

Chapter # 38

EXPLORING THE SUPPORT NEEDS OF TEACHERS IN FULL-SERVICE SCHOOLS TO PROMOTE INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

Supporting teachers in full-service schools (FSSs) is important in the South African education system as it enhances education for sustainable development. Although teachers have undergone pre-service and in-service training as part of support in inclusive education, it is apparent that they do not receive adequate support to teach in inclusive classrooms. Entrenched within the qualitative approach and the interpretivism paradigm, the study allowed teachers to construct reality in terms of their support needs. 12 participants from two full-service schools in the North-West Province were purposively sampled. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and were thematically analysed. The findings indicate that continuous practical training is their key need for support. Availability of the teaching and learning resources, participation in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and intentional support by the support structures were highlighted as other support needs of teachers in full-service schools. In addition, adequate collaboration with the key learning support stakeholders was highlighted as a support need in inclusive education settings. It is recommended that the School Management Teams (SMTs), School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs), and District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) should ensure that teachers are trained theoretically and practically on a continuous basis to maintain inclusive pedagogies.

Keywords: full-service school, inclusion, instructional pedagogies, support needs, support services, teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Globally, Inclusive Education (IE) was initiated as a result of the worldwide conference on Special Education that was held in Salamanca in 1994. The Salamanca conference proposed that all educational systems worldwide should be inclusive of varied learner diversity (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). In essence, IE should provide equal educational opportunities for all learners, regardless of their inabilities, abilities, backgrounds, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Internationally, IE policies regard a teacher as the key and primary stakeholder in implementing inclusion (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Ayaya, Makoelle, & Van der Merwe, 2020; Chow, 2023). Like other countries, South Africa, as a signatory of the Salamanca statement and framework on special needs education (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit, & Van De Venter, 2016), agreed to the call to adopt an inclusive education system.

In South Africa, the Education White Paper 6 on special needs education (Department of Education [DoE], 2001) was specifically promulgated to guide the implementation of an inclusive education system. It was in this inclusive policy that the South African Education system was divided into three categories of schools namely, ordinary or mainstream schools, Full-service schools (FSSs) also known as inclusive schools, and Special Schools as Resource Centres (SSRCs) as a strategy of ensuring inclusion in schools (DoE, 2001).

This means teachers teaching at all types of schools should embrace inclusive practices in their instructional pedagogy. According to UNESCO (1994), inclusive schools should offer quality education for all learners, including learners with disabilities, thereby enhancing education for sustainable development. However, for teachers to fully embrace inclusive education practices, their support needs should be prioritised.

International and national inclusive policies emphasise the need for teachers to be supported. For example, the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) highlighted that teachers should be supported in inclusive educational settings. South African Education White Paper 6 stipulates that teachers should be supported to enhance the implementation of inclusive education practices (DoE, 2010). White Paper 6 called for the establishment of Support structures such as School-Based Support Teams (SBST) and District-Based Support Teams (DBST) to provide support to teachers and learners in South Africa (DoE, 2001; Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). In addition, the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy guideline further emphasised the provision of support to teachers as an enabler of inclusive pedagogies within classrooms (DBE, 2014). However, it seems the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools are still not prioritised. This is because the literature highlights that teachers in South Africa are still challenged to foster and maintain inclusive pedagogies (Mpu & Adu, 2021).

Teacher support is significant in the teaching profession across the world. Generally, teachers require support as they navigate the profession (Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018) and implement various educational policies. Department of Education (1997) in the Report of the National Commission on Special Needs Education and Training (NCSNET) postulates “support” as an enabling mechanisms that ensure responsiveness in addressing the needs of learners and teachers within an inclusive education system. The report outlines the enabling mechanisms to include Education Support Services (ESS), ranging from teaching and learning support interventions, social support interventions, parental support, various forms of therapeutic support, teacher training and support, and curriculum development, to name a few. In their study, Nkambule and Amsterdam (2018) pointed out that teacher support includes activities such as mentoring, coaching and professional development. Cambridge Online Dictionary (2022) defines a “need” as a thing an individual must have to have a satisfying life. This means that a need is a necessity or a must-have. Thus, in the context of this study, support needs are defined as the interventions, activities within and outside the school environment that teachers require to enable them to thrive in inclusive schools. Thus, the availability of required support may assist teachers in adopting inclusive instructional strategies that would improve the educational outcomes of the learners.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

Supporting teachers is important to enhance the quality of instruction, improve educational outcomes, and ensure that teachers are well-prepared to manage their professional responsibilities. Teachers who receive continuous professional development training and are provided with sufficient teaching and learning resources have high levels of self-efficacy in teaching inclusive classrooms (Van Staden-Payne & Nel, 2023; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Furthermore, teachers need support systems and structures that provide them with opportunities to join Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and mentorship opportunities so they can teach in inclusive classrooms with confidence (Duncan, Punch, & Croce, 2021). Yu and Chao (2022) maintained that continuous involvement in professional learning communities encourages

knowledge sharing and the exchange of ideas in a safe environment. For example, some teachers wish to be professionally trained so that they can be well-equipped to deal with the social skills of learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and learn appropriate skills on when and how to intervene (Chow, Bruin, & Sharma, 2024). This implies that the professional training of teachers in inclusive schools should be critically considered to enhance their efficacy in performing their allocated duties. Teachers may also benefit more if they get more human resources, such as teaching assistants. Chow et al. (2024) argue that the support from teaching assistants would relieve teachers and grant them an opportunity to deliver the curriculum in such a way that caters to and accommodates all learners in the classroom.

It is reported that in inclusive schools where support structures and school leadership and management provide teachers with the necessary support, maintaining inclusive pedagogy becomes easier to uphold (Duncan et al. 2021). Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) affirmed that the active involvement of leadership in inclusive schools enhances equity and provides quality education for all learners. Hence, the school leadership and management should ensure that appropriate training and teaching resources are available for teachers to be competent in inclusive classrooms (Dickson, 2014). Nel, Engelbrecht, Nel, and Tlale (2014) further reported that collaboration that includes support structures is paramount in implementing inclusive education practices. However, the literature indicates that the support structures are not effective in their support role (Nel, Tlale, Engelbrecht, & Nel 2016). Thus, Chow (2023) argued that it can be challenging and daunting to teach in an inclusive education setting for teachers who do not have support.

3. CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Teaching in inclusive classrooms can be overwhelming and stressful at times. An inclusive classroom means that all the learners should be fully engaged to receive the quality education that would be achieved through full participation in classroom activities (Ngadni, Singh, Ahmad, & Baharudin, 2023). The conditions for teaching and learning, such as huge workloads, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, lack of training, and time constraints (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019), hinder the effective implementation of inclusive pedagogies needed in inclusive classrooms. As the classrooms become more diverse, teachers face increased challenges in managing different learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and special educational needs. In addition to the challenges highlighted earlier, a lack of collaboration among and between stakeholders in the implementation of inclusion is reported by various scholars (Ayaya et al., 2020; Chow et al, 2023). Van Staden-Payne and Nel (2023) reiterated that inadequate training of teachers, the ineffective functioning of the support structures, the incompetence of the school management team, lack of parental involvement, and inadequate resources contribute to ineffective instructional pedagogy in inclusive schools. In her study, Engelbrecht (2020) pointed out the lack of appropriate infrastructure and sufficient funding as some of the challenges experienced in implementing inclusive teaching practices. Thus, as a result of the outlined challenges, teachers working in inclusive schools experience stress and burnout, especially those who are not specialists in the field of special educational needs (Candeias, Galindo, Calisto, Borralho, & Reschke, 2021). The literature further indicates that teachers experience higher levels of stress (Gray, Wilcox, & Nordstokke, 2017; Räsänen, Pietarinen, Soini, Väisänen, & Pyhältö, 2022) due to the varied challenges that they face in the profession, especially those who are working in inclusive schools. We, therefore, argue that a snapshot of these challenges may shed light on the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools.

4. STUDY OBJECTIVE

This study sought to explore the support needs of teachers in Full-Service Schools to promote inclusion. To successfully achieve this objective, this study was guided by this research question: What are the support needs of teachers teaching in full-service schools in South Africa?

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The transformative learning (TL) theory that was developed by Mezirow (1978) was used as a theoretical framework for this study. Mezirow defined TL as ‘learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change’ (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58-59). As a framework, the transformative learning theory explores how people evolve their understanding and worldview (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020) through critical reflection and new information that they have received. In this study, the transformative learning theory was used to explore the challenges, and the support needs of teachers in full-service schools. This means teachers’ experiences can be used as a benchmark to shape and transform practice through the realisation of their support needs. Thus, transformative learning involves epistemological change (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020) where teachers examine and reflect on their support needs.

6. METHODOLOGY

Embedded in the interpretivism paradigm, the study sought to explore the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. Interpretivist researchers emphasise that the world could be best understood through first-hand experience of the insiders’ perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) also argue that with interpretivism, researchers can benefit from getting in-depth meanings from the participants. A qualitative research approach was used in this study to gain insight into the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. Furthermore, this research approach allowed the investigation of the phenomena in a real-world setting (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021), which produced in-depth knowledge of the support needs of teachers in inclusive schools. Purposive sampling, which aims to identify participants with the same experiences as the central phenomena of the study (Patton, 2015; Thorne, 2016), was used to recruit 12 participants from two full-service schools in the North West province. This sampling procedure allowed for the identification of participants who contributed to the shared understanding of the required support needs of teachers in the FFS. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) argue that semi-structured interviews permit interview questions to be focused to further enhance understanding of phenomena. Semi-structured interviews were the preferred data collection method as the aim of this study was to better understand teachers’ support needs. Braun and Clarke’s (2014) six-step thematic data analysis method was used to analyse data. Ethical approval to carry out this study was granted with the ethical approval number (N W U - 0 0 4 1 3 - 2 3 - A 2), and the adherence to respect for participants, anonymity, and confidentiality was safeguarded.

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented and discussed in this section. Six main themes that emerged during the data analysis process are outlined. Quotations and excerpts representing each theme are presented. Pseudonyms are used to safeguard the identity of the teachers. The six themes that emerged in this study included the teachers' understanding of support needs, continuous practical in-service training, availability of teaching and learning resources, adequate collaboration with the key learning support stakeholders, intentional support by the support structures, and participation in Professional Learning Communities.

7.1. Teachers' Understanding of Support Needs

Teachers showed an understanding of support needs based on their experiences of teaching in inclusive schools. This is evidenced in the excerpt below:

Support needs include a lot of things. As teachers who are working in inclusive schools, we should get support from the district office. (Pheliwe)

We work with learners with diverse needs, we sometimes feel overwhelmed. We need some therapeutic support. Some students drain us emotionally. At times, we do not know what to do with some learners who are in our classrooms. We need holistic support. We should also be trained regularly. (Zakhele)

It is evident from the participants' responses that they understand their support needs. Precious was able to elaborate on support needs as she said:

The Department of Education is not considering our holistic well-being. They just want us to work under so much pressure, to meet deadlines, but they are not giving us support. They should empower us through training. (Precious)

This finding indicates teachers' understanding of their support needs, which includes the need for holistic support from the support structures and the need to be trained on how to deal with learners with diverse needs. These findings of the study resonate with the definition provided by the DoE (1997) Report of the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET), which outlined support as the enabling mechanisms, including teacher training and support. The enabling mechanisms enhance the addressing of learners' and teachers' needs within the inclusive education system. In narrating their support needs, teachers conformed to the proposition of transformative learning theory, which allows people to understand what is happening around them through critical reflection of their practice (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020).

7.2. Continuous Practical Teacher Training

Teachers emphasised the need for continuous teacher training as it is key and may assist them in effectively teaching and supporting the learners in the diverse classrooms. This is evident in the following excerpt:

Yes, there is training provided in our school, which is important in our profession and for our school and learners, but the training is seldom, as a result, we do not feel supported enough. The training is mostly theoretical, I think the department and the support structures can do more. (Zakhele)

Siyanda also echoed the same sentiments by indicating the following:

Training is provided by the departmental education specialists, but you know the training is not enough. Last year, when I went for training, it was for two days only, and it focused on supporting learners with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder... you see, this training is needed, but we were not trained on how to complete the learning support referral form after identifying these learners. I wish the training could be more frequent and more practical. (Siyanda)

From the above findings, teachers propose continuous teacher training as their support need. They further indicated that the training should be as practical as possible. This means that teachers are emphasising that the training should not be an occasional, once-off intervention but rather should be as frequent as possible. In addition, the continuous training should align with the needs of teachers and strategies on how teachers can ensure that their classrooms are inclusive. This support for continuous training is congruent with the findings reported by Van Staden-Payne and Nel (2023), who reported that the training of teachers in inclusive schools is inadequate. This finding further aligns with Chow et al. (2023) views who reported that continuous teacher training is perceived by most teachers as the support needed within inclusive education settings. However, the literature is silent regarding the practical component of the training provided.

7.3. Availability of Teaching and Learning Resources

Teachers mentioned the need for teaching and learning resources for the learners to fully benefit from their learning experiences, as expressed by Sibusiso and Bulelwa in the excerpts below:

Resources are key. As a teacher, I can do my best, but when the learner does not have an assistive device, it means they may not access learning fully. So, it is a problem. At least the school management and the DBST should prioritise the assistive devices for the learners (Sibusiso).

At my school, we have many learners in the foundation phase, but there are no teaching assistants. I wish we could have these assistants so that they can assist us in supporting the learners with barriers to learning. You know if you have many learners in your classroom without a teacher assistant, you struggle to give attention to learners who may need support (Bulelwa).

The above findings depict that teachers recommend prioritising the availability of teaching and learning resources to improve instructional pedagogies. This finding further indicates that the availability of teaching and learning resources should not be for the benefit of teachers only but should be available for the benefit of learners as well. This could ensure and promote access to quality learning and improve educational outcomes. This finding corresponds with the findings by Adewumi and Mosito (2019) and Engelbrecht (2020), who reported that teachers need teaching and learning resources that may enhance inclusion. The provision of teaching and learning resources may allow teachers to be creative and conform to inclusive teaching practices.

7.4. Adequate Collaboration with Key Learning Support Stakeholders

Teachers mentioned that they are collaborating, but they feel that the collaboration is inadequate, and it is not always timely. See quote below from Precious:

Collaboration is there... I collaborate with other teachers; I involve learners, but parents are not always available for interventions. My challenge is that the collaboration does not involve other key stakeholders like parents. (Precious)

In addition, Pheliwe echoed similar sentiments by indicating the following:

Stakeholders do not always respond to intervention requests promptly. Yes, they respond, but sometimes we wait the whole year waiting for the intervention from the education specialists working at the district office. (Pheliwe)

The finding above indicates that there is collaboration between teachers, learners, and district officials. However, parents as partners in education are often not available for the interventions. In addition, there are delays in attending to the interventions by the district officials. Therefore, the collaborative partnership as a cornerstone of inclusive instructional pedagogies is inadequate. This finding highlights the unsatisfactory collaborative partnerships between teachers, parents, and district officials, which sometimes delay support provision. This makes it imperative for the support structures to support teachers in ensuring that all key stakeholders play their effective role in ensuring inclusive pedagogies in schools. This finding corroborates the view of Adewumi and Mosito (2019), who opined that strong and effective collaboration among teachers, parents, and other key stakeholders should be encouraged in the implementation of inclusive practices. Similarly, Nel et al. (2014) reported that collaboration that includes support structures is paramount in implementing inclusive education practices.

7.5. Intentional Support by the Support Structures

Teachers indicated that their classroom would display inclusivity if the support structures were intentional about ensuring inclusivity and actively involved in supporting them to effectively practice inclusive pedagogies. These support structures include members of the SMT and SBST, such as principal and departmental heads. Bulelwa expressed the concern in the following manner:

Our SMTs, I mean my head of department, is not supporting properly to ensure inclusivity in the classroom. They allocate many learners to one classroom, yet they know that we have to prioritise learner engagement in our classes. My view is to be inclusive, I need to actively engage all learners, but how do I do it if there are 65 learners in my class? You see, it becomes challenging. I feel they should be considerate and reduce the number of learners they allocate to us. (Bulelwa)

Moreover, Zakhele echoed his sentiments using the below excerpts:

In my school, the principal talks about inclusivity but does not support us enough. At least every quarter, she could check with us if we need any training support so that she can communicate with the district about our training needs. We struggle alone in diverse classrooms. (Zakhele)

These findings indicate that SMTs are aware that classrooms should be inclusive, but they are not intentional in supporting the teachers. Literature highlighted the active involvement of the management and leadership of the school to be effective in the

implementation of inclusive education practices. For example, Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) viewed the active involvement of leadership in inclusive schools as enhancing equity and providing quality education for all learners. Furthermore, Lambrecht, Lenkeit, Hartmann, Ehlert, Knigge, and Spörer (2022) also reported that the active involvement of school leadership in the implementation of inclusive education is crucial in inclusive schools. Consequently, these findings call for the intentional and active involvement of the relevant support structures in an inclusive education system.

7.6. Participation In Professional Learning Communities

Teachers mentioned that they wish to participate in professional learning communities continuously to enhance inclusive pedagogies and collaboration with other teachers. This was mentioned by Sibusiso as follows:

You know there are professional learning communities within my subdistrict. It is good, but it was going to be beneficial if this could be done as a formal intervention, which also has input from experts. The PLC should be used as a mandatory continuous professional development programme and not a voluntary once-off initiative. This will encourage continuous collaboration and sharing of best practices. (Sibusiso)

The above findings indicate that professional learning community initiatives are not mandatory. Therefore, making them mandatory may enhance collaboration and the sharing of best practices. This is because PLCs are excellent at creating inclusive practices where teachers can discuss and share best practices in enforcing inclusive pedagogies. This finding corroborates the findings reported by Duncan et al. (2021), who maintained that involvement in professional learning communities is proven to be effective when it is sustained. It can further improve and support teachers' inclusive education capacity building. Similarly, Yu and Chao (2022) reported that continuous involvement in professional learning communities encourages knowledge sharing and exchange in a safe environment.

8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research could focus on the efficacy of continuous practical, formal, and informal training and the adequate collaboration practices that are highlighted as support needs in this study. The focus could also be expanded by including the voices of support structures, especially the SBST and the DBST, in identifying the support needs of teachers in full-service schools based on their involvement in supporting teachers.

9. CONCLUSION

The study explored the support needs of teachers in full-service schools, which is critical for enhancing education for sustainable development. The literature highlighted the significance of the support needs of teachers in inclusive classrooms. This study confirms that teachers are not receiving enough support to teach in inclusive classrooms. The findings indicate that the teachers in full-service schools require continuous practical professional development interventions. Therefore, it becomes evident that teachers recognise the value of embracing lifelong learning through continuous professional development initiatives. This can help in enhancing their well-being and allowing them to thrive in full-service

schools. Availability of teaching and learning resources, intentional support by the support structures, adequate collaboration with the key learning support stakeholders, and participation in the PLCs were also highlighted as the support needs of teachers in full-service schools. The teachers narrated their support needs through reflecting about their current practices and experiences, which aligns with the key assumptions of transformative learning theory. It is recommended that the SMTs, SBSTs, and DBSTs should ensure that teachers are trained continuously on theoretical and practical strategies that enhance inclusive teaching practices. Furthermore, support structures should be intentional in providing support to teachers. The findings of this study can be used by the Department of Education's capacity-building personnel and support structures to develop support programmes that are continuous and sustainable for supporting teachers in full-service schools. These findings should not be generalised because this qualitative study was undertaken in two full-service schools in the North West province of South Africa.

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