Addressing Equity for Learners with Visual Impairment through Inclusive Education Policy Implementation in South African Schools

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Abstract

The implementation of inclusive education policy can attend to systematic barriers and address equity in schools. In this article we report on inclusive education policy implementation with learners who are visually impaired. Our study formed part of a broader initiative that focused on pathways to include learners with visual impairment, allowing them to access quality education in schools of their choice. In undertaking our study, we relied on critical disability theory, utilised a case study design and followed a participatory reflection and action (PRA) approach. Teachers (n=252) from seven full service and ten special needs schools from five provinces in South Africa participated. Data were generated through PRA-workshops, observation, audio-visual techniques, field notes and reflective journals.

The findings confirm that teachers perceive themselves as inadequately trained to teach learners with visual impairment outside schools for the blind, that mainstream schools are ill-equipped to address the needs of these learners, and that the implications of inclusive education policy have not been addressed on governmental level. Participants seemed motivated to support these learners yet required some guidance, for them to ensure quality education for this marginalised group of learners. We argue that teacher enablement is key to addressing equity in education for the visually impaired, in terms of curriculum differentiation, extra-curricular opportunities, re-

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source availability and career prospects.

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Introduction

The provision of equal educational opportunities in South Africa has been problematic for many years (Moon 2020). Apart from limited access to education due to ability and racial differences during the apartheid years, support and schooling for learners with disabilities have generally been neglected in the past. Many learners have been kept out of school because they do not meet certain scholastic standards or are differently abled (Habulezi & Phasha 2012). Although amends have since been made to accept all learners in schools regardless of their (dis)ability, some schools remain reluctant to follow this route (Department of Basic Education 2015). This reluctance may be ascribed to a number of reasons, such as a shortage of specialised or trained teachers and other staff members such as assistant teachers and therapists, or the absence of specialised facilities.

According to the National Education Department's *Education Management Information System (EMIS) report*, only 0.9% of the 29 749 public and independent schools that existed in South Africa in 2016 were special needs schools. More specifically, a mere 715 designated full service schools and 464 special needs schools were in operation at the time, of which only 22 were targeted at learners with visual impairment (Department of Basic Education 2016). These statistics highlight the shortage of special needs schools in South Africa yet also emphasise the importance of other schools supporting learners with disabilities, by following an inclusive approach which implies recognition of learner differences within the school system while capitalising on learner similarities (Department of Education 2001). When accommodating learners with disabilities in such an inclusive school environment it however remains important that their specialised needs will be met, that the necessary resources are available and that teachers are sufficiently skilled (Ferreira-Prevost 2020).

Inclusive education theory views children as holistic human beings

who may benefit from the input and support of the various parties involved in child development. At its core, the policy acknowledges the possibility of all learners to learn and benefit from an inclusive learning environment (Ferreira-Prevost 2020). The ultimate aim is to promote fairness and equity among learners with and without disabilities, by providing access for all learners to a school environment that can support justice as well as quality education for all (Department of Education 2001). The underlying principles of critical disability theory (Hall 2019; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz 2017) emphasise the need to transform the circumstances under which people with disabilities live and function. Such transformation efforts can be targeted at any sectors involved in the learning and development of individuals, thereby foregrounding the importance of the school context for learners with disabilities, such as visual impairment (Hall 2019).

In 2001, the *Education White Paper 6 on special needs education in South Africa* came into effect. This national policy document provides a framework for addressing special needs and providing support services in education and training in the country. At the time, 380 schools for learners with special needs existed countrywide with an enrolment of 64 603 learners, implying the possibility of a large number of learners either not enrolled in the education system or being placed in mainstream schools, which were at the time not well-equipped to support learners with special needs (Department of Education 2001). In 2015, the Department of Basic Education indicated the number of learners facing learning difficulties yet not attending special schools as 597 953 (McCarthy 2015).

The introduction of inclusive education policy in South Africa brought with it the notion that many learners who experience learning difficulties and should in theory receive specialised support, may in practice not have access to this. One of the reasons for this lies with teachers often lacking the necessary knowledge and skills to sufficiently implement current policy requirements. The question can be raised as to what extent South African teachers understand the *Education White Paper 6 on special needs education* (Department of Education 2001), and what the policy implies for their teaching practice on a daily basis. When focusing on the marginalised groups of learners with disabilities, such as visual impairment, this question is even more prominent, as these learners are more often than not treated in an unequal way, with the possibility of substandard education and a lack of sufficient supportive resources. In an attempt to redress the inequities in the

education system, more specifically in terms of inclusive education for all learners in South Africa, research on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in all schools remains important.

Against this background, and the international drive to implement inclusive education policy on an ongoing broader basis, we undertook research that focused on South African teachers' understanding of inclusive education policy and what this implies, within the context of learners with visual impairment. The research we report on in this article forms part of a broader institutional project that aimed to investigate the needs and expectations of teachers in both full service and specialised schools, in order to develop a postgraduate qualification that may better equip teachers of learners who are visually impaired. The broad institutional project in turn formed part of an initiative by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), in partnership with the European Union (EU) as funder. This national initiative had as overarching aim the development of future and in-service teachers to more efficiently implement inclusive education policy in South Africa, in order to redress inequity by attending to all learners' needs, more specifically those who experience learning difficulties.

Being guided by the underlying principles of critical disability theory (Hall 2019; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz 2017), the objectives for our research were to:

- Explore and describe teachers' understanding of inclusive education policy in both full service and special needs schools
- Explore and describe teachers' understanding of what the inclusion of learners with visual impairment implies
- Explore, describe and explain teachers' progress with implementation of inclusive education policy, more specifically in terms of learners with visual impairment.

Progress with implementation of inclusive education policy in South Africa

Since 2001, several guidelines have been put in place on policy level to ensure the successful implementation of inclusive education policy (Department of Education 2001). These include the introduction and publication of

the *Guidelines to Ensure Quality Education and Support in Special Schools and Special School Resource Centres*; the *National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS)*; the *Guidelines for full service/ inclusive schools*; the *Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning*; the *Guidelines for responding to learner diversity in the classroom through curriculum and assessment policy statements*; and the *South African National Development Plan* (Department of Basic Education 2010; 2011; Department of Education 2007; National Development Plan [NDP] 2012). Despite publication of these documents and training efforts by district officials on governmental level, teachers often tend to experience themselves as not sufficiently trained and equipped to implement the policy. In addition, schools are often regarded as not fit for implementation of inclusive education policy based on limited available resources and facilities (Murungi 2015).

A paradigm shift amongst teachers remains a central priority, in order for all teachers in the country moving from mere awareness of the underlying theory, to participating in the implementation of inclusive education policy in their everyday classrooms. In addition, the South African school system needs to become more flexible, accommodating and responsive to the various needs of learners, which once again emphasise the importance of suitable resources and professional services at all schools in the country (Bornman 2020; Ferreira-Prevost 2020). If successful on this level, social change can be facilitated while promoting openness, respect and empowerment for all individuals in society, as proposed by critical disability theory (Hall 2019; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz 2017).

When asked about the factors hindering the optimal implementation of inclusive education policy in previous studies (Ferreira-Prevost 2020), teachers often indicate that they lack the necessary skills to apply the policy with confidence. Factors such as teacher-learner ratio and a lack of sufficient resources have also been mentioned as hindrances to their implementation of the policy (Bornman; 2020). Although some efforts have been undertaken to support schools and teachers in implementing policy, findings such as these confirm the need for ongoing research in the field as well as continued training and support.

Children's Constitutional Right to Quality Education

In a democratic South Africa, the *Children's Rights Act* (Act No. 38 of 2005)

stipulates how children should be supported in terms of their freedom, dignity and equality (Bornman 2020; LeadSA 2013). In terms of these stipulations, the *Children's Rights Act* (Act No. 38 of 2005) emphasises the provision of quality education, socio-economic needs provision and basic healthcare. According to the act, all children have the ability to reach their full potential, with adults being responsible to fulfil a supportive role in children's learning, growth and development.

In support of the *Children's Rights Act* (Act No. 38 of 2005), the *South African Bill of Rights for All Children with Visual Impairment and their Families* (Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind [AER] and Visually Impaired & Council of Schools and Services for the Blind [COSB] 2019) foregrounds the protection of the rights of children with visual impairment by *inter alia* providing them with the necessary services and support. This bill stipulates vision evaluations and early intervention by qualified specialists as important for all children with visual impairment. In addition, educational support in terms of Individual Support Plans (ISPs) is foregrounded, in support of inclusion, as well as optimal learning and development of all children that fall into this category. The bill further alludes to the fact that all children with visual impairment have the right to accessible school settings, suitable learning material and relevant transition intervention procedures (AER & COSB 2019; Bornman 2020).

Quality Education for Learners with Disabilities

In terms of equal quality education provision to all learners in South Africa (Department of Basic Education 2015), it is generally accepted that learners with disabilities such as visual impairment find it hard to access quality education which is equal to and generally available for learners with normal vision. In this regard it is important to note that not many South African teachers have received specialised training to work with learners who experience learning difficulties, despite a national survey (Snap Special Needs Education [SNE] survey 2013) indicating that about 10 252 South African teachers were employed at special needs schools almost a decade ago. The remainder of teachers in South Africa are expected to implement Inclusive Education policy (Department of Education 2001) – regardless of where they teach.

Disparities that contribute to unequal education provision to learners

with and without disabilities therefore relate to insufficient human resources and limited specialised training of teachers. Even though the *Education White Paper 6 on special needs education* (Department of Education 2001) suggests that all learners can be supported in mainstream schools, despite their experienced learning difficulties or special needs, teachers may thus lack the necessary knowledge and skills to support all learners in an equal way (Department of Basic Education 2015).

As a step in the right direction and in response to the *Education White Paper 6 on special needs education* (Department of Education 2001) several mainstream schools have been transformed to full service schools in South Africa since 2001 – referred to as inclusive schools. The aim of this initiative is to accommodate learners with various learning difficulties, thereby providing quality education to all and in this way attending to equity in the current education system, with the potential of enabling them to subsequently function and be integrated into society. This will in turn address the need for social change, as directed by critical disability theory. More specifically, if disability (visual impairment) is taken as a social construct, the environment (schools) can play an active role in supporting and respecting these individuals, allowing them to fulfil equal roles in the systems where they function (Hall 2019; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz 2017).

More specifically, the idea is to attend to the individual needs of learners through, for example, early screening and identification, curriculum differentiation and individualised support provision that will not only enable them to succeed in school but also in future as equal members of society (Department of Basic Education 2010). The question however remains as to whether mainstream and full service schools are indeed sufficiently equipped to attend to this mandate of quality education for all. If not, many learners who require additional support may continue with their current mode of schooling, with the barriers to learning intensifying and inequality remaining rife. On the other hand, however, if teachers and schools are capacitated and take the lead in addressing inequality, society may follow, allowing these learners to be effectively included regardless of their (dis)ability.

Attending to the Educational Needs of Learners with Visual Impairment

The intellectual ability of children in South Africa still seems to determine

their access to quality education despite attempts to avoid this from occurring (African Child Policy Forum 2011). This implies that learners with special needs such as visual impairment, are often not accommodated in the mainstream education system. In terms of numbers, the *South African census report of 2011* (Statistics South Africa 2011) revealed that approximately 496 000 children up to 18 years were disabled at the time, with 32.1% of these being categorised as visually impaired.

Visual impairment can take many forms. The most prominent forms that a learner may present with are partial sightedness or a degree of vision loss despite attempts of rectification; low vision or vision loss of between 20/70 and 20/160 degrees which cannot be corrected; legal blindness, severe low vision or a loss of vision ranging from 20/200 to 20/400 degrees; and total blindness which entails a condition characterised by the absence of any light perception (Disabled World 2018; NICHCY 2017). Other forms of visual impairment include a range of refractive errors, taking the form of near-sightedness, farsightedness and astigmatism (American Foundation for the Blind 2012, 2020). As refractive errors can be corrected with glasses, special educational assistance is not always required in such cases.

In undertaking our research, visual impairment was taken to refer to learners with low vision as well as those who are blind, within the school system. These learners were taken as being disadvantaged due to them not being able to fully participate in or benefit from an educational setting in the way that learners with normal vision could. In terms of service provision to learners with visual impairment we focused on the requirement of accommodation, access to the curriculum and learning material, opportunities that may support optimal learning and active participation in educational activities – both inside and out the classroom (Willings 2020).

It follows that teachers of learners with visual impairment are required to adapt the curriculum in ways that may benefit the learners and create equal opportunities for them to perform well. A stronger focus is required on verbal modes of lesson presentation and adapted assessment tasks, with the utilisation of resources and techniques such as Braille material and repetition when explaining new content (Johnson-Jones 2017). Additionally, for learners with visual impairment to be able to thrive in school, they need to be accommodated in terms of classroom seating arrangements, specialised resources and the availability of material such as Braille material, large font print and/or audio tapes (Mastropieri & Scruggs 2010).

Redressing Equity through Quality Education for the Visually Impaired

Increased access to public funded quality education for learners with disabilities is necessary. More specifically, as it is the constitutional right of every child to access quality education and resources, it is important that learners with visual impairment will have the opportunity for enrolment in schools where they can be stimulated educationally (Bornman 2020).

Equity in education implies fairness and equal opportunities within the education system, where all kinds of learners are catered for (Western Governors University [WGU] 2021). Equity in education furthermore implies access to opportunities, support as well as resources that can promote all learners' development and learning potential. It follows that the aim of promoting equity in education mainly relates to the provision of equal opportunities for all learners to develop valuable skills, where they acquire knowledge and skills that may assist them to live a full life and contribute meaningfully to society (WGU 2021).

Equity in the education system can be promoted in various ways, with these including but not limited to removing barriers in a system, addressing leadership and administrative roles, addressing the role and use of technology and assistive devices, and regularly assessing learners' performance and progress in ways suitable for the needs of individual learners (Spratt 2017). The benefits of a system promoting equity include improved scholastic achievement, challenging the imbalance between power and privilege in the sense of redressing injustice, and strengthening socio-emotional relationships within an equitable environment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2008).

In a study on equity redress in the education system, Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick and West (2016) aimed to provide answers to the question as to how schools can ensure that all learners are treated fairly, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds. Ainscow *et al.* (2016) refer to five important conditions when wanting to ensure such equal opportunities for all learners. The authors namely propose that schools should collaborate in ways that create a whole-system approach, foregrounding equity-focused local leadership as requirement for such collaborative action. In addition, emphasis is placed on the importance of school-based efforts linking to those of the broader community when wanting to address the inequities experienced

by learners. Next, the importance of national policy being formulated in ways that will enable and encourage local actions is highlighted, and finally, it is proposed that equity in education should be mirrored by efforts to develop a fairer society.

Within the context of inclusive education, efforts related to accommodations, concessions and curriculum differentiation can promote equity in education. For this purpose, it is important that teachers adapt lessons to meet all learners at their level and some at their points of special needs. The ultimate aim is captured as follows in the *Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education*: '… to ensure increased and improved access to the education and training system for those learners who experience the most severe forms of learning difficulties and are most vulnerable to exclusion' (Department of Education 2001:26).

In support of the *Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education* (Department of Education 2001), the *SIAS* as well as *Guidelines on Full Service Schools documents* (Department of Basic Education 2010, 2014) promote equity by providing guidelines on how to manage and support the teaching and learning processes of learners with special needs in order to improve access to quality education for vulnerable learners and those who experience barriers to learning. Closely related, the *Guidelines on Full Service Schools* document describes full service schools as inclusive schools that symbolise the principles of diversity and maximum participation by all.

In essence, the definition of visual impairment (as also in the case of other disabilities) emphasises the importance of equity. By creating a non-discriminatory classroom and school environment that offers equal opportunities to all learners, teachers can promote participation and a feeling of belonging among learners with disabilities, such as visual impairment (Bayram, Corlu, Aydin, Ortaçtepe & Alapala 2015). Such an approach aligns with the basic premise of critical disability theory which emphasises that people with the label 'disability' share common goals and overlap with others not being regarded as 'disabled' (Hall 2019).

Even though some learners with visual impairment may attempt to narrow the gap between themselves and other learners, teachers and the school community are thus required to encourage other learners to treat learners with visual impairment fairly and with respect. Furthermore, to promote equity in the classroom and school environment, adjustments can be made to accommodate the special learning styles of the various learners

(Lamichhane 2017). In addition, the talents and interests of learners with, for example, visual impairment are important in activities such as music and sport, as participation in such activities implies the potential of promoting the social inclusion of these learners in society (George & Duquette 2006).

Methodology

As already indicated, the research reported on in this article forms part of a broader DHET/EU-funded research project. As part of the broad research initiative we conducted participatory research in five of the nine provinces of South Africa, during the period November 2017 to April 2018. We relied on interpretivism as epistemological lens and followed a qualitative participatory methodological approach (Creswell & Creswell 2018).

Research Design and Participants

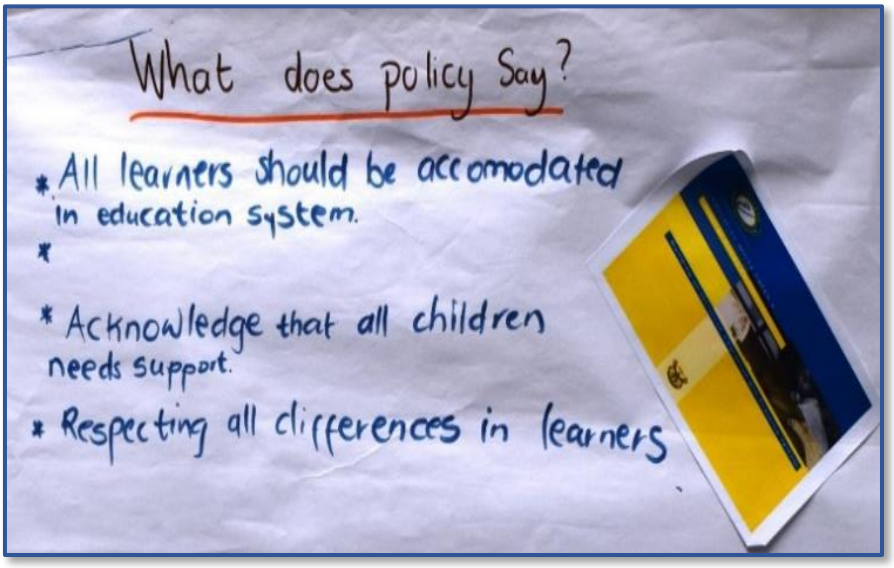
We implemented a multiple case study research design (Creswell & Creswell 2018), guided by participatory reflection and action (PRA) principles (Chambers 2017). As such, we could involve teachers as experts and research partners, from multiple schools, in exploring their perceptions on inclusive education policy and its implementation, more specifically with learners who are visually impaired. The findings we report on in this article relate to teachers' understanding of the South African policy on inclusive education (Department of Education 2001) as well as their experiences on policy implementation, with a specific focus on the inclusion of learners with visual impairment.

In purposefully selecting suitable cases, we focused on including both full service schools and special needs schools, in an attempt to explore the perceptions of South African teachers in both these contexts. We furthermore purposefully selected (Denzin & Lincoln 2018) 17 schools from five provinces of South Africa, in order to avoid region-specific findings.

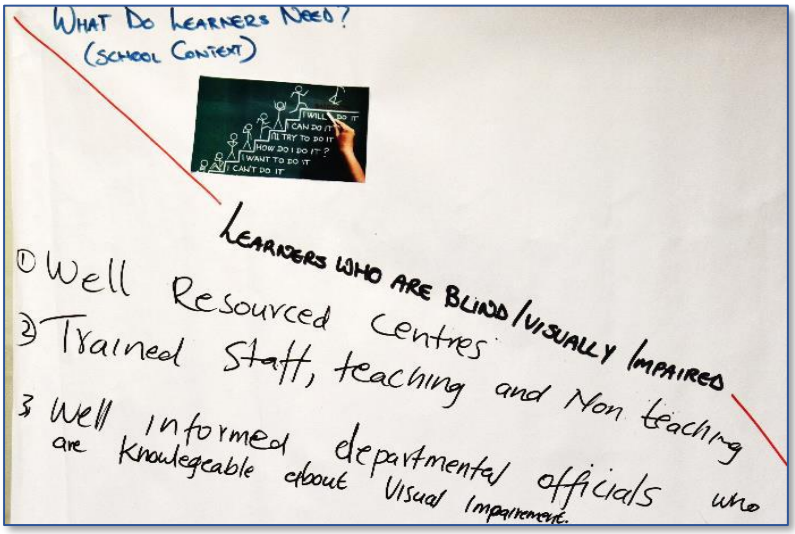
These schools represented both full service schools and special needs schools which had learners with visual impairment enrolled at the schools. As a result, 252 teachers participated in our study, with the sample including teachers from seven full service schools and ten special needs schools in South Africa. For the purpose of our discussion of the findings of our study further on, we do not differentiate between these two groups of teachers.

Data Generation, Documentation and Analysis

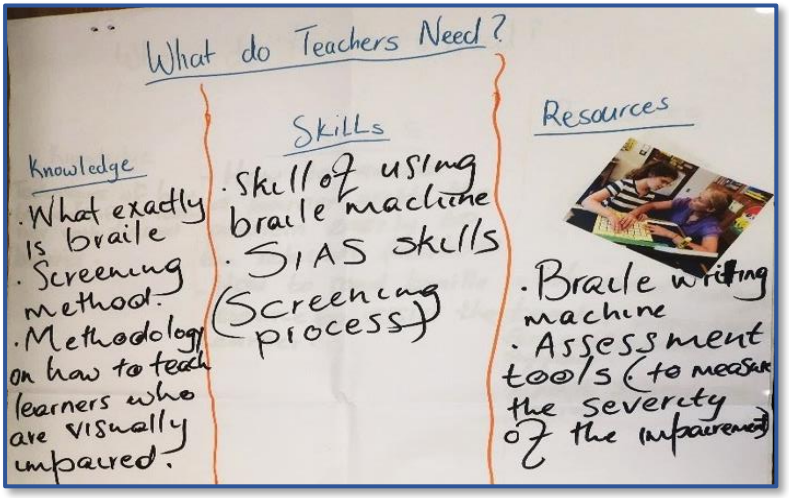
We utilised PRA-based activities and discussions, observation-as-context-of-interaction, field notes, reflective journals, and audio-visual techniques for data generation and documentation purposes (Chambers 2017; Creswell & Creswell 2018; Denzin & Lincoln 2018). During the PRA activities, teachers discussed certain questions in small groups and documented their ideas on PRA-matrices, while research team members facilitated the discussions, observed all interactions, took photographs, and captured field notes and reflections. For the purpose of this article, we focus on the data generated as a result of the PRA prompts associated with teacher perceptions of inclusive education policy as well as their implementation of policy when working with learners with visual impairment, and their associated needs. The PRA-matrices that were used are captured in Photographs 1 to 3.



Photograph 1: PRA matrix on teacher-participants' understanding of inclusive education policy



Photograph 2: PRA matrix on teacher perceptions of the inclusion and needs of learners with visual impairment



Photograph 3: PRA matrix on the implications of inclusive education for teaching practice in the context of visual impairment

All discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research team members conducted independent thematic inductive analysis of the various data sources (Denzin & Lincoln 2018), after which we compared our analysis and finalised the themes and subthemes. By including various data generation and documentation strategies as well as various independent processes of analysis, we relied on triangulation and crystallisation to add rigour and obtain trustworthy findings.

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting the study, we obtained permission from the national Department of Basic Education and the institution (UP 17/06/01) where the research project was based. Next, we obtained permission from the participating schools and informed consent from the teacher-participants. In discussing the research project with prospective participants, we explained how we would respect the ethical guidelines related to voluntary participation and their right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity, trust, respect for privacy, protection from harm, as well as ethical report writing (Creswell & Creswell 2018).

Results

The first of three themes we identified from the generated data relates to the teacher-participants' willingness to implement inclusive education policy with learners with visual impairment yet not feeling confident to do so. The second theme captures the primary challenges the teachers experienced to implement policy and the third theme concerns the associated needs of teachers to improve their implementation of the policy with this group of learners. Each of the three themes represent a number of sub-themes, as discussed below.

Theme 1: Willing but not Confident to Implement Policy

The teacher-participants seemingly realised the importance of supporting learners with visual impairment in the areas of both learning and development. They displayed an awareness that they themselves could offer some-

thing when working with these learners despite their apparent lack of the necessary self-confidence to do so. They seemed motivated and wanted to form part of positive change by implementing inclusive education policy and supporting learners with disabilities, although they did not always know how to transform intention into practice.

Sub-theme 1.1: (Limited) Understanding of the Policy

It seems clear that the teacher-participants' understanding of inclusive education and what the *Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education* implies for teaching practice was fairly limited. Even though they were able to capture the central premise of the policy document on the PRA matrices they compiled, they shared a rather narrow view. More specifically, the participants mainly focused on the provision of equal access for all to quality education, referring to the importance of allowing all learners access to opportunities and resources, thereby not excluding any learner with a disability. This rather concise view of the policy is captured in the following contributions: '*Inclusive education should include all learners with learning barriers*', and '*The word inclusive specifically seeks to include learners with learning barriers (which can take many forms) so they are part of the mainstream*'.

In essence, the participants focused on inclusive education not allowing for any form of discrimination. They made comments such as the following: '*All learners have a right to access to education equally in respect of age, gender, religion, physical disability, social differences, etc.*', '*It recognises the right of a person with disabilities to education without discrimination*', and '*There should be no discrimination, all learners should be treated equally*'. When referring to inclusive schools, participants were of the view that '*All inclusive schools must be accessible to all learners*'. Based on their contributions, it was clear that the participants realised that inclusive education policy propagates non-discrimination and respect for learners with special needs – such as those with visual impairment − as well as curriculum adaptation to allow for equal access to educational opportunities for all learners.

As such, our research indicate that the participants' views did not represent a comprehensive understanding of what inclusive education policy implies for teachers in South Africa. Their limited understanding of the po-

licy could be observed at some of the schools where the participants started paging through the hard copy *Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education* (Department of Education 2001) that was available during the PRA activity sessions, when prompted to share their understanding of the policy. Some other participants accessed the electronic version of the policy *via* their mobile devices when asked to discuss their understanding of what this entails.

Sub-theme 1.2: Supporting One Another in Order to Support Learners

Even though they displayed the need for additional training and guidance, the participants seemingly engaged in joint efforts and relied on collective expertise in supporting learners with visual impairment to the best of their ability. They shared ideas on possible people to involve as advisors or resources, that could support them in undertaking this task. They for example suggested that teachers could '*request Department of Education to employ Braille instructors*', thereby demonstrating commitment to support learners with visual impairment, be it in the form of support by themselves, or through the facilitation of access to external support services. One of the participants summarised this idea in the following way: '*Learners with visual impairment have a unique educational need which is mostly effectively met by using a team approach of educators, parents, and the district officials*'.

Theme 2: Challenges Experienced with Implementation of the Policy

The teacher-participants emphasised the challenges they had experienced in implementing inclusive education policy. They primarily referred to them not having received sufficient training and to all schools in South Africa not being regarded as sufficiently supportive environments.

Sub-theme 2.1: Limited Training and Support to Implement Inclusive Education Policy with Learners with Visual Impairment

According to the participants, teachers had to understand visual impairment and what this implies before attempting to include such learners in class.

They indicated that the majority of all teachers were not sufficiently prepared to fulfil this responsibility as they had not received '*special training on working with visually impaired learners*'. They mentioned that they had '*no proper training …*' and '*… no inclusive education training has been brought to the school*'.

Some of the participants displayed an awareness of the intent of the national Department of Education to provide training and support to all teachers yet when discussing training opportunities on inclusive education, the participants shared the view that departmental officials who were responsible for this, often possessed limited understanding themselves when it comes to the skills required by teachers. Participants from full service schools specifically indicated that they were experiencing limitations in terms of their own knowledge and skills, and that they had to empower themselves by for example furthering their studies. In addition to the perception that the training they had received had not been sufficient, teacher-participants referred to the '*lack of support from health professsionals*', '*lack of support from the department*', and '*lack of understanding by officials on the practical implications of inclusive education*' as factors that negatively affected the support they were able to provide to learners with visual impairment in the general classroom.

As such the participants were seemingly of the view that they required specialised knowledge due to them not having received focused training in this field. Despite the national Department of Education's attempts to train teachers and present workshops in preparation of the implementation of the *Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education* (Department of Education 2001), the participants thus indicated that the intended training efforts had not been actualised. They furthermore reported that they were not receiving support or have attended follow-up training sessions with departmental officials, despite their expectations to have been supported in this way.

Despite the majority of the participants indicating that they had not received sufficient training as described in the previous paragraphs, a few individuals seemingly possessed some knowledge and experience in the field. To this end, a few teachers reported that they possessed knowledge on '*Braille Grade 1 and 2 and how to adapt papers*', on '*Braille and mobility*' and on ways to '*use different strategies and methods*'. Experiences such as these were however limited.

Sub-theme 2.2: Schools not Regarded as Sufficiently Inclusive Environments

The participants identified several areas of concern for the accommodation of learners with visual impairment in mainstream school settings. They stated that the: *'... curriculum is good but not adapted for these learners; question papers and text books are not adapted; no accommodation for visually impaired learners'*. Many participants referred to the need for adapted and alternative learning material that could benefit individual learners, the importance of an adapted learning environment as well as suitable teaching strategies for learners with visual impairment, which – according to the participants – were not readily available in all mainstream schools.

In terms of the learning environment, the participants were of the view that the *'classroom environment should favour the different disabilities for effective teaching and learning'*. According to the participants, learners with disabilities require schools that are '… *conducive for effective teaching and learning, ... and well-organised (big and clean)*'. In elaborating on their view, the participants referred to the importance of suitable classrooms, play grounds, public spaces and transport facilities, which had to be responsive to the needs of learners with visual impairment but were – according to them – not in place in all schools in South Africa. For learning material and physical resources, the participants emphasised the need for suitable Learning and Teaching Support Material (LTSM) when teaching learners with visual impairment, stating that there is typically '*no LTSM in the classroom*' when referring to mainstream schools.

Despite the majority of the participants indicating the need for additional and specialised resources at school for them to be able to implement inclusive education policy, a few of them displayed insight in terms of the possibility to use what they already possessed to teach and support learners with visual impairment. One of the teachers made the following suggestion: '*Use skills that we have at our disposal to support all differently abled learners in all aspects of teaching and learning*'. In addition to this possibility, some of the participants referred to the potential value of '*... intersectoral collaboration with other stakeholders*', in order for them to learn from peers and become better equipped. Contributions such as these were however limited, with the majority of the participants demonstrating some reservations about the suitability of this policy for all schools in South Africa.

Theme 3: Need for Additional Training, support and Conducive School Environments

As indicated, the teacher-participants displayed the need for continued support and additional training sessions, which was reportedly not met.

Sub-theme 3.1: General Classroom Teaching when Including Learners with Visual Impairment

In terms of their need for additional training and support, the participants indicated that they required basic knowledge as well as practical skills that can be applied in the classroom. They mentioned specific examples such as '*Training of how to deal with visually impaired learners; Training on how to identify learners with visual impairment; Training of how to take care of them; Training on how to use resources relevant to the visual impaired disability*'. They furthermore mentioned aspects such as Braille, screening procedures and suitable teaching strategies as areas of specific concern which they required guidance on.

For curriculum differentiation, participants emphasised the importance of supporting learners with visual impairment to be able to access the curriculum, thereby accommodating their special needs. In this regard, they stated that a '… *teacher should know how to develop a teacher checklist in order to formulate individual education plans for each learner*'. Participants however furthermore indicated that they were not always confident in drawing up such plans based on their experiences and (limited) training in this field.

Next, the participants highlighted the importance of being skilled in using Braille as language and closely related, knowing how to use specialised resources in class when teaching learners with visual impairment, such as apex and talking calculators. They for example referred to the need '*to be trained on how to use technological assistive products*', and '*receive training on how to use assistive devices*'. They also required training or guidance on how to identify and screen a learner with visual impairment, and later facilitate referral pathways for these learners. In this regard, the participants said that the '*Department of Education should capacitate us with SIAS Policy in order to be able to screen, identify, assess and support learners*' and that '*Educators must know where and how to refer a learner*', In terms of possible

referral pathways, the teachers emphasised their need to know when to contact which specialist, and what such a referral procedure would entail.

Theme 3.2: Dealing with the General Functioning and Behaviour of Learners with Visual Impairment in School

Participants indicated the need to be trained in classroom management and discipline when learners with disabilities are included, with them subsequently fearing that their attempts to discipline learners could potentially be interpreted as discriminating against certain learners. The participants furthermore indicated that they did not possess the necessary knowledge and skills on teaching strategies suitable for learners with visual impairment, emphasising that they had not received training on how to '*… apply various strategies and techniques as far as education of visual impaired learners*'.

In addition to the teachers not feeling adequately skilled and sufficiently trained to attend to the scholastic needs of learners with visual impairment, the participants voiced the perception that they were not able to attend to the holistic development of learners with visual impairment due to them not having received training on participation in extra-mural activities by such learners. The participants were seemingly unfamiliar with the possible value of these activities, more specifically for learners with visual impairment. In addition to not being well-informed about the benefits of participation in extra-curricular activities for learners with visual impairment, the participants displayed the need to gain *'skills to teach extra mural activities, e.g. blind cricket'*.

Theme 3.3: Specialised Resources and Adapted Teaching and Learning Material

With regard to the need for supportive school environments, the participants referred to the importance of specialised resources in the form of adapted learning material and specialised equipment as well as skilled human resources, in addition to their view that the environment in- and outside the classroom had to meet certain criteria. More specifically, according to the participants, learners with visual impairment would need to engage with LTSM for their learning to be optimal, saying that: '*The learners must have*

good learning and teaching materials to support their needs' in an inviting and inclusive classroom.

When prompted to elaborate on the specialised material, resources and equipment that had been identified as important, the participants referred to the importance of all schools having teaching and learning material available in Braille and enlarged font. Furthermore, they indicated the need for voice recorders, specialised teaching aids, embossers, magnifying glasses, reading monitors and braillers as important supportive equipment. The participants also mentioned specialised software programmes and access to mobility orientation, e.g. in playgrounds where paint may be used in support of the needs of learners with visual impairment.

In discussing human resources, the participants emphasised that learners with visual impairment require qualified teachers and school staff members, therapists as well as the support of skilled district officials. According to the participants, the need therefore existed for '*trained staff, teaching and non-teaching*' yet in reality, their experience was that they '*…don't have the support staff*'. With regard to themselves as human resources, the participants indicated a need for more in-depth knowledge and skills – not only to understand what visual impairment entails but also how to teach and support the learners effectively, as already indicated.

Discussion

The participants in our study confirmed that inclusive education implies equal opportunity and access to resources and quality education for all. This view broadly aligns with the policy document of the Department of Education (2001) as well as the *Bill of Rights for All Children with Visual Impairment and their Families* (AER & COSB 2019). As captured in the *Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education* (Department of Education 2001) the participants in our study acknowledged that inclusive education embraces diversity, more specifically in terms of all teachers being required to teach learners from diverse backgrounds and abilities in the same classroom.

The participating teachers in both full service and special needs schools indicated specific needs that have reportedly not been met and might have hindered them from effectively implementing inclusive education when teaching learners with visual impairment. One of their main concerns related to the training of teachers in the implementation of inclusive education

policy, which seems to have been intended on governmental level however has not been actualised yet. Most teachers reported that they had not been trained on the *Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education* (Department of Education 2001) or how to implement this policy. Most of them referred to being trained on the *SIAS policy*, curriculum differentiation and guidelines for full service schools in accommodating learners but not specifically in the implementation of inclusive education policy.

Even though in-service training of teachers has reportedly been undertaken by officials from the Department of Basic Education, the participants did not view this as sufficient preparation. Some teachers may have received an overview of inclusive education implementation without detailed knowledge and skills being covered. More specifically, the training that all South African teachers were supposed to have received might not have been comprehensive enough for them to feel confident to implement the policy. This finding points to the difficulty currently experienced by teachers to include learners with special needs in the general classroom. If this can be rectified, teachers hold the potential to address inequity through the implementation of inclusive education policy, more specifically within the context of marginalised groups such as learners with visual impairment. Despite their willingness to support these learners and facilitate positive change, teachers in the profession therefore did not display the necessary self-confidence in terms of their own knowledge and ability to implement this policy.

The participants specifically foregrounded the need for sufficient support from departmental officials. In the current dispensation, the closest officials that can support teachers in South African schools are district-based and work in inclusive education sections. These sections consist of a chief, deputy chief and senior education specialists that are supposed to assist in schools with initial training and follow-up support to teachers in inclusive education policy implementation. Despite this proposed structure, the teachers in our study indicated that they had not been supported adequately, and mentioned the need to be guided, monitored and subsequently supported in the implementation of the said policy. In addition, we found that teachers may become frustrated due to the people being responsible to train, follow-up and monitor them, also not knowing the policy in detail and not supporting them sufficiently.

In this regard we argue that teachers on ground level hold the key to

redressing equity through inclusive education policy implementation yet on a practical level, may be hesitant to act as change agents based on their perceived levels of (limited) readiness and skill to do so. A process of enabling all teachers in the country would require collaboration on various levels – involving the teachers who will facilitate change but also the various role-players in their environments and on a national level, being the national Department of Education. Such a collaborative approach is the only way of addressing the principles of critical disability theory (Hall 2019; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz 2017).

In addition to training and support by government officials, teachers in our study indicated the need for sufficient LTSM and resources when working with learners with visual impairment. However, a shortage of resources is evident in both special needs schools and mainstream as well as full service schools in South Africa, with the latter not always being equipped with the relevant LTSM to implement inclusive education policy. In the current scenario, only some schools have furthermore been equipped with physical resources that can benefit learners with disabilities (Department of Education 2001). Even though resources are available at selected schools, some teachers in our research were found to be uncertain about using these, indicating the need for guidance on the use of specialised resources and assistive devices.

Against the background of limited resources, South African teachers need to be creative and use alternative resources in class. In this regard, it is important for teachers in the profession to be aware of their own strengths and realise that they can use what they have in support of the learners they teach, including those with visual impairment who may not receive equal opportunities and quality education when compared to other learners in school. Examples of creative adaptations done by the participants in our study include their attendance to ensuring sufficient space for learners with visual impairment to move around, changing seating arrangements and providing large print material, to mention but a few examples.

In their attempt to create inclusive classrooms that could cater for the needs of all learners, the participants also mentioned strategies such as oral teaching with repetition as well as tactile teaching methods to ensure that learners understood. This finding underscores the work of the American Foundation for the Blind (2020), stating that for learners with visual impairment to develop and optimally benefit from the instruction and

learning process, teachers need to attend to adaptation. In addition, Lamichhane (2017) states that adjustments in the school context can lead to learners with disabilities feeling included and as if they belong. Such adjustments may furthermore enhance the social interaction with other learners thereby redressing equity and providing more equal opportunities for all, in line with the proposition of critical disability theory (Hall 2019; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz 2017).

In terms of the adaptation of assessment measures when teaching learners with visual impairment, we found that many of the teacher-participants at special needs schools attended to this by for example allowing learners to use Braille when doing assessment tasks, in support of equity in education. Some teachers however felt that, as long as textbooks and question papers are not adapted, learners with visual impairment will stay left behind. In this regard the teachers referred to many schools not having trained staff members that can mark Braille examination papers. These findings raise the question whether or not learners with visual impairment are truly being accommodated as they are supposed to, more specifically in mainstream schools where teachers may not be Braille proficient. Should these training needs be addressed however, the accommodation and inclusion of learners with visual impairment may improve.

As our findings point to special needs schools focusing on the specific needs of learners, with mainstream schools lagging behind, it seems clear that more should be done to support and enable teachers in all schools to act as positive change agents. As such, even though our findings indicate that the participants were to an extent aware of what can be done to support learners with visual impairment, they required additional knowledge and skills for implementation of accommodating strategies. In addition, the participants foregrounded the provision of supportive resources as prerequisite to implement inclusive education policy. These recommendations confirm the work of Ferreira-Prevost (2020) who similarly indicate that many South African schools may be lagging behind in terms of inclusive instruction and learning due to limited resources.

The fact remains that, due to the shortage of special needs schools in South Africa, some learners with visual impairment find themselves in school contexts where teachers may not have been sufficiently trained to accommodate and support them. We propose that teachers should reflect on their own knowledge and expertise, and attend to personal development

themselves, in order to equip them to better support learners with disabilities. Teachers may for example capitalise on the potential value of collaboration and partnerships with one another and with stakeholders in the field of visual impairment in support of their implementation of inclusive education policy. In this way, teachers will possibly become more motivated to take agency, empower themselves and implement the necessary strategies to facilitate positive change.

In undertaking this study and interpreting the findings we obtained, we regard the education sector as an important system in the learning and development of learners with visual impairment. The findings of our research demonstrate that teachers can contribute to social change despite having received limited training and lacking sufficient resources. In making a contribution, teachers – and schools – can this support and enable learners to perform at their full potential, thereby contributing to the actualisation of critical disability theory (Halls 2019; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz 2017).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as many teachers in our study emphasised the lack of support for the implementation of inclusive education policy, both in the form of follow-up training as well as supportive resources, the Department of Basic Education may have to reconsider the methods that have been implemented up to now. In addition, teachers on ground level should identify available resources and possible networks that can support them in taking ownership and redressing equity in education in the case of learners with disabilities.

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