

The Provision of Support Services to Mainstream Class Teachers by School Management Teams: A Case of Johannesburg Independent Schools

Nilford Hove

Department of Education, Johannesburg, South Africa
nilfordhove@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Support services from school management teams play a critical role in empowering teachers to effectively teach students with learning disabilities in their mainstream classes. More so, constant engagement and support from school authorities help shape the direction and scope of inclusive education in the school. The study was aimed at establishing the extent to which School Management Teams (SMTs) of Johannesburg South District independent schools avail themselves to the mainstream class teachers for extra supports and services. The results of the study indicate that teachers in independent mainstream schools are left alone to carry the burden of teaching those with learning disabilities yet they lack in skills to differentiate the instruction in their mainstream classes. Furthermore, the results of the study also indicated that school principals are primarily interested in the improvement of their annual assessment outcomes which guarantee them funding from Government at the expense of the promotion of quality education for those with learning disabilities. The study was conducted through the qualitative research methodology. This was particularly so because the researcher wanted to use the phenomenological design which sought to uncover what the teachers are experiencing in relation to the support they are receiving from their school management teams. The sample of the participants included teachers who are currently teaching in Johannesburg independent schools. Critical theory was used in this study.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, learning disabilities, Children with special needs, Curriculum, Inclusion, Mainstream classes

1. Introduction

The policy of inclusivity adopted by the South African government in 2001 has seen a significant rise of students with learning disabilities being accommodated in the mainstream classes. This is in line with the Salamanca statement (1994), which states that inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students and ensure quality education to all through organizational arrangements and resource use. The school management teams are the custodians and guarantors of all the learning activities that take place within their institutional jurisdictions. In view of the above, it is important to have a look at the supports that they give to the mainstream class teachers. These school management teams are inclusive of the principals, vice principals and their HODs. This comes on the backdrop of the realization that "successful inclusion hinges on the provision of appropriate supports in the general education classroom as a basis for establishing a successful learning environment for students," (Polloway, Patton and Serna, 2008: 4).

Salamanca statement (1994), notes that successful inclusivity should focus on the provision of a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school. In light of the above, the provision of appropriate support services by the school management teams is of paramount importance in the education of those with learning disabilities. Such support helps boost the confidence of the teachers in their teaching of children with learning disabilities.

There are many social barriers which affect the inclusion of children with learning disabilities and they include attitudinal and institutional organization. In a broader sense, these are hindrances that are certainly beyond the control or manipulation of the mainstream classroom teacher. Institutional arrangements are mainly the responsibilities of the school management teams, hence they are the ones to create a conducive environment for meaningful engagements in the classrooms.

Cook (2001), in Friend and Bursuck (2006), notes that some teachers have indicated a lack of commitment to achieving educational goals for students with learning disabilities in their classrooms and some degree of rejection of these students. In the same vein, Learner (2000), posits that regular class teachers are sometimes hesitant and even fearful about providing for the needs of special needs students in their classrooms. Such negativity and fear towards inclusion is a result of lack of knowledge and skills by the teachers to optimally engage with those with learning

disabilities. This leads to opposition to inclusion and negativity towards such because of the lack of understanding of students with learning disabilities, (Smith, 2010). Teachers should be helped to develop instructional options that challenge all students, (Bender, 2008).

Education White Paper 6 (2001) notes that inclusive education is about enabling education structures, systems and learning methodologies to meet the needs of learners. In view of this, Engelbrecht, Green and Sigamoney (1999) posit that educators in collaboration with support personnel should develop a diagnosis and plan instructional programs designed to achieve specific outcomes appropriate for a particular learner. This however requires the teacher to be knowledgeable of the methodologies to be implemented in the designing of the aforesaid instructional programs.

According to Gearheart, Weishahn and Gearherat (1992), there are specific teaching approaches that a normal classroom teacher cannot be expected to know. These approaches require teachers to go through some training. In the absence of such training, school principals, vice principals and their HODs must possess the knowledge bases about inclusivity because they are the ones teachers turn to for support when the need arises. This is alluded to by Schaik, (2000), who notes that remediation of the problems of learning in disabled children is a highly specialized subject area which demands specific knowledge and skills from practitioners. Furthermore, Polloway et al (2008: 3) argue that "..... educators need new knowledge bases and skill sets to function effectively in the multi-tiered system that now exists to address the needs of students with learning related needs".

The teacher has to have sufficient knowledge of the implications which each type of disability has for a particular child's learning and growth towards adulthood in order to teach these children adequately, (Schaik, 2000). In view of the above, it can be argued that, since most teachers did not receive any training in inclusive/special education, they have to receive assistance from their school management teams in order for them to be able to effectively manage their inclusive classes.

The call is for these teachers and their school management teams to work collaboratively in their quest to provide for services such as individual educational programs, computer assisted instructions, appropriate mobile charts, textbooks, assessment criteria, diagnosis, placement and mutual support. In essence, the school management teams must provide for the needs of children with learning disabilities in the mainstream classes, (Grange and Newmark 2002).

In view of the above, successful inclusion can only be viewed as the consequences of shared responsibilities. Inclusion means that the education of children with disabilities is viewed by both the teachers and the school management teams as a shared responsibility, in which case, the school management teams should always be ready to offer the continuum of supports that the mainstream class teachers might need.

2. Goals of the Study

The study was undertaken to establish whether teachers in mainstream independent schools are receiving any help from their school management teams in their teaching of learners with learning disabilities. This was on the backdrop of the policy of inclusivity which requires that these children be taught together in the same inclusive classes with their more abled peers, yet at the same time, most teachers who are currently practicing did not get any training in the area of special/inclusive education.

3. Methodology and Design

The study was carried out through the qualitative research methodology. In this case, the teachers' experiences were vital in sourcing out information about how they receive support or collaborative assistance from their school management teams. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006) qualitative research is inquiry in which researchers collect data in face-to-face situations by interacting with selected persons in their settings. This was particularly important considering that the researcher wanted to gather data through face-to-face interviews.

Through the qualitative method, the research adopted the phenomenological research design. This allowed for participants to share their lived experiences as they are the ones on the ground to shed more light on the topic under study. Savin-Baden and Major (2013), note that phenomenology is an approach that allows for investigating the human experience at a fundamental level, seeking the essence of lived experiences. In the same vein, Creswell, (2007) in McMillan and Schumacher (2010) posits that phenomenology is a research approach that seeks to uncover what several participants who experience a phenomenon have in common. Phenomenology seeks not only to uncover what individuals experience but also how they experience the phenomenon. In this regard, the phenomenological design helped shed more detail to the experiences lived by the mainstream class teachers. The choice of this approach was influenced by the need to gather firsthand information from the participants who happen to be the ones who are experiencing the amount of

support from the mainstream school management teams.

4. Instrumentation

Structured interviews were used to gather information from the participants. This was preferred as there would be uniformity in the way questions were asked. According to Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtler (2010), interviews can provide much more depth and explore more complex beliefs, knowledge, or experiences than a survey. There is plenty of opportunity to ask for clarifications of answers or ask additional questions on some unforeseen issues that might arise. In view of this, structured interviews were deemed the best way of sourcing out information about the lived experiences of the mainstream class teachers with regards to support services provision by the school management teams.

5. Procedure

Participants were asked to take part in the study through letters of consent. This was after the researcher had explained to them the purpose of the study. Dates and venues of the interviews were agreed upon by both the participants and the researcher. This was done to avoid inconveniencing the participants in many seen or unforeseen ways. All the interviews were carried out within the schools premises of the participants, but soon after they had finished their day's work. Clarity was sought on responses that were vague in as much as the participants had the opportunity to ask questions on issues they did not understand.

6. Sample

Six mainstream class teachers were purposefully chosen to take part in the study. "The goal of purposeful sampling is not to obtain a large and representative sample; the goal is to select persons, places or things that can provide the richest and most detailed information to help us answer our research questions", (Lodico et al, 2010: 134). In this instance, participants were purposefully chosen because of their experiences in the teaching of children with learning disabilities in the mainstream classes. Three male teachers and three female teachers were purposefully selected to participate in the study. The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study, (Lodico et al, 2010).

7. Data Analysis

After data collection, all data were coded into categories as they sought to answer to specific questions on the interview. Data that were similar were grouped together for easy of interpretation and analysis. All given data were summarized for presentation.

8. Results

The results of the study indicated that teachers in mainstream independent schools are not receiving adequate support from their school management teams in their teaching of children with learning disabilities in their classes. The lack of support noted relate to: 1) the provision of adequate time to focus on learners with special needs, (2) provision of in-service training or any other form of teacher support in the handling of students with learning disabilities. (3) provision of relevant materials/resources for skills training.

9. Discussion

Hadebe (1993) notes that some general education teachers report that the instructional demands of meeting the academic and behavioral needs of students with learning disabilities create an added burden that decreases their ability to meet the academic needs of other normal children. This means that teachers in the mainstream classes are caught in between instructional provision for the more abled students at the same time reaching out to the needs of those with learning disabilities. Teachers in the mainstream classes do not have time to focus or to give attention to learners with learning disabilities. This is mainly because schools are mainly prioritizing the schools' performances at Annual National Assessments which guarantees them funding from the government for the day- to-day running of the school. As such, school management teams (SMTs) are directing all their efforts on improving or ensuring good results by the school. This

impacts negatively on the teachers' preparedness to deal with those with learning disabilities. The argument raised above indicates that, students with learning disabilities in the mainstream classes are a neglected lot, primarily because the teachers are concerned with working towards the improvement of the results of the Annual National Assessments.

Most teachers who are currently practicing were trained before the implementation of the policy of inclusivity. This follows that they were not trained in that regard. They were only trained to teach those who are normal and better abled. The presence of those with learning disabilities in their classes could be putting them in some awkward situations which need to be remedied. In-service training or workshops are essential intervention strategies that can be used to ensure that teachers are abreast with what is expected of them. However, the results of the study show that these workshops or in-service training are rarely done in these schools. This could be due to a number of reasons that could include negative attitude and lack of knowledge by the members of the school management teams. This means that teachers are left to bear the brunt of the policy of inclusivity on their own.

The research findings indicate that there are no resources that are being channeled towards the teaching of children with learning disabilities. These resources relate to the equipment they would need towards the teaching of skills such as woodwork or tailoring. Students with learning disabilities cannot be expected to perform at the same rate as their counterparts without learning disabilities. This means that their curriculum should be biased towards skills training. However, this is rendered impossible even if the teachers had the time to make themselves available to these students because of the scarcity of resources.

10. Recommendations

The lack of support to mainstream class teachers with regards to the teaching of children with learning disabilities in Johannesburg Independent schools is indicative of some deep underlying factors which militate against the provision of such. Inclusivity is about providing the best supports for students with learning disabilities in the mainstream classes. According to Vandeyer (2010), policies are not going further to interrogate the quality of contact; not only in the personal attitudes of students and teachers but also in the institutional arrangements, policies and ethos of the school. The institutional arrangements noted above should be as functionally effective as to empower teachers to deal with any issues that arise during their discharge of duty. Ineffectiveness of school administrators impacts negatively on the way teachers reach out to their students in the mainstream classes. As such, the dreams of the majority of children with special educational needs are a far cry from the desired policies, (Kalabula, 2000).

The panacea to such a problem lies in the deployment of school administrators who possess the necessary skills of handling students with learning disabilities in the mainstream classes. All practicing members of the school management teams must be having an understanding of the needs of children with learning disabilities. Those who don't possess such knowledge need to be upgraded through workshops or in-service training at their level. Also regular workshops should be held to help empower the teachers in this regard.

It can be argued that if the teachers concerned do not know how to plan for and effectively teach these students, then they won't benefit from those inclusive settings. Institutional arrangements should therefore be such that there is constant contact between the school management teams and the teachers to deliberate, review and appraise each other of the best practices that need to be embraced. The absence of such important meetings makes it impossible for the teachers to improve on their efficiency and effectiveness in the classrooms.

Given the evidence that many children with special needs require a greater structure to their learning, and more opportunities for repetition and reinforcement than their peers, time needs to be found for direct instruction, (Gross, 2009). To cover up for the above, teachers should develop differentiated instructional options that challenge all students, (Bender, 2008). In other words, all mainstream class teachers should be able to differentiate their instruction to meet the varied needs of their diverse learners. According to Learner and Johns (2012) differentiated instruction reflects the philosophy of teaching that enables teachers to reach to the unique needs of each child, capitalizing on the students' strengths and weaknesses. Regardless of the needs of the students, teachers would need to formulate the most effective instructional plan possible while avoiding instructional practices not supported by research, (Bender, 2012). In view of the above, school management teams must be knowledgeable in every facet about instructional differentiation. In turn, they will be able to help teachers to effectively teach their students in the mainstream classes. By that, time might be found within those settings to effectively and efficiently teach students with learning disabilities in the mainstream classes without compromising the rate and pace of learning of the average and above average. This in turn will not impact negatively on the Annual National Assessment outcomes of the school.

Another recommendation worth taking is that of having specialist teachers at each and every school. Specialist teachers have done special needs education/inclusive education in more detail and as such they have a deeper

understanding of the challenges involved and how to go about them. These specialist teachers can help provide some effective strategies that the mainstream class teachers need to embrace.

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