

Support strategies to assist foundation phase teachers with implementation of inclusive education: A case of selected Johannesburg West schools¹

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ABSTRACT

School-based support teams (SBSTs) have been established in full-service and mainstream public schools in South Africa to serve as one of the tools to deal with the challenges teachers faced in implementing inclusive education (IE) daily. Although the SBSTs are working very hard towards strengthening teacher capacity, it can be argued that their hard work does not seem to have any visible quality effect compared to the challenges that teachers have to deal with in schools. This paper focused on support strategies which the SBSTs can use, to assist with practical implementation of inclusive practices in mainstream schools in South Africa. Participants were purposefully drawn from two full-service schools and one mainstream school. Six foundation phase teachers, three principals and three SBST members were interviewed to get different perspectives of the phenomenon under study. The instruments utilised were: semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observation. The data analysis involved scanning, sorting, synthesising, pattern searching and categorising. The findings revealed several support strategies as proposed by teachers including the following: (1) need for change in the way support is channelled; (2) teacher training on specific skills; (3) regulate the pull-out system; (4) SBST meetings and workshops should be properly coordinated; (5) time for teachers and SBST to sit and reflect on practices, and (6) inclusive education should focus on teachers and not on SBST coordinators and learning support educators. The paper concluded that if these support strategies are given attention, teachers rather than learners will be given support on how to address learning difficulties within their classrooms; SBSTs will work in collaboration with the classroom teachers. The overall effect would be that more learners will be supported in real inclusive settings.

Keywords: Foundation Phase, inclusive education, learning difficulties, school-based support teams, teacher support

INTRODUCTION

Most nations are currently rethinking educational provision and moving towards inclusive education (IE). Governments are attempting changes at policy level to align their education systems with democratic principles such as human rights, equality and social justice. Walton (2016) applauds the efforts of many

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nations, especially in Africa, for embracing inclusive education. However, she warns that the idea of implementing IE in developing countries on the same grounds as in developed countries is bound to fail. While South Africa as a nation has much to learn from the international experience, we need to be mindful of our unique context if we want to implement the policy of IE meaningfully.

The reality of providing for inclusion in schools is without a doubt a complex issue, and should not be seen as an idea of placing learners with diverse needs and barriers in regular classes, without the support related to their actual barriers (Swart & Pettipher, 2011; Weeks & Erradu, 2013). Teachers are worried that schools and other learning establishments in South Africa are not equipped to handle an IE system. Swart and Pettipher (2011) determined that most teachers supported inclusion on condition that adequate funding, appropriate legislation, and collaborative support from administrators, parents, educational professionals, and the community, accompanied the move to an inclusive system.

The Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) on Special Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001) in South Africa - is the policy document which requires that inclusive practices be made available to everybody, everywhere and all the time (Ferguson, 2008). This therefore implies that the role of teachers, especially those at the foundation phase, has to change very rapidly as responsibilities mount. Policies such as the Draft National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) which was first published in 2008 and later revised in 2014 (Department of Basic Education, 2014), spells out the role of teachers especially in the foundation phase, parents, managers and support staff within the new framework of how support should be organised. Accordingly, teachers are expected to identify learners experiencing learning difficulties as early as possible within their phase and give the necessary support in collaboration with the SBST, observing learners carefully so that necessary adaptations can be made. Teachers are expected to identify and support learners who: are in need of an enriched programme; are in need of a support programme; require diagnostic help in specific aspects of a learning programme; have a learning barrier; have problems because of a mismatch between home language and the language of teaching (Department of Basic Education, 2014). How then are teachers expected to perform these responsibilities when they were trained as ordinary classroom teachers?

It is worth mentioning here that before the introduction of IE, the responsibility of assisting learners with barriers to learning lay with specially qualified persons employed either by educational support services or special schools. This implied that teachers and schools did not view the assistance of learners experiencing barriers to learning as their responsibility, but rather their duty was only to identify and refer the learners to more specialised people (Mahlo, 2011). It has become evident that the procedure for learning support as prescribed in the SIAS document requires teachers to have specific knowledge and skills to enable them to identify and help learners who experience learning difficulties in their classes. Therefore, teachers need to be developed into a competent, confident, critical and well-informed corps (Gallant, 2012).

For this empowerment to occur, the researcher concurs with Swart and Pettipher (2011) and Ferguson (2008) that systemic changes as well as levels of support were perceived as needing to increase, in relation to the increased demands that were placed on teachers when managing a diverse range of individual learning needs within a single classroom. Such levels of support in this research have been interpreted in relation to Bronfenbrenner's model, which explores the eco-systemic framework of thinking which forms the basis for inclusive paradigms in education and the broader society. The theory explains how the environment should be viewed as a set of nested structures; i.e. macro, meso, exo, micro and chrono and how each of these structures influences the development of the learner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Dale (2012), Systems Theory suggests that the child should be seen as the product of a system of units that interacts and the child's behaviour is the outcome of various causes rather than

a unitary cause. The idea is that if one component of the system has no regard for the total system, a negative effect on the learner can result.

Accordingly, the EWP6 (Department of Education, 2001) makes provision for support by recommending the development of a tier support system and collaboration between these systems (Landsberg, Kruger & Nel, 2005). At the top tier is the National Department of Education whose main focus is to establish EWP6 and a broad management framework for support. The National Department of Education was responsible for higher education, primary and secondary education until 2009 when two departments were formed; one for further and higher education and the other for basic education. The Department of Basic Education now oversees primary and secondary education, in close collaboration with its district and provincial offices. The provincial departments in the nine provinces focus on coordinating implementation of a national framework of support in relation to provincial needs. The district-based support teams are responsible for providing a co-ordinated professional support service that draws on expertise in further and higher education and local communities, targeting special schools and specialised settings. Designated full-service and other primary schools and educational institutions and SBSTs are to co-ordinate support services within the school by identifying and addressing learner, educator and institutional needs. They are also in charge of developing learner support programmes for learners, to provide training for teachers and to encourage collegial collaborative support and, ultimately, liaise with the District-Based Support Team (DBST) (Nel et.al., 2016).

The essence of using Bronfenbrenner's systemic theory is to show how individuals and groups at different levels of these social systems, such as above, are linked in dynamic interdependence and interacting relationships (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2009). For the purpose of this paper, the Department of Basic Education relates to the macro system; the provincial department - the exo system; the districts – meso system and the micro system - to the schools (SBST). The Department of Basic Education (macro) is the umbrella structure and it informs the micro, meso and exo systems. It extends to the wider society such as customs and traditions as well as national policies. It makes decisions, for example, through the EWP6, on how IE education should be structured in terms of support as well as how it should operate in collaboration with other government departments (Mahlo, 2011). The macro must also delegate responsibilities and develop job descriptions. They are responsible for issuing guidelines to the provinces (exo system) in this regard (Mahlo, 2011), and prioritise improvement of support and capacity of the education and training of the other three systems in order to assist learners experiencing barriers to learning. These different systems are in a chain interaction with each other, as well as with other wider systems, thereby shaping and limiting each other.

Since our focus is the SBST and foundation phase teachers, the eco-systemic perspective is used to demonstrate, for example, how in a micro subsystem such as the school, the SBST is supposed to come directly into contact with the learners experiencing barriers to learning as well as foundation phase teachers who need knowledge and guidance on how to support them. A school is made up of learners, teachers, heads of department, deputy principal(s), principal, and the larger community, serving as subsystems that are all working together towards one goal: that is, the education of a learner. Thus, there should be links between the school, the family and the community as a whole. If there is a change in the family or school, this could affect the whole system and the child will likewise be affected.

Encompassing the above-mentioned four systems is what Bronfenbrenner refers to as the chrono system. Swart and Pettipher (2005) describe this system as 'time-frames' that cross through and affect the interactions between the systems and, in turn, their influences on individual development. Within the IE framework, one should be aware of the potential barriers, assets and support factors (both internal and external) that exist for children, teachers and all the other systems that exist in and around a school (Mahlo, 2011). This

means that at this level, the attention will be on the learner, whether he or she has developed or showed an improvement as the systems interacted overtime.

The Department of Basic Education has continued after the EWP6 to issue several comprehensive policy documents as forms of its strategy to direct the implementation of IE. These include: the revised strategy for the screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS) of learners who are experiencing learning challenges (2014); and the Gauteng inclusion strategy (Department of Basic Education, 2011), amongst others. One of the key recommendations of the SIAS policy document, in terms of how the SBST should function, is that the SBST should collectively identify school needs and, in particular, barriers to learning at learner, teacher, curriculum and school levels; and also, to collectively develop strategies to address these needs. This should include a major focus on teacher development and support through training (Department of Basic Education, 2014).

Despite the establishment of the SBSTs in schools, as well as the publication of all these support – guideline documents; finding practical ways to empower teachers to address learner diversity have received relatively little attention in South African research. Teachers are still grappling with implementation of IE. There is currently a huge need for specific, well-structured and coordinated support strategies that will address the needs of foundation phase teachers and ensure successful implementation of IE. There has been increasing research advocating teacher support and professional development (Pieterse, 2010; Mahlo, 2011; Gallant, 2012; Weeks & Erradu, 2013; Engelbrecht, Nel & Tlale, 2015; Pantic & Florian, 2015) but these do not foreground how foundation phase teachers should be supported. Research by Pantic and Florian (2015), for example, has endeavoured to rethink and to clarify the meaning of teachers as agents of change in the context of inclusion and social justice. Their research is still on advocacy for change. It is high time we turn focus to the schools and deal directly with teachers as in the study by Walton et al. (2014) which looked at teacher professional learning in a full-service school.

Walton et al. (2014) explored the value and impact of a workshop on multilevel teaching as a means to promote teacher professional learning in a full-service school. Their findings revealed the complexity of teacher professional learning; and they took a stand by arguing that education for inclusion must consider individual teachers, the learning activities presented to teachers, and the institutional context. They concluded by recommending that professional learning communities should be pursued as an alternative to the workshop model (Walton et al., 2014). Although their recommendation is worth considering, we cannot, be content with such insufficient level of teacher training as has been the case in their research. Teachers at the foundation phase need continuous hands-on, higher level knowledge on IE which is far beyond the scope of a day's workshop.

Meanwhile in a previous study (Tebid, 2017) the researcher zoomed in on the factors affecting the implementation of IE at the foundation phase. The findings revealed several factors affecting implementation including: the policy itself is ambiguous; learners not school ready in an overcrowded classroom; unrealistic workload; minimal parental involvement; lack of knowledge on how to use learning support materials. There is limited information on practical ways in which SBST can effectively empower foundation phase teachers. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the emerging scholarship on effective classroom teacher support as we turn the focus into the schools, and deal directly with teachers; specifically exploring support strategies which the SBSTs can use to assist with implementation of IE.

The next section explores literature on the SBST and the DBST with particular reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, which is followed by a discussion on the research design. The paper ends with an outline and discussions of the findings as well as recommendations and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews two main support structures which have been put in place nationally to facilitate the implementation of IE: the district-based support and the school-based support teams (DBST & SBST). With the belief that IE may be failing because of systemic reasons, this paper uses Bronfenbrenner's (1979) eco-systemic theory to discuss these structures. According to Woolfolk (2007), every child lives within a micro system, inside a meso system, embedded in an exo system, all of which are part of the macro system. They all interact with the chrono system. As mentioned earlier, these subsystems are in constant interaction with each other, as well as with other whole systems, thereby shaping and limiting each other. A minor shift at one level will affect the entire structure. It can therefore be inferred that the way the SBSTs support foundation phase teachers is not sufficient without paying attention to relationships which develop between these different systems and which may in turn affect the learner. If the Department of Basic Education fails to provide practical guidelines which govern the manner in which the DBSTs coordinate their support to the SBST as well as how SBSTs should relay support to the foundation phase teachers, this will in turn affect the learner who is supposed to benefit from their services. Hence an understanding of these systems is helpful to all stakeholders because it gives them something to hold onto in their attempt to realise the vision of IE.

The District-Based Support Team (meso system)

The districts are expected to implement the policy according to their different needs. At this level the kind of collaboration that exists between the SBST and the district will be the main point of focus – corresponding to Bronfenbrenner's meso system. The DBST manages support for the curriculum, including IE at the district level, and is the channel through which support should be provided. The EWP6 (Department of Education, 2001) maintains that the focus of the DBST is also to introduce in-service training for all involved in the education system, in order to upgrade their knowledge and skills and to provide a framework for service delivery at district level and learning sites. DBST coordinators can play a vital role in building effective teaching and learning as well as in designing a flexible curriculum in order to address the barriers to learning and encourage the participation of learners.

The DBST must identify all special schools and resource centres (SSRCs) and should ensure that mainstream schools are clustered around these SSRCs. The district's role is also to ensure that these SSRCs should be linked to the schools so that they will be providing specialised support to teachers, learners and the community (Makhalemele, 2011). Furthermore, the DBST should make sure that the full-service schools are equipped with the human, material and physical resources which they need, as well as make provision for schools to have access to support programmes which involve the use of skilled and specialised personnel and use of assistive devices (Nel, et.al., 2016). This meso system is very strategic given the fact that it is the main source that coordinates support to the schools. It is imperative that collaborative relationships should be developed between role players at this stage which would in turn contribute to the school, teachers and learner improvement.

In line with the above, research by Makhalemele (2011) found that DBST members have come to terms with the fact that their roles have changed over time, and that they now include, amongst other things; the provision of resources to schools; the evaluation programmes and suggestions for modifications; the provision of collaborative formal and informal support with communities, educational institutions and other sectors. Their findings also revealed that the DBST members find it difficult to fulfil these roles. The DBST roles are not being executed successfully, due to insufficient support received from the Department of Basic Education (macro level) and exo levels and because there are gaps in the responsibilities of the provincial departments and the districts. In addition, there are other barriers that hinder the DBST's service delivery. An example is the inadequate facilities and infrastructure that are available to DBST members to provide

education support services at the district level, more specifically, the inadequate availability of human resource and transport for officials to visit schools (Makhalemele, 2011). The district where this research was conducted has four circuits, and each circuit has over 35 schools. One can begin to imagine what it means when only one or two district officials are expected to meet the needs in all the schools in one circuit.

The School Based Support Team (micro system)

The EWP6 (Department of Education, 2001) recommends the development of SBSTs, whose function is to identify and address specific barriers to learning through problem-solving. The SBST is a dedicated and specially skilled group of teachers who identify problems and give support in the schools. Teachers cannot meet all the challenges alone and need support to deal with the problems that exist in the schools on a daily basis. The SBST supports class teachers by making recommendations for intervention within the school and classroom. This level of support thus relates to Bronfenbrenner's micro system, as it refers to the immediate environments in which an individual develops and which proximal processes, interaction between the individual and the immediate environment, occur. This micro system is further explained by Berns (2012) as the innermost structure where the earliest effect on the learner is the interaction between the family, peers, childcare and school. It is also at this stage where the SBST comes directly into contact with the learners experiencing barriers to learning and teachers who need their support. If learners are not properly supported by the adult at this early stage, a barrier is bound to occur. In addition, it also has an impact on the development of the learner when the adult (the caregiver and teacher) is not supported by other adults, such as colleagues and other professionals, in his or her endeavours to support learners with barriers to learning (Nel et.al., 2016).

The SBST is thus made up of a team of teachers present at schools, whose focus and functions are to develop and empower colleagues in the identification of learning difficulties, intervention and preventative strategies, if at all possible (Schenectady City School District, 2015). Thus, the primary function of the SBST is to discuss specific needs and problems referred by teachers in the school and to come up with ideas and solutions for intervention. The SBST is therefore a fast, practical and effective way in which foundation phase teachers help to identify issues in education that need to be addressed as they emerge. The SBST and foundation phase teachers are engaged in a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relationship to share ideas, emotions, feelings, thoughts and understandings (Mahlo, 2011).

According to Walton et al. (2014), if the SBST is not in a position to support learners and teachers, it is advised that the DBST should step in and provide additional support necessary as well as monitor its implementation. Therefore, one of the primary functions of the DBST is to support the SBST by strengthening the school support system and to promote the systematic and effective accommodation of learner diversity (Department of Education, 2001).

One of the ways the DBST has shown its commitment to empower teachers in school through the SBST is by appointing learning support educators to address those on the spot issues which the DBST could not reach. The learning support educators are permanent in schools and they are expected to provide support to teachers on issues regarding curriculum and whole school improvement to ensure that the teaching and learning framework is responsive to the full range of learning needs (Mahlo, 2011). Where necessary, the learning support educator provides one-on-one and or small-group learning support to learners. Furthermore, in situations where learners need an individual support plan (ISP) or need outplacement, the DBST needs to assist the learning support teacher. However, comments made by an inclusive education coordinator at the district as well as from anecdotal evidence show that the learning support educators have not been given clear guidelines on what and how they should be doing in schools in terms of supporting teachers (Tebid, 2017).

Collaboration among inclusive support units within the district is reported to be lacking and this has been acknowledged by several sources to be the first step towards successful IE. The Department of Education (2005) stresses the need for support services to develop a framework of collaboration or teamwork where the different role-players work together in order to address the challenges presented in the class and school in a comprehensive way. Education and support without collaboration is doomed to fail, as children learn at home, in school and in the community (Department of Education, 2005). This emphasises that collaboration within DBST, SBST and teachers, parents, schools and communities is vital in order to deal effectively with barriers to learning and development, which may be present at various levels of the system.

To synthesise the various systems, the Department of Basic Education is at the macro level where policy is formulated after which the provincial departments at the exo system level, are responsible for implementing it according to their provincial needs; followed by districts at the meso level. Finally, at the micro level, the schools through the SBST are required to implement IE in the classroom. To ensure that every system is collaborating together, and to avoid gaps, there should be critical reflection on current practices, collaboration, feedback, monitoring and reporting strategies from the bottom up. Presently, there are still some loopholes between all the systems. Based on previous research (Tebid, 2017), at the micro level for example, foundation phase teachers and the SBST seldom find time to reflect on implementation, rather, they are mostly concerned with the screening and identification of learners with special needs and their focus is mostly to refer the learners for further support in a restrictive environment. This is in line with the argument raised by Makoelle (2014) that schools have mostly specialised in diagnosing learners for barriers rather than assessing the relevance of educational structures and pedagogic practices to address the specific barrier.

Taking into consideration the theories discussed in the above sections, substantial educational support is influenced by interactions, and influences and interrelations at all the levels of the systems as mentioned in the theories. Hence before departments of education, teachers, SBSTs or parents can advocate the inclusion of learners experiencing learning barriers in mainstream schools, these stakeholders should focus on ensuring that there are adequate inclusive support structures, which mirror a holistic, integrated, systemic-based approach, put in place to implement effectively IE for the benefit of the country and all learners, including those experiencing difficulties in learning. In addition, knowledge of the theories is helpful to teachers because these theories give teachers a lead to follow whenever they attempt to identify barriers to learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to develop an understanding of what participants perceived as strategies which could be used by the SBSTs to assist foundation phase teachers with the implementation of IE. The research also explored the different constructions and meanings that participants have with issues regarding SBSTs' functioning, and IE implementation as a whole (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005).

This research used the phenomenological research design which is located in a qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm, to collect data from a group of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. The researcher developed a composite description of the essence of the experience for all participants, and this consists of 'what' they experienced and 'how' differently they would have wished to experience it.

Purposive sampling was used because according to Creswell (2003) it is a technique used to select certain persons, settings or events on the grounds that they can provide the information desired. Therefore, three mainstream schools were initially selected to form the population and thereafter the sample for this study.

The researcher operated on the assumption that these schools had established SBSTs which were already supporting learners and teachers implementing IE as indicated in the policy document.

However, in conducting a pilot study in two of the three schools, the researcher discovered that the population initially chosen (mainstream public schools) and the sample (foundation phase teachers) would not yield the most relevant information about the research topic. This was because during the pilot study, all six participants in the mainstream schools pointed out that they do not have functional SBSTs. With that realisation, the researcher had to consult with the District under which the research was conducted. The researcher had an informal interview with the coordinator of the SBSTs at the District: sharing the pilot study experience at the schools. The district coordinator for IE also confirmed what the teachers at the mainstream schools had said: SBSTs at many mainstream schools were not serving their purpose at the schools due to lack of human resources as well as knowledge of what to do. She said the District on their part is overloaded given the fact that there are so many schools under her district and very few IE specialists to serve in all the schools. She further mentioned that it was very difficult for the few district staff to visit and train, let alone make follow-up visits in all the schools. She, however, recommended three schools for the researcher to conduct the study stating that those were the schools with functional SBSTs. Two of these schools turned out to be full service (in the township) and one was a mainstream (inner city) school.

It is worthy to note that in the EWP6 (2001) policy document, the Department of Education had promised to establish 30 full-service schools in South Africa as part of its short-term goals in implementing IE. Accordingly, these full-service schools carry a weight of expectations as they are supposed to be fully equipped to give support to neighbouring mainstream schools whenever the need arises.

Having ensured that ethical procedures were observed, one-on-one interviews were conducted after working hours, not exceeding one hour with six foundation phase teachers (FPTs) (two from each school). In addition to this, three SBST members who are in charge of coordinating support to foundation phase teachers were also interviewed so that data could be validated. The deputy principals (DP) of the three schools in which the research was done were also interviewed. The rationale behind this being that for SBSTs to function effectively at schools, the deputy principals needed to acknowledge and support what the SBSTs were doing. Observations and filed notes were kept during the entire data collection process and procedures. Document analysis included an overview of the SBST structure, minutes of SBST meetings and the SIAS document. These documents provided data about the structure of the SBST, how support is channelled to the foundation phase teacher as well as the intervention programmes to support those learners.

A qualitative phenomenological data analysis strategy was used with the aim of yielding important and valid answers to the research question. This is a procedure whereby the researcher blends the general qualitative data analysis steps with the specific research strategy steps (in this case: phenomenological strategy). The research question is as follows:

- What strategies can the SBST use to improve on the implementation of IE in the foundation phase?

In an attempt to identify units of meaning regarding the research question, the researchers adopted an approach from Creswell (2013). The researcher started by transcribing the data through making a text from taped interviews, field notes and typing them into a Word document; and sorting and arranging the data into different types (interviews and observations). The researcher read through all data several times to get a sense of what it contains, for example: what general ideas are participants saying with regards to their experiences of support as well as suggested strategies as to how they wish to be supported by the

SBST; the tone of the ideas; the impression of the overall depth, credibility and use of the information. The researcher developed a list of important statements and then looked out for statements from the data about what individuals are experiencing in terms of support from the SBSTs and how differently, they would have wanted to experience the phenomenon.

The researcher listed these important statements and treated each statement as having equal worth. The researcher then developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements and took these important statements and grouped them into larger units of information called themes or meaning units. Next, the researcher wrote a description of 'what' the participants experienced and 'how' the participants in the study would like the SBSTs to function. (What happened? and how they would have loved it to happen? including verbatim examples from the data.) Here, the researcher reflected on the setting and context in which the foundation phase teachers experience their SBSTs (classrooms, SBST meetings, training sessions, along the corridors, and so forth). Finally, from the 'what' (textural) and the 'how' (structural) descriptions, the researchers wrote a composite description that presents the 'essence' of the phenomenon. This study is however less concerned with revealing the essences of an experience and more on discovering the essential aspects of strategies to support teachers implement IE as recommended by the teachers themselves, which may help to effect change.

RESULTS

The following abbreviations were used to distinguish between respondents: FPt (Foundation Phase teacher); DP (Deputy Principals); and SBST (School Based Support Team). The main theme and subthemes which emerged during data analysis are discussed in detail as follows.

Need for change in the way support is channelled

In responding to the question: 'How can the SBST strategise to improve the implementation of IE in the foundation phase?' Some of the participants acknowledged that something needs to be done in terms of how teachers are currently receiving support from the SBST. The kind of support provided, be it from the District to the coordinators of the SBST or from the SBST to the classroom teachers, determines whether the implementation of IE will be successful. In their suggestions for change, participants' recommendations were summarised in comments such as:

I think maybe we need to change the way we present information to the teachers after coming back from a workshop. Rather than sitting and blaming that teachers didn't do this or that, we should rather see how we train them practically on what we learnt from workshops. So that when they take it back to the learners, we make a follow up to check if is working. (#SBST 2)

I do believe that we need to find more ways of empowering the teachers. The teachers have quite a lot of paperwork to go through and a very demanding curriculum. And on top of that she struggles to address behaviour problem; it becomes too much for the teacher. Actually, more information, more trainings for the teachers. (#DP3)

The findings of this theme revealed that the participants have taken ownership of the problem and are reflecting positively on it. The participants have voiced the necessity of finding more ways of empowering the foundation phase teachers and this can only be through more training and open dialogue. They also voiced that their performances have been affected negatively due to too much paper work. Implying that, if the teachers could be freed from all the forms which keep pouring in from the District, they will save that time to support learners in the classroom.

Teacher training on specific skills

All participants expressed desperate need of training on how to deal with specific learning difficulties as a strategy which will assist them in implementing IE. Although literature revealed that participants do receive some training, they claimed that such training is not enough given the realities in their classrooms. One participant expressed her frustration by commenting:

Basically, it is training! training! training! I mean how else do we help them? I have only got a Higher Diploma in Education. I never did IE. How do we help with specific barriers? I mean like autism? That is terrible! She actually had to come into the classroom every day with a helper from home that was trained to help the child. The child will swear badly the whole day in the class. How can we stop that? Yes, she got her nanny all day in the classroom, but that does not stop her from swearing. We need tips on dealing with specific issues such as this. (#FPt4)

The data indicate that in order for teachers to function to the optimum, in-depth support from the SBST through the DBST was essential and training should focus on specific skills such as mentioned above as well as the development of good teaching strategies that will be of benefit to all learners.

Regulate the pull-out system

All the participants mentioned that they do respect the principle of classroom support before referral; however, the rate and speed at which they refer is overwhelming hence causing a big IE implementation challenge. Participants still felt responsible for the learners and are worried about the way learners are constantly being pulled out of the classroom for support. This was summarised in a comment such as:

One thing that does bother me with the way we do it here is that, with this pull-out system, you got children out of the classroom constantly. I mean my Wednesdays are nightmares. Before school starts until home time. There is somebody out of my classroom all the time on a Wednesday. One point in time there are 10 of them that are out for therapy at the same time, which makes teaching very difficult and I don't know... that is something we need to find a way to regulate. (#FPt2)

Most participants felt strongly about the pull-out system which is a commonly practised form of formal support in schools and they are stressed by the fact that the constant pulling out of learners from the classrooms by the learning support teacher disrupts the free flow of lessons and it disadvantages the learners who miss out on a lot of things.

Pull out system hampers IE! (#FPT5)

This argument was supported by Pieterse (2010) who mentions that, not only does that model of special education in a separate setting deprive students with disabilities of interaction with their peers and full access to the curriculum, but also it can involve duplicate systems and resources that are costly for schools to maintain.

SBST meetings and workshops should be properly coordinated

Participants suggested that it will make a huge difference if workshops are coordinated in a manner that will meet their needs. Almost all participants complained that when they do squeeze time to attend SBST meetings, the coordination falls far below their expectations. The nature of the SBST meetings in terms of time allocated, frequency, issues discussed during the meetings and the workshops provided by the districts to the teachers will indicate whether the implementation of IE will be successful or not. Their resentments were clear in the following statements:

I think people resist going for meetings because some of them is not worth the while. I don't think any of us will resist going for a training meeting if we got to learn something or if we got to get some help or guidance. But unfortunately, we often get called to such meetings where we go and they might just hand us a piece of paper where they just read to you and that's it... I can also read! I don't need to go seat the whole afternoon to listen to someone reading to me. (# FPt 6)

The analysis of the above revealed that participants are demotivated due to limited time brought about by a heavy workload and the overwhelming number of meetings taking place within the schools. In addition, the fact that when teachers attend workshops or meetings organised by these structures, all they get is verbal motivation or they will be handed more documents to add to their already saturated desks.

Inclusive education should focus on teachers and not on SBST coordinators and learning support educators

The EWP6 (Department of Education, 2001) indicates that the DBST should support the SBST in coordinating learner and teacher support. It is from this call that support for teachers should be strengthened by the DBST through the SBST. The core function of this team is to ensure that schools establish SBSTs that coordinate both learner and teacher support. This relates to the meso system discussed in detailed in the previous section above. Teachers in this study mentioned that IE is over focusing on learning support teachers and SBST coordinators while the teachers, who are expected to deal directly with the learners experiencing learning difficulties, are being neglected. One deputy principal commented:

You know, IE is mostly focusing on the coordinators or the learning support teacher. Teachers are the ones having these learners in their classrooms. So, if the coaches come here and have a meeting with the coordinators and learning support teacher and avoid talking to the teachers; I wonder what support they are giving. To me, there must be collaboration and everybody must be involved in every information sharing session. (DP3)

One can deduct from this statement that the DBST makes appearances in the schools to coach and empower the leadership of the SBST. However, the question arises as to whether the SBST or learning support teachers translate this support to the classroom teachers who are the core drivers of the policy. And if they do, how is it done and why do teachers feel disconnected from the team? These questions were, however, answered by another teacher when she stated:

The SBST needs to be involved with us... They do not come to us as teachers to see how we are coping. They need to put us together as foundation phase teachers and find out where we are having challenges. Because we are the ones in the classrooms. They just give us instructions, do this, do that, nobody bothers if we are doing the right thing or not. (FPt5)

Time for teachers and SBST to sit and reflect on practices

One of the key strategies as recommended by participants is the need for foundation phase teachers and their SBSTs to find time to sit together and reflect on their current practices as they battle to move the IE dream further. Most participants commented that they seldom sit down as a team to reflect on their practices as they go about supporting learners. The teachers are left to try on their own while the SBST is equally busy supporting those learners referred to them. One teacher mentioned:

But I think if we have smaller meetings where all the FP teachers could sit with the SBST and discuss our challenges, discuss on the things we do and ways forward that will work. But the SBSTs are the ones who can call such a meeting not us. When they give us information on how to implement new things in the class, they should call a meeting like that and we discuss what is happening with what they asked us to do. But usually they just leave us to do it any how and nobody follows up to see if it is working or not. (#FPt1)

During the observation at SBST meetings, it was noticed that in applying formal support, the SBST does not personally go through the cases of learners referred to them especially to do some form of classroom observation to orientate herself before bringing up the issue during SBST meetings. Furthermore, during SBST meetings, class teachers and parents are not invited, and the deliberations are mostly rushed over: what do we do with this one? What do we do with that one in grade two 'A' and so on? The emphasis is on referrals and individual learner support. The issue of teachers reflecting on their actions is a good way to effect change. In supporting this view, another participant mentioned:

Yes, and also the reflection time are very important. Because there, we can sit and say since we have tried ABC and it didn't work, what can we then do? Yeah it can work rather than complaining every year and nothing is been done. (#SBST 1)

The teachers are assuming that this method of reflection would be a good communication channel as well between the SBST and the teachers; an aspect which has been neglected.

Furthermore, results from observation and document analysis showed that full-service schools in this research have not yet been transformed as envisaged by the Department. The findings revealed that although SBSTs have been created in full-service and mainstream schools, the quality of academic support rendered to the learners and the teachers is greatly influenced by the support specialists serving in the team. Mainstream schools in the inner cities have more functional SBSTs because of the parents' level of income and their commitment in the school governing body (SGB). The mainstream schools are able to hire the services of extra specialists to help serve in the SBST. Meanwhile, the SBSTs in the two full-service township schools, where the need is very high, are still grappling with how to support teachers largely due to a lack of experts to help coordinate or serve in the teams. Furthermore, where there were trained learning support educators in township full-service schools, you find out that one learning support teacher is expected to serve up to 600 learners due to a lack of human resources in the schools.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research revealed how the SBST is the 'pillar' of the school in terms of support to teachers and the school system as a whole; hence it needs to be strengthened so that it deals with these challenges adequately. As mentioned earlier, adequate educational support is greatly influenced by interactions and inter-linkages at all levels of the system. The findings revealed that the culture of collaboration is not entrenched in the schools. Collaborative consultative relationships need to be established following a holistic, integrated approach in order to deal effectively with barriers to learning and development, which may be present at various levels of the system as outlined in the theory above. Therefore, at the micro level such as in the school, when the SBST is developing learning support strategies, the focus needs to be on creating environments where problem-solving and decision-making are done in a collaborative and participative manner. This was supported by Engelbrecht and Green (2007) who stated that the establishment of collaborative support teams, based on a trans-disciplinary approach within schools and districts, including groups of therapists, can be regarded as a strategy that will facilitate effective interventions and support learners and teachers in classrooms.

The research further found that the teachers are very quick on referring learners for further assistance out of the classrooms. The pull-out system, which is the most preferred and widely practised model of IE in the South African public-school context, is when learners identified as experiencing learning difficulties are extracted from the regular classrooms at certain points of the day and given their own classrooms within the school premises and maintain separate learning environments from learners who are coping with the curriculum. During the interviews with participants, the impact of the pull-out system was argued deeply. Participants argued that they are not skilled to implement some of the learning support tips in the

regular classrooms. The results indicate that while it is not an impossible thing for teachers to support all the learners in her classroom, the situation is further complicated due to overcrowding and the diverse learning needs for a single teacher. Teachers are forced to refer the learner quickly so as to take the responsibility off their shoulders given the limited time they have to spend with the learners in a day. This stream of referral is causing a backlog because learners wait endlessly to have a turn to be assisted by specialists especially in the full-service township schools which lack human resources. A learner is pulled out for learning support once a month, and by the time the child gets pulled out again, he or she must have forgotten what they learnt during the last intervention. And at the end, nothing seems to change in terms of learner improvement. It is worth mentioning that countries such as Australia and the UK, where the pull-out systems have been practised, are beginning to scrap the system due to its ineffectiveness to raise academic achievement. New research into schools in England found that splitting pupils as young as six into classes based on ability, makes the brightest children brighter but does little to help the rest to catch up (Adams, 2014).

Two-thirds of the research in this paper was conducted in full-service schools which are seen as the front runners for inclusive education in South Africa, yet they lack staffing capacity which permits them to support learners experiencing difficulties. It is vital that for the Department to meet its long-term vision for all schools to become inclusive schools, it must put in place capacity-building mechanisms that will enable DBSTs to respond speedily to requests for support from the teachers. More learning support specialists, psychologists, social workers are needed to be placed on a permanent basis in the schools. Evidence from this research found that there is only one educational psychologist based at the District who rotates and renders counselling to learners in all the schools in that circuit. Pillay and Di Terlizzi (2009) in their research concur with the above statements by mentioning that the current South African socio-economic context may not allow IE to be successfully implemented as there is a dire need for access to resources and facilities.

Furthermore, another reason why there is an endless stream of referrals is because teachers and SBSTs are still overwhelmed and confused in their roles and responsibilities in terms of what kind of support to give to who and by whom. The researcher suggests that the District should map out the type of support foundation phase teachers are expected to be giving to learners within their classrooms and how it should be done before they can refer. We recognise foundation phase teachers as the key implementers of IE, therefore their area of support to learners should be mainly academic. This implies that teachers should be empowered to focus their creativity in addressing literacy and numeracy difficulties because the interactions that take place between teachers and learners during these learning processes go a long way to contribute to every learner's academic, social and emotional development. Teachers therefore need special training on inclusive teaching as far as possible to be able to provide content or materials in multiple formats, give learners multiple ways to show what they know as well as use multiple methods of motivating learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Furthermore, within the micro and meso systems, the participants reflected that teachers are unwilling to attend meetings and workshops due to limited time brought about by the heavy workload as well as the fact that the workshops are not meeting their needs. This seems to suggest that there is a disconnect between the teachers, the SBSTs and the District. It was evident from the results that there seems to be very minimal communication between what the learning support teacher is doing in her SBST classroom and what the class teacher is doing in her classroom especially in the two township full-service schools. This is contrary to what is set out in the policy whereby it is expected that the teachers and SBST should see each other as resources to tap from and that this can be achieved only if there are open channels of communication throughout the school staff (Department of Basic Education, 2014).

It is recommended that the SBST and District need to first of all conduct a needs analysis to pinpoint the specific kind of support teachers need so as to be able to tailor their training and workshops to address those needs. It is further suggested that before teachers are called to attend workshops, the trainers must have undergone training on how to train so that teachers will not find the workshops boring and time wasting as this research found. It is important to note that teaching at the foundation phase should be a fun exercise both for the teacher and her learners. It is advised that the trainer should not play an expert's role; rather, ensure there is a friendly atmosphere to make teachers relax, and ask questions freely. The activities should be practical, whereby teachers do relevant activities, talk about what they are doing, write short stories about what they just did (Harcombe, 2008). The training should be systematic, based on certain principles so that teachers will learn by doing, hence will be motivated to apply it in their classrooms. Furthermore, the SBST coaches who have been pulled out of the schools should be retrained and reinstated in schools so as to provide explicit guidance on each aspect in which teachers have been trained.

Findings from interviews with participants revealed that IE is more concerned with empowering SBST coordinators and learning support teachers. The foundation phase teachers who should be the ones being supported have been left to continue their trial and error approaches at learner support. In line with the findings, the Department of Basic Education showed its commitment to addressing the barriers of learners by employing learning support teachers to address those issues which the district officials could not reach. Where necessary, learning support teachers provide direct learning support to learners where the SBST is unable to respond (Mahlo, 2011). However, despite the Department's commitments, inconsistent support from the SBST was strongly emphasised by the teachers. They believed that if they could be appropriately supported after coordinators come back from workshops and observed during and after implementation with learners in the classrooms, then they would not feel so lost or neglected. Evidence from the research also pointed that most often, when the district officials make appearances in the schools, they focus their visits on checking foundation phase teacher's files to ensure much of the syllabus has been covered. The implications of this is that teachers tend to be rushing to get through the curriculum with learners and often times learners are being passed on to the next grade without fully achieving the requirements for their current grade. Time constriction, together with adapting the overly ambitious curriculum to meet a wide range of diverse learning needs have been reported in several studies to be a critical barrier for teachers being unable to implement successful inclusion (Engelbrecht et al., 2015). The participants blamed their frustration on the Department of Basic Education's pressure to produce good literacy and numeracy results at the Annual Assessment (ANA). Since the Department of Basic Education is focusing on ANA results, the participants claimed that they have decided to teach children as if preparing them for some sort of a show. This is something which needs to be addressed by stakeholders.

In addition, results seem to suggest that foundation phase teachers and their SBSTs seldom sit down as a team to reflect on their practices as they go about supporting learners. The teachers are left to try on their own while the SBST is equally busy supporting those learners referred to them in their specialised settings. According to Makoelle (2014) the SBSTs are focused mostly on the technical aspects of inclusion, with much less emphasis on teaching methodology. All the participants shared a common view that the need for change in the way support is currently done is the way forward.

This research argues that equipping foundation phase teachers to be able to teach effectively in inclusive schools cannot be achieved without systemic supportive procedures such as a very functional SBST being put in place. It is imperative that the team be capacitated with human resources for it to render the kind of quality support as envisaged by the Department of Basic Education for the successful implementation of IE. Furthermore, the research has demonstrated that the success of educational support provisioning in one setting, such as the classroom, is dependent on the quality of support provided in other settings, such

as the SBST, the home, the peer group, the school and the local and wider community as a whole. These strategies and recommendations are within the context of Bronfenbrenner's systemic model which argues that educational support within an inclusive classroom is understood as the responsibility of everyone, at all levels of the system. As a summary of the various systems at the micro level, the schools are expected to implement IE on a more practical level through the SBSTs. The SBSTs work in collaboration with all stakeholders including teachers, learners, parents, specialists, the wider community as well as the district at the meso level. The District informs the Provincial Department of Basic Education, which has been assigned to implement the policy based on their provincial needs. The province is expected to give feedback to the macro level (Department of Basic Education) where policies are formulated. The suggestions for change as recommended by the participants have the potential to ensure that systems are working together so that a complete whole can be achieved. This can be feasible if bureaucratic ways of doing things are eliminated and there are clear channels of communication, monitoring, feedback commencing from the bottom to the top tiers of the system.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the urgent need to improve the functioning of the SBSTs as well as moderate the rate at which learners are currently being pulled out of the class to receive support in specialised settings. Furthermore, the paper has exposed the necessity for the SBST to find more practical ways of empowering foundation phase teachers and this can be achieved through persistent training and genuine dialogue. The paper raised an argument that if these strategies as recommended by participants could be considered and perhaps improved upon through further research, teachers rather than learners will be given support on how to address learning difficulties within their classrooms. Furthermore, the SBST will work in collaboration with the classroom teachers. In addition to this, teachers will be helped with the planning of multi-level teaching and support specialists will give direct support to just a few learners in small group settings out of the classroom. The overall effect would be that more learners will be supported in real inclusive settings.

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