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Exploring school support stakeholders' perceptions in identifying learning barriers: the case study of selected rural schools in the Eastern Cape

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v42i2.7108>

e-ISSN 2519-593X

Perspectives in Education

2024 42(2): 176-191

PUBLISHED:

28 June 2024

RECEIVED:

1 December 2023

ACCEPTED:

15 May 2024

Abstract

Identification of learning barriers is a critical issue for support provision in inclusive classes, as it informs individualised support plans for each learner who experiences barriers to learning. However, the school support stakeholders in Quintile 1 rural schools in South Africa face challenges in identifying learning barriers experienced by learners in their classes. Quintile 1 is a socially based ranking given to schools in poverty-stricken communities where most people are unemployed. This study focuses on identifying the perceptions of school support stakeholders in the identification of learning barriers in Quintile 1 rural schools. In this qualitative research study, a multiple case study design was used and 15 participants from three categories (teachers, principals, and school-based support team coordinators) were purposively sampled from three secondary and two primary rural schools due to the different roles expected from each category in the identification of learning barriers. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings revealed insufficient knowledge about the identification of learning barriers; lack of support in identifying learning barriers; lack of continuous in-service training on inclusive practices and education policies as barriers to the identification of learning barriers, which led teachers to perceive their roles in identifying learning barriers in a negative way. In general, this article contributes to understanding the complexities surrounding the identification of learning barriers for support provision in rural settings. It highlights areas for improvement in inclusive practices and supports structures to enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of rural education systems.

Keywords: *identification of barriers, inclusive education practices, learning barriers, rural schools, school support stakeholders*



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/pie>

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1. Introduction

The first step in implementing inclusive education is the acceptance of the principle of identifying learning barriers before support can be provided in the classroom (DoE, 2001; DoE, 2014). Learning barriers denote learning challenges that arise within the education system, the learning

site and / or within the learners themselves, which prevent access to learning and development (DoE, 2014: 7). Barriers in this article denote factors that inhibit the educational progress of learners in Quintile 1 rural schools, including, but not restricted to, issues such as poverty, along with systemic challenges such as overcrowding and insufficient teaching staff attributed to the prevalence of low learner enrolment observed at many rural schools. Classroom teachers are regarded as the primary resources in achieving inclusive education goals, and one of their important roles is to identify learning barriers to develop support strategies that can address identified barriers to learning and development further (DoE, 2005). Furthermore, to fulfil this role, teachers work and report to SBST coordinators who have been appointed to lead the committee because they have experience (Makhalemele & Tlale, 2020). As stated in DoE (2014), principals have a responsibility of ensuring the effective support and functionality of the SBST. However, academic inquiry underscores persistent challenges in identifying barriers necessitating intervention, despite the presence of human resources such as SBST coordinators and principals within schools (Makhalemele & Payne-van Staden, 2020; Mpu & Adu, 2021).

The South African school system operates in three school categories to guarantee equitable access to education for all learners, including those with disabilities and special needs (Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2015a). Mainstream schools serve as the primary educational setting, integrating inclusive practices such as curriculum differentiation and individualised support. Full-Service Schools are specialised mainstream institutions equipped to offer comprehensive support services for learners with disabilities, fostering an environment conducive to all learners' success. Special schools cater to learners with severe disabilities, providing intensive specialised support while promoting integration with mainstream settings and communities (DoE, 2001; DoE, 2014; Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2020). School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) within mainstream schools offer additional resources and support to learners with diverse needs, facilitating their integration into inclusive classrooms through collaborative planning and the implementation of inclusive strategies (Makhalemele & Payne-van Staden, 2020). Schools are also classified into quintiles that are used to allocate resources to schools based on their socioeconomic status and level of disadvantage (Maistry & Africa, 2020). The quintile classification is determined based on various factors, including the income levels of the surrounding community, the availability of basic services, and other indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage. Schools are classified into one to five quintiles, with Quintile 1 representing the most disadvantaged schools and Quintile 5 representing the least disadvantaged schools. This classification system is intended to ensure that resources are distributed equitably, with schools in the lower quintiles receiving additional support to address the challenges associated with poverty and inequality (White & Van Dyk, 2019).

According to Maistry and Africa (2020), schools in lower quintiles typically face significant challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, and high levels of poverty among learners. These schools face resource constraints, including shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient learning materials, thus impeding their ability to effectively address diverse learning needs (Maistry & Africa, 2020). Furthermore, limited access to support services, such as special education professionals and therapists, exacerbates the difficulties in catering to learners with disabilities and special needs within these contexts (Engelbrecht, Oswald & Forlin, 2016). Furthermore, high learner-to-teacher ratios and overcrowded classrooms intensify the pressure on teachers, hindering their ability to identify barriers to provide individualised support and differentiated instructions (Engelbrecht

et. al., 2016). In contrast, at Quintiles 3, 4, and 5 school, which encompass schools with varying degrees of disadvantage, challenges persist, although to differing degrees. These may include inadequate teacher training in inclusive pedagogy and serious financial constraints due to inadequacy in state subsidy (Maistry & Africa, 2020).

Challenges related to the identification of learning barriers in mainstream South African schools have tended to be addressed in terms of how they play a role, among other things, in hindering the implementation of inclusive education (Dreyer, 2017; Mpu & Adu, 2021). The main areas of concern are the reluctance of teachers to identify learning barriers, misidentification, use of the traditional medical deficit model in identification, falsified information, and too much paperwork added to a national strategy for screening, identifying, assessing, and supporting (SIAS) as a toolkit (Abongdia, Foncha, & Dakada, 2015; Dreyer, 2017). SIAS is a framework that emphasises standardised procedures to identify, assess, and provide support to learners experiencing barriers to learning (LEBL). It also regulates the roles that different stakeholders must play in the provision of support to LEBL (DoE, 2014).

Deghaye (2021) asserts that due to a poor understanding of screening, teachers avoided identifying learning barriers and that meant that learners who experienced learning barriers were unlikely to be identified in schools, which hinders them from receiving the support they required to participate fully in learning. Challenges in the implementation of SIAS include, for example, the lack of practical guidelines for teachers to follow (Abongdia *et al.*, 2015; Mpu & Adu, 2021).

The South African inclusive education system faces unique challenges in different quintiles, reflecting the disparities in resources, infrastructure, and support systems between schools of varying socioeconomic status (Maistry & Africa, 2020). These challenges hinder the effective implementation of inclusive practices and exacerbate inequalities in educational outcomes for learners with diverse needs. The identification of learning barriers is fundamental in designing individual support plans, and failure to do so means LEBL will become victims (Nel *et al.*, 2016). We argue that if the challenges that hinder the identification of learning barriers in Quintile 1 rural schools are not addressed, there will be a lack of adequate support provided to LEBL. In some cases incorrect support strategies will be used, and that will not benefit learners who need it the most. Worse still, it can exacerbate the already high dropout rate of learners, which would mean that the education system had failed the affected learners (Mkandawire, Maphale & Tseeke, 2016; Mpu & Adu, 2021).

Many studies focus on the challenges in the implementation of inclusive education, creating a gap in research that focuses on school support stakeholders' perceptions related to their different roles in identifying barriers in rural areas, which is crucial as a starting point for successful inclusion in the LEBL learning process (DoE, 2014). Therefore, this study aimed to explore different perceptions of school support stakeholders on the identification of learning barriers in South African Quintile 1 rural schools.

2. Inclusive Education Policy in South African context

Before 1994, LEBL had great difficulties in accessing quality education, because schools were segregated according to race and disability. Schools for white people were well resourced, while those for black people were poorly resourced (Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2015a). Even special education for white children was more organised and properly financed compared to that

of other racial groups (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2022). Although there were many changes after 1994, nothing was done to equalise these different schools, which means that former black schools are bearing the consequences of segregation. Therefore, inclusive education in rural schools is instituted on these underlying challenges. The Education White Paper 6 was published as a South African inclusive education policy that was contextualised as a commitment to include all learners in learning as much as possible in mainstream schools. Among its principles was the recognition that all learners could learn and benefit from quality and equitable support (DoE, 2001) depending on the successful identification of learning barriers (DoE, 2014).

An inclusive education policy requires that the identification of learning barriers no longer be carried out by thinking in terms of deficits (DoE, 2001). Traditionally, a deficit medical model was relied upon, with the sole focus on barriers to learning that resided primarily in the learner (DoE, 2001). At the heart of the medical model, the identification of learning barriers prioritised diagnosis and treatment, allowing teachers to refer learners to specially trained professionals who would focus on the deficit found in the child (Swart & Pettipher, 2019). Inclusive education departs from the colonial assumption that a child must fit into a rigid education system, and the failure to do so meant that the child had to be referred to a specialised setting (Nel *et al.*, 2016). The medical model departs from the syndrome: Of this is my classroom; let us see if you can fit in. Partelow (2018) outlines the socio-ecological model as a theoretical framework that comprehensively examines the multifaceted relationships between individuals, systems and their environments, emphasising the interconnectedness of various social, environmental and individual factors influencing behaviour and outcomes. The socioecological model delineates multiple levels of influence, including individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, community contexts, organisational structures, and broader societal factors, each affecting the development, well-being, and behaviours of the child. Swart and Pettipher (2019) assert that the socioecological model provides a holistic understanding of human behaviour and health outcomes by considering the interplay between levels of influence. This comprehensive approach underscores the importance of addressing factors at multiple levels to promote positive outcomes and facilitate sustainable change in diverse contexts.

The scholar's interpretation of the socioecological model within the South African context is that barriers are expected not only to be found in the child, but also in the different systems within which the child develops (Swart & Pettipher, 2019; Partelow, 2018). For example, South African scholars view barriers resulting from the society within which the child develops, the education system, or school factors (Swart & Pettipher, 2019). Therefore, this means that, in identifying learning barriers that impede learning, the focus is not only on the learner, but also on many other aspects. Learners who need moderate support, which becomes evident when they do not respond to an individual support plan provided by a teacher in a mainstream school, should be referred to a full-service school and those with high support needs to a special school (DoE, 2001; DoE, 2014). New roles were assigned to different stakeholders to support learners experiencing barriers. The classroom teacher assumes the role of a case manager to drive the support process (DoE, 2014). The roles and responsibilities of the principal are to establish the school-based support team, ensure that the team is functional and supported, and ensure that the school is inclusive in all respects (DoE, 2014). The school-based support team is considered the engine responsible for implementing inclusive education policy within schools (Makhalemele & Nel, 2016).

3. Challenges in inclusive practices

Lack of confidence in teaching and supporting LEBL in mainstream schools has been identified as one of the hindrances in implementing inclusive education (Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2015b; Makoelle, 2016; Mpu & Adu, 2021). Makiwane-Mazinyo and Pillay (2017), in a study carried out in KwaZulu-Natal, indicate that teachers not only lack confidence in supporting these learners but also in how to identify barriers that have a negative impact on support provision. A study conducted in the Western Cape in an urban area also highlight the fact that LEBL are simply 'dumped' into mainstream schools because teachers are overwhelmed by the demands of inclusive education (Dreyer, 2017). Therefore, we are of the view that the circumstances of rural mainstream schools where there are other challenges need more attention.

Studies identified other challenges such as teacher workload, insufficient support given to teachers, an inflexible curriculum, a language of teaching and learning that is not the home language of many learners, lack of identification of learning barriers, overcrowded classrooms, and additional administrative paperwork (Dreyer, 2017; Mpu & Adu, 2021; Abongdia *et al.*, 2015). The researchers found that the implementation of inclusive education had made little progress due to the insufficient support given to teachers and the uncertainty about how the policy could be achieved given the socioeconomic factors affecting countries with low- and middle-income while compared to high-income countries (Dreyer, 2017, Mpu & Adu, 2021; Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Le Fanu, 2014). This can result in the danger that inclusive education be seen as just a 'lip service', with the consequence that some learners are left by the wayside as dropouts (Jama, 2014: 86). Progress towards inclusive and quality education can only be through evident improvements in accommodating LEBL's learning needs in inclusive classrooms, as opposed to specialised settings (Carew *et al.*, 2020; Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2015a). Quality education is unlikely for LEBL, while identification remains a challenge in rural mainstream schools, as additional support provision depends on it.

Research indicates that insufficient knowledge and abilities to deal with inclusive practices affect teacher confidence when they interact with learners requiring additional support for their learning (Makoelle, 2016; Mpu & Adu, 2021). This may be what makes teachers feel unprepared to identify barriers in inclusive classes and, in not doing so, learners who are desperately in need of support are disadvantaged. Studies conducted on inclusive education and identification of learning barriers in urban full-service and mainstream schools reveal that some challenges include LEBL who exit the education system before they pass matric despite the additional support available from learning support teachers (Dreyer, 2017; Mpu & Adu, 2021). This is partly due to parents' denying difficulties experienced by their children, and this leaves the identification process at a standstill, since designing a support plan should be based on the completion of the support needs assessment form (SNA1) by the teacher and the parent. In some cases, the low self-perceived confidence of mainstream teachers hinders them from designing individual support plans (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Mkandawire *et al.* (2016), writing in the context of inclusion in rural secondary schools in a comparative study between Lesotho and Malawi, provided a useful summary of the type of identification problems that teachers encountered. This could help to explain the frustration South African teachers have also reported (Dreyer, 2017; Mpu & Adu, 2021) in trying to identify barriers in crowded classes of 80 to 100 learners.

4. Theoretical framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner's socioecological systems theory offers a holistic framework for understanding human development within the context of inclusive education (Stanley & Kuo, 2022). This theory emphasises the complex interaction between individuals and their environments, highlighting the significance of diverse systems ranging from micro-level interactions to macro-level societal influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This paper provides an in-depth exploration of Bronfenbrenner's theory and its application in fostering inclusive educational practices. Recent research findings are incorporated to demonstrate the relevance and efficacy of this theoretical perspective in promoting functional and interactive relationships between school support stakeholders for the benefit of all learners within inclusive educational settings (McLinden & McCracken, 2016; Stanley & Kuo, 2022).

Urie Bronfenbrenner's socioecological systems theory has gained significant traction in the field of education, particularly within the context of inclusive education. This theory suggests that human development is influenced by dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments at multiple levels of influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These levels comprise the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, each exerting unique impacts on child's development. Within the inclusive education framework, understanding these ecological systems is crucial to creating supportive environments that accommodate to all diverse learning needs in the classroom (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

5. Research design and methodology

The overall objective of this research study was to explore school support stakeholders' perceptions in identifying learning barriers as a fundamental aspect of inclusive education (Stanley & Kuo, 2022). To achieve the aim of this study, a qualitative research design was used. It was placed within an interpretive research paradigm where knowledge is socially constructed, and the social world is understood from the perspectives of the individuals who live in it (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). In this study, this design was considered more relevant, as all participants were permanently employed and aware of what was happening at their schools when it came to identifying learning barriers. 15 participants from five schools (two primary schools and three secondary schools in three districts of the Eastern Cape province) were purposively sampled. The selection of principals and school-based support team coordinators was because they are assigned the roles of competent teachers in the identification process and the provision of relevant support (DoE, 2001; DoE, 2014). The participants selected for this study consisted of isiXhosa speakers that formed a diverse demographic, including both male and female, with service ranging from those in their first five years of teaching to those over ten years. Data were generated using semi-structured interviews that were carried out individually to all three categories of participants.

6. Data analysis

Data analysis followed six steps of thematic content analysis from interview transcriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The interviews recordings were transcribed and the data from the recordings were repeatedly listened to, ensuring that no information was omitted in error during the transcription process. The raw data were segmented into meaningful units, with

clear descriptions consisting of more than a single word. In other words, rather than simply classifying data, meaning was awarded and interpreted, as is the convention in an interpretive research paradigm (Creswell, 2013). Codes were formulated by carefully identifying patterns in the data that addressed the research question and these were used to establish different categories that were transcribed, linking themes to categories to fit logical patterns and possible groupings (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The themes were captured and organised into codes related to the research question.

Trustworthiness is a way to ensure credibility in qualitative research while maintaining its relevance (De Vos *et al.*, 2011). The trustworthiness principles were followed throughout the research by confirming transcribed data with participants (member checks) and ensuring clarity of the methods used for data collection (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

7. Ethical Considerations

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of Walter Sisulu University issued an ethical clearance after the proposal was accepted with the number REC/3/2015. Informed consent forms were signed by each participant, which was not difficult, as the principals who granted permission also participated. The approval to conduct the investigation was also obtained from the Eastern Cape Department of Education with mandates on the protection of participating schools and the autonomy of teachers using pseudonyms (White & Van Dyk, 2019).

8. Findings

The results in this section are presented starting with demographic data in the categories of participants who formed part of this study and themes derived from thematic content analysis of each group: insufficient knowledge about the identification of learning barriers; lack of support in identifying learning barriers; lack of continuous in-service training on inclusive practices; and education policies as barriers to the identification of learning. Schools were classified as Quintile 1 (no fee-paying schools) and there were no ramps for accessibility for people with disabilities. They were 40 km or more from the district offices of the Department of Education, and there was only public transport to the town in the mornings and afternoons. Some primary schools were mud structures with inadequate classrooms. In the research protocol, teacher participants were designated by the symbol “T”, followed by a numerical identifier, while members of the School Based Support Team (SBST) were denoted by the symbol “CO”, followed by a corresponding numeric. Lastly, principals were identified by the symbol “P”, followed by a numerical designation.

The demographic information of the purportedly selected participants is provided in the table below.

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

Pseudonyms for participants	Age Group (years)	Gender
T1	20-25	Male
T2	40-45	Male
T3	20-25	Female
T4	45-50	Female
T5	55-60	Female

Pseudonyms for participants	Age Group (years)	Gender
CO1	50-55	Female
CO2	55-60	Female
CO3	55-60	Female
CO4	45-50	Male
CO5	40-45	Male
P1	45-50	Male
P2	45-50	Male
P3	50-55	Male
P4	45-50	Male
P5	55-60	Male

8.1 Themes

Four main themes were derived from the analysis of the thematic content: insufficient knowledge about the identification of learning barriers; lack of support in identifying learning barriers; lack of continuous in-service training on inclusive practices; and education policies as barriers to the identification of learning barriers.

Theme 1: Insufficient knowledge on the identification of learning barriers in rural schools

Identification of learning barriers is of the utmost importance so that LEBL are provided with the necessary support for them also to attain education as their peers do. However, the responses of the participants indicated that they did not know how to identify learning barriers as speculated by inclusive philosophy. The medical model seemed to inform their actions, as affirmed in the following responses from the participants.

T1: When I teach a lesson, I notice that a learner does not respond to questions ... But it does not go far, as nothing is done even after I report to the school management team.

T2: We do not know about inclusive education, and we have received nothing about [these] pedagogical approaches at our school.

T3: I have limited knowledge about practical identification of barriers though I learnt about it while doing my honours in inclusive education, here at school there are many challenges because most learners do not want to talk about their backgrounds for fear of the unknown.

T4: I am teaching three grades (Grades 1–3) as of 2014 ... our school enrolment allows us to have a few teachers and I cannot find time to do anything extra.

T5: I identify through performance using diagnostic analysis ... To be honest, I just do not know how to do it ... our secondary school classes have a high number, and one has to rush to finish the syllabus on time ... while in Grade 12 there is much pressure as one is responsible for the results of her subject in January.

Teacher responses indicated that they were uncertain how to identify learning barriers with the intention of providing support. This raises the question of what is happening to learners who are experiencing barriers in these schools, as proper support depends on proper identification by a teacher. Even teachers who studied inclusive education did not know how to put theory

into practice. This showed that teachers were not equipped for inclusive practices, including their new role of identification for support. Teachers in Quintile 1 rural schools lag behind in implementing many education reforms, including inclusive education, because the way these were communicated to them did not consider the contexts of the schools.

Theme: 2 Lack of support in identifying learning barriers

The participants were vocal about the fact that though they lead the SBST committee, they were not supporting teachers on the identification of learning barriers, because they were not sure how to do it as well. Even principals admitted that they still use the old ways and sometimes identify learning barriers accidentally. Their responses to this finding were the following:

CO2: We sit down and discuss the challenges we face in our respective classes; we group the learners according to their performance.

CO3: There is not much support I give to teachers on identification, as I am not sure myself ... except when noticing that a learner is failing continually.

P1: We have not yet reached that level ... the only way we do is to use the old way of channelling learners experiencing barriers to special schools.

T1: I only notice that a learner has a barrier when he does not respond or participate in the questions.

P2: ... 80% there is no support to teachers for learners experiencing barriers to learning ... 20% is that of asking teachers to try check for these learners, which is not proper as these teachers are not equipped to do so... they end up coming with incorrect information.

P3: ... we accidentally identify that a learner has a barrier when they fail.

The responses suggested that the principals and the school-based support team, whose role is to support teachers in identifying barriers and providing support, were not trained for that role. This meant that they were not equipped for their roles, and that they had no confidence in providing support to teachers. For the school-based support team to be seen as functional, it needs to offer clear support to both teachers and LEBL. Based on the excerpts that was not the case in these Quintile 1 rural schools. The question then becomes: What happens to learners who need additional support in these schools if the support stakeholders cannot provide it?

Theme 3: Lack of in-service training on inclusive practices

Almost all of the participants indicated the need for support that would allow them to identify learning barriers, as they felt that they did not receive support from support services at the school. Although principals and school-based support team are support providers in their schools, they pointed to the need for training, as they found it difficult to carry out their mandate. While workshops are essential for in-service training and play a significant role in helping teachers stay up to date, they often fail to address all aspects of inclusive education adequately. Researchers have consistently questioned the effectiveness of workshops as a means of training teachers to identify learning barriers (Nel *et al.*, 2016). This uncertainty arises from the limited duration of these workshops, typically spanning only a few days, during which they attempt to cover all aspects of inclusive education without delving into crucial details such as identification and provision of support (Abongdia *et al.*, 2015; Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018).

The following are what the participants said in connection with the support they received.

T1: *People in the district, when they come to school, they speak with the school management team and school-based support teams ... they never call us and they do not spend a day coming to class where identification of learners experiencing barriers needs to be done ... How can teachers know what to do then... as there is no training provided.*

T3: *I think the remedial teachers we were promised can help if each school has three, one for each phase ... I never attended any workshop on inclusive education.CO1: I attended one workshop on inclusive education in general... It was only 2 days and I was expected to come back and train the teachers ... I just gave a report to the school management team ... as I was not sure what to train the teachers about.*

CO5: *No, I never attended any workshop ... our school-based support team started only last year but we do not know its role ... I motivate teachers not to neglect our learners because of barriers ... and not perform according to what we expected.*

P1: *... I would say that I will have other support programmes for teachers, but for now I do not. In a principals' meeting, we suggested ongoing training for all teachers ... the complaint was funding ... but a workshop of less than a week cannot help ...*

P4: *I think since inclusive education is about learners ... serious training is necessary ... not a workshop as if it is about subject content gap s... worse they are less than a week ... and once or twice a year ... not all teachers attend.*

All participants acknowledged that some workshops were provided by the district-based support team, but due to the duration of these workshops, they were not viable in training participants for specific aspects of the SIAS process. These workshops covered the general field of inclusive education and left teachers without specific knowledge of how to identify learning barriers for support.

Theme 4: Education policies as barriers to the identification of learning barriers

Implementing inclusive education has been clouded by challenges from its inception and, in some cases, has led to LEBL dropping out of school, mainly because they were not identified, leading to their exclusion from teaching and learning (Mkandawire et al., 2016). All participants indicated that the policy-related challenges they experienced also hindered them from implementing inclusive education practices.

T4: *... our school enrolment allows us for few teachers ... inclusive education is not possible.*

T2: *... The challenge is mainly in pace setters and trackers, which are closely monitored in the Foundation Phase ... you are expected to have completed a certain topic at a specific time ... learners who are experiencing barriers to learning end up being left behind ...*

CO3: *Teachers show negative attitudes and sometimes do not want to complete SNA 1 forms complaining that it is difficult and sometimes say that they have no LEBL in their classes ... even parents would be in denial that their children experience any barrier and do not want to give consent that their children should receive additional support and sign SNA1.*

P1: *Progression policy is a challenge to the identification of learning barriers ... as learners experiencing barriers are just listed under phase progressed, where a learner is expected to fail once in a phase and the following year be progressed.*

P5: *I have no time to help teachers, we are understaffed ... You end up teaching subjects you studied 20 years ago while doing Standard 10 ... In such circumstances, you cannot talk about inclusive education and its approaches.*

P5: *... lo mcimbi we classes ezi diverse is a big challenge (this issue of diverse classes is a challenge on its own) ... tell me how can I identify barriers in a class of 120 learners, as it is the case in our school..*

P4: *... We have not received serious training as managers and even some teachers do not know what to do ... we are also short-staffed so far.*

Schools in rural settings face unique challenges, such as being understaffed due to a learner-teacher ratio policy and, in some cases, due to overcrowded classes, and all of these have a detrimental impact on the implementation of inclusive education that includes the identification of learning barriers for support purposes. Even the progression policy was used as a leeway not to identify for support, as it says that a child cannot be in the same phase for more than four years. These challenges, coupled with the inability of principals and teachers to identify learning barriers in rural schools, hinder participants from meeting the demands of inclusive practices. Therefore, this shows that LEBL do not reach their full potential as they could if provided additional support in inclusive classes.

9. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that even after two decades, the Education White Paper 6 was published and the existence of a framework on the standardisation of screening, identification, assessment and support (DoE, 2014), school support stakeholders lack knowledge on how to carry out their roles. This concurs with what Yoro, Fourie and Van der Merwe (2020) discovered that insufficient knowledge of support services within the school setting hinders teachers from identifying learning barriers and implementing other inclusive practices. The consequence was that those assigned a role to support different stakeholders within the school were not sure what to do, and their lack of knowledge affects not only teachers but LEBL, whose learning depends on barriers being identified, before they can receive additional support for their learning.

Consequently, there is a need to organise in-service training to equip teachers, principals and school-based support teams on the SIAS process, as it includes identification of learning barriers for support provision. Since principals are responsible for the functionality of SBST (DoE, 2014), it is necessary to educate them about the importance of understanding the socioecological model as a model underlying inclusive education as opposed to the medical model to change the status quo (Partelow, 2018). Participants in this study mentioned that due to lack of support and training on the SIAS process, they use what they called 'old ways'. When looking at the characteristics of the old ways, they were more of a medical model than a socio-ecological model. The following remarks confirm this finding:

The only way we do this is to use the old way of channelling learners experiencing barriers to special schools. (P1).

This finding resonates with a study conducted in a largely urban Western Cape, which found that teachers face problems in identifying barriers because the perspective of the medical model overshadows the principles of the SIAS document in identifying barriers to learning in mainstream schools (Dreyer, 2017). Nel *et al.* (2016) acknowledged the impact of inappropriate

training of role-players in support services within the school as perpetuating challenges associated with the identification of learning barriers in schools. Principals and school-based support team coordinators admitted that they found it difficult to support teachers as they had never been trained on the identification of learning barriers. In this study, participants indicated challenges they have when it comes to the identification of learning barriers and providing support.

Additionally, based on participants' accounts in this study, it is concerning when another policy seems to overrule the principles of other policies as is the case between the progression policy and the inclusive policy. This challenge is evident from what P1 said:

Progression policy is a challenge to the identification of learning barriers ... as learners experiencing barriers are just listed under phase progress, where a learner is expected to fail once in a phase and the following year be progressed.

This is concerning when it comes from the principal, who is expected to be well versed with education policies and how they complement each other. To avoid misinterpretation of policies like the progression policy, in-service training is needed where all teachers are orientated on the principles behind policies, as well as how they relate with other policies that are already in place. Swart and Pettipher *et al.* (2019) recommend collaboration between different systems as a way of promoting positive outcomes. Hence, Bronfenbrenner's theory, which promotes interplay between levels of influence, grounded this study, as it fosters interactions between systems to create supportive environments.

Finally, though inclusive education practices are hindered by many factors in different contexts, rural Quintile 1 settings face a lot of pressure that must be considered before their competencies can be compared with other teachers in different contexts. Challenges including poor infrastructure and inadequate resources pose serious problems to quality education in rural schools (Mkandawire *et al.*, 2016), while Nel *et al.* (2016) confirm that overcrowded classrooms and a high teacher workload make it difficult for teachers to identify learning barriers and provide additional support. In some primary schools, a teacher could be responsible for teaching up to three phases due to a shortage of teachers, which would not allow time for the identification of learning barriers in these classes. This resonates with Engelbrecht *et al.* (2015b), who state that rural schools were known as places where the poor quality of learning and teaching thrived. The implications of these findings are that the identification of learning barriers remains a challenge in rural schools, leading many LEBL to opt to drop out of school and ultimately commit crimes. Dropping out of school affects learners in that they miss out on school resilience resources that could help improve the way they see things (Malindi & Machenjedze, 2012). Furthermore, it would be difficult to implement all aspects of inclusive education in rural areas compared to urban areas due to many factors, including the lack of attention given to rural education (Dube, 2020; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019), which weaken the quality of learning and teaching in South African Quintile 1 rural schools. Although collaboration is at the heart of support provision, the findings of this study revealed that district-based support teams do not work closely with other support stakeholders within schools, thus leaving LEBL in such schools marginalised. The data presented here suggest that the qualitative design allowed participants to share their lived experiences in under-resourced rural schools.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

The results indicate that there is much more to learn about the realities of the classroom and the context than is considered by inclusive education policies and their expectations of teachers. Furthermore, there are unique obstacles to Quintile 1 schools; for example, at some primary schools a single teacher may need to teach three grades, making it difficult to identify any learning barriers and provide support. In some secondary schools, there is the problem of overcrowding with more than 100 learners in some classes. Therefore, teachers' perceptions of the identification of learning barriers to support provision in Quintile 1 schools is a continuing challenge until hindrances peculiar to rural schools are addressed. Although some urban schools thrive in implementing expected inclusive practices, rural schools struggle, particularly when those assigned the role of providing support have not been trained in this. This implies that many learners are marginalised and deprived of their constitutional right to quality education. Furthermore, this creates inconsistencies and inequalities in the provision of quality education for all, as more LEBL who attend rural Quintile 1 schools remain unidentified compared to those in higher quintile schools that are well-resourced.

We recommend organised training that targets all teachers to be capacitated for inclusive practices in specific aspects, such as the identification of learning barriers to support provision, to improve the current status quo. Rural school learners are the most vulnerable in the country and have the greatest need of support as evidenced by their low academic performance. This small-scale study focused on only three districts in the Eastern Cape; therefore, the findings cannot be generalised, but it unravelled a need to consider and accommodate unique contexts of rural settings when measuring the implementation of inclusive education and any other education reform. This is based on understanding and considering the complexity of social life (Nieuwenhuis, 2015) hence, the influence of context situation, participants involved and unique circumstances play an important role in research.

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