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Paving Ways for Effective Inclusion in Selected Mainstream Secondary Schools in Gauteng Province, South Africa

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Abstract. This study explored mainstream secondary school teachers' understanding of inclusion from an interpretive paradigm and adopted a qualitative research design. The study used the inclusive pedagogy approach as the theoretical framework which was propounded by Florian, Back-Hawkins, and Rouse which is located in the sociocultural framework. The research was conducted at three selected schools in Gauteng, a province in South Africa. Twelve participants were purposefully sampled using critical case sampling. Data were generated using individual face-to-face interviews, followed by thematic data analysis. The findings of the study show that teachers understand inclusion as the accommodation of all learners, from a disability perspective, as equal treatment and non-discrimination of learners, and as unity in diversity. The study concludes that teachers have different understandings of inclusion with some seeing inclusion from a disability perspective. It is recommended that the government should facilitate teacher development on inclusive education policies and practices through pre-service and in-service training while workshops should enhance teachers' holistic understanding of the inclusion of learners in mainstream schools. The government should also elucidate policy documents such as the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, and the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support document.

Keywords: inclusion; inclusive education; mainstream; secondary schools; teachers' understanding

1. Introduction

Over the past years, the inclusion of learners in ordinary schools has been at the centre of practices in education. As a global movement, Inclusive education was

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advanced as part of the struggle against the violation of human rights and discrimination (du Plessis, 2013). According to Engelbrecht and Savolainen (2018), inclusive education means developing, accepting, and instructing all learners regardless of their differences in language, ability, culture, gender, ethnicity, and class. The inclusive classroom helps to create a more diverse and accepting environment for all learners and enhances peer relationships among learners as they learn to think flexibly and solve problems more effectively (Aalatawi, 2023). For this study, Inclusion is a social justice and equity agenda where teachers should accommodate all learners, despite their differences. The concept of Inclusion as a social justice and human rights agenda is supported by a diverse range of frameworks and declarations including, The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). The Dakar Framework for Action (DFA) of 2000 also endorses that all children of school-going age should have access to education (Adedoyin & Okere, 2017). In addition, the four fundamental principles of Inclusion include solidarity of philosophy, international mandates, and conventions, and respect for the cultural and linguistic diversity of all learners with disabilities and their families. Thus, for inclusive education to be a success, all stakeholders should work together to assess how barriers to learning and participation can be reduced. In this regard, teachers are important stakeholders who should have a clear understanding of inclusion so that they can collaborate with relevant stakeholders in advancing the inclusion agenda. However, it appears as if Inclusive education is theoretically well explained in international legislative frameworks and national policy documents, but in South Africa, it has not been properly implemented due to a lack of inclusive specialist teachers and a lack of resources. The current study focuses on paving ways for effective inclusion in selected mainstream secondary schools in Gauteng, South Africa.

2. Inclusive Education in South Africa

In South Africa, the aim to redress the disparities that were caused by apartheid resulted in the adoption of new policies and legislations that are embedded in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996). Like other countries, South Africa is also a signatory to the international legislative frameworks on inclusion such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework on Special Needs Education of 2004 (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit & van Deventer, 2016). In South Africa, inclusive education was prioritised to support transformation and democracy goals (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). This suggests that teachers should be well-equipped with knowledge and understanding of inclusion so they can support the diverse needs of all learners. Inclusive policies enacted include the South African Constitution (1996), the South African Schools Act of 1996 (SASA), the White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (2001), and the revised SIAS Policy (2014). The South African Constitution (1996) focuses on the transition from apartheid to democracy and enshrined in the Bill of Rights are values of human dignity and the right to basic education. (South African Constitution, 1996). The Bill of Rights is consistent with the United Nations Conventions (1989) and African Charter (2005) which both emphasise the right to basic education for all children. While it is universally accepted that inclusive education is a fundamental way of realising quality education for all learners

(Murungi,2015), there are clear differences in national policies and the transformation of schools.

3. Teachers' understanding of Inclusion

The successful implementation of inclusion depends on the teachers' understanding of this practice (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban, 2016). Studies have confirmed that some teachers do not understand inclusion as they never received training on it (Newton, Hunter-Johnson & Gardiner-Farquharson, 2014). Other studies demonstrate that teachers understand inclusion from a disability perspective (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2014). Similarly, In Indonesia, inclusion is used interchangeably with educating learners with disabilities (Mulyadi,2017). This suggests a narrowed understanding of inclusion as some teachers still believe in the medical deficit model which perceives learners with a disability as people who should be referred to a specialized institution. The understanding of inclusion from only a disability perspective culminates in some learners with other diverse needs being excluded from mainstream schools and this defeats the purpose of inclusive education.

In other studies, teachers exhibited a comprehensive understanding of inclusion (Young, McNamara & Coughlan, 2017). Such teachers understood inclusion as instruction of all learners in regular classrooms, including learners with special needs (Young et al., 2017). Those who hold such a perception structured lessons with such diversity in mind. In other countries, teachers understood inclusion from a human rights and social justice perspective (Kamenopoulou & Dukpa, 2018). Those who hold this broad understanding of inclusion pursue the inclusive pedagogy approach that requires teachers to use collaborative methods to support all learners (Spratt & Florian, 2013).

Magnússon, Göransson, and Lindqvist, (2019) mentioned that inclusion encompasses political ideals that focus on learners' special needs to create communities for all learners. The main emphasis is on creating a just society that has competent and independent citizens (Magnússon, et al., 2019). Similarly, Adedoyin and Okere (2017) established that some teachers submitted that inclusion entails setting up collaborative, strong, and supporting engagements for learners to learn in regular classrooms and for teachers to improve on their expertise. The other teachers understood inclusion as an opportunity for teachers to learn new instructional strategies that assist all learners in regular classrooms (Adedoyin & Okere 2017). Such new instructional strategies may include differentiated instruction which is aimed at focusing on aspects of the learners' condition, teaching environment, and teaching methods (Aisah & AB, 2019). Suprayogi, Valcke, and Godwin (2017) argue that teachers may use different lesson plans for each learner and different content that match the learners' interests in the inclusive classroom. This implies that all learners would be attended to despite their diverse learning needs.

4. Theoretical framework: Inclusive Pedagogy

This study is underpinned by an inclusive pedagogy approach. The inclusive pedagogy approach arose from researchers such as Florian, Black-Hawkins, and Rouse (Black-Hawkins, 2014) and it advocates for a shift from focusing on individual learners to creating learning opportunities that accommodate all learners. Such a shift enables them to take part in classroom activities by creating a rich learning community (Pantic & Florian, 2015). The inclusive pedagogy approach appreciates diversity in the classrooms, and it embraces differences by using appropriate collaborative instructional methods (Spratt & Florian, 2013). These collaborative teaching methods may include the integrative approach, experiential learning, problem-based learning, case-based learning, and project-based learning (Kanakana-Katumba & Maladzhi, 2019). Teachers in inclusive classrooms may also focus on the learners' cognitive environments which stimulate their mindsets, memories, and problem-solving strategies (dos Anjos, Rocha, da Silva, & Pacheco, 2021). Inclusive pedagogy thus acknowledges the normalcy of differences among learners, and it proclaims that no learner should be marginalized. The goal of inclusive pedagogy is to enhance the full participation of all learners in the classrooms. In this instance, the needs of all learners are met as learners feel respected and valued (Aalatawi, 2023).

According to Spratt and Florian (2013), inclusive pedagogy is embedded in 3 key assumptions, and these include (a) the assumption that teachers should reject the deterministic views and the idea that the presence of some learners hinders the progress of other learners. In this case, teachers are required to (b) believe that they are qualified and capable of teaching all learners. This can be achieved if (c) these teachers continually develop creative ways of collaborating with others. In this study, I propose that teachers' understanding of inclusion should cover these 3 key assumptions because true inclusion can only occur when an entire school community works together to achieve the common goal of inclusivity.

Inclusive pedagogy also advocates that teachers should be devoted to continuing professional development to generate and evolve more inclusive practices (Spratt & Florian, 2013). By continuously developing themselves, teachers become active professionals seeking new ways to support the diverse needs of the learners (Spratt & Florian, 2013). Teachers are therefore required to participate in pre-service and in-service teacher training and professional development workshops that address the inclusion of all learners. The inclusive pedagogy approach would, therefore, help the researcher to gain a practical understanding of the teacher's understanding of the inclusion of learners in secondary schools in Gauteng, South Africa. It requires teachers to account for the diverse needs of all the learners as a necessity in accommodating all learners in the community of the classroom.

5. Methodology

This section presents the data collection methods, data analysis procedures, sampling, ethics, and measures of trustworthiness.

5.1. Research Design

This study is situated in a phenomenological qualitative approach that focuses on studying the meanings of people's lives, as experienced under real-world conditions as they perform their everyday roles (Yin, 2016). The study adopted an interpretive paradigm to allow researchers to view the world and pave ways for effective inclusion through the perceptions and experiences of the research participants (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The study used critical case sampling to select 12 participants who were likely to yield important information which impacts on the development of new pieces of knowledge. The 12 participants were all qualified secondary school teachers who had more than five years of teaching experience in mainstream secondary schools. Data were generated through individual face-to-face interviews on paving ways for effective inclusion.

5.2. Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was used as a technique for identifying themes from text data which provides detailed and credible data (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2014). The following steps were followed in data analysis; data transcription, data organization, data segmentation, data coding, and identifying the underlying themes (Yin, 2016). In this study, each segment of the data that was relevant was coded using open coding. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) describe open coding as a way of developing and modifying codes as researchers work through the coding process. The themes that emerged from the face-to-face interviews are discussed in the findings section.

5.3. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to carry out this study was sought from the University of South Africa (UNISA) Institutional Review Board and the Gauteng Department of Education. The researcher explained the nature of the study to the principals, school governing bodies, and to teachers, provided a brief explanation of the study, and indicated that the participants' rights to anonymity would be respected. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity by assigning pseudonyms. The participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time from the research study, and they ultimately signed the consent forms.

5.4. Trustworthiness

For a study to be useful, readers and potential users must trust its integrity. According to Maree (2016), assessing trustworthiness is the cornerstone of data analysis, findings, and conclusions. The study used four criteria to ensure trustworthiness in the research study which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

6. Findings

Data generated were presented thematically and substantiated by relevant literature. The themes include fostering accommodation of all learners in the classroom, resourcing the schools towards inclusion, inclusion as equal treatment and non-discrimination of learners, and inclusion as embracing diversity.

6.1. Fostering accommodation of all learners in the classroom

The study established that some participants understood inclusion as the accommodation of all learners. This is evident in the following quotes:

"Inclusion, according to my own understanding... is all about incorporating, including.... you are accommodating all different groups of people." (Livalani).

Livalani understands inclusion as putting learners with different abilities together. This is evident in the words she used, *incorporating, including, and accommodating all*. This may suggest that when learners are taught, they must be in the same classroom regardless of their disabilities. One other participant concurs with Livalani; however, she added the aspect of culture as she said:

"Inclusion from my understanding is where you have to accommodate every learner and treat them in the same manner. From my understanding, despite their culture or physical appearance, as long as they are categorized to be in a classroom, then you have to treat them in the same manner." (Sindiswa).

Although Sindiswa shares the same sentiments with Livalani, she added that the culture of each learner should be taken into consideration as she said, *"...despite their culture and physical appearance..."* It means that schools accept learners from different cultural backgrounds and those who have different physical disabilities. She also mentioned that all these learners should be catered for under the same roof. This point is evident from the words used by Sindiswa which say, *"...treat them in the same manner."* This implies that the participant understands inclusion to be a social justice and equity agenda. The response from the participants resonates with literature that emphasizes the importance of accepting learners in the mainstream class despite their lived circumstances (Kamenopoulou & Dukpa, 2018).

One other participant understands inclusion as inclusivity in the classroom and has this to say:

"I think another inclusion would be talking about the physically challenged, some are crippled, some are blind so when you are talking about inclusion, you don't need to isolate them for example in a school setup, the blind having their classes, those who are using the wheelchair having their own classes but I believe that they must be included in one class." (Tshepo).

Tshepo understands inclusion as having learners with physical disabilities in the same classroom as other learners as evidenced in the words; *physically challenged, blind*. This implies that participants have a limited understanding of inclusion as they mainly focus on learners with physical disabilities only. This may suggest that participants have not fully mastered inclusive education since their understanding is inclined to the medical model of disability which concludes that solutions to an individual with a disability are found by concentrating on the persons with a disability hence the only solution is to treat the problem. The findings resonate with Agbenyega & Klibthong (2014) who established that teachers understood inclusion as the placement of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms and

that these learners should adjust to the demands of the mainstream classrooms. The findings are also in line with Mulyadi (2017) who confirmed inclusion is used interchangeably with educating learners with disabilities.

6.2. Resourcing the schools toward inclusion

It is acknowledged in the previous theme that some participants understand inclusion as accepting all learners, including learners with disabilities. It emerged from the participants' responses that inclusion requires well-resourced classrooms and schools. The following quotations reflect the participants' understanding of inclusion from a disability perspective:

"Yes, as one drive around the province like I have seen a lot of schools in the Eastern part of Johannesburg, your East Rand. They have some caption written full-service schools; I have seen a lot of schools in the East Rand. A full-service school is a school that will have wheelchair ramps, which would have therapist laboratories, which would have facilities to accommodate learners with eyesight, facilities to accommodate learners with speech [challenges], and so on. In our case let's suppose we include such learners." (Boitumelo).

The participant emphasised on preparing the schools to be user-friendly environments for all learners including learners with disabilities as evidenced using words such as, '... full-service schools, ...wheelchair ramps, ... therapist laboratories, eyesight facilities, and speech challenges. For this participant, such facilities would allow learners with disabilities to be taught in the same classrooms, and schools should accommodate learners with physical disabilities.

Woody lamented the lack of resources in schools to accommodate learners with diverse needs. The participant had this to say:

"I don't think the school is that ready. Yes, we may do that but the school is not that ready as far as I see the physical condition, the appearance of the school, the physical structure of the school." (Woody).

From this vignette, one would say in as much as schools would like to have inclusivity, not all schools are ready to accommodate all learners, including learners with disabilities. This is evidenced by Woody saying; *...I don't think the school is that ready, ... not that ready as far as I see the physical conditions."* This may mean that some schools are under-resourced, or they have no resources to cater for the needs of learners with disabilities.

In addition to physical resources, participants mentioned the lack of human resources to push the inclusive education agenda. The other participant bemoaned her inability to teach such diverse classrooms as evidenced by the vignette below:

"We don't have skills to teach these learners. We were not trained to teach learners that are different. I received education during apartheid and never had the training to teach diverse learners..." (Aphiwe).

Aphiwe's response shows that it is important for teachers to receive training on inclusion as she mentions that *"we don't have the training, ... education during apartheid, we don't have skills."* This shows that some of these participants received their training before South Africa got independence, harping on the need for in-

service training as advocated in white paper six and other inclusive education policies. The quest for in-service training concurs with the inclusive pedagogy approach that advocates for continual teacher professional development (Spratt & Florian, 2013). The participants' emphasis on resourcing schools for inclusive purposes resonates with Agbenyega and Klibthong (2014), who mention that effective and efficient inclusion requires appropriate resources which are user-friendly to all learners including those living with disabilities.

6.3. Inclusion as equal treatment and non-discrimination of learners

The participants understood inclusion as equal treatment and non-discrimination of learners in the classroom. They affirmed equal treatment and non-discrimination of learners. The following vignettes confirm the participants' emphasis on equal treatment and non-discrimination of learners:

"These diverse learners... if you don't discriminate against them...we... do not say bad things against an ethnic group and if we don't use those assumptions that say this ethnic group is better than this one." (Tanatswa)

Tanatswa insists on inclusion as accommodating learners from different backgrounds. This is substantiated by the use of words such as; "... diverse learners,...don't discriminate, and... not say bad things against an ethnic group.

Similarly, Maboreke also accentuated this perspective.

"Uhm, eh, first of all, I don't even make them understand that they are different, so, so I, from the beginning they must see you as a very fair person, eh, you are a non-judgemental person." (Maboreke).

The extract from this participant points to the idea that inclusion requires teachers to understand the differences that learners bring to the classroom. This is highlighted when he used the following words;...*I don't even make them understand that they are different.... He went on to say; "...They must see you as a fair person,... as a non-judgmental person.* Being fair and non-judgmental is a requirement in inclusive classrooms as it enhances teaching and learning. We consider this to be very important in this study as it gives learners a sense of belonging. In addition to catering for learners from diverse backgrounds, Legae highlighted the importance of inclusion as equal treatment of all learners including learners with specific disabilities as indicated in the vignette below:

"So that's how I understand the diversity that in the classroom learners should be treated the same way for example we may have learners with albinism..." (Legae)

Since albinism is one of the challenges faced in schools, it is important to ensure that learners with different challenges are supported to enhance meaningful teaching and learning. Moreover, Rophiwa stresses the importance of realising other inclusive issues such as language diversity in the classroom by saying:

"...And then I don't look at my learners as Setswana because I am a Setswana, a tshiVenda or Tsonga I look them as one, I don't place language first I place a learner first." (Rophiwa)

The participant's emphasis on language diversity shows the importance of creating an inclusive and culturally responsive classroom. South Africa has eleven (11) official languages and is a house to many immigrant learners who are educated in the same classroom. Some of these immigrant learners are not conversant in any of the eleven official languages but they should be included in the mainstream classrooms, making this an important agenda for inclusivity in Gauteng and other South African schools.

The above excerpts provide evidence of the significance of having equal treatment and non-discriminatory environments for all learners so that they can get the best from mainstream schools. The findings are consistent with Kamenopoulou and Dukpa (2018), who perceive inclusion from a human rights and social justice perspective. In addition, these findings are consistent with the inclusive pedagogy approach which encourages teachers to create a rich learning opportunity for all learners (Pantic & Florian, 2015; Spratt & Florian, 2013).

6.4. Inclusion as embracing diversity

Unity in diversity, a motto for the Gauteng province, is used by some participants in their understanding of inclusion. The following quotes demonstrate that participants perceive diversity as an inclusive practice as confirmed in the following quotation:

"My own understanding of inclusion, is, you know... the motto of Gauteng is unity in diversity, where you have different people, people from different cultural backgrounds in terms of the languages, you know, in terms of their understanding of life, in terms of what they value."(Tarisayi).

The above quotation suggests that to achieve effective inclusion, schools must embrace a diversity of cultures, languages, norms, and values. She used the phrases; *'...unity in diversity,...different cultural backgrounds.'* This implies that stakeholders should be united so they can support inclusion in schools. Furthermore, Esther expressed South Africa to have a possibility of uniting people as she said South Africa is a rainbow nation. The verbatim excerpt below expresses Maka's sentiments.

"What I love about SA is a rainbow nation. These languages, although they are three but learners understand almost all of those languages although they can have some difficulties in writing but when they are talking, they can understand each other." (Maka)

Another participant added that teachers must embrace the rich culture that each child brings to the classroom as highlighted below:

" These are different backgrounds, and then culturally we are taught to respect other cultures and culturally you are taught that if you ...if you want other people to respect you irrespective of age, you must also respect them, learners must respect me and I must also earn respect from learners that's how I conduct myself."(Dipuo).

Dipuo's perception of inclusion places respect for individuals' cultural backgrounds. However, this should not hinder the effectiveness of teaching and

learning. The appreciation of diversity resonates with the EWP6 which emphasises the need to acknowledge and respect differences in learners (DoE, 2001). The appreciation of diversity by the participants is in line with the inclusive pedagogy approach which emphasises that teachers should employ teaching methods that accommodate individual differences in the classroom setting (Kanakana-Katumba & Maladzhi, 2019; Spratt & Florian, 2013).

7. Conclusion

This study focused on creating conducive environments for the effective inclusion of learners in secondary schools in South Africa. The findings are showing a limitation of the teachers' understanding of inclusion since inclusion focuses on belonging, nurturing, and educating all students regardless of their differences. The difference in their understanding of inclusion may result in learners not receiving enough inclusive support in mainstream classrooms. Participants' multiple perspectives on inclusion mean that they may not cater to all the learners in their mainstream classrooms. The findings of this study amplify the fact that it is vital to train teachers on effective inclusive practices and provide physical resources and infrastructure to support inclusion in their classrooms regardless of the learners' diverse needs. The use of an inclusive pedagogy approach allowed the researchers to realize the importance of retraining teachers on inclusive education practices. It is recommended that teachers be workshopped on national inclusive policy documents such as the Education White Paper Six (EWP6), and the SIAS document so they may be able to fully understand inclusion and implement it in classroom situations. It is also recommended that teacher education curriculum should incorporate inclusive education components to equip pre-service teachers with the necessary skills to teach in inclusive classrooms. Parents and other stakeholders should support inclusion by providing some resources to enhance the inclusion agenda. It is further recommended that more research should focus on the effectiveness of inclusive education in South African mainstream schools. However, the findings of this study may not be generalized since the qualitative study was limited to three secondary schools in Gauteng Province.

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