

The Effectiveness of the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Mainstream Schools: A South African Perspective

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Abstract

The onset of the South African democratic government in 1994 brought remarkable changes in the entire education due to the introduction of an inclusive education system. This study argues that although the implementation of inclusive education is currently mandatory, the world over its effectiveness in South Africa is not yet established. The study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing inclusive education in their mainstream schools. The study used a phenomenological qualitative research design. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Ten (10) teachers from five (5) mainstream secondary schools were purposively selected based on their years of teaching experience, knowledge about inclusive education, and relevant qualifications. The data gathered through interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The analysed data came up with three themes: 1) Inclusive education policy implementation, 2) Inclusive teaching and learning strategies, and 3) Intervention by the Department of Education. Findings point to teachers' lack of self-efficacy, inadequate support from district-based support teams, and challenges in supporting learners with disabilities. The study recommends in-service training and ongoing professional development for all mainstream teachers, provision of adequate resources, equipment, and assistive devices for learners with disabilities, and inclusive education policy implementation. This study contributes to knowledge of the challenges faced by teachers in their attempts to implement

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inclusive education and to support learners with and without disabilities in mainstream schools.

Keywords: *Effectiveness, Implementation, Inclusive education policy, Mainstream schools*

1. Introduction

The fundamental principle of inclusive education is that all learners should learn together, regardless of their difficulties and differences. Inclusive education has a common aim of providing learners with adequate resources and support according to their diverse needs (Moonsamy et al. 2024). Despite the introduction of the Education White Paper 6 (2001) in South Africa, many schools are still facing challenges with the implementation of inclusive education (Moonsamy et al. 2024). Similar findings are indicated by Maguvhe (2024), who asserted that since the publication of the Education White Paper 6 in 2001, there have been several initiatives to facilitate the effective implementation of an inclusive education system in most mainstream primary and secondary schools through the establishment of institution-level support teams.

Inclusive education has an objective to allow regular learners and learners with special educational needs to be placed together in mainstream classes; to be taught and instructed by mainstream teachers, creating an environment that allows all children access to education (Akinsola & Chireshe 2016). Inclusion involves creating an environment that allows all students to feel supported emotionally, while being given the appropriate accommodations to learn and to be respected and appreciated for all their personal differences (Addy et al. 2023). Inclusive education implies flexible, accessible curriculum and learning support strategies, open schools that welcome a diversity of learners and acceptance of the differences between people (Maguvhe, 2024).

Section 12 of the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) requires that education must be provided for learners with special educational needs (SEN) in ordinary or mainstream public schools. Adequate and relevant support services should be provided for all learners and all reasonable measures should be taken in ensuring that physical facilities in mainstream schools are accessible to all learners. In terms

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of the Department of Basic Education's inclusive education policy, set out in Education White Paper 6, learners who are supposed to be taught in mainstream schools are those who are moderately disabled (Khumalo & Hodgson, 2015). Full-service schools are, on the other hand, considered specially-adapted mainstream schools, and special schools are exclusively for learners with severe disabilities (Khumalo & Hodgson, 2015).

The study conducted by Malahlela (2024) on inclusive education in South Africa has revealed that teachers perceive the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools as being ineffective because their mindsets are still on the previous education system. It was also reported that teachers feel they lack the necessary knowledge and personal efficacy to develop appropriate curricula and plan effectively for inclusive education (Singogo & Muzata, 2023). It was further reported (Nembambula et al. 2023) that many of the in-service development programmes, which were intended to promote inclusive education, have proven both inadequate and inappropriate, resulting in negative feelings towards the implementation of inclusive education. Nembambula, et al. (2023) further state that, although many of South Africa's higher education institutions have already made the necessary changes towards the implementation of inclusive education and have incorporated inclusive theory and practice into their curricula for preservice training programmes for teachers, the said programmes have been perceived as being less effective.

2. The revision of the specialty literature

2.1 Definition of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education involves enhancing education systems to better embrace and support all learners (UNESCO, 2017). Madhesh (2023) asserts that inclusive education is a recent trend that numerous international organizations focused on the education of individuals with disabilities aim to advance in various educational systems worldwide. The goal of inclusive education is to meet diverse needs, tackle obstacles that hinder learning, promote the removal of these barriers, and ensure that education is free from discrimination (Majoko, Febana, Soni & Mkra, 2018). In essence, there is no single definition of inclusive education because of the overlapping and confusing use of terms like "integration," "mainstreaming," and "placement," along with differences in terminology between countries

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and educational systems (Madhesh, 2023). Inclusion involves a comprehensive change in school systems, cultures, and practices to meet the diverse needs of all students, acknowledging that every individual, regardless of disability or other identity, deserves support (Jodl & Bian, 2023).

2.2 Current status – the effectiveness of inclusive education

Although inclusion in education is globally recognized as a vision that supports the right to education for all children, regardless of their background, most national laws focus on inclusive education specifically for children with disabilities. UNESCO (2017) reports that only five countries—Chile, Italy, Luxembourg, Paraguay, and Portugal—have formally established inclusive education as a framework for meeting the needs of all children. Additionally, only 16 countries make broad references to "inclusive education" in their general education legislation (Jodl & Bian, 2023). A Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) has revealed that achieving the ideal of full inclusion involves challenges and conflicts. Transitioning from our current state to a system that meets the needs of all learners, including those with significant disabilities, is a complex task.

The Education 2030 Framework for Action and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 4.2 recently urged countries to ensure access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education for all children. The minimum recommendation for meeting SDG Target 4.2 is to provide at least one year of free and compulsory quality pre-primary education in every country (UNESCO, 2021).

Literature (Andrews, Walton, & Osman, 2021) confirms that certain South African schools still view differences as challenges. Rather than adopting inclusive teaching methods, they focus on seeking alternative educational solutions. The Inclusive Teaching and Learning Guidelines (SA DBE, 2010, cited in Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022) emphasize that teachers need to be familiar with the characteristics of different disabilities, challenges, and conditions, understand how these affect learning, and implement suitable educational strategies in response.

2.3 Theory undergirding the study

The theoretical framework for the current study draws from Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1994), which emphasises the

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interaction between the individual's development and the systems within a broader social context (i.e., the environment). The systems within the broader context include the microsystem (the family, the school or peer group), the mesosystem (relationships that develop and exist between the microsystems), the exosystem (an environment in which the learner is not a direct and active participant) and the macrosystem (the attitudes, beliefs, values and ideologies inherent in the system of a particular society and culture) (Landsberg et al. 2005). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model in this study serves as a tool to guide the implementation of inclusive education, as perceived by teachers in mainstream schools, who are, in turn, also directly or indirectly being influenced by the broader umbrella, the Department of Education, which is the macrosystem.

The effective implementation of inclusive education as revealed by the findings of the current study, confirms the theory of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model by revealing the teachers' enthusiasm at school (the microsystems level) to apply various inclusive teaching strategies during their interaction with the diverse learners, which, according to this model, is highly commendable. The teachers' determination or passion for the implementation of inclusive education, which was revealed by the findings of the current study, concurs with the obligations of the current education system or the present time requirements to implement inclusive education, which highlights the chronosystem level of the model. The time frames or the chronosystem compels teachers to execute or practice inclusive education teaching and learning strategies, which are embedded in the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (Department of Basic Education, 2018). While the study generally revealed that the implementation of inclusive education was perceived positively, it also emerged that some teachers perceived it as being less effective. The current study revealed that teachers in selected mainstream schools had inadequate knowledge on inclusive education.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Goal of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' opinions on the effectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools. The study, therefore, sought to answer the

following question: How effective is the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools?

3.2 Study setting

The study was conducted in mainstream schools around Polokwane in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province. This is one of the nine (9) provinces of South Africa, covering a larger area of the Bushveld region of South Africa. Mainstream schools in this District accommodate diverse learners, ranging from those living with mild to moderate disabilities and the typical learners who do not have disabilities.

3.3 Research design

The present study employed a qualitative interpretive approach and design. The qualitative research approach is a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning whereby the researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experiences (Muzari et al., 2022). The researchers found a qualitative approach to be more suitable for the study to delve into the teachers' experiences, attitudes, and emotions on the effectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education and the challenges they experience in inclusive education settings. Semi-structured interviews were used to yield more information, thus offering an informal platform and opportunities that are more open for both the researchers and the participants, to engage in a discussion (Opara et al. 2023). The in-depth semi-structured interviews yielded rich and valuable information from the purposively sampled teachers through the scheduled open-ended questions.

3.4 Participants and Sampling

Ten teachers (n = 10) from five mainstream schools (n = 5) around Polokwane were purposively selected to participate in this study, the selection or inclusion criteria being their years of teaching experience, knowledge about inclusive education, and the relevant qualifications. A small sample of teachers was needed in this study, to explore how they felt about the effectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education in their respective mainstream schools. The logic and power of purposeful sampling is that it allows the selection of information-rich informants for the research task (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle 2010), cited in Hove and Phasha (2023). A purposive sampling strategy was used in this study based on a variety of criteria, which included specialist knowledge of the research issue, also called

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information-rich informants, availability, and willingness to participate in the research (Lokot, 2021). The sample of the study consists of participants that have been coded as: TP = Teacher Participant, S-A to D = School. The participants are further coded according to their roles and responsibilities, such as SMT = School Management Team member, SBST = School-based Support Team member, LST = Learning Support Teacher, and DH = Departmental Head.

Table 1: Participants' biographical data.

Participant number	School	Gender	Age	Role at work	Years of teaching experience	Relevant qualifications
TP1	S-A	Male	27	SMT member	6	PGdip (Inclusive Education)
TP2	S-A	Male	36	SBST member	12	PGip (Inclusive Education)
TP3	S-B	Female	42	LS Teacher	20	HCert (Inclusive Education)
TP4	S-B	Male	30	SBST member	9	Hons. (Psych. Ed.)
TP5	S-C	Female	52	LS Teacher	22	MEd (Education Management)
TP6	S-C	Female	41	DH	20	HCert (Inclusive Education)
TP7	S-D	Male	38	SMT member	7	Hons. (Psych. Ed.)
TP8	S-D	Female	30	SBTS member	9	Adv. Cert. (Inclusive Education)
TP9	S-E	Male	55	SBST member	24	MEd (Inclusive Education)
TP10	S-E	Female	46	DH	20	Hons. (Inclusive Education)

Source: Malahlela 2021

3.5 Data collection procedure

The researchers made personal contact with the selected participants for the interviewing sessions, especially after working hours. The

researchers tried to separate stereotypes, personal opinions, and judgments through effective recording of wording, meanings, and opinions of the research participants (Greenwald et al. 2021). The participants were asked open-ended questions probing to induce more insight from their lived experiences in their endeavour to implement inclusive education.

3.6 Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used in this study to analyse data collected from the semi-structured interviews. Data recorded electronically during the interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure validity and trustworthiness (De Groot et al. 2021). The in-depth nature of the interviews in the current study tied in with the intention of the interviewer, to uncover undisclosed details of the interviewees' experiences of the effectiveness of implementation of inclusive education (Malahlela, 2017). Qualitative content analysis involves a process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inferences and interpretations (Snodgrass et al., 2020). This is a research method of analysing data for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Mezmir, 2020). Categories were generated inductively from the data by using the constant comparative method to establish differences or similarities between apparent categories. This involved continuously comparing specific incidents in the data to all other pieces of data that were either similar or different, identifying themes and patterns, and organising them into coherent categories that summarised and brought meaning to the text (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance and permission to conduct research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa, with the reference number 2026/03/16/08371709/32/MC. In gaining permission from the participants to participate in this study, the researchers gave them assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, described the intended use of the data and ensured that the protocol for informed consent was signed by each participant (Tolich & Tumilty, 2020). Obtaining informed consent implied participants' right to decline to participate or to withdraw from the research project at any

time, once it had started, without penalty (Millum & Bromwich, 2021).

4. Analysis and interpretation of the research data

In the process of data analysis, the following themes emerged: 1) Inclusive education policy implementation, 2) Inclusive teaching and learning strategies, and 3) Intervention by the Department of Education. Themes were illustrated and supported by direct participants' excerpts.

4.1 Inclusive Education Policy Implementation

Two male teachers, TP4 and TP7 have attested that their mainstream schools have started to implement at least the first stage of the policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (DBE, 2014). This entails screening and identification of learners with barriers to learning and some attempt to implement curriculum differentiation. Verbal quotes that are presented below reflect the experiences of the teachers.

"We have got situations whereby we try to identify learners with learning barriers and problems and then we've tried in our own capacity and capability to implement at least the first step of SIAS. All I'm saying is, we are trying. (TP4, S-B)".

Teachers indicated that they have undergone training on the implementation of SIAS and had high hopes that its implementation could be effective.

"Yes, we are doing our best to implement inclusive education. We have also undergone the SIAS training and the screening process, and we believe that the screening process will really help us implement this process effectively. We are, as of now, trying our best to implement stage one of the SIAS. (TP7, S-D)".

The effectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education policies was revealed in several provinces of South Africa. Literature (Asongu et al. 2023) revealed that in the Western Cape Province, in-service teacher training for the implementation of inclusive education was less effective. It was reported that many of the in-service development programs that were intended to promote inclusive education have proven both inadequate and inappropriate, resulting in negative attitudes and feelings toward the implementation of inclusive education policy and legislation.

4.2 Implementation of inclusive teaching and learning strategies

The teachers expounded on how they usually make some efforts to apply or implement various inclusive teaching strategies in their classroom situations to accommodate learner diversity. The challenge is, however, that they lack self-efficacy due to being inadequately trained in the field of inclusive education. The following verbal quotes reflect what one of the teachers elucidated:

“I use different types of assessment in my class. I know that the learners in my class are not the same. We have those who are gifted and those who are not gifted, so when I assess, I take that into consideration. (TP8, S-D)”.

“We usually give them remedial work, extra work, and so on, and then starting, of course, with the work which might not be difficult, and then we take it from there, from the known to the unknown. We give them guidelines, even though I am not sure if I am doing the right thing, especially for slow learners. (TP9, S-E)”.

The findings of the current study concur with the study conducted in Saudi Arabia by Almalky & Alwahbi (2023), who affirm that when teachers have positive perceptions of their relationship with learners with disabilities, the implementation of inclusive education becomes effective. The finding of this study revealed that although teachers are inadequately trained in the implementation of inclusive education, their passion and positive attitudes towards the accommodation of learner diversity in their mainstream schools show the possibility of the effective implementation of inclusive education in the near future. The hallmark of inclusive education is the teachers’ willingness to accept students with special educational needs, and their attitudes and knowledge about inclusive education are important indicators of such willingness (Gordon-Gould & Hornby, 2023). Classroom teachers are expected to support students with diverse abilities and needs, cultural backgrounds, experiences, and learning styles, and they are also required to use strategies and resources that engage, motivate, and encourage active participation and learning by all students (Buzzai et al., 2023).

The teachers further reported that applying flexible grouping of learners in the classroom and grouping them according to their interests and abilities heightened those learners who were struggling. It was further revealed from the study that teachers sometimes used

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self and peer assessment for learners to socialise and assist one another in the learning process to make the implementation of inclusive education effective. The excerpts below attest to the teachers' feelings and opinions:

"In the classroom situation, I usually group learners and assign a group leader to each group. I normally encourage peer tutoring to help those learners who are struggling. I use different types of assessment in my class. I know that the learners in my class are not the same. We have those who are gifted and those who are not gifted, so when I assess, I take that into consideration. (TP3, S-B)".

"I make it a point that I group these learners, look at those different abilities, and identify their levels of IQ (intelligent quotient), which in most cases helps me to know them so that I can be able to classify or group them according to their IQs. (TP1, S-A)".

4.3 Intervention by the Department of Education (DoE)

It emerged from the semi-structured interviews that teachers perceived the Department of Education (DoE) as not supportive enough towards the implementation of inclusive education in their mainstream schools. Some pitfalls were identified as the responsibility of the DoE, which, according to the teachers, needed serious attention to enhance the effective implementation of inclusive education in their mainstream schools. These include issues raised concerning the limited support that the DoE gives to them in terms of the resources to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education. Two female participants in this study have echoed:

"The Department of Education must take teachers to workshops, inductions or in-service training so that they can get proper education on how to assist the learners with special needs. (TP10, S-E)".

"I think the DoE must supply us with resources in terms of manpower, the right equipment and facilities for these learners because it is a challenge. (TP5, S-C)".

The predicament in this regard lies with the support provisioning and insufficient resources to uphold the effective implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools of South Africa. Regarding the effectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, Paterson (2016) reports that it has not been effective. She attests that, although there has been an obvious effort to improve schools for hearing and visually impaired learners in

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the Limpopo Province, there is no real clarity around these programmes and that the implementation of inclusive education appears to be unsuccessful.

The findings on the effectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream secondary schools, which still need fortification, concur with Dimitrellou et al. (2020), who established that the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa was not effectively done because many teachers did not receive formal training either from pre-service or District offices. Van Werven et al. (2023) further argue that teachers need knowledge and skills for teaching diversity in the classroom. The ineffectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education, as revealed by the findings of the present study, agrees with Rakolobe & Teise (2024), who attested that teachers are overwhelmed by all the reforms that have been introduced since 1994, some of which had a significant impact on their abilities to deliver effective teaching.

5. Research limitations and future recommendations

A considerable limitation of this study lies in the small sample size. Ten ($n = 10$) teachers were purposively selected and sampled from five ($n = 5$) mainstream secondary schools around Polokwane in Limpopo Province in South Africa. The sample may, therefore, not be representative or generalised to all teachers and mainstream schools around Polokwane in Limpopo Province. Only a qualitative approach to data collection was adopted for this empirical study, which might have limited the data gathering scope. Mixed-method designs, in which qualitative data with quantitative data, could have been used to corroborate and triangulate the findings of the study, generate more complete data, and enhance insights attained with the complementary method.

The study recommends government intervention in providing in-service training and ongoing professional development for all mainstream teachers. Sufficient resources to enhance the implementation of inclusive education are also recommended, coupled with the provision of adequate equipment in the form of assistive devices for learners with disabilities. Despite limitations that are already highlighted, future researchers may use the outcomes of this study as a baseline for their future studies on similar or related-research topics.

6. Conclusion

Conclusions for this study are drawn in line with the goal of the study that guided the entire research findings. This article aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing inclusive education in their mainstream schools. The researchers deployed a qualitative research approach and used semi-structured interviews to collect data from teachers who were purposively selected. The findings of the study established the following conclusions: teachers' lack of self-efficacy, inadequate support from district-based support teams, and challenges in supporting learners with disabilities. Therefore, the findings suggest in-service training and ongoing professional development for all mainstream teachers, provision of adequate resources, equipment, and assistive devices for learners with disabilities, and inclusive education policy implementation.

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