



Journal of Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities

<http://www.jssshonline.com/>

JSSSH, Volume 12, No.1, 2026, 40-52

ISSN: 2413-9270

Teachers' experiences of identifying learners with learning barriers: A case of early childhood development and the foundation phase

Mduduzi Mazibuko, Metse Juliet Masalesa, Theledi Nkube & Michael Thobakgale

School of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education, University of Mpumalanga, Siyabuswa Campus, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa

Corresponding author: Juliet.Masalesa@ump.ac.za

Abstract.

Teachers' experiences in recognising and supporting learners with learning difficulties in early childhood development and foundation phase classrooms were examined in this study. Recognising learning difficulties promotes fair access to quality education, especially for learners facing classroom barriers. This remains a key goal of inclusive education policy in South Africa. This research employed a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm. A case study design was utilised for this study. The research was guided by Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Nine participants were deliberately selected, including practitioners and foundation-phase teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interview questionnaires and classroom observations. The six steps of thematic analysis were used to interpret the data. The findings showed that novice teachers are often expected to identify learners with learning difficulties without sufficient training. Participants also highlighted a lack of institutional support from stakeholders, including health services, community development organisations, and parents. This study concluded that schools face challenges in detecting issues early and providing timely assistance. The study recommends that the Department of Basic Education establish ongoing professional development programmes for teachers to build capacity for inclusive education practices. It also suggests that School-Based Support Teams include representatives from various departments to ensure cohesive support and stronger collaboration for learners with special educational needs.

Keywords: childhood, inclusive classrooms, learning barriers, early identification, learner support.

Introduction.

Inclusive education places a significant responsibility on teachers to recognise and support learners who face barriers to learning, especially during the Early Childhood Development and Foundation Phase. Early childhood is widely acknowledged as a vital period for mental, social, and emotional growth. Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Elliott (2017) contend that investment in early childhood education lays the foundation necessary for future educational and social success. When learning difficulties are identified at this stage, interventions can be implemented before problems escalate. Frederickson and Cline (2009) stress that early detection can prevent long-term educational and emotional consequences. The South African Department of Basic Education also endorses this

view. Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) introduced an inclusive education policy to address past inequalities and ensure that all learners, including those with disabilities, are enrolled in mainstream schools. Subsequently, procedures for assessing, identifying, and supporting learners needing additional assistance are outlined in the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) Policy (DBE, 2014). Despite the implementation of these policies, research indicates they remain insufficient. According to Engelbrecht et al. (2016), a gap exists between the ideals of inclusive education policy and the realities within the classroom. Teachers are frequently expected to meet diverse learning needs without adequate training or systemic support. Nel et al. (2016) also highlight weaknesses in support mechanisms at both school and district levels. This study investigates the challenges many Early Childhood and Foundation Phase teachers encounter when identifying and supporting learners with learning difficulties, despite departmental policies promoting inclusive education. Its purpose is to explore teachers' experiences in recognising and assisting learners with learning difficulties.

The study seeks to understand how teachers interpret their roles, the obstacles they face, and how support systems operate in real-world contexts. Guided by Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the research draws on Bronfenbrenner's model, as described by Estelle Swart and Ruth Pettipher (2016) and Petra Engelbrecht and colleagues (2015), which situates the learner within interconnected systems that affect development. This perspective facilitates analysis of how family, school, district, and policy environments influence the process of identifying learning difficulties. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development underscores the importance of guided support in learning, as elaborated by Anita Woolfolk (2014). Together, these theories frame recognition of learning difficulties as a relational system involving social systems, rather than solely a medical diagnosis or weakness. Employing a qualitative, interpretivist approach, the study aligns with the view that meaning is shaped by social relations, as outlined by Martin Terre Blanche and Kevin Kelly (2002). Data was gathered through a case study, including semi-structured interviews with Foundation Phase teachers, a focus group with early childhood development (ECD) practitioners, classroom observations, and document analysis. Analysis produced thematic categories. The structure of the study is as follows: first, the problem, research question, and purpose are discussed; then a review of the literature on inclusive education; then the theoretical framework; the methodology; the findings, which are compared with existing literature; and finally, recommendations for policy and practice.

Problem statement

Inclusive education in South Africa aims to ensure all learners are recognised, supported, and included in mainstream schools (DoE, 2001). The SIAS inclusive education policy offers schools clear guidance on screening, identifying, monitoring, and supporting learners (DBE, 2014). However, Engelbrecht et al. (2016) note that many teachers in South Africa still find it challenging to implement inclusive teaching practices for all children. Research also indicates that limited training and poor institutional support restrict teachers' ability to address diverse learning needs (Nel et al., 2016). Teachers are often expected to identify learners with learning disabilities without receiving adequate preparation for inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2010; Nel, 2011). A lack of knowledge can lead to incorrect assessments or delays in accessing support services. Vaughn & Fuchs (2005) argue that this can negatively impact learners' academic progress. Socio-economic issues and the absence of strong parent-school relationships further complicate the early detection of learning difficulties in many South African schools (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana,

2009). Therefore, it is crucial to assess teachers' experiences in identifying and supporting learners with learning difficulties in the Early Childhood and Foundation Phases.

Research Objective

The objective of this study was to explore teachers' experiences in identifying and supporting learners with learning challenges in the Early Childhood Development and Foundation Phase classrooms.

Research Question

How do teachers in the Early Childhood Development and Foundation Phase experience the process of identifying and supporting learners with learning challenges?

Literature review

Early identification and intervention of learning barriers in the foundation phase

Researchers agree that early childhood is the most vital period for mental and social development. Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Elliott (2017) found that investing in early childhood education can improve long-term learning outcomes. Similarly, Frederickson and Cline (2009) argue that identifying barriers to learning early reduces the risk of academic failure and emotional issues later on. The researchers concur that timely support can enhance learners' educational progress. In the South African context, Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) has formalised early detection of problems as the basis for inclusive education. The SIAS Policy (DBE, 2014) highlighted this principle by defining structured approaches to assessing, identifying, and supporting learners. However, the implementation of this policy varies across different schools. Engelbrecht and colleagues (2016) show that inclusive education policies often reflect strong intentions, but their execution in practice remains weak. These findings suggest that learner recognition systems are used inconsistently, especially in schools with limited resources. Vaughn and Fuchs (2005) warn that incorrect identification or delayed recognition of learners can hinder early intervention. Although their research was not conducted in South Africa, it relates to local concerns about how schools identify learners and refer them for support services. Donald, Lazarus, and Lolwana (2009) emphasise that barriers to learning often stem from the complex relationships among socioeconomic status, school environment, and individual circumstances. This perspective challenges purely deficit-based approaches. Overall, the literature highlights the importance of recognising barriers to early learning. Nonetheless, there are differences in how schools adapt these policies to classroom practice. Few studies have explored how teachers experience the process of identifying learners with learning barriers in the Foundation Phase.

Teachers' preparedness and professional development for inclusive education practices.

Teachers' capacity remains an ongoing concern in inclusive educational research. Avramidis and Norwich (2010) explain that teachers' perceptions of inclusive education are closely linked to the training they received and the skills they possess. When teachers have insufficient formal preparation, they often feel overwhelmed by the demands of inclusive education. Nel (2011) also notes that inadequate training before and during employment diminishes teachers' ability to implement inclusive teaching practices effectively. Nguyet and Ha (2010) suggest that inclusive education should be a mandatory component of teacher education programmes. This view aligns with South African experiences, which show that teachers were trained before inclusive education

became an official policy (Engelbrecht et al., 2015). Consequently, teachers tend to rely more on general teaching skills rather than specific policies when identifying and supporting learners with learning barriers. Du Toit (2014) emphasises that structured observation is a crucial professional skill for early identification of learning needs. This approach shifts the focus away from referring learners elsewhere and toward responding within the classroom. Nel and colleagues (2016) reveal that teachers often perceive support systems as inadequate, which diminishes their confidence when implementing inclusive education policies. While these studies agree that training is an important factor, they differ in emphasis. Some focus on attitude, while others highlight the deficiencies in available institutional structures. What remains less explored is how teachers cope with these limitations in their daily work, particularly when they must identify learners with learning difficulties early in their schooling. There is still very limited qualitative research examining teachers' actual experiences in specific school contexts.

Institutional support and stakeholder involvement.

Inclusive education extends beyond the classroom. Bronfenbrenner's environmental perspective, as explained by Swart and Pettipher (2016), situates the learner within a network of interconnected systems. This view is also supported by Donald, Lazarus, and Lolwana (2009), who highlight that learning barriers must be understood within the context of family, school, and community. The policy expects School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) and District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) to offer structured support to schools (DoE, 2005; DBE, 2014). However, Engelbrecht and colleagues (2016) note that these structures often lack sufficient resources and effective collaboration. Nel and colleagues (2016) further observe that teachers sometimes perceive district support as merely paperwork rather than meaningful classroom assistance. Parental involvement is equally vital. Donald et al. (2009) stress the importance of guiding families when recognising learning difficulties. Nevertheless, socioeconomic factors can hinder parents' regular involvement, especially in low-resource communities (Donald et al., 2009). This creates a conflict between policy expectations and the actual conditions schools face. Researchers agree that collaboration among teachers, parents, and external services is crucial for learner support. However, there remains a gap between policy, school practices, and external support services. Evidence of how teachers experience this interaction when identifying and supporting learners with learning difficulties remains limited.

Gap identified

Existing research highlights the importance of early problem detection, teacher training, and system support in promoting inclusive education. The studies by Engelbrecht et al. (2016) and Nel et al. (2016) offer valuable insights into the challenges of implementing national-level policy. However, there remains limited research exploring specific conditions and the details of teachers' experiences when identifying learners with learning difficulties during the Early Childhood and Foundation Phases.

Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory views child development as a process occurring within interconnected systems. Swart and Pettipher (2016) describe these as micro-systems, which include the immediate environment, such as the family and school. The meso-system refers to the

interaction between these environments. The exo-system involves institutional structures that indirectly influence the learner. The macro-system comprises cultural conditions, policies, and practices. This layered model aligns with the context in South Africa. Inclusive education policies are developed at the national level and implemented in schools with varying standards. Engelbrecht and colleagues (2015) show that while inclusive education policies often demonstrate strong intentions at the macro-system level, their classroom implementation (the micro-system) remains uneven. The SIAS Policy (DBE, 2014) outlines criteria for assessing and supporting learners. However, teachers' day-to-day practices depend on available resources, their training, and stakeholder cooperation. An ecological perspective enables this study to explore how district support structures, school leadership, parent engagement, and socioeconomic status influence teachers' perceptions of learners. When teachers report a lack of training or external support, these can be seen as weaknesses within the exo-system rather than personal shortcomings. In this way, the theory situates teachers' experiences within a network of interrelated systems.

The ecological systems perspective is complemented by Vygotsky's theory of culture and society, which emphasises the social nature of learning. A key concept here is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the gap between what a learner can do alone and what they can achieve with guidance. Woolfolk (2014) explains that support or scaffolding from someone with extensive knowledge helps the learner to reach independence. Learning occurs through social interaction. This perspective shifts the focus in inclusive education from labelling learners in a classroom to understanding how support is organised. Donald, Lazarus, and Lolwana (2009) demonstrate that learning barriers often stem from interactions between the learner and the educational environment. Identifying the problem is just the first step; it is the initial move towards addressing the barrier. In this study, teachers are viewed as facilitators of diverse learning experiences through differentiation, adaptation, and individual support systems. When resources are limited due to inadequate training or systemic pressures, learners may struggle to participate fully and meaningfully. Integrating these two theories enriches the analysis: Bronfenbrenner's model explains how broader systems influence teachers' capacity to identify practice; Vygotsky's theory details how learning support unfolds after barriers are recognised. Together, these models acknowledge that recognising learning barriers depends on effective institutional systems and human interactions. This approach aligns with the purpose of this study, which examines teachers' experiences in identifying and supporting learners with learning difficulties during the Early Childhood Development and Foundation Phase. This overview offers insights into teachers' discourses by linking them to policies, institutional structures, and classroom interactions.

Methodology

This study was conducted within an interpretivist paradigm and employed a qualitative research approach. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as the process of exploring and understanding the meanings that individuals or groups assign to a social problem. A case study design was utilised in this study.

Sampling strategies

Purposive sampling was utilised to identify participants in this study. Nine participants were selected based on their involvement in recognising learners with learning needs. The sample included six Foundation Phase teachers from the selected primary schools and three ECD practitioners. Participants were chosen for their direct work with learners in the early stages of schooling, when learning difficulties need to be identified.

Data Collection Methods

This study gathered data through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews provided participants with the chance to describe their experiences in identifying learners with learning difficulties, the strategies they employ, and the support they receive. Observations were conducted to gain a real-world understanding of teaching methods and learner participation.

Ethical considerations

Ethics were maintained throughout the investigation. Participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity have been preserved through the use of codes and the exclusion of information that could identify schools or individuals. The data is stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Data presentation

Perceptions of Identifying Learners with Special Educational Needs

All participants considered early identification of learners with special educational needs crucial in the ECD and Foundation Phases. Their responses demonstrated a shared belief that early recognition enhances planning, differentiation, and learner development. Foundation Phase teachers stressed the need for curriculum adjustment and cognitive readiness. One teacher explained:

“In my point of view, it is important to identify the learners at an earlier stage so that we can understand them well. To be able to prepare their work according to their abilities and to plan according to relevant cognitive levels”. (Teacher 1).

“When learners' needs are diagnosed earlier, support can be arranged in time to support learning”. (Teacher 4)

Another teacher linked identification directly to classroom planning:

“It is really important as it allows the teacher to cater for the learners' special educational needs... the level of work that will be given to the learners will be able to develop the learners at their levels”. (Teacher 2)

Teachers focused on timely intervention:

“I think it is a good idea to identify learners with barriers to learning at an earlier stage... If a child has been identified earlier, he will be able to get sufficient support.” (Teacher 3)

“We administer diagnostic assessments every year in our school to help us know our learners in time.” (Teacher 5)

ECD practitioners expressed similar views, but with a stronger emphasis on care and developmental support. One practitioner stated:

“If the barrier is identified earlier in the ECD, the learner will be easily supported... It will help the child to be properly cared for, and it will help her develop in that specific area that needs to be developed.” (Practitioner 1)

Another practitioner highlighted targeted attention:

“It helps the teacher to pay attention to that specific area where the learner needs help... It helps me as a practitioner to identify the strength and weakness points of the learners.” (Practitioner 2)

One practitioner referred to learners requiring constant care:

“Some learners may have physical disabilities. Those learners need special care every time and everywhere, even if they go to the toilet.” (Practitioner 3)

Across responses, early identification was associated with differentiated instruction, developmental support, and structured intervention.

Tools Used to Identify Learners with Barriers to Learning

Participants reported both formal documentation tools and informal observation strategies.

Two teachers reported using Learner Profiles to document learner progress and background information. One teacher stated that:

“The learner profile document is primarily used by teachers as a planning tool for daily interventions and assistance during the teaching and learning process.” (Teacher 1)

Another teacher explained how observation data are integrated:

“We fill the learner profiles for all the learners... The information I get when I observe the learners will help me to assimilate with the one from the Learner Profile.” (Teacher 3)

Learner Profiles were therefore used as cumulative records to guide planning and support.

Two teachers stated that they completed SNA1 forms once a learner was identified. One teacher described the process as follows:

“Once I identify the learner, I use a Support Needs Assessment form (SNA1) ... Then I call the parent to sign... I also sit down with the SBST and follow all the processes... It has questions that show what the problems with the learners are.” (Teacher 1)

Another teacher added that:

“Then I fill in the SNA1 for the learners I have identified as having barriers to learning and development.” (Teacher 3)

“Once we identify learners with barriers, the first action we take is to complete the SNA1 form, which allows us to have a brief interaction with the parents.” (Teacher 6).

The SNA1 were viewed as structured tools that formalise the identification process for learners with learning barriers.

One teacher described baseline assessment as a diagnostic tool:

“First of all, we use the baseline assessment... It checks the work of the previous grades. Sometimes you may find that there is a learner who cannot read and is doing reversal when she/he is writing”. (Teacher 3)

Baseline assessments were used to detect early literacy and developmental concerns.

Observation was frequently mentioned, particularly by ECD practitioners. One practitioner stated that:

“We use observation books to observe the progress of the learners... In the journal book, we write the name, the surname, and the time.” (Practitioner 1)

A teacher similarly explained that:

“I also observe learners using an observation book... There is also a checklist that I use where I tick whether the learner is able or unable to do such an activity.” (Teacher 2)

These tools were used to document behaviour, participation and skill development.

Support for Identifying Learners with Special Educational Needs

Participants reported limited support from school management, district and circuit offices.

One practitioner expressed frustration:

“As ECDs, we are being neglected for so long... There is no or little training we have as practitioners. I was never trained to identify learners with special educational needs.” (Practitioner 2)

A teacher confirmed the absence of structured support:

“At the school level, there’s no support.” (Teacher 3)

Two teachers indicated that SBST processes were not consistently implemented. One stated:

“We don’t even conduct the SBST meetings regularly”. (Teacher 1)

Another added:

“We don’t even conduct SBST meetings regularly... we don’t provide sufficient support to each other.” (Teacher 3)

Some participants acknowledged minimal guidance from the SBST coordinator. One teacher explained:

“The SBST coordinator tried... There was feedback in our meeting whereby our coordinator supported us on how to fill in the SNAI Form.” (Teacher 2)

However, support was described as procedural rather than developmental.

Practitioners reported assistance mainly for social or health-related matters. One explained that:

“The only assistance we have... is the assistance from the Social Development Department... But academically, there is no support.” (Practitioner 3)

Another practitioner stated that:

“We usually report to social workers wherever we face challenges... If ever they see there is a problem, they write a letter to a parent, or they give an order to a learner to be brought to the clinic.” (Practitioner 2)

Support beyond the school was therefore reactive and limited to social or health concerns.

Summary of Observation Notes

Researchers' observations indicated a well-organised and attentive learning environment. Learners were arranged in small groups to encourage cooperation and peer support. The teacher began the lesson with a diagnostic assessment, which helped evaluate prior knowledge and identify learners who needed additional help. Learners were given opportunities to read, though two learners struggled with basic vocabulary and often needed reminders. The teacher responded by approaching them and providing one-on-one guidance calmly. Several variations, especially between "b" and "d", were also observed in the writing work of the same learner. A checklist was employed to monitor learners facing difficulties. The teacher noted the challenges and related observations throughout the lesson. Learners who completed their tasks were given extra assignments, while those who responded slowly received simpler instructions. Visual aids, such as alphabetical charts and mathematical lines, effectively supported learning. One learner appeared withdrawn and showed little interest in participating in group discussions. Support within groups was encouraged, but the short working hours limited opportunities for external assistance that learners require. During the lesson, no SBST member was present. No injuries were reported during the investigation. The lesson concluded with an oral review, and some learners were identified for follow-up assessments.

Summary of findings

The study involved Foundation Phase teachers and three ECD practitioners. All participants agreed that early identification of learners with special educational needs is crucial. They integrated early identification into their lesson planning, curriculum differentiation, and timely support. Teachers stressed the importance of adapting learning tasks to match learners' cognitive levels. ECD practitioners, however, focused on child development and continuous support. Participants mentioned using both formal and informal identification tools. Teachers rely on Learner Profiles, SNA1 forms, and baseline assessments for data to identify learners. ECD practitioners, on the other hand, make extensive use of observation books, journals, and checklists. Formal documentation systems are reported to be more robust in schools than in ECD centres. Support structures have been described as weak and not always effective. SBST meetings did not occur regularly. Training opportunities for teachers were limited. Academic support from the district and circuit levels was reported to be minimal or non-existent. External assistance from the Department of Social Development focuses on community and well-being issues rather than on academic inclusion for learners.

Discussions

Perceptions of identifying learners with special educational needs. Participants strongly believed in the importance of recognising learning difficulties early. Teachers linked the process of learner identification to curriculum adaptation and lesson planning based on learners' cognitive levels. ECD practitioners emphasised the care, attention, and support of children's development. In both groups, early detection of challenges was seen as a need for implementation, not just a policy obligation. This view aligns with what was outlined in Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001), which places early detection of problems at the foundation of inclusive education. Frederickson and Cline (2009) showed that timely assistance reduces long-term academic and emotional problems. The participants' comments confirm this view. They see the problem as the first step towards meaningful support. According to the ecological perspective described by Swart and Pettipher (2016), problem detection occurs within the learner's immediate environment. In this

study, the teachers worked in a micro-system of the classroom. Their understanding of the learners' abilities has been reflected in how the support is organised. At the same time, the process of identifying problems was influenced by the expectations of the curriculum and the directives of high-level policies. The tensions between the two were evident. Teachers recognise the importance of identifying problems early, but they operate in situations that limit their ability to provide full support. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also helps to explain these findings. Woolfolk (2014) explains that learning arises through guided interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development. When teachers changed the tasks to better align with learners' abilities, they were, in fact, aligning with the scaffolding process. Identifying the problems helped them to see the current state of the learner's abilities. From then on, the support could be tailored to the situation. The participants have a clear understanding of this concept. Participants' responses did not contradict this theoretical position. The problem is most evident in the design of the systems. This reduces teachers' ability to practise what they already understand to be an effective teaching method.

Tools applied to identify learners with learning barriers

Participants reported using formal tools, including Learner Profiles, baseline assessments, and SNA1 forms. Observation books, diaries, and checklists are the main resources for ECD Practitioners. This distinction highlights differences between school-based and ECD settings. Alignment with the SIAS policy is clear when teachers use baseline assessments and structured documentation (DBE, 2014). Teachers described completing SNA1 forms and consulting SBST structures, indicating compliance with required procedures. However, participants' accounts suggest that documentation can sometimes become an administrative task rather than a developmental one. According to Engelbrecht et al. (2016), inclusive policies in South Africa often lead to procedural compliance rather than meaningful pedagogical change. This study's findings support that view. Teachers could explain the documentation steps, but ongoing instructional guidance after identification was seldom described. Observation emerged as a key strategy, especially in ECD contexts. Du Toit (2014) highlights systematic observation as a professional skill for early identification. Practitioners relied heavily on daily observation, recording behaviour, participation, and skill development. This reflects a developmental approach aligned with early childhood pedagogy. However, the lack of formal profiling tools in some ECD settings may hinder continuity when learners transition to primary school. From an ecological perspective, this indicates a weak connection within the meso-system, particularly between ECD centres and formal schools. Identification processes may start in one setting but lack systematic transfer to another. This study finds this contrast significant. It shows that teachers and practitioners are working, but not always within a coordinated system. Documentation exists; however, integration across levels remains uneven.

Lack of systematic support was one of the most concerning findings. Participants described inconsistent SBST meetings, limited training opportunities, and limited district involvement. They expressed feelings of neglect. These findings align with those of Nel et al. (2016), who found support structures in South Africa are often perceived as weak or merely system-oriented. Engelbrecht and colleagues (2016) also show that inclusive education policy has broad aims, but school-level resources remain insufficient. From Bronfenbrenner's perspective, the exo-system includes institutional structures that indirectly influence the classroom. District offices, social development services, and health departments are part of this structure. Participants reported that social workers' support mainly focused on social and health issues, with little attention given to educational matters. This division demonstrates how the weakness of exo-system support can

hinder performance patterns at the micro-system level. Vygotsky's theory of culture and society also explains the consequences of this situation. Without the support of teachers and professional training, their capacity to guide learners is diminished. A comprehensive education requires a well-informed approach. In the absence of professional development, teachers may rely more on their own experience and feelings than on structured support strategies. In this study, teachers seem to be the main practitioners of the problem-solving system. However, there is insufficient support for their initiatives. Responsibility appears to have shifted to the classroom, while the obligation to follow policies remains high. This imbalance puts pressure on the system to effectively identify problems.

Conclusion

This study explored how Foundation Phase teachers and ECD practitioners experience the process of identifying and supporting learners with learning difficulties. The findings showed that participants prioritised early detection of problems. They linked this to improved academic planning, curriculum diversification, and support for children's development. Teachers relied on formal tools such as learner profiles, baseline assessment, and SNA1 forms. ECD practitioners, by contrast, relied predominantly on observation-based and informal tools. Despite government efforts, support has remained inadequate. SBST procedures were not implemented as intended by the policy. District-based training was limited, and ECD practitioners reported a shortage of professional development opportunities. These findings support Bronfenbrenner's theory of environmental processes, illustrating that weaknesses in exo-system structures, like district support and intersectoral collaboration, can constrain classroom practices (micro-system). The results also affirm Vygotsky's theory of culture and society, which states that learning is most effective when supported by appropriate tools for teaching and guiding learners. Policies such as the Education White Paper 6 and the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy offer clear procedural guidance. However, the situation in many schools continues unchanged. Practically, this study highlights the need for ongoing professional development for teachers. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration is necessary to enhance the process of identifying learners in inclusive education. Future research might incorporate other measures to compare environmental conditions. Methodological studies could also investigate in detail how SBST structures function and how they support teachers in their daily work.

Recommendations

The Department of Basic Education must implement structured and ongoing training programmes. These programmes should include early identification of learning difficulties and outline support strategies used in the Foundation Phase and ECD grades. School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) should hold regular meetings that are documented and monitored. This will ensure that identified learning difficulties are not merely recorded but are translated into practical pedagogical support in the classroom. District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) should adopt a developmental approach, including visiting schools and providing on-site mentoring instead of solely checking compliance with procedural guidelines. Such an approach can enhance teachers' competence in their daily practice. Formal collaboration processes should be established among schools, ECD centres, health services, and community development departments. This collaboration can facilitate integrated academic, emotional, and community support for learners.

Limitations of the Research

The study involved only nine participants within a single circuit. The small sample size limits the ability to generalise findings to other provinces or districts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and short-term observation. An extended observation period could have offered a deeper understanding of classroom teaching practices. The study focused solely on teachers and ECD practitioners. Opinions from parents, learners, and district leaders were not included. Context-specific quantitative formulations provide depth of understanding but do not represent the entire population statistically. Additionally, resource constraints have limited the scope of the study.

References

- Ärlemalm-Hagsér, E., & Elliott, S. (2017). Special issue: Contemporary research on early childhood education for sustainability. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 49(3), 267–272. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-017-0200-9>
- Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2010). Teachers' attitudes towards integration/inclusion: A review of the literature. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 17(2), 129–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250210129056>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approach* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2014). *National strategy on screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS): Operational guidelines*. Government Printers.
- Department of Education (DoE). (2001). *Education White Paper 6: Special needs education: Building an inclusive education and training system*. Government Printer.
- Department of Education (DoE). (2005). *Conceptual and operational guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education: District support teams*. Government Printer.
- Department for Education and Skills. (2009). *Special educational needs code of practice*. DfES Publications.
- Donald, D., Lazarus, S., & Lolwana, P. (2009). *Educational psychology in social context* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Du Toit, P. H. (2014). An auto-ethnographic lens on lecturer professional development. In S. Vandeyar (Ed.), *Good practice in culture-rich classrooms: Research-informed perspectives* (pp. 45–63). Oxford University Press.
- Engelbrecht, P., Nel, M., Smit, S., & Van Deventer, M. (2016). The idealism of education policies and the realities in schools: The implementation of inclusive education in South Africa. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(5), 520–535. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2015.1073648>
- Engelbrecht, P., Swart, E., & Eloff, I. (2015). *Rethinking inclusive education: The philosophers of difference in practice*. Springer.
- Frederickson, N., & Cline, T. (2009). *Special educational needs, inclusion and diversity: A textbook* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.
- Nel, M., Tlale, L. D., Engelbrecht, P., & Nel, N. (2016). Teachers' perceptions of education support

- structures in the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa. *Koers: Bulletin for Christian Scholarship*, 81(3), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.81.3.2249>
- Nel, N. (2011). Support services within inclusive education in Gauteng: The necessity and efficiency of support. *Mevlana International Journal of Education*, 1(1), 38–53.
- Nguyet, D. T., & Ha, L. T. (2010). *Preparing teachers for inclusive education*. Catholic Relief Services.
- Swart, E., & Pettipher, R. (2016). A framework for understanding inclusion. In E. Landsberg, D. Kruger, & E. Swart (Eds.), *Addressing barriers to learning: A South African perspective* (3rd ed., pp. 3–26). Van Schaik.
- Terre Blanche, M., & Kelly, K. (2002). Interpretive methods. In M. Terre Blanche, K. Durrheim, & D. Painter (Eds.), *Research in practice: Applied methods for social sciences* (pp. 123–146). University of Cape Town Press.
- Vaughn, S., & Fuchs, L. S. (2005). Redefining learning disabilities as inadequate response to instruction: The promise and potential problems. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 18(3), 137–146. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5826.00070>
- Woolfolk, A. (2014). *Educational psychology* (12th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.