In-Service Teachers' Attitudes Towards The Inclusion Of Learners With Additional Needs In Regular Classrooms In South Africa

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Research Article

ABSTRACT

In the process of promoting inclusion in education, in-service teachers' preparedness is being identified as a vital factor. This study examined teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with additional needs. We followed a sequential mixed method design, where 63 in-service teachers were sampled through a purposive sampling strategy. Data was collected through a closed and an open-ended questionnaire. The overall finding was that teachers have a positive attitude towards the inclusion of learners with additional needs although they face challenges that affect their explicit attitudes. The finding suggests that in order to combat these challenges teachers should be prepared more for the inclusion of all learners to enhance their implicit attitudes and more resources should be provided to mitigate against these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Providing in-service teachers with training in working with learners who have additional needs is one of the key factors in promoting the implementation of inclusive education. Thus, identifying factors affecting in-service

teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of learners with additional needs is critical for its success [1]. Teacher education is becoming more important for training in-service teachers to be positive and receptive toward inclusive practices of learners with additional needs [2,3]. Among other factors research Beacham and Rouse [4] suggests that in-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion for learners with additional needs are negative. Learners with additional needs are increasingly being placed in inclusive education settings to educate them in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), where they can improve social integration by interacting with peers. Previous research [3] suggests that many teachers are still not prepared to teach learners with additional needs in general education classes and they lack sufficient knowledge about learners with various learning difficulties [5]. Given the importance of in-service teachers' beliefs, values and attitudes toward inclusion, conversely, some researchers Bornman and Rose, have investigated potential factors that influence inclusivity. Studies [3, 6,7] that looked at what influences teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusive education found some factors to be: taking a special education course, teaching and working experience with learners with additional needs, frequency of contact with these learners, and formal training in inclusive education. However, relatively few studies specifically focused on in-service teachers' attitudes toward learners with additional needs.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to add evidence-based information on the in-service teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with additional needs to uniquely contribute to the literature in this field. Therefore, the present study focused on this important area. In this regard, it is important to consider first, the background to inclusive education in South Africa. Secondly, a brief literature review and theoretical frameworks on teacher attitudes, towards inclusion, and thirdly, the in-service teachers' field experience of inclusion in South African schools.

The education system in South Africa has undergone a far-reaching policy change since the dawn of democracy more than two decades ago [8]. Before 1994, the South African education system was based on racial segregation as well as disability. Because of this, a great number of children with impairments were unable to access public education [9]. In essence, such a practice was discriminatory against people with disabilities and a violation of children's rights as enshrined in the charter of the United Nations Organisation. On its formation, the new democratic dispensation sought to alter the situation by announcing major education policy changes by, among other things, making education accessible to all learners irrespective of impairments. In other words, education became inclusive for all learners in the country.

In July 2001, the Education White Paper 6, titled Building an inclusive education and training system, was established [10]. The policy succinctly outlines the framework for inclusive education in the country. Consequently, the policy on inclusive education became official within the South African education landscape. The policy was to take effect in some schools on an initial basis as a pilot study. However, it is now being adopted in all schools and teachers are being trained on the question of inclusivity for purposes of thorough and successful implementation.

Additionally, the policy is designed to help teachers to handle barriers to learning as well as enabling them to respond to a range of learning needs in the classroom. Section 29 of the Constitution of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, comprises the Bill of Rights, which, also affirms that everyone has the right to basic education; and the State is obliged to make education progressively available and accessible to all. This Constitutional provision includes

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learners who experience barriers to learning because of a disability. After all, Section 9 of the Constitution prohibits unfair discrimination based on, amongst other things, disability. However, one of the challenges that the democratic state faces is the dire need to capacitate more teachers in the knowledge of different learners with additional needs. Dalton, Mackenzie and Kahande conclude in their study that teachers struggle to handle learners with additional needs.

In 2014, the DBE introduced a policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) for learners who experience barriers to learning. The policy supports the implementation of the main principles of Education White Paper 6 [10].

However, despite this strong evidence of the South African government's commitment to the agenda of inclusive education, a large number of learners continue to be excluded from mainstream schools. Teachers seem to be either reluctant or unwilling to address this desperate need of children who are dropout of school. They report their challenges as lack of proper training at college or university, lack of professional teacher development programmes, poor classroom management, amongst others [4].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We used the Associative Propositional Evaluation (APE) theoretical framework, which was developed by Gawronski and Bodenhausen[11] to describe the teachers' attitudes. The APE model distinguishes between two evaluations, the associative evaluations, which include implicit attitudes or automatic emotive reactions and the propositional evaluations, explicit attitudes, also referred to as evaluative judgments [11].

The model avers that change in explicit measures is greater than implicit measures when novel evaluative associations are developed and old associations are disallowed. On the other hand, the implicit measures are greater than explicit when newly formed evaluative associations are rejected [12]. However, when the two evaluations clash, implicit contradictions occur. In this way, attitudes are built or accepted toward a new initiative, such as accommodating learners with additional needs. The model was useful in providing a framework for looking into the teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with additional needs.

Without going into finer details into the operation of the model, we adopted it as a framework to describe how teachers' implicit attitudes affect their acceptance of learners with additional needs. For example, the positive evaluations in Table 1 may be that teachers were in the automatic mode, which might have not considered the external factors and thus did not consider the propositional evaluations. This was identified by their reactions in Figure 1, where they did not even know what resources were enablers of the implementation of inclusive education. Several studies have investigated explicit attitudes of different stakeholders in an educational system towards the inclusion of learners with additional needs into mainstream schools [4,13-15].

Figure 1. Statement about attitudes I am familiar with the resources that learners with disabilities need in order to learn.
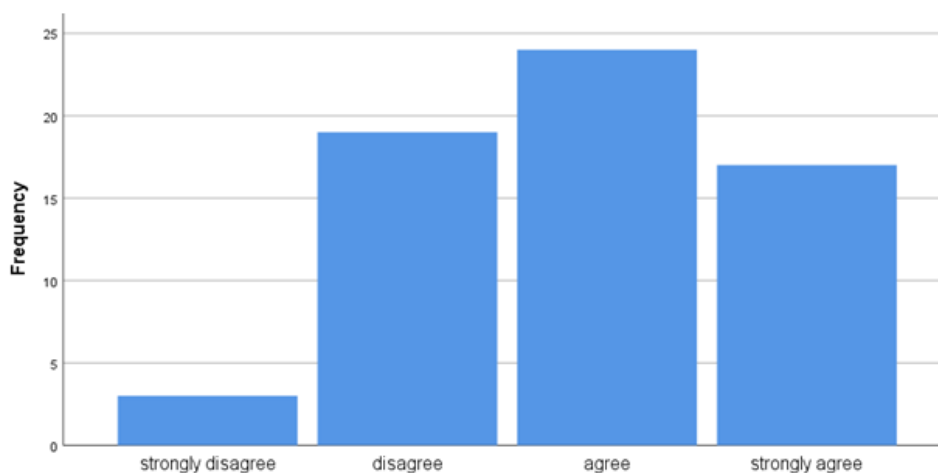
While such research generally indicates positive and explicit attitudes toward the general philosophy of inclusive education, teachers expressed neutral to negative attitudes when asked directly about the inclusion of learners with additional needs in their classrooms [2]. The APE model describes this neutrality as an ambivalent state; where there is a clash between the implicit and the explicit attitudes.

To understand why teachers' attitudes appear positive to teachers when there is an outcry that its implementation is slow needed an investigation, especially among in-service teachers who come from mainstream schools. Our study regarded such knowledge as important to have because of the assertion that attitudes are the best predictors of behavioural intentions [16]. In the next section, we turn our attention to teachers' experiences of inclusive education.

In-service teachers' experiences of inclusive education

Studies on in-service teachers' experiences of inclusive education abound [17,18]. These studies cover a wide range of issues, which include teachers' self-efficacy in teaching within inclusive classrooms. For example, in Beijing about 400 in-service teachers were examined through a questionnaire containing a Teacher Efficacy for Inclusion Practices (TEIP), to establish the relationship between self-efficacy for inclusion practices, their background factors and attitude towards inclusion. The study found that three factors, namely: teacher self-efficacy, collaboration and long experience in teaching learners with disabilities were the strongest predictors of teachers' attitudes towards inclusive practices.

In Japan, a study by Yada and Savolainen [18] on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and self-efficacy was conducted. A total of 359 in-service teachers revealed that teachers' sentiments toward disabilities were

generally positive. However, the majority of teachers had some concerns about practicing inclusive education in their classrooms due to several factors, such as lack of training, and resources, amongst others.

In South Africa, not much is known about the teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education [19-21]. A few studies that exist in this area are old and scattered, thus unable to provide useful insights in developing teacher education. However, more critically is that these studies did not focus on the teachers' attitudes. The only study in South Africa that looked at this topic is that of Savolainen, et al. [17]. However, this was a comparative study of in-service teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices in South Africa and Finland. Therefore, this study is for policymakers, education planners and researchers in the field.

Although this is such an important area, especially for South Africa given its obnoxious past policies of exclusion, limited studies have been conducted on teachers' attitudes. To date, most empirical studies on inclusive education have not thoroughly investigated this topic. Most have been conducted on other topics such as the readiness of in-service in full-service schools to implement inclusive education [22], teachers' understanding of inclusive education [23], an understanding of the interaction between policy and implementation of inclusive education [24] and assisting Foundation Phase teachers to implement inclusive education [25].

Therefore, it is important to investigate this area for at least two reasons. Firstly, at an international level studies examining attitudes and similar constructs within an international framework may shed light on the role of context-specific factors, which may be valuable for teacher trainers and policymakers. Secondly, if it is found that in-service teachers hold positive attitudes towards inclusive education it may allow, sustain and encourage practices that will guarantee, to a certain extent, successful inclusion of all learners regardless of their diversity [26]. To this end, we sought to answer the following research question: What are the in-service teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with additional needs in mainstream schools in South Africa?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design and sampling

We followed a mixed methods design with convergent and explanatory sequential components [27]. In so doing, we hoped that the mixed design would give us an impetus to engage in an ongoing critical reflection, negotiation and verification factors that underpin the teachers' attitudes. We felt that while a survey design would give us a window to gaze into the teachers' views, qualitative data would enable us to produce a range of complementary data and measurement that has the credibility and trustworthiness to capture the complexity of the teachers' attitudes.

Sixtythree (63) teachers were randomly selected from a population of 100 in-service teachers from the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education. The teachers were recruited from five districts: Capricorn, Mopani, Sekhukhune, Vhembe and Waterberg) in the Province by the Department. They came from different schools (full-service schools, piloting schools and special schools). The purpose was to train them for inclusive education, through a Short Course in Inclusive Education at the University of Limpopo.

Data collection

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Data was collected through a closed-ended questionnaire (part one) and an open-ended questionnaire (part two), which was adopted from the Teaching for All Evaluation and Monitoring Study (2019). In part one, the teachers were expected to express their views on seven statements about attitudes on a four-point scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree).

The statements were as follows: a) I feel it is important to create inclusive classrooms, b) I feel that it is important to use diverse teaching methods to accommodate learners who experience barriers to learning, c) I feel it is important to work with other teachers to make my teaching more inclusive, d) Teaching learners with disabilities is rewarding, e) I have high expectations and aspirations for all learners, f) In my teaching, I will deal with difficulties/ sensitive issues such as racism, and g) I am familiar with the resources that learners with disabilities need in order to learn.

In part two, the teachers were expected to express their views on a scenario (by answering two questions) reflecting inclusive education practices through writing on the questionnaire booklet provided. The scenario presented a story of an 11-year-old girl (Grade 4) whose parents were HIV positive and later divorced. Apparently, their separation affected her schoolwork and as such, teachers shunned her. Consequently, she was distressed and withdrawn and often neglected her hygiene.

The teachers were asked to respond to the following two questions: 1) which policies or a set of guidelines would you turn to, to help the learner? 2) Which approaches (in the classroom and the school at large) would you use to address this problem to address her problems?

Procedures of data collection

Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the Turf loop Research Ethics Committee (TREC/84/2019: IR). The nature and the purpose of the study were explained to teachers. Further, we also clarified that those who did not want to participant in the study were free not to do so. Consent for participation was then obtained from teachers.

The questionnaire was administered before any teaching could commence. This was meant to establish where they were before they could receive new information on inclusive education.

Data analysis

Data was analysed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) V.22 for descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation) for frequencies. The open-ended question was analysed through NViVo 12, where themes and categories were generated.

RESULTS

Results from closed-questionnaire

Table 1 below presents frequencies on statements about attitude.

Table 1. frequencies on statements about attitudes.

Statement	Frequencies %			
	SA	A	D	SD

a) I feel it is important to create inclusive classrooms	68.3	28.6	1.6	1.6
b) I feel that it is important to use diverse teaching methods to accommodate learners who experience barriers to learning	69.8	30.2	00	00
c) I feel it is important to work with other teachers to make my teaching more inclusive	68.3	30.2	00	1.6
d) Teaching learners with disabilities is rewarding	57.1	38.1	4.8	00
e) I have high expectations and aspirations for all learners	55.6	44.4	00	00
f) In my teaching, I will deal with difficulties/ sensitive issues such as racism	44.4	39.7	12.7	00
g) I am familiar with the resources that learners with disabilities need in order to learn.	27.0	38.1	30.2	4.8

Results from the open-ended questionnaire

We followed advice in processing the answers from the open-ended questionnaire by using two questions: How would you go about addressing a learner who experiences social problems at school and in answering the question show what legislative frameworks, policies and guidelines would you use to help her? This question was meant to evaluate the teachers' understanding of the legislative and policy framework that underpin inclusive education. From the analysis of this question, we came up with themes: a) the use of a legislative framework, b) the use of professionals in schools, c) awareness campaigns. Hereunder, we give a synopsis of each of these themes.

Finding 1: The utilisation of policies, guidelines, and policy frameworks

The results show that in general the teachers were aware of the availability of policies, guidelines and policy frameworks that could be used by the government. Of all the policies, the SIAS was the most cited. One respondent had the following to say:

"According to White Paper No.6, all learners are able to learn irrespective of any barrier. SIAS is there to assist in the screening, identify, assess and support. if we can apply all the policies as prescribed all learners will achieve their best. ISP- Individual support programme should be in place and be recorded to follow up an individual progress of the learner by all stakeholders including parents.''

Another said the following:

According to White Paper No.6 all learners are able to learn irrespective of any barrier. SIAS is there to assist in the screening, identify, assess and support. If we can apply all the policies as prescribed all learners will achieve their best. ISP- Individual Support Programme should be in place and be recorded to follow up an individual progress of the learner by all stakeholders including parents". This is the same as what was said by the first respondent; write what the second respondent said.

Finding 2: The use of professionals in schools

The teachers showed acumen in partnerships and collaborations between and among teachers in the implementation of inclusive education in schools. They indicated that inclusion could be strengthened by having professionals such as social workers, and psychologists within the schooling environment. They hinted that such professionals could be useful in a situation where a learner experiences social problems. For example, they could offer mental health support and help deal with issues such her HIV/AIDS. On this, one teacher had the following comment to say about the scenario of Buliswa:

"Her teachers only conclude that she has intellectual problems without trying to look at the strategies that can assist her to become a fully-fledged, responsible, acceptable adult in the society. Buliswa's problem of being stressful and loneliness needs intervention by her teachers, social workers, psychologists, specialists, health practitioners"

Finding 3: Awareness campaign about personal hygiene

Teachers across primary schools often give concern about the lack of hygiene in their learners [28]. In this case, Buliswa's is one of them. In this regard, the respondent noted that she often neglects her hygiene and, as teachers is their duty to educate learners of both genders about the need to take care of themselves and their well-being, they said that:

"Buliswa's needs to be guided and molded to appropriate path in life. Moreover, the problem of neglecting personal hygiene, her parents are solely responsible to teach her the good hygiene practices from childhood, her teachers are responsible to show her that, she needs to be clean at all times."

From the analysis of the second question: How would you go about trying to address this situation in your classroom? In your response please include any teaching materials or teaching approaches you would use in your lesson for this, we came up with three themes as well: a) the use of teaching aids in the class, b) curriculum differentiation and c) the use of group work.

Finding 4: The use of teaching aids in the class

Research has shown that the use of teaching aids such as videos and pictures have a positive effect on the cognitive development in young kids, as Buliswa's is still in Grade 4 her teachers advocate for more usage of visual media especially when tackling social issues within the curriculum content. They alluded to that by saying:

"Learners like television a lot, I will bring in a television set in class with more interesting visuals that include social activities."

Finding 5: Curriculum differentiation

Curriculum differentiation is a strategy that is used by teachers in inclusive education to teach in a diverse classroom that consists of even learners with additional learning need so that they don't get left behind, with the view that Buliswa's has reading and writing difficulties. Such a strategy can be beneficial to her and the whole class a, teachers perpetuated this by saying:

"Regarding her Intellectual challenges (reading and writing) –teachers to need differentiation in our teaching and assessing that learner"

Finding 6: Using group work learning

Group work is an educational model that promotes learning and socialization among learners. Studies have shown that learners also benefit from working together in group activities as it fosters peer learning. Teachers have used group work to get students to actively participate and engage in their groups as within that group work they are allocated roles to fulfil. The allocation of roles makes learners take charge of the activity and feel responsible for their role within the group. Teachers alluded to this by saying: *"Introduce group discussions where every learner has a role to play in a group and let them rotate on their roles."*

DISCUSSION

We examined the in-service teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with additional needs in mainstream schools. The use of a mixed methods research approach provided us with a reasonable evaluation of their attitudes on the inclusion of these learners in mainstream schools. Although we were cognisant of the limitations as we highlighted in the previous section, we were nevertheless convinced that the two methods we used to collect data provided us with a compelling snapshot of the attitudes that these teachers might hold concerning educating learners with exceptionalities. We used the APE to describe and interpret. Our overall finding is that teachers were both willing and ready to include and support with additional needs in their classrooms. However, similar to previous findings, these teachers tended to hold idealistic positive beliefs and attitudes which were not based on practical experience. Our assertion is based on the fact that in Figure 1 they seemed uncertain about the resources that learners with disabilities need to learn. According to the APE model, there was a split between the implicit evaluations and explicit evaluations on the support that these learners should receive.

But, the positive attitudes could be attributed to two explicit factors. One, the fact that they were recruited based on them being responsible for inclusive education in the schools or by working in special or full-service schools might have influenced their evaluation of the statements on attitudes, For example, teachers who might have had positive experiences at special schools could have influenced the results. These formed a big section of the teachers [28]. Also, it is important to observe that positive attitudes towards inclusion seem to have fuelled them to a willingness to adapt programming and work more flexibly with learners to meet their needs. Finding one could also be explained by this implicit factor.

In addition, our findings suggest that the teachers' positive attitudes might be linked to their profile, such as their teaching qualifications (elementary and secondary) and accordingly, the ages/grades of learners whom they taught. In our data, we had only two teachers who taught at secondary schools. The rest were based at the primary school level. Of interest also is the fact that of the 63 teachers only 12 were males. We think that this profile of the sample might explain the positive attitudes of teachers toward the inclusion of learners with additional needs. Notably, the survey results, on item (d) reflected (57.1%) on strongly agreed that teaching learners with disabilities was a rewarding experience. Here the teachers expressed an implicit positive evaluation, but this was mitigated by the realities of the unavailability of resources. Others studies [29] have identified this gap between positive attitudes and practices.

Finally, on findings 4, 5, and 6 indicate that in-service teachers were implicitly positive about the ability to provide differentiated instruction to accommodate diversity in their classrooms. Remarkably, as supported by our findings, earlier studies also elucidate that when teachers' attitudes are positive they become resilient and become agents of change.

These findings have at least three implications. One, these positive attitudes, although there have been drawn from a small sample that cannot be generalised to a wider population should serve as motivation to those of us who are campaigning for the inclusive education agenda. Two, since implicit measures of change are greater than the explicit measures when a new initiative is rejected; teacher education institutions intensify their training programmes for both pre-service and in-service teac hers. Three, traditional models of attitude change should be replaced by approaches that promote sustained engagement with the teachers if the change is to happen. Therefore, hit-and-run approaches such as weekend workshops are unlikely to equip teachers with the requisite skills to implement new initiatives.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we argued that providing in-service teachers with training in inclusive education is critical for its successful implementation. However, such training may not be successful if teachers' attitudes are negative toward the inclusion of learners with additional needs. It was, therefore, important to investigate in-service teachers 'attitudes toward the inclusion of learners with additional needs. We have argued that while such information is important for the successful implementation of inclusive education, in South Africa few studies that have looked into in-service teachers' attitudes towards learners with additional needs exist. The gap becomes even wider when it comes to rural areas like Limpopo Province. Our finding is that while there is a popular belief that teachers are generally negative toward the inclusion of these learners, it was not so.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study had its own limitation such as being conducted in one province (Limpopo), which could be addressed in future research. Another example of the study limitation, we have currently not varied the teachers according to the types of schools from which they came from some in-service teachers came from full-service schools, others from special schools, others from regular schools). Varying the schoolteachers according to type could provide a better understanding of their self-efficacy. Future research could investigate attitudes toward other groups of teachers from full-service schools, to see to what extent they could respond to the questions asked. Furthermore, although the theoretical frameworks' underlying this research specifies attitude behaviour links, (intended) behaviour was not assessed in this study. The recruitment of participants by the government officials might have introduced bias because these teachers were recruited on the basis that they were responsible for the inclusive education programme in their schools. This may have led to a relatively high-conscientious group about inclusive education. This might have affected the results.

Another factor that might have contributed to results is involving participants from both of the Foundation, Intermediate and Further Education Training Phases. This might have led to the mixed feelings that we see in the

results. In addition, future research could also include other demographic characteristics gender, age and place to gain a better understanding of the role of socio-demographic characteristics play on beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, in future it might be interesting to consider both the quantity and quality of interactions with learners with varied barriers to learning, such as those with hearing and visual impairment to provide a new vista in the developmental of differential attitudes. Finally, variances between attitudes toward inclusion and attitudes toward learners who experience barriers to learning raise the question; or as to what extent social norms concerning inclusion are actively transferred to different areas of society. While research has been uniform in reporting people's acceptance of the mission to create equitable and inclusive communities. There have been far fewer publications that document the active production of such communities. Only when people actively engage with the practical implications of inclusion, an educational system and a society for all can be created. In this regard, future research could explore the different ways in which people's understanding of inclusion affects their attitudes.

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