

Research Article**Evaluation of Educators' Experiences and Practices of Inclusive Education in Primary Schools: A South African Perspective ***Kentse LEGODI RAKGALAKANE ¹  Matsolo MOKHAMPANYANE ² **Abstract**

This research evaluates educators' experiences and practices of Inclusive Education in primary schools in South Africa. The educators who serve as role models, nevertheless, do not seem to truly grasp the idea of Inclusive Education. The study used a qualitative research approach based on the interpretative research paradigm to investigate educators' understanding, experiences, and practices of Inclusive Education. The fourteen participants, who included two school principals, two deputy principals, five teachers, and five members of the school-based support team, were chosen through a purposeful sampling process. Five primary schools in the Warmbaths region in Limpopo Province were used to select the participants. With each participant, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted. Thematic analysis was done to examine and analyse the data. The findings showed the varying perspectives on Inclusive Education, including views based on children's rights, abilities and disabilities, and quality, equity, and fairness for all children. This is further shown by the lack of improvement in stakeholders' ability to recognise learners who experienced barriers to learning. Educators lack adequate knowledge to implement Inclusive Education successfully. In addition, it was discovered that teaching an inclusive class was quite demanding on educators regarding planning, organising, and curriculum delivery. This study suggests that educators should use a combination of traditional teaching methods and digitally mediated learning to effectively meet the needs of all students, regardless of their learning abilities. Furthermore, educators should be provided with continuous professional development to empower them to meet the educational expectations of all learners.

Keywords: Digitally mediated learning, inclusive education, learning barriers, special needs education, traditional teaching methods

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of Inclusive Education has received tremendous research attention over the last decade, both national and international (Buli-Holmberg, Nilsen, & Skogen 2019; Mukhopadhyay, 2013; UNESCO, 1990; UNESCO, 1994). The global goal of education for all was a brain child of United Nations (Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), with the intention of meeting the learning needs of all children, youth, and adults. The objective of Inclusive Education for all students with special education need (SEN) was highlighted in 1990 already (UNESCO, 1994). Therefore, South Africa is no exception in the idea of Inclusive Education for all, irrespective of ability or disability (Department of Education, 2001). However, the effectiveness of Inclusive Education in the understanding of the concept and what it entails by all stakeholders is not standard (Sigstad, Buli-Holmberg & Morken, 2021). Different people, in their different settings, explain the concept differently (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006).

The South Africa of national unity, which came into power in 1994, brought several changes to the education system. Education White Paper of 1995 on education and training committed the

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government of national unity to a unified education and training system, which is committed to equal access, non-discrimination, and redress ([Department of Education, 1995](#)). Furthermore, it also made provision for a National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) to make policy recommendations to government on the inclusion of learners with special needs in main stream education and training within a single equitable system. The NCSNET and the National Committee on Education Support Services (NCESS) were appointed by the Ministry of Education to investigate and make recommendations on special needs and support services in South Africa.

The two committees, NCSNET and NCESS, presented reports to the then Minister in November 1997, and the Department of Education published the final report. The findings of the joint report of the NCSNET and NCESS were put forward to recommend that the education for all policy is to foster the development of inclusive and supportive centres of learning to enable all learners to participate actively in the education process, and that it would offer all learners with opportunities to develop their potential to become equally active members of society ([Department of Education, 2001](#)). The Department of Education further issued a framework policy document called White Paper 6 that contained the special needs education to build an Inclusive Education and training system in 2001. The paper outlined government's strategy to transform the education system to make it more efficient, more equitable, and more just, recognising the right of all learners to attend their local neighbourhood school and to receive the necessary support. The implementation of this policy is in its 20th year of the roll-out plan. The challenge is that there has been little progress to date. In conclusion, given the magnitude of this problem, a study of this nature would assist in finding a possible solution to the phenomenon.

Regardless of the challenges, the [UNESCO \(2007\)](#), reminds every stakeholder of the fundamental right of education for all, principles that values students' wellbeing, dignity, autonomy, and contribution to society, and a continuing process to eliminate barriers to education and promote reform in the culture and practice in schools to include all students. Focus should be on education to ensure quality, and equitable and effective learning outcomes for all as an integral part of the right to education ([UNESCO, 2017](#)). [Mitchell, \(2015\)](#) state that all learners or students, regardless of any challenges they may have, should be placed in age-appropriate general education classes that are in their own neighbourhood schools to receive high quality instruction, intervention, and support that enables them to be successful in the core curriculum. Therefore, all students could be full participants in the classroom and in the local school community. This view was supported by [Florian, and Black-Hawkins, \(2011\)](#) and [Hehir, Silvana and Pascucci \(2016\)](#), in partnership with ABT Association who point out that the importance of Inclusive Education is defined in its positive outcomes for all children, both with and without disabilities or other disadvantages.

The initiative of education for all became a solving tool for those individuals with disabilities, whose human rights were violated and their access to education restricted because of their physical ability ([Mukhopadhyay, 2013](#)). According to [Kirk, Gallagher, Anastasiow and Coleman \(2006\)](#), Inclusive Education rescues those who are disabled from abuse. Education that encompasses the most prevalent component of inclusion, where students receive excellent instruction and support in regular classrooms that enable them to thrive in the core curriculum, is the goal ([Alquraini & Gut 2012](#)). The education system provides instruction to a variety of learners in the same classroom ([Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015](#)). Therefore, learners with special needs should be placed in a regular classroom setting. Other studies; however, have put more emphasis on inclusionary principles like belongingness, participation on an equal footing, shared responsibility, and getting support academically and socially ([Sigstad, 2017](#)).

The South African framework, through White paper 6, states that educators are the primary resource for achieving the goal of Inclusive Education and a training system ([Department of Education, 2001](#)). Based on the above, it is the responsibility of primary school teachers to ensure that

Inclusive Education is implemented effectively in schools, teachers need an understanding of best practice in teaching and of adapted instruction for students with disabilities. However, a positive attitude toward inclusion is also important for creating an inclusive classroom that is effective.

White Paper 6 states that there will be a need for a flexible curriculum and assessment policy that is accessible for all learners, irrespective of the nature of their learning needs. Because curricula create the most significant barrier to learning and exclusion, the issue of curriculum differentiation is critically important and its success depends on implementation policy and teachers' characteristics (World Health Organisation, 2011). Forlin and Chambers, (2011), and Sharma, Simi and Forlin (2015), all suggest that more sustainable Inclusive Education implementation would put more emphasis on inclusive pedagogy in pre-service teacher training for all teachers, as well as sustained and continuous in-service development. This also positively affects the teachers' attitude towards inclusion by emphasising that it is within their professional role to include all children in their classroom, and it is not just the domain for specialists and a special curriculum.

Ineke, Markova, Krischler, Krolak and Schwedt (2017) state that teachers are expected to accommodate an increasingly mixed student population. However, teachers feel ill prepared and, hence, may be apprehensive toward the inclusion of students with SEN in a regular classroom setting. Mukhopadhyay (2013) explains that there is evidence to suggest that many teachers do not feel equipped to teach children with disabilities and complain that they need more time to instruct these students. Teachers are expected to accomplish the task of meeting all learners' educational needs by making the curriculum flexible and accessible. Therefore, the successful implementation of Inclusive Education practices is largely dependent on the teachers.

Armstrong (2017) states that teachers with more experience in dealing with children with social, emotional, and behavioural disorders, hold a more negative attitude. In addition, they argue that the organisation of training programmes should be well thought out. Borg (2011) states that the European Agency for Development in Special Need Education explicitly specifies that teachers need to have the appropriate skills, knowledge, and understanding, but also show certain values and attitudes to work effectively in inclusive settings.

Odom, Buysse and Soukakou (2011) emphasise that in the USA and Europe, it is generally stated that effective inclusive practices require teachers that can deliver specialised instructional practices geared toward the individualised needs of all students. Education White Paper 6 of Department of Education (2001) states that educators' skills and knowledge will be improved to develop new skills. In other words, teachers will be trained with new methods of teaching through training programmes and staff development at the school level. Educators need skills and knowledge to teach learners who experience difficulties in the classroom. Forlin, and Loreman, (2014) points out that inclusion is realised mainly at classroom level. Therefore, there is a need for adequate support from knowledgeable School Based Support Teams (SBST) at primary school level.

Forlin, and Loreman, (2014) asserts that the implementation of Inclusive Education requires teachers to reconsider their teaching practice, but many teachers do not feel competent in doing this, so professional development should support teachers by providing guidance on good practices Kurnaiwatt et al (2014) state that these training programmes have positive effects on mainstream primary teachers. Training programmes that are focused on specific students' needs or disabilities were found to be more effective than general training programmes. In addition, Kurnaiwatt et al. (2014), Roberts and Simpson (2016); emphasise that tools and strategies related to specific teachers' concerns and their teaching context (e.g., curriculum), are helpful and effective in encouraging change in teaching practices. On the other hand, Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter, and Smith, (2019), pointed out that for all stakeholders of education to be able to facilitate inclusive education successful within schools, educators and school administrators need to be aware of group dynamics, rather create conditions that are safe and accepting for all learners.

Qi and Ha (2014) point out that educators (in physical education) must provide successful approaches for including SEN students within their curricula, as good practice for pre-service teachers. The studies by Englebrecht, Swart and Eloff, (2001); and Englebrecht (2006) reveal that teacher training programmes do not appear to be adequately addressing this need, resulting in stress for teachers and lack of progress for learners with disabilities. Stofile (2008) state that training programmes that educate teachers on how to accommodate and teach learners with disabilities are generally a week or two weeks long, and teachers report that although these brief training programmes are helpful, it is not sufficient. Fullan (2007), and Kuroda, Kartika and Kitamura (2017), report that there is mounting evidence that these kinds of short term, 'parachute' training do little in terms of impact and systematic change. These training programmes are provided as continued professional development and it is once-off workshops that focus on developing some skills, whereas teachers need more time for training.

Avramidis and Norwich (2002) point out that teachers' competence is related to their studies in teaching students with special educational needs. According to Ineke et al. (2017), competencies are the skills and knowledge that enable a teacher to be successful. Therefore, the importance of teachers' competence for inclusive practice is evident in its effect on student learning. Dalton, McKenzie and Kahonde (2012) point out that in general, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge positively affects student outcomes. In addition, Kunter, Frenzel, Nagy, Baumert, and Pekrun, (2011); explain that teacher competence not only includes cognitive aspects, but also skills and knowledge.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

A qualitative design was used in this study to ascertain the opinions of participants and the meaning they attach to successful implementation of Inclusive Education. A phenomenological approach was used, as it describes the meaning of lived experiences of participants in the study. With phenomenology, the researcher puts aside all prejudgement and collects data on how individuals make sense out of a particular experience or situation. The authors attempted to understand how people experience a phenomenon from each person's own perception.

2.2. Research Population and Sample

Purposive sampling was used in the study to gather detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation from participants. The fourteen participants, who included two school principals, two deputy principals, five teachers, and five members of the SBST, were chosen through a purposeful sampling method. Five primary schools in the Warmbaths region in Limpopo Province were used to select the participants.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

With each participant, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather in-depth data from participants. Semi-structured interviews allowed the authors to have set questions with the option to probe for clarity when needed.

Data analysis was done through a systematic process of coding, categorising, and interpreting data to provide explanations of a single phenomenon of interest. Thematic analysis was employed by reading through data from the in-depth interviews and identifying patterns across the data to detect relevant themes.

3. FINDINGS and DISCUSSION

The findings showed the varying perspectives on Inclusive Education, including views based on children's rights, abilities and disabilities, and quality, equity, and fairness for all children.

From the thematic analysis, the following three sub-themes emerged and are discussed below:

Sub-theme 1: Views on Inclusive Education

Participants were asked to give their views on their understanding of Inclusive Education, and to give a simple explanation of what is meant by them. Participants' response showed that they view Inclusive Education in different ways namely the rights of all children, children's ability and disability, quality, equality, and fairness of all children.

Research has indicated that educators often have very different definitions of inclusion and Inclusive Education, and the definition that they believe in is seen to affect the way educators implement inclusive practices in the classroom (Hay, 2009). One of the participants asserted that Inclusive Education is for all schools to accommodate all learners with or without barriers in the same classroom. That is what the participant had to say: *E1 "A" "It means all children in the same classroom; all children must be in the same school"*.

In support of the previous participant, the other participants indicated that all learners should be accommodated in the main stream, and it is the responsibility of all school stakeholders to embrace and meet the diverse needs of every learner. *E2 "B" had this to say: "It is a way of embracing every learner in a school despite of his/her abilities or disabilities"*. In support, *SBST 3 "C" added, "It means all children must be included irrespective of age, colour, race, gender, academic achievement"*.

Interpretation

Participants' responses indicate that they understand Inclusive Education differently and in different contexts, but in practice they perceive inclusivity as accommodating learners in the same classroom irrespective of the learner's abilities or disabilities, gender, race, colour, or even learners' academic achievements. Through participants' responses they highlighted that there should not be any discrimination in learners' education. The other challenge could be on implementation of the system within schools and taking ownership (Nilholm & Goransson, 2017).

Sub-theme 2: Identification of learners with learning barriers

Barriers to learning is any difficulty within the education system, the learning site, and/or within the learner him/herself that prevents the access to learning and development of learners (Department of Education, 2010). Most learners in public primary schools are experiencing one or more barrier to learning, such as intrinsic, pedagogical, socio-economic, and systemic barriers, for example curriculum, language, and educator-pupil ratio (Lebona, 2013). Furthermore, it is the responsibility of an educator to manage the process of identifying and minimising any barriers to learning (Department of Education, 2014).

Participants raised the lack of support in identifying learners with barriers to learning as a serious concern to implement Inclusive Education effectively. Participants articulated their frustrations of dealing with learners experiencing barriers to learning. This is the response from *SBST 1 "A"* regarding the identification of learners with learning barriers, *"We deal with children who behave in a sensitive way, we listen to their needs. SBST 5 "E" concurs with SBST 1 "A" by saying, "some of us do not have any knowledge of really identifying learners with learning barriers except through judging them through their behaviour, for me I was not made ware as to how to identify them in my class"*.

Participants showed a lack of knowledge in identifying learning barriers. *E4 "D" stated, "It is very hard to tell because the school management and the department expect us to implement Inclusive Education and sometimes it is very difficult for us to identify learners experiencing barriers to learning"*. One of the participants in the intermediate phase indicated that there was no cooperation from foundation phase educators in connection with the names of learners who are experiencing barriers to learning. This showed that educators need training in the areas of identification of barriers to learning. *E5 "E" "First of all, most of the learners who come to us from foundation phase already have these learning barriers. The problem is that we are not aware of them because there is nothing to*

inform us about their learning abilities, their learner profiles do not indicate any learning need” (Participant shook his head).

One of the participants responded positively towards learners’ different needs. E2 “B” articulated that, “*We are aware of different needs and don’t feel excluded from the rest. We create environment that works for all. Every teacher in our school tries to create a purposeful environment*”.

Interpretation

Participants’ responses showed that there is little progress in their schools in terms of identifying learners with barriers due to their lack of knowledge and skills. According to Education White Paper 6 on special needs education [Department of Education \(2001\)](#), every educator should have skills or expertise to identify barriers to learning. However, according to the participants those are the skills that educators are still lacking in.

Sub-theme 3: Workload

Many educators feel that teaching children with barriers to learning is beyond their area of expertise, and they should not be expected to teach those learners without assistance ([Engelbrecht, 2006](#)). Some of the participants viewed the implementation of Inclusive Education as adding extra work and causing stress. [Lambe and Bones \(2007\)](#) point out that if educators are unable to adapt their teaching methods, it could result in adding more stress for them.

One of the participants pointed out that workload appeared to be the major concern, as inclusive education in the classroom needed more time for preparations. This is what E1 “A” had to say, “*Definitely a lot more preparation and planning is needed because of overcrowded classes with learners of different and unique behaviours.*” Another participant complained that an inclusive education classroom is very diverse because learners learn differently at a different pace, and educators had a problem in adapting to different teaching methods. E3 “C” posit that, “*Inclusive class really is more demanding and frustrating to us, it demands a lot from us as educators*”.

Educators’ frustrations for not coping were captured in the following quotes, SBST 3 “C” “*We struggle to reach our goals, when you attend to a child with special needs the rest tend to be noisy and naughty*” and E4 “D” “*Fast learners tend to get bored*”.

Interpretation

Participants’ responses indicate that there is a lot of pressure and a higher workload in an inclusive classroom, especially when it comes to planning, preparation, and discipline.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined Inclusive Education strategies and educator experiences in South African elementary schools. Cultures, educational policies, and practices vary regularly among nations. Considering this, South Africa developed and put into practice a policy on Inclusive Education through the Education White Paper 6 on special needs education. The Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support, which provides a framework for the implementation of Inclusive Education in all public schools, was developed to give direction and guidelines in the implementation of Inclusive Education. However, the educators do not seem to have a solid understanding of Inclusive Education. There are vulnerable learners whose quality learning and progress in their studies is the basis of education for all learners without any discrimination.

All concerned parties are advised to work together, support each other, and use all available resources to meet the educational goals of students, regardless of the obstacles to learning that students may face, and the difficult problems that educators may face. [Juvonen, et al, \(2019\)](#), reiterated that, to use proactive tactics to bring together children from different backgrounds and characteristics, educators must become knowledgeable about social dynamics and group processes. Therefore, collaboration of all stakeholders of basic education and educators require continuing assistance to avoid and manage instances of peer victimization, rejection, and isolation of learners in any form.

Makoelle, (2014) and UNESCO (2021) in support of the above recommendations, call for collaboration effort among all policy maker, middle management and the teachers as the implementation cannot be a one man show. Ydo (2020), indicated that the right to Inclusive Education requires a shift in culture, policy, and practice in all educational environments to accommodate the many needs and identities of individual learners.

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