

Chapter # 14

TEACHERS' CHALLENGES NAVIGATING THE PROVISION OF SUPPORT TO LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: MAINSTREAM RURAL SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Implementing support to learners with special needs in South African schools has largely been presented with challenges which increasingly make it difficult for teachers to navigate their provision of support. Thus, the pragmatic realities show that there is a need to identify and combat such challenges. This study investigated challenges experienced by teachers in their attempt to support learners with special needs. The study is underpinned by the social constructivism paradigm. The study used the transformative learning theory. The phenomenological qualitative research approach was employed to explore teachers' challenges in providing support to learners with special needs in mainstream rural schools. Data were collected using focus group interviews, with 36 purposively selected teachers in 6 schools. The collected data was thematically analysed and interpreted using Braun & Clarke methods. The study discovered the following as challenges hindering the provision of support to learners with special needs: lack of competency in managing the diverse learning needs of learners; limited resources; as well as a lack of training in attending to learners' learning needs. The study recommended resource allocation, teacher professional development training, and initiation of collaborative networks, to be in place for the alleviation of the support challenges experienced by teachers.

Keywords: challenges, mainstream schools, special needs, support, teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, and the Education White Paper 6 (South Africa. Department of Education, 2015) view supporting learners' learning needs as a pivotal initiation which should promote equality in the educational setting. Both documents deem it mandatory for all learners to be supported academically regardless of their physical conditions, intellectual capacities, social standards, emotional positions, linguistic capabilities, or other conditions (UNESCO, 1994). Clear measures of support and intervention have been laid out by the Education White Paper 6 (South Africa. Department of Education, 2015), aimed at ensuring that all learners experiencing barriers to learning are educationally supported to the level of the demands of their experienced learning difficulties. Thus, the provision of support to learners with special needs is said to occur at different levels such as the initial screening guided by the learner profile; identification and assessment of barriers to learning; and supporting the identified learning needs, which is guided by the Support Needs Assessment

Form 1 and 2 (South Africa. Department of Education, 2014). The context of the SIAS Policy document considers the need for teachers to be proficient in their ability to possess a conceptual understanding and practical demands of providing support to learners with special needs. However, due to a lack of support in rural schools, teachers are therefore responsible for increasing their knowledge of support needs (Mawila, 2023).

The provision of support to learners with special needs in rural mainstream schools is challenged with frustrations and complaints from teachers, often because of the overpopulated classrooms, which makes it almost impossible to support all learners' learning needs (West & Meier, 2020; Tshangana, Nomtshongwana, & Buka, 2023). On the other hand, a shortage of equipment, teaching aids, and well-suited infrastructure often poses a significant hindrance to teachers in the rural mainstream schooling system (Modikoa Pillay & Shipalana, 2023). In addition, large class sizes have been identified as a hindrance to supporting inclusive education practices (Masana & Kgothule, 2022). Among other contributing factors, mismanagement of disruptive behaviour is often reported as a result of overcrowding (Gagnon, Sylvester, & Marsh, 2021).

Challenges around teachers include limited access to information and training in dealing with learners with special needs (Engelbrecht, 2020). Teachers tend to demonstrate a sense of learned helplessness, which in turn, reduces the conducive learning environment, further limiting levels of possible support towards learners with special education needs (Adewumi, Mosito, & Agosto, 2019). This tends to position learners as referred cases to special schools, or categorised as progressed, all due to their learning needs being unidentified and thereby unsupported (George, 2019). In some cases, they are left to repeat a grade, tempering learners' self-esteem, causing victimisation, and eventually dropping out of school. According to Traya and Lopez (2023), teachers tend to feel threatened by the demands and difficulties that lie with teaching in mainstream education settings, where they tend to doubt their ability to support learners' learning needs accordingly. Moreover, Nseibo, Vergunst, McKenzie, Kelly, Karisa, and Watermeyer (2022) demonstrated such to occur because of a lack of teacher support, training, and preparation.

In mainstream rural settings, learners come from unsupported homes, where parental involvement is absent (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018). Furthermore, learners from low-income raking homes tend to perform poorly in their academic performance, as those raised by their grandparents severely lack academic progress due to the lack of support at home (Owens, 2018). Moreover, some parents in rural settings seldom engage in their children's educational affairs and leave it to the school to carry the entire burden (Stelmach, 2020). In addition, a lack of parental support makes it unbearable for teachers to function (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Despite inclusive education policies embracing values of equality and diversity (South Africa. Department of Education, 2015). Learners with special education needs and those from impoverished households tend to be viewed by teachers and other learners as different (Owens, 2018). Where teachers are unable to comprehend their attitudes as being discriminatory and contradictory towards the right to access education, which is negative (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018).

1.1. Support Needs Challenges in Mainstream Rural Schools

The study focused on rural mainstream schools to develop the understanding of teachers' challenges with the provision of support to learners' learning needs. Support within these areas is proven to be difficult because of the remote location in which schools are based. Rural mainstream schools face unique challenges that negatively affect the quality of learners' learning. Teachers in rural mainstream schools work with limited resources making it increasingly difficult to deliver the curriculum effectively. This then

translates into teachers' inability to support the learning needs of learners with barriers to learning due to a lack of specialized equipment (UNESCO, 2022). Bringing to light the lack of professional development and training opportunities for teachers (Petersson-Bloom, Leifler, & Holmqvist, 2023). According to Du Plessis (2014), learning might be difficult within the rural school context as support even in the form of extracurricular activities would lack profusely. Both teachers and learners experience limited access to professional guidance and support due to scarcity of support services. They were ultimately leading teachers to function in isolation which is detrimental to their mental health (Dempsey & Mestry, 2023). Contextual challenges that rural mainstream schools are confronted with include a lack of adequate facilities and technological resources needed to foster quality learning and learner development (Chang & Kabilan, 2022). Moreover, factors influencing the provision of support to learners with special needs in rural mainstream schools have largely been identified to be policy implementation, lack of funding and lack of implementation capacity (Masana & Kgothule, 2022). Additionally, teachers' complaints tend to center around challenges relating to unsupportive school environments, declining learner well-being, and insufficient collaboration between parents and teachers (Cele, 2023). Nel, Tlale, Engelbrecht, and Nel (2016) together with Madiba and Materechera (2020) further highlighted that the prevailing negative perceptions of teachers exacerbate difficulties in addressing learners' needs effectively. More especially if the above-mentioned challenge prolongs over a long time.

It is important to take into consideration how schools in rural settings are confronted with high levels of unemployment and poverty. As a result, schools in rural settings are unable to accumulate sufficient funding and resources as schools in these contexts fall within the no-fee paying category (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). Thus, in this situation, schools would encounter financial constraints that force teachers to navigate the support by improvised methods, as resource shortage would be a major challenge. Moreover, because of these socioeconomic challenges, parents would often find themselves not affording to support their children by ensuring that they get proper diagnosis (Munje & Mncube, 2018). In such circumstances, learners' learning barriers remain undiagnosed, placing more pressure on teachers who ought to support them in the absence of a professional guide.

Secondly, it is equally important to realise how cultural perceptions and beliefs surrounding disabilities affect how learners with special needs are viewed in rural communities. There tend to be stigmas and held ideologies explaining how learners with related disabilities are looked at and understood. Such that, families or parents would be reluctant to seek professional assistance regarding the experienced barrier within their children (Hoppey, 2016). Explaining how these culturally held attitudes hinder inclusive educational practices as well as collaboration with parents to support learners experiencing learning barriers (Du Plessis, 2014).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study is premised on transformational learning theory by Jack Mezirow (1978). The theory focuses on changes that happen after learning (Hay, 2025). Transformative learning theory emphasizes the need for effective changes in individuals' frames of reference (Fleming, 2022). In this study the transformative learning theory is used to help teachers to navigate support services in rural schools. This may suggest that through the use of the theory teachers' perspectives will be transformed so they can navigate support services to learners who experience barriers to learning. Rodríguez and Barth (2020) argue that the transformative learning theory explores how people evolve their

understanding and worldview through critical reflection. This means that teachers are supposed to reflect on their challenges in supporting learners so they can improve their teaching practices. Uddin (2019) also argues that teachers are the agents of change as they aim to make inclusive education meaningful by using suitable teaching pedagogies. This suggest that teachers can improve on the support they render to learners with special needs if their needs are attended to.

3. METHODOLOGY

According to Creswell (2014), the qualitative research approach is an in-depth and subjective study that investigates people and events in their natural settings. This study used a qualitative research approach, to draw an understanding of teachers' personal experiences in supporting learners learning needs. The paradigm of this research is social constructivism, and through the use and application of this paradigm, subjective knowledge and understanding of teachers' experiences were investigated regarding support within mainstream schools of Mafikeng (Wahyuni, 2012). The study made use of phenomenological design to describe, interpret and make sense of the experiences of respondents about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). This research study made use of focus group interviews, face-to-face, open-ended and unstructured as a data collection strategy to obtain information that would answer the research questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011:245). Data were thematically analyzed using the six steps of Braun and Clark (2014). The study is approved under the ethical number (N W U - 0 0 1 9 0 - 19 - A 2). Braun and Clark's (2019) six steps were used to analyze the data.

4. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

The study has accumulated rich data from over 36 research participants in all 6 schools visited in the rural settings of Mafikeng, in the North West Province, South Africa. However, only a few responses are presented as a result of the restricted number of pages for the article. Focus group interview data shows a lack of teacher competency in catering to the diverse learning needs of learners; limited resources; as well as a lack of thorough teacher training in the development of skills and expertise, around the provision of support to learners with special needs. The results of the study are discussed under the following headings, namely, learner support needs; nature of support administered; and lack of training and resources. The novelty work of the findings below demonstrates how supporting teachers within mainstream rural school settings tends to receive less attention. Further highlighting the existing gap between inclusive education policy and policy implementation within rural school settings.

4.1. Learner Support Needs

Table 1.
Sampled responses on learner support needs.

Research Question: What learning needs do you encounter among learners in your Classroom?
Teacher 1, School A: "They can't read and if they can't read then they can't answer the questions in the examination."
Teacher 2, School B: "They can't cope in class, we have also noticed that they tend to have a low concentration span and are unable to pay attention for a longer time."
Teacher 4, School E: "There are few who have visual problems, and they can't see, in that regard, they tend to all want to sit at the front row. They often come from abusive families, in that way, if the learners already have barriers to learning it worsens the situation."
Teacher 4, School D: "Cognitive needs, for example processing new information and thinking Independently."
Teacher 3, School F: "Other learners do not have parental support, as means of assistance or internet provision to complete projects, and to some extent, it is because other learners are in situations of child-headed families, where now they assume the responsibilities of caring for the younger ones."

The displayed shows how teachers are confronted with the complexities of learning barriers which they lack the basic skills to support. Furthermore, it showed that they have not been exposed to any formal training, or preparation to be in the position of administering care and support to the learning needs of learners with special education needs. All of this alludes to the ineffectiveness of the District Based Support Team (DBST) in matters relating to support services rendered to schools. Teachers are concerned about the existing lack of the resources required to include, accommodate, and support the diverse learning needs of learners.

The posed findings resonate with that of (Engelbrecht, 2020) on issues pertaining to the helplessness there is in inclusive education practices due lack of pedagogical knowledge and teacher training thereof in dealing with learners with special needs.

Based on the above responses, factors related to the low socio-economic status of the learners and issues around them being in child-headed households contribute to teachers not knowing whether learners in question have barriers to learning, or if such barriers to learning are rather perpetuated by factors themselves. Furthermore, learners are reported to be lacking in their reading and writing abilities, where quite a substantial number have been observed to show signs of low concentration span. It is therefore reported that such learners tend to fall victim to bullying, "They are often ridiculed in class as a result of their barriers to learning or struggle", said teacher 5 of school D.

4.2. Nature of Support Administered

Table 2.
Sampled responses on the nature of support administered.

Research Question: In what ways do you include (administer care and support) learners with special needs in your classroom?
Teacher 3, School A: "Not having the skills to administer care and support to learners with special learning needs, I find myself helpless."
Teacher 2, School B: "I am not trained to perform the skills of a special needs education teacher and I am not have being trained for that."
Teacher 4, School E: "We report special needs cases to the Department of Education, but often it does not solve the problem."
Teacher 5, School C: "For those who cannot see properly during examinations we prepare A3 question papers for them to see."
Teacher 4, School D: "It is difficult to include them with limited resources, we often want to include them, but the absence of the resources becomes the problem."

Teachers attested to the fact that their support methods may have not been as successful and effective as anticipated. However, some maintained to have observed their methods yielding better results, while on the other hand, other teachers reported to have had no other methods to utilise. It was rather interesting to observe teachers' resilience despite their functioning in isolation, without prior training or preparation, and with limited resources. Even with the intervention strategies laid out, teachers admitted that their strategies may have not always been effective in successfully supporting the existing learning needs in their schools.

This reveals how teachers are confronted with extreme difficulties while attempting to support learners' learning needs. Where despite the guidelines and policies formulated, clear practical directions to affect such directives are not adequately relayed. Even when teachers are to assume the role of an interventionalist in their classrooms as asserted by Buli-Holmberg and Jeyaprabhan (2016). It remains that teachers are to be thoroughly trained and supported on how to actualise the already existing Support policy documents that should guide the process of support in their classrooms.

Rural schools struggle to access customised educational materials necessary to cater to the learning demands of learners' learning needs. Lack of such resources disadvantages the learning process, while burdening teachers with time-consuming activities e.g., creating the resources themselves (Donohue & Bornman, 2018). Such matters exacerbate teachers' challenges, making it increasingly difficult for them to navigate support to learners with special needs. It is however important to consider how constant teacher improvisation due to a lack of resources may likely lead to a decline in teacher morale (Madiba & Materechera, 2020). Eventually resulting in less individualised support for learners with specific learning needs (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). With that said, more sustainable solutions regarding the matter need to be attended to with practical and tangible intervention measures. Such as Government and policy support structures advocating for increased funding and provision of customised educational materials and infrastructure development in rural schools.

4.3. Lack of Training and Resources

Table 3.
Sampled responses on Lack of training and resources.

Research Question: What learning needs do you encounter among learners in your Classroom?
<i>Teacher 2, School B: "Teachers need comprehensive training about inclusive education."</i>
<i>Teacher 5, School C: "There is a need for thorough training sessions from the department of education, instead of just dumping us with the responsibilities and not teaching us on how to deal with it."</i>
<i>Teacher 4, School D: "I need to be taught how to care for and support learners' learning needs, especially those with learning disabilities. As a teacher, I am not capable of knowing one hundred per cent if learners have barriers to learning or not."</i>

Lack of training and the unavailability of resources posed a threat. The fact that 30 teacher participants reported to have not received training of any kind on how to support learners with special education needs. The above responses depict the strain and number of difficulties under which both teachers and learners are functioning. It further appears as though the participants lack a basic understanding of their duties relating to supporting learners' diverse learning needs, especially those with special needs.

The above results are in harmony with those of Hoppey (2016) as well as Nseibo et al. (2022), who discovered a prevalence of inadequate teacher preparation and training. Furthermore, the study conducted by Engelbrecht and Muthukrishna (2019) demonstrated how South African teachers within rural mainstream settings face significant challenges in the process of supporting learners with special needs. Both Engelbrecht and Muthukrishna (2019) and Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel, N, and Tlale (2015) encountered a lack of teacher training and lack of ongoing professional development of teachers have been one of the determinants leading to teacher challenges. Thus, according to Makoelle and Burmistrova (2020), professional development training programs would have to be tailored for mainstream schoolteachers within rural settings. With a clear focus on effective teaching strategies for special needs learners.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

For learners with special needs to be adequately supported, measures would need to be taken to ensure that there are infrastructure improvements where individual learners' needs may be attended to. This is where sensory-friendly school environments would be created and make accessible special education material such as communication devices and boards, audiobooks, large print boards, pencil grips etc.

Teachers could focus on developing individualized and tailored educational plans which will inform their instructional methods in the process of teaching and learning (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). This way teachers can be prompted to differentiate their lessons to ensure that teaching and learning is being individualized to each learner's learning needs. The challenge around lack of training and resources may be resolved through the use of teacher professional development programs, such as workshops and ongoing training courses around pressing issues relating to support for learners with diverse educational learning needs (Petersson-Bloom, et al., 2023). Furthermore, School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) may be given quarterly comprehensive training and equipped on the high demands and complexities of handling the educational needs of learners with special needs. Moreover, teachers would need to undergo practical training where related special education methodologies and pedagogies are initiated per school following the educational needs experienced.

Additionally, mentee-mentorship programs can be established where inexperienced teachers can source support from experienced teachers in special needs education. School management in collaboration with the school governing bodies could work on plans with actionable implementation plans on securing funding from educational NGO's, government departments and other donors. Further looking into fundraising opportunities within their communities (Cele, 2023). The essence of collaboration between different structures, systems and role-players in schools would need to be realized and strengthened for support to be affected.

Teachers may employ strategies that may assist them navigate their day-to-day challenges. Where for instance they may enhance and sharpen their knowledge of how to apply methods of support at their schools (Richards, 2016). This can be done through reading appropriate materials and engaging with related textbooks and literature on Special Education Needs. The impact can result in peer learning and training which when applied would foster collaboration among teachers.

6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The major insights presented in the study were shown to be teachers' lack of basic skills to support learners' learning skills to supporting learners' learning; poor supporting structures from the Department of Education; impractical policy guidelines and implementation especially within the context of rural mainstream schools; and lastly, lack of training and unavailability of resources. The gap or limitation leading to the need for future research is the impact of professional development and training programs in the rural mainstream school context. In the current research study, lack of teacher training has been overly emphasised, however, the explanation of such results is underexplained. Thus, future research will examine the impact of professional development and training programs on rural mainstream teachers' ability to support learners with special needs. The research would employ mixed research methods to make room for a broader and holistic understanding of the research problem. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods would provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact. Quantitative methods could measure changes in teachers' knowledge, skills, and students' outcomes, while qualitative methods could capture teachers' experiences, perceptions, and challenges.

7. CONCLUSION

From the results of the study, it is evident that teachers in rural mainstream schools want to support learners with special needs. However, it is also evident that teachers are burdened and left to function in isolation. Making it greatly difficult to navigate their way in fully supporting learners' learning needs. A major concern is that teachers have not been adequately trained to navigate the demands that comes with supporting complex learning needs within inclusive education practices. The implications, therefore, show this to have considerably hindered teachers from meeting the inclusive education demands. The overall predicament ultimately places the learners in a disadvantaged position, due to lack of educational support. So long as responsible structures and stakeholders at the higher level of the education system do not engage collaboratively in resolving the existing challenges with practical and realistic solutions, teachers' frustrations will continue which will continue to have a negative effect on learners.

This research could therefore have a practical impact on bringing to light an understanding of the existing challenges that teachers are faced with in rural mainstream schools while supporting learners with special needs. Where in policy, the study's recommendation may bring about a practical guiding application on how support structures may assist teachers in navigating support amidst the challenges.

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