

# The Disproportional Support That Affects the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Full-Service Schools of Limpopo Province

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on the disproportional support that affects the implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools of Limpopo Province. The study followed a qualitative case study research methodology. Sixteen teachers and eight Heads of Departments were recruited through purposive sampling. Data were collected using interviews. Creswell's model of thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Four findings emerged from the data: lack of communalism, a missing link, the ignored purpose, and lack of interdependence, which resulted in the disproportional support that affected the implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools. Recommendations that may help to restore the balance of support offered for the implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools have been made.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education, Full-Service Schools, Directorate, Support Teams, District-Based Support Teams, Provincial Inclusive Education Directorate

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, social perspectives in education drastically changed when the international human rights movement exposed discriminatory educational practices for children with disabilities in many countries. The dual education system that separated learners according to ability and disability led to discriminatory practices that excluded learners with disabilities from access to quality education [1] [2]. Children with disabilities were placed in special schools, while others were placed in mainstream schools. As a result, access to schooling and support was a challenge for children with disabilities as compared to their counterparts, infringing on their basic human right to education.

Policy documents that are based on international human rights agreements, such as the Salamanca Statement, support the development of an education system that recognises a wide range of diverse needs and ensures a wide range of appropriate responses [3]. They also include the White Paper on Education and Training in a Democratic South Africa [4], which outlines the importance of addressing the needs of learners with disabilities in both special and mainstream schools; the South African Schools Act [5], which compels public schools to admit learners and to serve their educational needs without unfairly discriminating in any way; the White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy [5], which recommends specific action that ensures that people with disabilities can access the same rights as any other citizen in South Africa; and the National Commission on Special Educational Needs and Training [5], which identifies barriers that lead to the inability of the education system to accommodate diversity.

These frameworks establish the creation of a single education system and policy that is committed to human rights and social justice.' They also articulate the goals of equity and the rights of learners with diverse learning needs, to equal access to educational opportunities. As a result, the South African Government's commitment to an education system that caters to all led to the development of a policy on inclusive education. The policy is entitled: Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, shortened to EWP 6 [6]. This policy provides a framework for the implementation of an inclusive education system

that realises the constitutional rights of learners with diverse learning needs. Thereafter, in 2009, full-service schools were introduced to pilot the implementation of inclusive education for future roll-out to all other schools [7].

These schools are ordinary mainstream schools that are equipped and supported to implement inclusive education. The Education White Paper 6 [8] describes inclusive education as a system of education that caters for the learning needs of all learners irrespective of background, age, race, ability/disability, gender, religion or class. To realise the objectives of inclusive education, operational bodies that serve as support structures were instituted. At a provincial level, the Provincial Inclusive Education Directorate (PIED) was established to coordinate and oversee the implementation of inclusive education. At the levels of districts and schools, the District Based Support Teams (DBSTs) and the School Based Support Teams (SBSTs) were established. Each team was assigned a specific primary role to support the implementation of inclusive education as documented in the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support policy [9]. Their roles compel the two teams to work collaboratively and interdependently with each other and the PIED in supporting the successful implementation of inclusive education in schools.

However, although their support roles have been explicitly defined in policies, research reports on the individual support by the three operational bodies, that schools experience differently, affect the support they offer to full-service schools [10] [11]. Studies exploring the type of support offered by the SBSTs and the DBSTs on the implementation of inclusive education [12] [13] [14] [15] [16] [17] found that lack of capacity and lack of resources were painted as a hindrance at these two levels. The type of support offered by each of the three levels on the implementation of inclusive education was explored as a fragment of these studies. Studies that explored the balance of the support offered by the three operational bodies are limited. Against this backdrop, the purpose of this study was to explore the balance of the support offered by the three operational bodies on the implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools of Limpopo Province.

## **2. INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVES OF FULL-SERVICE SCHOOLS**

In the United States, full-service schools are referred to as full-service community schools. Dryfoos states that, in light of various challenges in that country, policymakers in the late 1970s and early 1980s considered full-service schools as sites for intervention [18]. These challenges included teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, access of certain groups of children to medical care and mental health issues [18]. The reasons for this were that a high proportion of children and young people, even a significant number of those considered to be high-risk youth, could be contacted and worked with in schools [19]. Schools were seen as places where the prevention, treatment and support services that children, young people, families and communities need to succeed, could be provided.

These full-service schools are based on partnerships between a school and its community, where academics, youth development groups, family support, health and social services, and community development agencies are integrated [20]. They have emerged as one-stop community centres that meet diverse needs so that each child can achieve the best possible educational outcomes. Full-service schools support diverse learners to learn and succeed, reinforce families and communities, offer amenities such as sports facilities, and form bridges between schools, families and communities. Their mandate is not only to promote academic excellence but also to provide health, mental health and social services on the school campus [21]. The intervention has had a positive impact on the well-being of diverse learners, both socially and academically.

In South Africa, full-service schools have been introduced to provide quality education to all learners without discrimination. Department of Education. posits that full-service schools are mainstream institutions that provide quality education to all [8]. The Education White Paper 6 notes that these schools are ordinary schools that are specially resourced and orientated to address a range of barriers to learning [6]. Therefore, unlike mainstream schools, full-service schools are presumed to be resourced and their personnel supported to realise the objectives of inclusive education.

Full-service schools strive to achieve access, equity, quality and social justice in education by providing educational support to diverse learners, especially those who experience barriers to learning [8]. In addition to their

ordinary learner population, these schools should be accessible to learners who experience barriers to learning and provide them with the necessary support. Engelbrecht, *et al* posit that, in the initial inclusive education implementation stages, full-service schools should be models of institutional change, which reflect effective inclusive cultures, policies and practices [22].

Their special emphasis is on the development of flexibility in teaching and learning and the provision of support to learners and teachers. However, because they were initially mainstream schools that were considered unable to cater for learners experiencing barriers to learning, they experienced challenges in realising the implementation of inclusive education [2] [22]. Mainstream schools were converted to full-service schools with the same teachers and the same norms and standards for resource allocation as those of mainstream schools.

After the introduction of the Education White Paper 6 in 2001, a directorate for inclusive education was established in Limpopo Province in 2005 [10]. Similar to other provinces of South Africa, twenty-one schools in the province were then declared full-service schools in 2010. Makhalemele asserts that, since the move towards decentralised education systems in South Africa was highlighted in 1994, the provincial education systems in Limpopo Province have not explicitly considered how to implement inclusive education [24]. However, a provincial inclusive education directorate was established, and officials were only based at the head office, not at district and circuit levels [10]. As a result, schoolteachers were not able to access information about inclusive education timeously, which led to misconceptions and negative attitudes [25].

### **3. THREE OPERATIONAL BODIES IN FULL-SERVICE SCHOOLS**

Structures that would drive the implementation of full-service schools were established to work with the Provincial Inclusive Education Directorate. Three operational bodies responsible for realising the goals of inclusive education were established, namely: the school-based support team (SBST), the district-based support team (DBST) and the Provincial Department of Basic Education [9] represented by the Provincial Inclusive Education Directorate (PIED). As stated above, although the bodies are interdependent, each has specific roles to support schools and teachers; in particular, to be able to cater for diverse learners.

The EWP 6 [6] and the SIAS policy [9] outline the role of each of the different operational bodies as follows: The SBSTs coordinate all learners, teachers, curriculum and institution development support in the institution, and collectively identify institutional needs, in particular, barriers to learning. The team collectively develops strategies to address these needs and barriers to learning and draws resources needed from within and outside of the institutions to address these challenges. The team also monitors and evaluates the support given to diverse learners at the school within an action-reflection framework.

The DBSTs train SBSTs in all schools; assist teachers in specific interventions for individual learners with high support needs; provide direct support to learners in terms of special interventions; and coordinate and manage the systems for the identification of levels of support for individual learners with high intrinsic needs; and coordinate services of the extended network of support, e.g., staff from Special Schools, as resource centres and full-service schools. The PIED develops an effective management system, capacitates and monitors the implementation in the province, guides and supports the implementation, builds institutional capacity, and draws the resources that assist with the effective implementation of inclusive education.

In addition, to realise the goals of inclusive education, SBSTs should ensure that full-service schools can cater for the needs of diverse learners by adopting best practices that accommodate diversity [6]. In the same way, the DBSTs have been established to support institutional developments [14]. They should do this through various interventions, such as managing inclusive education in the districts and organising interventions that require skilled personnel, for instance, the training of teachers by a specialist based at the district office, special school or resource centre.

The DBSTs also have the responsibility to ensure that full-service schools receive physical, material and human resources [8]. Their main task should be to assist teachers in identifying individual learners' barriers to learning in

the classroom. Again, they assist in advocating for the inclusion of learners, implement programmes to address barriers to learning, assist in evaluating the effectiveness of programmes, and also assist with assessing learner performance [25].

Lastly, the Provincial Inclusive Education Directorate is at the centre of the implementation. They should ensure that the norms and standards for the education and training of teachers include competencies in addressing barriers to learning and provide for the development of specialised competencies such as learner support [6]. As a result, the three operational bodies are equally vital and therefore should be dependent on each other to advance the effective implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools.

#### **4. THEORETICAL DISCOURSE**

This study is embedded in constructivism, which is a sociological theory of knowledge (epistemology) that argues that people generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas. The theory suggests that knowledge is a human product constructed in a social and cultural context and is then appropriated by individuals [26]. Thus, the underlying principles of constructivist theory that guided the study state that: individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment in which they live; knowledge is a product of human interaction; knowledge is socially and culturally constructed; and reality is constructed through human activity.

The theory corresponds with the interpretive paradigm, which enables researchers to understand the world of human experiences [27]. Interpretivism, within which this study is located, assumes that knowledge of reality is expanded through social constructions like shared meanings [28]. In addition, based on constructivism, the ecosystem theory shows how individuals and groups at different levels of society are linked in dynamic, interdependent, interacting relationships or systems which are interdependently operating, much like an ecosystem [2]. There should be total interdependence of all systems [30]. In the context of this study, there should be an interdependence of the support offered by the three operational bodies in full-service schools on the implementation of inclusive education.

Maddock, *et al* assert that lack of interdependence leads to the imbalance of support and that hampers the survival of an intervention [30]. In addition, Paquette, & Ryan affirm that lack of intervention by one body can ripple the interdependence with other bodies [31]. However, when the interventions between different bodies are interdependent, the intervention can be sustained and improved.

As indicated above, the policy indicates that the role of each body and the relationship between the three bodies should be dynamic, interdependent and interactive. School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) in South Africa are expected to work in consultation and partnership with the DBSTs and the PIED for the successful implementation of inclusive education. These three operational bodies should generate knowledge and meaning from the interaction of their experiences and ideas. Their experiences and ideas should help them to knowledge of the implementation of inclusive education and appropriate it to full-service schools. This study shows the type of support that is being offered and its impact on the implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools.

#### **5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a qualitative research approach that enabled the researcher to interact with the participants [32] of full-service schools to capture and interpret what they experienced, in their own words. The approach allowed the researcher to enter into the terrain of the participants' experiences, feelings, fears and frustrations regarding the support they get from the three operational bodies (SBSTs, DBSTs and PIED) on the implementation of inclusive education. Within this approach, a case study design was adopted, to gain a deeper understanding of the study in its natural setting.

Purposeful sampling was employed in the study because it was able to elicit the most information-rich sources from the field of the research [33]. Limpopo Province has five districts, Capricorn, Sekhukhune, Vhembe, Mopani

and Waterberg. Eight full-service schools in four districts of Limpopo Province were sampled. From each district, two full-service schools were sampled and coded as School A to School H. In each of the eight full-service schools, two teachers and one HoD were sampled. They were sampled based on their qualifications in inclusive education and their experience of teaching inclusive classrooms. They were also sampled based on whether they have attended training or workshops in inclusive education and whether they are members of the SBSTs. A total of sixteen teachers and eight HoDs were sampled.

Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure that similar data was collected from all participants [33]. They were used to understand the world from the participant's point of view, to reveal the meaning of their experiences, and to uncover their worlds. These interviews enabled the researcher to follow up on ideas, probe responses, and investigate motives and feelings [34]. Creswell posits that semi-structured interviews are appropriate to pursue a specific issue. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to elicit specific information on the support offered by three operational bodies on the implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools of Limpopo Province [32].

Semi-structured interviews consider participants to be experts on the subject, and they should be allowed maximum opportunity to share what they know with less control from the researcher [16]. The researcher prepared a set of predetermined questions on separate interview schedules for teachers and HoDs. Both the University and the Department of Education's ethics committee approved the interview schedule.

The researcher conducted individual face-to-face interviews with all participants. The interviews were held either in the HoD's office, in the principal's office, in the boardroom or in the individual teacher's class. A digital recorder was used to ensure the accuracy of the data, to be able to review it later. Parallel to recording, notes were taken during and after the interview to ensure that important information was not left out. Follow-up interviews were done telephonically to clarify some vague responses from participants. Responses from the interviews provided the researcher with an opportunity to learn about that which was not obvious from a person's natural setting.

Qualitative methods of analysing data were employed. The researcher used Creswell's model to do the physical sorting and analysis of data [32]. The researcher described, analysed and interpreted what was seen and heard in terms of common words, phrases, themes or patterns that would assist the understanding and interpretation of the data. The raw data was coded into general ideas and concepts of similar features that relate to the purpose of the study. Thereafter, the researcher sat with two critical readers who are experts in qualitative research to discuss emerging themes and thereafter reach a consensus.

## **6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Four findings emerged from the study, namely, lack of communalism, missing link, scant value of uniqueness and lack of interdependence. The findings are explained in the sections below.

### **6.1 Lack of communalism**

The study revealed that there was a lack of communalism amongst the three operational bodies. The PIED did not engage the SBSTs when it planned programmes of support. They imposed their programmes on the SBSTs, to the detriment of their school programmes. The DBSTs were also reported to be working largely in isolation and disregarding the schools' programmes. Maddock, *et al* assert that each body can impact another, while a lack of support by one body reflects the need for higher-order equilibrium to ensure the survival of an intervention [30]. The three operational bodies were found to be working in isolation. This finding resonates with previous research which established that SBSTs and DBSTs do not work together [11]. In addition, another qualitative study conducted in two provinces of South Africa by Makhalemele, & Van Staden revealed that factors such as the unavailability of structured programmes as well as poor communication and cooperation in the district and provinces make it difficult for the DBSTs to enhance the implementation of inclusive education [15].

## 6.2 Missing link

The DBST was found to be the missing link. Its lack of support distorted the equilibrium that could realise the effective implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools. Although SBSTs were found to be doing their best to identify learners with barriers to learning, and the PIED were also commended to be supporting full-service schools, the DBST was found to be dragging its feet in advancing the process of supporting learners who experience barriers to learning, as expressed by some of the participants:

*The people that support us most are people from the province, they call us to workshops and they sometimes come here just to support us (P. 6).*

Another participant added,

*The DBSTs are not supporting us. Not at all. The province supports us but as it goes down, it is a little bit fragmented (P. 1).*

Lack of capacity by the DBST was also found to be affecting the support that these schools get from the district.

*The people who come to our school from the district say they do not know how to help us. I do not understand why they even bother visiting our schools. So, for now, I can say the DBST is non-existent (P. 8).*

This finding aligns with a study conducted by Dreyer, et al who found that South Africa is employing an under-resourced education and support system which does not have the compassion, skills and knowledge to address the contextual dilemmas experienced in full-service schools [35]. This results in the gross neglect of learners who experience barriers to learning. In addition to lack of capacity, DBSTs visiting schools for compliance was also mentioned by one participant as another dilemma that they are facing as SBSTs.

The DBST do not support us; they are supervising to see how we do things. When we ask them to intervene in matters where learners need a high level of support, they tell us that they do not know how to do it. I think people who have been put in those positions are not qualified for inclusive education and that is bad (P. 6).

This finding resonates with a study that asserts that full-service schools in Limpopo Province are affected by a lack of visits by government officials who are expected to give support to the implementation of inclusive education [10]. Xitlhabana asserts in his study also posits that there are no regular workshops on inclusive education for teachers and that education specialists are seldom seen in full-service schools [23].

## 6.3 Scant value of uniqueness

The scant value for the uniqueness of full-service schools by the DBSTs and the PIED in the province during organised workshops was found to be preventing the SBST from realising the goals of inclusive education in full-service schools. Their unique nature of being mainstream schools that pilot the implementation of inclusive education for future roll-out to all other schools was found not to be valued by the DBST and the PIED. This was evident in the following remark:

When there is a provincial teaching and learning workshops for the SBSTs, they normally invite us to special schools. The whole discussion will be on special schools, their year programmes and what transpired during conferences they have attended. In addition, the province uses these workshops to discuss how special schools should use the huge amounts of their allocated funds which we do not have, or how they should manage their school vehicles. They spend 90% of the allocated time discussing that. Only 10% of the time will be used to discuss how learners with barriers to learning could be supported in class. We just sit there and keep quiet and ultimately have nothing to report to teachers back at school (P 5).

Another participant from another full-service school added another perspective on how full-service schools are not being acknowledged as being different from special schools and mainstream schools so that they can be afforded the appropriate support in the district and the province.

As the SBST, the province invited us to teaching and learning workshops with special schools. Unfortunately, we are being ignored when we ask questions about how we should support learners with barriers to learning in inclusive classrooms. To make matters worse, as the SBST, we are also being invited to teaching and learning workshops with mainstream schools; the district officials who do the training tell us that they do not have answers for us because they are not trained in inclusive education. Where must we go for help now? (P 7).

The above finding revealed that the unique nature of full-service schools was being ignored in the province. Ideally, full-service schools cannot be treated as special schools or mainstream schools in terms of resource allocation because they are somewhere in between. Unfortunately, this finding exposed that they were being treated as second-class citizens when they attended teaching and learning workshops with either special schools or mainstream schools. This was found to be the dilemma that full-service schools in the province experienced. They felt they were not being valued but neglected by both the province and the district. The finding aligns with the study conducted in Limpopo Province by [36] which revealed that full-service schools are not being considered and planned for in terms of resource allocation as reflected in the EWP6 [6].

#### **6.4 Lack of Interdependence**

Lastly, lack of interdependence amongst the SBSTs, the DBSTs and the PIED compromised procedures to enhance the support for learners who experience barriers to learning in full-service schools. Participants indicated that, as case managers, they identify and support learners with barriers to learning at the school level. However, they indicated that what they recommend is not being followed and acted upon by the appropriate support body. Unfortunately, they indicated that, as the SBSTs, they could only go up to a certain level and therefore depend on the DBSTs to advance their case. One participant said:

Teachers identify learners who have barriers to learning in their classes. After identifying them and not being able to support them, even after working with their parents, they engage grade teachers and thereafter phase teachers. When they still do not succeed in supporting the child after the phase intervention, they fill in the Support Need Assessment 1 (SNA 1) form and refer the child to us as the SBST. As the SBST, we make appropriate interventions and when we do not succeed, we fill in the SNA2 form and submit the form to the DBST. The form will stay with the district for months without us hearing anything from them. When we try to enquire about the progress, they tell us that they are understaffed, and that they will attend to the matter. We sometimes wait for more than six months without hearing anything from them. We have resorted to just filling out the SNA 2 form for compliance's sake. It is a problem mam, the DBST is failing us. As much as we want to support these children with barriers to learning, they are making things very difficult for us in a way that we end up ignoring these learners because, remember, we are also teachers, we have our classes like other teachers (P 4).

Once again, the equilibrium that could be maintained if the three bodies worked interdependently as a unit was also found to be distorted. Reasons for that distortion were found to be escalating beyond the district, in a mixed-method study conducted by Makhalemele, & Nel investigated the challenges experienced by District-Based Support Team (DBST) members in the sub-directorate of Inclusive Education of a South African province in the execution of their functions [37]. The lack of adequate training of DBST members and a lack of awareness of the role that they play in school communities was highlighted to be an aspect that makes it impossible for them to support full-service schools.

Similarly, another study conducted by Nel, Tlale, Engelbrecht, & Nel explored the functionality of all the formal support structures that included the DBSTs Institutional-Level Support Teams (ILSTs), Full-Service Schools (FSS),

Special Schools as Resource Centres (SSRC), Learning Support Educators (LSEs), and the community. It became evident from the findings of the study that the formal support structures were not as effective as proposed by the policy and that the policy needed serious re-consideration.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Despite strong advocacy for the support needed by learners who experience barriers to learning and the acknowledgement of potential benefits thereof through legislation and policies in South Africa, full-service schools still experience restricted participation from key structures such as the SBSTs, DBSTs and PIED. Specifically, the imbalance of support offered to full-service schools underscores a significant obstacle to the efforts aimed at meeting the educational needs of learners with barriers to learning. In addition, the DBSTs' and the PIED's inadequate support negatively impacts the implementation of inclusive education in full-service schools. This paper highlighted deficits in interdependence skills expected from the DBSTs and the PIED to support SBSTs, and the need for the three operational bodies to work together to maintain an equilibrium in supporting learners with barriers to learning.

## **Implications of the Study**

To restore the equilibrium of support, first, operational bodies should interact with their knowledge and experiences when they plan and implement support interventions; second, workshops organised to support full-service schools should cater for their unique nature and needs, and; last, perceptions about the support offered to full-service schools should guide policy review and departmental guidelines on the implementation of inclusive education.

The findings of this paper will not only contribute towards filling this knowledge gap but will also serve as an impetus for current debate and future studies on how the SBSTs, DBSTs and the PIED should work interdependently as stipulated in EWP 6 [6] and SIAS [23] to maintain a strong balance in the support they offer to full-service schools to realise the educational goals of learners with barriers to learning.

## **Acknowledgements**

We acknowledge the support of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), South Africa.

## **Declaration of Interest Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15379/ijmst.v10i2.3273>

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