Challenges Teachers Face in Identifying Learners Who Experience Barriers to Learning: Reflection on Essential Support Structures

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to explore the teachers' challenges in identifying learners who experience barriers to learning. Full-service schools are new institutions in South Africa which have been established in terms of the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001). Teachers in such schools are expected to have skills and knowledge to identify learners with barriers to learning and provide support. Most teachers in Full-Service Schools possess qualifications to teach in mainstream schools. It is recommended that teachers should therefore have skills and knowledge of identifying learners with barriers to learning in order to minimise bias, non-identification, over-identification as well as mis-identification. This qualitative study employed a case study design to examine teachers' challenges in identifying learners with barriers to learning. Six teachers were selected for focus group interviews and the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support strategy (SIAS) documents were studied to confirm the findings from interviews.

Keywords: Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support strategy (SIAS); Barriers to Learning; Mis-identification; Full-service school; Inclusive Education

1. Introduction

South African studies have reported various general teachers' challenges in the implementation of the inclusive education policy in various contexts (Mphahlele 2005; Gwala 2006; Khoele 2008; Ladbrook 2009; Hays 2009). Ntsanwisi (2008) reported specifically on the Foundation Phase in Limpopo, revealing that teachers lacked the necessary training in the skills needed to identify barriers to learning and instead depended on test scores as criteria for identification. The draft national strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support strategy (SIAS) (DoE, 2005) explained the importance of teacher training for the implementation of inclusive education, with the task of providing ongoing support to school-level teams, colleges, early childhood and adult centres to be entrusted to the DBSTs (District-Based Support Teams).

The process of identifying learners who experience barriers to learning is a critical step towards the provision of effective support; therefore teachers in Full-Service Schools are expected to possess the knowledge and expertise to do so. However, this is a challenge to many teachers as they may lack knowledge about various learning difficulties and guidance in using the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) strategy that was piloted by the Department of Education (DoE) in 2008. Ntsanwisi (2008) argues that this deficiency makes it difficult for teachers to manage diversity in their classrooms.

According to the Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001), the inclusive education and training system was to be changed so that learners who experience barriers to learning could be identified early and the necessary support given. The DoE further acknowledged that teachers were the primary resources in the accomplishment of the goals to establish inclusive education and training, and their knowledge would be improved and new skills developed. However, evidence of

such skills and knowledge remains elusive (DoE, 2001). Other challenges facing the teachers include extra paperwork, shortage of time, lack of knowledge about a wide range of learners' needs, overcrowded classrooms and lack of quality support from the District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs).

Full-Service Schools (FSS), then again, were created in South Africa as part of a pilot project to implement an inclusion education policy and for the national DoE to work with provinces to investigate ways of raising the capacity of teachers in primary schools for the early identification and support of learners who experience barriers to learning and need learning support (DoE, 2001). Landsberg, Kruger & Nel, (2005) argues for an asset-based approach to identification, in which assessment is used interchangeably with identification and purports that when the effective use of this approach is applied the very steps of assessment can become the first steps of learning support. However, the author warns of the danger which the remedial approach to identification holds, as it involves categorising and labelling learners in terms of their impairment or incapacity area (Landsberg, Kruger & Nel, 2005). The next section will provide a comprehensive discussion on full-service schools.

2. Literatures Review

2.1 Specific Features of a Full-Service School

Full-service schools are mainstream education institutions that provide quality education to all learners by supplying the full range of learning needs in an equitable manner. They are expected to provide access and achieve equity, quality and social justice in education (DoE, 2001, 2005 and 2010). This definition is not confined to primary schools that were converted to Full-Service Schools but also includes institutions at different levels of the education system such as Early Childhood Development, General Education and Training, Further Education and Training and Higher Education (DoE, 2005).

Full-service schools were established by converting primary schools, equipping and supporting them to provide for a wide range of learning needs. The support would include physical, material resources as well as professional staff development (DoE, 2001).

2.1.1 Expectations of what should be done in Full-Service Schools

The establishment of Full-Service Schools was meant to be the first step in expanding and providing access to support in the implementation of the inclusive education policy in South Africa. They had to be provided with physical, material and human resources suitable for the accommodation of a full range of learning needs (DoE, 2001). The DoE acknowledged that they would not have every form of support that each learner required but would have the potential and capacity to provide for such needs. The dynamic nature of the schools would ensure that they became communities in which all the barriers that bar learners from full participation in the curriculum were addressed. Such barriers would be factors from within the learner and the education system (DoE, 2005).

Teachers in such schools were deemed to have skills and knowledge necessary to provide support to each other and to maximise the success of all learners within the school in order to nurture the philosophy of inclusion (DoE, 2001). The identification of learners who experience or are likely to experience barriers to learning is one crucial task that the teachers must undertake as an initial step towards the provision of support. The accuracy of the identification should give an overall picture of the learner's strengths and weaknesses which in turn should give direction in terms of the type and quality of support needed.

3. The Role of the Principals

According to the conceptual guidelines for Full service schools (DoE, 2005), principals in a Full-Service School are responsible for setting the tone for transformation and that transition should be based on a truly inclusive philosophy by which teachers and learners are supported through skills development, mentoring, material provision and, where necessary, external services. These roles have been revised in the Guidelines for Full-Service/ Inclusive Schools (DoE, 2010):

- Ensuring that all efforts are made to address school policies, improvement plans, programmes and ethos in an inclusive manner
- Creating a safe, friendly and welcoming climate for parents, teachers, learners and staff members in an inclusive fashion

- Creating collaborative approach in school schedules where teachers are allocated time for planning for care and support programmes, allocation of resources, effective use of staff, provision of learner support and services etc.

When setting the tone for truly inclusive cultures within the school, Lorenz (2002) advised that an inclusive school should be one in which teachers, learners, parents, staff and visitors feel valued. One strategy recommended by the same writer is building teams at schools to foster collaboration among teachers and making work more manageable. The advantages of team work are as follows:

- Each child can benefit from the expertise of more than one teacher.
The school can offer a wider curriculum.
- High expectations for each learner are amicably managed instead of compromising standards because of lack of expertise.
- It provides a good example of sharing and collaboration for learners to follow.
- It prevents absolute reliance on one teacher, who might at the time be regarded as an expert in a certain area or subject.
- Learners learn to work independently.
- It reduces stress and enhances self confidence in teachers. (Lorenz, 2002).

Although team teaching is such a valuable tool in providing quality support to learners, teams should be used as a platform for sharing ideas rather than as tools for staff segregation. Primary school teachers spend most of their time in their classrooms and do not have sufficient time for sharing ideas. The principals have a responsibility to build and sustain such teams. This responsibility requires, among other things, that principals should (Lorenz, 2002):

- Provide time for team meetings
- Ensure the flexibility of teams
- Provide space for meetings, creation and storing resources made by the teams
- Provide opportunities for working together, regrouping learners and reorganising learning areas
- Appraise and recognise group effort.
- If appropriately constituted, the teams should assist teachers to identify learners who experience barriers to learning and provide quality support.

3.1 *The Role of the Institutional Level Support Team (ILST)*

The ILST has an important role to play in assisting teachers to identify and support learners, especially those who experience barriers to learning at school. This structure should be viewed as the engine of the implementation of the inclusive education policy. However, when this structure also lacks knowledge and expertise to support teachers in terms of identifying learners and providing equitable support, the mechanism of providing support to learners becomes minimal and ineffective.

3.1.1 *Composition of Institutional Level Support Team*

Although the focus of this study is on the challenges faced by teachers in identifying learners who experience barriers to learning, the manner in which steering structures such as the ILST are constituted and managed has a direct impact on the process of identification and support of learners. According to Carter (2012), the ILST is defined as a support structure at school which focuses on the screening, *identification* and support of areas needing development. The main concern is on the level of expertise and skills for the SMT in terms of the identification of learners to be assigned with the sole mandate of leadership in the three portfolio committees of the ILST as stipulated by this strategy.

According to the Conceptual and Operational Guidelines for Full-service Schools, the ILST should be made up of the School Management Team (SMT), principal and educators (DoE, 2005: 11). Carter (2012) stipulates that since the SMT is legislatively mandated to ensure the proper management and leadership of the school, its members should constitute the ILST. Teachers in post-level one are legislatively mandated to full time involvement in teaching and learning as well as assessment activities and therefore cannot constitute the ILST. In the same document Carter (2012), the following provisions are made with regard to the constitution of the ILST:

- That the three portfolio committees should be headed by the HoDs with the principal as the chair.
- That where the school has few HoDs, a post-level one teacher or a master teacher can be appointed into the leadership positions of the ILST.
- That when there is a teacher who is keen and suitably skilled, she/he can be made deputy of any one of the

portfolio committees of the ILST.

The lack of a minimum academic background of the inclusive education policy in the SMT creates challenges for teachers. For example, the HoD who coordinates the Learner Support Committee must have knowledge and skills to assist teachers to identify and support learners. This expertise includes the background of various learning disabilities and various strategies to identify learners other than tests results (DoE, 2010).

Most of the district officials who provide workshops to the SMT with regard to the identification and support of learners also show lack of strong academic background of the inclusive education policy and therefore depend on the workshops provided by DoE. Some of these officials have a vast experience of remedial education and therefore fail to articulate the philosophy upon which the inclusive education policy was founded in practice. As Flack (2005) noted, even the health professionals fail to articulate the inclusive education policy in their practice and do as they did before it, only with a conscience. Some of these health officials are employed by the DoE and still reach out for the IQ and standardised tests once they have to deal with a learner who experiences barriers to learning (Flack, 2005).

The time spent on the workshops run by the District is also limited. For example, in one workshop on the identification of learners in which much information was provided in less than three hours, leaving teachers confused over the issues that affect the identification of learners. Effective support could not therefore be provided adequately to learners at school level.

It is essential that the question of expertise in the composition of the ILST should be reconsidered by the DoE, because if teachers are appointed to coordinate the activities of the ILST on the bases of their positions at school, there are chances that the provision of support to teachers who have to identify learners in the classroom will be compromised, thus also impacting on the identification and support given to the learners.

Landsberg, Kruger and Nel (2005:66) suggest another model of the composition of the ILST which is based on the practice of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). In this model the size and composition of the ILST reflects the needs of the school and number of teachers available. They suggest the following composition:

- A learning support teacher, competent, innovative and possessing good collaborative skills.
- A learning area teacher, who refers learners who have been identified to the ILST.
- A scribe, who keeps the records of meetings.
- An elected teacher, competent in a learning area in which support needs to be given, e.g., mathematics or reading.
- The principal, who can participate on a part-time basis. The role, as described in the Guidelines for Full-Service/ Inclusive Schools (DoE, 2010:13-14), is manifold as the steering of all inclusive practices and the sole person accountable for what happens at school.
- A member of the school assessment team, who ensures that accommodation in assessment, is maintained.
- Any co-opted member who might not be a member of staff but has expertise needed by the school in order to provide support according to the needs of the learner.
- The parent of a child, able to provide valuable information about his or her strengths, preferences and needs, as well as support at home.
- A learner, especially in senior grades.

This composition is not prescriptive but some critical members, such as the class teacher and a teacher competent in a particular learning area and the nature of the role of chairperson of the ILST, should be reviewed by the DoE.

4. Methodology

In this study I selected the qualitative research mode of inquiry because the nature of the research problem requires data to be collected through face-to-face interaction with teachers in Full-Service School. The case study design was employed to explain the challenges experienced by teachers when identifying learners who experience barriers to learning in one rural Full-Service School (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport 2011).

The school in which the research was conducted is situated in a rural northern area of KwaZulu-Natal. It has electricity, running water and is next to a tarred road that leads to the main but small underdeveloped town. There are no computers for the learners or teachers and cottages for the teachers. As a result, local teachers stay in their homes and the principal and some other teachers stay in the nearby small town and commute to school daily. This school is one Full-Service School among eight in this District. It has an enrolment of 375 learners from diverse social backgrounds. Few of these learners' parents are working or have a stable income. Some learners survive by social grants and/or pension provision from their grandparents. It is not uncommon to find some of these learners going to school in bare feet. There are 11 teachers and two learner support assistants in the school. None of these teachers have a qualification in inclusive

education policy but all depend on workshops provided by the District-Based Support Teams.

Purposive sampling was used to select nine participants from the population of 13 teachers. During the actual interviews, it was decided to include the chairperson of the ILST, but four teachers made a sudden withdrawal from participation, leaving six participants in total (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:320). The interviews were used as the primary data collection strategy and corroborated with document analysis to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings for this study.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Use of Deficit Model to Identify Learners

The participants displayed some signs of lacking the sound theoretical background of the philosophy that underpins the process of identification of learners. The data indicates that teachers at the research site still used the deficit model and/or intuition to identify learners who experience barriers to learning.

One teacher was asked about how they identified learners and they retorted that: "You look at his exercise book when he writes and see that he has got the tendency of making mistakes when coping from the board and that's where you start and ask some questions such as, can you see clearly on the board? Why have you made this mistake? And you take that learner and sit him/her in the front rows of the classroom."

The HoD (Head of Department) stated that: "I read my learners a short passage and let them retell what I have read them. Those who fail, I identify them as having barriers in listening skills. In speaking, those who are stammering I identify them. When it comes to writing, I give them a short text to write down and then observe their handwriting and I identify those who are failing to write or to copy."

One Teacher reported that: "When I admit a learner from grade one; I give him/her a short test to test the phonics. Those who fail to articulate the sounds and vowels; I identify them as in need of help."

This teacher went on further and disclosed her concern that: "There is another problem: Some learners are gifted but they do not perform well."

When this teacher was asked about what they did with learners who were so gifted but did not perform well, she replied that: "It's difficult to say but we think he/she has got something wrong. We have one learner who has been in my class since last year ziyaduma nje (seriously confused) because even vowels give him problems. Some have dropped out from school because things were not working at school."

The last teacher's comment clearly displayed that teachers are still committed to finding what is wrong within the child and fixing it. If they cannot explain what is wrong within the child, the matter comes to a standstill and this has resulted in some learners dropping out from school because the school system fails to make use of their strengths or work out support for their individual needs.

The approach which teachers were using tends to focus on categorising learners into groups of those who cope and those who cannot. Consideration of learners' innate learning styles is overlooked. Teachers employ this approach because they lack quality training in which their needs as teachers would be considered and addressed. At this point one should also question both the expertise of the trainers and the quality of the training programmes designed for teachers in Full-Service Schools.

One particular HoD defended the failure of teachers to identify learners by saying that, "...educators are not running away from identifying learners but the work is too much for them; they have to complete SNA1 and SNA2 and then design ISPs for the identified learners. That's too much for them. That's why when you ask them for the names of learners they have identified they say, "I have none"."

The HoD also complained that: "We need someone to come and help us with the completion of these SIAS forms. We hoped that the appointment of the LSEs (Learner Support Educators) would relieve us from these forms because they would complete them but when the LSE came in, it became clear that they were not going to do this work".

The frustration of these teachers about the SIAS forms was also visible in their faces as they were talking to me. The prospect of developing negative attitude towards the whole policy of inclusion was not very far from them. Their key need was quality support.

When the teachers HoD from the Senior Phase was asked to give me an estimation of the number of learners they identified each month, the following interesting misconceptions emerged:

"The SIAS forms were for Foundation and Intermediate Phases only, and therefore the Senior Phase teachers did not identify any learner. Even if they did, they do not complete the forms but just use their own techniques, which I was not fortunate enough to discover".

The second inaccuracy was that in the Intermediate Phase teachers used to identify about ten learners per month but the District advised them against identifying such large numbers. Therefore they now identify around two learners. This confession was made by HoD 2.

Such errors are a threat to the welfare of the learners, especially those who need more support, and the chances of seeing the number of learners who leave school early are great.

5.2 Lack of Time for Collaborative Planning

Teachers raised concern about time constraints. Their perceptions were that the paperwork involved in the SIAS toolkit gave them an extra load, so they could not identify learners with fairness. This made some teachers avoid the process of identifying learners and so having to design an Individual Support Plan for each. Regarding this one HoD professed that:

"Another problem is that we do not always have time to meet. I wish that our working hours can be reduced in a week so that we can get time for these forms (SIAS toolkit)."

Another one asserted that: "We break at fifteen p.m. and we can't sit down for the meeting, serious."

Another HoD 2 added that: "...educators do not run away from identifying learners but the work is too much for them; they have to complete SNA One and SNA Two and then design the ISP for the identified learners. That's too much for them. That's why when you ask them (teachers) for the names of the learners they have identified they say "I have none".

The implication here is that learners' needs are compromised and they cannot be identified or supported because teachers do not have the time or expertise to design their support programmes. They cannot receive quality support because there is no time for teachers to sit down as a team to design strategies that can best serve the needs of the learners. The lack of time also impacts on the work of the Learner Support Assistants (LSAs), who should receive programmes from teachers. If there are no support programmes they cannot do anything.

When I asked the chairperson of the ILST if he was aware of teachers' difficulties with regard to the identification of learners he confided that: "... I haven't received any report but the only information I have is the information from the LSAs that they are having problems getting the ISPs from the educators. The educators maybe having problems in drawing the ISPs for the LSAs to work with and so they (educators) are not willing to identify learners in order to avoid drawing up the ISPs..."

5.3 Misunderstanding about the Roles among Members of the ILST

The data indicates a lack of training of the ILST in terms of each member's role and responsibilities in the ILST. According DoE strategy (2010), the ILST must be composed of three subcommittees: Whole School Development Portfolio Committee; Teacher Development Portfolio Committee; and Learner Support Portfolio Committee. The chairperson of the ILST is the principal of the institution (school) by virtue of being the principal and the other subcommittees are headed by HoDs by virtue of being the HoDs. The loophole in this strategy is that HoDs already have much administrative paperwork to deal with and have to teach. Departmental meetings and school-based meetings also consume their limited time.

The teachers indicated that they did not know the duties and responsibilities of each of these sub-committees and retorted as follows:

"Yea, I will say what I told the DBST that it looks like there is shift of duties and responsibilities in that most of the duties of the ILST are supposed to be done by me because I am the chairperson. I want the DBST to clarify the duties of each one of the three portfolio committees of the ILST and the duties of the ILST because they (he later confirmed that it is one HoD) shift the duties to the principal whereas the principal should have a less duty load." (Chairperson of the ILST)

The HoD continued that: "Another thing is that I am the chairperson of the Educator Development Committee within the ILST but I don't know about the things that we should discuss with the educators. There was a meeting but I didn't attend. We were busy as HoDs about something and I do have the document that talks about educators in my file but when I read it I don't find the things I should do with educators. The only thing I found is the IQMS. I don't know what to

do with the educator stress or how to deal with such matters."

This particular HoD finally made this plea to me: "Can you find us something that deals with the responsibilities of the Educator Development Committee and the Whole School Development Committee?"

I realised that these teachers were willing to work but lacked the guidance and support needed to address their specific needs as teachers in a Full-Service School. The role conflict has the detrimental element on the implementation of the policy and can create unnecessary havoc in the school.

5.4 Parental Involvement

The participants reported good cooperation with parents, telling me that they invited parents and informed them about any difficulties noticed in their children and also received information they needed about their children. They also told me about an incident in which a parent was invited to school but did not come on the assumption that her child was very clever at home. This denial case was unusual because most parents worked cooperatively with teachers in matters that involved their children. One of the teachers spoke about cooperation with parents as follows:

"We advise the learners' parents about what is happening with his/her child and they give background information about the child." (Teacher no. 1)

"We once had one parent who, after we had written a letter to invite her to school to discuss the condition of her child, responded by saying my child is not stupid, she's clever at home" but most parents do come when we invite them to school. We sit down with them and discuss about the condition of the child." (HOD no. 2)

Nevertheless, the role of parents is still undervalued by teachers, who still believe that they hold the role of being experts about the child while parents listen and sign whatever documents they are told to. This still creates a lot of problems for teachers and especially with regard to identifying learners with barriers to learning.

6. Conclusion

According to the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996:14), education is a basic human right. In the same document, section 9 (3) disallows unfair discrimination of the citizen in any form. It is against this background that the issues of misidentification, non-identification and over-identification of learners who experience barriers to learning become unlawful.

This paper has shown that teachers not only experience challenges in the implementation of the inclusive education policy in South Africa but they also experience specific challenges in terms of the manner in which learners who experience barriers to learning are identified. Although, the District-Based Support Teams have been established to provide support to teachers, nonetheless the teachers are still experiencing challenges in identifying learners. The teachers' challenges in identifying learners who experience barriers have a major block in the provision of support which would address the needs of the learners. The findings therefore suggest that the quality of teachers' developmental workshops which are organised by the District-Based Support Teams be improved. The strategies to improve the support the Institutional-Level Support Teams must also be enriched.

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