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Challenges faced by secondary school teachers in implementing inclusive education in Rakgwadi Circuit, Sekhukhune South

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Abstract

Implementing inclusive education practices and principles remains a significant challenge in many South African secondary schools, particularly within the mainstream system. These challenges must be identified and systematically addressed through a comprehensive, all-encompassing, inclusive education approach. A qualitative case study was employed to explore the challenges faced by teachers in implementing inclusive education in the Rakgwadi Circuit, Sekhukhune South, located in the Limpopo Province. The study was framed within the constructivism paradigm. Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants, comprising four principals and twenty teachers teaching mathematics, mathematical literacy, and languages. Data was collected through individual interviews, focus group discussions, and open-ended questionnaires. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and patterns related to implementing inclusive education. The study revealed several significant barriers to inclusive education, including inadequate teacher training, overcrowded classrooms, lack of support from the Department of Basic Education, insufficient school infrastructure, limited parental involvement, and language barriers. These factors collectively hindered the effective teaching and learning process. The findings highlight the critical need for a comprehensive approach to inclusive education that systematically addresses the identified challenges. The study suggests enhancing advocacy and awareness while improving continuous professional development for all teachers to effectively implement inclusive practices.

Keywords: Attitudes, barriers to learning, inclusive education, mainstream, mathematics, the language of teaching and learning

Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) is a global educational movement aimed at ensuring that all learners, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, receive equitable education opportunities. In South Africa, the implementation of inclusive education has been a central focus following the Salamanca Statement and the subsequent policies that advocate for the inclusion of learners with diverse needs into public ordinary schools. South Africa's commitment to inclusive education was formalised with the adoption of the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education-Building and Inclusive Education and Training System in 2001, which laid the foundation for the transformation of the educational system to accommodate all learners (Department of Education [DoE], 2001). However, despite these efforts, the practical implementation of inclusive education in secondary schools remains a daunting challenge, particularly in under-resourced areas like the Rakgwadi Circuit in Sekhukhune District-Limpopo Province. In addition, the Circuit is also faced with socio-economic and infrastructural limitations that affect the implementation of inclusive education. This study sought to explore the challenges faced by secondary school teachers in this region as they strive to implement inclusive education.

The concept of IE is rooted in the idea that all learners have the right to education and should be able to learn together, regardless of any physical, intellectual, cultural, social, or language

barriers (Kinuthia, 2022). South Africa developed the Education White Paper 6 (EWP 6) and other policies to ensure that learners with learning barriers are included into public ordinary schools (DoE, 2001). These policies emphasise the provision of strategies and interventions to assist teachers in addressing diversity in their classrooms (Majoko & Phasha, 2018). Even though these policies support inclusive education, teachers have voiced difficulties in putting them into practice in the classroom. There is still considerable resistance to inclusive education practice in Africa, including South Africa. Kinuthia (2022) and Singal and Muthukrishna (2014) concur that challenges associated with the implementation of IE may be caused by the discrepancies in the cultural, social, financial, and historical background of the education system. In South Africa, the discrepancies include financial constraints that affect the availability of resources, attitudinal barriers caused by a lack of cultural acceptance of learners who experience diverse educational needs, and the beliefs and practices of teachers who believe in traditional teaching methods that are not conducive to inclusivity (Engelbrecht & Muthukrishna, 2019).

While some teachers have displayed a positive attitude, many are still hesitant to implement inclusive education (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). Research has indicated that teachers voiced the inadequacy of their training, while others say implementation is hampered by focusing on learners with learning barriers at the expense of other learners in the classroom (Tichá, Abery, Johnstone, Poghosyan & Hunt, 2018). Teachers doubt their ability and knowledge to teach learners with additional needs, and this is aggravated by negative attitudes and lack of confidence.

The research thus focused on the following two research questions:

- What are the challenges experienced by secondary school teachers in the Rakgwadi Circuit, Sekhukhune South?
- What strategies can be employed to improve the implementation of inclusive education in secondary schools within the Rakgwadi Circuit?

Conceptualising Inclusive Education

An IE policy requires the attention of all those involved in education. All those responsible in schools, from the school management teams to teachers, must implement the inclusive education policy as mandated. There is a considerable gap in how secondary schools implement IE. The policy is not implemented as envisaged by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) as research continues to highlight that exclusion exists within the school system (Majoko & Phasha, 2018). The past South African education system and structures, which excluded certain ethnic groups, indigenous and learners with disabilities, directly or indirectly, contribute to this flawed implementation (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Inclusive education is an approach that is globally adopted to ensure the right to quality education for all and is widely applied to address these disparities by developing national policies that support inclusion.

Al-Shammari, Faulkner, and Forlin (2019) emphasise that IE is not just about placing learners with special education needs in mainstream classrooms but ensuring they learn alongside their peers in the same environment. This approach challenges outdated models of segregation and promotes equal opportunities for all learners. Schuelka (2018) further develops this concept, asserting that IE is a fundamental human right. It is not just about physical placement but about breaking down barriers to learning, fostering dignity, and valuing the well-being of every learner. Most importantly, IE ensures that learners with disabilities actively participate and engage in learning alongside their peers, reinforcing a sense of belonging and equal contribution to society.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) emphasises that quality education is the right of every learner (Farkas, 2014). There is an acknowledgment that progress is beginning to show in recent years, although significant gaps still exist worldwide. Inconsistency between national and local policies on inclusive education, poor teacher development, and schools not displaying the characteristics of inclusion have been noticed (Engelbrecht, 2020; Majoko & Phasha, 2018).

Inclusive education is a policy matter, and inconsistencies impact implementation negatively. Hornby (2015) believes that although the policy of 'full inclusion,' with its vision of all learners being educated in mainstream classrooms for all or most of their time at school, is desirable, it is impossible to achieve in practice.

Implementation of Inclusive Education

The South African education system has entered the third decade since the development of the IE policy, namely the EWP 6 (DoE, 2001). It emphasised, amongst others, building an inclusive education and training education system which would strengthen special schools and provide available services to mainstream schools. The focus of the policy was to remove curriculum and institutional barriers and how to overcome them (DoE, 2001). The strategies included support to full-service schools and covered a full range of learning needs for all categories of learners. The policy proposed a timeframe of 20 years comprising immediate steps (2001-2003), medium steps (2004-2008) and long-term steps (2009-2021). It was envisaged that by 2021, most schools should have started implementing inclusive education. To date, full implementation, as was envisaged, remains a challenging factor.

According to the EWP 6 (DoE, 2001), inclusive education should be implemented gradually and sustainably. The policy envisaged schools producing learners who will have received inclusive education irrespective of their ability levels, interests, and background. In recent years, the DBE (2014) raised awareness in communities that the education system accommodates various learning needs by incorporating different instructional strategies. It emphasises that learners with minor barriers to learning should be accommodated in mainstream schools, which should cater for their learning needs through differentiation curriculum, teaching, assessment, and learner-teacher support materials.

Despite the support that the DBE provided to schools through workshops, policies, and guidelines, teachers are still struggling to implement the policy. Malahlela (2017) found that some teachers are ignorant of what the EWP 6 is. This issue is not unique to South Africa but exists throughout the world (Hayes et al., 2018). For inclusive education to succeed, teachers and schools should commit to transformation (Engelbrecht, Nel & Tlale, 2015). Implementation of inclusive education requires schools to restructure teaching methodologies suitable to the learning needs of learners with disabilities (DBE, 2014). It involves adapting the language, classroom organisation, teaching pace, contact time, teaching and learning support materials, and assessment (DBE, 2014). Without adequate training and support, teachers struggle to adapt to teaching methodologies, content, environment, and assessment to enable universal access to learning.

The implementation of inclusive education poses significant challenges in South Africa, given its contextual realities (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018). Learners are unique, and come from different socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, and racial groups (Postiglione, Johnstone & Teter, 2023). Moreover, learners are admitted to schools with different experiences; some have difficulties with reading and writing, some live in poverty, and others battle emotional difficulties or experience difficulties in remembering what is taught (Phasha et al., 2017). Many schools tend to label these learners as intelligent and non-intelligent, which is tantamount to discrimination and negates inclusivity. Furthermore, awards to learners are still discriminatory without considering certain special abilities, thus disregarding inclusion (Maapola-Thobejane, Stanley, & Zondi, 2023). Change in teaching and learning can be brought about by embracing diversity to make a difference in the classroom.

The South African Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) sets the content for all the subjects taught in the classroom (DBE, 2011). CAPS contains the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP), which serves as a guide of what is to be taught in each term for the academic year (DBE, 2011). It means that teachers should teach according to the ATP and not fall behind. Teachers battle to adapt to the diverse needs of learners that require them to implement different approaches and strategies. Diverse needs could refer to difficulties in reading and writing, hearing, visual, and remembering. It requires the teacher to

consider learners' different abilities and interests, which can be time-consuming and lead to failure to complete the stipulated content on time. Regarding this point, teachers are struggling to modify the content so that learners with learning barriers can gain the knowledge and acquire skills and competencies. Learning barriers come in many different forms; however, careful consideration of the psychological, physical, and social environment could see learners completing grades in ordinary schools. Despite this, teachers are still struggling to see this adaptation as a normal routine in an inclusive classroom.

One other problem is the fact that the Education Department organises training programmes that fail to address the skills and knowledge required in the classroom (Nseibo, Vergunst, McKenzie, Kelly, Karisa & Watermeyer, 2022). The purpose of the programmes is to guide teachers on strategies that can be applied to address diversity in the classroom. However, as these programmes essentially fail, teachers are left further stressed and uninformed.

A lack of teaching skills, lack of parental involvement, and inadequate resources, negatively affects IE implementation (Zungu, 2014). Inadequate skills and resources are common challenges found in South Africa's education sector (Materechera, 2020). Furthermore, Donohue and Bornman (2015) confirmed that various factors contribute to the successful, or otherwise, implementation of inclusive education, including negative attitudes, poor resources, and the provision of support teachers. Implementing inclusive education is highly dependent on the appropriate skills, personnel resources, teaching and learning materials and infrastructure.

Despite the EWP6 (DoE, 2001) outlining that for inclusive education to be successful, there should be support structures at district and school levels to coordinate inclusive education services for teachers and learners, this remains a huge challenge. The roles of the District-Based Support Team (DBST) and School-Based Support Team (SBST) remain confused as Nel et al. (2016) found that DBST members have battled to adopt these new roles. The National Department of Education might not be providing enough support, or there might be gaps in the National Department's obligations, which leads to DBST roles not being carried out successfully (Nel et al., 2016). The monitoring and support to schools by DBST serve the purpose of evaluating whether the plans are implemented and, furthermore, identifying the weaknesses and gaps for future follow-up. However, the lack of actual monitoring by the DBST is problematic and so schools continue failing to progress. Seemingly, most schools establish the SBST team for the sake of compliance and not for its intended purpose. Implementation should be a collaborative effort by all the stakeholders with teachers being implementers in the classroom (Murungi, 2015).

Adewumi and Mosito (2019) assert that teachers' attitudes play a vital role in the successful implementation of inclusive education. However, these attitudes are often influenced by several factors, including inadequate experience in managing diverse learner needs within the classroom. This lack of experience can lead to teachers having a limited understanding of disabilities and ultimately failing to teach these learners properly. Furthermore, with inadequate training, teachers may feel unprepared to support these learners, particularly when they perform below expected academic standards; in turn affecting the overall performance of both teachers and learners.

Majoko and Phasha (2018) further highlight that negative attitudes from teachers and peers in mainstream schools create additional barriers for learners who already experience barriers to learning and disabilities. These challenges extend beyond individual attitudes and include systemic issues such as insufficient resources, inadequate training, and limited support from district and provincial education teams, which exacerbate the difficulties faced by teachers in implementing IE effectively.

Parental and community engagement also play a significant role in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Research indicates that the active involvement of parents and the broader community enhances support systems for learners with diverse educational needs, leading to improved academic and social

outcomes (Epstein, 2018). The collaborative efforts between schools, families, and community stakeholders foster a holistic learning environment that accommodates all learners, regardless of their abilities.

Parental engagement plays a crucial role in enhancing learning beyond the classroom. Studies have shown that when parents are actively involved in their children's education, learners exhibit greater motivation, improved self-esteem, and better academic performance (Jeynes, 2020). Additionally, parents offer valuable insights into their children's strengths and challenges, allowing teachers to create adapted strategies that address individual learning needs (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). Schools that promote open communication with parents and involve them in decision-making processes foster a sense of shared responsibility and commitment to inclusive practices (Deslandes & Rousseau, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model was used to examine the factors that affect (the influence of) inclusive education in mainstream secondary schools. This model was chosen because it reveals how influential process-person-context-time is in human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These four aspects brought about an understanding of how different system levels interact in a social context. According to the model, factors such as age, gender, self-esteem, belief and social status and attention skills affect the quality of human experience and development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Furthermore, there is a bidirectional relationship between the teachers and their contextual environment (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The model can be used to investigate how teachers feel about inclusive education in their immediate environment. This also pertains to how the department supports the teachers in their efforts to implement inclusive education. It can also shed light on how teachers' attitudes impact the implementation of inclusive education.

Central to the theory are the person factors - the primary mechanisms for producing human development (Slomp, Mombourquette & Marynowski, 2018). Person factors play a pivotal role as they are related to an individual's characteristics that influence their development. The model also acknowledges that personal attributes such as ability, achievement, and personality contribute to a social situation. These attributes can either contribute positively to shaping the future development of teachers or hamper the process. The context in which proximal processes take place has an impact on an individual's personal environment.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted using a constructivist paradigm because the researcher relied on participants' views and ideas concerning the phenomena under study. According to the constructivist philosophical paradigm, humans build their own knowledge and understanding of the universe by engaging in experiences and reflecting on such encounters (Adom, Yeboah & Ankrah, 2016).

A qualitative approach and a case study were used within the constructivist paradigm to explore the challenges in the implementation of inclusive education. Prasad (2017) recommends a qualitative approach in situations focusing on understanding beliefs, behaviour, perceptions, and attitudes. Notably, a qualitative research approach allows for examining people's experiences in detail (Flick, 2018). It was stated earlier that the proposed study follows a qualitative approach using purposive sampling. Taherdoost (2016) describes purposive sampling as an approach in which specific situations, people, or events are purposefully chosen to elicit essential information that cannot be gathered by other means. Creswell (2015) emphasises the use of purposeful sampling in qualitative research. This sampling method provided the latitude to decide who should be sampled, what form the sampling would take, and how many people or sites needed to be sampled. Participants and study locations were purposively selected to better understand the research problem and the phenomena under study.

The study was conducted at four secondary schools with high enrolment figures in the Limpopo Province, Rakgwadi Circuit, Sekhukhune District. Departmental learner

performance schedules were used to select schools with high enrollment. In each school, six participants participated as follows: one principal participated in an individual interview (N= 4). Additionally, four focus groups were conducted, with each group consisting of five participants from each school (N= 20). The same participants who were involved in the focus groups completed open-ended questionnaires. The participants were selected teachers of Grades 8 to 12 who taught languages, mathematics, and mathematical literacy. The above category was chosen because these subjects are compulsory for all learners. This meant every learner in a school studied either mathematics or mathematical literacy, home language (HL), and the first additional language (FAL). All the learners in the Rakgwadi Circuit are taking Sepedi as an HL and English as an FAL. The choice of participating teachers offering these subjects gave the researchers the advantage of gathering information from experienced teachers teaching learners with diverse needs.

The following table illustrates the individual interview participants and focus group participants

Table 1: Participants in individual interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questionnaire

Name of Schools	**Number of participants**	**Pseudonyms of Participants Involved in the Individual Interviews**	**Pseudonyms of Participants Involved in the Focus Groups**	**Pseudonyms of Participants who completed open-ended questionnaire**
A	1	PA (Principal A)	FGA1; FGA2; FGA3; FGA4; FGA5	QA1; QA2; QA3; QA4; QA5
B	1	PB (Principal B)	FGB1; FGB2; FGB3; FGB4; FGB5	QB1; QB2; QB3; QB4; QB5
C	1	PC (Principal C)	FGC1; FGC2; FGC3; FGC4; FGC5	QC1; QC2; QC3; QC4; QC5
D	1	PD (Principal D)	FGD1; FGD2; FGD3; FGD4; FGD5	QD1; QD2; QD3; QD4; QD5
Total Participants	4		4 groups of 5 participants from each school= 20	(Same participants who were engaged in the focus groups)

Data Collection and Analysis

Flick (2018) explains that qualitative data gathering is the selection and production of linguistic information to analyse and interpret phenomena, social domains, subjective and collective experiences, and the associated meaning-making processes. Qualitative data-gathering methods using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires were employed. The recorded data was transcribed verbatim to rule out any bias.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the coded data. Creswell et al. *(*2015) describe data coding as the process of carefully reading through the transcribed data line-by-line and breaking them down into analytical units. This approach involved identifying recurring themes and patterns within the data, which provided insights into the challenges faced by secondary school teachers in implementing inclusive education. The emerging themes and patterns were used to construct a coherent narrative that captured the key findings of the study. By synthesising the data, the researchers were able to gain a deeper understanding of the reported challenges and the factors contributing to them.

Trustworthiness

To ascertain whether there were any inconsistencies in the results, the researcher established credibility by using triangulation as the technique for data collecting and analysis. Korstjens and Moser (2018) state that credibility determines if the research findings represent knowledge that may be inferred from the participants' initial viewpoints. Transferability is the extent to which qualitative research findings may be applied to different situations and used with data from different respondents (Creswell et al., 2015). The participants' descriptions and contexts provided the researcher with a large amount of clear and detailed information about teachers' understanding and perception of inclusive education, although the aim was not to generalise the study's findings.

To ensure dependability, the researcher triangulated all data collected during the research process to search for common themes to provide reliable findings. Confirmability indicates the degree to which other researchers could confirm the research study findings to search for common themes to provide reliable findings. Confirmability aims to establish whether the researcher's interpretations and findings are drawn from the data and provide evidence of how the conclusions and interpretations were derived (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). To ensure confirmability, the researcher requested the supervisor to assess the research questions to ensure adequacy and to verify whether the questions would measure what they were supposed to. The researcher additionally used multiple data sources by combining the individual interviews with information from the focus groups to ascertain whether the results would lead to the same conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical obligations were adhered to for the purposes of the study. First, ethics approval was sought from the relevant Higher Education Institution (2020/11/11/31140971/AM). Second, permission letters were obtained from the Limpopo Province Department of Education and the principals of the four identified schools. No data collection commenced before written informed consent was obtained and all the participants ensured of voluntary participation. Confidentiality was also preserved in the study using pseudonyms to identify the participants.

Results and Discussion

The table below summarizes the themes from the data analysis

Table 2: Themes emerged from the data

Theme	Codes
Lack of training	Lack of knowledge Unable to identify learners Lack of in-service training Lack of practical implementation
Overcrowded classrooms	Overcrowding Large classes Many learners
Poor infrastructure	User-friendly buildings Enabling physical infrastructure Classrooms not accommodative Inadequate facilities
Educational system	Time allocation per period Fixed promotional requirements Annual Teaching Plan Teacher – learner ratio Application of differentiation Slow learners
Lack of support from DBE	No visit No monitoring

Lack of training

Focus groups and individual interviews revealed that lack of training on inclusive education is a challenge. Of all the participants in the focus groups, only one mentioned attending training. Almost all participants asserted that they were not trained in inclusive education. Participants further alluded that it is difficult to implement in the classroom due to lack of knowledge. The verbal quotes below illustrate how participants felt:

FGB2: "*I think if we are serious about this inclusive education, the government itself must go and train teachers on how to identify the learners with challenges and those learners should be known and after been known, there be a certain way or specific way of dealing with or teaching them in a particular manner that it will suit them because different learners with similar approach and everything the results will be the same.*"

FGD3: *"I attended a one-day training which not enough according to me. How do I implement such a big thing with little training offered in one day?"*

PA: "*The challenges is lack of in-service training in terms of IE, we are still far behind, if the government can support the schools."*

PD: *"Personally, I think we were never properly trained; this is my 23rd year as an educator, and the training attended was just bits and pieces that cannot make a whole. It is not something that I can confidently tell other teachers or practice in the classroom."*

The above quotes reveal that teachers are still lacking in training in inclusive education. It is indicated in EWP 6 that special attention will be paid to developing flexibility in teaching practices and styles through training, capacity building, and the provision of support to learners and teachers (DoE, 2001). Proper training for practicing inclusive education is required for grades R-12 teachers. According to EWP6, establishing an inclusive education and training system would mean the transformation of mainstream secondary schools so that learners with learning barriers can be identified early and be provided with appropriate support (DoE, 2001).

Further revelations are that teachers need to be empowered to enable the implementation of inclusive education. This statement is in line with what was reported by Mokaleng and Mowes (2020), that appropriate teacher training is crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education. The indication is that since the inception of Education White Paper 6, Special Needs, no training has been given to teachers regarding inclusive education. Teachers mentioned that the success of implementation is highly dependent on what the Department of Education offers them. The personal attributes of teachers, as a component of the PPCT model, significantly affected the implementation of inclusive education (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Most participants reported a lack of formal training in inclusive education practices and policy, affecting their ability to address barriers to learning.

Zwane and Malale (2018) corroborate that teachers frequently lack training and sufficient resources to teach learners with learning barriers which is a disadvantage in terms of learning opportunity. It is perceived that special knowledge and skills are required for one to be able to identify learners with barriers and to be able to teach in accordance with their needs.

The quotes attest that an awareness of being inclusive came through self-development by accessing information on the internet. Principals' interviews also revealed that during their long service as teachers, they were never trained in inclusive education. The department expects teachers to implement inclusive education but does not provide appropriate training. White Paper 6 outlines that flexible teaching practices and capacity building were amongst the aspects mentioned as key in the provision of support to schools (DoE, 2001).

The training of teachers is a starting point to enable their smooth transition, especially as most of the teachers did not study inclusive education when trained to become teachers, or it was never part of the curriculum. According to Adewumi and Mosito (2019), the inadequate training of teachers is an ongoing challenge in South Africa as indicated by the recent study conducted in Beaufort West. One can assume from the findings that the lack of training persists as a

challenge regarding the implementation of IE in most South African schools. For teachers to teach in an inclusive school, they must develop a shared vision, a conceptual framework and vocabulary, as well as the instructional and technical skills necessary to meet the needs of diverse learners through pre-service and in-service programmes (Landsberg, Kruger, & Swart, 2019).

Overcrowded classrooms

Overcrowding in some of the classrooms of mainstream secondary schools was a challenge mentioned during the interviews. Teachers revealed that their classrooms are overcrowded. It is impossible to attend to learners' individual needs, especially learners with barriers to learning, because of the large number of learners in the classrooms. As a result, teachers resort to teaching the entire class in exactly the same way, regardless of those learners who battle to keep up with the content. The teachers found it difficult to manage their classrooms due to overcrowding. QD3 and QD2 stated that it becomes difficult to move around the classrooms to help learners who need individual attention.

'*Overcrowding makes it difficult for me to move around the classroom to assist learners who needs individual attention".*

QC1, QC3, QB3 and QB5 shared the same sentiments that high enrolment numbers and lack of resources are real challenges in the mainstream secondary schools. Teachers are unable to give learners individual attention. These learners need teachers' assistance and extra time to grasp certain concepts. QA3 outlined that sometimes it worked out better when learners were given activities in groups, however, overcrowded classrooms did not allow that kind of arrangement.

"Sometimes you give them activities in groups, it becomes difficult to arrange table in groups because of limited space."

QB1 agreed with the other participants but added noise factors as a disturbance. The participants went on to ask how learners with learning barriers can be assisted when the noise levels are too high, and general discipline becomes difficult.

QC3: "Large class of learners always give a problem; they make noise and disturb learners with barriers who still needs to be taught or individually assisted. It becomes difficult to discipline them."

Participants' quotes reveal that it is difficult to implement inclusive education effectively in overcrowded classes because of lack of space. According to Bronfenbrenner's PPCT's model, the process of implementing inclusive education is hindered by various factors, including inadequate teacher training and insufficient institutional support. Teachers reported feeling overwhelmed due to large class sizes and a lack of adaptive teaching strategies. West and Meier (2020) believe that overcrowded classrooms are also a contributing factor to poor learning conditions because of the lack of space, fresh air and high noise levels that could lead to a lack of attention and even create stress within learners. Marais (2016) contends that overcrowding has a variety of disruptive consequences for learner behaviour. For example, learners could not pay attention or participate at the required level of intensity because classmates were noisy and restive, leading to academic achievement being negatively affected. Participants also added that large classes are a considerable problem because learners become uncontrollable. They emphasised that as you try to give struggling learners your attention, some other learners become noisy, disturbing teaching and learning.

Matsepe and Maluleke (2019) agree that overcrowded classrooms have a direct negative impact on teaching and learning and impose a great deal of stress on teachers. The findings revealed that overcrowded classrooms were the reason the participants failed to give learners who needed support the appropriate support. They indicated that sometimes the classrooms were so crowded that it became difficult to move between the rows or columns of desks. This results in a heavy workload aggravating and stressing teachers, resulting in disengagement and loss of hope in their work (Aketch, 2017).

Poor infrastructure

Amongst the problems pointed out by focus group participants was poor infrastructure in mainstream secondary schools. Two of the four

schools sampled have state-of-the-art buildings but do not suit the requirements of inclusive schools. The other two schools sampled had crumbling and dilapidated buildings. Participants also attributed poor implementation of inclusive education to poor school infrastructure. Issues such as dilapidated school buildings, unavailability of ramps and pathways for learners who are physically challenged, and lack of equipment for learners with other disabilities were raised. Responses revealed that some schools have ablution facilities that were recently built but that are not user-friendly or accommodative of learners who are physically disabled.

Verbal quotes from interviews reflecting poor infrastructure are given below:

FGC2: "We *don't have buildings that might be user-friendly for those with disabilities; somehow, I think it's not going to be an easy thing to implement."*

FGB1: *"I don't see any inclusive education in our schools because when we look at the physical structure of our school, cannot allow a leaner who maybe uses a wheelchair to classes, the way our school is designed, they are not user friendly, no wheelchair for lame people".*

FGD4*: "Some learners are visually impaired; some have albinism and have problem with eyes. Our classrooms are not ready for such learners."*

Lack of infrastructure was also mentioned as a challenge by Principal A during the individual interviews as follows:

PA: "*The school does not have ramps, no ramps for wheelchair bound learner. There are no pathways so that the blind students can be able to walk free. There are no facilities and resources to implement the policy"*

According to Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, the context represents the various environments that influence development (Slomp et al., 2018). The environment in schools was not responsive to being inclusive. The environment did not adhere to the 'Guidelines for Full-service Schools' DBE (2010), which specifies that all classrooms should be accessible for all learners, including those with disabilities; the school should have adequate toilet facilities for learners and staff, including at least one toilet that is accessible for a person using a wheelchair, and that the school should be a safe and secure place for all learners and educators. Hodgson and Khumalo (2016) revealed that poor infrastructural conditions still exist and that many schools do not have enough classrooms and furniture. Appropriate buildings, an environment that is accommodative, and suitable furniture are key to ensuring the success of implementing inclusive education.

Educational system

Participants revealed that the current system applied by the DBE, such as fixed period duration, Annual Teaching Plan (ATP), and teacher-learner ratio, are contributing factors that also make it difficult to implement inclusive education. The findings further revealed that the current system applied by the DBE makes it difficult to implement inclusive education. The following quotes support the above:

FGA1: *"The main challenge is that learners need more time; if we can change the promotion requirements of one size fits all requirements, we need to separate the promotional requirements for less gifted learners."*

FGD4: *"The department provides us with the annual teaching plan which must be completed per term, it has times frames which guide according to time and if you don't finish on time, it becomes a problem. Because of the above, I cannot cater for learners who needs more time to master certain concepts."*

FGC3: *"The other factor to make it possible to implement is to restructure this question of ratio of teachers against learners."*

The same sentiments were shared by participants in the questionnaire provided as follows:

QD3: "*Some learners are too slow to grasp the matter and, therefore, it very difficult to complete the curriculum."*

QA3: *"The time allocated per subject is very little to complete all that is planned. I sometimes stop to make time for learners who experience barriers."*

The educational system and the excerpts above relate to the components of process, context, and time from Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model. Importantly, findings revealed that the rigid period duration disrupts the learning process, and the ATP imposed by the Department of Basic Education as the macro system, was working against implementing inclusive education. Teachers are expected to support learners with diverse educational needs, yet the fixed time limits meaningful engagement. When the 45 minutes elapse, the period is over, and another period starts. Moreover, learners who require extra time for processing information or additional support struggle to keep up with learning. The participants argued that it was difficult to take care of the needs of learners with learning barriers within 45 minutes. This indicates that time, and the lack thereof, is also a direct barrier to inclusive education.

The findings further brought to light that the ATP is also a factor that contributes to the challenges experienced. The ATP is a guide that is given to teachers that provide the content that should be taught in a particular subject and the duration of the topic per term. This means that teachers must work according to the stipulated times within which they must teach so that the curriculum can be completed on time. The participants indicated that working within the timeframes posed a challenge in that some learners needed more time to grasp the concepts. Furthermore, the findings revealed that it became a problem when the curriculum was not completed on time, and as such, learners who needed more attention were neglected.

The teacher-learner ratio was also cited in the findings. The participants emphasised that the model used by the Department of Education in the provision of teachers' posts was contributing negatively to the issues discussed. The department allocated posts based on learner enrolment, and, as a result, the schools could have fewer posts even though they offered all the grades from 8 to 12. The classes became too many for the few educators, resulting in period congestion on the school timetable. The teachers added that with so many periods to be covered on a particular day, it became difficult to give learners with learning barriers the attention they deserved.

Lack of support from the Department of Basic Education.

Participants were asked to describe the support they received from the DBE. The main aim of the question was to obtain an understanding of how DBE supports schools in the implementation of inclusive education through visits by DBST and the provision of resources. Data from the interviews revealed that teachers felt that the DBE did not provide sufficient support for the implementation of inclusive education in the Rakgwadi Circuit. They pointed out that it is the responsibility of the department to provide certain basics to ensure there is effective implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools. Teachers mentioned that continuous in-service training and regular monitoring and support will be a step in the right direction.

The following verbal quotes validate the above information pointed out by educators:

FGB1: "*We are not sure if they ever came because sometimes, even if they come, they may go to the office and not come to teachers."*

The above quote reveals that the teachers have challenged the lack of support from the DBE towards the implementation of inclusive education in Rakgwadi Circuit mainstream secondary schools. It emerged those teachers had never been visited or even seen the DBST at their schools. One of the participants in FGA is an SMT member who confirmed that there was never a visit by DBST. The responses from PB, PD and PC also indicated that they were never visited as quoted below:

PB: *Well, the DBST are you referring to the team that comes to monitor and support the inclusive education or curriculum in general? To the best of my collection, we were never visited by the district team coming to school specifically to come and see whether we are implementing inclusive education."*

A probing question, "Do you think it is necessary that they come?" followed, and this is what the participant said:

PB: *"It's very important to always be visited by the seniors so that maybe they can come and see whether you are doing things accordingly,*

and where there are gaps, they are able to advise accordingly."

It is through district support that the goals of EWP6 would be achieved to address and respond to the diverse needs of all the learners and increasing participation in mainstream secondary school. The above findings on the lack of support on the implementation of inclusive education from the DBE is confirmed by Mfuthwana and Dreyer's (2018) findings that few schools in South Africa have adequate access to support services from the DBST. The lack of oversight by the DBST is contrary to what is outlined in EWP6 strategies for building an inclusive education and training system. The policy emphasises that education support personnel within district support services will be orientated to and trained in their new roles of providing support to all teachers (DoE, 2001). The DBST aims to support teachers and learners so that a full range of learning needs are achieved (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018). Through regular monitoring and support provision of learning strategies and adaptation of support systems, learners and teachers will benefit.

The study revealed that the DBE did not provide sufficient support to schools. According to the researcher, the question was aimed at determining the provision of resources and support visits by the District Based Support Team. The findings revealed a failure by the DBST. The purpose of such visits is to provide a full range of support to School Based Support Teams. According to SIAS, the DBST is a crucial element in establishing an inclusive education support system successfully (DoE, 2014).

Conclusion

The study set out to explore the challenges hindering the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream secondary schools. The findings, using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, revealed how inclusive education is affected by systemic constraints at different levels. The process of implementing inclusive education is affected by dynamic interactions between teachers, learners, policies, and the schooling system. Factors included inadequate teacher training and insufficient support from DBE and parents. Additionally, overcrowded classrooms and rigidly fixed period duration limit teacher-learner interaction, making it difficult for teachers to address diverse learning needs. The expectation for teachers to accommodate learners with different barriers within constrained timeframes further disrupts the learning process, ultimately compromising the quality and sustainability of inclusive education.

The findings revealed that the schools in Rakgwadi Circuit have not implemented inclusive education fully. Much more still needs to be done in the schools to bring the circuit on par with the departmental expectations. This article contributes to the knowledge of how inclusive education can be implemented in such a way that it produces equitable and quality education for all learners in secondary schools in the Rakgwadi Circuit.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been brought forward:

Strengthening Awareness and Advocacy on Inclusive Education

The Department of Basic Education should initiate a robust awareness campaign on inclusive education in collaboration with the district's inclusive education unit and curriculum coordinators. This initiative should ensure that all schools in Rakgwadi Circuit fully understand and implement inclusive education policies. Key aspects of the campaign should include clarification of the expectations set by inclusive education policies, dissemination of information regarding the District Based Support Team, and its role in assisting schools. Additionally, the campaign should emphasise the responsibility of all schools to embrace inclusive practices.

Enhancing Continuous Professional Development for Teachers

To improve the competency of teachers in inclusive education, structured and continuous teacher training programmes should be prioritised. The training should be mandatory for all teachers and include modules or content on curriculum differentiation and adaptation and inclusive classroom management. Teachers should earn points for the training attended, and the points earned should work toward certification. This will serve as motivation for teachers and encourage

their attendance. Furthermore, there should be follow-up visits from departmental officials to assess implementation and provide guidance where necessary.

Provision of Adequate Resources and Infrastructure

The successful implementation of inclusive education is contingent on the availability of relevant resources. The DBE should conduct a comprehensive needs analysis across schools in Rakgwadi Circuit to identify gaps and ensure that resource allocation aligns with the school requirements. This should include providing learner-teacher support materials (LTSM) that are developed for diverse learning needs. Moreover, the department should ensure that the infrastructure of all schools is enabling, such as accessible classrooms and assistive learning technologies. Adequate funding is also key to procuring necessary materials and assistive devices.

Strengthening Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

A dedicated team should be established to systematically monitor the implementation of inclusive education and ensure that resources are effectively utilised. Monitoring should evaluate whether schools meet the expectations outlined in EWP 6 and ensure that equitable resources are distributed and utilised. Monitoring will also ensure that no school is left behind for requisite accountability. It is through monitoring again that challenges encountered by schools can be detected early and solutions be provided. In addition, school leadership should be held accountable for the progress of inclusive education initiatives.

By implementing these recommendations, Rakgwadi Circuit can progress towards fully realising inclusive education, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their barriers to learning, receive a quality education in an equitable and supportive environment.

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