STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS WHEN ASSESSING LEARNERS WHO EXPERIENCE BARRIERS TO LEARNING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

MPYA NWACOYE GLADNESS

Department of Inclusive Education, School of Educational Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa,
empyag@unisa.ac.za

MARUBINI CHRISTINAH SADIKI

Department of Inclusive Education, School of Educational Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa,
sadikmc@unisa.ac.za, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7749-4115

Abstract

Educators experienced several challenges or contextual factors in inclusive classrooms, and these are worth to be noted so that they can reduce or eliminate the barriers to learning. This study aimed at examining the challenges that affect educators' assessment practices for learners encountering barriers to learning in the Senior Phase. The study used a phenomenological research design. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews to understand challenges that affect educators' assessment practices for learners encountering barriers to learning. Sixteen educators from the four schools and two district officials between the age of 35 to 52 years from Tshwane North district were interviewed. The interviews were analysed utilising thematic analysis. This study revealed three themes: (i) parental involvement; (ii) support from school-based support teams and (iii) support from district-based support teams. These findings point to insufficient parental involvement, as well as limited support from the school and district-based support teams as experienced by inclusive education educators. The study established that educators experience challenges on finding strategies to assist their learners who experience difficulty in learning. The study contributes to understanding challenges that affect educators' assessment practices for learners encountering barriers to learning. This study provides information on the challenges that affect educators' assessment practices for learners encountering barriers to learning in the Senior Phase.

Keywords: Assessment, Barriers to learning, Educators, Stakeholders, Parental involvement

1 Introduction

Educators of learners who experience barriers to learning in an inclusive environment, can benefit from stakeholder support that goes beyond the classroom and local school (Reiche, 2023). In the same manner, strong partnerships are beneficial between key stakeholders who can provide the necessary support to the academic success of learners who experience barriers to learning. These stakeholders include parents/caregivers; teachers and other education professionals; teacher trainers and researchers; national, local and school-level administrators and managers; policymakers and service providers in other sectors (e.g., health, child protection and social services); as well as civic groups in the community (Ainscow, 2020). Recent developments in educators' assessment of learners who experience barriers to learning, have heightened the need to consider the perspectives of any stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in the assessment process.

The changes brought about by COVID-19 have disrupted the lives of and posed challenges to learners, parents and school managers. Despite the inconvenience caused, COVID-19 required educational innovation initiatives which will have a lasting impact on the trajectory of learning innovation and digitisation in inclusive classrooms in

South Africa (Brako, 2020). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most parents and learners were highly dependent on teachers in terms of teaching, assessment and evaluation, posing a distinct challenge during the initial stages of the pandemic to many parents, who did not have the necessary resources in place to instantly replace teachers in support of the continuation of teaching and learning as well as assessment. During this challenging time, the directors of education, teachers, parents and caregivers all played a role in the response to the COVID-19 crisis, taking on additional responsibilities yet in unexplored territory (United Nations, 2020). In this way, the involvement of stakeholders in teaching and learning activities supported the education system's resilience, with parental involvement being regarded as key in assessing and improving learners' achievements (Haiyudi & Art-In, Sitthipon, 2021).

In an endeavour to enhance stakeholder support in South African schools, the national government have put the necessary policies in place and committed to provide the necessary support in the Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) (2001). Among other documents, the EWP6 of 2001 and the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support document (SIAS, 2014) provide guidelines for the implementation of inclusivity. These policy documents emphasise that educators require support from a variety of stakeholders who can assist them with learner assessment. According to Ndinisa (2016), these stakeholders include parents, school-based support teams (SBST), district-based support teams (DBST), and the Departments of Health and Social Development, among others, in the South African context. To be more specific, the Glossary of Education Reform (2014) document defines a "stakeholder" as anyone who has interest in the activities occurring at a school and its learners. Additionally, Roberts and Simpson (2016) posit that stakeholders can provide valuable insight into the way education policy translates into practice.

In support of the above perception, Maghnouj, Fordham, Guthrie, Henderson &Trujillo (2020) comment that stakeholders have an obligation to support educators in their efforts to improve learner assessment processes. For example, Chavalala (2015), as well as Hay, Malindi, & Makhalemele (2021) regard it to be the duty of the SBST to ensure that educators and learners are supported. Despite this plea for support and value placed on support from others, existing studies indicate that educators get the minimal support from the various stakeholders (Ndinisa, 2016; Hlalele, Jiyane & Radebe, 2020; Mahlo, 2011; Nel, 2014; Syamsudduha, 2017). Similar findings are indicated by Tsotetsi & Omodan (2020), who state that, regardless of the intention of SBSTs to support and integrate inclusive education by accommodating all learners, the successes expected to have been recorded because of SBST establishment seems not to have yielded the necessary positive results, especially in secondary schools. This revelation does not align with the Education White Paper 6 (EWP) (2001) and the stipulations by the Department of Education (2010) which indicate assessment as a key responsibility of DBSTs.

2 Goal of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the stakeholders' support for educators when assessing learners who experience barriers to learning. It sought to address the research question that guides the study: How do stakeholders support educators when assessing learners who experience barriers to learning?

3 Methodology
3.1 Research design

The researcher utilised an interpretivist social constructivist methodological framework in undertaking the study. The primary aim was to understand stakeholders' views and experiences of the way in which they support educators in the assessment of learners who experience barriers to learning in an inclusive classroom (Creswell, 2013). A phenomenological research design was implemented (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormiston, 2013; Creswell, 2012). A qualitative approach was followed with the aim of understanding how stakeholders support educators by exploring participating stakeholders' experiences and perception.

3.2 Study population and sampling strategy

Convenience sampling was used on participants comprising Senior Phase educators and school management team members of four secondary schools in Tshwane North District. Purposeful sampling was used to select 16 participants from the four schools (n = 16) and two district education officials (N = 2). In total, the sample thus included 18 participants (n = 18), who had experienced stakeholder support provided (or not) to educators. The inclusion criterion was 16 participants selected from the schools comprised four educators, four deputy principals, four SBST coordinators and four school assessment team coordinators. The district officials from the Tshwane North district included the head of the district assessment team and the head of the district-based support team. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 provide a profile of the participants who took part in the study. They have been coded P1–P18 to preserve their anonymity.

Table 5.1: Participants' characteristics (n = 16)

Participants	School	Designation	Qualification ,	Gender & age	Teaching experience
P1	A	E	UDES and BA	M-38	10 years
P2	A	IC	UDES & ACE	F-47	23 years
P3	A	DP	UDES; BA & B.Ed.	F-50	25 years
P4	A	SAT	UDES; BA & PGCE	F-42	20 years
P5	B	E	UDES & ACE	M-50	26 years
P6	B	IC	UDEP & BA	M-46	22 years
P7	B	DP	UDES; BA & B.Ed.	F-46	22 years
P8	B	SAT	STD; BA & B.Ed.	F-54	28 years
P9	C	E	UDES; BA & B.Ed.	F-41	12 years
P10	C	IC	UDEP; ACE& B.Ed. (Hon) (Inclusive Education)	F-48	19 years
P11	C	DP	UDES; ACE; BA & B.Ed.	F-52	28 years
P12	C	SAT	UDES; BA & B.Ed.	F-40	17 years
P13	D	E	UDES; ACE & BA	M-35	9 years
P14	D	IC	UDES; BA & B.Ed. (Hon) (Inclusive Education)	M-44	14 years
P15	D	DP	UDES; BA & B.Ed.	F-46	20 years
P16	D	SAT	UDES; BA & B.Ed.	F-46	21 years

Table 5.2: Participants' characteristics (n = 02) from the District Office

Participants	District	Designation	Qualifications	Gender & age	Teaching experience	Years' experience in the post
P17	TN	DAT	STD; ACE, BA & B.Ed.	M-55	22	9
P18	TN	DLST	STD; BA & B.Ed. M.Ed.	F-56	23	10

Source: Mpya 2021

Key to abbreviations of the qualifications
P = Participant; UDES: University Diploma in Education Secondary; UDEP: University Diploma in Education Primary. ACE: Advance Certificate in Education; PTD: Primary Teachers Diploma; STD: Senior Teachers Diploma, BA: Bachelor of Arts; B.Ed.: Bachelor of Education; PGCE: Post Graduate Certificate in Education; MEd: master's in education.

3.3 Data collection
In conducting the study, the necessary principles were followed to uphold the human rights of the participants (Head, 2020). The participants signed informed consent forms before participating. Each interview lasted up to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded. The educators consented to the study in writing after being informed that participation was completely voluntarily. Furthermore, the educators were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time should they wish to do so. The researchers conducted the interviews in private educators' classrooms after the school day. They also interviewed the district officials in their offices after hours.

3.4 Data analysis
The researchers utilised the thematic analysis method to establish patterns and generate themes (Lindgren, Lundman & Graneheim, 2020). In the context of this research, firstly, the audio recordings of the interviews conducted with the educators, deputy principals, SBST coordinators, school assessment team coordinators and two district officials from the Tshwane North district were transcribed by the researchers to gain a thorough understanding of their inputs. Secondly, coding was done to reduce the data from the transcripts. Open coding was utilised in the study. The third step clarified responses from the participants and the fourth step integrated themes into the report. In order to ensure anonymity, the authors used identification codes that were given to the participants for the sake of anonymity. The participants are accordingly assigned letters P1 to P18, the schools as schools A to D (with P1 to P16 being school-based participants), the head of the district assessment team (DAT) as P17 and the head of the district-based support team as P18. The themes generated and evidence are presented below utilising direct quotations.

3.5 Ethical considerations
The study was granted ethical approval and study clearance by the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Inclusive Education, University of South Africa (Unisa) (reference number: 2018/09/12/07388381/21/MC). The crucial ethical issues observed in this study included protection of participants from harm. The participants were ensured of voluntary participation. They could pull out of the study at any time. Participants were also given the right to privacy and honesty. A request for permission to conduct research in secondary schools was also made from the Gauteng Department of Basic Education (GDBE), which was also granted and from the District Manager. Consent letters were given to school principals for educators to give their written consents. The purpose of the study was explained to all participants. The participants were informed about their rights of participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured and maintained for all participants. They would only be referred to as Schools A, B, C and D. Any information that could give rise to easy identification of a school was avoided.

4 Results and discussion
The results presented three specific themes from the analysis: namely (i) parental involvement; (ii) support from SBSTs; and (iii) support from DBSTs. In the following sections, each theme will be discussed, in turn, and illustrated with verbatim quotations from the interview data. The participants whose direct quotations are used in this article formed part of a doctoral study.

4.1 Parental involvement

The general stance of the participants about parental involvement in their schools varied. Some highlighted the positive support of parents while others reported on the negative support received from parents. Those who reported positive support indicated their perception that the parents at their school tended to be sufficiently involved, linking that to good performance by learners. For example, the following excerpts are illustrative:

"I think assessment should involve parents because they are the important part of the equation. Hence our learners perform well it is because they get support from home. I do not want to lie; our parents are highly involved in education of their kids" (Participant P1, male, 38 years)

"As a school we do not experience challenges when it comes to parental involvement. Most of the parents are learned hence they understand their role and their importance in scholastic achievement of their children" (Participant P2, female, 47 years).

"… our parents are responsible and support their children in totality. Even if there are those who need a push before they try, they do try their level best to be involved. I can say assessment is a continuous method for learners so parents should be part of the team to see that their children get the best education ever" (Participant P3, female, 50 years).

*"As a school assessment team committee, we have an assessment programme that we share with parents during parents' meetings about the important details of assessment. What can help them [parents] and other stakeholders to know what learners will be assessed on, when and why. It is, however, easy for parents to follow our programme and to understand when and how to help their children. High performance of our learners is highly supported by the unconditional parental involvement" (*Participant P4 female, 42 years*).*

The participants responses are in line with the assertion of Papadakis, Zaranis &Kalogiannakis (2019) that parental involvement is key to successful learner performance. This is supported by Basson (2021), who accentuates that it is universally acknowledged that parental involvement in education is beneficial for learning and educational success. It is therefore important to highlight that parents play a pivotal role in the assessment of their children. These findings are consistent with Bonilla, Camo, Lanzaderas, Lanzaderas & Bonilla (2022) when they declare that parental involvement is an integral part of learner success. Bubic, Tošic & Mišetic (2021) argue that efficacy research shows that measures of achievement and attributes supporting achievement, including perceptions of self-efficacy, an internal locus of control and the ability to self-regulate, are all enhanced through parental involvement.

However, some of the participants reported negative support from parents ascribing their limited involvement to reasons such as a poor socio-economic situation or lack of sufficient resources. The following excerpts are illustrative of this assertion:

"… in our school parental support is very limited, they say that they are not educators and it's not their job. One could realise that they are so naïve because this is about their kids" (Participant P6, male, 46 years).

"Some parents cited their socio-economic status as an issue for not being involved in school matters. They argue that time and again educators need some resources and money to support the learners and because they are not working, they feel bad and irresponsible for not being able to support their children financially" (Participant P16, female, 46 years)*.*

"Very few parents help and support their kids in their schoolwork. Most of the parents are not learned and some are unfamiliar with other subjects like Technology, and some are poor with maths … I think most of them do not go an extra mile for their kids to get good results with their assignments and homework" (Participant P9, female, 42 years).

*"When I call them to discuss their children's underperformance and other challenges, they do not come as they themselves feel intimidated by the information as they are illiterate themselves" (*Participant P14, male, 44 years).

The results suggest that parental involvement in terms of school-related activities is minimal (Sibanda, 2021). Similarly, Hlalele, Jiyane & Radebe (2020) report that in a South African full-service school educators have received limited or no support from the SBST and DBST. Some parents in rural areas feel that learners at Senior Phase level should be independent, not needing help or support from their parents. Schools must acknowledge the pivotal role parents play in inclusive education because they help in the identification of learners experiencing barriers to learning (Subban, Woodcock, Sharma & May, 2022). Some previous studies indicate dissatisfaction from educators about the level of parental involvement in the education of their children (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Munje & Mncube, 2018; Baker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016). Mkhuma, Tlale & Maseko (2014) believe that the role of parents is still undervalued by educators, who do not realise that parents' observations assist them in understanding the needs of these learners.

4.2 Support from school-based support teams

Participants reported that the level of support received from the SBSTs was not sufficient. This is what they had to say:

"We [referring to SBST] *are not as functional as other teams in the school because we still lack the support from the district, which is not happening. We only use the information that we have as educators who are passionate about our learners. Sometimes we are unable to do so due to so many things that are happening in the school"* (Participant P2, female, 47 years).

"I think SBST's roles and responsibilities are very good on paper and policies but practically it is a different story. There is overcrowdedness in our classrooms. Learners with barriers are many and there is no good system in place to help these learners. I am not blaming the team I am just blaming our system of education that they only thought of some systems to be put in place but fail to implement them in the right way" (Participant P5, male, 50 years).

"I think our SBSTs do try to support us, but they lack support from the district. Some learners need psychologists and some need audiologists and even social workers and when these officials are called for support they don't come, they always tell us about a long, long list of schools that need their attention and they are understaffed, shortage of human resources" (Participant P9, female, 41years).

"The team is there by just a name. I think the DBE has a lot of work to do when it comes to these teams [referring to SBSTs and DBSTs]*"* (Participant P12, female, 40 years).

The study confirms the findings by Ndinisa (2016), who reports that the SBST is not properly trained to handle the task of supporting teachers. There is no liaison between the SBST and the DBST since teachers experience the challenge of psychologists or speech therapists never visiting the learners to support them accordingly. Our results concur with Sappio & Howland (2022), and Mpanza & Govender (2022), who recommend that every school should have an SBST for the provision of learning support. These results support those from Hlalele, Jiyane and Radebe (2020), who urge that SBSTs and teachers need ongoing support in the form of workshops, mentoring and monitoring on how to support learners who experience barriers to learning in the classroom. The researchers therefore suggest that teacher training institutions should capacitate aspiring educators about the inclusive education policy's rationale and principles, and how to effectively implement it at schools. Induction and mentoring of novice educators are essential for them to adopt a positive mindset towards being passionate about learner support.

4.3 Support from district-based support teams

All the participants reported a lack of sufficient support by DBST members. According to the participants, the DBST seldom visited their schools and tended to voice various excuses for this. The participants were of the view that this lack of sufficient support did not necessarily relate to limited resources but could be linked to the district office being understaffed or to district officials not knowing how to assess learners who experience barriers to learning. For instance, some participants noted:

"I am teaching Senior Phase; it is somehow difficult to understand that a learner at this stage cannot read simple words and has also writing difficulties … Learners reach Senior Phase by being progressed or pushed to the next class but [are] not capable of meeting the assessment standards of a particular class. Even if the DBST can visit I do not see how they will solve this issue. They are not regular in our school" (Participant P1, male, 38 years).

"When I need help from the DBST, especially with learners who struggle with reading, writing and other challenges, the answer that I always get is that they are understaffed so they cannot be able to attend them, [and] as a school we should rather make a plan on how we can help those learners" (Participant P15, male, 44 years).

"We have the DBST, but it does not support us as we need them to be. Many of our educators in the mainstream lack expertise and skills to deal and assess learners who experience barriers to learning. We are not qualified to do it hence we need the district's intervention on this one. You know what? I realised that it seems as if they [referring to district officials] *do not understand it themselves"* (Participant P5, male, 50 years).

"The DBST only comes to our school where there is a memo from the National DBE looking for statistics of the progressed learners or something connected with these learners" (Participant P14, male, 44 years).

"I do not have any comment about the district because it let us down many times when it comes to them [referring to the district] *taking responsibility for these learners. Educators have completed SNA forms, but nothing is happening with these learners. These learners need help"* (Participant P16, female, 46 years).

"The DBST does not play its role; they always complain about shortage of transport and human resources" (Participant P6, male, 46 years).

These results are in line with those from Hlalele, Jiyane& Radebe (2020) who also found that limited support is given to schools from the district level. Some of the inclusive policies put it succinctly when they indicate that it will be beneficial for schools if much support for learners with barriers emanates from DBSTs (DoE, 2001; DBE, 2014). Similarly, Mnguni (2017) reports that this support was promised in the EWP6 (2001). This situation of non-support makes it difficult for teachers to translate policy into practice.

5 Limitations of study and future recommendations

This study was limited to four schools in the Tshwane North district in Gauteng province. It is important to note that Gauteng is one of nine provinces in South Africa, and that the study was confined to educators of only four schools in the Tshwane North district of Gauteng province. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to other schools in all the districts in Gauteng province, South Africa. In addition, future studies should explore establishing effective programmes to engage different stakeholders when assessing learners experiencing barriers, focusing on their roles and responsibilities and the benefits for everybody involved.

6 Conclusion

This study shows that inadequate support for teachers is a big challenge because if teachers are not supported, they cannot support learners. The findings suggest that educators need resources and support from stakeholders, including parents, DBSTs and SBSTs, when assessing learners who experience barriers to learning. The study revealed various barriers that hinder assessment practices when assessing learners with barriers. In this endeavour, the Department of Education has to focus on the issue of

training educators and equipping all schools with the primary resources and facilities needed to improve the educators' assessment practices so that they become effective and cater for diverse learners

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