Journal of Education, 2022
Issue 86, http://journals.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/joe doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i86a05

Conceptualising a framework for school leaders as they foster an inclusive education culture in schools

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(Received: 29 August 2021; accepted: 14 February 2022)

Abstract

The need to identify and address South African school leaders' challenges in developing an inclusive education culture frames the purpose of this study. A qualitative methodology using a multiple case study design in three secondary schools was employed. Data collection ensued through focus group interviews with school management teams (SMTs) and teachers. The findings highlight areas that both challenge and overwhelm SMTs. These areas include the inadequate implementation of the screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS) policy, the need for parent support for inclusivity, and inclusive pedagogy limitations. Furthermore, there is a need for human and financial resources to support inclusive education. The study proposes a framework that clarifies the role of the SMT in facilitating inclusivity. The framework posits the need for visionary, strategic, and social justice leadership, focuses on ways to transform the school culture, and offers practical guidance for translating the SIAS policy into practice.

Keywords: inclusive education, inclusivity, school management teams, school leaders, screening identification assessment and support policy, school-based support team

Introduction

Inclusive education was introduced into South African schools in 2001 through Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education [DoE], 2001), which provided a framework for an inclusive education system. The ideal of inclusive education is that all learners, irrespective

of their physical disabilities or learning barriers receive access to schooling (South African Human Rights Commission, 2018), and that their learning needs be provided for in mainstream schools (Engelbrecht et al., 2015a). At the forefront of White Paper 6 was the need to promote equity, human rights, and social justice in South African schooling (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2010). Social justice is underpinned by values of "respect, care, recognition and empathy" and draws attention to the experiences of marginalised groups and forms of discrimination in education (Furman, 2012, p. 194). Social justice leadership requires "ongoing actions, skills, habits of mind, and competencies" (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014, p. 847) that seek to eradicate all forms of exclusion in education. School management ought to adopt inclusion as a social justice paradigm and strive to remove all forms of learning barriers—decreasing fear, prejudice, and rejection, and encouraging tolerance among individuals (Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021).

South Africa, in particular, faced difficulties in moving to an inclusive education system, which necessitated reforms to address the needs of all learners (Meltz et al., 2014). Despite efforts to conceptualise the idea of inclusive pedagogy (Makoelle & van der Merwe, 2014), research in school leadership and management largely points to numerous challenges that school management teams (SMTs) encounter in implementing inclusive education. SMTs comprise the principal, deputy principals, and departmental heads (DHs) in schools. A challenge is that SMTs lack skills and knowledge of inclusive education policy, resulting in implementation challenges for teachers (Mkhuma et al., 2014). Furthermore, Kanjere and Mafumo (2017) asserted that SMTs are confronted with the problem of adapting to inclusive education curricula to meet a range of diverse learner needs. Similarly, Naicker (2006, p. 5) pointed out the need for a refined curriculum because it is "the traditional curriculum that alienated learners from mainstream classes." Kanjere and Mafumo's (2017) study revealed that SMTs lack definite policies and systems for training teachers to implement inclusive education, and emphasise the importance of training school principals to manage inclusive education. Kgothule and Hay (2013, p. 33) found that SMTs can play a greater role in "changing teachers' perceptions regarding inclusion," a notion supported by Makoelle (2014), who postulated that a mindset change is essential to creating an inclusive education culture. Various contextual issues exacerbate the quest for truly inclusive schooling such as overcrowded classrooms and a lack of comprehensive educational resources (Marais, 2016). In addition, many schools have insufficient basic infrastructure and inadequate service provision, which increase the burden that SMTs have to contend with (Engelbrecht et al., 2015b). Heeralal and Jama (2014) maintained that, without adequate resources, SMTs are hindered from fulfilling their mandate to implement inclusive education policies.

In view of the pressing difficulties faced by SMTs concerning the implementation of inclusive education, this research sought to contribute to knowledge in the field of inclusive education from the perspective of education leadership. The purpose of our study was thus twofold: firstly, to ascertain the prevailing and/or new challenges that SMTs face regarding the implementation of inclusive education and secondly, to propose a way forward for school leaders on the path towards an inclusive school culture.

Conceptual perspectives

Inclusive education from a social justice perspective

This study used social justice as a theoretical framework. The practice of social justice requires the provision of equal rights and opportunities for everyone in any organisation. Fraser's (1998, 2009) social justice theory focused on the applicability and utility of a three-dimensional approach emphasising redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural), and representation (political). Fraser (2009, p. 1) emphasised that social justice is increasingly split into redistributive demands seeking a more equitable allocation of resources and income, and a "politics of recognition." She explained a justice theory based on "parity of participation," which "needs social arrangements that allow all members of society to interact with one another as peers" (Fraser, 2009, p. 5). Social justice has one of its foundations rooted in "educational disciplines like curriculum and pedagogy" (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 3). Thus, social justice education integrates aspects of "democratic education, critical pedagogy, critical multicultural education, and culturally responsive education" (Dover, 2013, p. 6). Striving toward social justice requires an ongoing struggle to share knowledge and resources equitably. Moreover, social justice development for educational leaders may be organised around a set of "principles that include acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions" required to understand social justice, human rights, and the implications for schools (Furman, 2012, p. 199).

Inclusive education as a human rights priority

Adopting inclusion as an operational vision at both the school and individual levels necessitates the integration of inclusive education as a mindset of how schools as a unit remove learning barriers and value all members of the school community (Carter & Abawi, 2018). As a concept, inclusive education entails improving schools by modifying instructional materials, policies, procedures, and strategies to address learning problems experienced by learners who encounter barriers to learning (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2009). In this research, inclusive education is seen as a basis for learning focused on human rights principles and social justice for all learners. Moreover, inclusivity can be perceived as part of a larger fight toward human rights violations and the effort to ensure that social justice prevails in education (du Plessis, 2013). Participation, social cohesion and redress of historical injustices, equal and equitable access to schooling, collective responsiveness, and cost-effectiveness are the core sets for inclusion (DBE, 2010). Inclusive education encourages equality and necessitates that the range of curriculum delivery is broad enough to meet the needs and requirements of every learner in society (Murungi, 2015). Moreover, aligned with social justice and equality, inclusive education promotes the notion that learners with a range of learning barriers should be accommodated in public classrooms (Lampen, 2014). Furthermore, inclusive education acknowledges the rights of all learners to attend school in regular classrooms with peers of the same age (McConkey, 2014).

School leadership and inclusive education

School leaders are gatekeepers for change (Fullan, 2014). Thus, their leadership effectiveness is pivotal in moving towards an inclusive education culture (Gill, 2003). School leaders play a role in promoting inclusion, addressing diversity, and embracing multiculturalism (Cherkowski, 2010). Leaders with a commitment to inclusive values are likely to foster inclusive school cultures (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). Leadership is an influence process (Bounds et al., 2013). Thus, changing attitudes of staff towards the new paradigm of inclusivity is necessary (Gill, 2003) and, perhaps, an important first step.

School leaders worldwide and in South Africa, are being held accountable for learner performance. Thus, leading for inclusivity towards the improvement of learning outcomes (de Villiers & Pretorius, 2011; McGlynn & London, 2013; Setlhodi-Mohapi & Lebeloane, 2014) raises an interesting challenge for school leadership. Pertaining to this challenge, the DoE (2001, p. 49) contended that leading inclusive education would require new conceptualisations of "curriculum development, assessment, and instructional development programmes." South African school leaders require greater knowledge and skills in addressing learning barriers (Motitswe, 2014) and how they can lead cultural change pertaining to inclusivity in their organisations (Kgothule & Hay, 2013). Improving the implementation of inclusive education requires support structures and resources (Motitswe, 2014).

Transformative leadership strives for "equitable change" in society, and is relevant for education leaders who possess the agency to create "inclusive, respectful, and equitable" school cultures (Shields & Hesbol, 2019, p. 3). Leaders should align the school vision to inclusivity and diversity to address inequalities in their own schools (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Portela (2011) made the important point that diversity must first be understood in order to understand inclusivity. A thorough conceptualisation and awareness of diversity is required in school leadership and management practice (Rayner, 2009). Issues of diversity encompass but are not limited to religion, culture, language, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, belief, and sexual orientation. Msila (2008) proposed the concept of ubuntu, which school leaders can use as a frame to scaffold inclusivity in schools. Ubuntu is an African concept that espouses "compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and humanity" (Letseka, 2014, p. 547).

With regard to inclusive education, SMTs must make "all efforts to address school policies, improvement plans, programmes, and ethos" so that they reflect inclusive practices (DBE, 2010, p. 13). The main policy for the implementation of inclusive education in schools is the screening, identification, assessment, and support policy (SIAS), which provides "a framework for the standardisation of the procedures" for inclusion (DBE, 2014, p. 11). SMTs are expected to take the lead in SIAS policy implementation, which requires specific competencies at different levels of authority within the system. SMTs ought to ensure that learning programmes, resources, and assessment procedures accommodate learners with diverse learning needs (DBE, 2014). The SIAS policy framework stipulates that SMTs should ensure that school-based support teams (SBSTs) are set up to implement inclusive education

in schools (DBE, 2014). Furthermore, SMTs must ensure that SBSTs are functional, and that they coordinate learning interventions for learners experiencing difficulties (DBE, 2010). Teacher development is a responsibility of SMTs, which ensures effective inclusive teaching and learning in schools (Bush et al., 2010). For example, information communication technology has been introduced to enhance teaching and learning in South African schools. SMTs should ensure that the process of inclusion is incorporated in discussions during staff meetings (Kgothule & Hay, 2013). Kgwete (2014) maintained that SMTs hold the capacity to inspire, motivate, build teams, resolve conflict, and enable others to contribute toward the school's effectiveness and success.

Inclusive school culture as a support strategy

Culture has been described as "the driving principles and values apparent in school operations," which play a role in promoting change, shared decision-making, and learning (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 13). An inclusive education culture adheres to an ideology of acceptance in which all learners are accepted and regarded with dignity (Gillies & Carrington, 2004). Moreover, a culture of inclusion in a school observes the norms, principles, and values that provide teachers with a sense of stability in the face of change brought on by learners, parents, and shifts in school communities. An inclusive ethos requires listening to and motivating all school stakeholders so that both real and perceived exclusion prejudices are identified and dismantled (Gillies & Carrington, 2004). An inclusive education culture aims to support learners, especially those who face learning challenges, by improving learning outcomes, social skills, academic performance, and personal growth (Wang, 2009). Moreover, Wang (2009) contended that an inclusive culture would improve the academic performance of learners with developmental disabilities as they engage with their peers in mainstream classrooms. In an inclusive school culture, learners of the same age, no matter their diversity, are brought together in the same learning environment and classroom. Thus, SMTs ought to examine their management strategies, curriculum provisions, and pedagogical practices in order to turn schools toward inclusivity (Gillies & Carrington, 2004).

Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was employed, underpinned by a social constructivist paradigm. Qualitative research is concerned with "the studied use and collection" of personal experiences that describe moments and meanings in people's lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). Constructivism places emphasis on "the subjective human creation of meaning" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545), which enables an understanding of the reality of SMTs in their school contexts. A multiple case study design using three secondary schools from various settings allowed us to explore the research phenomenon in each setting to obtain a more comprehensive understanding (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, the use of multiple case studies enabled data comparison across sites to fully explore the topic under investigation (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Data were gathered through six focus group interviews: three with SMT members and three with teachers. The SMT focus group at each school comprised eight SMT participants and included the principal, two deputy principals, and five DHs. The teachers'

focus group comprised six participants from each school who were members of the SBST. There were no specific gender requirements for this research given that the sample was formed by the SMT and SBST members. However, for biographical information, the sample consisted of 11 male and 13 female SMT members and six male and 12 female teachers. In total, there were 42 participants in this research. Focus group interviews in a qualitative research rely on the "interaction of participants led by the interview topics addressed throughout the interview" (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). Thematic data analysis (Creswell, 2012) was employed to analyse the data. Data were coded, codes were clustered into categories, interpreted, and themes were formulated (Maree, 2010). Each case was first analysed independently. Thereafter, the data were analysed across cases. Four measures of trustworthiness were applied. Credibility was applied by the rigorous analysis of the data (McMillan, 2000), transferability by the use of rich descriptions from the data (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), dependability by reporting the research processes thoroughly, and confirmability by minimising researcher bias (Shenton, 2004). Ethical considerations such as protecting the instructional time of schools and obtaining informed consent from participants were addressed. Confidentiality, anonymity, and protection from harm were respected and applied (Babbie, 2010). Permission from the education department and relevant school district ensued in order to execute the research. The following section presents a discussion of the case contexts.

Case contexts

School A is a township school characterised by areas rife with poverty, crime, and violence. The school is a no-fee-paying school that is financially subsidised by the DBE. Learners receive stationery, are loaned textbooks, and provided with free nutrition. The school has consistently produced good academic results. School B is located in a semi-rural industrial region. The majority of learners come from low-income families. There is also a paucity of resources, which may impede effective teaching and learning. However, the school's performance has regularly surpassed the district target throughout the years. School C is a mixed-race, former Model C school that serves learners from its surroundings including the nearby townships. This school is a fee-paying public school, which is partially subsidised by the DBE and receives donations from private businesses and local organisations. Despite having more resources than other schools, the school performs on par with underprivileged schools—which is not what was envisioned.

Findings

The data from each case were first analysed. Thereafter, findings across the cases were analysed. Due to the limitations on length, the research findings presented emanate from establishing comparisons across the three cases.

SMTs' understandings of the concept of inclusive education

The findings revealed disparities in meanings towards the concept of inclusive education. For instance, during the focus group discussion it emerged that participants in School A were confused—limiting the concept of inclusion to physical disability or complex special educational needs (SEN). One SMT member (principal) explained:

> We are not inclusive because the learners that we have here, most, actually all of them don't have the disabilities that anyone can see.

Another SMT member (DH), stated:

> I don't think we know the difference between inclusive and special schools.

Similarly, an SMT member (DH) at School C expected learners with severe handicaps at their school to render the school completely inclusive, stating:

> I think we are partially inclusive. We have quite a few learners with learning problems. But we don't have learners, like, with severe physical handicaps.

Another SMT member at School C (DH) questioned:

> Who's supposed to be in LSEN School. Who are being brought to our school?

There was some evidence of recognition, differentiation, and curriculum adaptation in School B, demonstrating the implementation of core social justice principles. However, similar to Schools A and C, there were a few SMT members in School B who were of the misconception that inclusive education in a full-service school needed to cater for blind, dumb, and deaf learners. An SMT member (DH) from School B stated:

> I don't consider it [the school] to be inclusive. My reason is based on the infrastructure. For the physically handicapped, for the blind, the dumb, the deaf and the partially disabled.

Another SMT member (DH) added:

> Much as we meant to be more an inclusive school, but practically, sometimes not. But we do accommodate such learners [learners with physical disabilities].

South African learners with severe physical disabilities, for example blind and deaf learners, are required to attend special schools with access to high-intensity educational support programmes and services (DBE, 2014). On the other hand, a full-service school is inclusive when it accommodates a full range of learning needs with an emphasis on inclusive principles that include "flexibility in teaching and learning, and the provision of support to learners and teachers" (DBE, 2010, p. 1). It is concerning that SMT members do not fully understand the concept of inclusion and its application to schools in South Africa. Learners' equity, equality, and rights cannot be meaningfully addressed if inclusion is not well understood. Leadership

for social justice requires school leaders who have a "heightened sense of awareness of issues related to oppression, exclusion and marginalisation" (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014, p. 847). Social justice leadership requires leaders who strive to portray leadership that would create shared meanings around inclusion.

SMTs' understanding of their role in the implementation of the SIAS policy

There was evidence that SMT members in all three schools had not fully grasped the SIAS policy, or were confused about how it should be implemented. However, at School B, it was evident that all the SMT members demonstrated insufficient knowledge of the SIAS policy:

> But we then haven't familiarised with the document. (DH)
>
> Maybe we know it [SIAS policy] at a superficial level. (Another DH)
>
> The policy on SIAS . . . I'm totally lost. (Teacher)

What was more concerning in the latter case is that the teacher was a member of School B's SBST and, as such, ought to be well versed with the SIAS policy.

At School A, a narrow understanding of the SIAS policy emerged when three SMT members (DHs) were vocal about SIAS in terms of referral forms, thus missing its essence. For instance, one DH remarked, when asked about the SIAS policy:

> There are forms I think from the district office that assist us, what we need to do when we want to help these learners. So, yeah. That's the only thing I am aware of.

Furthermore, limited awareness of the SIAS policy became evident when another DH exhibited confusion about the role of the SMT and the SBST, stating:

> Our role is not different. All SMT members are SBST members. Yes. Because whatever problem that has been identified by the educator, it will be referred to the SMT. And then the SMT needs to attend to that problem.

A third DH in School A demonstrated unawareness of the function of the SBST as per the SIAS policy. This DH commented that educators report problems to the SMT who then approach the Learner Teacher Support Material (LTSM) committee or, alternatively, an educator could go the route of reporting learning barriers to the principal who would then consult the DH.

There was evidence from four SMT members at School C that revealed a blurring of the SBST and SMT's role. For instance, SMT members often took the lead in addressing learner needs rather than the SBST members. One member (DH) explained:

> We are part of the SBST. So, if there's for instance, if there is a Grade 11 learner that people are worried about, then they will come to me.

Another member (deputy principal) revealed:

> Even though we are an SMT, we also do this school-based support. We read, we write, we also jump in and do it.

The findings at School C coincided with those at School B: that the SMT members generally were not fully aware of the SIAS policy. An SMT member (DH) asserted

> Ma'm, I don't know if we've used the SIAS policy because I don't know the policy off by heart.

It was interesting to note that at School C, the SIAS policy was not formally implemented, as an SMT member (DH) stated:

> See, I don't think we really implemented anything? The system adapted us. So, as the whole thing developed, we adapted all our staff to it. So, we didn't really go sit down and say, now we have to become inclusive.

The previous quote indicates that the SIAS policy was not carefully studied before being implemented nor has strategic planning for inclusive education taken place. The SIAS policy aimed to improve access to quality education by providing operational guidelines for schools "regarding the provision of support for those learners who experience barriers to learning" (DBE, 2014, p. 10). The purpose is to develop "a policy framework for the standardisation of the procedures to identify, assess, and provide programmes" enhancing learners' participation and inclusion in schools (DBE, 2014, p. 11). The SIAS policy is thus a tool that enables inclusive education to be implemented in practice. By means of correct implementation of the SIAS policy, social justice is promoted and "parity of participation" (Fraser, 2009, p. 5) is promoted.

In Schools A and B, teachers were vocal that that SMTs did not show interest in the SBST except when there were workshops to be attended. Furthermore, teachers expressed frustration about their ignorance of inclusive education policy. It appears that in School A, the SMT does not arrange for information sharing sessions after a teacher has attended workshops pertaining to inclusive education policy. A teacher asserted:

> I think seriously as a school we have a problem, because sometimes we do have an educator who goes for a training for such (SIAS) policies, but when they come back, they don't give us the information.

This view indicates poor leadership by SMTs in driving the inclusive education agenda and providing teachers with the necessary support. SMTs in this study lack the vision for promoting inclusive education. Social justice leadership compels SMTs to engage in processes that lead to inclusive practices and to promote the continuing development of socially just ways to meet the needs of all learners in every school. An earlier study by Kanjere and Mafumo (2017) revealed that SMTs do not have definite policies and systems in

place for training teachers to implement inclusive education. It appears that this situation prevails in schools such as Schools A and B in our study.

SMTs' progress in advocating and promoting an inclusive education culture

While the findings discussed thus far identify gaps that ought to be addressed, there were areas where SMTs have made progress in moving towards inclusivity. In Schools B and C, there was evidence that transformation towards non-discriminative attitudes had taken place. These two schools redressed historical societal injustices by openly admitting learners of all races, genders, disabilities, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic statuses. At School B, learners from poorer backgrounds were assisted with the purchasing of school uniforms, textbooks, haircuts, and sanitary items. Social justice is characterised as "supporting a process based on respect, care, recognition, and empathy," and it focuses on the experiences of marginalised groups and different types of discrimination in education (Furman, 2012, p. 194).

There was evidence that Schools B and C had embarked on intervention programmes to reduce social ills as well as improve learner performance. At School B, parents or guardians were consulted to support their children through various intervention strategies. Staff members initiated various intervention campaigns addressing, for example, drug abuse, police searches, and teenage pregnancy. There was a peer support programme as well as remedial classes. Teachers admitted that, although they had not reached their desired level of achieving an inclusive education culture, they were trying their best. At School C, there were interventions to address individual student needs, meetings to discuss learner problems, and an ethos of care. In contrast, there was an absence of inclusive intervention programmes in School A and teachers struggled with differentiated methods of teaching. While it was easier to identify the learning barriers, participants grappled with how to address these barriers. An SMT member (principal) in School A remarked:

> The only thing we can do is to identify. Learners that are progressed, we still teach them like any other learner. There's not special way of teaching them.

The challenges experienced by SMTs in implementing inclusive education

The findings identified some common challenges that SMTs in all three schools encountered, which hinder inclusive teaching and learning practices. An area of concern was that parents are hesitant to acknowledge that their children are struggling with learning. An SMT member (DH) at School A shared:

> The parents deny that their learners (children) are having learning barriers!

It further emerged that in all three cases, parents are not supportive in assisting their children. A teacher at School C expressed that:

> It is a joint effort. It doesn't help if teachers are there every day but the parents and the learners are not part of it.

At all three schools, participants expressed the need for support from school districts as well as social services. Participants wanted district officials to visit schools and engage about the challenges pertaining to inclusive education. An SMT member (DH) from School C was vocal about the lack of district support and asserted:

> Support, none. Criticise, a lot . . . but they [District] are never there to actually help you.

The need for specialists such as nurses and psychiatrists came up in School B, and SMT members in School A expressed the need for social workers and a psychologist. Teachers at School A were vocal about the need for specialised learning materials that could address barriers to learning. A teacher stated:

> There is no different material or no different person that you're going to take you through for that learner.

School C was fortunate to be able to fund a social worker but felt that there was a need for more specialist teachers to address learning barriers. An SMT member (DH) in School C elaborated that the expectations of teachers were too demanding as follows:

> The teacher is not only a teacher anymore. You should be the teacher, the doctor, and the whatever. That is problematic because the department expects from us to be everything. But we are specifically here teachers.

Across all three cases, it emerged that there was a need for better infrastructure to support inclusivity. Teachers pointed out that:

> If we are to implement inclusive education. We need to change some of the infrastructure here at school to cater for all the learners. (School B)

> Regarding our, the buildings of our schools, we've got all those learners with physical disabilities. So, it's very difficult for them to climb stairs. (School A)

> I think that's the problem, our school, we don't have enough space for everyone. So, we have teachers who don't have classrooms and they have to move around with the kids to other classrooms. (School C)

SMTs as leaders have the responsibility of ensuring a safe accepting environment in which learning can take place. Inclusive education is about creating a welcoming culture and ethos that accommodates the needs for all learners including those with physical disabilities.

A concern that emerged across all three cases was that SMT members and teachers do not have sufficient pedagogic skills to teach and include learners who are experiencing learning barriers. Hence, learners experiencing learning barriers are being taught in the same classroom as their competent peers, with no pedagogy differentiation. A teacher at School C expressed that they were not trained to address learning barriers:

> Then even teachers that's trained to work with learning disabilities to take an example, I mean I'm not trained to really deal with it! So, in a way it is really hit and run. But if we can get people at school that's trained to do it [assist to fast-track the learner].

A teacher at School A grappled with the notion of assessing learners with learning barriers. The teacher stated:

> The very questions that we say are easy, targeting those we feel have got barriers, we even give them to those that we feel are intelligent.

Another teacher found it difficult to teach physical education for the life orientation programme to learners who are physically disabled together with the rest of the class. A teacher at School B was of the view that training is necessary and remarked:

> Yeah. Because inclusive education, they just introduced it, and I had to adjust to it, without proper training.

The same teacher pointed out that the SMT members too, required training, highlighting that:

> They [SMT] must also be equipped, Ma'm. They cannot train, they cannot assist us if they also don't know much about this. So, they need to be trained thoroughly.

There is a need for pedagogical training for teachers so that they receive the knowledge and skills required for differential learning activities. Makoelle (2014, p. 1260) maintained that inclusive pedagogy should entail a "totality of teaching methods, approaches, forms, and principles" that enhance learner participation and respond to the individual needs of learners through differentiation strategies.

Towards a framework for SMTs to promote an inclusive education culture

Makoelle (2020) highlighted that for the successful implementation of any educational programme such as inclusive education, the correct social framework is typically necessary to establish an environment conducive to change. Moreover, education modifications aimed at achieving inclusive education necessitate various "systemic, structural changes, in theory, principles, and practices," and schools' reorganisation (Makoelle, 2020, p. 3). Thus, the findings of this research led to the synthesis of a framework emphasising three essential components required for SMTs to promote an inclusive culture. The framework is illustrated in Figure 1. Each of the three main components, namely "Leadership," "Fostering an inclusive education culture," and "SIAS policy implementation," has supporting elements that contribute to the fulfilment of the main component.

The leadership component of the framework has three supporting elements. The first, social justice leadership, which served as a theoretical lens, highlights that SMTs must advocate for

inclusive education as a means to promote an equitable society in striving for social justice. Social justice leadership ought to be represented in a school's vision, beliefs, and practices (Zhang et al., 2018). SMTs should recognise oppressive and unjust behaviours and utilise democratic methods to correct them by "reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights, equality, and fairness in social, economic, and educational contexts" (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014, p. 847). Bearing in mind the challenging contexts particularly of Schools A and B in this study, SMTs need to identify, investigate, and create solutions to socioeconomic disparities and other challenges affecting learning in their schools.

Figure 1

The school management team's role in managing an inclusive education culture (adapted from Ramango, 2021, p. 186)

The second element of leadership that is proposed in the framework is visionary leadership. Such leaders may formulate and communicate "distinct visions that provide meaning and purpose to an organization's work" (Taylor et al., 2014, p. 567). Thus, the second element emphasises that it is necessary for SMTs to promote the vision of inclusive education by establishing clear goals aimed at fostering inclusive school cultures. Visionary leaders consider what is best for the entire school, including its staff, learners, and parents. SMTs should be dedicated to driving change processes to achieve the school's envisioned inclusive education goals. Moreover, SMTs can strive to establish internal and external relationships through a shared vision, with the hope of mutual acceptance and advancement of that vision by others for the benefit of the school (Roueche et al., 2014).

The third element of leadership posited is strategic leadership. Strategic leadership refers to the leader's capacity to "anticipate, envisage, and retain flexibility while empowering others to accomplish strategic change" (Jooste & Fourie, 2009, p. 52). Strategic leadership for inclusive education is about managing and guiding teachers to cope with change, as well as encouraging them to participate in making decisions that would improve a school's long-term performance. To create social cohesion through cooperation, SMTs can engage in strategic planning, thinking, leading, and developing teachers. Furthermore, SMTs ought to develop financial plans and budgets that align with the school's goals, model healthy instructional practices, strategically analyse learner performance, and foster shared knowledge on curriculum and social justice activities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The second component in the framework in Figure 1 is fostering an inclusive education culture, which proposes three supporting elements. The first, teaching and learning culture, requires that SMTs strive towards a teaching and learning culture where curriculum delivery is "broad enough to equally accommodate the needs and conditions of every learner in society" (Murungi, 2015, p. 3166). SMTs should create awareness that learners are not all the same and, as a result, cannot be approached in the same way in terms of pedagogy, including assessment practices. Inclusive pedagogy requires "teaching techniques, approaches, forms, and ideas" that cater to differentiated learning styles (Makoelle, 2014, p. 1260).

The second element of the component, fostering an inclusive education culture, is management of learner rights. SMTs are responsible for managing the rights of all learners to learn in a safe school and classroom environment. SMTs can encourage beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours in the wider school community that respect learner rights. In this study, Schools B and C had made strides towards encouraging constitutional values such as non-discrimination.

Stakeholders' collaboration and involvement is the third element proposed for fostering an inclusive education culture. SMTs can engage with educational psychologists, social workers, school district authorities, police, health professionals, and community-based groups to involve them in supporting inclusivity. Furthermore, SMTs could make an effort to include parents in general support for learners but also create awareness about the concept of inclusive education. SMTs need to find ways to collaborate with school district officials and alert them to some of the challenges that they face. For instance, school districts can arrange

training for inclusive pedagogies. SMTs could attract the commitment and participation of teachers, parents, and other stakeholders by "creating a school vision, defining school goals, modelling best practices, and exhibiting high-performance expectations" (Bush & Glover, 2016, p. 6).

The third component in the framework in Figure 1 is SIAS policy implementation, and comprises five elements. The first element posited is understanding the SIAS policy. SMTs must understand and be conversant with the SIAS policy guidelines, which serve as the agenda for regulating inclusion processes (DBE, 2014). The managerial plans of SMTs should complement the SIAS policy framework, focusing on identifying learners encountering various barriers, assessing them, and providing support to increase their involvement in school activities (DBE, 2014). Furthermore, SMTs should implement support programmes to address learning barriers, and assist learners who have not fulfilled the specified standards for competence in previous grades (DBE, 2014). There was evidence in this study that Schools B and C were on the right path in introducing interventions in their schools to address both social ills and academic performance.

The second element is setting up and utilising structures for SIAS policy implementation. Principals are responsible to establish structures to support and implement the SIAS policy. The principal is tasked to set up a SBST, which is the main coordinating structure for inclusive education, and ensure that it is functional (DBE, 2014). As specified by the SIAS policy, support structures such as SMTs, SBSTs, district based support teams (DBSTs), and parents or caregivers should be used to serve various levels of learner needs (DBE, 2014). What came across in this study is that SMTs could not make a clear distinction between their roles as SBST members and those as SMT.

The third element important to the component of the SIAS policy implementation is managing continuous professional development for teachers. This component emphasises the need for SMTs to manage continuing professional development for teachers to achieve inclusive education goals. SMTs can focus on "improving individual performance, correcting unproductive processes, laying the basis for policy implementation, and facilitating change" (Blandford, 2012, p. 3). Arising from the study findings, SMTs should ensure that teachers are trained and equipped with pedagogic content knowledge, skills, and tools to meet a wide range of learner needs.

Managing intervention, remedial programmes, and referrals is the fourth element. SMTs are encouraged to create planned interventions, remedial programmes, and referral mechanisms to assist learners who have been identified as having learning barriers. The goal is to improve teaching and learning in inclusive classrooms without making learners feel marginalised. SMTs should help teachers gather evidence regarding at-risk learners, those experiencing learning breakdowns, and those who may drop out of school to provide interventions (DBE, 2014). Support for learners should not only focus on the diagnosis and remediation of individual learning needs but also on the holistic approach where a whole range of possible learning barriers have to be considered (DBE, 2014).

The fifth element posited is resource management funding strategy. This element proposes that funding is required for various aspects including professional development, school infrastructure, pedagogic learning material, specialist teachers, and psychologists. The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996) stipulated that SGBs are responsible for a school's financial and physical resource management, and to supplement state funding. Mestry (2016, p. 1) emphasised the need for SGBs to obtain funding from "parents, corporations, and the broader community through school fees, donations, and other fundraising projects" to support effective teaching and learning. Parents cannot be asked to pay for infrastructure changes because such arrangements are the responsibility of the DBE, (2010). However, SBGs are mandated to raise funds for increased personnel provisioning such as securing human resources necessary to support learning and provide specialised services.

Conclusion

The global shift toward inclusive education has had a significant impact on educational change in South Africa. For inclusive education to succeed in a developing economy like South Africa, it is important to reflect on the progress that has been made, identify where the shortcomings are, and contemplate how to move forward to make the ideal of inclusive education a reality. Notably, the policy framework for inclusive education has been set and is in alignment with the values and principles of the constitution of the country. Inclusive education has been introduced in schools and this research indicated that transformation towards non-discriminative attitudes is taking place. Furthermore, attempts to provide interventions in at least two of the three schools studied had materialised. However, various shortcomings prevail that both challenge and overwhelm SMTs. SMT members need to fully conceptualise the concept of inclusivity and empower themselves with thorough knowledge of the SIAS policy. This will enable them to better implement the SIAS policy. It is necessary to work with parents to enable an understanding of inclusive education in order to garner their support. Advocating for professional development opportunities for teachers in order to improve inclusive pedagogy is a matter that SMTs must drive resolutely. Furthermore, there is a need for human and financial resources to support inclusive education. Arising from this research is a framework that identifies three components that SMTs might find helpful in promoting an inclusive education culture in their schools. The three components draw attention to the need for appropriate leadership, fostering an inclusive school culture, and translating the SIAS policy into practice. School leaders hold the key that can drive transformation towards an inclusive school culture and thereby advance social justice.

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