

PERCEIVED IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON TEACHERS’ IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY ON SCREENING, IDENTIFICATION, ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT IN SCHOOLS: IMPLICATION FOR RESEARCH IN ENGINEERING CAREER

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ABSTRACT

Research evidence across the globe especially in South Africa, have shown the failure of effective implementation of the policy of Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) in inclusive schools. These literature points to the fact that principals and teachers who chief implementers of the SIAS policy lack adequate knowledge and training on the implementation of the policy. This ugly situation, therefore, necessitated this research on the perceived impact of professional development on teachers’ implementation of the policy on screening, identification, assessment and support in schools. The researchers adopted a Participatory Action Research design with the selection of three schools of Motheo District. Data for the study were collected using focus group discussion schedule with teachers and School Based Support Team (SBST) coordinators, as well as group discussions with district officials, including the Learning Support Advisor (LSA) from the District Based Support Team (DBST), the Subject Advisor (SA) and the Circuit Manager (CM). Data were analysed thematically. It was found that exposing teachers to professional development programs enhances their effective implementation of the policy of screening, identification, assessment and support in schools. This finding has implications for research in Engineering career in that when SIAS policy is properly implemented by teachers, students’ chances of picking interest in Engineering career will increase greatly. It was thus, recommended that regular professional development programs should be organized for the teachers to enable them to acquire the required skills for the implementation of SIAS.

KEYWORDS: *Implementation, Policy on screening, identification, assessment and support Professional development*

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Statement of the Problem

In South Africa, inclusive education which is an important part of the education system came with the Constitution of the country and it is aimed at recognizing diversity and reducing exclusivity (Nel et al., 2016). In line with the above statement, Literature emphasises the importance of training teachers for implementing of Inclusive Education policies in mainstream schools because they are the key role-players in teaching and learning (Mbelu, 2011). Inclusive Education is now a compulsory component in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes (Walton, 2017). For the implementation of Inclusive Education in South Africa, teachers are required to follow the process of screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS), which was the strategy for Education White Paper 6 (RSA DBE, 2001). After a number of researchers have proved evidence for the failure of the Education White Paper 6, SIAS was then introduced as the policy in 2014, with the hope of effecting improvement of Inclusive Education

(RSA DBE, 2014). Teachers seem to be challenged by the implementation of SIAS due to alleged inadequate teacher training. Besides, teachers of the selected schools of Motheo District displayed incompetence in terms of the latter, due to the alleged lack of knowledge and understanding of SIAS process. Some of the teachers have attended SIAS training, however, they are still unable to implement the policy due to alleged inadequate training.

Literature also confirmed that untrained teachers find it difficult to implement inclusive policies and these policies faced difficulties, due to the policy-practice divide in mainstream schools (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007). For effective SIAS policy-practice by teachers, there has to be formally and organised developmental activities sustained over longer periods of time (Walton, 2017). Among others, the distinct practices of inclusive leadership should include advocating for inclusion, educating participants, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasising learning and classroom practice of the learners, adopting inclusive decision and policy-making strategies, and incorporating whole school approaches (Ryan, 2006). It is obvious that to master the latter, there has to be continuous and adequate training on implementation of SIAS policy.

Training of SIAS policy is, therefore, important because limited training and inadequate knowledge and skills have an impact on how teachers handle inclusive classrooms (Walton, 2017). Teachers need to improve their skills and knowledge and develop new ones to facilitate the process of SIAS (Walton, 2017; Majoko & Phasha, 2018). Leaders and teachers who have acquired knowledge to build inclusive schools through teacher development have the potential of producing inclusive classrooms (Majoko & Phasha, 2018). According to Qeleni (2013) with adequate knowledge of SIAS, school leaders can minimise negative attitudes among teachers, so that they can develop positive attitudes towards inclusive beliefs and practices. Walton (2017) confirms that, before the introduction of EWP 6, scholars indicated the need for teacher training in knowledge, skills and attitudes for the implementation of inclusive policies.

To acquire skills and knowledge of inclusive policies, SIAS seems particularly inclined to require teachers who are life-long trainees (Walton, 2017). Self-motivation is, therefore, needed from the teachers by preparing themselves psychologically, emotionally and socially, as well as physically, for in-service training to improve the implementation of SIAS policy. Lack of proper training on SIAS implementation has earlier been mentioned, with an indication that untrained teachers find it difficult to implement inclusive policies, and these policies face difficulties in terms of policy-practice (Walton, 2017). According to Walton (2017), in SA and internationally, lack of teacher training is often impeding the achievements of Inclusive Education because teachers just learn theory and not practice. Once more, the non-implementation of inclusive education is attributed to insufficient professional development (Hodgson, 2018; Walton, 2017). Ryan (2006) believes that overcoming challenges associated with inclusion requires everyone involved to acquire knowledge, understandings and attitude through professional development program. That can be done by role-players assuming the role of both trainers and trainees, where those who have knowledge and understanding become trainers and those who lack knowledge and understanding become trainees (Majoko & Phasha, 2018).

REVIEW OF RELATED EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Formal support structures in form of professional development of teachers at school levels can facilitate collaboration and the sharing of expertise in order to ensure effective implementation of SIAS within mainstream classrooms (Nel et al., 2016). Professional development training increased teachers' willingness to implement special education policy (Kisbu-Sakarya & Doenyas, 2021). Training program promotes teachers' participation in teaching and implementation of inclusive education policy by connecting them to the realities and challenges of diverse nature of such education (Pérez-Ordás et al.,

2021). Educational programs and remedial training are paramount to teachers' effective implementation of inclusive education policy (Olagunju et al., 2021). For proper implementation of the inclusive education policy by teachers, there is the need for investment in the training programs that certify them (Fernandes et al., 2021). Rodríguez-Oramas et al. (2021) revealed that after exposing teachers to professional training in inclusive education, teachers increasingly promoted the educational inclusion of their students with special needs.

Research Gap

The foregoing discussions have shown the relevance of professional development programs to the effective implementation of inclusive education policy by the inclusive educator or teachers. However, few literature or empirical evidence abound for such discussions across the globe. The situation is worse in the South African context where there is a dearth of empirical evidence on the impact of professional development on the implementation of inclusive education policy. This gap in the literature in the South African context necessitated this study. Thus, the researchers sought the perceived impact of professional development on teachers' implementation of the policy on screening, identification, assessment and support in South African schools.

METHOD

Research Approach and Design

Participatory Action Research design within the context of qualitative research approach was adopted for this study by the researchers. This design enabled the researchers to gather necessary research information from the participants (Thwala et al., 2020; Baloyi-Mothibeli et al., 2021; Thwala et al., 2021; Ntseto et al., 2021).

Participants

The participants for this research comprised teachers and School Based Support Team (SBST) coordinators, as well as district officials, including the Learning Support Advisor (LSA) from the District Based Support Team (DBST), the Subject Advisor (SA) and the Circuit Manager (CM) in schools in Motheo District of South Africa. A total of 15 participants were involved in the research.

Instrument

Data for this research were gathered using a focus group discussion (FGD) guide. The items of the FGD were based on the potential impact of professional development on teachers' implementation of SIAS policy. The trustworthiness of this instrument was ensured by thorough reading and re-reading by members of the research team and other colleagues.

Data Collection Procedure

To gather the necessary data for the research, the researchers first obtained ethical clearance from the University of the Free State committee on research ethics. Thereafter, gatekeeper permissions were obtained from the sampled schools to enable the researchers to have access to the participants. Thus, the focus group discussions were conducted with the participants at their respective schools. Such exercise lasted for a period of 40 minutes. In the course of the discussions, the researchers adhered to other research ethics such as using pseudonyms in place of the participants' identities, allowing for discontinuation in the discussion by the participants as may be demanded.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analysed using a thematic analytic procedure. This was achieved by reading and rereading the responses of the participants during the FGDs in order to make meaningful points from the discussions.

RESULTS

The main theme that arose from the transcription of the FGDs was the perceived impact of professional development on teachers' implementation of the policy on screening, identification, assessment and support in South African schools. Below are the extracts from the discussions with the participants.

School A participants responded thus: Yeah we think that teachers need training because I have done little reading research about what SIAS is all about, and then this policy doesn't only include learners in the class. It goes as far as ... maybe some of them would have problems at home like social problems. So, we need training so that we can be able to help children so that at the end of the day we don't end up passing or do transfer learners who do not need to be transferred. It was a strategy and also for us if teachers can be trained at tertiary level, where they get exposed. Let us say teacher training where you come to a school and say I am inclusive teacher on an ad-hock it will only be done after confession, Diploma or ACE. Is then we gonna be exposed to SIAS, but if we can say we are trained as remedial teachers. But now if you take teachers during a week it is not going to benefit them.

School B participants responded thus: We think if they can bring the Social Workers, especially Psychologists because we think they will ex-pantiate more on the strategies that the teachers can use, in order to identify all those learners that have learning barriers. It is not only on their academic side, but even the behaviour of the learners hamper their progress. Some of them need the specialist, the psychologists and the social workers. When teachers start to be concerned about the learners faced with barriers around the classes. Then follow the process of SIAS and not just signing any learner who is having any certain behaviour without the performance been known, just step by step until they are sure that now such a learner will have to be referred or need assistance of some sort. Maybe to support you, last week we went to collect referrals from one school, and then with screening, we check the learners how did you go with gender, age, grade etc. This learner is seven years, first year in grade one. This child is referred, he never repeated so we said to the schools, we don't test because we will come back to assess the learner and our recommendation is to let the child repeat. Is obvious and we would say where is the evidence of support.

School C participants responded thus: All of us are part of those children, not certain teachers, not those who are in SBST or the ones who are there for the special education. At first, we thought mainly that SIAS is strictly meant for members of the SBST, only to find that now it is everybody's business at school level. So, teachers also must take part and ensure that now they are adhering to the policy itself. SIAS opens the eyes for you to understand what the child is going through, so if training is there for the teachers, then everything will be solved, everything will be fine, everyone would know how to tackle a child with the challenges. And about teacher training for SIAS, when learners are... we wouldn't say be referred but when learners are not supported from Primary School there will also be problems at High School Level. So SIAS is tackling that problem in order for you to support the child at a younger age so that the problem wouldn't increase at High School Tertiary Levels. We should learn a lot from that training.

DISCUSSIONS

This study sought to find out the perceived impact of professional development on teachers' implementation of the policy on screening, identification, assessment and support in South African schools. The findings showed that the participants perceived professional development training programs as veritable tools for enhancing teachers' implementation of the policy on screening, identification, assessment and support in South African schools. Thus, committing teachers to in-service training of SIAS seems to be what participants accept as the need to improve implementation of SIAS implementation. For Schools A, B and C to decide on giving feedback to their staff members the way they did, it was like they are committing them to their roles and responsibilities. For example, School C suggested that teachers were committed by first identifying learners with learning barriers, who are also appearing on the Learners at Risk List and Progressed Learners List. Each teacher chose one learner from each list and the group had fifteen learners whose forms were filled in. Participants asserted that professional behaviour and professional responsibilities enable everyone involved in SIAS policy to be sure of what is needed. Literature supports them, in that the behaviour of SIAS trainers and trainees should be professional, so that, at the end of the training, the negative attitudes of teachers can be changed to positive ones. Through professional parameters, behaviour and responsibilities, the teachers' consciences will be raised, and they will be concerned about LSEN, as well as creating positive learning environments for them. These findings agree with the findings of recent empirical studies.

Almalky and Alqahtani (2021) revealed that special educators affirmed that their exposure to professional training enabled them to have adequate practices that support partnerships in the implementation of the policy of planning, assessment, and needed skills provision. Teachers experiences as a result of their participation in professional development sessions shaped the socialization and professional identity of special education teachers thereby improving their implementation of special education services (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Professional development and learning programs improved teachers' implementation of inclusive education policy in Vietnamese special education schools (Pham et al., 2021). The successful implementation of the Hong Kong government's inclusive education policy was attributed to the teachers' exposure to professional development training programs (Sin & Yan, 2016). Lopes and Oliveira (2021) found that teachers who had the opportunities for professional development were very effective in the implementation of the key elements of inclusive education in Portuguese schools. (Bloom, 2021) indicated an increase in teachers' awareness and implementation of inclusive education policy as a result of their engagement in the professional development training.

Professional development training increased teachers' willingness to implement special education policy (Kisbu-Sakarya & Doenyas, 2021). Training program promotes teachers' participation in teaching and implementation of inclusive education policy by connecting them to the realities and challenges of diverse nature of such education (Pérez-Ordás et al., 2021). Educational programs and remedial training are paramount to teachers' effective implementation of inclusive education policy (Olagunju et al., 2021). For proper implementation of the inclusive education policy by teachers, there is the need for investment in the training programs that certify them (Fernandes et al., 2021). Rodríguez-Oramas et al. (2021) revealed that after exposing teachers to professional training in inclusive education, teachers increasingly promoted the educational inclusion of their students with special needs.

Based on the above, integrated support of district officials and school-based leaders is needed in order to close SIAS gaps and improve the implementation thereof. In other words, the learning barriers and gaps should be addressed and closed with resources like teaching materials, special equipment, facilities like remedial classes, additional personnel, like

remedial teachers and effective teaching and learning. Furthermore, circuit managers and subject advisors should be involved in SIAS training, so that they can also support the DBST in addressing the challenges faced by the teachers, SBSTs and SMTs at school level. Being involved in SIAS training will help them understand what the school is going through and will help them know what to do in terms of improving the implementation of SIAS. This finding has implications for research in Engineering career in that when SIAS policy is properly implemented by teachers, students' chances of picking interest in Engineering career will increase greatly.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Professional development training programs are veritable tools for enhancing teachers' implementation of the policy on screening, identification, assessment and support in South African schools. Thus, the researchers recommended that: There should be adequate and effective teacher training for the teachers in order to ensure the Improvement of SIAS implementation; Principals as school leaders need to be empowered with inclusive knowledge, so that they can also display inclusive attitudes and be able to articulate a philosophy that reflects inclusive beliefs and practices. There should be teamwork among the various stakeholders responsible for the implementation of SIAS policy. This entails involving support staff from the districts, circuits, the DBST that includes staff from the inclusive section, curriculum section, management and governance, and many more, to implement SIAS policy.

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