



Creating a shared meaning of inclusive pedagogical principles during an inclusive education intervention program

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Abstract

Teaching in the 21st century requires teachers to have not only comprehensive subject knowledge and technological skills but also inclusive pedagogical understanding. An effective teacher strives to cater to the diverse learning needs in their classroom. This necessitates the provision of inclusive education intervention programs to help in-service teachers learn the pedagogical skills needed to support all learners. This study, which is part of a doctoral thesis, was conducted using a qualitative case study within an interpretive paradigm. Nine teachers were purposively selected to participate in an intervention program that was held for five weeks. The Community of Practice was used as a theoretical framework and data was collected during focus group discussions and then analyzed using thematic analysis. The purpose of this study was to explore nine teachers' understanding and practice of inclusive pedagogy while attending a five-week intervention program. It was found that despite being short, the intervention program empowered teachers with comprehensive knowledge about inclusion, differentiating instruction, and collaborative learning. We conclude that intervention programs are indispensable since they capacitate in-service teachers and help them gain the necessary skills to cater for the diverse learning needs of special needs learners in a mainstream classroom.

Keywords: inclusive education, differentiating instruction, collaboration, inclusion, intervention program

Introduction

A typical 21st century teacher is expected to have comprehensive subject knowledge, digital skills, and a good understanding of effective inclusive pedagogical principles. The starting point towards inclusive education (IE) is a teacher's understanding of what inclusion entails and how it can be implemented to cater for the diverse learning needs of learners in a classroom. Implementing inclusive pedagogical practices may seem straightforward, but in practice, it presents a formidable challenge for many teachers as they theorise practices of inclusive pedagogy (Asthana, 2023; Maree, 2023; Mulholland et al., 2023) and struggle to create conducive and inclusive learning environments. IE refers to a teaching approach that recognises and values learner diversity by promoting equal access participation, and achievement for all learners, especially those who experience barriers to learning. Inclusive pedagogical principles are grounded in the belief that all learners can learn, and it involves strategies such as differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and responsive classroom practices to meet diverse educational needs (Pantić & Florian, 2015). This is why inclusion is sometimes seen as a “far-reaching reality” because teachers struggle to implement inclusive pedagogical principles (Asthana, 2023, p. 15). In Southern Africa, different scholars report that IE is difficult to attain. For example, in Zimbabwe, IE is reported to have remained an illusion because many teachers do not understand what the term means, let alone how to implement IE effectively in schools (Muresherwa & Jita, 2023). Similarly, Naicker (2023) postulated that IE is a far-reaching concept in many Southern African countries like E-Swatini and Botswana where teachers lack the fundamental understanding of how to cater in a mainstream classroom to the diverse learning needs of children with special needs. Teachers in South Africa are no exception and are reported to be struggling to create inclusive environments for all children (Maree, 2023). This necessitates the provision of intervention programs (IPs) to support teachers to implement IE effectively. This small-scale study, which is part of a doctoral thesis, aimed to evaluate the impact of an IP on IE conducted with teachers in Cape Town over five weeks. The IP focused on capacitating teachers with knowledge about IE to improve their inclusive pedagogical approaches.

To ensure that learners are supported in the education system, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) document (Department of Basic Education, 2014), and the IP was based on this policy document. Even though the document articulates all the necessary inclusive pedagogical approaches to support learners in the classroom, some teachers and school administrators are unfamiliar with how to implement these strategies and have a limited understanding of what IE entails (Nel et al., 2016). As a result, teachers and school administrators develop negative attitudes towards IE practices and fail to implement these strategies (Nel et al., 2016; Stofile et al., 2017).

Increasing teachers' knowledge of inclusive pedagogical practices has the potential to transform their mindsets towards inclusion (Stofile et al., 2017). By equipping teachers with comprehensive knowledge about IE, we can ensure that they can become advocates for

change and drivers of inclusive practices in their classrooms and schools (Hooijer et al., 2021).

Presently, many teachers have a limited understanding of IE practices, and often focus solely on physical barriers to learning (Dignath et al., 2022). This narrow perspective can hinder the implementation of inclusive practices and perpetuate biases and stereotypes. Teachers are not aware of the complexity of IE, which entails dealing with a variety of internal and external barriers to learning as well as advocating for different pedagogical practices (Oswald & Engelbrecht, 2017; Pantić & Florian, 2015; Swart & Pettipher, 2017). By expanding their knowledge of inclusive pedagogical principles, which include differentiating instruction, teachers can better identify and address the diverse needs of their learners, provide tailored support, and create an inclusive classroom community (Oswald & Engelbrecht, 2017).

I, the first author, have used IE pedagogical practices actively in my school as a learning support teacher, and in my own private practice, and have noticed repeatedly that these pedagogical approaches have been beneficial to my learners. Not only did IE benefit my learners, but, as an IE trainer, I developed my own learner-centered IE training programmes in which I use many more and quite different strategies than those suggested by the DBE. I developed my programme to be more practical and encourage discussions during which the teachers explore their lived classroom experiences. I began the intervention by underpinning my work in an exploration of the latest IE theories. Then I moved onto discussing case studies and juxtaposing practical strategies to address these issues in the classroom. Before I began with my IP, I had all the participants complete an initial open-ended questionnaire. My aim here was to understand how the teachers understood IE and to consider how I could build on their existing knowledge. This information was necessary to ensure that my training was relevant to the teachers' needs and that they could implement the strategies presented during training. According to the feedback I received, teachers were more enthusiastic about implementing IE methodologies, and I observed that they managed to transfer this information successfully into their classrooms. This left me questioning how and why teachers changed their professional discourse on IE and if this discourse had an impact on whether they employed inclusive strategies in their classrooms. These thoughts led me to conduct this study for which I recruited teachers who were interested and prepared to change their pedagogical discourse as far as IE was concerned.

The main aim of this study was to explore nine teachers' understanding and practice of inclusive pedagogy while they were attending a five-week IP. The study was guided by one critical research question: How does a five-week IP shape primary teachers' understanding and practice of inclusive pedagogy?

Literature review

In South Africa, the DBE published the SIAS (2008) policy document to assist educators in identifying learning barriers, assessing them and providing appropriate support for learners “. . . to enhance participation and inclusion” (p. 1). However, as very experienced educators in the field, following Walton and Engelbrecht (2021), we believe that this “enablers' approach

to inclusive education is limiting” (p. 1) because identifying and eliminating barriers cannot be a simple linear approach. Along with my teacher participants in the five-week IP I planned to engage with the policy document, create a safe space in which discussions regarding historical contexts, interconnecting power relationships, and inequality in complex social contexts could be carried out (see Walton & Engelbrecht, 2021).

Creating safe spaces

This research project focused on the internal space as functional and reciprocal and where creative processes happen (Fuss & Daniel, 2020). Sternberg (1999) posited that creative cognition builds a connection between fundamental cognitive practices such as attention, perception, memory, information processing, and creative problem-solving. Since this IE IP was dealing with complex situations in our inclusive educational systems, it was necessary to create a creative space in which problem-solving moved step-by-step from the known to the unknown. By deliberately focusing on creative problem-solving, I hoped that relevant pedagogical applications would be strengthened for the teachers to take back to their classrooms for future use (Fuss & Daniel, 2020). For this to happen I ensured that physical and social elements were available, that managing time and routines efficiently was facilitated, and quiet moments for reflection on the implementation of the SIAS document in their classrooms occurred.

Differentiating instruction

While differentiated instruction has gained recognition as an effective inclusive pedagogical strategy, it is evident that many teachers face challenges in the implementation of this strategy (Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020). These challenges stem from limited knowledge regarding differentiated instruction or a belief that they lack the ability to adapt the curriculum to accommodate this pedagogical approach. Furthermore, teachers believe that this strategy requires more time than they have available (Green & Moodley, 2017; Stofile et al., 2017).

At the time of my conducting this research, most in-service teacher training and professional development opportunities did not provide comprehensive training on differentiated instruction (see Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Nel et al., 2016). Consequently, teachers are left without adequate knowledge of how to employ an inclusive pedagogical approach effectively. This lack of knowledge can lead to reluctance or hesitancy to implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms (Oswald & Engelbrecht, 2017; Stofile et al., 2017).

Compounding the issue of knowledge is the perceived constraints teachers experience with the integration of differentiated instruction in the curriculum. These constraints include standardised test criteria, inflexible curriculum standards, and pressure to cover a large amount of material in a short period of time (Green & Moodley, 2017; Stofile et al., 2017). Subsequently, teachers find themselves compelled to rely on a one-size-fits-all instructional

method that may prove inadequate to meet the diverse needs of their learners (Oswald & Engelbrecht, 2017).

Collaboration as a pedagogical strategy to enhance inclusive pedagogical approaches

Pantić and Florian (2015) and Nel et al. (2016) emphasise that teacher collaboration is crucial to building inclusive practices. It allows teachers to generate knowledge collectively and learn new ideas (Fullan, 2019; Nel et al., 2016). However, teachers' current work environment does not provide sufficient opportunities for collaboration, resulting in a culture of isolated practices rather than positive interdependence among teachers (Fullan, 2019; Majoko & Phasha, 2018; Nel et al., 2016).

To address this, Steyn (2017) suggested creating nurturing collaborative learning environments that contextualise learning. In such environments, trust is established, and this enables teachers to engage in difficult discussions about IE pedagogy and underlying assumptions about learners facing barriers (Nel et al., 2016; Swart & Pettipher, 2017). These discussions help teachers to recognise openly their pedagogical needs related to IE and to feel safe to participate in IE discourse (Fullan, 2019; Nel et al., 2016; Steyn, 2017; Swart & Pettipher, 2017).

By contextualising teachers' learning in collaborative settings, such as those proposed by Swart and Pettipher (2017), teachers can apply effectively their newly acquired knowledge in their classrooms. Together, they develop pedagogical understanding and support structures that are relevant to their specific context, thus contributing to the development of positive attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to inclusive pedagogical approaches (Nel et al., 2016; Swart & Pettipher, 2017).

Theoretical framework

I used Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice (CoP) social theory of learning framework as a theoretical approach to explore nine teachers' responses after they had attended the five-week workshop on understanding IE and how to implement it in their classrooms. By using this theoretical approach, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of how these teachers' knowledge, mindsets, pedagogical practices, and professional development were influenced during the five-week IP programme. The CoP framework consists of three key components: the domain; the community; and the practice.

The domain refers to the shared area of interest or expertise that brings individuals together in a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this context, the domain was IE, with its focus on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards learner diversity required for implementing inclusive pedagogical practices. By examining the domain of IE, I was able to explore the learning outcomes and changes in mindsets and attitudes that nine teachers experienced after their participation in the IP. The community represents the social structure that facilitates learning and collaboration among its members (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and these were the

teachers who participated in the IP. This CoP framework enabled me to analyse the interactions and knowledge exchanges that occurred in the community, as well as the ways in which teachers learnt from each other's experiences and expertise. The CoP framework highlights the role of social relationships and collaboration in shaping professional identities and promoting continuous learning among teachers (Dreyer, 2021). The practice refers to the shared resources, experiences and activities in which community members engaged while pursuing their domain of interest (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The component of practice allowed for an examination of the strategies, techniques, and approaches, as stipulated by the DBE IE policy documents, that teachers adopted from the IE IP to meet the diverse learning needs of their learners. In this specific context, the CoP offered an appropriate unit of analysis focusing on the engagement and learnings that the IP created (see Nicolini et al., 2022).

Methods

I employed a collective case study design and used a qualitative approach within the interpretative paradigm to examine the impact of a five-week IE IP for primary school teachers. The IP included the following learning topics extracted from the SIAS policy paper (DBE, 2014): (i) Inclusive pedagogy; (ii) The curriculum; (iii) Planning for support; (iv) Profiling your class; and (v) Feedback on the IP sessions through focus group discussions.

A qualitative approach allows researchers to have close interactions with participants to obtain rich textual information from their perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This qualitative approach was ideal for this study because it allowed me to tap into the richness of participants' perspectives. A collective case study design allowed me to investigate full-service schools in the Metro Central Education District in Cape Town and to obtain a better understanding of how teachers experienced an IP focused on inclusive pedagogical principles. Full-service/inclusive schools in South Africa are mainstream education institutions that supply the full range of support options including psychological services, occupational therapy, social workers, and IE specialists to children who face barriers to learning (DBE, 2010).

Following Cohen et al. (2018) and Creswell and Creswell (2018), my interaction with teachers from different schools in similar communities allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of their school context by examining processes and outcomes in all situations. To interpret and comprehend the participants' experiences, I used an interpretative paradigm (Fraenkel et al., 2015) and the points made by Creswell and Poth (2018) to enable me to see the world through their experiences and viewpoints and how they developed their understanding of inclusion in a full-service school setting.

The Western Cape Education Department's Head of Learning Support provides learner support services to mainstream and special education schools and works with Learning Support Advisors allocated to Western Cape schools to execute learner health, welfare, and specialty programming. This person and his multidisciplinary team chose the schools that were part of this study. This group of Learning Support Advisors, who work with schools all

around the Metro Central Education District, identified full-service institutions that actively implemented inclusive pedagogical principles. After I presented my proposal to the principals and teachers of all ten of the recommended full-service schools, nine teachers from three full-service schools agreed to take part in this study.

These schools were convenient to me since I lived in Cape Town and worked with schools as a learning support educator. Through purposive sampling, which is characterised by the deliberate targeting of information-rich participants (Cohen et al., 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), I selected all nine participants who volunteered to take part in the study. They were committed to implementing IE practices in their classrooms. The teachers were all females aged 22 to 58, with one white teacher, two Indian/Asian teachers and six Colored¹ teachers, and had teaching experience ranging from six months to 38 years. Six teachers taught in the Foundation Phase, two in the Intermediate Phase, and one in the Senior Phase. All three full-service schools were classified as Quintile 2.² Five teachers were from School A; one was from School B, and three were from School C.

I used an initial open-ended pre-questionnaire to develop a baseline, with the aim of establishing how the teachers understood IE. In other words, I established a starting point and used this information diagnostically to develop my own IP to build on the teachers' existing knowledge. To "elicit views and opinions from the participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187) I collected qualitative data in 2019 from three focus group interviews with three participants each, after they attended the five-week IP on inclusive pedagogical principles. I facilitated all IP sessions. The first IP session (13 July 2019) started with a discussion on inclusive pedagogy theory, driven by IE principles. The next four sessions (13–26 July 2019) began with summaries of prior sessions. Following that, the participants were divided into small groups to explore how the theory presented related to their classroom experiences and how they could use the theory effectively. Following that, each small group was given the opportunity to deliver their critical analyses to the full group. Participants took a few moments at the end of each session to reflect on their day's learning. I conducted focus groups after the IP in the 5th session, since smaller groups allowed for more meaningful interaction among the participants and yielded valuable information as participants shared their experiences of their IE practices in their classrooms. Focus groups were formed through random selection to promote open dialogue and a diversity of perspectives. This strategy ensured varied interactions and intentionally avoided grouping participants by school affiliation or teaching phase. I gathered data during the IP and wrote this up and analysed and evaluated it in my doctoral thesis in 2023. The results and discussion in this article are based on one of the research questions that informed this thesis as mentioned above, namely, "How does a five-week IP shape primary teachers' understanding and practice of inclusive pedagogy?"

Henning et al., (2004) and Lune and Berg (2016) discussed succinctly the concept of the thematic analysis that enabled me to explore the material in depth and uncover recurring

¹ I used Statistics South Africa's population group indicators distinguishing between Colored, Indian/Asian and white teachers (StatsSA, 2019).

² Quintile 2 schools are defined as poor, no-fee paying schools (Mestry, 2020).

themes. The raw data was color-coded after a thorough inductive analysis of the present literature on this topic, allowing me to turn the data into usable themes and smaller units of meaning (see Henning et al., 2004). I used an inductive approach to generate inferences from the raw data obtained during the focus group interviews (Henning et al., 2004; Lune & Berg, 2016).

To ensure that this research was trustworthy, I created a credible and accurate account of the participants' experiences of the IE IP following Anney (2014) and Moon et al. (2016) by capturing the voices of the participants through verbatim transcriptions and member-checking (see Gay et al., 2012). To ensure dependability, I aligned the theoretical framework with the data from the participants, which resulted in stable data. To ensure conformability, the results of the research were based on the experiences and preferences of the research participants rather than on mine, thus ensuring the neutrality and objectivity of the data (see Anney, 2014; Gay et al., 2012; Moon et al., 2016).

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university since this study emanated from a doctoral research study. Access and informed consent were obtained from the Western Cape Education Department, the three school principals, and the nine teachers (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2016). All participants were fully informed about the research project and that they could leave the study at any time if they so wished. For confidentiality purposes, the teachers' names were kept anonymous, and they are referred to here as: HF, CA, EB, RH, KJ, CP, CS, JG, SS, FP, and GB.

Results

The results of this study are categorised into three main themes that emerged from the inductively and deductively coded data. The three themes are: increased knowledge and empowerment; differentiated instruction; and collaborative learning and were guided by Lave and Wenger's (1998) work on the concept of a CoP being a single framework which provides convincing explanations as to the relationship between and among the three concepts.

Increased knowledge and empowerment

Increased knowledge and empowerment are closely related to the CoP's component domain. Participating teachers indicated their shared interests and offered their expertise as well as the information and skills they had learned to implement inclusive educational techniques. All teachers who participated in this study confirmed that the five-week IP they attended provided them with comprehensive knowledge and skills which empowered them to implement a variety of inclusive pedagogical practices. Teachers felt enlightened by the new information they attained from the IP, and they changed their mindsets and attitudes towards practising inclusion. This was confirmed by Teacher GB who said, "I have become more aware of the fact that we need to change things around the school and for our learners too when it comes to inclusivity." Similarly, Teacher CP said, "The IP has helped me to figure out that this is the way we do things. I cannot just label a child for the simple reason of labelling."

Some teachers had a shallow understanding of inclusion prior to the IP, and they acknowledged experiencing some benefits from the intervention. Teacher SS said,

I thought that the word inclusive was referring to people in wheelchairs, deaf and with hearing problems only. I never knew that it was all different types of barriers including language. I now have more understanding about what inclusivity is.

Teacher JG echoed the same sentiments saying, “Before [attending the IP], I did not know what it [IE] means but now, I have got that information. I know how to handle the child and I feel more confident to help that learner.”

For some teachers, the way they learnt this new knowledge about inclusion challenged them to read more about the concept and find out how to implement it fully in their classrooms. Teacher GB confirmed this by saying, “Prior knowledge showed in these workshops challenged me to do more reading and understanding of what inclusivity is all about.” Teachers CA, KJ, EB, CS, GB, and SS realised they needed to look at their classes more “inclusively” and place their focus on the needs of their learners. They recognised that they need to “read up on” and “experiment” with different “inclusion strategies.” Reading more about inclusion was a strategy adopted by many teachers who participated in the IP. They had to read to learn more about inclusion and supplement the information they gained from workshops. Teachers were challenged to go back and forth in search of more information about inclusion. Teacher RH affirmed this by saying the workshop was

a rude awakening. It made me aware that I have to go back all the time. It is teaching five steps forward and ten steps backward. Going forward and coming back, that is how you reinforce the concepts and the skills and values of teaching learners. I had to reflect on why a reading corner is needed and what purpose it serves.

Through the IP, teachers learnt that barriers experienced by some learners are not school related but relate to their lives. Teacher GB reflected on her teaching and confirmed this by saying,

A couple of weeks ago I did an exercise with learners just to ask what their challenge for the day was and what they were struggling with. It was so strange to see things that kids would be struggling with and it had nothing to do with schoolwork, absolutely nothing, it had everything to do with their lives.

When learners are affected by social barriers or any problem at home, this often also affects their learning at school. The IP was credited with empowering teachers with the knowledge that enabled them to look at learners’ barriers to learning from a wider perspective rather than confining them only to a classroom setting. The program enabled teachers to learn to understand the diverse origins of barriers to learning and to identify the challenges to learning. A teacher’s identification of barriers to learning is the first step towards inclusion. Teacher HF confirmed that the IP provided a milestone of achievement because it helped her learn how to identify barriers experienced by learners in her class. She said, “What stood out

for me was the identification of barriers to learning. The importance of identifying the correct barrier to learning is important because if you get that wrong you will not be able to help a child.” Teacher KJ commented about the identification of barriers to learning saying,

The IP helped me to identify who I need to sit with more, maybe my top group can work with a middle or weaker learner you know, and it will give me the opportunity to work with them that has definitely helped in my classroom.

For some teachers, the IP empowered them to think critically about how best to plan and execute their lessons. Teacher SS said,

Learning about IE practices has helped me because now I can think. For example, we were doing sharing and I marked the books and I said to myself, ‘Uh-uh, we need to do this again.’ I did an analysis, and I saw that some learners needed this and some needed that and then I focused my lessons on those things . . . my group[s] worked on those things and I can now see that it has helped. There has been an improvement.

Teacher CP learnt new knowledge which helped her figure out things in class and understand an effective way to teach so as to cater to the diverse learning needs of individual learners. She said,

I have learnt to go step-by-step to figure out what is actually wrong with the child because you cannot just say the child in my class has behavior problems. There is a reason why they have behavior problems, and I think now after the workshop I can see it clearly. I can kind of differentiate in the classroom.

From the IP, teachers learnt that they have to meet the diverse learning needs of learners in classrooms. This can be done by differentiating instruction. Wenger (1998, p. 483) called this new knowledge “boundary encounters and boundary brokering” that created “local situated practices.”

Differentiating instruction

This theme relates to the CoP’s component of practice during which teachers engaged in shared activities, experiences, and resources (Lave & Wenger, 1998). Many teachers learnt how the various aspects of IE come together, and many used terms like “differentiated teaching and adapting teaching styles”; “multiple intelligences”; “teaching methods and strategies for different barriers to learning”; “strengths and weaknesses”; and spoke about being aware of the learners so as to adapt to their needs. The IP had an impact on teachers since it empowered them to implement inclusive pedagogical practices effectively. Teachers learnt different ways of differentiating instruction to cater to the diverse learning needs of students in a mainstream classroom.

Differentiation of instruction implies that a teacher has to meet the needs of both high and low-performing learners. This means a teacher has to plan the lesson accordingly and provide different activities. Teachers learnt that differentiating instruction is an effective way of

including learners with different abilities in the mainstream classroom. Differentiation of instruction was done in a simplified way by using different activities for learning with learners who had different learning abilities. This was confirmed by Teacher CP who said she would “provide the learners with different activities to allow growth.” Teacher GB gained those skills from the IP. She confirmed this by saying,

Learning about IE changed the way I even do my planning because I need to make sure that I am reaching the weakest learner in my class, and I need to be aware that I need to plan for each group in my class. . . . So, for me, it has changed the way I think, not following the timetable so rigidly. I adapt my day around my learners, and I am more in tune with my learners.

Eight of the nine teachers who participated in the IP reiterated the usefulness of differentiation of assessments. Teacher HF postulated in an interview that she wanted to apply her new knowledge in her classroom and use differentiated assessment methods. She wished to create case studies of learners in her class to use for future reference. She wanted to reflect constantly on her teaching and apply new methods and strategies when something was not working.

Teacher RH agreed that assessments must be differentiated since this is an effective way of addressing the learning abilities of different learners in one class. She said, “I would like to adapt my teaching methodology, activities, and assessments to accommodate learners.” For learners who experience barriers to learning, she wants to be “more sympathetic, display more empathy and try and salvage the one whom she foresees going astray.” Teacher CA agreed with the idea of differentiating assessments, claiming that she learned nothing new about IE in general but only a specific aspect of “adjusting assessments.” Adjusting assessment is part of differentiation since it requires a teacher to make accommodations and modifications in accordance with each child’s learning capabilities. The need to reinforce differentiated assessments was emphasised by Teacher EB who demonstrated enthusiasm in “working at creating a set of diverse forms of assessing to accommodate all learners in class.” She would like to use different learning aids to assist all learners in her class. She wants to “keep in constant communication with the learners’ behavior and keep planning.” Teacher CP argued her point about differentiation from a policy perspective in saying,

I think for me it was understanding the SIAS document and the Education White Paper 6 and actually understanding that you do not have to make one test paper for the whole class, you can go back to the documents that the government created and say, ‘But I am doing this for this child’ because it says in your documents and in your policies that we can actually meet the needs of a learner.

At the beginning of the IP, the teachers were not aware that the SIAS policy promoted differentiation of instruction. They learnt about this section of the SIAS from the IP and expressed enthusiasm for implementing differentiation strategies to help meet individual learning needs of learners in class. Teachers showed an interest in using different strategies to meet the needs of learners. This was confirmed by Teacher JG, who said, “I will try different

strategies, take the ideas and information learnt [during the IP] and implement it in my classroom.” Similarly, Teachers CS, FP, and GB commented on the idea of teaching using different strategies as the way to go.

I recognised that some of my learners have definitive learning barriers, and I want to exercise greater patience and strategies to deal with the problems. Teacher CS.

I want to make the work more practical for learners who experience barriers to learning in my class and apply different intervention strategies. Teacher FP.

I had learnt or discovered quite a bit about myself. Things that you know but that you have forgotten that you can implement in your class. Teacher GB.

Teachers learnt that they do not just have to differentiate their teaching but also show some patience with learners who experience barriers to learning. Teacher GB confirmed this by saying “I am now more patient with learners who experience barriers to learning in my classroom. I want to make my teaching more fun.” Similarly, Teacher KJ concurred about being patient when teaching learners with barriers to learning. She said, “I have more empathy towards the learners. I am a lot calmer and patient with myself from last year it is a heck of an improvement. I feel like I want to make a difference in my class. I enjoy it now.”

Teaching inclusively is burdensome to teachers when they do not understand what inclusion means let alone how to implement it. When teachers have knowledge of this concept, they become able to implement it by using a variety of strategies to meet the diverse learning needs of learners in a classroom. The result is that teachers develop zeal to teach and accommodate learners and creatively develop new strategies that work in their classrooms. Teacher RH confirmed this saying, “I have learnt that it is ok if the learners do not understand the work. If this is not working, I will try another strategy.” These changing viewpoints of how to manage differentiation of assessments, because of the IP and the social context, indicate a transformed practice of real-life problems (Pyrko et al., 2019). The teachers drew on each other’s reflections and practices to change their own ways of teaching inclusively.

Collaborative learning

All teachers who participated in this study reiterated that collaboration is important when dealing with IE, which aligns with the CoP’s component of community (Lave & Wenger, 1998). Teachers liked the collaborative sessions during which they interacted and developed answers to questions on which they were working. They found the collaboration informative and fulfilling. Teacher CS confirmed this saying “We collaborated, and I felt a sense of fulfilment. We did reflection and there was feedback on how we felt about that session.” Teachers learnt from each other through the collaborative reflective sessions they had. Teacher GB reinforced this point by saying, “The facilitator gave us the opportunity where we could interact with each other and learn from each other.”

The main purpose of collaboration was for teachers to learn from each other’s best practices and experiences in handling IE cases in their schools. For instance, Teacher CA, who had

already implemented IE in her classroom, expressed her desire to educate her colleagues at the school and become an advocate for IE. She felt the need to network more with others and work as a team. Teacher CS wished to “collaborate with colleagues who include members of the School Based Support Team as well as make constant references to the SIAS documents for further information.” Teacher GB would like to “collaborate with colleagues” and inform them of what they have learnt about the SIAS document. She felt the need “to be consistent, fair and also stand up for [her] learners.” During the teachers’ regular attendance of the IP, their shared knowledge was indirectly redeveloped from one person to another where they were able to think together and create new boundaries and knowledge.

Discussion

Here, I link the findings and the theoretical framework in employing the three fundamental components of the CoP framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991), namely the domain, community, and practice. This IP was an experience during which the members of this community extended known boundaries and created new knowledge appropriate for their local situated practices.

Domain

The shared domain of interest of participants in this study was to increase knowledge and empowerment of IE pedagogical practices that promote inclusion in the classroom. The results indicate that the IP provided comprehensive knowledge and skills to empower teachers in implementing inclusive pedagogical practices. The IP not only deepened the participant teachers’ understanding of inclusive pedagogy but resulted in a transformation of their mindsets and attitudes towards inclusion (see McFarlane, 2006; Rafiq, 2015; Swart & Pettipher, 2017). This shift in perspective enabled Teachers CA, KJ, EB, CS, GB, and SS to re-evaluate their classroom planning to prioritise inclusion and boosted their confidence in supporting learners facing barriers to learning.

Community

The teachers who participated in the IP formed a CoP around the concept of IE and they engaged in joint activities and collaborated to deepen their understanding and expertise. Teachers CS, GB, and CA described the collaborative sessions and interactions among their peers as highly enjoyable experiences. These experiences not only fostered a sense of fulfilment but nurtured a culture of collaboration and active participation in the IP process (see Makoelle & van der Merwe, 2016). The collaborative sessions held during the IP played a pivotal role in facilitating interactions and knowledge sharing among the participating teachers (see Fullan, 2019; Nel et al., 2016). These sessions were highly valued by the teachers because they provided opportunities to learn from one another’s experiences and best practices (see Nel et al., 2016; Swart & Pettipher, 2017). Some teachers expressed their commitment to supporting and educating their colleagues at the school about IE, emphasising the importance of collaboration in promoting inclusive practices.

Practice

The practice component encompasses the shared resources, IE policy documents, and inclusive pedagogical strategies that are developed and refined in the CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The participation in the IP brought about a significant shift in Teachers CP's, SS's, and JG's perspectives on IE, prompting them to move away from labelling learners with disabilities to embracing a more inclusive approach (see Stofile et al., 2017). The IP enlightened teachers, like Teacher RH, compelling them to reflect critically on their past practices and beliefs. This critical self-reflection led to a noticeable change in the teachers' behavior and conduct in the classroom as they actively worked towards creating a more inclusive learning environment (see Stofile et al., 2017; Swart & Pettipher, 2019). The IP prompted the teachers to engage in deep introspection regarding their pedagogical practices and their understanding of inclusion, paving the way for meaningful changes in their approach to education (see Hooijer et al., 2021).

An aspect of inclusive practice that the teachers valued was the use of IE policies, such as the SIAS document and EWP6, as guiding frameworks to promote inclusive pedagogy (Department of Basic Education, 2014). The teachers embraced the SIAS policy enthusiastically since it proved to be instrumental in supporting differentiated instruction and assessments, allowing them to make necessary accommodations and modifications based on each learner's capabilities (see Nel et al., 2016). By referencing and adhering to the SIAS guidelines, the teachers learned to ensure the provision of IE while effectively addressing barriers to learning. Their recognition and utilization of such policies demonstrated their dedication to continuous improvement and their commitment to creating an IE experience for all their learners (see Stofile et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The teachers' participation in the IE IP aligns closely with Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP framework. The IP provided the teachers with a comprehensive understanding of the domain of IE, broadening their knowledge and empowering them to implement inclusive pedagogical practices. As a CoP, the teachers collaborated, shared experiences, and learned from one another, thus reinforcing their commitment to IE. The practice component of the CoP framework is evident through the teachers' adoption of differentiated instruction, adaptation of teaching methods, and the use of various strategies to address barriers to learning and interactions with IE policy documents. Overall, the study demonstrated how the three components of the CoP framework, domain, community and practice, interacted with and contributed to the professional growth and implementation of IE practices among the teachers involved, transforming their viewpoints of IE.

Limitation

This study was limited to nine teachers in three full-service schools who voluntarily participated in a five-week workshop. The findings cannot be generalised or assumed successful in all full-service schools or mainstream schools.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made. First, it is crucial to continue providing teachers with comprehensive and practical training in IE. Such training should emphasise the importance of collaboration and knowledge sharing among teachers since these elements contribute to the success of inclusive practices. Additionally, ongoing professional development opportunities should be provided to further enhance teachers' understanding and implementation of inclusive pedagogical strategies. Second, the use of IE policies, such as the SIAS document, should be encouraged and supported. These policies serve as valuable guiding frameworks for teachers, enabling them to make necessary accommodations and modifications to meet the individual needs of their learners. Schools and educational institutions should ensure that teachers have access to and are familiar with these policies, providing them with the necessary resources to implement inclusive practices effectively.

Fostering a culture of reflection and critical self-evaluation among teachers is essential. Teachers are encouraged to reflect continually on their teaching practices and beliefs, challenging any preconceived notions or biases they may hold. This reflective practice can lead to meaningful changes in behavior and classroom conduct, ultimately creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can further promote inclusive practices and support teachers in catering to the diverse learning needs of all learners.

Authors' contributions

CM served as the primary researcher, with JC and LM fulfilling the roles of supervisor and co-supervisor respectively of the thesis.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported on in this paper.

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