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# Support services for learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms using capability theory

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**Background:** South African schools accommodate a wide range of learners with various learning abilities in accordance with the policy of inclusion. However, little is known about how learners with learning disabilities are supported in the classrooms.

**Aim:** The study sought to explore how learners with learning disabilities are supported in mainstream classrooms in the wake of the policy on inclusivity.

**Setting:** This qualitative study embedded in descriptive phenomenology was carried out in eight selected mainstream primary schools in the Vaal Triangle of South Africa.

**Method:** Data were collected through in-depth interviews with each participant and were thematically analysed using the Capability theory by Sen, 1998. The theory basically states that individuals can reach their maximum capabilities if they receive adequate support.

**Results:** Findings revealed that learners with learning disabilities receive additional support from their teachers through one-on-one tuition, their peers, learner support educators, school based support teams and psychologists. However, two major drawbacks have emerged in the provision of additional support to learners with learning disabilities: insufficient teacher training for inclusion and a lack of commitment from parents to have their children undergo further assessments by educational psychologists.

**Conclusion:** The study recommends that psychologists, school based support teams, parents and social workers must all be involved in the provision of support to learners with learning disabilities. The study further recommends that teachers' training institutions must reinforce their training programmes to include strategies for teaching learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classes.

**Contributions:** This study is important for mainstream class teachers as they can effectively strategise on supporting learners with learning disabilities in their classrooms. Strategies that can be used include supporting learners with learning disabilities with individual educational programmes, buddy systems, as well as provision of relevant teaching or learning aids. Furthermore, the study lays the foundation for further research on effective mainstream classroom teaching pedagogies.

**Keywords:** learning disabilities; mainstream classrooms; peer support; individualised educational programmes; differentiated instruction; additional support; inclusive education; special educational needs.

## Introduction

The inclusion of learners with learning disabilities in mainstream schools has been at the centre of education debates for decades now. A wide range of empirical literature has been written about inclusive education, (Makhalemele, Payne-Van Staden & Masunungure 2021), but there is a paucity of literature on how learners with learning disabilities are supported in mainstream classrooms to receive both equitable and quality education in South African schools. Before the introduction of inclusive education, learning and teaching were largely teacher-centred, with pull-out programmes for those with learning disabilities, but now require learner-centred pedagogies that include everyone, and not some, and at the same time being able to address the unique needs, differences, interests and abilities of all learners (Florian & Balck-Hawkins 2011).

Since the signing of the Salamanca statement on inclusive education in Spain in 1994 (UNESCO 1994), there has been a global rise in advocacy for education to be provided from the human rights perspective that seeks to address issues of both equity and quality education for all learners,

without segregating others (Bubpha 2014). Consequently, this has sparked significant interest in how learners with learning disabilities receive additional support in mainstream classrooms, without holding back the progress of other learners without learning disabilities.

Before the adoption of inclusive education, learners were mainly taught in different settings, informed by their abilities or disabilities, where special schools were for learners with disabilities and ordinary schools specifically designed for learners who were perceived to be 'normal' (Hove & Phasha 2023). Learners, including those with learning disabilities, received support that addressed their specific needs in their separate classrooms or schools. Within schools, learners were streamed into categories informed by their abilities and arranged into ability groups in classrooms to enable teachers to give support that matched learners' levels of ability (Hove & Phasha 2023). However, methods of instruction were mostly teacher-centred, denying learners the opportunity for meaningful engagements among themselves, including support for one another through pedagogic practices such as cooperative learning.

South Africa adopted the policy on inclusive education through the Education White Paper 6, 2001 document which firmly states that all learners must be supported in the classrooms despite the differences they might have (Department of Education 2001). Unlike in the past where additional support needs were provided separately according to which type of school the learner was attending or class that the learner was in, inclusive education dictates that support services have to be provided within the mainstream classroom environment, despite the disabilities that some learners might be having.

Educational support services are broadly defined as psychosocial educational services that are given to learners at school (Makhalemele et al. 2021). Essential additional support services that learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms require are those that enable them to achieve their full academic and social potential (Wachianga 2010). Such supports include additional teaching materials, additional personnel, new teaching approaches, or any other resources or gadgets that individual learners may need in the learning process. Schneider et al. (2018) divide additional support resources in mainstream classrooms into two categories: personnel resources (teaching and nonteaching staff), as well as material resources, which include funding, textbooks, classrooms, educational gadgets, computers and availability of additional programmes for learners with learning disabilities.

Specific learning disability refers to neurological disorders that hinder an individual's ability to learn, particularly in areas such as reading, writing and arithmetic (The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Test Revision DSM-V-TR of American Psychiatric Association 2022). Learners with a specific learning disability experience more difficulties in comprehending concepts than the

majority of their peers (Bryant, Bryant & Smith 2017). In other words, learners with specific learning disabilities have poor academic performances as a result of their neurological disorders as compared to their physical, intellectual or other deficits (Hove & Phasha 2023). Essentially, these learners (learners with learning disabilities) require more attention in curriculum adaptation and pedagogy to increase their functionality in mainstream classrooms (Udoba 2014). A lack of additional support may lead to high dropout rates for such learners, low teacher motivation, as well as low academic success (Hayes & Bulat 2017). A report by UNESCO (2018) in 49 countries across the globe revealed that 24% of children with disabilities (including those with learning disabilities) are less likely to complete primary education if they do not receive adequate support that addresses their unique needs.

The presence of a disability in a child can be one of the most marginalising and debilitating factors that individual learners struggle with if not taken care of (Hayes & Bulat 2017).

Additionally, the type of disability influences the learning method, moving away from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, towards a tailored approach to increase the capacity to meet the needs of diverse learners. In that vein, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) assert that support has to be given to individual learners without necessarily excluding them from the rest of the learners and the curriculum that everyone else is receiving in the classroom. This places a huge challenge on teachers and other stakeholders such as parents and caregivers to provide for the needs of learners with learning disabilities, which in most cases have to be provided as an addition to what is generally available to all learners.

Several strategies are available to support learners with learning disabilities in the classrooms, which include co-teaching, differentiated instruction, and peer-mediated instruction and interventions (Ford 2013). Psychological assessment of learners is another important support service that learners with learning disabilities require. Early assessment and intervention improve the emotional, educational and social development of learners, reducing the chances of secondary disabilities (Sharma & Leif 2019). The primary function that additional support resources play in mainstream classroom life is to make learning real, practical and enjoyable for all learners. Challenges that can hamper the provision of additional support to learners with learning disabilities in classrooms include teachers not knowing how to accommodate the needs of these learners within diverse classrooms (Hayes & Bulat 2017). In light of the aforesaid, Koch and Burkett (2006) suggest a framework for supporting everyone in the classrooms, particularly those with learning disabilities, which entails the following: (1) using their first language in group discussions; (2) allowing the use of a first language for summarising and concept mapping; (3) asking questions during lessons in their first language and (4) using first language for giving verbal or written feedback or answering questions. The above framework applies to

situations where pedagogy is provided through a prescribed language of learning and teaching (LoLT), which is predominantly the case in South African schools where English is often used as the medium of instruction, despite it being a second language to most learners.

Hove's (2015) study conducted in the Johannesburg South District revealed that teachers often feel isolated when it comes to teaching learners with learning disabilities, as they believe they have not received sufficient training on how to differentiate instruction for diverse classrooms based on individual learner needs. In the same vein, Petrenas, Puigdellivol and Campdepadros (2013) report that schools in Spain mostly organise classrooms based on streaming because teachers do not know alternatives for teaching diverse learners in one classroom setting, as well as alternatives for providing both quality and equality for all learners.

Elsewhere, a qualitative case study by Buli-Holmberg and Jeyaprathaban (2016) that sought to evaluate the effective teaching practices for learners with learning disabilities in South Norway revealed that learners who need special support to master their learning in mainstream classrooms are not getting it, except when they are in small groups where they get closer interaction with the teachers and other peers. This is consistent with Lynch (2012) who asserts that some mainstream class teachers have various concerns, which include a lack of support services for learners with learning disabilities when they are moved into mainstream classrooms, as well as limited content and field experiences in teacher education programmes focussing on learning disabilities.

A study by Rose and Shelvin (2019) on support provision for learners with learning disabilities in Irish schools established that support is provided based on the assumption that individualised learning approaches through withdrawal approaches may help eliminate barriers to learning for those with learning disabilities.

However, such a practice is against inclusive pedagogy, which stipulates that support has to be given without necessarily separating some learners as this may lead to adverse consequences of labelling towards those who would have been pulled out from the classrooms for extra support (Hove 2022).

On the other hand, Person (2012) posits that teachers in Swedish schools give additional instructions and support to learners with learning disabilities one-on-one to achieve better academic results because they will be able to address the unique needs of each learner. Similarly, a study by Takala, Pirtimaa and Tomane (2009) on the role of specialist teachers in Finland revealed the use of one-on-one, which was seen as giving focussed attention to those with learning disabilities. However, the same study raised concerns about the use of a one-on-one approach regarding the high pressure it can place on learners, the lack of contact with peers, as well as stigmatisation that may arise.

Moreover, Yee (2013) reports that learners with learning disabilities are grouped alone in mainstream classrooms and teachers teach them separately in their groups, giving them additional support in those groups. Meanwhile, swifter learners would be working on more challenging work, which they can do on their own. The aforementioned was corroborated by Spratt and Florian (2013) who assert that learners in New Zealand are assigned to groups based on the need for additional help, time and practice to master the content and skills covered in a particular unit or lesson.

In other instances, learners with learning disabilities have their curriculum differentiated as a way of accommodating them. A study by Rix et al. (2009) in the United Kingdom on pedagogical approaches that can effectively include learners with special educational needs in mainstream classes revealed that teachers adapt instruction according to learners' needs. In the same vein, findings from a study by Walsh (2018) on the inclusion of learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms in America revealed that teachers differentiated instruction to meet the needs of every learner by providing learners with multiple options for learning. A qualitative study by Petrenas et al. (2013) in Spain revealed that the curriculum of those with more educational and social difficulties was reduced. However, a qualitative case study by Mukhopadhyay, Nenty and Okechukwu (2012) on the inclusion of learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms in the central region of Botswana revealed that there are inadequate resources to support learners in need in the schools.

South African mainstream classrooms now accommodate widely diverse learners, often reflecting a multi-lingual society. However, Mazibuko, Flack and Kvalsvig (2019) reveal that, in KZN, for example, 78% of the population speaks Isizulu, but the Language of Learning and Teaching is mostly English, putting English second language learners with learning disabilities at a higher risk of failure.

## Aim of the study

Other studies related to this study that I carried out revealed that teachers use classroom practices such as multilevel teaching, differentiated instruction and code switching to accommodate learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Hove & Phasha 2023). Challenges that were found included difficulties that teachers faced in the provision of differentiated instruction that addressed the unique needs of individual learners, a lack of time for extra support to learners with learning disabilities and teachers' lack of skills in teaching diverse learners within mainstream classrooms.

However, learners with learning disabilities get accepted and are supported by those without learning disabilities (Hove 2022). Arguably, learners with learning disabilities also require the provision of either psychological, educational, material or social support for them to function optimally (Makhalemele et al. 2021). Thus, this study sought to explore

the provision of support services to children with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms in line with the requirements of inclusive education to teach all learners in the same settings despite the differences that they may have. The policy on inclusive education dictates that diverse learners must receive quality education in the same environments, and must receive adequate support that addresses their unique needs. In line with the policy of inclusivity, the study sought to answer the question: How are additional support services provided to learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms?

## Theoretical framework

This study was undertaken through Sen's capability approach, which in its initial form argued that social reforms should coexist with economic reforms to achieve sustainable growth and good governance (Herguner 2012). Sen (1998) defines a capability as a person's ability to do valuable acts, reach valuable acts of being or reach measurable milestones (Walker & Unterhalter 2007). From a broader perspective, Amartya Sen, an Indian economist and 1998 Nobel Prize awardee argues that the Capability approach is a framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being, and proposals for social change in society (Sen 1998). The core characteristic of the Capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be.

Drawing from Amartya Sen's capability approach, in the domain of inclusive education, we can benefit from extending our evaluative spaces beyond learners' achievements to encompass freedoms to achieve (Hart 2018). There are three spaces in which inequalities in education can be understood which are: (1) inequalities in opportunities to access education, (2) inequalities in experiences of education and (3) outcome opportunities afforded to individuals (Hart 2018). There should be a paradigm shift that broadens attention to include whether an individual has the real opportunity to achieve a valued way of living as well as focus on the kind of resources that are at their disposal. Background to the study has established that learners with learning disabilities are those whose achievements are below what is expected of their age and grade levels, but are capable of attaining desirable results if they get proper and adequate support. Thus, the theory helps in understanding how inequalities in the classrooms are erased, as well as how learners with learning disabilities are supported so that they can reach their full potential.

# Research methods and design

A qualitative approach embedded in descriptive phenomenological design was used in this study. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the researcher in the real world (Mertens 2010). In this study, I sought to explore the perceptions, feelings and lived experiences of the participants through their own voices on how they support learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. It is against this backdrop that qualitative researchers interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Mertens 2010). The study used a descriptive phenomenological design, which allows for investigating human experiences at a fundamental level, seeking the essence of lived experiences (Savin-Baden 2013). In this context, descriptive phenomenological design enabled me to dig deep and excavate the nuances of how learners with learning disabilities receive additional support within mainstream classrooms from participants' daily experiences. One powerful aspect of descriptive phenomenology is that it allows participants to explain their lived experiences through their voices (Williams 2012). Each participant was able to give their expressions on the provision of additional support to learners with learning disabilities in the mainstream classrooms emanating from what they experience in their classrooms daily.

## Site and sampling

This study was carried out in the Vaal Triangle area located in the Johannesburg region of South Africa. This particular site attracted interest in this study because primary schools in this region mostly enrol learners who are widely diverse in abilities, backgrounds and ethnicity, including those with learning disabilities. Schools in this area have been categorised as nonfee paying because of the low economic status of the surrounding communities. Purposeful sampling was used in this study. The power and logic of using purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases from whom one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance (Savin-Baden & Major 2013). Eight mainstream class teachers (five females and three males) were purposefully selected for this study. The participants who were selected had more than 5 years of teaching experience in mainstream classrooms, with qualifications in Special Needs Education or Inclusive Education, because of their presumed understanding of learners with learning disabilities. In purposeful sampling, a researcher chooses or selects cases because they will be particularly informative about the topic being investigated (McMillan & Schumacher 2012). Eight participants were purposefully selected for this study, with assistance from the school based support teams. Table 1 shows the profile of the participants.

## Data collection

Data for this study were collected using observations and individual in-depth interviews. However, this article reports on data collected through in-depth interviews with each participant, focussing on learners with learning disabilities only. Interviews have the advantage of collecting data from individual participants face-to-face, allowing the interviewer to ask for more clarity where the initial responses are not clear. Collecting data through interviews allows researchers to probe deeply into individual participants' experiences, allowing for the collection of more detailed data (Savin-Baden & Major 2013). We conducted two 60 minute in-depth interviews sessions with each participant, with a two week gap between the sessions. The second round of interviews

**TABLE 1.** Profiles of participants.

| Participant | Gender | Age | Teaching experience | Qualifications |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Male | 43 years | 22 years | Bachelor of Education, Honours degree in Inclusive Education. |
| P2 | Female | 46 years | 15 years | Bachelor of Education, Diploma in Inclusive Education. |
| P3 | Male | 48 years | 17 years | Certificate in Education, Bachelor of Education in Special Needs Education. |
| P4 | Female | 51 years | 18 years | Diploma in Education, Bachelor of Science in Counselling. |
| P5 | Female | 44 years | 16 years | Bachelor of Education, Honours Degree in Inclusive Education. |
| P6 | Female | 38 years | 10 years | Diploma in Education, Bachelor of Education in Special Needs Education. |
| P7 | Female | 41 years | 12 years | Diploma in Education, Advanced Certificate in Inclusive Education. |
| P8 | Male | 52 years | 24 years | Certificate in Education, Advanced Certificate in Inclusive Education. |

was particularly necessary as it gave participants the opportunity to give more clarity on issues that they had raised in the first interviews for authenticity. This allowed me to probe the initial responses through follow-up questions on issues that needed further explanation, allowing participants to explain themselves more and clarify issues further. The participants were interviewed in the afternoons at their workplaces to avoid interfering with their daily activities.

### Data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research involves numerous small pieces of collected data that have to be gradually combined to form broader, more general descriptions and conclusions (Lodico, Spaulding & Vogtle 2010). In the first phase, data were analysed thematically using a model by Lodico et al. (2010), which has six steps that have to be followed when analysing data. These six steps are the preparation and organisation of data; reviewing and exploring the data; coding data into categories; conducting thick descriptions of people, places and activities; building themes; and reporting and interpreting data (Lodico et al. 2010). The process of data analysis commenced from the time and the interviews were conducted with the participants. The data analysis process began by preparing and organising the collected data, which entailed putting data that were collected into a form that could easily be analysed after the transcription process. The process of data transcription that was undertaken related to the site or location from which data were collected and persons studied. In the second phase of data analysis, data was reviewed and explored. This process enabled me to read through the data and look at the various types of data collected. I wrote down words and phrases that captured the important aspects of the data. In coding the data, different segments of data was identified, that described related aspects of the study and gave them broad names. For example, all related data that spoke to the provision of material resources in the classrooms were grouped together (categorised) and given a code name (R). The different categories were divided into sub-categories as the data were analysed and relationships between categories were established through discovering data patterns. The idea was to put related data together for easy discussion and interpretation. The coding of data was followed by the construction of thick descriptions of both participants and the schools that were visited for data collection, as well as participants interviewed, after which a thorough narrative of the findings was presented.

### Ethical considerations

Principles of justice and respect should be upheld when one is undertaking a study, and the people involved in the study should be protected from harm. Participants took part in this study willingly without being coerced or forced to do so. The author got permission to carry out the study in the schools from the Gauteng Department of Education. Participants were given a full description of the research aim and were told of their right to decide not to participate if they wished not to. The research was carried out overtly, with participants well aware of all the necessary information about the study and with their participation having been confirmed by signing the consent forms, which I had drafted, which explained what it meant to be involved in the study as well as the aim of the study. The participants were them aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they came to feel they were no longer interested in participating. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa, College of Education, Research Ethics Review Committee (reference no.: 2015/05/13/47000872/22/MC). The participants were assured that all information will be kept confidential. I tried to be as honest as possible in the recording and transcription of the data so that it was a true reflection of what the participants had said.

## Results

The findings of this study revealed that, to a larger extent, learners with learning disabilities receive extra support through teaching and learning practices within the mainstream classrooms, provision of material resources, and referrals to learner support teams and psychologists. However, drawbacks to support provision emerged, which include teachers' lack of skills in teaching learners with learning disabilities within mainstream classrooms, and non-commitment by parents to have their children with learning disabilities referred to psychologists for further assistance. The findings are presented through four themes that emerged from the data, namely: (1) within classroom teaching or learning support, (2) material resources provision, (3) referrals and (4) drawbacks to classroom support.

### Within classroom teaching or learning support

The findings of this study revealed that learners with learning disabilities receive extra direct support from mainstream class teachers as well as from their peers other than what is

generally provided to all learners. These supports relate to one-on-one tuition, scribe and reader assistance, and peer support. Six participants indicated that they make an effort to assist learners with learning disabilities individually in the classrooms, as evidenced by a participant who was captured saying:

'There are learners that I can see they are struggling with a concept. I assist them individually [*learners with learning disabilities*] in the presence of other learners during the class. However, others will be busy doing other work for the day. I go to them and I help them in understanding what we will be doing.' (Participant 1, Male, 43 years old)

In the same vein, a participant explained that:

'I can't leave them behind … you can see that this child is struggling with phonics, they are struggling with addition. I take them aside and help them with letter sounds or the concept I will be teaching. You see that others are struggling … I help them, and usually, you see them improving.' (Participant 8, Male, 52 years old)

On the other hand, three participants indicated that they use the 'scribe and reader' approach to assist learners who cannot read and write in the classrooms. This approach entails having learners respond to questions orally, and the teacher writes down the responses for the learner as was explained by a participant who stated that:

'What we do, we were trained as a scribe and a reader. For instance, when we are doing our common exams for formal assessments. For those learners who cannot read and write, we call them one by one and give them a second chance. You ask one question and the learner will respond and you write down the responses the learner gives you.' (Participant 4, Female, 51 years old)

Besides assistance from the teacher, learners with learning disabilities get support from their peers without learning disabilities as stated by a participant who explained:

'Those without learning disabilities relate well with those who are struggling, because they want to exercise or use what they have been taught by the teacher. They are willing to assist those with learning disabilities. I encourage them to help one another.' (Participant 3, Male, 48 years old)

'Sometimes they learn better from each other than from me as the teacher.' (Participant 3, Male, 48 years old)

He added:

'You see them improving, especially learners with minor barriers, they do improve, for example in writing as they grow up from Grade 4 to Grade 6. You find now they can sit still and write. They have improved really.' (Participant 3, Male, 48 years old)

Learners with learning disabilities need to be provided with additional support in the classrooms so that they can overcome the barriers they are facing. Additional supports are programmes that must be provided in addition to what is generally available to increase learners' participation, retention and achievement in the learning process (Department of Education 2015). Findings revealed that learners with learning disabilities get additional support

from teachers as well as their peers from the same classrooms. This is consistent with findings by the Education Review Office (ERO) (2015), which indicated that learners with learning disabilities in New Zealand are withdrawn from the rest for one-on-one support programmes to develop academic or social skills. Teachers encourage learners to understand and accept diversity through working with peers with or without learning disabilities. Elsewhere, Pesron (2012) asserts that teaching in Sweden is mainly one-on-one tuition aimed at addressing individual learner needs.

There is a need to maximise the participation of all learners in the culture and the curriculum of educational institutions to minimise barriers to learning (Selvaraj 2015). Peer support places greater emphasis on active involvement and initiation by learners with learning disabilities thereby enhancing their inclusion (Frederickson & Cline 2011). The Capability theory adopted in this study stresses enabling learners to be able to do what they can and to become what they can be. Essentially, learners with learning disabilities can improve their academic achievements or performances if they get the right support.

## Material resources provision

The findings of this study also established that learners with learning disabilities benefit from teaching or learning resources that are made available to them in the schools. These teaching or learning resources include libraries, videos, pictures, laptops and counters. A participant explained:

'We have a library here at school. We take them for videos. Some children like hearing something through music and videos so it helps them learn some concepts a lot.' (Participant 3, Male, 48 years old)

He further added that:

'There are things that you just teach using pictures because we have a lot of them in class. You are just using pictures and what you have written on the chalkboard and then you will give them those words to go back home and read.' (Participant 3, Male, 48 years old)

One participant corroborated the aforementioned when she stated:

'I think we have quite a fair number of resources like laptops in the school. We also have the library. It's a resource centre. We also get certain things from the library before teaching.' (Participant 7, Female, 41 years old)

In the same vein, a participant stated that:

'I try to do that justice for certain concepts like when you are doing what they are doing right now, counting. If a child misses tens and units and that, then they move to the next grade, it's a problem. So you show them counters, you show them pictures. You should treat them in a way that they are all catered for.' (Participant 2, Female, 46 years old)

However, three participants indicated that although teaching or learning resources are available in the school, they are not enough for every learner, as evidenced by a participant who opined:

'We have teaching aids in our school. However, they are not enough for every learner.' (Participant 7, Female, 41 years old)

'They cannot reach out to each learner.' (Participant 7, Female, 41 years old)

The findings of this study established that, to a larger extent, schools have enough resources that learners with learning disabilities would require in their learning. This is consistent with a study by Matavire, Mpofu and Veneka (2013) in Zimbabwe, which revealed that the allocation of resources such as learning materials is very critical in the teaching of learners with learning disabilities. Learners with learning disabilities require more or additional learning materials that suit their current ability levels so that they can achieve mastery in learning (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban 2016). Teaching must be characterised by a rich variety of explanatory models, feedback to the learners and demonstrated skills (Person 2012). Recommendations from a study by Mupa and Chinooneka (2015) recommended that government should provide learning materials, and teachers should frequently be reminded of the use of media during teaching and learning.

## Referrals

A further finding from the study was that mainstream class teachers refer some learners whom they would have identified to be having learning disabilities to learner support educators within the schools. The idea would be for learners to receive additional support separately from this personnel, as well as to get recommendations on the best strategies that can be used to help them overcome their challenges in mainstream classrooms. Five participants indicated that they refer learners with learning disabilities to learner support educators, as demonstrated by a participant who was quoted as saying:

'We refer learners to learner-support educators. If I see that I have failed to improve the performance of a learner, I send him or her to learner support educators who are better trained to help these learners. They can come up with ideas on how best we can help these learners.' (Participant 8, Male, 52 years old)

In the same vein, a participant stated:

'This school, fortunately, we have two learner support educators, one for the intersen phase [*intermediate and senior phases*], and one for the foundation phase. We send our learners who are struggling to them for support.' (Participant 1, Male, 43 years old)

Three participants indicated that they practice pull-out programmes for those with learning disabilities, as evidenced by a participant who said:

'We pull out learners so that they can be assisted separately by learner support educators. We don't take them out completely, it's just for certain periods like the specific things that the child will be struggling with. They also want to go for that support because they feel when you go out of class the experiences are different and better than when you are in the class.' (Participant 6, Female, 38 years old)

This was corroborated by a participant who stated that:

'We use pull-out programs. I have not seen pull-out programs as a problem of exclusion. I don't see those children struggling to fit in when they come back, or being ostracised that you are being taken out for this and this. They fit well with other learners when they come back from the learner support educator.' (Participant 4, Female, 51 years old)

Participant 4 indicated that before taking learners with learning disabilities to learner support educators, they first gather evidence that they have tried different strategies without success, and they take such evidence to the school based support team for further assistance. She explained:

'In my class when I am teaching I do see that this one is not coping with the work that we are doing, I support them. If I have exhausted my support, with evidence that I have exhausted my support, then I will fill the support needs assessment form for that particular child then I take it to the School Based Support Team together with evidence of support I have done.' (Participant 4, Female, 51 years old)

Besides referring learners with learning disabilities to learner support educators and the school based support team, teachers also refer these learners to local psychologists as indicated by a participant who explained that:

'We refer them [*learners with learning disabilities*] to local psychologists for assistance. There are psycho-social challenges or family problems that the learner lives with. In the home environment, you find they are abused, they are not taken care of properly due to poverty and other challenges.' (Participant 1, Male, 43 years old)

Improving educational outcomes requires efforts from many fronts for learners with learning disabilities to achieve better academic results (Dunlosky et al. 2013). Findings revealed that learners with learning disabilities get support from learner support educators through pull-out programmes, school based support teams, as well as psychologists. Inclusivity in education hinges on collective efforts from different stakeholders so that barriers can be minimised and learners can learn effectively (Plows & Whitburn 2017). The involvement of different stakeholders in the education of learners with learning disabilities is plausible as it helps learners reach their best capabilities. Dunlosky et al. (2013) assert that there are available learning techniques that can help deliver significant gains in classroom academic performances of learners with learning disabilities. Learner support educators and psychologists can recommend strategies that can help learners realise their full potential, based on what they require. This is against this backdrop that teachers in the classrooms generally implement a narrow interpretation of formative assessments that focus on ensuring learners pass the set goals and standards, but lack the skills for redressing the challenges or limitations that the children will be facing (Hume 2009). Psychologists have been developing and evaluating easy-to-use learning techniques, which teachers can use in the teaching of their children with learning disabilities (Dunlosky et al. 2013).

## Drawbacks to classroom support

Despite the support that learners with learning disabilities receive from teachers, their peers, learner support educators, school based support teams and psychologies, the study's findings have revealed that some factors militate against access to additional support by learners with learning disabilities. These factors relate to a lack of proper teacher training resulting in a lack of skills in differentiating instruction. Six participants indicated that they were not properly trained to teach learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Participant 5 stated that:

'There are those whom we feel the mainstream school is not meant for them. Their challenges or barriers to learning are unique. I feel they must be in special schools because whatever they write, they will write something like dots, or they cannot read. Some of them cannot write their names, or surnames in full, some they reverse letters.' (Participant 5, Female, 44 years old)

'You feel that this needs someone who is trained clinically to deal with this.' (Participant 5, Female, 44 years old)

The problem with teacher training transcends to the inability to differentiate instruction in the classroom by some teachers, as shown by a participant who argued that:

'I think when we are using this one-size-fits-all curriculum, for me the problem is the curriculum. Because they will say "differentiate the curriculum", but truly speaking, some teachers are not qualified to differentiate the curriculum. This ends up affecting learners with learning disabilities as they will not be fully supported in the classes.' (Participant 8, Male, 52 years old)

He further added that:

'If you see the annual teaching plans that we have, they are bombarded with work. They are not considerate of the fact that there are these learners who are slow to digest information. It's like the curriculum is for those who are able.' (Participant 8, Male, 52 years old)

A participant bemoaned his lack of proper training in mainstream class teaching, as well as his lack of time to give adequate additional support to learners with learning disabilities. He explained:

'There are a lot of skills that we feel we are not equipped with for mainstreaming teaching. Even those skills that we have been trained in, I don't know when it will happen to improve a learner's pace of writing. As a teacher, I don't see where I will get this time. I don't find time to give individual assistance. It's just impossible.' (Participant 3, Male, 48 years old)

Findings revealed that teachers feel they have not been properly trained to teach learners with learning disabilities, resulting in their lack of skills to differentiate instruction to address the needs of those with learning disabilities. Arguably, this leads to learners with learning disabilities not being adequately supported in mainstream classrooms. Teachers play a pivotal role in the academic success of all their learners regardless of some disabilities manifested by others (Donahue & Bornman 2014) and have a responsibility to work with learners with very diverse needs (Maciver et al. 2018). It is therefore imperative that teachers receive adequate training so that they will be able to support all their diverse learners despite the varied challenges that they will be facing. All learners need to be supported so that they can be capacitated to become who or what they can be. Teachers need to learn about and practice inclusive education during pre-service and in-service training and they need to be given opportunities for professional development.

Another challenge that emerged regarding support for learners with learning disabilities is the non-commitment by parents to have their children receive psychological assessments so that they can be assisted adequately. Two participants bemoaned the non-commitment by parents in having their children sent for psychological assessments as shown by a participant who stated:

'Some parents are in denial of their children having challenges. Some of them refuse to sign support forms so that the child can be referred for further assessments and placement in special schools. Perhaps we should get rid of this stigma and educate our parents about what learners are experiencing and why. So we should try to remove the stigma that if your child cannot write this there is something wrong with them mentally.' (Participant 7, Female, 41 years old)

Parents need to commit themselves to the education of their children, irrespective of whether they have learning disabilities or not (UNESCO, 2005). Academic achievements of learners with learning disabilities can improve significantly if parents play their roles in ensuring that learners receive whatever assistance they need (Topr et al. 2010). Parental involvement in the education of their children is a very important ingredient for successful inclusive practices (Afolabi, Sourav & Nenty 2013). They are social actors in the education of their children whose roles include networking with teachers on issues that affect the child's learning, as well as giving consent for any other psychological assessments that their children may need (Topr et al. 2010). Findings have revealed that some parents are not very committed when coming to have their children sent for further psychological assessments so that they can receive supports that match their needs. The lack of parental involvement, as revealed in the study's findings, deprives learners with learning disabilities of essential support that can improve their academic performance and achievements

## Limitations of the study

This study was carried out in one District of the Johannesburg Region of South Africa. Findings revealed that learners with learning disabilities receive additional support from their teachers, as well as their peers in mainstream classrooms. Challenges that mitigate against full support for learners with learning disabilities were observed, which include inadequate training on the part of teachers resulting in a lack of knowledge or skills in differentiating instruction, as well as non-commitment by parents to have their children for further assessments. However, the study did not include the views of other participants in the region. Furthermore,

selected participants who were selected are those who have studied special needs or inclusive education. The views of other teachers without the aforementioned qualifications were not captured in this study, although they also have learners with learning disabilities in their classrooms.

# Conclusion and recommendations

This study established some of the most important supports that learners with learning disabilities need in the classrooms, which include one-on-one support, scribe and reader, peer support and provision of additional teaching or learning materials such as libraries, videos, pictures, laptops and counters. The study also revealed that learners are supported through pull-out programmes where learners get more support from learner support educators and the school based support teams. Furthermore, it has been established that learners with learning disabilities are referred to psychologists who guide teachers on the most appropriate strategies to support learners in need. However, it has also been revealed that teachers feel that they have not been properly trained to support learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. In addition, some parents are not committed to having their children sent for psychological assessments.

This study, therefore, recommends that all teachers must provide additional support to learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. More specifically, all stakeholders in education such as psychologists, school based support teams, parents and social workers must be involved in the education of learners with learning disabilities to erase the barriers learners might be facing. In light of the Capability theory (Sen 1998), such stakeholder involvement can help to increase freedoms for learners with learning disabilities to achieve desirable outcomes. This study further recommends that universities and teachers' training colleges must strengthen their training programmes to include strategies for teaching learners with learning disabilities in mainstream programmes. All parents must be encouraged to support teachers' initiatives to have their learners with learning disabilities sent for psychological assessments so that teachers can utilise the recommendations from these stakeholders to enable effective learning by all learners.

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