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Teaching mentally disabled learners

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This investigation focused on the "special" (different from mainstream education) nature of special education and teachers' experiences of the challenges of teaching the mentally disabled learner. The aim was to investigate the nature of the experiences of teachers of mentally disabled learners and what guidelines can be provided for them. A qualitative study with a descriptive, explorative, subjective and contextual research design was chosen, using a phenomenological approach to data collection. This report of the findings may serve as a basis for guidelines to teachers.

Onderrig aan verstandelik gestremde leerders

Hierdie ondersoek fokus op die "spesiale aard" van spesiale opvoeding (dus anders as hoofstroomonderwys) en die ervarings van onderwysers met betrekking tot die uitdagings wat hulle in die gesig staar as hulle die verstandelik gestremde kind onderrig. Die doel was om onderwysers se ervaring van hulle onderrig aan die verstandelik gestremde kind en riglyne in hierdie verband te ondersoek. 'n Kwalitatiewe studie, met 'n beskrywende, ondersoekende, subjektiewe en kontekstuele navorsingsontwerp is gekies waarin van 'n fenomenologiese benadering tot dataversameling gebruik gemaak is. Die verslag van die bevindings dien as grondslag vir riglyne aan onderwysers.

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Mentally disabled learners have special educational needs and are therefore often regarded as "special" in the sense that they require assistance and support to overcome contextual, social and individual barriers. Their difficulties may include slow cognitive development (reasoning, problem-solving, remembering and generalising) as well as slow language development (Gulliford & Upton 1992).

Mentally disabled learners find it difficult to comply with the demands and expectations of society, possibly because of their perceived lack of performance or potential (Stakes & Hornby 1997). They are often treated with little interest or sympathy, with unease, fear, embarrassment and/or even disgust.

In South Africa learners with special educational needs are currently accommodated in "special schools" that cater for their specific needs (Swart & Pettipher 2005). However, the South African "special education" system is currently under review. The Bill of Rights (RSA 1996) and the Education White Paper 6 (Dept of Education 2001, Naiker 1999) provide a framework for inclusive education in the country (Donald *et al* 1997). It is expected that specialised assistance will in future be made available through mainstream education and that the curriculum will become flexible enough to accommodate the barriers to learning and development of mentally disabled learners, among others (Landsberg *et al* 2005, Donald *et al* 1997).

Teachers of mentally disabled learners must do much more than simply follow a fixed, prescribed curriculum; they constantly have to adapt to the specific and unique barriers to learning and development of each individual mentally disabled learner (Lomofsky *et al* 1999). The teacher should therefore be knowledgeable about each learner's abilities and circumstances in which s/he learns best (Wolfendale 1993). It has to be understood that the mentally handicapped learner struggles with social construction and has limited reasoning powers and conceptual ability. The teacher must accept and adjust to this in order to teach mentally disabled learners effectively and enable them to reach their full potential. The teacher has to be mentally and emotionally prepared to give the learner adequate support. S/he is expected to feel empathy for the learner, not pity. Yet, s/he should not become over-involved as the primary educator, but play a role complementary to that of the parents (Steenkamp 1979).

This article argues that many teachers of mentally disabled learners are unprepared to handle their occupational situation (a classroom with mentally disabled learners) efficiently and that they find it hard to cope with the unique demands of their daily task, such as the fact that a mentally disabled learner requires much more than regular educational teaching and assistance (Lomofsky *et al* 1999). For example, in planning learning programmes, cognisance should be taken of such pupils' specific, unique needs (Steenkamp 1979). A common complaint of these teachers is that the mentally disabled learner is either neglected or overprotected by his/her parents. We aim to make these teachers' voices heard by the Education fraternity or which they work, in the hope that their needs will be addressed.

This study thus proposes to investigate the problems and challenges experienced by teachers of mentally disabled learners, in order to suggest some guidelines for addressing their needs.

1. Problem statement

The teacher of the mentally disabled learner is faced with unique challenges that go far beyond the standard requirements of teaching. Not only must the pupil's barriers to learning and development themselves be addressed, but the parent-teacher and parent-child interactions also need serious consideration, contributing further to the complexity of the task. Uncertainty about the division of responsibilities between parent and teacher, as well as parent and learner, can be extremely stressful for the teacher. The complexities of the classroom demands contribute to the unique experiences of the teachers of mentally disabled learners. Hence we ask:

- What are the experiences of teachers of mentally disabled learners?
- What guidelines can be provided to teachers of mentally disabled learners in order to support and assist them in their educational task?

2. Aim of the research

The objectives of this study are to explore and describe the teachers' experiences of their major challenges in the education of mentally disabled learners and to formulate guidelines enabling teachers to handle

more effectively the difficult problems they face in meeting the specific needs of the mentally disabled learner.

3. Clarification of concepts

According to Hallahan & Kauffman (1997) the most commonly used definition specifies that in order to be considered mentally disabled, the learner has to meet two criteria: low intellectual functioning and low adaptive skills. The terminology relating to the barrier of "intellectual disability" is constantly changing (cf Engelbrecht & Green 2001). In the *Education White Paper* 6 (DoE 2001) the term "intellectual impairment" is used. For the purposes of this article the term "mental disability" (Landsberg *et al* 2005: 5) is preferred, as it resembles the term used by the school at which the research was done, namely "mental handicap".

According to the NCSNET/NCESS report (DoE 1997: 55) the mentally disabled learner has unique needs, based on his/her specific deficiencies, which differentiate him/her from the majority of learners in body, mind or behaviour to such an extent that s/he cannot derive sufficient benefit, make progress or develop by means of the instruction provided in mainstream education. Such a learner is excluded from mainstream education "because of a physical disability" (as explained by the medical or "within-child" discourse that co-constructed the field of specialised education) (Landsberg *et al* 2005: 5, Naiker 1999: 13). The learner requires education of a specialised nature to facilitate adaptation, and should not attend a mainstream class in a regular school (because such attendance may be harmful to the learner him/herself or to other learners in that class), but s/he is nevertheless partially educable (Steenkamp & Steenkamp 1992). The shift to an eco-systems approach emphasises the importance of the learner's situation, including the role of the school and the teacher.[1]

For the purposes of this article, the concept "mentally disabled learner" will refer to a learner whose intellectual functioning is significantly below average and whose level of development lags behind in comparison with learners of the same chronological age. Therefore, such a learner finds it difficult to adapt to the learning situation.

1 Cf Ferguson 2002, Thomas & Loxley 2001, Engelbrecht 1999, and Bronfenbrenner 1979.

Barriers to learning and development exist where learners require special help and support if they are to overcome the particular contextual, social and individual disadvantages they face (Swart & Pettipher 2005). Naiker (1999: 13) refers to the different discourses that have constructed the field of specialised education, namely the medical, charity, lay and rights discourses. The concept of barriers to learning and development should include personal and social needs as well as educational needs (Gulliford & Upton 1992: 1). Special educational needs require the provision of different or additional resources for learners on account of some degree of disability or impairment (Swart & Pettipher 2005: 15, Naiker 1999: 22).

For the purposes of this article, the concept of barriers to learning and development refer to identified educational needs additional to those of a learner in mainstream education, and particularly those experienced by the mentally disabled learner.

4. Research design

The study focused on the various problems faced by teachers involved in the education of the mentally disabled learner. The approach may be described as qualitative (interested in meaning rather than outcomes), exploratory, descriptive, inductive (without preconceived ideas), holistic, interpretative and contextual (in the everyday setting).[2]

4.1 Research method

This research study was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 involved the exploration and description of the experiences of teachers of mentally disabled learners. In Phase 2 guidelines for teachers were derived from the findings of Phase 1.

4.2 Sampling of participants

Sampling refers to the process of selecting the participants from a population to obtain information regarding a phenomenon in such a way as to ensure that the population will be properly represented (Brink

2 Cf Burns & Grove 1993, Mouton & Marais 1994, Creswell 1998, and Fraenkel & Wallen 1993.

1991). In qualitative research it is important to select those participants who are best able to give the researcher access to the special perspective, experience or condition which s/he wishes to understand (Morse 1994, Yegidis & Weinbach 1996).

The eleven participants in this study were therefore consciously and purposively selected. Their ages ranged from 20 to 58 (average 35) and they were representative of diverse genders (four males and seven females), languages (five Afrikaans, four English, two Xhosa), races (two black, seven coloured, two white), years of experience (from 12 to 35, average 24) and level of teaching (Grades 1 to 7). They were a homogenous group in that they were all employed at a school for the mentally disabled, where they had to face the challenges of teaching such learners. They were therefore able to supply the researcher with rich information on the topic under investigation.

4.3 Data collection

Eleven in-depth, individual phenomenological interviews were conducted with the participants to assist in identifying their primary experiences, perceptions and opinions, with the unique contribution of each participant being of paramount importance. The researcher used an audiotape recorder to capture the interviews. The interviews were based on the following open-ended research question: How do you experience your teaching of the mentally disabled learner?

Open-ended questions encourage fluency and rich disclosure of information (Kock 1996). The interviews in this research were continued until a point of saturation was reached and no new information could be gathered.

The role of the researcher (or moderator) was that of the research instrument: facilitating the discussion, posing the research question and creating an atmosphere conducive to discourse, in order to encourage the participants to speak freely. During the interviews field notes were written on the observations made by the second researcher (or observer). After each session the two researchers discussed their experience and impressions of the interview, and made further notes. An audit file was kept of all the raw data. The various ways of collecting the data (interview, observation, and field notes) contributed to triangulation.

The findings of Phase 1 served as data for Phase 2 and were used as a basis from which the guidelines could be derived.

4.4 Data analysis

The data analysis for this study began with *verbatim* transcription of the tape recording of each interview. Thereafter the information was analysed by means of Tesch's descriptive analysis (Creswell 1994: 155). The transcribed interviews were coded to derive the themes and categories that formed the basis of this research. An experienced qualitative researcher was requested to serve as an independent re-coder. After the researchers and independent coder had both analysed the material according to the same descriptive analysis, a discussion took place between them to reach consensus on the themes, categories and sub-categories identified.

4.5 Literature study

A literature study was undertaken for both phases of the study, not only to provide a firm theoretical framework, but also to illustrate and compare the meaning of the findings with other research, in order to find similarities, differences, and unique contributions or gaps between the various projects. When the literature verifies findings, the trustworthiness of the research is increased.

Furthermore, a literature check was performed to verify the guidelines generated during Phase 2. These proposed guidelines were also discussed with the participants, as well as with professional role players in special education such as psychologists and therapists. They were furthermore subjected to peer assessment.

4.6 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research the measures used in quantitative research to ensure reliability and validity, cannot be applied. Trustworthiness becomes a quest to produce findings through qualitative research that can be trusted and are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 290).

In this research Guba's model was adhered to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The principles of credibility (checking the truth-value), transferability (the strategy used to attain applicability),

dependability (relating to the consistency of the findings) and confirmability (using the criterion of neutrality as freedom from bias) were maintained.

4.7 Ethical measures

The researcher is responsible for protecting the participants throughout a research study. For the purposes of this study the following ethical measures were adhered to: confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, prior informed consent from participants and the principal, as well as full disclosure of information about the research (Kvale 1996: 120).

5. Findings of the research

By means of data analysis, two themes emerged during the research. Under each theme various categories and sub-categories were identified.

In the first theme, the categories described represent the challenging nature of special education. Theme two gives an exposition of the needs expressed by teachers of disabled learners.

5.1 Theme 1: Special education is, by its very nature, challenging

The participating teachers stated that special demands were made on them by the specific nature of special education. They referred in particular to the following six aspects:

5.1.1 Special education is different from mainstream education

The participants highlighted three specific problems with regard to the challenge of teaching disabled learners: the different levels of potential and ability of the learners in a single group; communication problems created by language differences in the group, and the disciplinary problems they experienced in the class.

The fact that special education is more demanding than mainstream education was also confirmed in the literature. Wolfendale (1992: 110) emphasises that the skills and expertise needed to overcome such barriers to learning and development are clearly different from the teaching skills

required for mainstream learners. Bos & Vaughn (1994: 444) therefore contend that teachers need special training for this task.

The differences between special education and mainstream education were further stipulated with regard to intellectual ability and language differences.

- *Different levels of intellectual ability*

The participant teachers, especially those who had come from mainstream education to special education, observed that they had found it difficult to adjust to the differences in the intellectual levels of learners of the same age in a single group.

> Our classes at present is [*sic*] divided into age, the age of the child, and not to the abilities.
>
> This is also a big challenge, as you have mentally disabled children who have different levels of ability in one class.

Individual differences are even more evident in classes for mentally disabled learners than in mainstream classes. Some mentally disabled learners are multi-disabled, which makes it even more difficult for the teacher. It is therefore essential that the teacher differentiate between learners and decide on an appropriate teaching style to stimulate and facilitate each one's curiosity and creativity, and allow each learner to progress at his/her own pace (Friel 1995: 22).

- *Different languages*

Spoken language is an important medium of communication among people and it is essential for the mentally disabled learner to be taught to express him/herself verbally. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to communicate effectively in class, because the teacher frequently needs a third language to use, but may not be fluent in it.

Comments from the teachers interviewed included the following:

> We've got kids from three, basically three language groups. English, Afrikaans and Xhosa. I don't think I'm capable of really talking to a learner or training a learner in Xhosa, especially a mentally disabled learner. It's, it's very, very difficult.
>
> In the class, I had different languages … I didn't have to be bilingual, but trilingual.

Teachers have to understand and honour their learners' cultures and languages in order to meet their needs (Fletcher & Boss 1999: 197). The

teachers interviewed did try but were not able to comprehend and communicate in all the learners' mother tongues and therefore valuable teaching opportunities were lost.

5.1.2 Discipline in the mentally disabled class is more complicated

Teachers were of the opinion that disciplinary or behavioural problems might occur in a classroom of mentally disabled learners for specific reasons, such as a short attention span or lack of understanding. Their comments included the following:

> Another thing that I found very challenging was the discipline. How do we discipline these children in a severely mentally disabled school? Do they really understand what is discipline ... ? for what purpose, and why?
>
> Their attention span is very short … They become restless …

Mentally disabled learners tend to be very restless, moody and sensitive, so a great deal of effort and energy is required from teachers to maintain discipline in such a class (Baum 1982: 52).

5.1.3 Special education involves additional work and responsibility

From the comments made by the teachers interviewed, it was clear that teaching mentally disabled learners entailed a great deal of additional work and responsibility. They made numerous references to the fact that they did not only serve as teachers, but also had to assume the roles of class aid, nurse, social worker and therapist:

> I had to prepare different lessons, different activities, and it meant a lot of work.
>
> I must simplify each little word and first explain it.
>
> We have a shortage of teachers' assistants. Therefore the teachers themselves must help out.

Since the learners did not achieve equally well and instructions had to suit each learner's ability, the teacher had to do a great deal of preparatory work (cf Steenkamp & Steenkamp 1992: 46). They had to plan adaptation activities and materials to ensure the learners' participation.

5.1.4 There is stigma attached to special education

During the interviews, some of the teachers stated that there was a stigma attached to special education. They reported that the stigma was obvious from the reflections of the attitudes of other people, especially colleagues in mainstream education.

> The other teachers, uhm, the staff at other schools, actually look down on us who are associated with the special school.
>
> It seems that, uhm, people think we are, uhm, less than, uhm, our child is less than a normal child. The society seems to think that way about our children.

Teachers of mentally disabled learners often lack the support, acknowledgement and appreciation they deserve. Furthermore, the stigma is often linked to the low academic status of the school and transferred to the teachers at the school (Norwich 1990: 113).

5.1.5 Special education is stressful to teachers

The problems and frustrations expressed by the teachers were obviously experienced as very tiring and stressful.

> Teaching at the school can be very tiresome, as we have to encounter many problems.
>
> I admit that it can be very difficult and stressful at times.

Teachers of mentally disabled learners need enormous resources of patience and empathy. They often feel drained and experience emotions such as guilt, anger and irritation. Apart from the heavy emotional toll it takes, this exhausting and stressful situation can also affect their personal health and family life (McGrath 1995: 8).

5.1.6 Special education can also be highly fulfilling and rewarding

Despite their many problems, frustrations and concerns, the teachers interviewed emphasised that they found their work fulfilling and rewarding. Comments to this effect included the following:

> It is not always easy to teach the mentally disabled child, but it is very rewarding.
>
> It's so much more fulfilling than working with a mainstream school child.

Riddell & Brown (1994: 209) confirmed this fact in their research. Although these learners may not have much ability, they are generally eager to learn and the struggle brings commensurate rewards, when something is actually eventually achieved.

5.2 Theme 2 : Teachers in special education have special needs

The second theme related to the fact that teachers of mentally disabled learners themselves displayed barriers to learning and development. They expressed the following five clearly identifiable needs:

5.2.1 A need for orientation and experience with regard to their task

Teachers of mentally disabled learners find it difficult to fulfil their task, because they are seldom adequately aware of what will be expected of them. According to some of the teachers interviewed, they found it hard to adjust to the new situation, as they had no prior experience of special school teaching.

> Uhm, there was no orientation, which I think is very important for a new teacher, especially from a mainstream school ....
>
> There was no orientation, nobody helped me, nobody explained to me what type of child I'm actually dealing with.
>
> You know, I was in a sort of adapt-or-die situation ... I was either gonna survive here and become more comfortable with the children, or not at all.
>
> Here you cannot expect to walk in and work as if you are teaching normal children.
>
> It was a totally new experience for me and very challenging.

Gerber *et al* (1995: 452) contended that all newly appointed staff should receive induction training to reduce their adjustment problems by giving them a sense of security and confidence. Fink (1992: 47-8) also emphasises the importance of the introduction and preparation of new employees for the demands of a new working environment. The management of each institution should initiate such a programme.

Hutchinson (1982: 30) argues that teachers' limited range of educational experiences was often matched by low expectations. This confirms the contention that a more experienced teacher will be better equipped to live up to the more daunting challenges of this teaching context.

5.2.2 A need for specialised training

An important need emerging clearly from the reports of the participants was their need for special training.

> [...] and there was no training for us, no workshops, no training for severely mentally disabled children, and it became very difficult.
>
> I think if the Department was fair enough, teachers dealing with these learners should receive special training ....

Hellriegel *et al* (1999: 407) highlight the important role of special training and development in overcoming certain limitations in the basic training of teachers.

5.2.3 A need for support

It seems from the statements made by the participating teachers that they themselves also experienced a need for support, to "make it easier for learning to happen" in their classes (Green *et al* 1999: 121). The participants expressed a need for support from experts in the field, from the Department of Education (including in-service training on the curriculum and inclusive education), from parents (who often do not adequately care for their children, or overprotect them, or foster unrealistic expectations), from the community and from society at large.

A general concern expressed by most of the teachers interviewed was that they had no assistance from professional experts in dealing with the many physical and psychological problems they experienced. They complained that they

> ... have no occupational therapists to assist, to assist us in working out activities that are suitable for the learners. Also we do, uhm, not have any psychologists, educational therapists or speech therapists — there is nobody that has the expertise that we can turn to. We need medical personnel [...] a social worker.

According to Hallahan & Kauffman (1997: 22) teachers need to collaborate with other professionals in identifying and making maximum use of learners' abilities. Gulliford & Upton (1992: 69) note, too, that special education, in particular, requires collaboration and a multidisciplinary team approach.

The participants also expressed rather negative feelings towards the Department of Education, due to its perceived lack of support. They also

expressed concern about changes in education (inclusion) and job insecurity among staff in special schools:

> We have requested an OBE ... workshop to be done for us. Nothing has materialised. We do not know if we are doing the right or wrong with regard to the curriculum.

Tomlinson (1982: 139) states that it is not particularly surprising that special school teachers should be confused as to the nature of the special school curriculum and its aims and objectives, as they operate within an ambiguous frame of reference. Hegarty (1993: 138) contends that local education authorities must assume a more active role in in-service training.

The teachers interviewed voiced their disappointment and dissatisfaction about the general lack of parental involvement and interest at their school:

> The parental involvement … it's almost non-existent … as if the parents are only too happy to see their children off at the school.

Closely linked to this was inadequate parental care for the mentally disabled children. Some parents are overprotective; others have unrealistic expectations of their children and the teachers:

> Sometimes the parents neglect their children. Some are not well cared for. Uhm, they do not receive enough food ... they are not even washed.
>
> According to the overprotective parent, the child can do no wrong.
>
> I said the expectations of the parents were too high from this type of child.

Hegarty (1993: 153-4) also expresses concern about the fact that parents are often more than happy for schools to take over full responsibility for their children's education and care. They also often display a lack of understanding for the child (Fine 1991: 169).

The teachers who took part in the study were of the opinion that both the community and society in general were apathetic and ignorant, which could possibly be ascribed to a lack of communication. Such apathy means few sponsors and little financial support:

> We have little or no community support.

Many special schools rely heavily on money raised from the communities within which they are located (Donald *et al* 1997: 99-101). Where

there is little interest in the disabled and they are treated in an uncaring manner, such schools will be at a disadvantage.

5.2.4 A need for resources

Teachers were disempowered by a lack of the resources necessary to enable them to fulfil their task, because they were

> ... experiencing a shortage of apparatus. There was also not enough resource material to assist me ...

The resources used by teachers have a major influence on what and how information and skills are taught (Bos & Vaughn 1994: 427).

5.2.5 A need for strong leadership and management

The teachers commented on various aspects of leadership and management, such as a lack of co-operation and transparency at the school, and a non-democratic style:

> ... the school is run in a more autocratic way, which is reminiscent of the old South Africa.

The principal of a special school has to be innovative and flexible, and should seek co-operation from all role-players to ensure the efficient functioning of the school. This would include the provision of resources, being him/herself a resource on good instruction and a visible presence, and having good communication skills (Harber & Davies 1997).

6. Guidelines to assist teachers of mentally disabled learners

Guidelines were derived from the findings to assist teachers of mentally disabled learners in coping with the challenges and needs revealed by this investigation.

In respect of the first theme, to address the challenges posed by the different levels of development, intellectual abilities and languages of the learners in a single class, the following strategies and approaches could be utilised:

- Experts and assistants, such as psychologists, occupational, physio- and speech therapists, as well as nurses and class aides (whether on a permanent or temporary, paid or voluntary basis) would sig-

nificantly alleviate the pressure on teachers at special education schools.

- The teacher could consider using a wider variety of presentation methods in the class. The volume of work to be taught could be reconsidered and divided into smaller sections (Engelbrecht & Green 2001: 204). Helpful devices, such as audio-tapes, video recordings and computers, could also be incorporated. A well-organised teacher would probably also find it easier to handle the diversity in the classroom, for example by arriving early to prepare the classroom and using "to-do" lists of priorities.
- Age-appropriate curricula are suggested to address the differences between the phases. In the junior phase (6-9 years) the focus can be mainly on perceptual and motor, safety, communication and socialisation skills; body image, and basic reading and numeracy skills (Engelbrecht & Green 2001: 205). The middle phase (9-12 years) can highlight socialisation, self-sufficiency, communication, motor co-ordination and more functional academic skills, which allow greater independence. In the senior phase (12-18 years) career-related activities such as handwork, painting and cooking can be introduced, as well as education on sexuality.

  The final years of the senior phase can be seen as job preparation. Learners with profound mental impairment can focus on practical skills such as self-care, motor development, socialisation and safety. On-the-job training and part-time placements can be arranged for older learners (Hegarty 1993: 76).
- In order to enable teachers to place learners in appropriate groups, proper records of progress and achievement should be kept. A personal information file should be opened for each learner, as well as a personal assessment portfolio. This record should accompany the learner throughout his/her education and should be retained as visible proof of development (Steenkamp & Steenkamp 1992: 89).
- With regard to the language dilemma faced by teachers, peer tutors could provide invaluable assistance (Hallahan & Kauffman 1997: 70). Learners could effectively tutor one another and develop peer networks. This is also an inexpensive source of assistance. Parents and other community volunteers could also stand in as class assistants for language translation (Williams & Snipper 1990: 141).

- Discipline was a challenging issue for teachers in special education. Various means of addressing this issue have been proposed: a code of conduct (disciplinary policy) for the school, classroom rules, routine and order, a balanced approach, flexibility, class mentors, setting up a reward system, capacity building, prefects or monitors, collaboration with families, and behaviour-management workshops.[3]
- Special education involved extra work and responsibility for teachers, and therefore causes stress. Various strategies and techniques could be employed to address this problem. Systematic planning is essential (Gulliford & Upton 1992: 69). The teacher also has to be resourceful, and to change an activity or instructional material when it is clear that a planned programme is not having the desired results (Steenkamp & Steenkamp 1992: 22). Teachers should keep up with the latest developments in the field of special education. They could also benefit from life skills training, as well as by developing a positive outlook on life and good interpersonal relationships (Dunham 1992: 113) to help them to deal with the stress they experience.
- To address the reality of the stigma attached to special education, better interaction between mainstream and special education schools as well as with the community and society at large, should be attempted, such as joint meetings, events or functions.

In respect of the second theme, teachers in special education revealed special needs. These included orientation courses, adjustment, experience, specialised training and mentoring programmes (Dunham 1992: 147-8).

- To address the identified need for orientation, management could design and implement a preparation and adjustment programme and arrange mentoring for new teachers (Donald *et al* 1997: 18) to ensure that teachers assume their duties in a productive manner, without insecurity.
- Specialised teacher training at tertiary institutions and by means of in-service workshops is the appropriate way to equip teachers with the skills and competence they need to address their task (Green *et al* 1999: 128).

3 Cf Hallahan & Kauffman 1997, Bos & Vaugn 1994, Steenkamp & Steenkamp 1992, Bernard 1990.

- Effective in-service staff development workshops are vital for the development of appropriate teaching strategies. Such workshops should be preceded by needs assessment. The following, according to Engelbrecht & Green (2001: 50), are some categories of activities that may emerge during staff development initiatives: analysing barriers to learning and participation; deciding on a target issue; problem-solving, and setting criteria for success.
- Strategies to provide teachers in special education with the necessary support include teacher support groups (Dunham 1992: 119); a staff welfare policy (Bernard 1990: 325); peer group support (Bernard 1990: 293), and voluntary expert support from the community.

An urgent requirement of teachers is active support from the Department of Education (Green *et al* 1999: 128). The Department could send delegations to schools to advise and support teachers on relevant issues; officials of the Department could give demonstration lessons so that teachers can observe how to work with a mentally disabled learner, and workshops could be arranged to enlighten teachers on curriculum matters. other means of support, such as finance, material and resources, are very important and should also be provided by the Department of Education.

Programmes for the development of parent support, empowerment and co-operation could be facilitated by means of home visits (to establish contact and interaction) and parent-teacher partnerships. Teachers could encourage parents to play a more active role, such as painting the school or providing legal advice, depending on their skills and competence (Engelbrecht & Green 2001: 205).

From the findings there seems to be a serious need for support from the community (cf Green *et al* 1999: 129). Such support would include family members, volunteers, non-governmental organisations and the business sector. To elicit community support, awareness and information campaigns could be launched. Newsletters and brochures could be sent to businesses, firms and churches. Media campaigns could include articles in the local community newspapers on the achievements of and challenges facing mentally disabled learners. The community could become involved in school activities, for example, by means of invitations to open days and community projects for learners, such as making greeting cards for old-age homes. The school could become a

centre for community development, offering educational programmes for illiterate members of society. The school facilities, such as the hall and the sports fields, could be made available for community use (Donald *et al* 1997: 22). The community could share its expertise by offering art, dance or music lessons to mentally disabled learners and exposing them to social experiences through concerts and performances.

- The need for resources in schools for mentally disabled learners has to be addressed to prevent hardship. This could be done by means of a resource network and sponsoring bodies (Norwich 1990: 37), as well as twinning relationships with other schools.
- Strong leadership needs to be supplied by the principal, by means of understanding, support, good relationships, involvement of teachers and a democratic management style. The principal should consider discussing the school's vision with the teachers; defining the educational goals to be striven for; developing a school leader development programme, and ensuring good communication channels (regular meetings, democratic decision-making and active participation by teachers).

7. Conclusion

This study identified both the challenges posed by special education and the particular needs of special education teachers. These teachers daily accompany mentally disabled learners, with all their many needs, problems, joys and sorrows and, above all, their daily struggle to understand, to learn, and to develop, in order finally to take their proper place in society. Guidelines were provided to assist teachers in this important task. Teachers in special education, as well as mentally disabled learners, will be the ultimate beneficiaries of any good action, however small, that may flow from this study, and it was for the sake of every single one of them that the research was undertaken — in the hope that it may make a difference.

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