Learning Support Teachers' Views on the Implementation of Inclusive Education in the Foundation Phase in Gauteng, South Africa

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ABSTRACT The policy of Inclusive Education (IE) in White Paper 6 (2001) acknowledges that all children can learn with support, and this paper emanates from research into the experiences of learning support teachers (LSTs) in supporting Foundation Phase teachers in implementing IE in Gauteng Province, South Africa. It is envisaged that the implementation of IE in South African schools would require well-planned district as well as school level support services, more than just accepting learners with different learning needs in mainstream classrooms. Many teachers have not had the benefit of being trained to teach learners who experience barriers to learning, hence most find it difficult. Although specialist teachers in the form of LSTs have been employed in the Foundation Phase to fill that gap and assist classroom teachers, the learners may not be receiving the assistance that they are hoping for. Based on an assumption that the failings may largely be systemic, the authors used Bronferbrenner's ecological systems theory and a qualitative research design to examine the implementation of IE in selected schools, with seven LSTs being interviewed and observed, while documents pertaining to the support rendered were analyzed. Analysis employed Creswell's method. Findings highlighted factors affecting implementation of IE, which include inadequate district support, socio-cultural issues, classroom and management factors, lack of resources and inadequate collaboration between the stakeholders. The study makes recommendations and suggests further areas of research.

INTRODUCTION

According to Nel et al. (2013: 4 and 6) Inclusive Education (IE), aims to accommodate all learners provide opportunities to develop the full potential. Inclusion promotes equal participation in the learning process and professional development of all learners irrespective of ability or disability, race, class, religion, culture or language within a single education and training system and with a continuum of learning contexts and resources according to need (Department of Education 2001).

Teachers responsible for teaching learners with barriers to learning and development should have the knowledge, skills and the appropriate attitude to teach and guide them in fulfilling their highest potential. In the light of this, the Gauteng Department of Education embarked on a strategy to employ Learning Support Teachers (LSTs) in mainstream schools, with the role to provide continuous support to teachers working with learners who experience barriers to learning in their classroom. However, as we argue, there is currently an absence of specific support strategies in the policies to address the needs of LSTs, particularly in the province of Gauteng. LSTs rotate in different schools, expecting to find learners with a diverse range of differences, either extrinsic or intrinsic, but their roles and positions at schools are not clearly defined in the policy White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education (Mahlo 2012: 8). This research captures the voice of LSTs explaining what their experiences were at the schools and with the teachers and the Foundation Phase learners who are in need of support.

The Research Project

Implementation of Inclusive Education is still in its early stages in South Africa, but already alternative options need to be explored for many learners who are not receiving the support they need. These learners suffer in their development and are not provided with the support of LSTs, who are employed by selected districts in Gauteng to help both teachers and learners (Ladbrook 2009) after the learners identified as having barriers are referred by the school for intervention. Naidu (2007) defines a support teacher as one who provides support in an IE setting for other classroom teachers and learners experiencing barriers to learning. The importance of LSTs in this process cannot be overemphasized, because they assist teachers in areas in which they lack skills, attitudes and knowledge.

By establishing the experiences of these support teachers we wished to establish the factors that help or hinder them in the successful implementation of IE in the Foundation Phase. The long term aim of the research is to improve the processes that can be used to regulate the practices of the LSTs and so enhance that implementation.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Approach

For IE to be successful, it is necessary for teachers to understand interactions and interrelationships between the individual learner and numerous other systems connected to the learner (Nel et al. 2013: 11). An ecological systems theory was used in the research, based on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979: 21), who affirms the following vision in line with the ideals of IE:

"*Ecology of Human Development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between the settings, and by the larger context in which the settings are embedded.*"

The ecological perspective demonstrates how a micro-system, for example the home, is interwoven with the meso-system, such as the school and school staff, as well as the wider society, in determining the level of comfort and contentment human beings experience as they go about their lives. The theory may be used to explain differences in the individual's knowledge, skills and abilities and the role of support systems to guide and structure the individual. The overlapping micro-, meso-, exo-, chrono- and macro- systems all contribute to form the whole that the individual will perceive as positive or negative (Haihambo 2010). The systems that are present in the education of a child and that might be significant in explaining the experiences, attitudes, frustrations and motivation for LSTs to execute their duties are discussed in this article.

METHODOLOGY

Design

A qualitative approach was used in line with Creswell's (2002:38) view that the researcher gradually makes sense of social phenomena through contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloguing and classifying the object under study. The researchers were able to examine various factors that contribute to LSTs' experiences of supporting teachers in the implementation of IE.

A number of schools in Gauteng were selected, believed to be representative of other schools and areas in South Africa in which learners live under similar difficult and harsh circumstances. For many of these the school is often the only place they can find support and make a success of their lives.

Sample

The sampling consisted of seven LSTs in Gauteng, selected on the grounds that this district employed them in mainstream schools, with the task of supporting learners with reading, writing, and mathematics problems that can be remediated. It was assumed that LSTs would yield the most relevant information about the topic under investigation so sampling was applied on the basis that these LST's had an experience in these positions from 2006. Only participants who would be able to supply needed information, be prepared to participate in research and be willing to share the information were chosen. Furthermore, only those LSTs who had a qualification in remedial or inclusive education and had been supporting teachers and their learners for at least three full years in the Foundation Phase were interviewed.

Instrument

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were used for data collection as useful tools for providing firsthand information, conducted after working hours, not exceeding one hour. The interviews were audio-taped and independently transcribed. Tesch's method (Creswell 2003) was used to identify the units of meaning relating to the experiences of the participants. Teachers were interviewed, the data was independently transcribed by putting it together according to themes that arose from the data and the themes related well to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. Audio-taped data was listened to several times to gather emerging categories and themes.

Questions that were posed to Learning Support Teachers are as follows:

Semi- structured Interview Schedule

1. What are your opinions about the implementation of Inclusive Education?
2. What is your role as a Learning Support Teacher in the Foundation phase?
3. What support do you need to implement Inclusive Education effectively?
4. What strategies could be used to enhance the implementation of Inclusive Education?
5. Is there anything that was not asked but you want the researcher to know?

Interpretation of Data

The interviews were audio-taped and independently transcribed. Techs' method (Creswell 2003) was used to identify the units of meaning relating to the experiences of the participants. Audio-taped data was listened to several times to gather emerging categories and themes.

The verbatim accounts of the interviews were transcribed, different categories relating to the research topic formed and information from interviews, observations and document analysis analyzed and arranged according to themes. In order to identify units of meaning relating to the experiences of LSTs in the Foundation Phase with reference to the implementation of IE, a model was adopted from Creswell. The researchers started by transcribing the data through making a text from taped interviews and documents, and typing them as word processing documents. The process commenced by reading all the data and then dividing it into smaller meaningful units. Data segments or units were then organized into a system predominantly derived from the data, and comparisons used to build and refine categories which were then modified. The steps are after Creswell (2002: 150):

- The researcher reads all data, and breaks down large bodies of text into smaller meaningful units in the form of sentences or individual words.
- The entire data is perused several times to get a sense of what it contains, and in the process the researcher writes in the margins for possible categories or interpretation.
- The researcher then identifies possible categories or themes, perhaps sub-themes or sub-categories, and then classifies each piece of data accordingly. At this point the researcher assumes it will be easy to get a sense of what the data means.
- The researcher integrates and summarizes the data.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

In the discussion the teacher's viewpoints are described and direct quotations from the interviews are provided. The following discussion, divided into Bronfenbrenner's five systems, is based on the semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 LSTs in Gauteng Province.

Working through the data, certain major themes arose, discussed here according to the various systems in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory .The systems relate to the life worlds of the children, but acknowledge that whatever occurs in any system of the children also relates and influences the LSTs in the execution of their duties as professionals.

Micro-system

Micro-systems are the immediate environments in which an individual develops, characterised by those individuals and events closest to one's life, and involving continual face to-face contact, with each person reciprocally influencing the other (Swart and Pettipher 2005: 11). In addition, Donald et al. (2009: 41) define the micro-system as one in which learners are closely involved in proximal interactions with other familiar people, such as the family. It involves daily activities that shape many aspects of cognitive, social, emotional, moral and spiritual development. In this study the micro-system mainly comprises the young learners' home environment.

 One LST said: LSTs experience a feeling of helplessness and frustration with parents who do not support their children, and this can contribute to the barriers to learning. In the words of one LST: "…. We must start teaching them [parents] how to parent their own children first, then they would understand that the children are not the same because some of the problems of the learner [are] not academic. Basically they have got underlying issues, maybe … social."

What happens in the family has an effect on how learners react at school. Most LSTs experience a situation whereby whatever happens in the family influences how a learner responds at school:

… some learners their parents are not there they are neglected, some of the learners they live alone, there are no parents, the parents have died, meaning its child headed families. They look after themselves; they have no one to take care of them. Other learners they come to school hungry, other learners come from families were their families are dysfunctional, there is lots of fights. Other learners they don't have parents, they stay with their stepparents. Others are abused, others are being raped. Their social life is just terrible and that results in learners having problems in class. They can't even concentrate in class because they are busy thinking about what happened at home yesterday or last night.

The influence of events in the micro-system of young learners as explained by the LSTs has a negative impact on them and the learners. They are supposed to work with the learners in a school situation but cannot ignore what happens at home. Unfortunately there are not sufficient professionals, such as social workers or psychologists, to assist.

The Meso-system

A meso-system is a system of micro-systems in which the family, school, classroom teachers, principals and peer groups interact (Swart and Pettipher 2005: 11). From the interviews and the problems that affect the learners it is clear that it can affect how the learner responds in class. He or she might struggle in class, thus being classified as a learner having with learning difficulties, and developing more slowly in comparison to the peer group. It might not be easy for the LST to assist with such problems if the other stakeholders, for example the social worker and police, are not working together.

Dyson (in Symeonidou 2002: 150) has traced a growing debate over the role of support teachers in a new context of more inclusive practice and inconsistency in it, which could promote segregation at the expense of more inclusive practice. LSTs experience frustration as they are defining their roles in terms of a medical model, seeing themselves as specialists who go to schools to assess them, make a diagnosis then design an individual education plan. This undermines a vision of inclusion that seeks to redress past imbalances and end segregation from class of individuals singled out for special attention. One LST said:

… my role is to help Foundation Phase Teachers to identify these learners who are having problems, maybe help them to administrate assessment, usually. So, after identifying these learners I help them to maybe develop an individualized support programme for the learner.

LSTs experience feelings of helplessness and frustration when having developed Individual Education Plans (IEPs) together with supporting teachers in the Foundation Phase, they return to find they have not been implemented. In addition, school principals should play a pivotal role in promoting and sustaining change in their schools, helping staff, learners and parents to think and act inclusively. Their role is to guide and support change, drawing together the resources, as well as the people to make a success of inclusion in their schools (Salisbury and McGregor 2005: 2). The principals agreed that inclusive education provides support for all learners because "*… it means to include even the learners that are very slow in education*" and learners "*are not the same in terms of talents, skills, capabilities.*" However, the principals did not provide feedback on how the support should be provided or on the role of the LSTs in their schools.

Ali et al. (2006: 36) found that teachers require additional tools and skills for coping with the social and emotional problems that accompany inclusive classrooms. This also applies to LSTs, who in our research indicated that they were not receiving adequate support from the district, whether in the form of physical resources, such as stationery and transport, or emotional support, such as debriefing. This was because they were faced with different problems that sometimes affected them personally. The following is a direct quotation from an interview with a LST:

Wow! It will be recognition from the district or not the district - the ISS from the head office, because as we speak right now there are no guidelines policy that governs this learning support teacher system.

… They are expecting me to move around the schools, yaah. For instance, I have fifteen schools under my care right now, yes and [I] am using my own car, at times I have to speak to other schools whereby there is an emergency, I use my own phone.

The Department of Education ranks employees according to position, so post-level one is

the lowest and the greater the post-level the higher one is and the more authority one can command. If recognized, the post-level can also be elevated to giving instructions with authority. It became clear that teachers at schools respected and took orders depending on the level held.

It was revealed that LSTs also need to belong and be recognized for the work they were doing, as evident in the words of one participant:

I think we need that recognition whereby we meet and do some guidance for us,… like I am still post-level one after twenty years of being in the field. It was never taken into consideration, even the experience I have. I think I can talk for a full day about that. It makes me really cross. I talk about recognition whereby they can at least evaluate our post-level from post-level one to something higher, like post-level two or three. I don't know to which post-level, but not post-level one, for goodness sake, you know the reason why. I am expected to address issues in a school whereby there is line functioning. The principal of the school is post-level four and the deputy is post-level three, HOD post-level two, aah... aah - the people start questioning who are you to tell us when you are post level one? So I think that's unreasonable on my side to be post-level one, addressing issues with people on post-level four.

Exo-system

The exo-system includes other systems in which a child is not directly involved, but which may influence the people who have proximal relationships in the micro-systems (Donald et al. 2009: 42). In the case of this study, it refers to the policies of the provincial and national education departments. LSTs experience frustration when policies of a department are disadvantaging learners and thus causing learning problems that are not easy to remedy. An example is the admission policy of the school, which has a direct influence not on the children but on the teachers and the LSTs with whom they have a proximal relationship. This applies especially to those identified as experiencing barriers to learning, as evident in the following interview with an LST:

According to those philosophers, a foundation phase learner is expected to be ready for formal learning in Grade 1, but if you go to the schools you will find this five year old, who cries and sleeps in class and other symptoms of not being ready for school. This shows that the child is not yet ready for school.

Chrono-system

A chrono-system refers to the developmental time that affects the interactions between these systems, as well as their influences on individual development, for examples families and the other systems in which developing children are involved, continuously change and develop themselves (Donald et al. 2009: 42). Systems in which children are developing continuously change, for example unemployment in the home, socio-economic status and the influence of the HIV pandemic. Some children in South Africa are starting to exchange roles with their parents and acting as caregivers, which puts pressure on them and can result in learning barriers. Many in this study were experiencing changes and new developments in their lives, making it difficult to cope and consequently for teachers to help, as was clear from one interview: "… when the learner comes to you and tell you that my mother is sick and she has got nothing to eat at home and she is waiting for me to come with food from school it's so painful." This young child's situation could also change, if the mother's health were to worsen and even die.

The Macro-level

The macro-system involves dominant social and economic structures as well as values, beliefs and practices that influence all the other social systems**.** In the South African context it can refer to the level at which policy decisions about education are made, that is, the national Department of Education, which provide the provinces with guidelines to implement a particular policy according to provincial needs. Their policies include Inclusive Education, but at this level of the study a lack of proper planning regarding implementation arose. According to the participants, there were no clear structures or guidelines at this level to regulate the practices of LSTs: "We don't have a policy running our duties. What do we call this? What do we call this - the thing that guides our working? We don't have it at the moment, they are still drafting it."

South Africa has well-written policies in place but their practical implementation is problematic, as could be seen clearly when the national Department of Education employed LSTs with-

out considering the rules and regulations to govern their practices. Guidelines will enable them to support teachers and learners who experience barriers to learning, and the department needs to address seriously the issue of guidelines or regulations for the LSTs if they want to preserve them. One LST provided the following reasons for thinking that there had not been proper planning in the implementation of IE:

… definitely, sure some of the things are good on paper but the implementation part of it, well, like, whereby the inclusive education should have those resources, person therapists, of which we don't have in our schools. We should have a school nurse but there is only one local nurse from the local clinic, and who have to move around schools about forty eight schools at a time. So there is never sufficient manpower with regard to that, and also the implementation part of it really, training for the teachers to implement it".

Guidelines and facilities to implement IE are serious issues that the LSTs feel that the departments of education at national and at provincial level need to attend to.

CONCLUSION

The Department of Education is at the macro-level, where policy is formulated, after which the nine provincial departments, at the exo-system level, are responsible for implementing it according to their provincial needs. Districts are responsible for implementing policy according to the district needs, at the meso-level. Finally, at the micro-level, the schools are required to implement IE on a practical level. To ensure that every system is interacting, and so that a complete whole will be established, there should be feedback, monitoring and reporting strategies from the lowest level of the system to the highest. However, during the time of this study there was a grey area between each of the systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the provincial department in Gauteng has employed the LSTs in the implementation of IE, more focus should be put on assuring that they are provided with adequate support in terms of human and emotional resources. Since the LSTs are travelling on a daily basis to different schools, provision needs to be made for this. The elevation of the post-level seems necessary, in line with the effort they put in making sure that IE is implemented. Districts

should therefore redesign their strategies for supporting LSTs, taking account the problems that there are on all levels, as set out in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, and within which a learner who experiences learning problems functions. Guidelines to regulate the practices of LSTs need to be redefined, as well as clarity given as to their status and responsibilities.

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