, who require context-responsive strategies tailored to their diverse learner groups (Dontagon et al., 2024).

Multigrade classroom intensifies the complexity of inclusive teaching

Multigrade classes require much time and passion from the teacher who is expected to service learners of different grades in one classroom while also having to cover more than one subject in many instances.

The observations were in a multigrade class in which 3 foundation phase are taught at the same time, even though the teacher tries to cater for all the grades, but the teacher may not have enough time to identify learners experiencing barriers to learning, and in some cases may not be in a position to provide additional support as the time is already divided between four subjects for the 3 grades, and having to cover annual teaching plan for each grade as these are monitored. [LO 2]

A multigrade classroom intensifies the complexity of inclusive teaching and if the teacher is not supported with appropriate training, resources, and collaboration with support services, it can lead to them overlooking barriers to learning; being inconsistent support and employ teaching practices that unintentionally exclude certain learners. According to Dontogan, et al. (2024), multigrade classrooms present numerous challenges related to classroom practices. One of the key difficulties is time management, which often leads teachers to employ what is referred to as the “jump-jump strategy,” whereby instruction is directed at one grade level while learners from another grade work independently. Teachers also rely on peer teaching as a complementary practice to manage diverse learning needs. Despite their best efforts, multigrade teachers continue to face substantial challenges in delivering effective instruction (Dontogan et al., 2024).

Effect of insufficient in-service training and monopolised leadership roles on support provision

School policies are not always communicated transparently to all teachers which affect how they engage with their day-to-day duties including identification of learners experiencing barriers to learning. Principals tend to draft policies independently without involving other teachers even those who are in the school management team.

As head of department (HOD), I am not sure of inclusive related policies in our school, it can be that it is not communicated to us. We do have school-based support team (SBST), that does identification and complete support needs assessment (SNA) forms and make copies of their work, and thereafter, call their parents. We normally let parents be the ones that approach the special schools as if it is done by the school it takes time for them to be placed.

According to Khoshhai and Guraya (2016), effective leaders are able to identify needs and develop action plans to achieve desired outcomes that improve a given situation or context. Similarly, Sydänmaanlakka (2003) argues that leadership should not be monopolised; rather, it should be broadened to include various spheres of influence, ranging from individuals and teams to organisations and societies. In environments where leadership is centralised and constrained by restrictive policies, genuine leadership cannot flourish.

6. Conclusions

The findings accentuate that improved pedagogical practices and inclusive learning outcomes are strongly influenced by the quality of systemic collaboration among stakeholders such as teachers, school leadership and other support structures. Where collaboration is fragmented, teachers experience inconsistent support and unclear guidance, which undermines their ability to implement inclusive teaching effectively. Conversely, strong systemic collaboration provides coherent support, shared accountability, and aligned interventions, enabling teachers to respond to diverse learner needs more confidently and competently. Inclusive practices compel the education system to improve its functionality by eliminating multigrade teaching. Multigrade teaching affects the effectiveness of identification of learning barriers and support thereof owing to the demands of diverse classrooms and insufficient teacher training.

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