

## Examining the Extent to Which Learners with Special Educational Needs are Included in Regular Schools: The Case of Four Primary Schools in Cape Town, South Africa

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**KEYWORDS** Challenges. Curriculum. Diversity. Policy. Training

**ABSTRACT** This paper examined the nature and limit to which regular schools contain learners requiring special support in education. The study used the mixed methods approach and the post-positivist research paradigm was adopted. A sample of 80 teachers and 4 principals pooled from the four primary schools involved in the study were used to generate data. Questionnaires with closed items, interviews which are semi-structured, observations in classroom as well as documents were used to provide information. Many schools were moving towards inclusivity as established in the present study. In regular schools, there was relative prevalence of learners requiring special support in education. The study established as well, that in regular schools, learners requiring special support in education were faced with difficulties for example inadequately trained teachers, classroom shortages, class sizes, inappropriate equipment and materials. These affected the quality of access to education for these learners. Major recommendations were that schools are adequately resourced, class sizes be reduced and teachers quality be improved.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper examined the nature and limit to which regular schools contained learners requiring special support in education. It was important to conduct such a study given the current global drive towards inclusivity. A study of this nature takes lofty significance because it acts as a way to assess the extent to which inclusive education is succeeding in schools. The South African Schools' Act of 1996, No. 84, Section 5(1) puts forward that, regular schools need to enrol children of school going age, providing them with support in education without treating them differently because of their sex, race or religion. In line with this Act, the present study became interested in finding out the nature and extent to which regular schools include and possibly serve the interests of learners requiring special support in education.

### Review of Literature

The inclusion of learners with special educational needs dates back to global Conventions and Declarations such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the World Conference on Education for All

(1990), the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) and the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994). These Conventions and Declarations stressed the need for regular schools to adopt an inclusive orientation as a way of stopping having attitudes towards others and building friendly environments, accommodating societies as well as succeeding in providing education to all (Deppeler et al. 2015). Thus, an education that is inclusive, hinges on matters of the fair treatment of humanity, demanding that even the provision of education be such that everyone is catered for (Florian 2017). This stands contrary to the medical model, (a theory that partly informs the study) which advocates exclusion of learners with disability on the grounds that they need special attention (Kiel et al. 2014).

Like many other countries, South Africa also started transforming its system of education, moving from one which separates to an accommodative one as evidenced by its accepting and following the guiding principles of the Salamanca Statement 1994. In particular, the Constitution of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, Section 29(1) supports schools that accept and respect

individualism among learners and provide support according to their (learners') varying needs. To show that the government of South Africa was committed to the educational welfare of its children requiring special support in education, investigations were carried out through commissions and reports were written which resulted in Acts being adopted to meet these needs. The White Paper on Education and Training of 1995, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in its Bill of Rights 1996, the South Africa Schools' Act of 1996, the Report on the National Commission on Special Needs Education and Training of 1997, the National Commission on Education Support Services of 1997 and finally, the White Paper 6 Special Needs Education of 2001 are some of the South African government's show of commitment to providing an education that was inclusive. Given that in South Africa, the provision of an education that is inclusive started at primary school level (Walton 2011), it is only necessary 21 years after its inception of an education that is inclusive, a study examining the nature and limit to which regular schools contained learners requiring special support in education be conducted.

Although new policies and curricula have been initiated regarding regular primary schools admitting and having learners requiring special support in education contained within, numerous statements asking for information still arise about how far regular schools would go to contain learners requiring special support in education. One such question is: Does the school personnel provide the right education which will suit learners admitted in the school as diverse as they are? To the researchers' knowledge, presently there is little information available on the limit to which regular schools contain learners requiring special support in education as compared to private schools; especially if one considers the curriculum and assessment policies that have remained inflexible. Engelbrecht et al. (2003) long noted that with the existing paradigms of education, it was not going to be easy to implement inclusive education. Ngcobo and Muthukrishna (2011) raised concerns about the children being required to make the necessary self-adjustments which would enable them to be suitably equal to all other learners in the school and classrooms than the latter being remodelled to ensure all children are learning in an environment that is user friendly as well as teachers

adapting their methodology and content to accommodate children with learning needs. According to Ngcobo and Muthukrishna (2011), schools do not differentiate their academic expectations and learner behaviour for all children contained in the school despite the children's different learning needs and levels at which they grasp concepts. Meltz et al. (2014) found that learners requiring similar special support in education would not be treated the same although in one school. From the researchers' point of view, it would appear that policies and structures have so far failed to achieve their intended purposes of redressing past injustices and providing opportunities for all children to succeed in school. All this, points to the problem regular schools experience; having learners requiring special support in education to be part of the larger group. It is against such backdrop that this paper was instituted to look carefully at the nature and limit to which regular schools contained learners requiring special support in education.

### Objectives

The study had as its objectives to:

- ◆ Examine the nature and extent of inclusion in regular schools;
- ◆ Assess the extent to which regular teachers possess requisite skills and training to teach inclusive classes;
- ◆ Find out what monitoring and support programmes ensure successful inclusion;
- ◆ Examine challenges encountered in inclusion;
- ◆ Explore effective ways for successful inclusion in regular schools.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Paradigm

For the reason that the present study employed the mixed methods approach, the post-positivism paradigm was the paradigm found to support the design of the research in this study. The researchers had an interest in working with numbers and explanations in discussing issues without losing subjectivity and purpose; hence preferred post-positivism. Post-positivism was also preferred because it allowed for the triangulation of various data collection instruments. This, according to Trochim (2006), helps to achieve objectivity in research.

### Research Design

The study used the parallel mixed design or concurrent design to collect data. Triangulation would make any one method independent of another. In other words, triangulation would aim to reduce any unfair opposition to any one method that might be as a result of personal opinion (Maree 2007; Bergman 2009). This design was also preferred because, for example, data from the questionnaire were used to check conclusions reached from interviews, classroom observations, document reviews or vice-versa.

### Population

All teachers (n= 402) and all the principals (n=24) in Cape Town's North Metro District primary schools were the target population of this study.

### Sample and Sampling

For Brynard et al. (2014), in descriptive research (which the present study is), for a population of about 400 subjects, anything from ten percent to twenty percent of the population is representative. Given that the teacher population was 402, the researchers took twenty percent, which translated to 80 teachers who answered the questionnaire. These were randomly selected.

For the qualitative data, the 4 principals and 16 teachers who were purposively selected provided the data. Teachers who were believed to be information-rich and were teaching classes with learners with special educational needs were selected for the interviews. Given their small number, all the four principals were interviewed.

### Instruments

A hand-delivered questionnaire with closed items was completed by the 80 teachers which collected quantitative data while the semi-structured interviews with teachers (n=16) and principals (n=4), classroom observations and document analysis (policy documents on inclusive education) yielded qualitative data. For Trochim (2006), the best hope of achieving objectivity in research is by triangulating multiple fallible meth-

ods of data collection. As already seen, this triangulation also helped verify data collected through the different instruments.

### Validity, Reliability and Measures to Ensure Data Credibility and Trustworthiness

The validity and reliability of the questionnaire was established through the use of the Inter-Rater method. This involved giving the questionnaire to 6 raters to check its suitability (validity) as a measure of the nature and limit to which regular schools contained learners requiring special support in education. All raters agreed the questionnaire was suitable, hence, valid.

The raters were also asked to rate the questionnaire (out of 20) as a measure of homogeneity or consensus. The ratings were correlated and yielded a coefficient of 0.6; indicating that to a large extent, the raters agree that the questionnaire was reliable. Later the questionnaire was test-run with a group of 10 teachers to see if it worked as intended. After minor modifications, the instrument was adopted for use with the main sample.

The credibility and trustworthiness of data collected through interviews, classroom observations and document reviews was established through member-checking, prolonged engagement and the triangulation that resulted from using the different instruments.

### Ethical Issues

Ethical issues were important since the study involved human subjects. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) argue that as it is common to work with human beings while conducting research in education, the importance of ethical implications cannot be overlooked. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) further point out that research subjects need protection from harm, an informed consent should be obtained from them before conducting research, the right to privacy be adhered to and honesty with professional colleagues be kept. Ethical issues were adhered to during the processes of data collection, data analysis and data interpretation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data were presented and analysed/discussed in line with the questionnaire whose

items addressed the research questions and objectives. Data from the interviews, classroom observation and analysis of policy documents were used to buttress findings/observations from questionnaires.

The first item on the questionnaire was interested in finding out how many of the principals and teachers involved in this study had a professional qualification in Special Needs Education. Of the 4 principals, one had a professional qualification in Special Education while of the 80 teachers, only 12 (15%) had a qualification in Special Needs Education. Information obtained through interviews revealed that although most principals (n =3=75%) and teachers (n=68=85%) did not have professional qualifications in special needs education, they were happy having learners requiring special support in education in their classes though experiencing challenges as a result. However, given that many studies for example, Ozigi (2003) and Asikhia (2010) have shown teacher-quality directed the quality of education, it suggested that large numbers of teachers without professional qualifications in special needs education may be compromising the education of learners in inclusive classes.

One teacher commented:

*While nothing beats a proper qualification and passion when it comes to teaching learners with special educational needs, I feel my long teaching experience is an asset when it comes to handling inclusive classes.*

Such an optimistic view coupled with determination is what propels many teachers without special qualifications in special needs education to succeed in handling inclusive classes. Smith and Smith (2000) maintain that teachers in regular schools harboured experiences and beliefs which were pivotal where learners requiring special support in education needed to be contained in regular schools. Under normal circumstances, where teachers had more years of teaching experience, the more informal the teacher was about learner behaviour and needs. Barrett et al. (2015) found that long years of experience as a teacher had a great impact on the way in which one included learners with special educational needs.

Item 2 required the respondents to give their opinion on whether or not, having a special qualification in special needs education made a difference in teaching learners requiring special

support in education. Most teachers (n=65=82.25%) and all the principals (n=4=100%) felt that a special qualification in special needs education was an absolute necessity. A female teacher commented in an interview:

*I did not have any formal training in handling children with special educational needs when I was in college. Twenty years in the field now, I feel I do not possess the skills and proper knowledge to handle a special educational needs class.*

A male teacher from school B corroborated the above view:

*I feel teachers need to be re-trained. I have four learners with special educational needs in my class and they are not copying. I get frustrated and exhausted by the end of the day despite my long experience.*

The two comments clearly show that having a special qualification in special needs education is seen by many teachers as making a big difference in handling diversity in their classrooms (Brodin 2007). Regarding experience, Ainscow and Sandill (2010) found it as having no effect on how learners requiring special support in education are taught as well as managed. From Brodin (2007) and two interviewed teachers, there need for teachers to train in special needs education if they are to successfully include learners with special educational needs. Dantas (2007) argues that teachers' development in knowledge and skill enables accommodation as well as coping with the increasing complex diversity encountered in inclusive classrooms. For Evans (2003), teachers without specialist knowledge in the area in which they operate are and should be a real cause for concern. Such sentiments suggest that although learners requiring special support in education may be physically contained classrooms, educationally they may be paying the price. For Makoelle (2012), poorly trained teachers could themselves be a barrier to pupils' learning. These teachers have difficulties articulating content in ways that adequately address diversity in all learners (Makoelle 2012).

Item 3 required the teachers to rate themselves with regards to teaching learners with special educational needs. While none rated themselves as unskilled; 16 (20%) rated themselves as just skilled; 37 (46.25%) were unsure and the last 15 (18.75%) is highly skilled. These results suggest that many teachers lack confi-

dence in themselves when teaching learners requiring special support in education.

One female teacher from school A said:

*To be frank with you, I am not even sure anymore that I joined the right profession. There is a mismatch between what we were taught at University and what I find myself faced with.*

Similar sentiments were expressed by another female teacher from school C:

*It is not practical for under qualified teachers to provide the most suitable support to learners requiring special support in education.*

For Asikhia (2010), teacher confidence and expertise to handle learners with special educational needs have an effect on the quality of service teachers render. This means that if teachers' lack confidence and expertise in teaching learners with special educational needs, what they teach and how they teach it will be affected. This is perhaps why Ozigi (2003: 18) says:

*No matter how efficient and well intentioned a programmed can be, you can hardly achieve success without the support and co-operation of well qualified, dedicated and adequate staff. It is through well qualified and dedicated staff that the actual education will take place. Indeed, high quality teachers are education's very resource asset.*

Item 4 sought to find out if teachers and principals could describe their schools inclusive. The results revealed that all four schools admit learners requiring special support in education. According to Salamanca Statement (1994), schools should endeavour to give every school going child a place to access education without discriminating. In the schools under the present study there are children who are Emotionally Disturbed, are Hearing Impaired, Intellectually Disabled, have Specific Learning Disability and some are Visually Impaired. This shows that schools are working within policy guidelines.

Item 5 sought teachers' views on the placement option for learners requiring special support in education. These options included: A- Special Schools; B- Regular Schools; C- Not Sure. Results indicated that the majority of teachers (n= 54= 67.5%) were in favour of placing learners requiring special support in education in Special Schools while 22 (27.5%) favoured Regular Schools and 4 (5%) suffered from indecision regarding the issue. These results show that largely many teachers were reluctant to have

learners requiring special support in education in regular school. Some for this reluctance mentioned during interviews were lack of skills and knowledge among regular teachers, large class sizes that made it almost impossible for teachers to attend the needs of learners requiring special support in educational as well as lacking proper materials and equipment.

One principal commented in an interview:

*My observation as a principal is that learners without special educational needs get bored having to wait for the teacher to attend to them as the teacher will be attending to those with special educational needs.*

In their study, Scruggs and Mastropieri (2005) found that about two thirds of the teachers involved in their study were reluctant to have learners requiring special support in education in their classrooms. Scruggs and Mastropieri (2005) attributed this to a lack of real experience with these learners. This is different from the present study where the teachers already have experience with these learners yet most are still unwilling to accept learners requiring special support in education in their classrooms.

As teacher capacity may influence the way teachers deliver their lessons for the benefit of learners requiring special support in education, the study found importance in examining curriculum delivery as one of the determinants of the nature and extent to which learners requiring special support in education were included in regular classrooms (Item 6). Basically, teachers were required to indicate the teaching strategies they used in teaching a diverse group of learners. From the given strategies which were adopted from Walton et al. (2009) (Motivation, Peer tutoring, Involving learners in Co-operative learning, Using the learner's style, Considering each child's cognitive level) Co-operative learning was ranked highest (n=39=48.75%), followed by Motivation (n=16=20%); then Considering each child's cognitive level (n=13=16.25%); Using learners' learning styles (n=7=8.75%) and finally, Peer tutoring (n=5=6.25%). Classroom observations somehow confirmed the high use of co-operative learning (group work) though one doubted where learners with special educational needs benefited from that set up. Bright learners tended to dominate the discussions. It was also observed that despite 7 teachers (6.25%) claiming that they consider each learner's learning style there were no Individual Edu-

cational Plans for each of the learners. Interview data also revealed that teachers hardly provide more time/ extra time for learners with learning barriers, yet this is paramount in ensuring learners requiring special support in education access quality education in regular classrooms.

It is worrying many teachers did not see peer tutoring and using the learner's learning style as playing a significant role in providing quality education for learners requiring special support in education in regular schools despite literature abundance for example, Mushoriwa (2006) and Rayner (2007) to the effect that some learners learn better under the tutorship of their peers and that learners achieve significantly higher scores if taught according to their preferred ways of learning (learning style). For Landsberg et al. (2011), teachers' classroom practices have not changed significantly and this affects the nature and limit with which they accept and provide for learners experiencing difficulties in education with the ideal support. Through classroom observations, the current researchers noted that teachers still use norm-referenced assessments where learners of diverse abilities and learning needs compete against each other. This works against the true spirit of inclusion.

Responses to Item 7 showed that teachers and learners experiencing difficulties in education were assisted by government to ensure learners receive quality education in all four schools. However, the nature of support varied from school to schools. Most of the teachers acknowledged receiving material and moral support through class visits by principals while the District-Based Support Team's support was not adequate enough. All the teachers concurred that when the DBST came, they were only seen entering and exiting the principal's office. Teachers also pointed out that there were no moderation sessions in inclusive education as well as in-service training workshops on inclusive education as with other learning areas. As support includes the provision of human and material resources, Moodley (2002) argues that learners can only be active participants when the government avails workshops in inclusive education to up skill teachers and other stakeholders of inclusive education. Trained teachers are better able to manage diversity. From this, it was clear learners requiring special support in education did not receive adequate supported which would be of benefit to their accessing education

like any other child who does not have special educational needs. The external support for implementing a programme such as enabling vulnerable learner's access quality education is critical. Ladd (2009) purports that, providing teachers with supportive environments have the potential of contributing towards improved inclusion of learners with special educational needs.

One principal commented:

*It is time we embraced change. We are the change agents. Together with our teachers, let us organise cluster workshops to discuss strategies, resourcing and monitoring of inclusive education.*

According to the Walsall Council (2006), monitoring of a newly introduced programme is necessary not only for tracking progress but also for making necessary adjustments if need be. For Mpofu (2010), school principals should continuously monitor teacher attitudes and feelings to ensure that they do not militate against having learners experiencing difficulties educationally in classrooms. For Hay (2010), principals are primary agents of change as well as promoting or blocking change in a school. Having learners who are moderately to severely educationally challenged in classrooms is a little uncommon for most regular education trained teachers, however, if principals do not help facilitate the change, this may fail.

Responses from the last item, (Item 8) showed that teachers and principals were equally concerned in matters of education for learners requiring special support, hence wanted something done about the situation. The teachers cited teachers' qualifications and skills (pedagogy and teaching methods) as well as infrastructure and material resources as areas to address for successful and effective inclusion to take place. Teacher opinions through both the questionnaire and interviews showed that, teacher empowerment was critical. Teachers wanted training in special education with emphasis on learning about learner characteristics in special educational needs and drawing up individualised educational plans. With the variety of special needs in schools, some teachers expressed a wish to be trained on strategies for testing and assessing student progress as well as adjusting progression requirements. Other teachers were of the opinion that the kind of training they would need is one which focuses on strategies on behavioural management, discipline, and

adapting instruction to the diverse needs of learners.

UNESCO (2014) found that, with the increased demand for schools to be inclusive, so was the necessity to reskill teachers equipping them knowledge on how to teach these diverse learners. In China for example, it has been recognised that theoretical knowledge is of limited value (UNESCO 2014). Instead, teachers of learners with special educational needs benefit when they get the opportunity to observe other teachers in the classroom, talking to them, seeing the practical solutions to classroom organisation and management and seeing individual programmes being planned and implemented (UNESCO 2014).

### CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicated that although schools and teachers were doing their best to include learners requiring special support in education, there were challenges that affected successful inclusion. Teachers were a critical factor if learners were to be successfully included. Issues ranging from lack of specialist teachers, large class sizes, inadequate teaching and learning materials, classroom shortages, limited furniture and lack of skills made them uncomfortable and lack confidence to handle diverse learners. There was a relative number of learners who are emotionally disturbed, hearing impaired, intellectually disabled, with health related issues such as HIV/AIDS, specific learning disabilities and visual impairment. This indicated a prevalence of children with different disabilities in schools.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of the study are that Government, through the Ministry of Education and Training, help teachers acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to handle inclusive classes by arranging workshops and seminars. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and Training needs to avail adequate infrastructure and materials in schools. There is also need to reduce class sizes so that learners with special educational needs get maximum help from teachers.

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**Paper received for publication on July 2016**  
**Paper accepted for publication on December 2016**