Principals' Perspectives on Socio-psychological Support to Learners in Primary Schools: Caring for Those in Need

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ABSTRACT The present exploratory study examined the perspectives of primary school principals on their understanding of South Africa's inclusive education policy that was introduced in 2001, herein referred to as Education White Paper 6 [EWP6]. The research was conducted in disadvantaged rural primary schools in the Eastern Cape, a province in South Africa. A total of 80 principals (53 males and 27 females) participated for data collection purposes through questionnaires. The SPSS was mainly used in the analysis of data. Findings indicated that learners who were psychologically in need of support (LePINS) received minimal socio-psychological support (SPS), experienced exclusion, stigmatization, marginalization and discrimination in the school education system even after 14 years of the adoption of the EWP6 policy document of 2001. Principals were found to be unfamiliar with the basics of the policy, and related documents. Besides, there was little effort exerted by the district-based support teams (DBSTs) in respect of implementation of inclusive education in their respective districts.

INTRODUCTION

Earlier research projects on inclusive education (IE) in South Africa mostly dealt with human rights and social justice with emphasis on rights of persons with disabilities (Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013). While it is essential for IE debates to revolve around issues of equal rights, social justice and so on, it is also imperative to explore how schools commit themselves to implementing various legislative frameworks, especially those, that are IE related, and that attempted to secure children's rights – by different departments in South Africa (SA). The roles of principals and school governing bodies (SGBs) regarding the implementation of such policies remain crucial for the ultimate aim of delivering quality education for all. A general survey indicated that SA, as compared with other developing countries, has met educational goals set and agreed upon by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] reasonable well; however, the general quality of education is regarded as inferiority (Donohue and Bornman 2014).

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There are various factors that contribute to poor learners' performance in public schools. The high rate of school violence, teenage pregnancy and ever-low Grade 12 results seem to reflect the current state of education in SA which has reached what can be said to be an education crisis stage (Janssen and Molly 2014; Daily Dispatch 2014). In the midst of an education crisis (EC), one may wonder how did this impact on vulnerable learners, such as LePINS in South African public schools. Donohue and Bornman (2014) argued that South African learners' performance remain categorically lower than the most of African countries even though most IE policy standards, as stipulated by UNESCO, seem to be met. While application of democratic principles such as social justice, equal rights and equal education for all in schools can help to the fundamental issues (marginalisation, learning barriers, exclusion and stigmatisation) of inclusion, IE depends on the ability or competency of principals and governing bodies to conceptualise policies for effective implementation.

The lack of competency by SGB members in most South African schools has been a subject of debate since the introduction of the South African Schools Act (SASA) in 1996, a legislative framework that included stipulated SGB roles. The Ministry of Education is aware of such incompetency although it has been slow to come up with an effective training system (Jansen and Blank 2014).

Quality Education for All

In the promotion of education for all and inclusive education practices, the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1994 in Salamanca (Spain) adopted the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and Framework for Action (UNESCO 1994). The Salamanca Statement is a call for all governments of the world to adopt, promote and implement legislative policies on inclusive education in their respective countries. With this clear-cut framework for action, such as the Salamanca Statement, governments are expected to be more committed to implementing IE policies in an attempt to eradicate barriers to learning, exclusion, discrimination and marginalization of all vulnerable children, in their respective countries (UNESCO 2008; Buka 2013).

As the above statement assumes that education systems in various countries of the world still, in some way, discriminate, exclude and marginalize learners with barriers to learning, it also strives for a shift towards a socio-cultural diversity model in schools. Inclusion in the South African education context also referred to many issues of diversity in a school environment such as admission of learners to any school of their choice regardless of race, financial status, disabilities and cultural backgrounds, to meet the underlying principles of IE and with the hope of conquering social justice and equal rights (Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013). UNESCO's (2008) principles of IE pertain to changes and modifications of context in content, approaches, structures or strategies that support basic education delivery. Such changes and modifications come with the vision that all children of school-going age be enrolled at schools regardless of differences or disabilities; however, research indicated that in South Africa, despite the fact that basic education is compulsory between the 6-15 years of age, approximately 70 percent of children with impairments do not attend school, and of those who are at school, the majority are still in special schools when they should ideally be in ordinary schools (Donohue and Bornman 2014; MacLeskey et al. 2014).

The marginalization and exclusion of learners experiencing barriers to learning (LEBTLs) and LePINS remains a challenge, despite various laws and policies in place to improve the lives of individuals in various communities in the world (Clough and Corbett 2002). Miles (2000: 9) argued that education is supposed to be empowering but, unfortunately, in many instances failed to be so. This assertion raised concerns and speculation and suggested that the situation might be more serious in the case of LePINS and LEBTLs in rural schools. The issue of implementing IE often ignites heated debate as people argue and deliberate on issues of practical implementation of education reforms while evidence reveals that only a few schools, even in developed countries like Unites States, have been successful in implementing some of IE the principles (Buka et al. 2011; MacLeskey et al. 2014).

In most of the developing countries, IE policies focus on the admission of learners experiencing barriers to mainstream schools, thus emancipating them. Such policies have, however, not been reflected in the classroom environment for effective practice and schools still grapple with complexities with regard to meeting educational needs of LePINS (Sharma et al. 2013). Lack of clarity on IE policy issues and ineffective guidelines for teachers do not assist teachers but hinder progress on IE movements in schools (Donohue and Bornman 2014). Although, the endorsement by the South African Ministry of Education, of the legislative framework called the Education White Paper 6, Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (simply known as Education White Paper 6 [EWP6]) in 2001, acknowledged aspects such as human rights, equality, social justice, and in particular, education for all as enshrined in the South African Constitution Act 108 of 1996, research indicated that little has been achieved even after 14 years of its launch. The South African education system currently accounts for 20 percent of better achievement learners while 80 percent go down the drain (Jansen and Blank 2014). One of the prominent challenges encountered by schools, especially in developing countries, is governments' complacency with regard to teacher training, funding and provision of incentives for both schools and teachers (Sharma et al. 2013; Donohue and Bornman 2014).

South African Inclusive Education in Context

As mentioned earlier, there are several factors that contribute to the lack of smooth im-

plementation of IE policies and which perhaps remain unique to the South African context. Before 1994, South Africa was under the apartheid regime where segregation and discrimination policies were in force for decades (Donohue and Bornman 2014). The complications of transformation and reconfiguration of various systems of government simply increased challenges with respect to IE implementation (Engelbrecht and Green 2007). The legacy of apartheid left former Whites-only schools, which were designed to accommodate the elite minority groups, with wealthy resources at the expense of dire-in-need majority black schools, especially those in rural and township areas. The current government finds itself not only trapped in ways of providing efficient and equitable funding system to redress the imbalances of the past, but has exacerbated the situation by creating a culture of maladministration practices which can be termed as a cancer of corruption. Such negative practices adversely impact on delivery of basic service such as equal education for all (Jansen and Blank 2014). Despite their willingness to implement IE policies, teachers are left anticipating adequate support and training, proper resources and sufficient funding (MacLeskey et al. 2014; Donohue and Bornman 2014). As more educational reforms are put in place, teachers are confused about the implications of inclusion pertaining to "what and when" to do, according to the National Association of Professional Teachers of South Africa (NAPTOSA 2007: 3).

Environmental Conditions in Disadvantaged, Rural South African Schools

With the failure of government to deliver basic services, the plight of disadvantaged rural schools has deteriorated with many schools resorting to legal action against the state (Daily Dispatch 2014). Although various studies conducted in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa (for example, by Kwababa 2011; Buka 2013), the condition of schools remains appalling, many schools being mud structures. There is also a shortage of relevantly-skilled teachers and a scarcity of support staff, (herein referred to as inclusive classroom caregivers [ICCs]) in most schools. Learners are unique in nature and require socio-psychological support (SPS) that will ensure their rights and security.

With the situation as depicted above, the hospitality, protection and security promised to vulnerable learners in schools by various children's acts, remain gloomy and doubtful. Engelbrecht and Green (2007) noted that while the concept of IE has gathered momentum in terms of status in South Africa, it does so with considerable confusion in terms of the exact meaning of the concept. There is much uncertainty around the issues of real implementation of the IE policy since its promulgation in 2001. It was in the light of the above background, that a small-scale study was conducted to investigate how school principals provided SPS to LePINs (Donohue and Bornman 2014).

The Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to explore SPS and learning support to LePINS by examining perspectives and attitudes of principals with regard to IE implementation in their respective schools. While IE principles advocate for schools to accommodate learner diversity in the same classroom, less is known about what is happening behind closed classroom doors. Despite various efforts by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to reinforce advancement in addressing the needs of all learners in public schools, research indicated that little progress has been seen in respect to IE policy implementation worldwide (MacLeskey et al. 2014). Donohue and Bornman (2014) stated that, as the majority of countries experience constraints in implementing inclusive education policies, governments must intensify positively-perceived training programs for teachers and provide adequate support in schools.

METHODS

For the present study, data were collected mainly through the use of a quantitative approach with the engagement of a survey limited as a research design. Quantitative research design renders a holistic overview of the phenomenon for generalisation (Maree 2010). Data were collected through questionnaires which were personally distributed to randomly-selected sites. The key dimensions used in the selection of sites were critically considered so that schools with learners with disabilities or impairments were included. Visiting schools, during questionnaire

distribution, gave the researchers an opportunity to have a better understanding of the sites as they had the advantage of casual-general observation of research sites. Once the 80 returned questionnaires were collected from the respondents, data were analysed by means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Participants and Setting

Before questionnaires were administered to participating schools, ethical issues were observed; permission to conduct the study was sought from both the Department of Basic Education and participating schools and was granted. Eighty respondents signed consent forms. Respondents (53 male, 27 females between 30-55 years of age) comprised school principals who were randomly selected. As already stated above, the SPSS was used in the analysis of data with percentage and descriptive graphs being preferred in the presentation of results.

RESULTS

The implementation of the EWP6 document was affected by both extrinsic and intrinsic barriers. Besides, it also included the contextual and systemic factors along with socio-economic circumstances as well. Findings are discussed below:

Negative Attitudes of Principals to LePINS and Ignorance about EWP6

This study revealed that most principals (77%) did not want these children in their schools; much as they claimed to recognize the need to support the learners with difficulties (80% in their schools (see Table 1). The process of really involving learners with impairments (disabilities) in leadership positions was not only minimal but non-existent and shrugged off by many principals. The findings also revealed that most schools (79%) discriminated against, excluded and even marginalized learners with barriers in their programmes regarding sports, recreation, entertainment and social activities. These learners were not given opportunities to be part of organizing committees (to develop leadership qualities) and were stigmatized. Most principals were found to be ignorant about the content of the inclusive education policy document, although, it was available at their schools. The majority of principals (55%) in this study could not differentiate between inclusive education and Outcomes-based education (OBE). This might have impacted negatively on the principals' attitudes and their perceptions with regard to the implementation of IE principles in their schools. The above assertion is confirmed by Engelbrecht and Green (2007) who maintain that OBE seems to have stigmatized education in the minds of many teachers.

Table 1: Summary of respondents' views

Title	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Disabled children should go to special schools.	13	0	77	0
Entertainment and social activities accommodate disabled learners.	0	79	21	0
We need to give disabled children extra support.	15	0	80	0
Leave disabled children at home. Why bother with them?	3	15	51	31
Government does not give real support for inclusive education.	13	8	74	5
There are serious challenges at our school regarding inclusive education implementation.	18	13	67	2
Collaboration with parents and stakeholders is definitely needed for inclusive education.	33	2	62	3
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Lack of Viable Programmes and Support by DBSTs

On various occasions, workshops held were symbolic and only convenient for, or significant for the organizers, that is, District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs). About 77 percent of principals had not attended workshops on inclusive education in the last 24 months while 38 percent of principals were never oriented on inclusive education in the last 12 months. The few seminars that were launched were mostly organized at district level. These development programmes would work better if they were decentralized and more localized. There was also an indication of poor co-ordination or communication between the DBST and schools. Only 15 percent of schools seemed to be communicating reasonably well with DBSTs regarding inclusive education matters and a larger number (47%) tended to give a convenient and common 'fair' score. About 38 percent of principals rated the communication strategies of the DBSTs as poor. Most of the respondents indicated that more support from government was expected (74) while parental involvement was crucial (62%).

Inadequacy of Infra-structure and Resources

Most of the schools had inadequate, poor, weak and unsafe classroom structures. There were no proper offices for principals to competently perform their daily duties. Almost 34 percent of respondents indicated that they thought that the general teacher/pupil ratio was larger, with half of them suggesting that it was "reasonable". Only 16 percent of respondents reported that the ratio was small. Almost 55 percent of respondents reported that school classrooms were "extremely inadequate" for proper education of impaired learners, while 45 percent indicated poor conditions of classrooms.

DISCUSSION

The study was confined to the comprehension of the inclusive education policy document by the principals of schools as the key role-players in the implementation of the EWP6 policy document. Since, most of the teachers in schools were either initially trained for general education or special education, the role of principals was crucial in achieving IE social ideology (Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013). While the South African Ministry of Education attempted to effect educational reforms for the promotion of social justice and equal education, policy reviews took place with little emphasis on implementation of such policies. Since, the training of teachers was largely based on a medical model, most teachers currently in the system in public schools lacked fundamental skills to teach and support learners with barriers (MacLeskey et al. 2014).

It is necessary for principals to have a clear understanding of their roles pertaining to inclusive education policy issues in order for them to be able to initiate and be innovative about implementation strategies and support to vulnerable children in their schools. The discrimination, exclusion, stigmatization and marginalization of LePINS and LEBTLs in the school education system is an adverse factor that is prevalent in most education systems worldwide, even in the most developed countries of the world (MacLeskey et al. 2014; Ahsan 2014). As can be expected, implementation of inclusive education in Third World countries might be characterized by multi-problematic symptoms. The dominance of political ideology in the concept of education seems to be prevalent, and even causes discomfort in educational research.

The implementation of the Education White Paper 6 document in rural primary schools appeared to be minimal and can be regarded as exiguous. The discrimination, exclusion and marginalization of learners with disabilities, in curricular and extra-curricular school programs, needs to be addressed and dealt with. This research revealed that not all principals were capacitated or familiar with the policy and programs of inclusive education in schools with respect to implementation in the Eastern Cape. There was a lack of sufficient and appropriate skills among teachers to handle learners with disabilities in learning (Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013; Donohue and Bornman 2014). There also seemed to be lack of close co-operation or collaboration with parents and community-based organizations. In addition, there was notable concern about corruption and profligacy which apparently resulted in the failure of government to deliver basic services (Jansen and Blank 2014; Daily Dispatch 2014).

CONCLUSION

Inclusion is a thought-provoking perspective which challenges innovations and devel-

opments with regard to fostering of better teaching methodologies, learning strategies and various types of support for learners in need. The research findings revealed gross incapacity, lack of skills on the part of principals (broadly speaking, even teachers) with regard to rendering appropriate SPS to LePINS and LEBTLs. One needs not only to have to consider how teachers in schools are shaped and fashioned to carry out the task or how to out-source tasks (government) for the benefit of education for all, but teachers also have to think about how, as personnel may produce *experts* from amongst themselves, if they are serious about quality education for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In respect of empirical evidences indicating that the majority of principals had a negative attitude to LePINS and LEBTLs, the District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) are required to come up with empowerment programs that focus on changing principals' mind sets. Comprehensive training programs on IE ought to be put in place near schools; for example, in small pocket programs (clusters with not more than 10 schools). In such local programs, parents and School Governing Bodies must be invited to participate. The DBSTs must closely work with schools and community-based building forums including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) by forming formidable fronts to persuade government to provide the necessary infrastructure in schools as a first step to implementation of EWP 6.

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