Teachers' Perceptions on School Based Support Team in Facilitating Inclusive Education at Tshwane North Schools

Mahlangu T.; Maile S.; Mashaba E.K

Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa

E-mail: MaileS@tut.ac.za

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate the perceptions of teachers who serve in school based support teams (SBST) on their facilitation role in the implementation of inclusive education. SBST is a new role mandated to teachers as a result of inclusive education policies promulgated by the Department of Basic Education. As a new role teachers have no previous education and training on inclusive education. The policy introduced new roles unfamiliar to teachers. For this reason, the article seeks to establish how teachers cope with the challenge of having to deal with a phenomenon they have prior knowledge of. This study explores the experiences and perceptions of seven SBST members in two Gauteng North schools. We utilized qualitative methods to select teachers in two primary schools located in Tshwane North District 3. We collected data from (n=10) participants. The findings reveal that teachers are oblivious of their new role as they lack knowledge and training to give adequate support to learners with special needs.

Introduction

Inclusive education merges from the broader transformation permeating the new democratic era. The concept gained traction as government moves from specialized and separate educational provision of education. In the new democratic era the specialized and separate educational provision of education is regarded as a transgression of Constitutional principles. The Constitution Act 108 of 1996 created a new environment governed by human rights. A quick glance of at current knowledge suggests that inclusive education is inchoate and a growing field characterised by huge interest from academics, policy makers, teachers, non-governmental organizations. Apartheid treated people unequally and utilized racial discrimination when coming to the provision of education.

The discrimination permeated the way people treat each other in households, social gatherings and public institutions. In public institutions men and women, boys and girls, whites and blacks were separated. The separation went as far as physical and psychological abilities. Since the early days of apartheid, globally there was a shift in the way education was provided. South Africa was part of the global movement, but strictly utilized separation and discrimination internally.

The United Nations' (1948) Universal declaration of Human Rights changed the situation – recognized the rights of all human beings (equality). The United Nations (1960) moved a step further by passing the Convention Against Discrimination in Education- completely doing away with unfair treatment and discrimination in education. The United Nations (1989) also introduced the Convention of the Rights of the Child – which gave recognition of children's rights. In 1994 the United Nations, emboldened by the conventions and international support, organized a conference in Salamanca, Spain. The agreement reached in that conference is known as Salamanca Statement- which enjoins nations to to work towards "schools for all", inclusion of everyone irrespective of differences, support and respond to individual needs. The global move towards inclusive education culminated into passing of Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2007).

South Africa is a signatory of all the Conventions of the United Nations. As a member of the United nations, she was obligated to align her policies according to the conventions of the United Nations, though the change was very slow. The breakthrough came in 1994 when South Africa became a democratic state, changed all the laws discriminating against people. The new democratic laws introduced entrenched the rights of everyone, making discrimination a thing of the past

This article aims to add new knowledge by traversing inclusive education terrain focusing on the assessment of the current policies and practice. Since the implementation of the policy of inclusive education (IE), the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has made progress towards ensuring that all teachers, including those in special schools, are supported to protect the rights of the most vulnerable learners in the system. At school level, the school-based support team (SBST) is assigned to perform support role of co-ordinating learner and teacher support services (Makhalemele & Tlale, 2021). However, the challenge in the implementation of SBST roles became apparent as team members struggle to meet the expecttions set out in the policy (Tsotetsi & Omodan, 2020).

This study seeks to explore the effectiveness of SBST in schools in their function to support teachers and learners. We aim to investigate the perception of SBST members and teachers from the schools on the successes of the SBST and the challenges encountered on support services at school level. Makhalemele and Tlale (2021) argue that the work of SBST is relatively new, as such the work of SBST is of interest to researchers as there is a need to investigate how teachers cope with the implementation of inclusive education as a new role. Researchers need to unravel this phenomenon to establish good practices which can be duplicated in other settings.

Special educational needs in South African schools are increasingly becoming complex, as policy require that mainstream schools start to enrol all learners irrespective of their conditions. This means that school are beginning to become more diverse as diverse learners are beginning to attend mainstream schools (Fourie, 2017). To complicate matters, teachers in the mainstream schools have to face special needs learners in classroom. The complication emerges from lack of training and knowledge about inclusive education. To assist teachers in mainstream schools, the Department of Basic Education mandated schools to establish school-based support teams (SBST). SBST is an initiative of the Department of Education (DOE) in South Africa to consolidate the trajectory of inclusivity in the South African education system where the learners with learning disabilities and other vulnerabilities attend mainstream schools (DoE, 1995).

The responsibilities of the team, according to Gaffney (2016) and Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (DBE, 2014 and Tsotetsi & Omodan, 2020) include, but is not limited to, supporting learners who are perceived to be vulnerable and have learning disabilities; to standardize procedures, assess and provide programmes for all learners; to improve access to quality education for vulnerable learners and those who experience barriers to learning; to manage and support teaching and learning processes for vulnerable children or youth; direct the education system how to plan, budget and support at all levels and to implement key procedures screening, assessment and support.

The introduction of SBST in South Africa is a priority as it predominantly compliments the transformation agenda of the new democratic government and the vision of the United Nation (UN). This is corroborated by DBE (2014) and Makhalemele and Nel (2015) that the aim of the SBST in South Africa is to transform the classroom practices by supporting learners with learning barriers. It is a priority for South Africa as a country endowed with diversities such as ethnicity, regional differences, racial disparities, and language as part of transformation. These diversities are not limited to nationalism but include various diversities in the classroom such as individual differences in the learners' backgrounds, cognitive and intellectual capabilities, social and sociological prowess (Tsotetsi & Omodan, 2020).

Literature Review

According to the bill of rights, all children have a right to education. This fundamental right to basic education is further developed in the Constitution in Section 9 (2) which entrusts the state with the achievement of equality, and Sections 9 (3), (4), and (5) which commits the state to non-discrimination. These clauses are particularly important for protecting all learners, whether disabled or not, and requires that support be given to teachers teaching IE.

Tsotetsi and Omodan (2020) allude those learners differ in background, cognitive and intellectual capabilities, social and sociological prowess. According to the DBE, EWP6 is the piece of legislation that is used as an intervention strategy. However, literature has demonstrated that the successes expected to be recorded because of SBST establishment is on the moribund, especially in rurally located schools (Masango, 2013).

Part of the challenges to the implementation of SBST, according to Masango (2013), is the lack of knowledge of the team members to take care of learners with special needs, which may be as a result from the lack of training and motivation to carry out their responsibilities. This, according to Tsotetsi and Omodan (2020), is practically in line with observations that most members of these teams in rurally located schools have only a teacher's training qualification, which is considered insufficient to deal with learners' needs in this context. However, finding such teachers without the needed skills in the team is largely a posture of failure (Masango, 2013).

Currently, South African schools are faced with a tug-of-war situation – on the one hand, we have educational policies promoting inclusion, equality, and learner collaboration that must be implemented (Mudzingwa, 2018), and on the other hand, we have a schooling system that is competitive, run like a business, and is focused on outperforming other schools in terms of academic results.

Competitiveness about academic results is seen as necessary by schools to attract a specific type of learner (or more importantly, the parent) from a middle-class background as future cohorts of the school (Mudzingwa, 2018). This tends to be a complex situation, and although the consumer is often seen to be the parent in a neoliberal schooling system, this is not always the case. Gulson and Fataar (2011) argue that in South Africa, learners from child headed homes are in fact the consumers, as they find themselves transacting school.

For decades, Apartheid's brutally segregated education system actively deprived black children in South Africa of an opportunity to receive quality education. The segregation impa ted severly on vulnerable children. Vulnerable are classified into three categories: Learners who are failing due to family disruption, language issues, poverty, learning disabilities, disability, etc; learners with disability in special schools; and children of compulsory school going age who may be out of school or have never enrolled at school due to disability. For children with disabilities, racial apartheid in the education system was compounded by a second 'disability apartheid', which isolated children with disabilities to poorly funded special schools that often treated them as incapable of being educated. Part of the challenge to implement SBST, according to Masango (2013:2), is the lack of knowledge of the team members to take care of learners with special needs, which may have resulted from the lack of training and motivation to carry out their responsibilities. This, according to Tsotetsi and Omodan (2020), is practically in line with observations that most members of these teams in rurally located schools have teachers with inadequate to deal with learners' needs in this context.

Compounding the problem is that schools are divided into a quintile system. Although the quintile is an attempt to bring equality in the allocation of resources, poor schools struggle with the new demand of inclusive education. Most rural schools have School Governing Body (SGB) post teachers who are not qualified as professional teachers. These teachers are given huge responsibilities in dealing with IE. Some are members of the SBST. These teachers have no choice and are at the mercy of the principal to keep their posts and cannot question anything. Although the DBE includes them in training for IE, they are ineffective in the implementation inclusive education policy.

SIAS Policy divides schools in South Africa into three types: special schools, full-service schools, and ordinary (mainstream) schools. According to the SIAS Policy, learners are categorised as having high, moderate, or low support needs in terms of learning. Generally, because of the way the system is structured by the DBE, children with disabilities are defined as having high or moderate support needs and are required to attend special schools or full-service schools. A special school is a school that caters exclusively for children with disabilities, while a full-service school is a mainstream school that caters for most learners with low support needs, and a smaller percentage of learners with disabilities, who have moderate or high support needs. Despite this requirement, in terms of Education White Paper 6, for mainstream schools to reasonably accommodate the inclusion of children with disabilities (whether they have high, moderate, or low support needs), this is simply not a realistic option for children in the Tshwane North Sub-District, as schools lack the resources, expertise, and support to cope with children that have disabilities.

Problem Statement

In many rurally located schools, there are discrepancies such as politics and politicking that makes the "qualified unqualified and the unqualified qualified" in the choice of team members, as it appears that many chosen members are not competent to handle the responsibilities. This supports the argument that several teachers with low grades found themselves in the team with little or no knowledge on how to maintain the proposition of inclusivity in the schools by supporting learners with a barrier to learning.

Makhalemele and Nel (2015:15) support this, stating insufficient knowledge of team members remain one of the challenges of providing quality and effective support services in South Africa schools. Nel et al. (2016), in their report, found that the problem is not only with the SBST, but also on the part of DBST. In their study, the teachers alleged that the DBST is not skilled enough to render assistance or to give the necessary support services to learners with learning barriers. To justify this argument, scholars such as Nel et al. (2016) acknowledge that school support systems are still not adequately equipped to

cater for the functions as stipulated in the policy guidelines, and these cases exists in rurally located schools.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of teachers on the School Based Support Teams providing support to the teachers in two Tshwane North Primary Schools in Gauteng?

Conceptualization

It is highly unlikely in any school that there are no children experiencing barriers to learning. These children can be the starting point for implementing inclusive practices. Schools can start by addressing the needs of these learners with whatever limited capacity that may already exist in the school (Mosito, 2019). If schools wait for the right resources or the correctly qualified staff, IE will simply not happen. Schools that attempt to implement inclusive practices on a broad scale from the outset, generally fail in their honourable endeavours, because of the magnitude of the undertaking. The key is to identify one or two children that obviously need assistance, and who are amenable to the support that will be offered.

Conceptualisation Framework

Internationally, South Africa has shown it is committed to IE. Domestically, South Africa has committed itself to the provision of quality, equitable, and IE (Mudzingwa, 2018). EWP6 describes the intent of the DOE to implement IE at all levels in the system by 2020.

Such an inclusive system will facilitate the inclusion of vulnerable learners and reduce the barriers to learning through targeted support structures and mechanisms, which will improve the retention of learners in the education system, particularly those learners who are prone to dropping out. Below in Figure 1.2 is an illustration of how teachers are supported in the execution of implementing the IE policy advocated by the DBE.
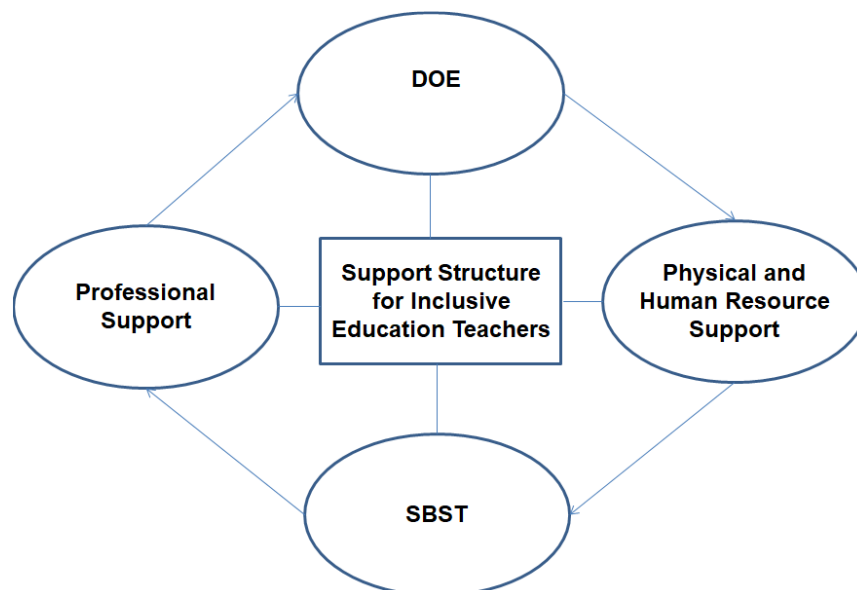

Figure 1.2: Conceptual Framework

Department of Education Support

Literature revealed that mainstream teachers did not have skills to implement an inclusion policy, but the shift towards IE has forced them to accept the responsibility to accommodate all learners with Special Education Needs (SEN) (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). These teachers need support from the DOE. In full-service schools, the target population are learners with moderate levels of support, where the class teacher receives physical and human resources in the form of DBST and institutional level support teams. Both teams assist the teacher to accommodate learner diversity in the classroom (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). Each school is required to have an Institutional Learner Support Team (ILST). The ILST coordinate learners, teachers, curriculum, and institutional developments at the school about developing strategies to meet those needs, especially managing and supporting curriculum differentiation, access suitable resources, building staff capacity for IE; and ensuring the sustainability of IE (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019).

School-Based Support Team (SBST)

The SBST is responsible for determining the support needs of our learners. The team is involved in coordinating the provision of the identified support both within the school framework and education department policies. The SBST should function effectively to meet the needs of all learners in the school, but particularly those with special and diverse educational needs. For the SBST to function effectively, it should be highly networked within the school and its broader community (Fourie, 2017). The SBST, previously known as ILST, is responsible for determining the support needs of the school, teachers, and learners and coordinating support provision within the framework of the SIAS, and the team should meet on a regular basis to fulfil these functions.

Professional Support

Professional support involves a planned and systematically monitored arrangement of teaching procedures, adapted equipment and materials, accessible settings and other interventions designed to help teach learners with learning barriers achieve a higher level of personal self-sufficiency and success in school. Professional support for teachers enables them to deal with children who challenged and allows the learners to be with their peers and to learn in a normal school environment (Gous & Mfazwe, 1998). A professional support programme encourages learners involved in IE to learn things differently in an inclusive classroom.

All teachers should have access to an excellent and equitable programme that provides solid support for their teaching and is responsive to their prior knowledge, intellectual strengths, and personal interests. Gous and Mfazwe (1998:6) declare that teachers who have taught normal children before are therefore faced with unfamiliar challenges in their classrooms when they interact with, and teach, children who have specific learning disabilities. The new trend of inclusion offers children who are intellectually or physically challenged the opportunity to be with their peers and learning in a normal school environment.

Gous and Mfazwe (1998:51) emphasise that the atmosphere in a classroom depends on a teacher's attitude and teaching style. One needs to remember that a teacher's responsibility is to meet the educational needs of children, as well as their social and emotional needs. Teachers, therefore, require support throughout their teaching and learning journey, such as counselling, career guidance, specific teaching and learning techniques, social interventions, and other assisting services.

Table 1.1 below summarises the support given to the learners with learning challenges as it corroborates the above statements.

Table 1.1: Summary on IE

Level of Support	Key Support Functions
National DOE (Macro-level)	Providing EWP6 and a broad management framework for support
Provincial departments in the nine provinces (Exo-level)	Coordinating implementation of national framework of support with provincial needs
District-based support teams (including special/resource schools) (developed within smaller geographical areas, determined in different ways in the nine provinces) (Meso-level)	Providing integrated support to education institutions (ECD, schools, colleges, and adult learning centres) to support the development of effective teaching and learning
Institution-level support teams (local teams in schools, colleges, early childhood, and adult learning centres) (Micro-level)	Identifying and addressing barriers to learning in the local context, thereby promoting effective teaching and learning

Research Strategy

We adopted a qualitative research approach to the perceptions of teachers on the School Based Support Teams providing support to the teachers in two Tshwane North Primary Schools in Gauteng and to understand the actual situation in its original social and cultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach is appropriate because it provides data for research questions inquiring on "how" and "why" (Jameel, Shaheen & Majid, 2018) differences (Merriam, 2019). This qualitative paradigm also enables the researchers to analyse data

In the development of the research strategy we took counsel from Nieuwenhuis in Maree (2007) to construct an instrument that take into account the realities of the participants and the traditions of interpretivist/constructivist paradigm. Constructivism is concerned with how knowledge arises; what concepts are constructed; and what criteria can be involved in the evaluation of knowledge (Flick, Kardorff & Steinke, 2004; Crotty, 2003).

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were involved in IE. Five participants were selected from each of the two schools. The sample comprised the principal, the coordinator of the SBST, and three teachers who are members of the SBST from each school. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The researcher used a voice recorder to collect the data. Permission was sought from each respondent. Interviewing was done at a place chosen by the participant. Consent forms were filled, thus ensuring confidentiality and credibility. Departmental and school documents were interrogated and teachers or members of SBST were observed.

In analysing the data, the researcher began by listening to the voice recording of each interview and transcribing the data. The transcribed data was read to establish its logic and to obtain a sense of the participants' varied understandings of the experiences of teachers in inclusive classes. The data was then coded using open coding that involves word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase, and sentence-by-sentence analysis to get the initial codes. The codes were then grouped into categories and the emerging categories were merged into broad themes (Glasser & Strauss, 1999).

Findings

From the findings, the SBSTs believe that the following were their responsibilities in supporting learners experiencing barriers to learning: Identifying a learner as having a barrier to learning, there is a need for the accumulated evidence provided by curriculum assessment which uses observation and documentation from the learner's portfolio. Workbooks and consolidated verbal and written information from other teachers, parents/ caregivers (DoE, 2008:13). The SBSTs mentioned that one of their functions is to identify learners experiencing barriers to learning.

They believed that they must work closely with the teachers during identification. They also noted that another responsibility is to give individual attention to these learners. Put differently, the DOE (DoE, 2014:32) maintains that the primary function of the SBST is to support the learning process by identifying and addressing barriers to learning, and also to promote effective teaching and learning.

The SBST collectively develops strategies to address the needs of learners and teachers, including a major focus on teacher development and parent consultation and support (DoE, 2014:33). The DOE further recommends that support services should be moving away from only supporting individual learners to also supporting educators in the system, to "recognize and respond appropriately to the needs of all learners, thereby promoting effective learning" (DoE, 1997, p.58).

Implications of the Findings

From the findings, it became evident that the SBSTs are lacking capacity to identify and give support. This implies that learners with barriers to learning are just dumped in the mainstream schools without enough support from their classroom teachers, SBSTs, and other role players in education; therefore, these learners are not benefiting from the education system. Although there is willingness, the challenge is that classroom teachers are frustrated by the time-consuming IE.

Time consuming refers to finishing the syllabus and is delayed by learners with administration of learning challenges in their classes. They do not know what, how, when to do what and with whom to do it to support these learners. The same challenge is with the SBST. That is why they resort to turning to a teacher who has studied IE to show them the way. There is a lot of uncertainty amongst the learners in this dire situation; because of this uncertainty, learners with barriers to learning may either return to the schools they were attending before the call for inclusion or may drop out if the current situation does not change for the better. Observation and document analysis were also used.

Recommendations

We recommend the following factors based on the findings from the two schools that were selected for my study.

General Recommendations

There is a need for a specialist who work directly with learners who experience barriers to learning. Teachers are overloaded in public schools, the department need to look into teacher work load, considering that there are other committees teachers belong to. There is a need for all the stakeholders within and outside the school to change their negative attitudes towards IE. All teachers should be trained in IE so that they know how to support and deal with the learners experiencing barriers to learning. The schools should draft a policy which addresses, particularly, the needs of learners experiencing barriers to learning. All schools are provided with a paper budget where the procurement committee budgets for items to be bought or acquired in that year. I recommend that they also include IE activities in their budget. Parents should be urged to disclose all information about the child so that the SBST knows which area needs support.

The DOE should address the challenge of overcrowded classrooms by providing more accommodation for learners, so that each classroom accommodates not more than thirty-five learners for our disadvantaged schools, as per post provisioning norms provided by the DOE for primary schools. The DoE should employ more teachers, especially those who are trained or have a qualification/ course/ module in IE so that they could be able to practise individualisation. The DoE should employ therapists, audiologists, and psychologists in all districts for those who have speech, hearing problems and those with psycho-social behavioural challenges.

Specific Recommendations According to Themes

Below are the specific recommendations according to the identified themes:

School Based Support Team (SBST)

To drive the programme of implementing IE, all schools should have an SBST. Without this structure, IE will remain a dream. This structure should constitute dedicated members as envisaged by the DOE.

Composition of the SBST

When SBSTs were established, they did not include other important stakeholders like non-teaching staff and the learners at school. It is based on that finding that I recommend that the SBST should be composed of all the important stakeholders as proposed by the DOE.

Functions of SBST

Based on the findings, I recommend that the SBST should ensure that they monitor and evaluate the progress they have made during a specific period. They should also ensure that meetings are held frequently and support is given continually so that learners are not disadvantaged.

Challenges Encountered by SBST

I recommend that the team should work together with the common goal of supporting teachers so that learners benefit in the education system. This can be enhanced by frequent meetings to discuss their challenges and to find solutions to those challenges.

How to Improve the Current Situation?

The SBST should ensure that they capacitate the teachers with the necessary, relevant knowledge and skills to address the daily challenges encountered by teachers during teaching. If they are capacitated, their negative attitude towards IE may change. This can be enhanced by working together and establishing good communication among the members and the community. In cases where there are behavioural challenges, teachers should be trained in how to deal with them. The classroom should not accommodate a large number of learners, as this result in teachers not being able to undertake individualisation.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of SBST about providing support to the teachers in two Gauteng Primary Schools in the Tshwane North. From the literature review, it was found that the main function of the SBST is to support the learning process by identifying and addressing barriers to learning and to promote effective teaching.

From the data analysis, it became clear that SBSTs were not satisfied with the training they received, and collaboration among the SBST and the parents was lacking. This means that there is a need to strengthen the education support services. They also indicated the need for specialised services such as psychologists and therapists, which seem to be unavailable.

Overloading and overcrowding were also raised as other hindrances in the effective implementation of IE.

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