

Assessment Strategies Adapted for Implementing Inclusion of Learners with Special Education Needs in Selected Primary Schools in the Amathole West District, South Africa

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KEYWORDS Classroom. Good Practice. Inclusive Education. Qualitative Research Approach. Teachers. Training

ABSTRACT This study investigates pockets of good practice in assessment methods adopted to ensure inclusion of learners with special education needs (SEN) in selected primary schools in the Amathole West District, South Africa. The study was conducted within the interpretivist paradigm. It used a qualitative research method and a case study design. Eight teachers and eight principals from eight purposively selected primary schools, including one provincial and two district officials, were interviewed. Thematic analysis was utilised for data collected using semi-structured interviews. It was found that both formal and informal assessment strategies were used. The study also revealed that due to lack of qualifications and training, some teachers did not know how to adapt assessment strategies. The study found pockets of good practice in assessment strategies adapted and recommends effective in-service training programmes on assessment modification for teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is a global phenomenon in teaching and learning that emphasises the right to education of people living with disabilities (Kanter 2014; Mittler 2012). The Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Education (UNESCO 1994) announced that regular schools with an inclusive point of reference were the most effective ways of fighting attitudes that discriminate, building a welcoming society, creating inclusive communities, and achieving education for all. Inclusive schools are designed to offer effective education for the majority of children and to promote efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the education system (UNESCO 1994). South Africa has been re-envisioned as an open state, benefiting from the right to dignity and equality for all her citizens. Inclusive education in the context of South Africa means attending to varied needs of learners by minimising barriers to education (Department of Education 2001). It is a process of fighting attitudes that discriminate against learners with barriers to learning. Inclusive education

is about acquiring quality education for learners' success (Sisonke Consortium 2006).

The education system in South Africa is based on the notion of a rights culture. This means the right to education is acknowledged in South Africa as it is globally. The Constitution of South Africa, 1996 acknowledges the right to basic education for all. This is referred to as important constitutional rights, as it supports social well-being and economic. The system needs to avoid barriers to learning within the classroom, and encourage equal opportunities for successful learning (Schweisfurth 2011).

Assessments are important in the effective implementation of inclusion of learners with SEN (Rivera 2017). Assessment is the way toward gathering, analysing and deciphering information to support instructors, guardians and different partners in making choices about the improvement of learners (Reid 2019). Classroom assessment should describe a learner with SEN by ensuring that sufficient confirmation of performance is gathered with different assessment strategies (Salvia et al. 2012). Learners may have special education needs because of disabilities or other factors (Shakespeare 2013; Swain et al. 2013). Inclusive assessment unmistakably aims to support learning and avoid exclusion by maintaining to a feasible extent forms of labeling and by concentrating on learning and instructing practice that advanc-

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es inclusion in a mainstream setting (Mitchell and Sutherland 2020). The ABC model by Kelly and Melograno (2004) affirms that a predefined programme plan should be followed by teachers, consistently survey the children, and utilise assessment information to plan and execute guidance. The teacher utilizes the assessment information not only for record purposes, or as a responsibility plan to give proof of effort, however to decide the learners' advancement, the viability of educating and the suitability of the scheme.

UNESCO (1994) states that a wide scope of assessment strategies are required in inclusive assessment to have a wide inclusion of areas. Mitchell (2008:31) states that an inclusive assessment should put into thought the idea of specific inability for learners with SEN, present comments to learners and guardians and be criterion referenced in nature. Inclusive assessment should assist the teacher in educational plan adjustment and instructing strategies. It should permit the teacher to recognize where learners show no dominance of a specific assignment and the explanation that happened and afterward re-structure learning openings. Consequently have singular instruction plans.

It was reported that learners with SEN were part of those whose performance in international assessment tests was not good (SOS Children Newsletter 2012). This paper presents instances of unsatisfactory results by South African learners in assessments written by the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) II in 2003, where the country was one of least countries in reading and mathematics (Mitchell and Sutherland 2020; Polat 2011; Sisonke Consortium 2006). Another instance was cited in the International Mathematics and Science Study of 1995 and 1999, where South African learners obtained the least in Mathematics with an average of 264 contrasted with a world-wide mean of 467 (Human Sciences Research Council 2005; Polat 2011).

The outcomes of the regulated national assessments for Languages and Mathematics and Literacy and Numeracy for intermediate and foundation phases were released to the public in June 2011. The test of above six million learners revealed a national average performance in Literacy of 35 percent in Grade 3, and a national average in Numeracy of 28 percent. The national aver-

age in Languages was 28 percent and 30 percent for Mathematics in Grade 6 (Tikly 2011). This result was credited to teachers' attitudes to learners with SEN and to curriculum delivery (Walton 2011; Tikly 2011). In the Amathole West District, 1270 of the 2355 grade 9 learners performed poorly at the end of year 2010. The records at the Department of Education provincial office indicated that this figure constituted a 16.6 percent decrease from 2009 (which was 62.7%). In 2011, there was a 48.5 percent pass rate among grade 9 learners in all learning areas. Among the many learners who did not perform well were those with special education needs (Department of Education 2012). There are qualified general education and remedial teachers who seem to be able to teach all learners. According to the Amathole West District, all schools were reportedly implementing inclusive education as all teachers were trained. It was also observed by some DBST members that there were some schools in both rural and urban areas of the district with pockets of good practice in inclusive education (Adewumi 2012; DeMatthews 2015; Themane and Thobejane 2019).

However, stakeholders are concerned that even with the adapted assessment strategies, many learners with SEN are left out in terms of accessing basic education (Mitchell and Sutherland 2020; SOS Children Newsletter 2012; Polat 2011; Sisonke Consortium 2006). Informally, these stakeholders credit the marginalisation of learners with SEN to teachers' use of the same assessment criteria for all learners in spite of their diverse special needs (Mitchell and Sutherland 2020; Polat 2011; Sisonke Consortium 2006). Stakeholders have credited the high dropout rate among learners with SEN to these issues (Mitchell and Sutherland 2020; SOS Children Newsletter 2012; Polat 2011; Sisonke Consortium 2006). Teachers have issues with accommodating learners with SEN (SOS Children Newsletter 2012; Tikly 2011). Some of the issues include teacher's inability to cope with learners of different diversity, insufficient training, challenges of curriculum adaptation, insufficient funding, insufficient support for teacher, inadequate knowledge, time constraints and heavy workloads (Walton 2011; Tikly 2011). Given the concerns listed above by stakeholders, it is really not clear how teachers adapt assessment strategies to accommodate all learners.

There are policies on the ground to guarantee learners with SEN acquire quality education. However, it is uncertain how assessment strategies are adapted for inclusion. Many studies have been conducted on assessment strategies for children with SEN. However, barely any study has thoroughly considered pockets of good assessment practices adapted for children with SEN in schools, particularly in underprivileged rural schools with challenging working conditions and scarce resources (SOS Children Newsletter 2012; Tikly 2011). It was noticed by some stakeholders that, even with challenging situations, some pockets of good practice exist in assessment strategies in a number of primary schools in the Amathole West District, but it is not clear how the teachers are adapting their assessment strategies (SOS Children Newsletter 2012; Tikly 2011). With the above issues and observations, this study determined to ascertain how teachers were adapting assessment strategies to include learners with SEN. Focus is on good practices in the Amathole West District. In this context, learners with special education needs are referred to as learners facing difficulties in learning owing to socio-economic deprivation as well as children of below average intelligence (slow learners).

Objective

This paper sought to investigate the assessment strategies adapted for inclusion of learners with SEN in selected primary schools in the Amathole West District.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This paper employed the qualitative approach which is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm. The paper applied a case study design that centred mainly on interviews giving thorough accounts from participants, teachers, principals, district and provincial officials regarding the assessment strategies adapted for implementing inclusion of learners with SEN in selected primary schools in the Amathole West District. The researchers employed semi-structured interviews in order to gather data on the assessment strategies adapted for implementing inclusion of learners with SEN. This was to enable the researchers to comprehend the explanations, ideas and val-

ues that participants gave to the assessment strategies adapted for applying inclusion of learners with SEN (Creswell 2014; Kuada 2012). Eight teachers, eight principals, and a provincial and two district officials were purposively selected. Consequently, purposive sampling was used because the study adopted a qualitative approach. These participants were key as they were at the helm of support and monitoring of the inclusion policy.

The data collected were clustered into common themes to reveal the key issues that emerged. Inductive rechecking was done by the researchers as they shared transcribed data with the respondents for verification and confirmation. The researchers acquired ethical clearance from the University Ethical Committees, and obtained approval from the Eastern Cape Education District. The participants signed the Informed Consent forms in agreement to the observed code of ethic by researchers. The participants' names were labelled as: PO1 (provincial official), EDO1-EDO2 (education district official), P1-P8 (principal) and T1-T8 (teacher).

Assessment Strategies Adapted and Reasons for Adapting the Assessment Strategies for Inclusion of Learners with SEN

Assessing the educational development of learners with SEN is not an easy task for teachers. Hence, there is need to guide teachers for accurate adaptation of the assessment strategies in their classrooms. This study investigated the methods with which teachers assess learners with SEN, and the motives for adapting the methods. This data was gathered by interviews with the participant provincial official, district officials, principals and teachers. Below were some of the participants' comments on the assessment strategies adapted and reasons for adapting the assessment strategies.

T2 disclosed that many of them were not trained but from the experience of being a teacher they were able to assess learners with SEN. This teacher established that the use of continuous assessment encouraged and motivated learners.

Although we have not been trained for inclusive assessments strategies. I assess learners with SEN continuously with individual oral questions and written in remedial with few tasks. The methods of assessment help learners to under-

stand and inspire them to take their school work more seriously. It creates inspiration to learn for learners with SEN.

According to T1, teachers are not trained for teaching diverse learners. She however, employed group work, questions and answers to ensure inclusion of all learners.

I pose questions to them to answer, and give group work to do so that learners with SEN can learn from their mates. These methods work for me and it ensures inclusion of all learners even though I do not think my colleagues and I have got the required skills for inclusive education.

Similar assessment strategy for learners without SEN was used by T8 to include learners with SEN in the classroom.

The approaches are not different from the approaches used for learners without SEN, but they are modified to the cognitive level, social abilities of the learners. I mostly assess my learners with quizzes. This is for inclusion and for motivation of learners with SEN.

T6 assessed learners using the question and answer approach to motivate them and to identify learning challenges.

I use group assessment, question and answer. As a teacher, I encourage learners with SEN. When they are motivated, they would do more. If there is need for criticism, it must be constructive. My methods help in motivating and diagnosing problems.

T3 revealed:

I give continuous assessment in form of written test, debates, oral discussion and class work. I use these strategies to determine if the outcomes of the lesson have been achieved, to be sure of my learners' knowledge and their progress.

T5 commented:

My assessment strategies are: educator assessments like test, class work and examination. Also, I assess with continuous peer assessment, debates. These methods are current and they reveal learners development and aid inclusion of all learners.

T4 said:

I use class work and test for continuous assessment. This way, I am able to know learners are learning or not.

Assessment strategies are key to successful implementation of inclusive education. As revealed above, teachers' adapted various strategies such as debates, oral questions, class work, tests, and discussions as their assessment strategies.

Their reasons for utilising these strategies were also revealed in the responses above. However, some of them mentioned that they had not been adequately trained for inclusive education. The principals who had their minds on NCS compliance requirements as well as accountability, established that teachers employed formal and informal assessments.

Some principals revealed that teachers followed guidelines provided by district officials. P1 and P6's responses are cases in point.

P1 pointed out that:

Teachers are guided in assessment for learners with SEN in all subjects by subject advisors' guidelines. They use continuous assessments, projects and written tests to assess what learners have learnt.

P6 explained that:

Teachers employ NCS required methods. The methods include examination, written tests and class work.

Interviews with the principals also revealed good practice in the approaches teachers used in assessing learners with SEN using NCS methods. These included continuous observation, written tests, projects with assigned marks, class work and so on, all of which were learner-centred methods specified by the NCS.

In their responses, the education district officials and the provincial official did not understand the assessment strategies adapted for implementing inclusion of learners with SEN. The following were their comments:

EDO1: I am not sure how teachers assess these learners.

EDO2: I don't know, let me not commit myself.

PO1: This question has to do with examination section. I could not respond.

The district officials and the provincial official were not clear on the methods of assessment used by teachers to include learners with SEN. This is a concern that those who ought to be facilitating the inclusive programme lack basic knowledge with regards to how to support learners with SEN through assessment.

DISCUSSION

This paper explored the assessment strategies adapted for implementing inclusion of learn-

ers with SEN in selected primary schools in the Amathole West District, South Africa. One major finding of this study was that learners were assessed in order to accommodate all learners. The methods employed by teachers included the use of formal assessment such as group, individual, and continuous assessment. According to Walkington (2013), teachers can develop and accelerate learners' cognitive ability through supporting learners in resolving challenges. This is done by asking questions about learners' ideas, and by questioning their responses (Fisher and Frey 2014). In addition, teachers can mediate by offering specific interventions through "scaffolding" (Panadero et al. 2016). Differentiated instruction permits teachers to deal with exact skills and complications while Universal Design for Learning offers the teacher ideals for preparation (Maringe and Sing 2014).

Data gathered from this study also revealed that learners were assessed using informal methods such as being questioned about their surroundings, or by being asked to debate certain topics. This finding is similar to that of Salvia et al. (2012) who note that, in order to determine whether a learner with special education needs has mastered the skills, assessment should be continuous throughout the learning. What is learned should be practiced in various situations in the classroom and in daily living. These authors further state that curriculum-based tests may be useful when the outcomes set for the learning support have been achieved for transferring skills and knowledge to other contexts. This finding is also in line with the views of UNESCO (1994), the ABC model, Kelly and Melograno (2004) and Maki (2012), that inclusive assessment consists of a variety of means to assess learners. All of these possible methods work together to provide evidence of learners' learning. Inclusive assessment gives reports on the outcomes of learning. Decision-making that is built on inclusive assessment is based on different sources that are action-oriented and give evidence of learning gathered for a specific duration of time (Beach and Lipshitz 2017). UNESCO (1994) and Mundia (2010) state that a variety of evaluation techniques are required in inclusive assessment to ascertain that all areas are assessed. Evaluation techniques should be targeted at adding value to a learner's progress.

This study revealed that many teachers were adapting assessment strategies for the inclusion of learners with SEN, despite some teachers not having been trained to implement inclusion for learners with SEN. Borg (2011) is of the view that teachers have inadequate training for teaching diverse abilities in their classrooms. Training is required and essential for productive teaching and learning. Some teachers have not been trained for curriculum differentiation. Teachers should be trained regularly in order to be able to solve the difficulties associated with regular classrooms (Al-Shammakhi and Al-Humaidi 2015).

Another major finding was the variety of assessment activities, and motives behind the use of the methods. Participants highlighted the more inherent benefits of assessment (inclusion of all learners, motivation for learning of learners with SEN, response to teachers and learners, diagnosis of difficulties), instead of the more extrinsic purposes (reporting to superiors, accountability to parents). Some of the teacher participants indicated that methods and approaches of assessment for children without SEN could be used with learners with SEN, provided that they were adapted and adjusted to meet the needs of SEN learners. Modifications are changes made to the curriculum for the inclusion of learners with SEN. For instance, a learner with SEN could be given shorter and easier reading assignments, or homework that may not be the same as that of other learners in the class. Mitchell and Sutherland (2020) notes that inclusive assessment should consider the nature of particular disability for learners with SEN, be criterion referenced in nature, and assist the teacher in curriculum adaptation and teaching methods. An inclusive assessment should show areas where there is no mastery of task, and reasons behind the lack, and then re-design learning opportunities and consequently have individual education plans.

It emerged in this study that some of the participants did not understand the assessment strategies adapted for implementing inclusion of learners with SEN. The participants had limited ability and skills to apply inclusive assessment strategies for all learners. This implied that the teaching and learning needs of learners with SEN was not adequately met, meaning that inclusion policy was not adequately implemented in some of the selected schools. However, researchers found

some pockets of good practice in the study from most of the interviewed teacher participants, who revealed there was learners' continuous assessment all through the teaching and learning process. This is very vital for learners with SEN as it encourages them to be actively involved in the teaching and learning process. An assessment activity, such as written work (portfolio), is a good reflective strategy for all learners.

CONCLUSION

This study found that teachers adapted formal and informal assessment strategies for inclusion of learners with SEN. A variety of reasons why participants adopted the diverse assessment methods was revealed in the study. These included inclusion of all learners and motivation for learning for learners with SEN. It was also indicated that methods and approaches for assessment of learners without SEN could be used for learners with SEN, provided they were adapted to meet the needs of those learners. This finding established a good practice of assessment strategies among teachers, despite the challenging working situations, particularly in the poor rural setting. However, it was revealed that some of the participants did not understand the assessment strategies adapted for inclusion of learners with SEN.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking these findings into account, the Department of Education should organise adequate training on assessment modification for teachers, to equip them for inclusion of all learners in the regular classrooms. The study also recommends that observation data gathering technique be employed to augment interviews that were used, lest they did not reveal other important aspects.

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Paper received for publication in August, 2019
Paper accepted for publication in December, 2019