ENHANCING TEACHERS' READINESS TO SUPPORT LEARNERS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES IN RURAL MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Inclusive education is a global strategy that supports the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schooling to optimize their access to equal and equitable education by compensating for their deficiencies or limitations. Stakeholders in the education sector must acquire skills to manage and implement inclusive-education policies to be able to support learners with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) in mainstream classrooms. A transcendental qualitative research design was adopted to investigate teachers' readiness to support learners with specific learning disabilities in rural mainstream schools. To achieve this goal, semi-structured interviews were conducted to get a thorough understanding of the opinions and perceptions on the subject under investigation. Ten teachers were purposively selected to participate in the study. Thematic qualitative analysis was used to explore patterns of themes across the transcribed interview data. Three themes were distillated from the analyzed data, namely: a) teacher training and professional preparedness; b) psychological readiness and c) school readiness for inclusivity. The study considered Lev Vygotsky's ideas on sociocultural learning to understand the teachers' fundamental beliefs, attitudes, and motivations regarding support for learners with specific learning disabilities. The findings suggest that although teachers are highly motivated to support learners with specific learning disabilities, they have a limited knowledge of transformative inclusive-education teaching strategies. The study recommends rigorous teacher training, quality support, and the assistance of specialist personnel in inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Inclusive teaching strategies, Learning disabilities, Mainstream schools, Support

Introduction

Mainstream schools around the world seem to have trouble with accommodating learners with diverse educational needs. This arises from challenges in the implementation of the inclusion policy and is exacerbated by teachers' inability to teach learners with diverse individual needs. According to Dube, Ncube, Mapuvire, Ndlovu, Ncube, Mlotshwa, and Unlu, (2021), good inclusive-education policies of many countries have been impeded by inadequate training of teachers dealing with learners with disabilities. Inclusive education accommodates marginalized and excluded children in regular schools so that they can reach their full potential and enter adult life as dynamic citizens (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018). But a lack of knowledge, skills and expertise lead to frustration and feelings of inadequacy in teachers, which interrupted effective teaching and successful learning (Khoaeane & Naong, 2015:290). Although teachers at mainstream schools are expected to support learners with learning impairments, they are not ready to meet their obligation.

Morelle and Tabane (2019:2) contend that the daunting task of including learners with learning barriers in mainstream schools is a complicated by contextual factors such as teachers' lack of knowledge, an unadjusted environment, and a school environment unfriendly for learners with learning barriers. According to Yaraya, Masalimova, Vasbieva and Grudtsina (2018), the effective inclusion of learners with special educational needs, particularly learners with specific learning disabilities (SLDs), relies on teachers' commitment and attitudes; their

understanding of the inclusive process; their experience of working with such learners; and their continuous professional self-development. Mahlo (2017) asserts that teaching students with diverse needs necessitates knowledge and skills to identify and support them, especially in rural mainstream classrooms. Yaraya et al. (2018) maintain that teachers' acceptance of inclusive-education principles is pivotal as it constitutes the first and most crucial step in developing their readiness to engage with students with diverse educational needs.

Teachers who believe they are unqualified to teach in inclusive settings may be anxious about the inclusion of learners with different educational needs in mainstream classrooms (Pit-Ten Cate, Markova, Krischler & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2018). According to Pit-Ten Cate et al. (2018), their competence and attitudes influence the degree to which teachers are willing and able to implement inclusive practices. Hooijer, Van der Merwe and Fourie (2021) state that, in many schools, teachers' attitudes towards learners with SLDs and varied learning needs are negative. It can be argued that teachers' resistance may hamper the implementation of the principles and values of inclusion. Saloviita (2020) affirms that a positive attitude is essential when children with special educational needs are placed in mainstream classrooms. Developing effective inclusive-teaching practices for teachers in rural areas not only expands their knowledge, but also encourages them to change their methodological approaches and attitudes towards learners with SLDs. According to Lepheana and Chisango (2022), teachers face challenges such as time constraints, excessive administrative duties, and a lack of support and resources, which contribute to the feeling that they are unable to accommodate students with SLDs.

Mangope, Kuyini and Major (2020) assert that positive experiences of teaching in inclusive learning environments have an effect on teachers' willingness to teach learners with SLDs. Mangope et al. (2020) argue that as teachers master the skills required to teach learners with a wide range of abilities, their attitude and resistance will change. Vasileiadis, Koutras, and Dimitriadou (2021:27) advocate training in inclusive education. Training is crucial to develop a positive attitude towards inclusive curricula and students with and without disabilities. When teachers are ready to support learners with SLDs, especially in rural mainstream schools, they are exposed to a transformed curriculum that upholds inclusive-education policies (Yaraya et al., 2018; Mangope et al., 2020; Saloviita, 2020; Pilipchuk et al., 2021). According to international studies, teachers' acceptance of the inclusion of learners with SLDs in mainstream classrooms can be accelerated by furnishing them with the required skills, resources and support, as well as with positive experiences of the inclusion policy (Movkebayeva et al., 2016; Mangope et al., 2020).

Theoretical framework

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development of 1962 (Woolfolk, 2010:45) informed this study. According to it, children learn through social interaction and through their culture by means of "dialogues". Their cognitive development is, in other words, greatly affected by their social interactions and their cultural setting. Culture is the main factor in knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1962) and plays a significant role in shaping cognition. As young children intermingle with others, the principles and customs entrenched in their culture are transmitted to them and influence their cognitive development. Learning takes place through the interactions learners have with their peers, their teachers and other experts (Vygotsky, 1962).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory offers a better understanding of social and societal interactions and enlightens teachers in the ways they can establish active learning environments that amplify learners' capability to interact with one another. Elevated mental processes occur when people co-create during shared activities. According to Vygotsky and Rieber (1999), learning impairments are caused by a rigid environment that does not support the developmental stages of learners. Learners with specific learning disabilities encounter numerous hurdles throughout their learning journey and require a customized learning environment in which they can develop holistically. Because children's social environment (their rural environment for the purposes of this study) influences their developmental path, non-inclusive school settings have the potential to perpetuate distortions and delay the learning process of such learners.

Method

Research design

The study employed a transcendental or descriptive phenomenological qualitative research design, which entailed that the researchers did not allow their subjectivity to interfere with the participants' descriptions. The transcendental phenomenological research design enables the researcher to understand the participants' experiences of the phenomenon in a pre-reflective manner, thereby avoiding the need for categorization or conceptualization (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019). The researcher adopts the stance of a tabula rasa, or blank slate, and uses the participants' experiences to understand the essence of a phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). In essence, transcendental phenomenology delves beyond individual experiences to investigate the fundamental

structures of consciousness and the universal ways that individuals perceive and interpret phenomena, and to reveal the essential aspects of human experience (Trymata, 2023).

Participant selection
The participants for this study were purposively selected. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique according to which researchers select participants based on specific characteristics or criteria relevant to the research question to ensure a particularly informative sample (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015).

The criteria for the selection of participants included years of teaching experience, their phase and grade and, most importantly, their qualifications in either educational psychology or inclusive education. Ten (n = 10) teachers from five (n = 5) mainstream secondary schools in rural areas of the Mogalakwena district in the Limpopo Province of South Africa were purposively selected to voluntarily participate in this study. Two teachers from each of the five mainstream schools were chosen, amounting to a total of ten. The participants taught in the Senior and the Further Education and Training (FET) Phases in grades 7 to 12. The researchers considered purposive sampling particularly appropriate to this study as it gave them time to interact with information-rich informants who were selected among a population of teachers in the area demarcated for this research activity. The following code replaced the participants' names: T1-A represents Teacher 1 from school A. Table 1.1 below displays the participants' demographic data.

Table 1.1 Participants' demographical data

Data collection and analysis

Participant's code (T1 to T10) and school (A to E)	Gender	Teaching Experience	Highest Qualification	Grade taught
T1-A	Female	15 years	B.Ed. Hons – Inclusive Education	Grade 12
T2-A	Male	2 years	HCert – Inclusive Education	Grade 12
T3-B	Male	30 years	B.Ed. Hons – Inclusive Education	Grade 9
T4-B	Male	7 years	M.Ed. – Educational Psychology	Grade 12
T5-C	Female	5 years	Adv. Cert. – Inclusive Education	Grade 12
T6-C	Female	6 months	B.Ed. (with Inclusive Education modules)	Grade 12
T7-D	Female	1 year	PGDip – Disability Studies	Grade 12
T8-D	Female	17 years	B.Ed. Hons – Education Management	Grade 10
T9-E	Male	23 years	ACE (with special-needs education modules)	Grade 12
T10-E	Male	25 years	STD – (SBST coordinator)	Grade 12

Source: Madiba (2023)
Key to abbreviated qualifications: B.Ed. Hons = Bachelor of Education Honours; HCert = Higher Certificate; M.Ed. = Master of Education; Adv.Cert = Advanced Certificate; PGDip = Postgraduate Diploma; ACE = Advanced Certificate in Education; STD = Secondary Teachers' Diploma.

A qualitative inquiry was done and data collection instruments were employed that would yield more insight into the issue under investigation, which is teachers' readiness to support learners with specific learning disabilities (SDLs). The instrument for data collection was semi-structured interviews to determine whether or not the teachers were ready to support learners with SLDs. Semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to probe the participants' lived experiences and verify the essence of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell

& Poth, 2018:121). During the semi-structured interviews, the researchers made sure that their prejudices, perspectives and assumptions did not influence the participants' perceptions.

Qualitative thematic data analysis was done to explore patterns of themes across the transcribed interview data. A structured approach was adopted in the exploration and interpretation of the qualitative data to get a thorough understanding of human experiences and social phenomena (Braune & Clarke, 2023). Qualitative thematic analysis entails identifying patterns within a data set and interpreting them to uncover their inherent meanings (Liebenberg, Jamal, & Ikeda, 2020). The following systematic steps, as proposed by Naeem, Ozuem, Howell and Ranfagni (2023, 2–4), were followed during the data analysis:

Transcription, familiarization with the data, and a selection of quotations: This involved the transcription of data and familiarizing us with it.

Selection of key words: The researchers identified recurring patterns, terms, or visual elements and marked them as keywords.

Coding: Codes were assigned to segments of data that captured the data's core message, significance or theme.

Conceptualization through the interpretation of key words, codes and themes: This step involved understanding and defining concepts that emerged from the data. The researchers identified social patterns and refined them into definitions that align with their research.

The analyzed data brought forth three main themes (to be discussed in the subsequent sections) that were regarded as relevant to the study's main research question, namely: *How can teachers' readiness to support learners with specific learning disabilities be enhanced?*

Research ethics

The researchers have obtained permission to conduct the research from the Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC) of the University of South Africa. The reference number is: 2021/11/10/63588536/21/AM. Permission was also given by the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education, the District office, the Circuit Office and the principals of the mainstream secondary schools whose teachers were purposively selected to participate in the study. The researchers obtained informed consent from all participants involved in the research. The participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study and its potential risks and benefits. Participation was voluntary and the participants could withdraw any time without penalty. The participants were assured of their right to privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, and protection from harm.

Findings and discussions

The themes that emerged from the analised data regarding the enhancement of teachers' readiness to support learners with specific learning disabilities were as follows: (1) teacher training and professional preparedness, (2) psychological readiness, and (3) school readiness for inclusivity.

Teacher training and professional preparedness

The results revealed uncertainty about and unpreparedness for the implementation of inclusion practices. According to literature (Movkebayeva et al., 2016; Mangope et al., 2020), teachers' acceptance of the inclusion of learners with specific learning impairments in mainstream classrooms can be accelerated by providing them with the required skills, resources and support, as well as positive experiences in terms of the inclusion policy. The participants highlighted problems with the execution of inclusive-education policies and their unpreparedness to provide adequate support to learners with SLDs.

"We actually lack the necessary skills because we were not adequately workshopped. The Department of Education has never provided any in-depth workshops for teachers to deal with such situations that need us to support learners with specific learning disabilities. If the Department of Education can take this matter seriously and make sure that teachers in rural mainstream schools are taken through rigorous workshops, I think that will also help. It will enable us to deal with such situations and help these learners." (T9-E)

"We were not well workshopped to deal with such learners who have specific learning disabilities and teaching them is usually time-consuming because those learners, they take time to understand simple things." (T10-E)

"In most cases, we are not supported on how we can assist these learners. There are no regular workshops about these learners with learning impairments, everything is just teaching." (T2-A)

"There is a need for adequate workshops to work with learners with special educational needs. Teachers need to be taught on how to treat these learners and these learners need educators who studied inclusive education to be able to know their level of understanding, knowing what they should do and what they should not." (T8-D)

Participants complained that because they were insufficiently workshopped, they are unable to support learners with SLDs. They believed that they required extensive training to teach such learners in mainstream schools. The findings of a study conducted by Warnes, Done and Knowler (2022) in England reveal that insufficient training to implement inclusive practices and address various educational and diversity needs in the classroom increases teachers' stress levels. Teachers also mentioned a lack of professional development opportunities to learn techniques to teach students with moderate to severe disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Anderson, 2020; Jaffal, 2022). To be able to teach effectively in inclusive classrooms and help all learners, teachers must be trained (Anderson, 2020).

According to the findings of this study, teachers have a limited professional knowledge and insufficient skills and abilities to manage the educational process in an inclusive setting. They have a vague understanding of inclusive education and some demonstrated a slight awareness of handling learners with diverse gifts and learning styles. The following quotes are teachers' assertions.

"When coming to the methods that one must apply when or employ while teaching the learners, the educator or the teacher must select, must be inclusive while selecting the method. In cooperative learning, the role of the teacher is to ensure that every learner in that group participates, every learner provides a content, which will eventually make sure that all of them participated towards the product that they shall have produced." (T3-B)

"Strategies which can be used, in most cases, to support learners with specific learning disabilities is integration methods and the use of gargets, for example, we can use different chalk in class to demonstrate like in mathematics on some graphs, or we can use some charts, come with charts like in Life Sciences to demonstrate the heart there. We can use videos where other teachers are teaching. You must be creative so that you can attract their attention." (T2-A)

"If you teach for example, learners with visual learning disabilities, learners with hearing impairments, if you use pictures for such learners to present your lesson, they will be able to understand. They can't hear very well, but with the caption of visuals they will be able to understand what is transpiring. We also have learners with eye-sight problems, we also support them with both verbal and visual learning in a sense that when you teach those learners, you must make sure that you use big letters and in terms of written documents, we encourage that you increase the font." (T7-D)

Psychological readiness
The findings revealed how important it is that teachers accept learners with SLDs in mainstream schools. It was found that teachers had not fully embraced the idea of learners with SLDs in their classrooms. Some teachers believed that they were certainly not ready to teach and support learners with SLDs. Some were of the opinion that these learners should rather be referred to specialized institutions outside mainstream schools where they would get support tailored to their educational needs. This viewpoint was expressed as follows:

"It is a great concern for me because this type of learner cannot perform well in the mainstream, and I don't have that confidence working with them. Perhaps there should be a facility where they can be taken to; where they can be able to be dealt with accordingly, perhaps be given activities or the learning that is equivalent to their IQs [intelligence quotient] levels." (T1-A)

"They should be given special attention and then, like being taught separately, maybe be given extra classes or they can be referred to special schools." (T5-C)

"Learners with specific learning disabilities must be admitted to the correct school and not the mainstream." (T7-D)

"It is true that the institution to which I am attached, there are such learners with impairments. It might not be a surprise why do we have such learners who must be attending the special schools." (T3-B)

According to Vygotsky et al. (1993:66), learning impairments should be viewed as a social anomaly rather than a biological issue. The psychological makeup of individuals with a learning impairment is shaped to a greater extent by the social consequences of their impairment than by the impairment itself (Vygotsky et al., 1993:67). The findings of the study indicated that teachers concentrate more on the shortcomings or defects of learners than on developing their skills and proficiencies through inclusive learning.

School readiness for inclusivity

The concept of inclusive education necessitates schools to integrate learners with disabilities with those without disabilities. Schools need to be inclusive and cater for learners with varied academic needs. Therefore, the school environment and infrastructure must be inclusive so that all learners have access to quality education. Participants believed that overcrowded classrooms were a significant barrier to supporting learners with specific learning disabilities. The quotes that follow reflect their concerns.

"When learners are overcrowded, it is difficult to identify them. It is difficult to know who has a learning impairment and who has not. It is difficult to also give them individual attention." (T5-C)

"The classrooms here are so over-crowded, you would not be able to identify if this learner has an impairment or if this learner is okay." (T6-C)

"The fact that our classes are overcrowded sometimes we get so busy that we only recognize such learners or identify such learners at a later stage, perhaps towards the end of the year, that we have had this type of learners." (T4-B)

Although teachers want to incorporate learners with SLDs, they lack the tools, the expertise, and the readiness to carry out their responsibilities. Despite challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and a lack of resources, teachers develop alternative methods and techniques to include everyone (Themane & Thobejane, 2019; Musseau, 2024). Vygotsky admits that social settings and learning are closely entwined. Therefore, teachers must identify and implement strategies for teaching learners with learning disabilities in a particular social context (Kurt, 2020; Reyes, 2023).

Limitations of the study and recommendations

This study was geographically demarcated to five rural mainstream secondary schools in the Mogalakwena district of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. Because of the small sample size (10 teachers), the study's findings may not be generalized to all rural mainstream secondary schools in this province and district. The authors recommend that teachers in rural mainstream schools get quality training in inclusive education practices and policies. Collaboration with education experts and community stakeholders is recommended to support teachers and enhance their readiness to teach learners with specific learning disabilities. This study may serve as springboard for future research on the same issues concerning learners with learning disabilities.

Conclusions

This research article reports about research conducted in the Mogalakwena District of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. The aim was to find out if teachers in rural mainstream secondary schools are ready for and able to support learners with specific learning disabilities (SLDs). The findings revealed that more needs to be done to ensure that teachers are trained to provide professional support and put into practice the inclusive-education principles and policies in rural mainstream schools. The findings of this study resonate with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development because, in a school set-up, learners' social environment (a rural environment in this study) and the knowledge, skills and values imparted by their teachers can greatly influence their cognitive development.

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