

Challenges Encountered by Teachers in Identifying Learners with Learning Barriers: Toward Inclusive Education

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The predominant objective of any education system is one providing quality education for all learners in order to enable them to realise their full potential, thereby enabling them to contribute to, and participate in society. During the last two decades, international policy development has turned the focus on providing quality education for all learners within the mainstream of education, thereby removing the stigma and stereotype of learners with barriers to learning. South Africa has also accepted educational approaches that facilitate movement towards more inclusive forms of education. Intensive attempts are made to identify the barriers and developments, and to provide all children and young people with equal access to quality education. The most important problem that has to be overcome in this process is the training and empowerment of teachers to identify and effectively support learners who experience barriers to learning. Full Service inclusive schools are new institutions in South Africa which have been established in terms of the Education White Paper (Department of Education, 2001: 22-23) as pilot schools for the rolling of the Inclusion policy in South Africa. The purpose of this kind of education is meant to give equal opportunity for all.

For the past six years, South Africa has paid diligent attention to the following truth. The increasing challenge to schools when they want to make a difference and they want to be fit for the future, is to examine what they are offering their learners, how it is offered and whether it meets the needs of learners and the public (Charlton & David, 1993). The new

constitution emphasises respect for the rights of all, with particular emphasis on the recognition of diversity. This implies an inclusive approach to education in the sense that all learners are entitled to appropriate education in an inclusive and supportive learning environment. The new curriculum, with its outcome based approach is well suited to inclusion (Republic of South Africa, 1996). One of the problems facing South Africa in realising the ideals of inclusive education is the wide meaning of the concept learners with disabilities or learners with special educational needs. It includes not only the barriers caused by economic and emotional deprivation in South Africa as well as social exclusion. According to the Report of the NCS-NET& NCESS (South Africa), learners whose education requires additional planning and modification in order to assist them to learn are described as learners who are experiencing barrier to learning.

There are various forms of special educational needs (Weeks, 2000: 17-21).

- Permanent shortcomings in a person's make up. These shortcomings include sensory disabilities, physical disabilities, intellectual disability and multiple disability
- Developmental problems which could manifest as a total delay in most of the development areas, a delay in one or more aspects of development such as motor, perceptual, language or intellectual development or not being school ready at the accepted age for new entrants.
- Learning problems which could manifest in all school subjects or only certain school subjects or in certain aspects of a school subject. These are associated with concepts such as under achievement, learners who do not do well at school and disadvantage learners. The concept disadvantage refers to those whose education has fallen behind as a result of social, economic or political circumstances.
- Circumstantial problems which could prevent learners from having a fair chance to make a success of their school career.

NCSNET (1997: 12) defines learners who experience barriers to learning more inclusively as those with socio economic barriers like inadequate numbers of learning centres. Learners with barriers are also those who experience a lack of access to basic services like adequate transport, access to clinics, poverty and underdevelopment, leading to the inability of families to meet basic needs of their children. However, some factors place learners at risk positions such as the emotional and social well being of learners due to violence, crime HIV/AIDS. In some cases, discriminatory attitudes towards learners who are labelled slow learners, drop

outs inflexible and inaccessible curriculum and inadequate training of teachers as well as teaching styles that do not meet the needs of all learners, language and communication where the medium of instruction is not the home language of the learner; inaccessible and unsafe built environment; inadequate and inappropriate provision of support services; lack of enabling and protective legislation and policy; lack of parental recognition and involvement e.g. the learning environment and the broader society do not provide for the needs of these learners and a lack of human resource development strategies e.g. the absence of ongoing in-service training programmes lead to insecurities, uncertainties, low self-esteem, lack of innovative practices which in turn impact on the attitudes of the teachers.

In a developing country such as South Africa where unemployment and poverty are rife and where government and community structures are inhibited by an unstable economy, it can be expected that the provision of quality of education for all learners, including those who experience barriers to learning and development, would be a formidable task. South African schools need to be restructured in terms of the review of the curriculum with the collaboration of various stakeholders. Weeks (2000: 23) claims that community-based involvement in this regard are essential with members of the community becoming involved in actualising the full potential of learners. Teachers need to be trained in pre and in-service programmes to focus on the strengths of learners as having the potential to stimulate a richer learning environment. They also need to understand the diverse needs of the learners in their classrooms so as to identify their problems and to be able to give support to all their learners in order for them to learn and develop optimally.

According to the Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001: 24), the inclusive education and training system was to be changed so that learners who experience barriers to learning could be identified early and support given. The DoE further acknowledged that teachers were the primary resources in the accomplishment of the goals to establish inclusive education and training, and their knowledge would be improved and new skills developed. However in our experience, evidence of such skills and knowledge remains elusive. Other challenges that are facing the teachers include extra paperwork, shortage of time, lack of knowledge about a wide range of learner's needs, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of quality support from the District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs).

Full service schools are mainstream education institutions that provide quality education to all learners by supplying the full range of learning needs in an equitable manner. They are

expected to provide access and achieve equity, quality and social justice in education (DoE, 2001: 22). This definition is not confined to primary schools that were converted to Full Service School but also includes institutions at different levels of the education system such as Early Childhood Development, General Education and Training, Further Education and Higher Education. Full service school were established by converting primary schools and equipping them to provide for a wide range of learning needs. The support would include physical, material resources as well as professional staff development.

Full-Service Schools (FSS) were created in South Africa as part of a pilot project to implement an inclusion education policy and for the national DoE to work with provinces to investigate ways of raising the capacity of teachers in primary schools for the early identification and support of learners who experience barriers to learning and need learning support (DoE, 2001). Landsberg et al. (2005) argue for an asset-based approach to identification in which assessment is used interchangeably with identification and purports that when the effective use of this approach is applied, the very steps of assessment can become the first steps of learning support. However, the authors warn against the dangers which the remedial approach to identification holds. This is because it involves categorising and labelling learners in terms of their impairment or problem area.

The purpose of this study is to explore the teachers' challenges in identifying learners who experience barriers to learning in a Full Service School in the East London District. Teachers in such schools are expected to have skills and knowledge to identify learners and provide support. Most teachers in Full Service Schools possess qualifications to teach mainstream school and depend on Departmental workshops for the skills needed in identifying learners and to provide support. Teachers should therefore have skills and knowledge of identifying learners in order to minimise bias, on identification, over identification as well as miss identification.

This study strives to explore teachers' challenges in identifying learners with barriers to learning in Full-Service Schools in rural Alice. The Teachers are expected to have skills and knowledge to identify learners and to provide support. However, most teachers, if not all in Full-Service Schools are only being trained to teach in mainstream schools, not inclusive ones. The only form of training that they received from the department of education was in the form of workshops for the skills needed to identify learners so that they could provide

support (Lindokuhle, 2003). The identification of such learners is essential because it is the first step in the process of providing support to learners.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the challenges that teachers experience in identifying learners with learning barriers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is premised within the policy implementation theory of Paudel (2009). Public policy evolution and implementation since the end of apartheid in 1994 has been on top of developmental agenda of the new dispensation. Gumede (2008) argues that at theoretical level in the new South Africa public sector, reforms must take place and be linked with new public management reforms which can ultimately lead to integrated governance approach. Gumede (2008) further asserts that although integrated governance system requires further interrogation, South Africa has established ideal institutions for policy-making process and encapsulates most of the salient features of a democratic developmental state.

In view of the above, Paudel (2009) argues that public policy implementation literally means carrying out, accomplishing, fulfilling, producing or completing a given task. Paudel (2009) further says that policy implementation encompasses those actions by public and private individuals or groups that are directed at the achievement of objectives set forth in policy decisions. O'Toole (2003: 266) defines policy implementation as what develops between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of government to do something or stop doing something and the ultimate impact of world of actions. Paudel argues that successful implementation requires compliance with statutes' directives and goals, achievement of specific success indicators, and improvement in the political climate around a program. This means that success of the policy depends critically on two factors: local capacity and will. Questions of motivation and commitment (or will) reflect the implementer's assessment of the value of a policy or the appropriateness of the strategy.

The relevance of this public policy implementation theory to this study cannot be overemphasised. The researchers intend to assess whether the policy of recruitment of educators is correctly implemented by the School Governing Bodies. Furthermore the

researchers seek to assess whether this policy is yielding its intended objectives or these are unintended consequences in the policy of recruitment.

Barriers to learning in an inclusive education setting refers to those difficulties that arise within the education system as a whole, the learning site or within the learner himself / herself which prevent both the system and the learner's needs from being met. When based on objective evaluation made by an educational authority, it is ascertained that teaching and learning are hampered when such needs are not met, and educationally sound measures must be applied (DoE, 2005). Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) SIAS is the support strategy in the education system which was designed to overhaul the process of identifying, assessing and providing programmes for all learners who require additional support in order to enhance their participation and inclusion in education (DoE, 2008).

Recent South African studies have reported various general teachers' challenges in the implementation of the inclusive education policy in various contexts. Gwala (2006) reported specifically on the Foundation Phase in Limpopo. He reveals that teachers lacked the necessary training in the skills needed to identify barriers to learning and instead depended on test scores as criteria for identification. The draft national strategy on SIAS (DoE, 2005b) explained the importance of teacher training for the implementation of inclusive education, with the task of providing ongoing support to school-level teams, colleges, early childhood and adult centres to be entrusted to the DBSTs. Sideridis et al. (2008) conducted a study in Greece on how teachers' bias influences the identification process and in part leads to over-identification. They argue that there is evidence that general and special education teachers often miss the characteristics in defining disability. The argument in their study illustrates the need for a standardised instrument that would ensure fairness in the process of identifying learners and remove any doubt.

IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

Kokot (2006: 136) argues that, in practice, school-aged children are still recognised as having learning inefficiencies which may be short-lived or long-lived. Teachers in Full-Service Schools are expected to possess essential knowledge of common disabilities and learning difficulties as well as skills to identify them through assessment processes. However, teachers do not have skills (Ntsanwisi, 2008: 1) and therefore quality support is not always available for learners, especially those who experience barriers to learning. Westwood (2000: 24) also

contends that there are many factors that make the identification of learners experiencing barriers difficult. Some of these factors are definitions and criteria for particular categories of difficulty, and overlapping of learning difficulties. Vogel (2006: 68) suggests the following reasons for the early identification of learners. Young learners are still dependant on adults for support, guidance and protection and are flexible for support. Their playful nature allows them to tolerate intervention with minimal resistance. The gaps in their learning are still not great. Support for older learners is usually met with some resistance because they have already developed difficulties associated with poor self-image, which may make them sceptical about simple support measures.

In South Africa, the SIAS also focused on the screening and identification of learners and development to establish a support package to address barriers (DoE, 2008: 9). However, this document does not make teachers' work less challenging because it consist of too much paperwork and does not provide practical guidance in some sections. For example, the information requires teachers to use scores from classroom assessment as main learning areas for the learners (DoE, 2008: 47), instead of looking at the root of the difficulties. The scores can only reflect the results of the difficulties and not their nature. Teachers in Full-Service Schools recognised the primary resources in the implementation of inclusive policy and therefore must have skills and knowledge necessary to identify learners and employ multi-level teaching, curriculum enrichment and cooperative learning, as well as dealing with challenging behaviour.

Teachers' challenge in identification

The inclusive Education Policy is an international agenda which requires that the effective implementation in a South African context be viewed in both local and international contexts. Terminology is one area in inclusive education that poses difficulties to teachers and related practitioners not only in South Africa but also world-wide. Teachers should have a clear definition of what constitutes learning difficulties before they identify learners in the classroom.

The controversy around inclusive Education terminology has also been reported by some international researchers especially with regard to the operational meaning of the terms such as learning disabilities or learning difficulties or specific learning disabilities. To a lay person, these terms refer to the same condition that prevents learners from making full participation at school. Practitioners argue that the clarity of what constitutes a learning

disability is pivotal because it makes it possible for teachers to design programmes that are tailor made to address that specific difficulty. Kokot (2006: 136) noted that in South Africa, the terms learning difficulties or learning problems are used or refer to learners who experience learning difficulties which may last for a short time and be overcome without them experiencing moderate to severe barriers are not related to extrinsic causes referred to as learning disabled, assistance from a teacher or a therapist, whereas those learners who are identified as experiencing moderate to severe barriers are not related to extrinsic causes referred to as learning disabled.

Teachers' challenges in inclusive classroom

Recent studies conducted by local researchers indicate commonality of the challenges that classroom teachers are facing with regard to the assimilation of inclusive practices in their classroom and the identification of learners who experience barriers to learning in particular. Two of these studies were conducted in Gauteng white schools: one independent school (Gumede, 2008) and one public school (Paudel, 2009) whilst two were conducted in African rural and semi rural schools one in Mpumalanga (Mpya, 2005), Khoele (2008) in Gauteng, and Gwala (2006) in kwaZulu Natal. The contexts were not identical but the content led to one similar conclusion that South African teachers have challenges with regard to the implementation of inclusion policy. These challenges are experienced by teachers in various provinces and racial lines in both urban and rural school settings.

METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature and falls within the interpretive paradigm based on a case study. A total of ten teachers were observed and interviewed from one High School in Alice with the aim to see how the policy to inclusive education was being implemented.

Data Analysis and interpretation

The data was framed within the participant's naturalistic context and comprised their rich descriptions of the challenges. Quotations from interviews transcripts were used to validate the researcher's descriptions. The themes that appeared more frequent from the data are presented below.

Lack of effective training of the teachers

There was justifiable evidence from the data that the kind of training provided for teachers was not effective in addressing their challenges with regard to the implementation of the inclusive policy or identification of learners who experience barriers to learning. Below are responses to the interview question that elicited the answers.

Question 2: How long did your training to identify learners with barriers last?

Teacher 1: *I remember the training but it was not clear because the whole thick manual was done in few hours*

Teacher 4: *It lasted for two hours. I wish there can be more patient with us and train us for a long time.*

Teacher 3: *It was one day from eleven a.m. to thirteen p.m.*

Question 6: Do you think this training was efficient and helping you to identify learners with learning barriers?

Teacher 2: *Sometimes you think that you have understood but when you have to apply what you learnt from the training, you find that you have a problem and you need more training*

Teacher 8: *... they come here and give us a brief training and they quickly come and say now complete these forms we want them on the eighth of this month. That's frustrating really. Sometimes you want to do it perfectly but fail and you can feel the failure because you want to be perfect.*

The above evidences are suggestive that although training sessions were conducted for a very short time, the teachers might have failed to attend them because of other commitments at the school. Teacher 10 also disclosed that the teachers in the Senior Phase do not bother to identify learners with barriers to learning because they are told that they should be identified by teachers in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases. This is what she had to say:

Teacher 10: *In Senior Phase we do not identify any learner because the DBST told us that this thing is for Foundation and Intermediate Phases. I use my strategies but I do not follow the SIAS procedures like completing the forms. We were told that the forms are not for Senior Phase. So I do not complete any form.*

Teachers appear to be frustrated by the lack of quality training and the pressures that the Department puts on them in terms of forms to be completed without proper guidance. The temptation to present falsified reports about the identification processes is great and the victim of this condition would be the child contending with barriers to learning.

Teachers' approach to identification

The process of identifying learners who experience barriers to learning should be in line with a philosophy of inclusive education that purports that the barriers can be within the system and that accommodation of individual learner's styles should be considered instead of trying to find out what is wrong with the learner (Lindokuhle, 2003). The shift from a deficit model that permitted specialist educators to find out what was wrong with the learner and either fix it or, if it could not be fixed, exclude the learner from the normal community of learners, and the normal system, meant that an inclusive approach to identification should also accommodate individual differences.

In view of this, the teachers seemed to show signs of a lack of sound theoretical background of the philosophy that underpins the process of identification of learners. The data indicates that teachers only use the deficit model or intuition to identify learners who experience barriers to learning. This was elicited by:

Question: How do you identify learners who experience barriers to learning?

Teacher 9: You look at his exercise book when he writes and see that he has got the tendency of making mistakes when copying from the board and that's where you start and ask some questions such as, „can you see clearly on the board?“ or „why have you made this mistake?“ and you take that learner and sit him/her in the front rows of the classroom.

Teacher 5: I read my learners a short passage and let them retell what I have read them. Those who fail, I identify them as having barriers in listening skills. In speaking, those who are stammering I identify them. When it comes to writing, I give them a short text to write down and then observe their handwriting and I identify those who are failing to write or to copy.

Teacher 1: *When I admit a learner from grade one; I give him/her a short test to test the phonics. Those who fail to articulate the sounds and vowels; I identify them as in need of help.*

Teacher 1 further said: *“There is another problem: Some learners are gifted but they do not perform well.”*

When asked what they do with learners who were gifted but did not perform well, the teacher responded that: *It’s difficult to say but we think he/she has got something wrong. We have one learner who has been in my class since last year because even vowels give her problems. Some have dropped out from school because things were not working at school.*

The last teacher’s comment clearly displays that teachers are committed to finding what may be wrong with learners and may attempt to fix it because it has resulted to some learners dropping out. In view of this, Lindokuhle (2003: 63) argues that “[t]he approach which teachers were using tends to focus on categorising learners into groups of those who cope and those who do not. Consideration of learner’s innate learning styles is overlooked.” Teachers employ this approach because they lack quality training in which their needs as teachers would be considered and addressed. At this point, one should also question both the expertise of the trainers and the quality of the training programmes designed for teachers in Full-Service Schools.

Overcrowded classrooms

Ntsanwisi, (2008) asserts that some teachers are unable to identify learners because of the huge numbers of learners in their classrooms. This is in light with most of the responses from the interviews with the teachers. The following responses are excerpts from answers from teachers concerning huge and overcrowded classrooms.

Question: How many learners do you have in your class and how do you manage them.

Teacher 4: *I have 43 learners in my class and I can tell you that it is a nightmare*

Teacher 9: *36 and they are completely out of control as I can tell you. Large classes like this one are always headache and there is nothing you can do to control the classes.*

It is evident that the number of learners in this class is a problem on its own. This therefore makes it impossible for a teacher to be able to have access to all the learners.

Parental involvement

The participants reported that they invited parents and informed them about any difficulties noticed about their children, and in some cases received information they needed to know about the children. They also revealed an incident in which a parent was invited to school but did not come on the pretence that her child was very clever at home. Teachers spoke about cooperation with parents as follows:

Teacher 6: We advise the learner's parents about what is happening with his/her child and they give background information about the child.

Teacher 10: We once had one parent who, after we had written a letter to invite her to school to discuss the condition of her child, responded by saying 'my child is not stupid, she is clever at home' but most parent do come when we invite them to school. We sit down with them and discuss the condition of their children.

There is enough evidence that parents would want to avoid stigmatisation on their children as much as possible which in a way may hinder the teachers from identifying the child's barrier to learning.

However, the role of parents is still undervalued by teachers, who still hold the role of being experts about the child while parents listen and sign whatever documents they are told to.

LACK OF COLLABORATION AMONG EDUCATORS

The data suggests that the lack of collaboration is another challenge that inhibits teachers when identifying learners in this school. The inability of the educators to meet and discuss issues about the learners experiencing learning barriers could also be attributed to lack of collaboration. There is evidence in the fact that the teachers in the Foundation Phase only meet twice in a quarter.

Teacher 5: Because of our busy schedules, the staffs only have two meetings in a term, one at the beginning and the other at the end.

This also suggests that the lack of collaboration is stronger in the Intermediate and Senior Phases.

Teacher 9: There is no meeting between the intermediate and the foundation teachers so it is difficult to know what barriers learners were experiencing in their classes before coming to this level.

However, other evidence suggests that teachers in the Foundation Phase support each other during teaching,

Teacher 1: ...come to my class and show me how to teach.

The misunderstanding about the roles between the teachers from the different phases and fewer meetings also suggests lack of collaboration.

Although it was evident that the Department visits the school to ascertain that teachers were putting the training and development in practice, the viability of such support is questionable. This is because the teachers are not opened to the department about their inability to identify learners experiencing barriers to learning.

CONCLUSION

Teachers should therefore have skills and knowledge of identifying learners in order to minimise bias, non-identification, over-identification as well as mis-identification. According to the Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001:18), teachers are the primary resource in the implementation of the goals of the inclusive education policy and therefore the District personnel have a responsibility to improve the skills and knowledge of teachers. It is worthy to say that this is not happening and one would expect that inclusive education should only be another policy that lacks implementation. In view of the above, the study revealed that at the heart of the teacher's challenges in identifying learners who experience barriers to learning lies the lack of effective training of teachers. The lack of training can be attributed to two main factors. First and foremost, teachers are not trained in inclusive education at colleges and universities and cannot therefore be able to identify learners who experience learning barriers. Secondly, the training offered by the District officials does not address the challenges that are identified by this study. They are more interested in getting teachers to fill in the policies that training took place when in actual fact they just passed by for a few hours. On these grounds, it should be acknowledged that most South African teachers do not have

an academic background of inclusive education and therefore depend on the ineffective/inefficient departmental workshops for training.

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