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Context-specific inclusive education: A local perspective on the enterprise

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Inclusive education is moulded by local factors. A qualitative case study was used to explore professionals' perceptions of inclusive education (IE) practice in local schools along with interventions for a support model in the schools. Observations, focus group interviews and individual interviews were used to collect data from teachers, school principals, curriculum advisors and psychologists in Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. Data analysis revealed five themes in terms of factors impacting on IE practice in the local schools and proposed actions to address the factors. The themes were discussed and recommendations were made for a sustainable support model in the local schools.

Key words: Context-specific inclusive education, perceptions of inclusive education practice.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is simply the totality of educational activities engaged to increase access, participation and progress of all learners in local mainstream schools. The local perspective on inclusive education (IE) is founded on the strongly localised interpretation of the concept and its implementation that varies according to countries, local contexts and organisational interest (Schmidt and Vrhovnik, 2015: 6). Stubbs (2008: 52) insists that IE interventions are sustainable when developed locally, using local resources. Recent global calls for decolonisation of IE are reminiscent of the context-specificity of IE albeit from an international perspective (Walton cited in Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht, 2018: 1). Current studies on IE identified key elements in successful inclusive education (Pappas et al., 2018: 8). However, few of these studies concentrated on IE in rural

mainstream secondary schools from an international perspective with little attention to a local perspective (Engelbrecht et al., 2015:1; Dreyer, 2017:5; Shanda et al., 2018:20). This is despite the localised nature of IE implementation. Therefore, the research problem is a paucity of studies on IE from a local perspective. To address this problem, the paper aims to explore perceptions of IE practice from a local perspective.

METHODOLOGY

Features of qualitative case study approach were used in the study (Creswell and Creswell 2018: 296). Constructivism and ecological systems theory (EST) underpinned the approach as participants constructed forms of knowledge about IE which specific research methods could recreate into scientific knowledge (Gelo et

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al., 2008: 269). Exploration of IE in ecological system levels of real-life context enhances understanding of IE practice (Kamenopoulou, 2016: 517). Two rural mainstream secondary schools (A and B) in Capricorn South District of Limpopo province of SA and twenty-two participants were purposefully selected in Lebowakgomo District of Limpopo province of SA. IE was implemented by nine teachers and one principal in each school. Two curriculum advisors supported the teachers. One hospital psychologist offered specialist support to the schools. The researcher was a subject advisor servicing the two schools. Prior to interviews, information about research purpose, mutual benefits, departmental permission to conduct research and non-comparison of the schools was shared in meetings with participants in research sites to encourage honest responses. In the same meetings, protection against harm was ensured by highlighting avoidance of disclosure to third parties and use of names in findings for confidentiality and anonymity and signing of consent form with freedom to withdraw at any stage of the process for voluntary participation. School observation with video camera, lesson observations and focus group as well as individual interviews using voice recorder were used for data collection. Collected data was analysed using the thematic method. Multiple methods, results confirmation with participants, clarification of researcher bias, and, description of settings with use of verbatim statements ensured trustworthiness of the results (Creswell and Creswell, 2018:314).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inadequate inclusion in rural mainstream secondary schools in Lebowakgomo District of Limpopo province of SA prompted exploration of IE practice that would contribute to a locally-based sustainable support model. Five questions in two settings (A & B) produced results analysed into themes. The themes were subsequently integrated into five themes simultaneously presented and interpreted in accordance with research questions and ecological system levels in real-life context.

School related factors: What physical and social conditions are there in the school to enable inclusion?

Generally, gravel paths, inadequate ramps, lack of adapted toilets and inadequate facilities characterised the schools. For example, those on wheel-chairs and others with specific disabilities were excluded. Only soccer and netball facilities and poorly resourced laboratories and libraries frustrated the quality of education provided for all (Ainscow et al., 2013, 4) as participation in sporting activities according to preferences was restricted and learning support materials were inadequate. Broken or missing window panes and general littering with over-grown premises violated the principle of cleanliness and orderliness of inclusive schools. Participants' voices corroborated implications: "Some children use wheel chairs. They cannot use our stoops. They will need stoops with ramps." "Yes, we say the school is an inclusive school but you can see that even the infrastructure does not allow it." Summarily, school conditions countered access to educative learning which

was described by Slee (2018: 8) as a priority in inclusion initiatives. It also meant State's failure to ensure adequate, available and adaptable education for all (South African Human Rights Commission, 2012: 15).

Classroom related conditions: What do the teachers and the principal in the school do to achieve inclusivity in the classrooms?

Mostly, physical conditions and curriculum delivery methods were basically deficient of inclusion. Littering, damaged electric plugs with hanging wires and broken, dilapidated furniture created an atmosphere not conducive for learning. Lesson presentation was not better. Non-statement of lesson objectives did not enhance learner engagement and learner achievement (Milkova, 2012:4) included in key elements in defining IE. Mainly, lecturing and only verbal and individual learner activities lacked flexibility as one of the principles of inclusive teaching meant one-size -fit all curriculum delivery (Meo, 2008: 3). Participants' comments validated foregoing interpretations: "You know why we cannot just tell you clearly how we are supporting these learners.......is just because even ourselves as teachers we ………do it by default…….."

Teacher related factors: What do the teachers in the schools know about IE?

Teachers' knowledge about IE was satisfactory as their responses in focus group interviews were suggestive of presence, access, participation and achievement itemised in the definition of IE: "It (IE) means we must include all learners irrespective of their disabilities"; "We can include learners in both planning and teaching"; and "We can even include them in other activities like extramural activities". "IE is about mixing learners of all.........learning abilities and disabilities. Let them learn together without segregation of any sort." However, other participants in individual interviews hinted that only recently trained teachers seemed knowledgeable about IE. For example, one participant said: "No, actually I don't think they have any knowledge." Another said: *"Generally, recently trained teachers have knowledge about inclusivity. Others' knowledge needs to be developed."* Still another said: *"I cannot say they are knowledgeable about inclusivity because sometimes when you go there you do not find anything there…………"* The connotation was that young teachers have some knowledge about IE because IE was recently incorporated in teacher training programmes since the world declaration of IE. Further, deficient inclusion in the schools inferred inadequate in-service training on Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements in South Africa.

Departmental factors: What do the departmental officials do to support inclusivity in the classrooms?

Predominantly, education officials were disobliging in offering support to teachers or offered segregating support to types of schools. This was apparent from provincial curriculum coordinator's response: *"We do not support IE in the schools…. We push curriculum issues….......Inclusivity is an add-on. If those guys dealing with inclusive education call us to their meetings we are reluctant to go there because we know it is a waste of our curriculum time."* Non-support of IE and perception of IE as an add-on that interfered with curriculum issues denoted either ignorance or misconception about the role of inclusion in facilitating access to curriculum in inclusive. For instance, IE improved achievement by learners with disabilities and their counterparts (Hehir et al., 2016) provided that teachers infused curriculum differentiation in traditional teaching methods (Suleymanov, 2014:69). IE district coordinator's response insinuated segregation of in-service teacher training and supports IE: *"I support IE by training and school visits to….......our pilot schools. I am very much disappointed with what is happening in the ordinary schools…… when I asked them if they have ever seen the EWP6 policy document. You find that they have not seen it. "*This meant lack of training on IE in ordinary secondary schools. Notwithstanding, unhelpful and isolated support by education officials, support specialists from other departments than education were surprisingly obliging. For example, the hospital psychologist said: "*Basically, when we go to schools to help teachers identify learners having barriers to learning…………. And, ………. recommend programmes to teachers and parents to assist the learners. That is what we do".* Ostensibly, education department has relegated its responsibility to other departments.

Proposed interventions: What do the teachers, school principals and departmental officials suggest should be done to improve IE practice?

Teacher training and support, parental engagement, and specialist resources were highlighted. Responses in all interview sessions alluded to need for training and support. For example, teachers declared: "We need training on how to accommodate learners with different abilities in our classes." Provincial curriculum coordinator retorted: "Well, the first one is that teachers should be addressed…......" Hospital psychologist supported teachers' lament for training: "Teachers must be remediated….…...to mix methods and not use the lecture method only…………. there must be support structures in the schools." Continuing training and support is a high-leverage practice (McLeskey et al., 2017: 17) and is therefore likely to enhance inclusion. Parental engagement

too, featured in responses. Teacher's comment: "……………parents are not supporting", was furthered by the psychologist: Especially in the rural schools, parents feel that it is the responsibility of the school alone to educate their children. There is no support from home". Positive parents' views and actions enhance learner achievement (National Education Collaboration Trust, 2016: 11). Provision of specialist resources was another prominent proposition. For instance, a school principal was unequivocal: *"The system must make sure specialised resources are there………"Teachers went further: "………. the department can help by having enough school psychologists ………to help us……."* District IE coordinator was even more explicit: "The policy says we should have psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists and speech therapists on our payroll." By underscoring teacher training and support, parental engagement and specialist resources amidst other potentially viable interventions implied what participants viewed as first steps towards geographically sound and enriched IE. This is concomitant with the argument that IE interventions are sustainable when developed locally, using local resources and therefore the relevance of the local perspective on IE.

Despite generally prevailing limitations, exploitable opportunities were noted to enhance IE practice from a local perspective: Parents were readily available to engage through in dunas (local chiefs); qualified teachers (all had teaching diplomas) along with their satisfactory awareness of IE were predisposed to development through in-service training on inclusive approaches and classroom techniques. Schools' proximity to health centres (schools within less than a kilometre from clinics) made it easy to access specialist support services. Adequate basic water and electricity in all schools already ungraded to a full-service school (in terms of unfortunately abused administration offices, sick rooms and washbasins) were further prospects.

Results described and discussed in this paper are comparable with findings established in South Africa and other countries. Teacher training and support, infrastructure and facilities, material and human resources and stakeholder participation including parental involvement were similarly linked to successful IE implementation (Engelbrecht et al., 2015: 1; Schmidt and Vrhovnik, 2015: 16; Pappas et al., 2018: 8).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper aimed to explore and describe IE practice in rural secondary schools in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo province. Based on the identified limitations and strengths, recommendations are made for what Price (2018:16) described as locally driven IE that will contribute significantly to sustainable support model to move IE practice forward: Teacher training on IE preceded

by awareness campaign targeting local stakeholders especially traditional leaders, parents, teachers, school principals, subject advisors, learner representatives and circuit managers. This will enable them to have a common understanding of IE, which according to Ainscow et al. (2013: 6) is a strong lever for change; Flexibility in curriculum content, process and product (Meo 2008: 3) in particular lesson planning, instruction and assessment to proactively address learner diversity; Clear and specific learning goals and objectives expressly stated at start of lesson presentations to promote learner participation (Price 2018:8); and adaptation of both new and existing schools to include all learners, by capacitating the schools in terms of stakeholders' propositions. Finally, the local perspective with need to engage local resources for sustainable IE interventions ostensibly contributes to global IE decolonisation movement and context-specific interpretation of IE implementation.

Limitation of the study

Nevertheless, certain limitations have to be acknowledged in respect of the findings in this article. First, the results might not be generalizable due to limited scope (only two rural secondary schools in only one district and province), some participants refused lesson observation and not all participants have verified the results. Second, participants might have responded in a way to satisfy the researcher as subject advisor servicing the schools. Finally, since the researcher completed primary and high school education in a deep rural area, this might have resulted in emphasis on rural contextual factors. Nevertheless, limited scope of the foundation research and general classroom inclusion inadequacies, suggest need for further research, in particular, participatory action research with wider scope for focused understanding of teacher training needs and improved inclusive lesson design and delivery. However, prior sharing and results consistency along with different methods, clarification of bias, result confirmation and verbatim statements were trustworthiness strategies (Creswell and Creswell 2018: 314) for validity and credibility in the qualitative research.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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