

An exploratory Study of Learning Support Structures for Learners with Visual Impairments in the Gauteng Province, South Africa.

Andile Alfred Mdikana

University of South Africa

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ABSTRACT:

In the study reported on here, a qualitative research methodology was used to collect data through semi-structured face-face interviews with selected participants to explore challenges experienced by partially sighted learners in mainstream schools. It was found that even though learners with visual impairment are now physically integrated into mainstream classes, they are not truly included. Furthermore, teacher training should be enhanced and teacher support reviewed when it involves the parents of visually impaired learners in their children's schooling. The sampling of the study was made up of one principal, three (3) HoDs and four SBST members in one school. The ethical considerations were discussed to avoid unethical and non-trustworthy issues. The face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted and also focus group discussion was conducted on SBST members who were schoolteachers and school management teams. Transcriptions of audio-recorded both face-to-face semi-structured interviews and group discussions or interviews were checked by both researcher and interviewees to ensure trustworthiness of the study. The presentation, analysis and discussion of findings were done. 4 Themes were discussed by supporting and arguing the key findings in line with research questions The conclusions, recommendations, implications and limitation were also done with use of key findings from themes against literature reviews and theoretical framework as well as research questions and objectives of the study.

Keywords: Learning support, Visual impairment, Special school, Resource Centre, Trustworthiness

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1. Introduction

Introduction of topic and context

This paper introduced an exploratory study of learning support structures for learners with visual impairment in the Gauteng Province, South Africa in the mainstream schools. In this chapter intend to discuss the background of the study. Furthermore, it intends to provide a

statement of the problem, the rationale, aim, objectives, research questions and overview of theoretical framework, research approach, research design, ethical considerations, the research site, the population and sampling, data analysis and interpretation, the limitations of the study, definitions of terms, and an overview of the study. The learning support structures used to include among other things, District-Based

Support Teams (DBSTs, Institutional –level Support Teams(ILSTs) or School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs), Full-Service Schools (FSSs), Special School as Resource Centres(SSRCs), Learning Support Educators(LSEs) or learner support advisor (LSAs) and community (Nel et. al., 2016). These learning support structures may also include School Management Teams (SMTs), School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and other government departments such Department of Health (DoH) and Department of Social Development (DSD).

Visual impairment may be defined as a condition in which students have (Chinyenze, 2018). People with visual impairment are typically divided into groups such as those with congenital and acquired vision loss, which may be categorised as moderate or severe blindness. For the purposes of this study, visual impairment was defined as students who have restricted sight and light perception, as well as those who are not blind but are unable to read print material efficiently, even when a magnifying device is employed or the font is expanded (Maguvhe, 2015).

State the problem and research objectives

As a lecturer, in one of the Universities in South Africa, I have been painfully triggered by number of learners who are experiencing various types of maltreatments and discrimination in our communities and within education system. From there I became interested in finding out more about this at international and national levels as well as at district or local levels looking at historical and current situations. The following were found and briefly discussed from various parts of the world: Education Monitoring Report Team (2020) reported that in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) only Uganda out of 11 countries such as Cameroon, Zambia and Senegal have adequate specialist teachers to teach learners with visual impairments. However, these specialist teachers still need more additional quality training. RSA education system might be implicated by this statement in terms of respecting and complying to international and local legislative frameworks and policies that state rights of learners with

disabilities like those with visual impairments (Spunguin, Ferrell & Monson, 2017).

Research objectives

- 1) To explore the effective support of support structures in training of teacher to screen, identify, assess and support learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools.
- 2) To explore which government departments should the learning support structures to collaborate with in supporting learners with visual impairment.
- 3) To explore possible challenges and solutions learning support structures could be faced with in assisting learners with visual impairment.
- 4) To explore strategies for improving the functionality of learning support structures in supporting learners with visual impairment.

Main research questions

How do the learning structures be explored in supporting learners with visual impairment?

Sub research questions

- 1) How do support structures support schoolteachers in teaching learners with visual impairment?
- 2) What are possible challenges and solutions are learning support structures used to face in supporting learners with visual impairment?
- 3) What strategies learning support structures use to improve their functionality?
- 4) With which departments should learning support structures collaborate to assist learners with visual impairment?

Brief review of relevant literature

A literature review is a survey of scholarly sources on a specific topic. Omede (2015) says that a literature review provides an overview of current knowledge, allowing the researcher to identify relevant theories, methods and gaps in the existing research. A good literature review does not only summarise, but it also critically evaluates in order to give a clear picture of the state of knowledge on the subject Omede (2015). To Creswell (2005) literature review seeks to

discover what prior research has established regarding the issues around the topic and by so doing the researcher can discover the gaps in the reviewed points of view and give the reader an in-depth understanding of visual impairment and the impact it has on children's learning process.

This paper will provide background information related to educating individuals with disabilities, particularly visually impaired learners in mainstream schools. International laws and organisations will be discussed, then South African inclusive education, particularly in the Gauteng Province. The section is structured as follows:

1. Historical perspectives of inclusive education worldwide.
2. International inclusive education systems and organisations.
3. Inclusive education in Africa.
4. Inclusive education in South Africa.

The public-school education movement, which has today metamorphosed into what is universally termed "inclusion", first began in Europe with an Australian educator named Johan Wilhelm Klein. By 1805 Klein had concluded that the solution for the problem of providing education for every blind child was in their replacement in local public schools. This innovative practice of public education for children who were visually impaired later spread to Scotland, Germany and England. The inclusion movement advanced in the early 1980s with the advent of the regular education initiative (REI) in the USA. The US has a long history of providing and promoting educational opportunities for all of its children, and all students have the right to a free, appropriate public education (DoE, 2005).

The US has ensured that education is not a one-size-fits-all model; there are many diverse individuals with many ways of learning and different learning needs, and those individuals with visual impairment have gone through many years of hardship in order to become a part of society as a whole (Mpaku-Papu, 2020). Legislation throughout the years has ensured

educational opportunities for individuals with visual impairment, and their individual rights are still being protected today. During the era of extermination in 1407-1416 in Greece, disability was seen as a "punishment of the gods", hence an evil (Lebona, 2015).

2. Methodology

Research paradigm

The set of ideas, beliefs, values and assumptions of the interpretivism were adopted to gain an understanding of the experiences of Visual Impaired learners on the support services. Interpretivism was considered as the approach to follow on how to conduct this research study including its patterns, structure, scientific system and academic ideas, ideas and values (Barbie, (2015). Becking (2011) states that interpretivists assume that the reality is subjective and can differ considering different individuals.

Research approach

This study opts to use a qualitative research approach which usually addresses the objectives of the study, the research questions, and the trustworthiness of the study (Mampe, 2016). This approach uses systematic data collection and thematic data analysis (Hammarberg, Kirkman & Lacey, 2015). A qualitative research approach tends to be associated with interpretivism, and it has a recommended degree of flexibility in using some features of a quantitative approach (Hammarberg, Kirkman & Lacey, 2015).

Research design

This is a qualitative study that has adopted case study to explore learning support structures for learners with visual impairment. Durkheim (1999; 2006) defines a research design as a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between the research questions and the implementation of the research. A case study can be studied, stretching over a specified period (Leedy & Ormrod, 2006). Currently the researcher looks closely at an organisation, a programme and activity until they are understood.

The case study was chosen to conduct the study in one combined school. As mentioned above, a case study is an in-depth study undertaken of a particular case which can involve a site, an individual or a policy.

Population and sampling:

Population

In this section, population will be defined and related to researcher's study population where her participants will be purposefully selected.

The population is a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects or events, that conform to specific criteria, and to which we intend to generalise the results of the research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Population can also be defined as the total number of people in an area where the researcher carries out his/her research. Therefore, eight participants, who are teachers, where is one Principal, one Deputy Principal (DP), three Departmental Heads (HODs), each of whom represented Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase and Senior Phase, and three classroom teachers, each representing Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase and Senior Phase respectively, were purposefully from study population of twenty (20) teachers of the same school.

Sampling

Sampling can be defined as the process whereby the researcher selects participants from the population (Newby, 2010). It can also be defined as a small portion of the total set of objects, events or persons that together comprise the subject of the study (Mampe, 2016). The researcher defines sampling as a process through which a small and manageable portion of the entire population may be purposefully selected based on the researcher "s proposed criteria. The researcher "s criteria for selecting research participants include experience, knowledge about visually impaired learners, and positions in institutions. For this reason, the researcher opted to use the purposeful sampling technique to select richly informed participants.

Data collection

This section on data collection includes two data collection methods which involved face-to-face interviews and focus group interviews, Kavale (2000) defines an interview as an interview whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee with respect to his/her interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in face-to-face encounters between the researcher and participants about visually impaired learners. The group comprise of eight participants to ensure full participation by each participant. The use of focus group discussion as a data collection tool in social research is a firmly established tradition within the ambit of the qualitative paradigm, hence it resonates with the current study design (Thahn & Thahn, 2015). The study adopted focus group discussion method because participants in a group can debate about a specific issue and provide rich information in a short period (Momba, 2016). The researcher interviewed a selected group of teachers separately to explore how their skills can be enhanced to improve academic performance among visual impaired learners.

Data analysis and interpretation

In this study, the researcher opted to use thematic analysis as her data analysis method. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a qualitative analytic method used in identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data. Thematic analysis organises and describes the data set in rich detail, and it frequently goes further to interpret various aspects of the research topic (Onwuegbuzie, 2009); Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical considerations

The researcher explained voluntary participation, the right to privacy, protection, confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity and pseudonyms for sampled participants. The researcher had to apply for ethical clearance from the University of South Africa (UNISA). He had to send a letter to the Gauteng Education Department, South Africa seeking for permission to conduct research using schools. He had to write letters to school principals asking for their permission to access

selected schools as the population of the study. “Qualitative studies help researchers answer questions dealing with the „why“ and „how“ of the problem being explored”. The researcher invited educators to participate in the study through a letter in which he described the study and the data collection process. In the letter he included the purpose of the study, study procedures, the voluntary nature of the study, confidentiality, and information about himself; and he supplied his contact details.

Research sites

The school is quintile 1, no-fee and located in a rural area where the road is dusty in summer, muddy and slippery in wet weather, and thus challenging to the researcher as she investigated the schools. Businesses were very far from the school, and that made it more difficult to reach them on poor roads, and via unreliable telephone and network facilities.

Limitations and delimitation of the study

As has been stated, the study took place in the Gauteng Province. The environment in which the school is located limits the chances of visiting it during the rainy season because of the muddy and slippery roads. The lack of funds in carrying out this study made it difficult to do a lot of paperwork, which included the binding and printing of documents.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of social justice by Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandegou (2010), underpins this study about visually impaired learners in mainstream schools. This theory forms the foundation for the pursuit of social justice by which disadvantaged or designated persons can benefit from social services such as education. It does not directly focus on education but is open to extension to related circumstances such as the inequality in education. Visual impairment should be viewed from a social justice rather than a medical perspective. Visually impaired learners must be included in mainstream schools, otherwise they will be sent for special needs education. Visual impairment is not only a health problem. Rather it is a civil rights and social issue.

Hence social justice needs to bring educational change in our society.

3. Presentation of Results and Discussion

In this section the findings are presented, analysed and discussed in line with research questions and objectives. This has been organised around 4 themes, literature reviewed and theoretical framework. This paper is also linked to the research methodology which spell out how what, how and why should findings be collected or treated in this way. However, pseudonyms were used to protect research participants” and institutions real names identities during interview proceedings. Therefore, participant “s profiles were given pseudonym to protect their identities. These participants “profiles were into two sets. The first set with Ps were for face-to- face interviews while those with G’s were for group discussions. The 2 sets of data collection were conducted in one mainstream combined school from grades R-9. Therefore, collected data were presented in thematic manner where 4 themes for each set i.e. face-to-face semi-structured interviews and group discussions. These themes were formulated in line with research objectives and research questions. Therefore, interview schedules were derived from research questions. For these reasons, responses from interviewees were answering research questions, but very important, unexpected responses emerged to form emerging theme. Therefore, the theoretical framework is used as theoretical lens through which respondents” responses are critically viewed against literature reviewed or previously conducted similar studies. After having discussed findings of both sets, this paper ends with conclusion for findings of both sets.

Theme 1: Teachers’ understanding and training in teaching visually impaired learners

Three participants responded to this question about how teachers in their respective schools showed understanding of existing guidelines for implementing SIAS policy, and about training for and implementing existing guidelines of SIAS policy to deal with learners with visual

impairment in mainstream schools. This is how these participants responded:

PLSP2: "I have a problem with this SIAS policy because I have insufficient knowledge about it. No one, especially from the Department of Education, has given me clarity on it. I once heard about it from the SBST coordinator who had attended the workshop, but when it comes to practicality, that's where the problem starts."

PL3: "We teachers have realised that we are running short of knowledge, understanding, techniques and experience of dealing with guidelines for implementing SIAS policy. This is due to a lack of teachers, other support structures, and other relevant role-players."

PL3's views seem to be in line with the statement made by Weber (2013) that responsible and relevant role-players such as DBSTs and SBSTs are expected to mobilise communities and raise awareness in the community about the causes, nature of, and possible solutions, for visual local support and self-help groups for people with visual impairment PLIP1: "As a teacher I think all stakeholders in the education system should collaborate so that SIAS policy will be implemented effectively. Teachers should know how the policy works. It is especially our mainstream schools that include learners with diverse disabilities, like visual impairment. There must also be active SBST members in schools so that learners with visual impairment can be taken care of and correct channels followed. If the SBST committee is active and strong, all or most teachers will have clarity how to use the policy." From the responses given by participants it became clear that implementation of existing guidelines was ineffective owing to the lack of skills to implement and knowledge and understanding of these guidelines because there was insufficient training and in-service training of teachers and SBSTs.

Theme 2: Teachers' challenges and accommodation of visually impaired learners in mainstream schools.

The following seven participants expressed their views and concerns about challenges and accommodating such learners in mainstream

schools, and about parents or community beliefs about and treatment of such learners.

PL3: "There are many learners in many schools, both primary and secondary, who have diverse disabilities, including visual impairment, who are not attending school because their parents and teachers believe that such learners are a curse"

PLFP1: "Most parents do not show any compassion for their visually impaired children, because they think their children's visual impairment is a curse or a taboo. They rely on teachers to take care of them; they behave as if they seem to assume that teachers know everything and should do everything for their children".

PL4: "I think parents are not doing enough for their children because the parent is the first person to know and understand the child's health. However, once the child shows that he/she has visual problems and the parents are notified by the teacher about their child's condition so that the SIAS process may start".

PLFP2: "I think the collaboration between the support structures and the relevant stakeholders will remain the key in ensuring that the SIAS policies are implemented effectively for the visually impaired learners".

PLSP1: "As I understand it, the SBST must support and keep provisioning and organising regular meetings with parents or guardians of learners with impairment. If there is no progress from the teacher's support, the learner should then be transferred to the SBST. The SBST should offer support to the learner, and if the learner does not progress, the SBST should complete SNA2 for DBST reference."

Theme 3: Strategies for implementing EWP6 and SIAS policy

PL3: "All support structures (SMTs, SGBs, subcommittees of SGBs, the Health Department, and the Department of Social Development) should collaborate to find common platforms for sharing challenges and expectations stipulated in EWP6 and SIAS policy documents."

One of the crucial strategies used to implement EWP and SIAS policy is to apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which advocates the use diverse teaching-learning methods such as using text and audio-visual or visuals (Aftab, Chaudhry & Amjad, 2024).

PL3 stated the importance of collaboration between stakeholders that will enable successful implementation of SIAS and EWP6 policies. He emphasised the proper functioning of these stakeholders in assisting learners with visual impairment and teachers. Collaboration and the proper functioning of stakeholders would minimise challenges encountered in schools. The primary aim of DBSTs is to enhance the inclusivity of the education system by broadening access to support (DoE, 2001). Aftab, Chaudhry and Amjad (2024). observe that teachers are critical role players in the implementation of inclusive education. Although only one participant responded to this question, effective facilitation of the implementation of inclusive education programmes seemed to be based on various provision of both human (special teacher and learner support advisor/LSA) and physical resources (assistive technologies). These assistive technological devices include, among other devices, screen magnifiers, speech synthesisers, screen readers, braille and adapting written texts (Modisi, 2019; Aftab, Chaudhry & Amjad, 2024).

Respondent (PL3) was just making a comment on the strategies to be followed by responsible stakeholders in implementing the two policies (EWP6 and SIAS policy). I agree with the respondent as this should be done in schools so that learners and teachers will get assisted and supported. Teachers should be thoroughly trained, and children are most important. RSA Act 108 section 28(2) states that "the child's best interest is of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child" Therefore, all RSA policies (EWP6 & SIAS policy) and legislative frameworks concerning the children to be valid and constitutional should comply with RSA Act 108 section 28 (2), UNCRC Art 3 (1) and ACRWC 4(1)

It has been evident from discussion that strategies of implementing inclusive education policies in most of mainstream schools and more years seem to be sent with little success achieved. There are fewer positive results in the implementation of inclusive education policies in RSA provinces especially in the Gauteng Province.

Theme 4: Lack of provision of flexible curriculum and resources

Without being trained, teachers cannot involve themselves in a curriculum differentiation process so that learners with visual impairment can be provided with suitable and flexible curriculum that will cater for their various paces and levels of complexity. The following three respondents aired their views in line with these points of curriculum differentiation and provision of suitable and required resources.

PL4: 'I combine or mix learners with and without visual impairment when doing group work, so that those without eye problems will assist those with them. When there is something to be read, those without eye problems will read and try to explain to the others what is expected of them. When notes are written on the chalkboard, I make sure that visually impaired learners sit in front or next to the chalkboard so that no other learners will disturb them.'

PL3: "The Basic Education Department seems to be failing to provide full-service schools, special schools and mainstream schools with basic, relevant resources to promote the education of all learners with disabilities, with special reference to learners with visual impairment and teachers. These should include building relevant infrastructure, providing resources such as braille, funds, walking passages, lifts and many others".

PLIP2: 'Other relevant stakeholders should form a social compact with the relevant structure to deal with the challenges facing the visually impaired learners. I think the bone of contention should be the delivery of resources. Resources are very scarce. I think if there is sound cooperation between the stakeholders and the support, relevant stakeholders should be made available. Other stakeholders can arrange for relevant

workshops to build capacity for people to deal with visually impaired learners.'

Participant IP1 confirmed what the SIAS policy is pointing out about drawing on resources that will be useful to learners with visual impairment. The respondent spoke about the need for sufficient resources that would help in the teaching and learning of learners with visual impairment. IP4 mentioned that stakeholders, especially DBSTs, should ensure that visually impaired learners have suitable resources for their successful learning.

PL3 added that funds and infrastructure (buildings) are also lacking owing to the failure of the DBE to provide these resources. The following statements by various scholars and researchers support what participants were saying. Kapur (2018) sees visual impairment as a loss of vision that may occur even when a person makes use of corrective lenses. It may be caused by eye disease, accident or an eye condition present from birth. Corrective lenses are one of the very important resources needed by learners with visual impairment so that they can maximise their chances of having correct vision of words when studying, otherwise they will think they can see well, and then fail to write correctly. For this reason, the DBE has a responsibility to provide such lenses free of charge based on Act no. 108 of 1996, section 29 (1) and (2), which spell out the rights of learners to basic education in South Africa.

According to Johnson and Green (2007), there are always inadequate facilities and infrastructure available to DBST members to provide educational support services at district level, which hinders the DBST service delivery. Officials do not have transport available to visit schools, so it is difficult for them to monitor SBSTs and teachers. DBSTs need to support, train and mentor teachers who need such assistance, and have to arrange special support.

For the visually impaired learners, use large writing on the chalkboard or visual aids. The use of coloured chalks is recommended. Let the children come close to the board or teaching aids so that they can see more easily. Prepare teaching

aids that learners can read more easily, like large print material. Other learners in the classroom could help prepare these or they can be produced by enlarging font sizes on computer printouts, and this will help learners who have difficulties to read (UNESCO, 2001; Leonard Cerise Disability, 2011).

As stated above, insufficient funding makes effective education difficult because it means that inclusive education is not a priority, and DBSTs do not provide enough resources. Although SMTs understand inclusive education, they lack confidence, which makes them unable to provide proper support to educators. Insufficient support received from the national Department of Education makes the DBSTs unable to play their roles effectively because there are gaps in the responsibilities of the national Department of Education, the provincial Department of Education, and the districts (Johnson & Geen, 2007). DBSTs overcome barriers that prevent the system from meeting the full range of learning needs by identifying and prioritising them, and providing the support needed to address them by strategic planning and a management framework in the district. They serve as consultant mentors and develop ongoing support by monitoring and evaluating the SBSTs, SMTs, SGBs and educators aiming to build the capacity of schools to recognise, accommodate and address a range of learning needs. They must work very closely with SBSTs to provide the expert advice and services needed.

4. Conclusion

In line with this research question, Minister Angie Motshekga introduced SIAS policy in 2014 and developed new functions for role players within the education support system, that is, District-Based Support Teams (DBST), School-Based Support Teams (SBST), Special School Resource Centres (SSRC) and Full-service Schools (FSS).¹ The policy outlines the roles and responsibilities of role players in developing a more inclusive educational system. Therefore, it could be concluded that collaboration between the DBST, SBST, parents, and teachers is essential for the successful implementation of the policy, as it

aims to provide teachers with the necessary support and resources could mean role-players are doing justice to learners with visual impairment. This is in line with social justice

theory which favours fairness and social justice to be done to fight for their social justice in education and in South African society.

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Author Declaration

I hereby declare that this study represents my own work which has been done, and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications. I have read the University's current research ethics guidelines and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures in accordance with the University's Committee on the Use of Human & Animal Subjects in Teaching and Research (HASC). I have attempted to identify all the risks related to this research that may arise in conducting this research, obtained the relevant ethical and/or safety approval (where applicable), and acknowledged my obligations and the rights of the participants.

Signature: 

Confirm originality of work

I wish to confirm that this study is original, and it has not been published anywhere. It is the first of its kind.

State no conflicts of interest

The way this study was conceptualised, it was made sure that there no conflict of interest.