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Challenges experienced by learners with visual impairments in South African township mainstream primary schools

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Diversity in education is not about different races only; in the South African context it also refers, for instance, to types of schools or different learning styles. Inclusivity in education thus refers to all learners, regardless of their abilities, being noticed and encouraged to share and learn in the same space. However, the South African education system is still struggling to ensure that learners with disabilities, especially those with visual impairment, are fully catered for in mainstream schools. In the study reported on here a qualitative research methodology was used to collect data through semi-structured interviews and observations with selected participants to explore challenges experienced by partially sighted learners in mainstream schools. It was found that even though learners with visual impairment are now physically integrated in mainstream classes, they are not truly included. Furthermore, teacher training should be enhanced, and teacher support reviewed while involving parents of visually impaired learners in their children's schooling.

Keywords: full-service school; inclusion; inclusive education; mainstream school; partially sighted; township school; visual impairment

Introduction

Implementing an inclusive education system is part of the significant educational reforms that occurred after the 1994 democratic election. In 1994 the World Conference on special needs education was held in Salamanca, Spain, and the outcome of this conference informed a worldwide movement towards inclusive education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). The reforms required that the fundamental right of basic education for all learners should be equal, and consequently address the imbalances of the past by focusing on the issues of access, equity and redress (Engelbrecht, 1999). In 1990 over 150 governments adopted the World Declaration on Education for All towards delivering the right to education, in Jomtien, Thailand. In Dakar, Senegal, the World Education Forum adopted six Education for All (EFA) goals that ran to 2015 (Global Campaign for Education, 2017).

The Education for All (EFA) movement aspired to make education accessible to all by developing various education programmes such as project literacy and fostering affordable education around the world. It is thus important to understand that redress is not meant to cover issues only on race, class and hegemony, but also issues of (dis)ability and access to education. As a global player, and especially in positioning itself in multi-lateral agreements with other BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), South Africa espouses for its citizens to contribute to the economic growth of the country. People with visual impairment can contribute positively to the relevant-interest economic sector, thus facilitation on their inclusion in the mainstream economy is important. To be globally competitive, it is thus important that South Africa draws from all its people by ensuring that the education system caters for and grants equal and inclusive opportunities for all despite their race, gender, culture and to the same extent, their impairments.

Background

In 1994 South Africa signed the Salamanca Statement on Principles and Practice in Special Needs Education, which highlights diversity as a core issue of inclusive education. South Africa devised Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) on Special Education Needs (SEN) (Department of Education, 2001) in response to the Salamanca Statement. According to White Paper 6, every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs. The education system and educational programmes should be designed and implemented to take the diversity of these characteristics and needs into account (Dyson, 2001).

In the quest to address the quality of education, the post 1994 education system and curriculum underwent various changes. These changes affected the teaching and learning landscape and introduced learners with diverse disabilities from special schools to mainstream schools. Teachers were expected to infuse their teaching styles and curriculum, and support learners to accommodate the new education system. The challenges were whether mainstream teachers were equipped to teach learners with diverse disabilities, including the partially sighted (Learners with Visual Impaired [LVI]), and whether the learners received adequate support to access the curriculum.

The EFA initiative states that "education is a fundamental human right" (International Agency Commission, 1990 in Dyson, 2001), and Maguvhe (2015) agrees that inclusive education is based strongly on the "rights perspective." This translates to access, gender equity, and all issues of equality. Inclusion can be implemented at different levels and based on "different motives, reflect different classification of special educational needs," and relate to services in different contexts (Peters, 2007:117).

Schools in South Africa were divided – not only in terms of race, but also in terms of aptitude and physical capabilities. Learners with different disabilities were schooled in what was referred to as Special Schools, while those learners who were regarded as normal were schooled in mainstream schools. This affected staff the complement as those interested in special education taught at special schools and not in mainstream schools.

The inclusion of learners with learning barriers in mainstream schools is not an easy task, exacerbated by contextual factors such as teachers' lack of knowledge, an unadjusted environment and a non-user-friendly schooling environment for learners with learning barriers. In terms of LVIs, teaching methods and materials are not adequately adapted, and the physical environment within classes and schools are not accessible (Ramrathan & Mzimela, 2016).

Teachers in mainstream schools are not adequately trained and supported, and not all stakeholders participate sufficiently to give LVIs the necessary support within the teaching and learning environment (Maguvhe, 2015). The Department of Basic Education (DBE), in trying to alleviate this challenge, introduced learning support teachers whose role is, among others, to assist with inclusion in schools. However, with the extensive school landscape, learning support teachers might not be employed at all schools and some of those employed might not be qualified to attend to all learning challenges that learners might encounter. In other instances, problems resulting from language barriers might also manifest.

Inclusive education is the process of strengthening the capacity of ordinary schools to educate all children within their communities (UNESCO, 2008). Therefore, enabling teachers through skills development programmes to withstand the challenges experienced by learners is significant, specifically in dealing with those with vision impairment, which was the focus of this study. Teacher development, in-service training, and capacitation also play significant roles towards successful inclusion of LVIs, as these enable them to face daily challenges and alleviate their frustration.

It is important that teachers in mainstream schools know about the “different eye conditions that impair normal vision of the LVIs and the effect of such conditions on learners’ visual functioning and learning ability” (Landsberg, Krüger & Nel, 2005:332). When LVIs are included in mainstream classes, the successful inclusion of such learners depends largely on the teachers’ training, the quality of support such teachers receive, and how confident teachers feel about teaching learners with special learning needs (Sadler, 2005:148). To understand and fulfil the needs of LVIs, the teacher should know “what risk factors may lead to a visual

impairment and the influence they may have on the normal development of a learner” (Landsberg, Krüger & Swart, 2011:364–365). LVIs with more enlightened and well-trained teachers stand a better chance of being successfully included in a mainstream classroom as teachers will be sensitive to what is needed for them to participate optimally in their learning. Furthermore, while not expected, knowledge of the causes of visual impairment will enhance teachers’ knowledge in other important areas of child development, learning, and participation.

Research Question

What are the challenges experienced by LVIs in mainstream primary schooling?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges experienced by LVIs in South African mainstream township schools with the aim of highlighting the specific support that can benefit visually impaired learners in their daily classroom activities.

Research Paradigm

According to Antwi and Hamza (2015:219) the interpretive paradigm “sees the world as constructed, interpreted, and experienced by people in their interactions with each other.” In this study it was essential to understand participants’ experiences. The interpretive paradigm functions on the assumption that there are no fixed realities; rather, people make individual, subjective meaning of the world as they interact with it.

Individual meanings are influenced among others by cultural, historical, and political backgrounds. It was thus important to understand social members’ experiences and perceptions of their situations viewed from their unique contexts and backgrounds.

Method

This study employed a qualitative method to understand the meaning people have constructed; that is, how they interpret and make sense of their experience of the world. Qualitative researchers collect data in the form of written or spoken language, or in the form of observations, and analyse the data by identifying and categorising themes.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling from two full-service or inclusive schools identified in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District in the Klerksdorp area. Purposive sampling was employed as a result of the subjects’ defining qualities that make them holders of information of interest. The participants selected were four teachers teaching LVIs (two from each school);

two parents of LVIs; four LVIs (two from each school); one specialist (itinerant) teacher designated to assist and support LVIs in both schools; and two principals (one from each school). Teachers were selected because they worked with the partially sighted learners on a daily basis and because they had not received training in teaching partially sighted learners. Principals are included because they managed curriculum coverage and delivery.

Site

The selected schools were situated in the outskirts of townships. The community around the selected schools was characterised by poor infrastructure, unemployment, and poor socio-economic status.

Data Collection

In a qualitative study it is important to note the language learning of teaching (LoLT). The LoLT in school 1 was English and the teachers were English speaking, while the LoLT in school 2 was Setswana and all the teachers were Setswana speaking.

Semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis were employed as data collection techniques. Interviews are important because they empower the participants to tell stories in a microcosm of their consciousness (Greeff, 2005). O'Donoghue (2007) argues that the qualitative research interview is a conversation with purpose, thus it was important to explore the experiences of the participants on the phenomena under study. Interviews allow the researcher to enter another person's world to understand a person's thinking and reasoning. By using interviews, participants may provide the researcher with rich phenomenological data regarding their lived experience (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). Interviews can take advantage of social cues such as interviewees' voice, tone, and body language, as this yields valuable data for analysis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted for a duration of 30 minutes per participant to provide the researcher with rich qualitative data. Audio recordings for data transcripts were made with the participants' permission.

The observation method was also employed to enhance the information collected during interviews. Teacher-learner interaction was observed during regular lessons. Observation implies seeing and observing with other senses (Henning et al., 2004).

The schools' vision and mission statements were analysed for the purpose of this study.

Data Analysis

Interviews with learners, parents, teachers, principals, and itinerant teachers were transcribed verbatim and the information obtained from transcribed interviews was analysed. Data in this

study was analysed by means of content analysis, which, according to Kumar (2011), provides the basis for identifying the main themes that emerge from the responses given. The final stage of analysis involved identifying and interpreting the dominant themes from each learner's experience in mainstream schools.

Results and Discussion

Understanding Inclusion and Training

The South African economy has been under pressure lately with several rating agencies downgrading it to the verge of junk status in 2016 and 2017. For ordinary learner the economic downgrades imply that access to quality education remains an ideal rather than a reality. The DBE, for instance, might fail to fund enough training for teachers to deal with learners with diverse educational needs, including LVIs. Thus, implementing an inclusion strategy from a teacher's perspective is a challenge, because they have not received the necessary training to be able to teach, especially LVIs, in an inclusive school environment. One teacher said: "No, we have not received any form of special training related to inclusion."

The teachers also indicated that the training that they had received from the DBE did not equip them to work with learners with visual impairment. One teacher complained: "We do receive support upon registration at the new school, but it does not really help us to work with learners with visual impairment."

Thus, when the DBE conducts training or workshops, the focus should be on skills for equipping teachers to deal with the diverse classrooms, and specifically with LVIs or any other disability that might be the focus of that training. The training should focus less on the theory of inclusive education, and more on its practical application so that teachers feel empowered and skilful at the end of the training.

Teachers complained that they were not acquainted with the concept of inclusive education and thus would like to receive in-service training that would encapsulate the inclusion of LVIs. One teacher emphasised: "As for inclusive education, we are really not brought on board as to how to work with a learner with visual impairment."

The inclusive training will enable teachers to screen LVIs and administer the screening, identification, assessment, and support (SIAS) document. The SIAS process is aimed at identifying learners with learning barriers and giving them the necessary support (DBE, Republic of South Africa, 2014). Implementing policy on SIAS is significant in the inclusion of LVIs. The SIAS document is structured in such a way that it ensures that teachers and schools understand the support needs of all learners to enhance successful

inclusion. The policy also outlines a process of identifying learners' needs in relation to the home and school context, and to establish the level of additional support needed. It is recommended that teachers are orientated on implementing SIAS to maximise the support required in schools and in the classroom. Enhancing learner participation thus results in successful inclusion.

Teachers stated that a nonchalant attitude brought about negativity among LVIs, which resulted in feelings of being segregated as they are being referred to as "they." The phenomenon of "us" and "them" prevails as divisive between those perceived to have power (able-bodied learners) and the aggrieved (LVIs).

According to Kornat and Micgiel (2007), the idea that no policy should be decided by any representative without the full participation of members of the group(s) affected by the policy, should be kept in mind. This involves the inclusion of LVIs in all matters that concern them in their schools. Teachers, while perceiving learners as indifferent or uninvolved in school activities, should check whether learners feel part of the decision-making in school, or they will simply feel excluded. One teacher emphasised that "if the nonchalant attitude was not addressed, it could be demoralising to learners and might result in a large number of drop-outs – especially those learners with visual impairment."

Resources, Support and Education Environment

The learning environment was perceived as not being user-friendly for the inclusion of LVIs. Learners indicated that their learning environment was dangerous. During one of the interviews, learners presented an example of a learner from a particular school who broke her leg because there was no proper pathway, and that it was difficult to use the stairs unaided.

One of the principals highlighted that his school were not built to accommodate LVIs: "(O)ur school is really not geared towards learners with visual impairment, in a sense there is no accommodation for the learners with visual impairment."

The principal emphasised that LVIs were merely physically in the classroom with the rest of the mainstream learners. Furthermore, the principal outlined that nothing was done to ensure that the physical environment did not hinder the inclusion of LVIs. According to the principal, "in the playing grounds, learners with visual impairment are really not catered for."

The conditions expressed by both learners and principals infringe on the learners' right to education and to learn in a secure and safe environment. The Department of Education (2001) committed itself to providing the necessary physical environment to establish comprehensive support systems within full-service schools. However, this study

found that LVIs were not catered for in terms of buildings and the infrastructure at large.

Participants described the classroom layout as not conducive to accommodating LVIs: "the environment is not user-friendly, for example, if the teacher writes on the chalkboard there is no font that can be adjusted. Again, when the question paper is set, they cannot accommodate learners with visual impairment." This then has an impact on learners' learning, socialisation, and holistic growth.

Participants indicated that overcrowding was another challenge. Overcrowded classes make it difficult for teachers to teach and in particular, to attend to individual learners. This is amplified when teachers need to deal with overcrowded classes accommodating LVIs. Teaching and learning in these conditions is challenging. According to the National Norms and Standards for School Funding, the learner-teacher ratio in mainstream schools is 1:40 (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2004). However, due to the challenges experienced when teaching LVIs, the prescribed ratio might not cater for conducive learner-teacher interaction with LVIs. The learner-teacher ratio for LVIs, should be weighted at a different scale to that of learners without barriers to learning and participation (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2004).

It is vital to note that learner enrolment must be considered to avoid overcrowding that may aggravate challenges experienced by teachers in the inclusion of LVIs. LVIs in the study lamented that they felt ignored or not considered when registering at their current school and that they did not receive assistance in coping in the schools. One learner said: "We are ignored, not considered, no one would assist us."

Regarding human resource development, teachers felt that "training at colleges and at universities in South Africa is inadequate, especially pertaining to incorporating LVIs." According to a senior education specialist (SES), she must attend to six schools, which involves traveling, thus making it difficult for her to reach all schools at the set times. The SES agreed that itinerant teachers also faced the same challenge; they simply could not reach all the schools to assist with teacher training.

Parental Involvement

From the interviews with the parents, it became clear that it was crucial that all stakeholders needed to work together towards achieving the positive inclusion of LVIs in mainstream schools.

The active involvement of parents and the broader community in the teaching and learning process is pivotal for effective learning and development. Such involvement includes recognising parents as major stakeholders in the education process, and as primary caregivers of their children.

The lack of parental recognition leads to resistance, poor commitment, and reluctance or no participation in school activities.

Schools should include parents in all their activities to promote their participation and positive contribution. To stimulate and enhance contribution and participation parents can participate in fun days, parents' meetings, and parents' evenings where they are given reports on learners' academic performance. The findings indicate that parents needed to be educated on the issue of inclusion of LVIs in mainstream schools. Parents also felt that workshops on the inclusion of LVIs would contribute towards providing quality education. One parent said that "there will be improvement in our children's results if we are given support."

Therefore, a series of workshops should be held to equip parents with knowledge regarding learners with learning barriers and their inclusion in the education process in mainstream schools. It is therefore recommended that involving parents of LVIs in the schools through parents' evenings and fun days, for example, can benefit both teachers and learners, as the parents understand their children. Their insights and support will be valuable and can contribute to successfully implement inclusive education (Swart, 2004).

Vision and Mission of the School

The vision and mission statements of the schools were analysed to determine a school's philosophy and values. One of the school's vision was to be the preferred school of excellence for every career-minded learner. The school's vision does not state anything about the inclusion of learners with barriers. The principal of one of the schools indicated how the philosophies of these documents are not practised. The principal remarked: "Yes we have but it [the vision] doesn't cater for inclusion at all."

The mission statement focuses on providing quality education for all learners and creating an enabling teaching and learning environment. Lastly, it educates learners and the community on good moral values. The issue of inclusion is not mentioned in the mission statement. One can thus deduce that it does not cater for, or support the inclusion of LVIs.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges experienced by LVIs in mainstream schools. The results suggest that teachers, learners, and principals hold a positive attitude towards the inclusion of LVIs in mainstream schools. These positive views may be attributed to an increase in awareness of the inclusion of LVIs in mainstream schools.

The inclusion of LVIs into mainstream schools is viewed as nurturing an increased feeling of tolerance, acceptance, and respect among all

participants within the inclusive setting. However, LVIs may emerge as a factor to shape teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of LVIs.

Participants were adamant that there was a need for more workshops, seminars, and colloquiums to equip them with knowledge to alleviate fears and frustration in the inclusion of LVIs. Furthermore, the responses of participants revealed that the environment, classroom settings, and curriculum were focused on LVIs in mainstream schools. Teachers also need to be prepared by attending training or coaching sessions to alleviate fears and frustrations when working with LVIs.

The findings of this study should be interpreted in the light of the following limitations: the researcher only interviewed partially sighted learners, not blind learners. Therefore, this study did not gather a variety of information concerning the inclusion of all different levels of LVIs. Furthermore, while yielding valuable information, the findings are localised and not generalisable. These findings, however, do shed light on the challenges experienced by LVIs, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders.

The learners' environment and the school context may influence their experience. Teachers, on the other hand, should be observed over a long period in the classroom to establish whether they indeed promote positive inclusion. Future research may be considered on the factors influencing the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools.

Authors' Contribution

MM wrote the manuscript and collected data. RT provided supervision and contributed to the manuscript. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the master's dissertation of Mokwena Morelle.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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