


Factors influencing foundation phase rural teachers' understanding and practices in selecting inclusive teaching strategies

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Dates:

Received: 17 Feb. 2021
Accepted: 18 Nov. 2021
Published: 17 Feb. 2023

How to cite this article:

Mabasa-Manganyi, R.B.,
2023, 'Factors influencing
foundation phase rural
teachers' understanding and
practices in selecting inclusive
teaching strategies', *South
African Journal of Childhood
Education* 13(1), a991.
[https://doi.org/10.4102/
sajce.v13i1.991](https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v13i1.991)

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Background: It is arguable that teachers' understanding of the roles of various stakeholders and their need to sometimes assume some of these roles influenced how they practice inclusive education that results in influencing the choice of strategies that they will employ in the classroom.

Aim: This article presents factors influencing how foundation phase rural teachers practised inclusion during teaching and learning in ordinary classrooms.

Setting: The study was conducted in Limpopo, South Africa, from four selected schools.

Methods: Four foundation phase teachers were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Direct observations and supplementary data through individual interviews were employed to elicit data from in-service foundation phase rural teachers.

Results: The findings from the data revealed that teachers' current understanding of inclusive pedagogy is influenced by knowledge of inclusive pedagogical practices, professional development, reflective teaching and planning of lessons contents, which was found to be inadequate, whilst the absence of teacher development through workshops and lack of parental involvement and teachers being in loco-parentis is found to be another contributing factor.

Conclusion: The study supports that foundation phase rural teachers should be capacitated and empowered through consistent teacher development workshops. Parents also need to be empowered on their support role in order to fully realise inclusive pedagogy in rural classrooms. Finally, the study recommends further research on teacher development and teachers being in loco-parentis in rural foundation phase classrooms.

Contribution: The study highlights issues of equality and human rights, which has a fundamental bearing on teaching and learners for both teachers and more importantly the learners they teach.

Keywords: factors; foundation phase; inclusive pedagogy; rural teachers; teaching strategies.

Introduction

It is arguable that teachers' understanding of the roles of various stakeholders and their need to sometimes assume some of these roles influenced how they practise inclusive education that results in influencing the choice of strategies they will employ in the classroom. On this background, it is noted with great concern that factors that influence teachers in selecting inclusive teaching strategies in the rural foundation phase have not been researched in Limpopo, South Africa. According to Veerabudren, Kritzinger and Ramasawmy (2021) in an inclusive classroom, the role of teachers is to consistently and creatively modify their teaching strategies in order to include all learners learning needs. Even though there is no single definition of what inclusive pedagogy is, Floria (2015) defines it as an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences amongst learners but avoids the marginalisation that occurs because some students are treated differently. However, teachers and their choice of teaching strategies are salient in the contextualisation of the above definition.

In the South African context, Makoelle (2014) states that inclusive pedagogy is the totality of teaching methods, approaches, forms and principles that enhance learner participation. In this background, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) aims to achieve the set goals of inclusive education through White Paper 6 (WP6), therefore, demand is placed on teachers to respond to the diverse needs of learners in classrooms. It is important to note that the conceptualisation of WP6 in South Africa came after lots of criticisms from various stakeholders including parents that

teachers are not inclusive in their teaching methods; as a result, many learners were excluded by the system and ended up dropping out. Arguably, teachers were not well equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills to address the challenges of diverse learners in various classrooms. These criticisms were loaded to teachers without considering the revealed challenges that some were overburdened by overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources and lack of adequate knowledge and skills on how to respond to diverse learners and their diverse learning needs (Walton et al. 2019). In addressing these challenges, various initiatives are being put in place and implemented with the aim of realising the dream of an inclusive classroom. Stakeholders from communities, parents, departments, schools' teachers as well as learners are gearing the energy to commit to these goals as they have been outlined in the WP6 and other documents. Besides all these efforts being made, there is little that is known on what informs teachers:

[S]election of teaching strategies in their classrooms to accommodate all learners. In order to respond to this gap, this study aims at investigating the factors influencing foundation phase rural teachers' understanding and practices in selecting inclusive teaching strategies. This study is viewed to be important in providing some of the solutions that schools are searching for. The next section will review literature on inclusive education and inclusive pedagogy as the study is situated on.

Literature review

Inclusive education in South Africa

Inclusive education may be defined in different ways, depending on the context. According to Bornman and Rose (2010:21), 'Inclusive education' is the term to describe an education system in which all learners are accepted and fully integrated, both educationally and socially. It is argued that the state of inclusive education in South Africa requires an approach that will embrace all learners including disadvantaged learners and learners with additional learning needs as the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are used in an inclusive approach (DBE 2010; Slee 2011; Walton 2016). However, this state is still an elephant that schools and teachers are cutting into small chunks. According to Donohue and Bornman (2014), South Africa's position of implementing inclusive education policies was because of the barriers that were reflected in teachers' attitudes, inadequate teacher readiness and professional knowledge and lack of transparency and clear explanations on policies and how they should be implemented. For example, rural foundation phase classrooms are constituted by learners who are diverse in terms of their cultural, religious, social, economic, political and academic needs. Therefore, it is the responsibility of teachers that all these diverse areas are contextualised and catered for whenever teaching strategies are selected. However, for inclusive education policy to be implemented in South Africa, Makoelle (2020) emphasises on taking into account the political context for the success of this implementation that should happen in a conducive environment. Accordingly, Walton (2016) indicates that despite the implementation of the policies and putting them

in place, lack of university conceptualised programmes to include inclusive education content that will remain the major barrier to the achievement of inclusive education both internationally and in South Africa. In contrast with Walton, research shows that globally teachers were found to be knowledgeable about legislations and policy guidelines in inclusive education (Alnahdi 2020; Black-Hawkins & Florian 2012; Heyder, Südkamp & Steinmayr 2020).

Trends and debates on inclusive pedagogy

There is a consensus that there is no universally accepted definition of inclusive pedagogy, but that its meaning is contextually, philosophically and operationally determined. Florian (2015) states that inclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners but avoids the marginalisation that occurs when some students are treated differently. It seems that the current debate on inclusive pedagogy is that there are many teachers who are still caught up in the medical model perspective of disability where Hong et al. (2018) indicate that teachers in South Korea were found to be underprepared to teach learners with autism in general education. Whilst in South Africa, pre-service teachers were found to be unhappy with the training they were given in inclusive education simply because the training was more theoretical and lacked practical implementation. Despite these limitations, for instance, South African government has embarked on programmes through various institutions such as universities, non-government organisations and education consultants have been mandated to capacitate both pre and in-service teachers through Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD). Richards and Armstrong (eds. 2015) remind us that pedagogy and curriculum are two tools that cannot be separated from each other. Secondly, they remind us that in any classroom, teachers should learn to recognise that learners are individuals who are unique and will bring their own history and experiences in the classroom. Therefore, these socially and culturally constructed knowledge should be integrated with the curriculum. Rose (ed. 2010) suggests that teachers need to engage in collaborations and communicative activities with other stakeholders in order to learn best practices. It is through these best practices that inclusive pedagogy will be reflected in addressing learners learning needs. By so doing, teachers will be acting as agents of social change in the context of making schools safe, caring, inclusive and non-discriminatory (Muthukrishna & Englebrecht 2018). In support of the above, Walton et al. (2019) impress on the agenda of collaboration by various stakeholders because of its positive characteristics in nurturing inclusive cultures and practices in classrooms.

Inclusive pedagogical strategies

Whole-class instruction

Whole-class instruction or teaching is a sound pedagogical practice that teachers use in their daily teaching, and it is manifested in direct instruction (Florian & Black-Hawkins

2011). In South African ordinary schools, particularly those in the rural context, I have observed schools that are faced with overcrowding classrooms, and it is for these reasons that some teachers often resort to whole class teaching when they are confronted with big class size. This means that in whole class teaching, the teacher teaches the lesson with the belief that whilst learners learn together, they are in a way assisting each other to grasp some new knowledge without fear because they are learning together. Whole class instruction is arguably regarded as being inclusive in its nature because of the positive characteristics of embracing all learners irrespective of their learning needs as compared to others.

Direct instruction

For teachers to be inclusive in their teaching, it is worth considering various teaching strategies including direct instruction. Direct instruction is a strategy that involves explicit step-by-step teaching, which can be done with a whole class, a group of learners, pairs or individual learners (Loreman et al. 2010). Even though this strategy might exhibit exclusive characteristics as compared to whole class, it has some positive elements that can benefit learners with different learning needs by offering one-on-one instruction. However, this one-on-one instruction depends on the planning of the teacher and how they will execute the strategy for the maximum participation of individual learners. According to Rose (ed. 2010), direct instruction is an effective strategy as some learners may require explicit teaching, reinforcement, structure and detailed continuous assessment more than others during teaching and learning.

Differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction is an inclusive pedagogical practice that implies the carrying out of learners tasks that are planned to be pedagogically inclusive in order to deliver the curriculum to diverse learners in a classroom setting during teaching and learning (Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey 2010). In defining differentiated instruction, Tomlison (2005) indicates that it is a philosophy of teaching that is more focused on the basis that learners learn best when teachers accommodate their diversities in their preparedness levels, interests and learning profiles. Hong et al. (2020) argue that differentiated instruction as a teaching strategy can be attained by working with learners who are different.

Co-teaching

Co-teaching is a practice that involves more than one adult in the classroom teaching at the same time, and its implementation can take a variety of forms in the classroom. According to Gurgur and Uzuner (2011), co-teaching is an inclusive practice and is one way of providing support to learners with special educational needs in general education classrooms. When implementing co-teaching, Armstrong (as cited in Hattie 2008) argues that co-teaching allows for more individual attention being paid to the learners. Co-teaching demonstrates the modelling of collaboration by adults in the classroom based on Loreman et al. (2010), which is a valuable technique when illustrating the benefits of collaboration to

learners. Co-teaching is inclusive in its nature as it allows collaboration between teachers by sharing their teaching strategies based on their various classroom context and learners they engaged with in their profession. This strategy has an ability of bringing positive solutions where teachers are faced with challenges. For instance, teachers may have conceptualised and employed another strategy well that their knowledge and experience can be useful to a new teacher or teachers who have been in the field for long but struggling with being inclusive.

Peer tutoring

Moreover, teachers being the dominant individual in selecting teaching strategies for effective teaching and learning, peer tutoring has been found to be an inclusive strategy that can support learners who are facing barriers in learning. Peer tutoring involves pairs of learners in teaching and learning on a one-to-one basis. Peer tutoring based on Brooks (2007) allows for learners to partner especially in areas of reading and writing as the teacher pairs them. The role of peer tutors is to give instructions and encouragement to the tutees. For example, in cross-age tutoring arrangements, the older learner acts as a tutor for the younger learners, whereas in reciprocal teaching arrangements, learners themselves alternate between tutor and tutee roles (Loreman et al. 2010).

Teaching social skills

Teaching learners' social skills is an important aspect of the curriculum that is fundamental to the successful implementation of inclusive education and has a strong research base (Fenti, Miller & Lampi 2008; Florian & Rouse 2005; Sapon-Shevin 2007; Shoefeld 2012). In public schools, the teaching of life skills as a subject at the Foundation phase is aimed at guiding learners for life and its possibilities, including equipping learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society (DBE 2011). Teaching social skills is inclusive in nature as it gives the teacher an opportunity to understand his or her individual learners in an organised context. For example, skills such as respect, love, trust, honesty, hardworking and tolerance can be observed, whilst teachers teach different subjects and not specifically life skills as a subject in foundation classrooms.

Learner selected work

Learner selected work or work choice is a strategy that is used with the intention to create a community of learners learning together in which all children are given opportunities to shape what, how, where and with whom they learnt (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011). Learner selected work means learners are given the freedom to choose the tasks that they want to engage with. Through learner selected work, learners' individual differences are accommodated through the choice of tasks and activities that are available to all without the stigmatising effects of marking some students as different, pre-determining the learning that is possible. According to Rose (ed. 2010), learner selected work is an extension where the teacher takes responsibility to adapt and modify the current curriculum and

TABLE 1: Inclusive pedagogical approach in action framework.

Underlying assumptions	Actions	Key challenge
Difference must be accounted for as an essential aspect (knowing)	Replacing deterministic views of ability with a concept of transformability	'Bell-curve' thinking and notions of fixed ability still underpin the structure of schooling
Teachers must believe (can be convinced) that they are qualified/capable of teaching all children. (believing)	Demonstrating how the difficulties students experience in learning can be considered dilemmas for teaching rather than problems within students	The identification of difficulties in learning and the associated focus on what the learner cannot do often puts a ceiling on learning and achievement
The profession must develop creative new ways of working with others (doing)	Modelling new creative ways of working with and through others	Change the way we think about inclusion (from 'most' and 'some' to everybody)

Source: Florian, L., 2014b, 'What counts as evidence of inclusive education?', *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 29(3), 286–294. <https://doi.org/10.15823/p.2017.32>

instructional approaches that fit in the individual learners. One of the strong points of this strategy as an inclusive method is that it is centred on the individual learning need of the learner with the purpose of empowering both academically and socially. For instance, in this skill, learners draw skills such as confidence, decision-making, accountability and problem-solving based on the choice they have made.

Research methods and design

Background and context

The study has been conducted in four foundation phase rural ordinary schools situated in the geographical context of Malamulele in the Limpopo province. They all share constraining factors that may vary in degree yet most of them are similar. These schools are situated on the outskirts of Malamulele Town, three of which are within 50 km radius from the local Township, and one school is within 30-km radius from the local town. Most of the learners who attend these schools hail from the local community.

This means that all the learners speak Xitsonga both as their home language and as their language of instruction at school. Most of the learners come from either lower-class income or unemployed families and are, therefore, mostly social grants recipients. Also, the village schools are situated in high density rural settlements. Two schools are close to the Kruger National Park gate. The fact of this closeness to the game park compromises the safety of the learners given the fact of wild animals such as lions, elephants, leopards and buffalos. The villagers and their cattle and crops are also at risk. These contexts have what is referred to as temporal characteristics according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), which assist the researcher to understand their nature. They also have geographical parameters determining them to be what they are in the study (Cohen et al. 2007).

Participants

The main participants are four foundation phase teachers in the rural Limpopo province in South Africa. The four schools and four teachers were selected using purposive sampling. For the purpose of this study, purposeful was chosen over others like convenient because convenient sampling has a

bad reputation with both qualitative and quantitative data because of its weakness to produce and represent sample (Daniel 2012; Flick 2018). The study chose foundation phase (Grade one to three) because of the following reasons: (1) It is the phase where formal schooling starts. (2) From grade one, learners are assessed formally in order to progress to the next grades. (3) Grade three is the grade exit from foundation phase to intermediate phase, where learners are exposed to a variety of subjects. It is for this reason that the participants were identified and selected in accordance with the purpose of the research and the questions (Leavy 2017), whilst it is also known that qualitative research typically relies on purposeful sampling based on the specific cases with the aim of generating the best data as Patton (2015) indicates.

Data analysis

The study investigated factors that influence foundation phase rural teachers in selecting inclusive teaching strategies. Given the nature of qualitative phenomena in the classroom, this study used a qualitative research approach in order to gain in-depth understanding of the use of inclusive pedagogical practices at foundation phase classrooms. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) justify the use of qualitative studies when the researcher is gathering data on naturally occurring phenomena. Qualitative research is an accepted methodology for many important questions, with significant contributions to both theory and practice (McMillan & Schumacher 2014).

Data analysis techniques included a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis. Because direct observation was used, the study compared the information observed amongst the four participants into themes to determine whether they match or do not match. The study has used interviews for analysis in which key words and themes emerged that were identified to explain the correlations and explain the reasons that informed teachers use of selected inclusive strategies and their justifications.

Data collection

The data collection method for this study included direct observations and individual interviews. Firstly, permission was sought from all participants, and they have voluntarily signed an informed consent form to be observed as well as being interviewed and audio-recorded. Both classroom observations and subsequent interviews were used by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011). A detailed semi-structured interview with each of the four teachers was conducted after the observations to gain an in-depth view into the teacher's knowledge and perspectives on the choice of inclusive strategies they employed in their lessons. As a result, no learner was interviewed, only the four foundation phase teachers. Interviews were used to give chance to collect in-depth data than the case with other methods of data collection (Cohen et al. 2007), whilst direct observations were employed by the researcher as a non-participant to observe teachers teaching as an observer with the aim of gaining first-hand experience with the teachers (Creswell 2009).

The interview served as a guide to listen to teachers' justifications and to gain more information on their reasoning behind the inclusive pedagogical strategies they used in their classrooms. Below are the three underlying assumptions developed by Florian (2014b) with the aim that it can be adopted by teachers. The study used the assumptions to investigate factors influencing foundation phase rural teachers' understanding and practices in selecting inclusive teaching strategies.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Wits school of education, the nature of study was explained to participants and consent for participation was gained from foundation phase teachers.

Results and discussion

The article employed inclusive pedagogical approach in action (IPAA) as a theoretical lens to analyse the data that were collected through semi-structured interviews and direct lessons observations of foundation phase teachers' teaching. It has used the underlying assumptions from the IPAA framework to investigate factors influencing foundation phase rural teachers' understanding and practices in selecting inclusive teaching strategies. From the interviews that were conducted with the four teachers, the article compared them with the underlying assumptions drawn from the IPAA framework developed by Florian about inclusive pedagogy in practice. The assumptions are:

1. Difference must be accounted for as an essential aspect (knowing).
2. Teachers must believe (can be convinced) that they are qualified/capable of teaching all children (believing).
3. The profession must develop creative new ways of working with others (doing).

These three assumptions were applied to employ both inductive and deductive approach where both teacher's observations and individual interviews were used. In interviews, the analysis looked at teacher's views and perceptual justifications about their choice of teaching strategies that they have employed during teaching which the study identified from direct lessons observations. The individual interviews and lessons observations mapped the study to further engage inductively by reflecting on the practices of foundation phase teachers concerning inclusive pedagogy. It is through the inductive approach that analytical themes emerged, and these were grouped according to their opinions and actions. It is also important to clarify that even though these assumptions were used to guide the analysis, the study was conscious not to make them as if they were a prescription from what the teachers presented. During analysis, the study was flexible and considerate to the three questions asked by the study which are what are the teaching strategies that foundation phase teachers selected to use? What informs their selections of inclusive teaching strategies? And how do you reflect in your selection of teaching

strategies you employed during teaching? In order to accommodate these questions, it was important for the study to include teacher's views and perceptions regarding the selection and use of teaching strategies that have been narrated in the results below.

Results and discussion

The results from the study have been organised into five themes that emerged from the data analysis that have been obtained through lesson observations and structured individual interviews. The first theme is Teachers feelings and reasons on the strategies they have employed. This theme is linked to the question; what are the teaching strategies that foundation phase teachers selected to use? Teachers' first strategy that they have employed during teaching was whole class teaching. However, the scope of study required them to use this strategy in teaching either a Xitsonga home language lesson or mathematics lesson in any grade in the foundation phase.

The following are observations that were observed as teachers were teaching their lessons. Teacher A used whole class teaching strategy as she articulated that her class was overcrowded. She regards whole class teaching as being fast and simple because she teaches all the learners the same content at the same time. From this observation, one can understand that the teacher chose to employ a whole class teaching strategy because her class was overcrowded whilst Teacher B chose non-verbal communication as a form of discipline that was meant to accommodate all learners as she was teaching a mathematics lesson applying a whole class teaching strategy. Teacher B's response on the question was that her way of accommodating learners is to look at the learners' eyes when they start to misbehave. This finding align with what Florian (2017) argues that inclusive education should be based on the principle of local schools providing education for all learners through the use of inclusive strategies. In addition, this finding was responding under the second underlying assumption that teachers must believe that they are capable of teaching all learners (Florian 2014b).

The second strategy that was used by foundation phase teachers was direct instruction. Direct instruction is a strategy that involves explicit step-by-step teaching that can be done in a whole class, a group of learners, pairs or individual learners. In this strategy, teachers were able to demonstrate that as professionals they should develop creative new ways of teaching. Some of the salient examples of direct instruction observed in foundation phase ordinary classrooms are Teacher A in her grade one mathematics lesson employed direct instruction in these observed steps. Step 1: she wrote number symbol 5 on the chalkboard, and Step 2: she drew five shapes of triangles next to the number symbol and coloured the shapes in a yellow colour. Step 3: she explains to learners that the number of triangles drawn represents the number symbol 5, and Step 4: she asked learners to complete activity in their learner activity book National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) and complete the activities 8 and

9. At the end, the teacher allows learners to complete the activity independently as she walks around to see whether they are following what she taught them. According to Rose (ed. 2010), direct instruction is an effective strategy as some learners may require explicit teaching, reinforcement, structure and detailed continuous assessment more than others.

In another class, teacher C employed direct instruction as she supported another boy named Makungu (not his real name) who was also struggling to find how many weeks are there in 28 days? The first step: she identified the struggling learner and called him to come in front. Step 2: Teacher C instructed the boy to take the counters, which were beer caps and cold drink caps placed in a green bucket. Step three: She watched Makungu as he counts the counters. Step four: She advised him to count 28 counters and group them in groups of seven counters and place them aside until he got the answer correct that was 28 weeks equal to 4 weeks. From what has been presented above, one can tell that learners' capacity to learn can be shaped and directed for better because of the teacher's influence of what should happen and how it should be done (Hart et al. 2004).

Differentiated instruction was also another observed teaching strategy that was used by teachers. Differentiated instruction is a pedagogical strategy that is used by teachers to differentiate the lesson by providing various methods of teaching and activities for learners to complete at the end of the lesson. It can be used in a way that it promotes the individualised approach to learning. This finding is based on the assumption that the difference should be accounted for as an essential aspect (Florian 2014b). The use of language during the lesson was differentiated as learners were not confined and subjected to write their responses in one language (Xitsonga) as mathematics in the foundation phase is instructed in Xitsonga as the language of teaching and learning. However, in the observed mathematics learners in grade three teacher B allowed to use any language to answer in their learner activity books (NECT), the workbook is written in Xitsonga HL and English. Some responded in Xitsonga, whilst some responded in English whilst a boy and a girl were found to have completed their activities in both languages (Xitsonga and English). But majority completed in Xitsonga as it is the language of instruction for mathematics, whilst in grade two, teacher C allowed learners to choose any worksheet for mathematics that were placed inside the shoe boxes. This finding is supported by Rose (ed. 2010) that teaching strategies that teachers select should match with learner's learning level.

From the observation list that I prepared, co-teaching as an inclusive strategy was not employed. Co-teaching refers to the way in which two teachers in the same grade work together by teaching collaboratively. From the observations that I did in the four foundation phase classrooms, there was no event of co-teaching that was recorded. Foundation phase grades are allocated one teacher per classroom who is responsible of executing teaching role, administration and

managing the classroom. However, there are some schools where there are more than one grade classrooms, and as such they conduct class rotation by teaching various subjects that the teacher has been allocated. In one school that I have observed, the teacher indicated that because they have two grade ones previously, they used to do class rotation where she used to teach English and Mathematics whilst her colleague teaches Xitsonga HL and Life Skills. The response was captured in the interview as teacher D expressed her view 'Laughing ... you see with us we teach our own grade... so each and every one mind his or her own grade'. Here, we see the element of ownership as the teacher expressed it. This articulation shows that co-teaching is not something that this teacher values as she is happy that she owns her class and therefore she minds her own teaching. Despite the absence of this strategy in the observations, co-teaching itself according to Gurgur and Uzuner (2011) is an inclusive practice and is one way of providing support to learners with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms.

In some observed classes, peer tutoring was indirectly employed by learners not because the teachers instructed them but it happened naturally. Peer tutoring is a pedagogical practice that involves two learners working together as tutor-tutee, where tutees are learners receiving instructions from the tutor. Peer tutoring can be simply understood as learners teaching each other. Teachers can assign learners the role of tutor depending on the need. During the observation, peer tutoring was between the learners. Although this tutor-tutee role was not assigned or appointed by the teacher, learners naturally helped each other as they noticed some of their peers struggling to complete activities given. I observed that some learners were helping each other with work or activities when they noticed that their peers were struggling. Teacher A in support of peer-tutoring articulated that 'peer tutoring is medicine, a learner being tutor of another learner is also medicine' Whilst in teacher D's class, I noticed a boy taller than the rest of the peers were being helped by another boy in the mathematics activity. When I tried to find out about the boy, teacher D indicated that the boy has been retained in grade 3, meaning he was repeating the same grade. 'You see my learners have taught the other grades especially grade two to do a weather chart every morning before the lessons start'. From her response, her view on peer tutoring is that it has moved to a level of grade tutoring that she spoke proudly of this achievement. Peer tutoring based on Brooks (2007) allows for learners to partner especially in areas of reading and writing as the teacher pairs them.

The sixth inclusive teaching strategy that was observed and foundation phase teachers who employed it was teaching social skills. Teaching social skills refers to teacher modelling a desirable behaviour in the class that learners imitate or follow their teacher. Teaching social life skills is an inclusive pedagogical practice that promotes oneness between learners also promotes the principles of ubuntu, as well as learners' educational rights enshrined from the constitution/Bill of

rights of South Africa. The following are examples of observed social life skills practices.

In teacher D's classroom, she crafted her own pledge for learners to recite. The pledge is not prescribed by the department either found in the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum or other policies. During her mathematics lesson, she will stop the lesson and lead them in a classroom pledge that says:

'[J]ust for today, I give thanks for my many blessings, just for today I will not worry, just for today I will not be angry, just for today I can do my work honestly and diligently, just for today I am a success.'

This finding align with the government objectives at guiding learners for life and its possibilities, including equipping learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society (DBE 2011).

Teacher B way of employing social life skills was to encourage learners to appreciate each other's efforts. This was evident as she discouraged some learners who were tempted to laugh at some learners who could not get the answers correctly. She praised all the learners for responding to the questions and even if the learner did not get the correct answer, she will show the learner the method of getting the right answer especially in mathematics. Learners were encouraged to try and she rewarded them for trying. In teacher A's class, she asked them to respect each other's belongings and not take without the permission of the friend. In a way, respect, love, compassion and appreciation were taught in the class.

The last strategy recorded from the observation was learner selected work. Learner selected work refers to a variety of activities prepared by the teacher for learners to freely choose from without being forced by the teacher. These activities can include classwork, projects, extended or enrichment activities as well as the resources that the learner chooses to use whilst completing the activity. The main aim of this strategy is to give every individual learner an opportunity to create, shape what, how, where and with whom they learnt as they select what they want to do (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011). Despite the confinement of using prescribed DBE Workbooks in the foundation phase, one teacher went an extra mile to employ this teaching strategy. Teacher C allowed her learners the choice between the two activity books the NECT and DBE Work books. This privilege of choosing meant that her learners were also allowed to write their responses (answers in either Xitsonga or English as the activities in the NECT learner activity book were written in both English and Xitsonga). However, other teachers were not motivated to employ this strategy except giving learners workbooks. The use of learner selected work as an inclusive strategy has been seen as encouraging as learners were engaged in multisensory learning where the teacher presented them with opportunity to explore materials with senses such as seeing, hearing, saying and touching (ed. Rose 2010). Thus, this finding shows teachers willingness to account to differences amongst learners as a useful resource.

The second findings were based on teachers' knowledge behind the selection/employing strategies that support that all learners and teachers were expected to answer the question: What informs your selection of teaching strategies?

In answering the question above, teachers had the following to say:

Teacher A's choice was based on the knowledge that learners have different learning abilities as she articulate that:

'[T]hese fast learners I assign them to teach others ... and you know when a learner is taught by another learner, it helps because those learners can understand better more than when they are taught by an adult.'

Teacher B's decision is also attributed to the same knowledge that teacher A showed as she considers learners' uniqueness of pace to grasp certain concepts taught as she indicated that 'we did not use their own number lines as resources but we used a chalkboard so that they come and do by themselves ...'

From teacher C, giving individual attention informed her knowledge of selecting the teaching strategy as she believes that 'if he answers correctly then his self-esteem is boosted'. Here the emotional aspect of the learner is taken into account as she maintains that 'he feels much better'. She uses interaction as a strategy even though she indicates that it was not easy for her to interact with all of them considering their levels of abilities. Some learners are in the iconic level those who are using scribblers and abacus, which she refers them being in the concrete stage, whilst some she refers as being in the abstract level as she feels they don't need a book, scribbler or abacus but can calculate using their minds.

Teacher D's knowledge that before teaching can take place, the classroom environment should be print-rich and conducive. Besides the bad state of the classroom, teacher D has this to say:

'Ja it is their class, they are familiar with it however, i would prefer that it needs to be more print rich ...' she further articulated that 'the classroom condition also has a negative part in the process of teaching and learning.'

Teacher A's knowledge of overcrowding informs her in the choice of teaching strategies that she should employ. She confirmed this by saying:

'[W]hen they are many some learners can sit and not write, I have discovered that since yesterday this learner was not doing anything, he just sit and hide amongst the other learners and it is because of overcrowding.'

Teacher A is also informed by the knowledge that in some classrooms, there might be learners with additional needs as she expressed concern that her lack of sign language knowledge skills has been a challenge in her teaching and she might face the challenge in future. She said:

'I don't have any special need learner here, the special need learners are the ones whom you give support by way of follow-up as I make them repeat things all the time.'

She further articulated that she once had a learner who was dumb who required sign language but she was not equipped with the skill of teaching this learner in her class. She remembered this experience as she said:

'I remember I once had a learner who was dumb, the child was normal but the challenge was that she could not talk, so she needed sign language, and I did not have the sign language as a result of not being trained ... so that sign language could have helped the learner if I knew it.'

The third finding was on the theme reflective teaching. In this theme, teachers responded to the question below.

How do you reflect in your selection of teaching strategies you employed during teaching?

Teacher A response on reflecting on her own teaching was based on the concept of child friendly classroom that is enhanced by learners' familiarity of their own classroom:

'[I]f I happened to say now because this is difficult we need some concrete objects, those learners will know where to stand up and take those concrete objects ... if I have worksheets they know where to find them, if I group them they know where to sit.'

Whilst Teacher B reflects on the emotional bearing as a result of lack of resources that has a negative impact on her teaching, she confirms this as she says:

'I think it was not conducive enough, I think the space was small and learners are many'. The lack of resources was also a challenging factor in her class as she sadly said 'they do not have comfortable chairs to sit on.'

Teacher C chose to reflect on the use of stories as a strategy of teaching mathematical concept of rounding off to the nearest 10. This was the example that she used:

'[A] hi nge ku na xihontlovila naswona xihontlovila lexi xi lava ku dya 95, xana 95 yi ta tsutsumela kwihi exikarhi ka 90 na 100? Xana hi kwihi laha yi nga ta pona loko yo tsutsumela kona?' the English translation is 'Imagine there is a big giant that wants to eat 95, where do you think 95 will run to for safety between 90 and 100? What is the nearest place for 95 to go and hide?'

Besides learners struggled to understand the content of number range and rounding off to the nearest 10, her way of using different examples made the lesson exciting and interesting. Her teaching includes emphasising and telling them until they master the concept. Whilst the other teachers reflected on other aspects, only teacher D reflected on re-teaching the same content lesson as she indicated that 'it's Inclusive when you have to repeat the lesson ... some learners are left behind'. This finding is consistent with Muthukrishna and Egelbrecht (2018) that the selection of teaching strategies is a giant step towards the goal of teachers becoming agents of change by making their classrooms to be safe, caring, inclusive and non-discriminatory.

The fourth finding was based on the theme planning of lesson plans. In her lesson planning, teacher A considers the use of resources especially in the teaching number range in mathematics in order to accommodate all the learners that she refers as differentiation. This accommodation she does it by varying activities, allowing them to use concrete objects as they manipulate the objects. Here, teachers were presented with unique instructional needs presented by learners, and in order to respond, the teacher has to adapt, modify the current curriculum as they move from their comfort zone, and change from their previous ways of teaching (ed. Rose 2010). This finding is also attributed to teachers displaying a positive attitude as it is expressed by Finkelstein, Sharma and Furlong (2019) that a positive attitude is a pre-requisite before considering the skills and knowledge that they possess as professionals:

'I give them enrichment activities as a way of extension of my lesson and to always keep them busy because some learners finish before others, and the activities are different so every learner choose what is suitable for them and that minimizes noise and unnecessary disruptions.'

Here, teachers demonstrated the knowledge of creating lesson plans that are individualised based on learners' learning needs. This type of intervention is what Richards and Armstrong (2018) refer to as socially and culturally constructed knowledge that should form part of the curriculum.

Teacher C's response was that in her planning of the lesson, she considers teaching her learners per their learning abilities. She added by saying that:

'I know that this group can be taught in this way and this is what is according to their levels ... but at the end of the day they end up learning the same content but that content would be shelved according to their levels of understanding.'

The fifth finding on teachers' knowledge of inclusive pedagogical practices as an important aspect in selecting strategies for teaching has been explained in this way. It is important to first explain that the use of various inclusive teaching strategies is an important element in ensuring that all learners are accommodated. However, teachers feel that the source of knowledge is derived from reading as teacher A indicated that:

'[O]ne of the main source of information is to read, I do read books which concerns inclusive education information' 'Through strategic meetings with parents and school management' '... is still about studying ...'

Besides the lack of departmental workshops that contribute to the insufficient knowledge of inclusive pedagogy. Teacher A attributes her knowledge to internal workshops that they hold at school level as she indicates that:

'[W]e do have our internal workshops where we can discuss and encourage each other ... not to label children, it is not our responsibility to diagnose ... when the right people come they will observe and see what is wrong.'

Teacher B attributes her knowledge to knowing how to support learners with additional learning needs as she boldly articulates that:

[A] child with poor vision sits in front and a child with difficulty in reading do more word segmentation or phonemic awareness'. Teacher B added on by saying the knowledge of how to support learners; in her case a blind learner came as a result of reading as she says 'through reading more on the subject or topic, the more I read the greater the understanding.'

Teacher C's response was that 'I have been taught inclusive education course at the university as a course' 'Except reading' teacher C maintains.

Teacher D also attributes her knowledge on professional development just like teacher C:

[L]et me tell you, at the university, the foundation phase course taught me the different teaching methods and how to use them and the benefits of them, so I refer and rely on the knowledge I acquired at the university.'

Here, one can attest the efforts that teachers are making in order to be up-to-date with the current trends and debates on inclusive pedagogy, which is recommended by Rose (ed. 2010) that teachers should engage regularly in collaborative and communicative activities with others. The above findings confirm that globally teachers were found to be knowledgeable about legislations and policy guidelines regarding inclusive education (Alnahdi 2020; Black-Hawkins & Florian 2012; Heyder et al. 2020).

Discussion

The knowledge and insight on factors influencing foundation phase rural teachers' understanding and practices in selecting inclusive teaching strategies are a topic that has been minimally explored in the province, the country and international context as well. The study engaged four foundation phase teachers who participated from four different schools teaching different grades. From the results presented, there are five themes that emerged from the data. The first theme is teachers' feelings and reasons on the strategies employed in teaching. The second theme is teachers' knowledge on employing the teaching strategies. The third theme was drawn from reflective teaching, whilst the fourth theme was based on teachers' lesson plans and the fifth theme being teachers' knowledge of inclusive pedagogy.

The first finding reflects on teachers' feelings and reasons behind their choices of teaching strategy, which reveals that foundation phase teachers are willing to teach inclusively as this was observed by a number of teaching strategies that they employed in their classrooms. This finding is of importance because it breaks the wall that was standing among teachers, learners, parents and schools to realise the dream of inclusive pedagogy. This finding is consistent with what Florian (2017) argues that inclusive education should be founded upon the principle of local schools providing education for all learners through the use of inclusive strategies. In this case, foundation

phase made conscious decisions to plan and employ various strategies that were found to be inclusive in an effort to willingly accommodate diverse needs of learners. The second finding on the knowledge of teachers that informs their selection of teaching strategies highlights important sentiments that foundation phase teachers possess the relevant theoretical knowledge of teaching inclusively. On this finding, it has been revealed by their consideration of learners' different learning abilities, uniqueness of learners, organising a print-rich classroom, which is conducive for learning and the challenges of overcrowding and how to address them. The above findings resonate with what Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht (2018) assert as a step towards driving change by creating classrooms as safe, caring, inclusive and non-discriminatory spaces as teachers assume the role of teacher agents. As it was observed, teachers indicated that they confidently possess the theoretical knowledge of inclusive pedagogy by striving to manage overcrowding and creating print-rich context for the purpose of including all learners. In sharing the same sentiments, Slee (2011), Walton (2016) and DBE (2010) recommend an inclusive approach that will embrace all learners including those who are disadvantaged. These sentiments align with the objectives and principles of inclusive pedagogy, whilst on the third finding, despite the challenges of lack of resources as it was voiced by one of the foundation teachers, teachers showed resilience as they emphasised on the concept of child-friendly classroom and learners' familiarity of their own classroom that they saw as having an emotional bearing in teaching and learning. The study found this to be in alignment with what Florian (2014b) regards as teachers developing and creating new ways of working with others. On the fourth finding, foundation phase teachers expressed their commitment in planning their lesson plans where factors such as resources especially in mathematics was taken into consideration in order to accommodate all learners. This finding has a positive bearing on teachers. A positive attitude towards a profession is what is considered as a pre-requisite before skills and knowledge are applied in the classroom (Finkelstein et al. 2019). Mathematics as a subject has a potential of discriminating some learners because of its nature as there is no single method of teaching it. However, in this case, teachers were found to have the necessary knowledge and skills to propel that all learners participate and achieve through the use of concrete objects in mathematics classrooms. Finally, the fifth finding reported on teachers' knowledge of inclusive pedagogy. From this theme, data revealed that foundation phase teachers' knowledge was based on a number of aspects such as professional development and attendance of external and internal workshops. The importance of collaboration is what Loreman et al. (2010) suggest that collaboration by adults in classroom-based context should be utilised as it benefits both participants. Walton et al. (2019) concur with Loreman et al. (2010) that collaboration is viewed as an important instrument if used effectively and it can support inclusive cultures and practices in classrooms. The study argues that these interventions positioned these foundation phase teachers to be fit and positive in driving the agenda of teaching inclusively. Data revealed that they read and studied as part of personal

growth besides the department limitations in organising inclusive education workshops to enrich them.

Conclusion

Factors influencing foundation phase rural teachers' understanding and practices in selecting inclusive teaching strategies are important that has an impact on the province and the country of South Africa. Although the study cannot be generalised with the entire population of the Limpopo province and South Africa, it is important to know that the study has positive inputs as the framework and method that has been used allowed the researcher an opportunity to have direct observation of what teachers are doing in their classroom in terms of inclusive pedagogy and also a follow-up by means of individual interviews to understand their decisions in selecting teaching strategies they employ during teaching and learning in the foundation phase. The study highlights issues of equality and human rights, which has a fundamental bearing on teaching and learners for both teachers and more importantly the learners they teach. Finally, it will be of utmost importance that the DBE should nurture the love, passion and knowledge that foundation phase teachers possess in driving the agenda of inclusive classrooms for all learners through professional development by conducting in-service training, workshops and short courses around inclusive education and inclusive pedagogy.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author(s) declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

R.B.M.-M. contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

Funding information

The research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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