

Constraints to quality education and support for all: A Western Cape case

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In its vision for education, the National Planning Commission (2011:264) of South Africa states that “all children can access and benefit from high quality education” through flexible services which are available, accessible and responsive to the needs of children, and that “specific consideration will be given to the most vulnerable children – those who live in poverty or with disabilities”. As an emerging economy, South Africa is faced with the challenge of implementing the policy aimed at realising this vision. This paper highlights the plight of learners who have been identified as having high-level support needs and who are waiting for special school placement. Data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured focus group interviews. In total, 371 participants were involved in this research. Forty-one learning support teachers were purposefully selected, and 165 mainstream teachers were systematically selected from within a specific education district of the Western Cape Province of South Africa. The findings imply that the needs of learners on waiting lists are grossly neglected in mainstream classrooms. Teachers generally feel ill equipped to provide adequate support. Various other contextual factors exacerbate this situation. This article offers some practical recommendations in pursuit of moving beyond a discourse of justification to debate the implementation of inclusive education that will benefit all learners, including learners with high-level support needs.

Keywords: continuum of support; emerging economy; high-level support needs; inclusive education; inclusive schools; learning support teachers; mainstream teachers

Introduction

Emerging economies place a high premium on primary education. This opens the way to secondary and tertiary education, and thus leads to a more highly skilled workforce. Responding to one of the United Nations’ millennium goals, emerging economies are increasingly prioritising primary education as a means to ensure productivity and competitiveness in the world. South Africa reported a 99.3% primary education enrolment in 2014, and can therefore already boast universal primary education to be an effective reality. However, it is recognised that, in order to translate this achievement into meaningful educational transformation, it is imperative that focused interventions are implemented to improve the quality and functionality of education (Statistics South Africa, 2015).

Current international debates on inclusive education centre on the notion of providing quality education to all learners, including those who face barriers to learning in the mainstream schools (Miles & Singal, 2010). This debate is fast moving, from justifying the principle of inclusive education to a discourse on its implementation (Dreyer, 2010; Dyson, 1999). As inclusive education is implemented in education systems around the globe, the question remains as to whether justice to those included is served, particularly in emerging economies like South Africa. According to UNESCOⁱ governments, development agencies, civil society and the private sector have to work together to reach internationally agreed sustainable development goals such as Education for All and inclusive education. These relate directly to increasing opportunities to all and in particular the most vulnerable.

South Africa has embraced inclusive education since 1994 as part of the broader democratisation process. In so doing, it adopted a social ecological model (Landsberg, Krüger & Swart, 2011). This model reflects the strong socio-political motivation that underpins the move to inclusive education in the South African context. It has resulted in several systemic changes being made in order to address this crucial issue of providing quality education and adequate learner support (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2010; Department of Education, 2001). Recently, the National Planning Commission, Republic of South Africa (2011:264) reaffirmed its vision for education “to ensure that all children can access and benefit from high quality education”. It stated that flexible services ought to be available, accessible and responsive to the needs of children, particularly that of the most vulnerable children who live in poverty or with disabilities.

Legislation alone, however, is not enough to bring about changed perspectives or to ensure implementation. To bring about the desired changes, it is imperative that both policies and practices become contextually responsive. In an attempt to ensure quality education and support for all, South Africa introduced a continuum of support model. However, in a country faced with vast contextual differences in the provision of and access to quality educational support, the teachers in certain communities are faced with many challenges. While the country boasts some of the most advanced policies on inclusion and education as a basic human right, there is still a vast gap between policy and implementation (Dreyer, 2008; Wildeman & Nomdo, 2007).

Unfortunately, this gap between policy and implementation results in the needs of many learners not being adequately addressed. Despite the continuum of support advocated in the policy documents, many learners who would qualify for intensive support in a special school are on long waiting lists, because special schools are few

and full. The result is that many learners with high-intensive support needs are “accommodated” in mainstream classes where they are often marginalised. Teachers are faced with the daunting task of giving support to these learners. Often with inadequate training and given little support themselves, they are expected to be sensitive to inclusionary practices and to offer a multilevel and multimodality curriculum, while at the same time challenging learners with educational and social experiences, which are consistent with their abilities (Department of Education, 2001; Salend, 2011).

Including the Marginalised

The inclusion of learners with additional support needs in mainstream schools continues to be a focus of education debates around the world (Florian & Linklater, 2010). According to the McKinsey Report (McKinsey Education, 2009), all the representatives from the six participating countries, including South Africa, mainly discussed the provision of equitable education to all. Internationally, various approaches have been adopted to implement education and support strategies to address this immense need. In more affluent economies, the focus is on providing for high-level needs in mainstream schools through well-established and well-resourced special education systems.

Poorer countries with emerging economies, however, focus mainly on social inclusion (Dreyer, 2008). Broadly defined, the latter group includes learners previously excluded on the basis of various contextual factors. These include gender disparities, social and economic status, and geographic location, as well as disability. Due to the political heritage and historical discrepancies in the provision of education and support, South Africa faces challenges from both perspectives (Dreyer, 2008). The all-encompassing term “barriers to learning” was therefore adopted to refer to the diverse range of factors that may lead to the failure of the system to accommodate diversity. In turn, this may lead to a breakdown of learning or prevent learners from having access to educational provision (Department of Education, 1997).

More than Disability

Given that South Africa has taken up the challenge of inclusive education as part of the wider political restructuring programme, it is recognised that inclusive education involves much more than the reform of special education. Inclusive education is regarded as a moral issue, embracing human rights and values, and is therefore an integral part of creating an equal and just society (National Planning Commission, Republic of South Africa, 2011). The adoption of this broad vision of ‘Education for All’ reflects a shift in paradigm from one which supports the rights of learners with

disabilities, to one which focuses on all those who are vulnerable to exclusion and exclusionary pressures in education (Muthukrishna, 2003:vii). Naicker (2005:244) argues that the intention of the government is to create a pedagogy of possibilities in terms of race, ability, interest, intelligences and learning styles. With the emphasis on equity, quality and access, South Africa thus included the notion of ‘Education for All’ in its overall social, political and economic transformation (Dyson & Forlin, 1999:39). It would not be enough, therefore, to suggest that inclusive education can be restricted to what Slee refers to as the “theoretical straight-jacket of special educational needs” (2001:121). The development of an inclusive education system must be aimed at enabling schools to provide for all learners (Landsberg et al., 2011).

This would include provision for high-intensive support needs. As an emerging economy, South Africa has adopted a systemic approach to providing for the diverse needs of all the learners in the education system. This follows the trend set by economically more advanced countries such as Australia (Fielding-Barnsley, 2005), the United States of America (Salend, 2011), and Britain (Dyson, 2005).

A Systemic Approach

The McKinsey Report (McKinsey Education, 2009) reiterated the importance of whole-system reform in providing access to high quality education. This implies access and collaboration across the system (Landsberg et al., 2011). South Africa has come a long way in the struggle to dismantle the apartheid educational system, and to replace it with one based on a democratic social order. According to Sehoole (2003), however, it is simultaneously struggling to establish a system that will allow more extensive participation by its different stakeholders.

In recognition of research done in the early years, a single curriculum was developed for all schools, including special schools (Department of Education, 1997). This was carried out in response to the call for systemic changes and the need to implement inclusive education. It echoes a paradigmatic move towards recognising that barriers may be encountered within education systems. Thus, “the ability to address diversity and minimise, remove and prevent barriers to learning and development must be structured into the system and be integral to its development” (Department of Education, 1997:58). South Africa therefore opted for a systemic approach to ensure that all learners benefit. The continuum of support is accordingly categorised as:

1. Low-intensive support provided in ordinary mainstream schools;
2. Moderate support provided in full-service schools; and

3. High-intensive support, which will continue to be given in special schools.

However, the education system here is not as developed or as well-resourced as are its European or American counterparts, so many learners with high-intensive support needs continue to find themselves in under-resourced mainstream classrooms, with teachers who do not feel competent or qualified to provide for their educational and supportive needs (Dreyer, 2008; Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel & Tlale, 2015). Traditionally in South Africa, as internationally, teachers were not trained to cope with learners who experienced barriers to learning. Nonetheless, in today's inclusive education system, they are required to accept responsibility for all the learners in their classrooms (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2010; Florian & Linklater, 2010). Both teachers and support staff are increasingly expected to work flexibly and to differentiate their teaching materials, methodologies and techniques to cater for the diverse needs they encounter (Salend, 2011). Embracing inclusive education and implementing the necessary policies called for a reconceptualisation of teaching roles and responsibilities (Rose, 2001:147). This was directly related to introducing inclusive practices which would enable all learners - including those on waiting lists for special school placement - to participate meaningfully in the classroom (Moran & Abbot, 2002). However, teachers' self-perceived confidence to teach and support learners with high-intensive needs is still rooted in the deficit view that "they do not have the specialised skills they believe that they should have to effectively teach those learners whose learning needs they believe can only be supported by specialised interventions" (Engelbrecht et al., 2015:7). It is nonetheless important to note that both the McKinsey Report (McKinsey Education, 2009) and the National Planning Commission, Republic of South Africa (2011) stressed the link between the quality of an educational system and the quality of its teachers. In light of this, it is clear that in establishing an inclusive education system, it is imperative to acknowledge that many teachers, both internationally and nationally, are deeply concerned about their lack of knowledge, skills and expertise required to teach and support learners with high-intensive support needs (Black-Hawkins, 2012; Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Florian & Linklater, 2010).

In the light of the above discussion, and the promise the policies hold for equal access to quality education and support services, some burning questions remain. To what extent are learners with high-level needs currently really 'included' in mainstream schooling, especially in the context of an emerging economy such as that of South Africa? To what extent do they have access to the curriculum, or are they only tolerated while waiting

for placement in a special school? The aim of this paper is to explore the impact of teachers' perceived levels of competence and confidence on the support they offer to children with high-level needs in primary school classrooms. The article is based on the findings of research carried out to evaluate a learning support model implemented in the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) in the Western Cape Province of South Africa.

Research Design and Methodology

A mixed methods research design guided this study. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse the data (Mertens, 2005:26, 294; Patton, 2002:71). According to a number of researchers (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002:68), this is a pragmatic approach, which offers the researcher a better understanding of the research problem, treating it in a practical, contextually responsive and consequential manner.

Research Population and Sample

The participants included both learning support and mainstream teachers. Sixty learning support teachers (all those in the chosen district) representing 87 schools were purposefully selected as a sample of all the primary schools in the West Coast Education District in the WCED.

Mainstream teachers were randomly selected with the assistance of the principals of the participating schools. This quota sample comprised one teacher from each of the three phases in the school, that is, the foundation, intermediate and senior phases. Identified in each case by the school principal, they voluntarily agreed to complete the questionnaires.

Four focus groups were randomly selected from mainstream teachers in the participating schools. These groups were coded as Focus groups 1-4. They are identified in the text by number and the lines in the transcript (e.g. FG 2, 30-35). Focus Group 5 (FG5) consisted of learning support teachers from circuits in the southern part of the district. Given the vast geographical distances within the district, this decision was made to allow for a minimum of travelling.

Questionnaire

Two questionnaires were designed; one for the learning support teachers, the other for the mainstream teachers. They were developed within the framework of the survey method (Neuman, 2003). This article focuses on questions directly related to both the mainstream and learning support teachers' views and their experiences of their changing roles in the provision of learner support. More specifically, it looks at their perceived levels of confidence and competence in addressing the high intensive needs of learners in the mainstream classroom. The questionnaire included both closed

questions using Likert-type scales, as well as open-ended questions that explain some of the closed questions. As this article reports on data from a larger study, the first section sought biographical data. Section one consisted of six items, which provide some context, particularly with regard to qualifications, for responses regarding teachers' perceived confidence to support learners who experience high-level needs. The second section focused on perceptions about the effectiveness and quality of the learning support given in mainstream primary schools. Ten items focused specifically on support provided to learners with high-level support needs, and the respondents' self-perceived confidence and competence to support this particular group of learners. The questionnaires were pilot-tested to determine and ensure that the questions as well as the questionnaires are well structured. Any uncertainties regarding interpretation of certain questions were thus eliminated. This pilot study helped to ensure validity of data collected through the questionnaires.

Verbatim responses were recorded in the results section on the basis of teaching position (mainstream teacher as MST and learning support teacher as LST) and the number of the respondent (e.g. LST Respondent 16).

Permission was sought from the head of the Specialised Learner and Educator Services (SLES) of the district to explain and distribute the questionnaire to the learning support teachers at their circuit meeting, which included the learning support advisors in all nine circuits of the district. Some learning support teachers were absent from this meeting; thus only 43 questionnaires were distributed. Being a rural education district with vast distances between towns, all nine circuits only meet twice a year. Therefore, given the time constraints and the distances involved, this was the only opportunity to reach these teachers. They were asked to complete the questionnaire at home and return it to the learning support advisor in their specific circuit within a week. The completed questionnaires were collected by the learning support advisors. The sealed envelopes were then collected by the researcher. Forty-one (41) of the forty-three (43) respondents returned completed questionnaires. This resulted in questionnaires being completed for 63 schools in the district. A total of 41 (95%) completed questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaires for the mainstream teachers were distributed to the schools in a sealed envelope with the help of the learning support teachers. The questionnaires were accompanied by a letter to the principal explaining the procedures to be followed. Of the 189 questionnaires distributed to mainstream teachers, 165 (87%) were completed and returned. Data from the questionnaire were

used to frame the interview schedule for the next phase.

Focus Group Interview

The focus interview guide was informed by data collected from the questionnaires. The guide provided a framework within which the interviewer could develop questions, sequence it, and make decisions about which information to pursue in greater depth. It further helped to "keep the interactions focused while allowing for individual perspectives and experiences to emerge" (Patton, 2002:344). The discussion included questions that focused on opinions regarding inclusive education and support structures to support learners who experience learning difficulties. Considering that a focus group interview can last from one to two hours, a great deal of qualitative data could be generated in a relatively short period of time.

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with both mainstream and learning support teachers. Although the four participating schools shared certain commonalities, each had its own unique context and character. Four separate interviews were carried out and recorded with permission at the respective schools. Each focus group (FG 1–4) consisted of six to eight mainstream teachers, systematically selected (every fifth or sixth person) from a staff list with the help of the principal. Each interview lasted about one hour. The interview with FG5 (6 of the eight learning support teachers selected) took place at a local primary school. The schools they represented included rural farm schools and semi-urban schools.

For the purpose of this article I will refer to data from both groups, recording how, both individually and collaboratively, they dealt with high-intensity support needs in the mainstream.

Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected (Patton, 2002). This paper deals with some of the results from a larger evaluation research study (Dreyer, 2008). Data were thus analysed and discussed according to the themes identified as evaluation objectives for the larger study. For the purpose of this article, the author will focus on the section that deals with "Learners identified for Special School placement" with the emphasis on "*Support for learners who qualify for support on level three of the learning support model*".

The quantitative data were analysed with the SPSS 15.0 for Windows data analysis computer programme. However, although the SPSS programme was used for frequency analysis, priority was given to descriptive statistics of the qualitative data.

Qualitative data from the interviews and the open-ended questions in the questionnaire were

thematically analysed (Creswell, 2003). Data from the questionnaires and interviews were analysed independently of one another. The transcribed interviews and qualitative responses from the questionnaires were then organised separately into categories, e.g. 'large classes', 'differentiation' and 'Teacher Support Teams'. The researcher constructed themes capturing recurring patterns and then grouped them, finding both commonalities and differences essential to the study, e.g. support provided at Level One of the learning support model. The schools that participated in the focus group interviews were coded as School 1, School 2, School 3, and School 4. The group of learning support teachers were simply referred to as 'learning support teachers'. The focus groups were further identified by referring to the number of the group and the lines in the transcript (e.g., FG 2, 30–35). There were thus five focus groups that participated in the semi-structured interviews. After coding and categorising, themes were constructed. These captured those commonalities and differences essential to the study. The themes and subthemes identified were as follows: major theme: support on Level One of the learning support model, while the subthemes were: 1) effective functioning of the Teacher Support Team and the role of the principal; and 2) in-class support given to both learners and teachers.

Results

Data from the survey and responses from the focus group interviews about inclusive education are integrated in this section (Creswell, 2003). Biographical data from the questionnaires revealed that teaching and support services were dominated by females, as 92% of learning support and 71% of mainstream respondents were female. The age distribution showed that the majority of both groups were between 40 and 49 years. Contextually it is important to note gender and age distribution, as teaching is historically viewed as a female profession, particularly in primary schools, where inclusive education is a relatively young philo-

sophical underpinning for education.

From Table 1, it is clear that 65% of the mainstream teachers in this project had no formal qualification in learning support.

Provision of High-Intensive Support

The graphic responses below were elicited from the questionnaire covering support to learners whose names were on a waiting list for placement in a special school. The purpose for these questions was to establish what the participants' opinions were regarding the support provided to learners who are identified to be referred to a special school.

There was a significant correspondence between the responses from both groups. An overwhelming response from both learning support (70%) (Figure 1) and mainstream participants (61%) (Figure 2) indicated a lack of adequate support for those learners who qualified for high-intensive support.

According to the qualitative data, there was a general consensus among learning support teachers (LST) that not enough was being done to provide for those learners who qualified for high-intensive support. The major themes identified from the qualitative responses of both groups (Questionnaire 1, Question 2.33, and Questionnaire 2, Question 2.22) as reasons for the quantitative responses, were that learners tended to be left to their own fate, special schools were full and too far away, and mainstream teachers lacked qualifications and training on barriers to learning.

The following were some of the responses captured by the sub-theme "in-class support given to both learners and teachers":

LST Respondent 16: *Many learners who are on the waiting lists for too long tend to drop out. Accommodation in special schools is limited.*

MST Respondent 130: *The teachers are not trained to support learners effectively. They need special attention.*

LST Respondent 25: *Mainstream teachers do not feel equipped and feel that it is someone else's responsibility.*

Table 1 Learning support qualifications of mainstream teachers

Learning Support Qualification	Mainstream teachers	
	Count	%
Diploma in Remedial Teaching	6	3.9%
Fourth year in Remedial Teaching	16	10.2%
Diploma in Learning Support	2	1.5%
Fourth year learning support module	1	1%
Further Diploma in Education (Learning Support)	4	2.6%
Advanced Certificate in Education (Learning Support)	5	3.4%
B.Ed. (Learning Support)	-	-
B.Ed. Hons (Learning Support)	2	1.4%
Other	17	11.0%
None	102	65.0%
Total	155	100%

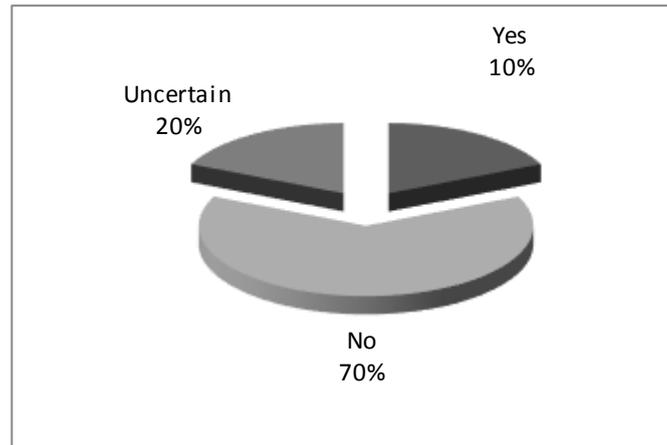


Figure 1 Learning support teachers' opinions of support for learners on the waiting lists of special schools ($N = 41$)

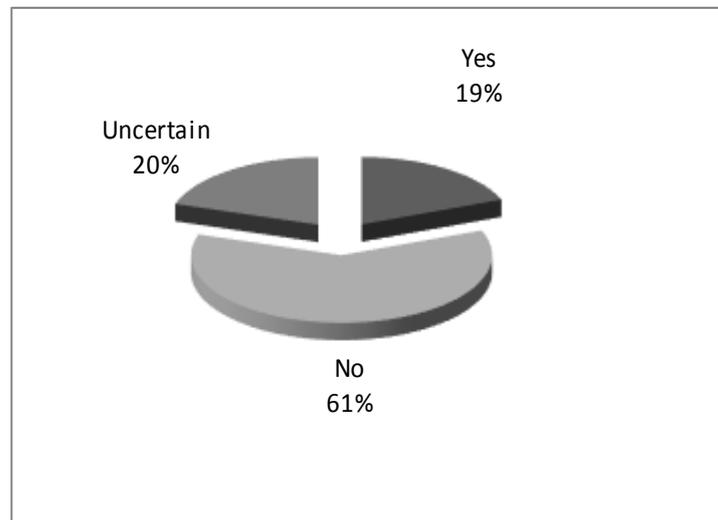


Figure 2 Mainstream teachers' opinions of support for learners on the waiting lists of special schools ($N = 154$)

Many of the mainstream respondents agreed with the comments made by the learning support teachers above. However, they also noted that “*learners get lost in the mainstream and just drift along.*” Some suggested that a full-time learning support teacher might alleviate the problem, while one suggested having two learning support teachers, one for the Foundation Phase (Grade R-3) and one for the Intermediate and Senior Phase (Grade 4–7). While some teachers tried to help these learners, many did not feel confident or equipped enough to offer specialist support. Nevertheless, some respondents reported that a great deal of effort was put into establishing contact with parents, and completing the appropriate documentation. Class teachers worked closely with the learning support teachers in this. On the other hand, some parents refused permission to apply for

special school placement, while financial constraints and distances from special schools also hindered the process.

Self-Perceived Confidence Levels of Mainstream and Learning Support Teachers

Only 59 (38%) of the 154 respondents (Table 2) said they felt confident enough to support learners with high-intensive needs in their classes. However, it is interesting to note that only 28% indicated that they could develop individual support plans (ISP). With regard to the sub-theme “effective functioning of the Teacher Support Team and the role of the principal”, 52% of the respondents, reported that they did not receive any help from the learning support teacher to develop an ISP. An alarming 42% believed that it was the responsibility of the ILST to develop such plans.

Table 2 Self-perceived confidence of mainstream teachers

Confidence and competence	YES		NO		SOMETIMES		TOTAL
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
I have adequate confidence to support learners experiencing serious barriers to learning in my class.	59	38%	35	23%	60	39%	154
I can develop an individual support plan (ISP).	41	28%	49	33%	58	39%	148
The learning support teacher helped me to develop an ISP for a learner.	45	31%	76	52%	25	17%	146
The Institution Level Support Team (ILST) is responsible for developing ISP's.	60	42%	23	16%	60	42%	143

Note. Source: Adapted from Dreyer, Engelbrecht and Swart (2012).

Table 3 Self-perceived confidence of learning support teachers

Questions on confidence	Learning support teachers						TOTAL Count
	YES		NO		UNCERTAIN		
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	
I have adequate confidence to support learners with serious barriers to learning.	30	75%	3	7.5%	7	17.5%	40
I have adequate confidence to support mainstream teachers who support learners on the waiting lists of special schools.	31	77.5%	1	2.5%	8	20%	40

Note. Source: Adapted from Dreyer et al. (2012).

According to Table 3, a high percentage of learning support teachers were confident enough to support learners with high-intensive needs, as well as helping mainstream teachers to do the same. It is of concern that 17.5% were uncertain about their own ability to support these learners, while 20% were uncertain about their ability to support teachers. While 38% of mainstream participants (Table 2) felt confident enough to support learners who experienced serious barriers to learning, only 28% reported being able to develop ISPs.

From the answers to an open-ended question on the questionnaire for the learning support teachers, the following themes were identified relating to the support they provided to mainstream teachers who had learners with high-level needs in their classes: 1) developing an ISP on their own or in collaboration with the teacher; 2) placement in a core group; 3) withdrawal in a small group more often and for longer periods; 4) seek external help such as referring to the school psychologist to be assessed; 5) administrative referrals to a special school; 6) provide individual support; and 7) provide practical help and support, e.g. emphasise keywords, enlarge question papers, provide study buddies and carry out alternative assessment for these learners. Besides working at the learners' level, some participants mentioned that they gave a lot of love, attention and support to promote the chances of success, and had discussions and counselling sessions with parents, giving them advice.

The analysis of the reasons given by learning support teachers for the strategies they employed revealed various responses. In particular, many of the participants believed that these learners generally had a low level of self-worth. They therefore encouraged them to enjoy school and feel that they could also achieve success.

However, some responses reflected a less positive picture. One participant boldly stated that if the learners were taken out of the class, the mainstream teachers would "complain less". Another highlighted the lack of special services such as therapy. The responses of both learning support and mainstream teachers indicated that a great degree of emphasis was placed on academic performance, while other aspects, such as vocational skills development and emotional wellness, were neglected. It was argued that learners who experienced serious barriers to learning were not adequately instructed in the mainstream class. For this reason, the respondents called for the return of the special class or full-time teachers for those with high-intensive needs. This opinion was reflected in the following highly emotive responses:

MST Respondent 66: *I feel that the learning support in Senior Phase is a mockery. It is because of the system that we have so many learning support learners in our classes these days. I would rather see the old special classes return where learners can be taught skills.*

MST Respondent 89: *What really will be an advantage is a permanent adaptation class. In our*

rural schools there are many learners who struggle to learn in the mainstream.

Opinions about Inclusive Education

From the interviews, it was clear that many mainstream teachers' understanding of inclusive education was limited to learners who had high-level support needs, such as those with physical disabilities or severe intellectual impairments. This was seen as overwhelming, and in addition, large classes, limited resources and a lack of qualifications made it difficult for them to deal with such learners. The responses also highlighted concerns about ramps, space for wheelchairs in already overcrowded classrooms, and the reactions of the other learners in the school. Some were concerned that it was a "money saving thing" and that learners were "dumped" in the mainstream, regardless of whether or not their teachers could cope. Generally, the respondents felt that inclusive education looked good on paper, but was a disappointment when it came to be implemented.

Nonetheless, the participants did feel that it might work if schools were given additional financial and human resources to provide for learners who were identified as needing high-intensive educational support, but who were still in mainstream schools. One focus group explained how they had to pay for an additional teacher from their school funds to help support learners with a high-level need for intervention. They felt that the Department of Education should at least meet them halfway to pay for these additional human resources.

Discussion

An almost 100% access to primary education has been achieved in South Africa. Given that it is an emerging economy, however, there is still an enormous need to translate this achievement into meaningful educational transformation. Focused interventions are paramount to improving the quality and functionality of the education system as a whole. It is concerning that, while a continuum of support has been introduced, discrepancies persist. In 2011, an average of 73% of learners with disabilities had completed their primary education, but only 39% of those who enrolled in secondary education had finished (Statistics South Africa, 2013). This has serious implications in an emerging economy such as that of South Africa, in which there is an urgent need to improve the skills of the nation's workforce. This state of affairs can be linked to poor implementation of policy, the perceptions and attitudes of teachers, as well as to their lack of skills and knowledge.

The findings of this study suggest that teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards inclusive education are still very much framed within the perspective of a medical model which locates and categorises deficits in the person and translates

these into curative interventions. This was evident in the responses from both the survey and the interviews, as teachers urged that special classes be reinstated. Many mainstream teachers still believe they are incapable of teaching learners who face barriers to learning and that this should be done by specialists. This situation is further aggravated by the lack of both human and financial resources in an emerging economy. The provision of equitable quality education and support to all learners seems at the present to be beyond reach. This is particularly the case for those learners currently on waiting lists for special school placement.

While the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) distinctly provides for a continuum of support, several reasons are presented as to why learners with high-level support needs are still accommodated in mainstream classes. One such reason is that teachers see the referral procedure as time-consuming, delaying the provision of adequate support or placement in a special school. This is a clear indication that a stronger emphasis should be placed on the high-intensity needs of learners in the pre-service and professional development programmes for teachers.

The data confirms that mainstream teachers do not feel confident enough or sufficiently qualified to offer the kind of specialist support they believe is needed by some of the learners in their classes. A further concern is that learning support teachers generally do not give such learners additional support, and some even believe that they are neither qualified nor competent enough to support mainstream teachers in this area. Giving such support, however, would help address the needs of both the mainstream teacher and of the learners. The mainstream teachers in this study further suggested that too much emphasis was being placed on academic performance, and that the emotional wellness and vocational skills, which could prepare their learners for life were being neglected.

From both the survey and the interviews, it is clear that learners who are eligible for high levels of support are grossly neglected in mainstream classes. It is imperative, therefore, that pre-service and professional development programmes ensure that teachers merely "tolerating" these learners in the mainstream class is not acceptable.

Although the South African concept of "barriers to learning and development" is much broader than the traditional view of special needs, the negative perceptions many mainstream teachers had of inclusive education were limited to the inclusion of learners who would qualify for placement in special schools. Their objections included the physical accessibility of schools as a whole, already overcrowded classes, limited resources, and their own lack of qualifications. However, these re-

servations should not be dismissed, taking into consideration the long waiting lists and the fact that their learners, as seen from the above discussion, have to be accommodated in the mainstream class without significant support. Findings from this research confirm local and international research (Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Florian & Linklater, 2010) indicating that, in addition to their narrow understanding of inclusive education, teachers have to face many contextual challenges with a direct and significant impact on their classroom practices. This feeds into the argument that an education system is inexplicably linked to the quality of its teachers, referred to in the McKinsey Report (McKinsey Education, 2009) and the National Planning Commission, Republic of South Africa (2011). Florian and Linklater (2010:370) calls for an inclusive pedagogical approach in the training of pre-service teachers so as to enable and prepare them to move beyond “thinking from ideas of ‘most’ and ‘some’ learners to everyone”. In an emerging economy such as that of South Africa, this approach to the training of teachers can not only engage students in true inclusive practice, but also allow them to use “what they already know about learners who experience difficulty” (Florian & Linklater, 2010:369–370) and the resources currently available to them.

The Challenge

South Africa has made significant strides in the provision of formal access to schooling, which was one of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals set for 2015. However, the results above indicate that teachers are generally overwhelmed by the challenges involved and have negative perceptions and attitudes towards inclusive education. Unlike some of the more advanced economies from which this continuum of support model was adopted, South Africa is employing an under-resourced education and support system which does not address the contextual dilemmas experienced in schools in general (Dreyer et al., 2012). The result is that learners who face barriers to learning, particularly those with high intensive needs who are waiting for placement in a special school, are grossly neglected in mainstream classrooms. The focus group interviews further highlighted the economic disparities that still exist in South African schools. In more affluent communities, parents have the financial means to secure private support from professionals.

Other contextual factors include the long waiting lists at special schools, travelling distances to special schools, and the financial implications of this for parents who battle with poverty and adverse socio-economic conditions.

A bleak portrait of access to the curriculum emerges, as learners whose names are on waiting lists for special school placement are socially included, but enjoy very little academic support. This plays into the perceptions of many teachers that such learners are “dumped” into the mainstream as “a money-saving strategy”.

Against the background of the current findings, supported by national and international literature, it can be concluded that teacher confidence and competence, exasperated by contextual factors constrains the provision of the vision to provide quality education and support for all in an inclusive education system.

The challenge therefore extends to effectively addressing the diverse needs in contemporary mainstream classrooms. The current state of inclusive education and service provision requires focused efforts so as to ensure the provision of equitable quality education and support to all learners, including those who are identified with high intensive support needs. This challenge is a call to move beyond trying to justify why inclusive education is a necessity to finding ways to implement practical measures to ensure education and support for all. Table 4 below offers some practical recommendations in pursuit of moving beyond the justification discourse to the debate on implementation of inclusive education.

The author contends that the constructs of “full service schools and inclusive schools” hampers the development of truly inclusive schools and that all schools should be inclusive and provide for all needs. From a pragmatic point of view, however, this may not be possible in the present context of a still developing and very fragile education system. Instead, it is suggested that human and material resources be provided to the school where the child is already enrolled. Hence the principle that the “money follows the child”. In addition, pre-service and in-service teacher training should move away from teaching “how to differentiate to include those who experience barriers to learning” but rather to develop sound inclusive pedagogical practices that focus to include all learners in authentic learning.

Table 4 Beyond justification towards implementation

TARGET	PURPOSE
1 Teacher training (pre- and in-service)	- Focus on training to embrace the philosophy of an inclusive pedagogy that respond to differences between learners rather than explicitly individualise for some. - Develop skills, positive attitudes and confidence by focusing on the teaching methodologies and practices needed to provide multilevel support in a diverse classroom.
2 Support systems in and for schools	Move away from the current practice of relying only on experts towards addressing challenges collaboratively.
3 The Learners	Apply the principle that the “money follows the child” needs to be implemented to address the current lack of human and material resources in mainstream schools.

Legislation alone is not enough to bring about a change in perspectives, attitudes and practices. Quality education for all can only be realised if contextually relevant and creative ways are explored. Both the schools and the teachers who work in them need to be prepared to embrace the undoubted challenges, which come with the implementation of inclusive education in an emerging economy such as South Africa.

Notes

- i. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/>
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

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