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Reimagining Teacher Development for Special Schools: Voices of South African Teachers in Special Schools in Soweto

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Abstract

This study set out to reimagine teacher development in South African special schools. It explored the lived experiences of teacher development in special schools in Soweto, Gauteng province. The research adopted a qualitative approach. A case study design was implemented, with participants comprising 25 teachers purposively sampled from five conveniently selected special schools in Soweto. From each school, five teachers were selected from the five phases of the Basic Education schooling system to participate in the study. Data were gathered through 25 individual face-to-face interviews and classroom observations with selected participants. Data were analysed inductively using constant comparative analysis, with data collected, transcribed, categorized, and classified into themes that emerged from the data. The study found that predominantly, teachers posted in special schools in South Africa had mainstream teacher development experiences. Primarily, there was no specific focus on training teachers for special schools. The conclusion emphasises the need to recognise the widespread challenges in special schools and their impact on the welfare of both teachers and learners. Recommendations included emphasising the inclusion of special education in teacher development, especially given the need for dedicated schools for teachers in special education. Unlike in mainstream training programmes, teachers need to be exposed to workshops that offer emotional support.

Keywords

mainstream education, special education needs, special schools, teacher support, resources

INTRODUCTION

Mexico and Latin America support the Millennium Development Goals globally, especially Goal 2, which focuses on universal primary education. In line with this objective, educators need to be supported, motivated, and qualified (UNESCO, 2006). It is the educators' duty to provide effective instruction, promote student growth, and improve academic outcomes (Munna & Kalam, 2021). UNESCO (2006) further asserts that recent efforts to create a more equitable education system aim to improve the existing monolithic educational framework by ensuring universal access to primary education, eradicating adult illiteracy, and enhancing the overall quality and efficiency of education. Sliwka (2010) notes that, in some countries, teacher education occurs in higher education institutions that may not have university status but can award degrees. On the other hand, all teacher education in France has lately been moved inside universities, where it is now taught at the master's level with a stronger focus on academic subjects.

Teachers are critical agents of school transformation, and the quality of primary education is strongly dependent on their performance (Graham et al., 2020; So & Park, 2022). According to research, instructors are among the most important elements influencing student achievement (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012). Given the global trend toward inclusive classrooms and the growing number of children recognized as having special learning needs, it is critical that classroom teachers are equipped and confident in teaching students of varying abilities.

In Malaysia, there are various hurdles to inclusive practice, the primary one being a lack of teacher readiness to educate kids with diverse needs (Jelas, 2010). Historically, individuals with disabilities in America have faced exclusion in educational settings (Yell, Rogers & Rogers, 1998). General and special education programmes for teacher preparation, both in-service and pre-service, are often designed and regulated by different departments, with little collaboration between them (Blanton, Pugach & Correa, 2011). Countries like Germany, Finland, and Norway also engage in this practice, so it is not just the US (Hausstätter & Takala, 2008; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). According to Laurillard (2013), training should empower educators. Although they began their professional lives with the intention of helping students with disabilities become productive members of society, special education teachers face a number of obstacles that make this difficult (Tjentz, 2013).

In the United Kingdom, the two-year "Teach First" programme offers "high calibre, highly motivated graduates" leadership development and transferable skills. Latvia, Estonia, and Germany, are developing comparable programmes. Nonetheless, most courses continue to use the conventional approach of attending college full-time and then spending time teaching in schools (Sliwka, 2010). Surprisingly, none of these programmes pay special attention to special education teacher training. Gaytos, Lavilla, and Cablao's (2020) study concluded that, indeed, there is really a lack of budget and poor monitoring of Inclusive Education. There is also a shortage of schools offering this kind of program, and shortage of teachers trained and willing to be trained to teach special education (Gaytos et al., 2020).

Every teacher should have access to a top-notch, fair programme that supports their instruction well and takes into account their interests, intellectual prowess, and past experience (Kotting, 2022). However, they frequently face obstacles to their professional growth, including loneliness, a lack of support, scarce resources, and changing requirements (Sancar et al., 2021). Researchers argue that by seeking alignment between features of rigorously evaluated professional development interventions and evidence from basic research on human skill acquisition, they would be able to identify characteristics of effective professional development more quickly (Kim, Rohaan, Peijnenburg, Samsen-Bronsveld & Bakx, 2023).

The University of Köln in Germany provides inclusive education courses in which mainstream and special education teacher education students collaborate 'in tandem' to report on school visits, assignments, and evaluations. Siegen University follows a similar cooperative approach (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2011). However, the system itself does not specify how teachers' experiences are addressed within it. According to Bothma and Gravett (2000:203), educators contend that particular kinds of people decide to work with students who are facing learning obstacles. The participants believed they lacked the skills and training necessary to assist students dealing with these difficulties. Florian (1998) suggested that special school teachers need knowledge about learning difficulties and must be skilled in using specific instructional methods. Although 'functional' rather than 'attitudinal'-oriented, professional development was found to be equally important in both jurisdictions. Zeng and Day (2019) found that teachers in Shanghai schools were more likely to experience the latter than those in the English schools under study. This raises questions about the advantages of concentrating only on collaborative professional development.

Improving teaching methods and student performance requires investigating strategies to support instructors' professional development and teamwork (Prenger et al., 2021; Sancar et al., 2021). Special schools often face challenging and traumatising situations, as different learners have varying disabilities. A large body of worldwide research confirms that pre-service teacher education programs have traditionally failed to adequately educate teachers for inclusive teaching (Abu-Heran et al., 2014; Ashan et al., 2013; Bhatnagar and Das, 2014; Das et al., 2013). The findings indicate that teachers are not prepared to teach in special schools due to a lack of training. This leaves teachers in Soweto with a gap in supporting learners who require significant emotional support. This assertion is supported by focus group interviews conducted by Bhatnagar and Das (2014) with 20 secondary teachers selected from four administrative zones in New Delhi. The study found that "a close scrutiny is warranted to fully understand the barriers that prevent teachers from successfully including children with disabilities in their classrooms. A sustained and comprehensive effort from all stakeholders is needed to address teacher concerns and perceived barriers. It is only then that the true inclusion imperative can be realised in India" (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014: 99).

The determination and creation of professional development opportunities for teachers working in early childhood special education settings is challenging (Francois, 2020). When Snoek, Swennen, and van der Klink (2009) examined international teacher education policy papers, they discovered little mentions of special teacher educators' professionalism. To improve teacher educators' standing as a specialized professional group, they recommend creating an introduction procedure and more professional development. This is encouraging, as it might help address the problems special education teachers confront. Burns and Gersing (2010) note that, as few of the current generation of teachers and teacher educators have had personal experience of special school settings during their own education, this could be problematic. Cummings (2022) emphasises that ongoing professional development helps educators stay current with best practices, network with peers, and create inclusive learning environments. Against this literature, this study aims to address gaps in teacher preparation for special schools that have been overlooked, even internationally. It is also evident that in South Africa, teacher training programmes are predominantly mainstream, with insufficient focus on special education.

Teachers experience stress and students with disabilities do not make progress because teacher training programs do not appear to sufficiently meet the demands of teacher development in special schools (Engelbrecht, 2006; Swart & Eloff, 2001; Chataika et al., 2012). According to the pre-summit global consultations and deliberations, education

transformation will only occur if teachers—the change agents at the core of any educational system—are professionalized, trained, motivated, and supported to guide the process and assist their students in achieving their objectives and well-being (Spandagou, 2025). Freedberg and Harrington (2017) indicated that California's special education system was in deep trouble due to an extreme shortage of fully prepared teachers. This statement was echoed by the President of the California State Board of Education, who stated that the education system needs to be updated.

“Teachers in inclusive schools require a special type of training in special needs education to work collaboratively with other teachers to provide support to learners in their classrooms” (Schnorr, Black & Davern, 2000:13; Welding, 1996:116; Forlin, 2001:124). They must put their newly acquired knowledge and abilities to use in addition to learning them. A lack of support and teacher training, as well as limited knowledge of official policy documents, has led some teachers to develop resistance to, and disillusionment with, teaching inclusive education (Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff & Pettipher, 2002). According to Cochran-Smith, Villegas, Abrams, Moreno, Mills, and Stern (2016), teacher education programs have been criticized for not properly training teachers to work in schools that now frequently enrol diverse learner groups. Nevertheless, many teachers report feeling inexperienced or lacking confidence in responding to an extensive variety of learning differences. This is far less than the preparation provided for special schools, where the class composition consists entirely of ‘special’ learners.

Teachers must receive extensive training on recognizing and meeting special education needs. Teachers must work together as a team when switching from a content-based to an outcomes-based approach in order to satisfy the various requirements of students. Many educators are unfamiliar with this method, thus they need a framework that will help them adjust to an inclusive education paradigm (Calitz, 2000). Since all teachers are responsible for a diverse group of students, understanding educational theory, professional insight, and competence are crucial for resolving learning hurdles (Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995). However, current teacher training programmes often fail to address the development needs of teachers in special schools, highlighting the importance of this study.

Teachers who work with students who have learning difficulties require specialized training, claims Landsberg (2011). Entry-level courses and other forms of basic professional training must equip teachers to meet the demands of a diverse spectrum of students. Every teacher should be prepared to work with a variety of students and understand that some might need different instruction. As a result, although special education appears to be widely accepted, Nordic nations do not have a common view of what educational inclusion entails. Instead, based on their own views and expectations of education, each nation has created a distinctive response to UNESCO's rights agenda (Takala, Hausstätter, Ahl & Head, 2012). Inclusive education, a cornerstone of UNESCO's Education for All agenda, has become a recognized educational objective in many countries (Artiles, Kozleski & Waitoller, 2011). Taweechaisupapong (2015) emphasises that positive relationships are essential in the training and support of teachers involved in inclusive settings. Geldenhuys and Wevers (2013) assert that the success of inclusive education hinges on providing teachers with continuous further training. Problems with pace, learning preferences, seating arrangements, and individualized attention are common for educators. In this regard, many educators think that the development of inclusive teaching techniques is primarily the responsibility of the teaching staff. Therefore, teacher training must be regarded as a crucial factor in steering educational proposals in the creation of inclusive schools. In the same spirit, Florian and Spratt (2013) made the case that it is essential to make sure that teacher education programs educate teachers with the skills necessary to be reflective practitioners who can adapt to the unique requirements of a wide range of learners.

Geldenhuys and Wevers (2013) argue that ongoing professional development for teachers is essential to achieving inclusive education. Sharma, Forlin, and Loreman (2008) conducted a large study in Canada, Hong Kong, Australia, and Singapore. The findings showed that both infused approaches—in which inclusion training is incorporated throughout all coursework—and single-unit courses were successful in promoting favourable attitude changes. The field experience component, which gave pre-service teachers the opportunity to engage with students with a range of exceptionalities, was a significant turning point for a positive shift in teacher attitude (Jodi & Sal, 2014). According to Engelbrecht (2013), pre-service and in-service teacher education are crucial for ensuring that students with disabilities are included in mainstream classrooms. Regretfully, professional development programs still have difficulty preparing educators to work in educational environments where exclusion is common (Slee, 2010). Therefore, a review of the literature on teacher professional development for inclusive education in general and special schools in particular is necessary, as is an analysis of the ways in which knowledge on this subject has been produced. Conventional teacher preparation programs typically place a strong emphasis on pre-service training, assuming that the information and skills trainees gain from their coursework and real-world experiences would equip them with what they need to succeed in the classroom.

Teachers in many countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, often lack basic qualifications and training. In crisis or refugee contexts, teachers typically have minimal qualifications and limited access to professional development opportunities. With a focus on ongoing professional growth, adequate training in inclusive education theory and practice is crucial. This can give educators the motivation to keep preparing for the unforeseen and unplanned, which can lead to the development of new teaching and support techniques (Engelbrecht & Muthukrishna, 2019). The issue of curriculum differentiation is fundamental to implementing inclusion. Challenges faced by teachers observed in Tanzania include a lack of special needs teachers, with ordinary teachers responsible for teaching learners with special needs. Additionally, low motivation and poor salaries contribute to a lack of morale and commitment (Humphrey, 2014). Ritu (2020) recommended that active involvement of teachers in designing in-service training

programmes is crucial, ensuring the content aligns with their needs. This approach enables teachers to apply what they learn in their classrooms when managing children with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN).

One important component of inclusive education's success is teachers' professional competence in working with students who have impairments (Ritu, 2020). The unequal results caused in the past by teachers' lack of preparedness to effectively support all students could be addressed by a number of advancements in South Africa. For new teachers, inclusive practice teaching standards have also been created (Walton & Rusznyak, 2019). Ritu (2020) argues that, with the current emphasis on inclusion both nationally and internationally, there is an urgent need for the professional development of general and newly qualified teachers to meet diverse student needs. Several prominent evaluations and two meta-reviews have stressed the importance of continual, collaborative, subject-specific professional development that draws on external knowledge, includes teacher buy-in, and is practice-based (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021).

Teacher professional development (TPD) is critical for enhancing student outcomes (Sancar, Atal, & Deryakulu, 2021). Kalim's (2024) insights provide vital information for planning and customising Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programmes, emphasising objective evaluation of teachers rather than self-assessment. Based on these findings, customized professional development programs can more successfully improve teachers' competency and professional development (Kalim, 2024). Training should include visits to special schools, which may help teacher trainees change their perceptions of children with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN). Involving professionals who have worked with inclusive schools in the past might help participants feel more engaged and allay their concerns about different SEN or disability types. Sustainability of the effectiveness of in-service training programmes can be achieved through refresher courses, while preparing members of 'core groups' and future researchers should focus on studying the positive effects on outcomes for children with disabilities (Ritu, 2020).

According to Mudzingwa (2019), Inclusive Education South Africa (IESA), in partnership with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the European Union, developed the New Teacher Induction Programme (NTIP). The induction programme aims to promote inclusiveness and assist new teachers in addressing diversity in the classroom (Mudzingwa, 2019). In most instances, learners with special needs are educated in special schools away from their homes and their peers (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Developing effective and efficient inclusive instructors, retaining new teachers by providing them with effective inclusive practices, and cultivating a professional identity as inclusive teachers are the objectives. The induction programme aims to foster inclusiveness and assist new teachers in responding to classroom diversity (Mudzingwa, 2019). The goal is to develop efficient and effective inclusive teachers, retain new educators by equipping them with good inclusive practices, and foster a professional identity as inclusive teachers. Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel, and Tlale (2015) argue that while many schools for specialised education still exist, the significant concern in South Africa is that most educators have not received any training in special education. A study by Mpu and Adu (2021) highlights that among other issues, insufficient training, lack of knowledge and skills of educators were the overarching themes that resulted in educators feeling a sense of inadequacy to teach in an inclusive education classroom. Many students with high-intensive support needs continue to be placed in classrooms with inadequate resources and teachers who do not feel qualified or competent to meet their educational and supportive needs because South Africa's educational system is not as advanced or well-resourced as that of their European or American counterparts (Dreyer, 2008; Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel & Tlale, 2015).

Despite the central role of South African teachers in an inclusive education system, most of the country's educators are not equipped to understand how a child's disability affects their learning (Phasha, Mahlo & Dei, 2017). According to Svendsen (2020), teachers view development programmes as beneficial and the best way to expand their knowledge and skills. Tebele and Chaka (2024) confirm that teacher empowerment, attitude, and commitment significantly influence inclusive education practices. For most teachers, commitment was the strongest predictor of these practices, followed by empowerment, and finally by attitude. According to Moyagabo and Johnson (2024), South African educators possess sufficient theoretical understanding of inclusive education policies; however, their self-efficacy in implementing these policies in inclusive teaching and learning settings is low. Furthermore, the study advocates ongoing professional development for teachers in inclusive education.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Professional development for teachers is critical to enhancing student outcomes (Sancar, Atal, and Deryakulu, 2021). Merga et al.'s (2020) findings can inform ongoing professional development opportunities and initial teacher education programmes to ensure that learning experiences reflect current teacher needs. Therefore, there is no doubt that the world's education systems need to be accommodating, inclusive, and responsive to all who consume them. There is also no doubt that special education continues to be a challenge, not only for learners with physical disabilities but also for teachers who teach in special schools. Yet, education is a basic human right that should be available to everyone, regardless of their background. Therefore, regardless of gender, race, ability, or other potential discriminatory factors, everyone has the right to an education (Bani & Lach, 2024). When teachers lack the skills for effective special education, they are more likely to miss learning barriers. Having reported that challenges in implementing inclusive education in Africa stem from teachers who are not trained in inclusive education, it becomes difficult for teachers to assist learners when they themselves lack professional skills.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The study sought to answer two questions:

- a) What is the nature of teacher development for special schools in Soweto, Gauteng province, in South Africa?
- b) How do special school teachers reimagine teacher development for special schools in Soweto, Gauteng province, in South Africa?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach: The study used a qualitative approach. “The focus of qualitative research is to understand, explain, explore, discover, and clarify the situations, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and experiences of a group of people” (Kumar, 2011: 103). According to Maree (2007), qualitative research is an organized investigation of interesting phenomena. Instead of using deductive reasoning to support its claims, it uses inductive reasoning.

Research Design: A case study research design was used for this investigation. “In a case study, a single person, programme, event, process, institution, organisation, social group, or phenomenon is investigated within a specified time frame. A combination of appropriate data collection devices” (Creswell, 1994: 12 as cited in Moodley, 2013).

Population and sample: A population is a collection of cases or elements – whether people, things, or events – that meet certain standards and to which the research's findings are intended to be applied (McMillan, 1996: 85). The target population comprised teachers in special schools in Soweto. Convenient sampling was used to select the research sites in Gauteng Province. The purposive sampling method was employed to select five participants from each school for individual interviews. Instead of drawing broad conclusions from the study, purposeful sampling provides the researcher with a deeper understanding of the topic under investigation (Patton, 2015: 463). In total, 25 participants participated in the study.

Data collection tools: The most efficient and appropriate data collection techniques must be used, as data are the foundation of research (Nicholas, 2006). The study employed individual face-to-face interviews and classroom observations for the selected teachers. For practically all qualitative research, the interview is the primary and most popular method of gathering data (Robinson, 2014; Subedi, 2021). For this study, the interview schedule was semi-structured, allowing the researcher to probe further during the participants' responses. During the observation, the study adopted a direct, overt observation approach with two participants who availed themselves.

Data trustworthiness: The level of confidence in data interpretation and research quality assurance techniques is known as trustworthiness (Polit & Beck, 2014). “Sampling strategies and the number of participants play roles in maintaining the research rigour of any scholarship” (Subedi, 2021:3). In this study, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were exercised, as they are important in establishing trustworthiness in research. In this study, credibility was ensured by comparing interview and observation data, as well as through member checking.

Data analysis: Data from interviews were analysed inductively using constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 2002), with data collected, transcribed, categorized, and classified into themes that emerged from the data. On the other hand, observational data were analysed descriptively as the teachers taught using the conceptual framework adopted by the study.

FINDINGS

This section presents the study's findings on the nature of teacher development in special schools and the reimaged special school teacher development. Two aspects that emerged from the results include in-service teacher training in special schools and preservice teacher training in tertiary institutions. These aspects are described in detail in the following subsections. Figure 1 is a network diagram reflecting these subthemes. In this section, SAT1 refers to the interviewed School A Phase 1 teacher, SCT3 refers to the interviewed School C Phase 3 teacher, in that order.

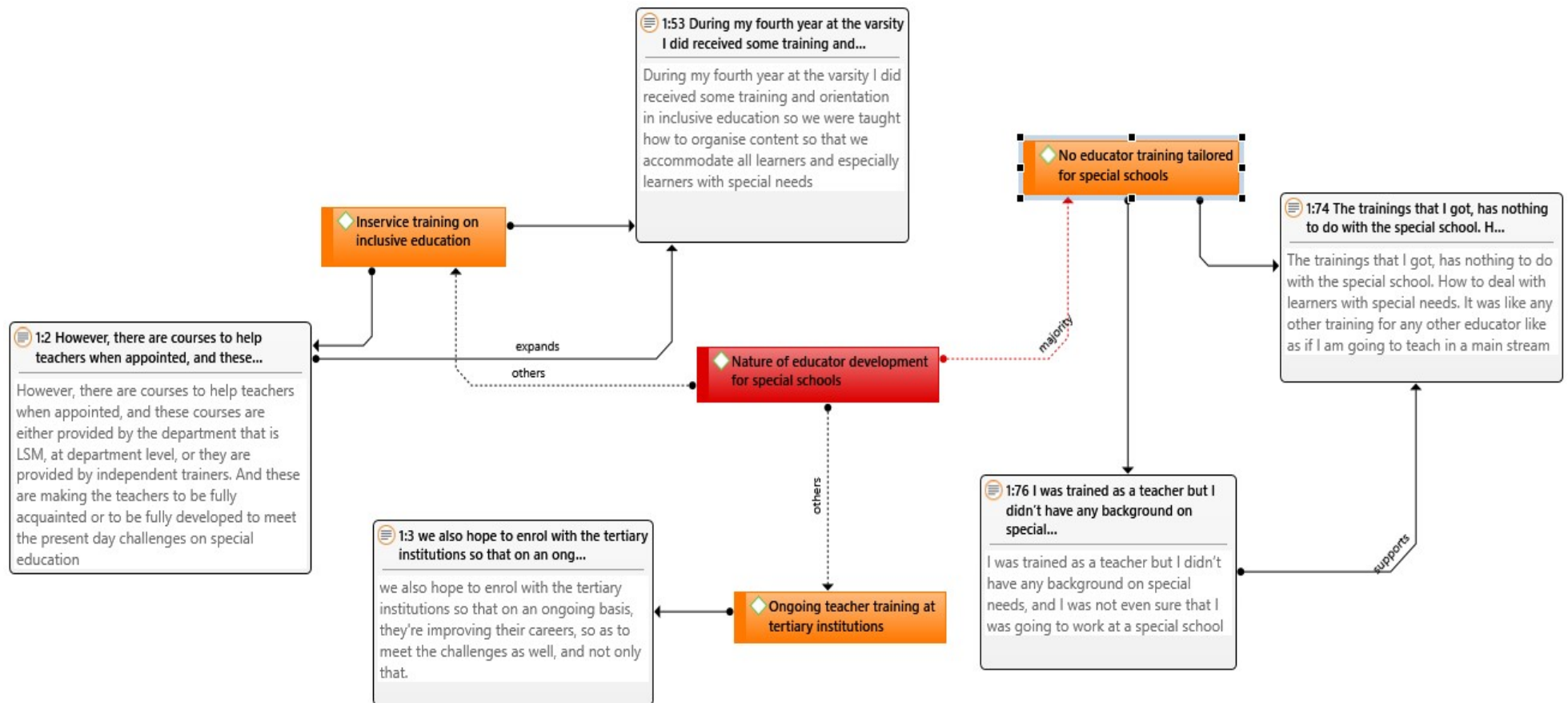


Fig. 1 Nature of educator development in special schools

Subtheme 1: In-service and pre-service teacher training on inclusive education

Results showed that ongoing in-service training on inclusive education is taking place in some schools. This training aims to equip teachers in special schools with the necessary skills and knowledge to address the diverse needs of learners with disabilities. It provides opportunities for professional growth and adaptation to evolving pedagogical practices. However, in-service training is only occurring in a few special schools; in other institutions, only one-time orientation sessions are conducted. This is confirmed by the responses in the following section.

Regarding pre-service training, it emerged that, *“The nature of pre-service training, because one has to make a good audit on how the teacher was trained, or was specializing on, when was he trained for each field, is that teachers have not been directly trained to teach special children”* (SAT1). SAT2 also confirmed by saying, *“My pre training, unfortunately, was not related to special schools. I was trained as an ordinary teacher without any reference to LSEN. There is no specific content training workshop in terms of assisting me as an teacher with relation issues of special schools, so my training had nothing to do with special school but I was just employed in a promotional matter to this institution. I think training is very little, is nonexistence usually training is for mainstream schools because most of the time we got trained by the Department in terms of subject knowledge and content of the subject but there is no specific training that speaks to learners need in special schools for example where they will give training in terms of disabilities and how they impact on learning. So I have never received any training of that kind. So we learn about these things as we engage with the learners but there is no formal training specifically as a requirement that was done prior to being employed in a special school.”* SAT3 also agreed by saying that, *“I did a Secondary Teachers Diploma, and there was no pre service training in my training as a teacher. There was no time to do special needs.”* Furthermore, SAT4 confirmed, *“I was trained as a normal teacher but inclusive education was not included in my modules. No pre-service training relevant to special school.”*

However, one participant contradicted on this issue by responding that *“During my fourth year at the varsity I did received some training and orientation in inclusive education so we were taught how to organise content so that we accommodate all learners and especially learners with special needs. So the last year was focused on the inclusive education and papers we had to write were based on special education I think that all teachers at some point do receive special needs education higher education institutions like varsities inclusive education and they are well equipped for going to classes”* (SAT5). In this respect, SDT5 said, *“Okay, well basically what we did we did what we call inclusive education it’s a B Ed degree we did it for four years. And part of it is inclusive education. It doesn’t go through for four years, it’s simply for a year or two. Between third and fourth year on we do touch on inclusive education. To be quiet honest, we don’t go deep in to how we handle children who are differently able, children who are moving slow into class and children who are moving fast. In actual fact the way we are educated it’s not enough to handle the real situation on the ground.”*

Subtheme 2: Ongoing teacher training in tertiary institutions

Others noted that tertiary institutions play a vital role in preparing teachers for special schools. Some participants reported receiving training that included components on special education. However, many teacher education programmes lack a strong emphasis on special education, leaving teachers ill-prepared to teach in special schools. Additionally, some tertiary institutions do not update their curricula to reflect current best practices in special education. The verbatim response of SAT1 was, *“...We also hope to enrol with the tertiary institutions so that on an ongoing basis, they're improving their careers, so as to meet the challenges as well, and not only that.”*

Subtheme 3: Limited pre- and in-service training

Participants also raised that there is a limit to the availability of both pre-service training as well as in-service training for teachers in special schools. As indicated by SBT3, saying *“The pre-service training is very limited and there is no development that is occurring for teachers in South African special schools. There is no specific skills or training or workshops to assist educators to understand learner disabilities and their impact on learning and teaching. I didn’t receive any pre service training, I was just trained as a general teacher. Teachers who receive the in service training are well equipped and they gain more knowledge and skills on how to handle different challenges in the classroom and outside the classroom.”* SCT1 also agreed, *“I remember even in our meetings we will cry and asking our managers if possible maybe they can organize these other workshops and the training but unfortunately up until it’s my year number 5 now but never received any training regarding the special schools. The only information and I have it it’s the information that I gathered myself like through Google, through interacting with other teachers from other special school but here in my school, in this institution, we never receive enough.”* In this respect, SDT4 responded, *“The nature of the pre service training and its relevance to special schools is there isn't much of a pre service training when it comes to being employed at a special school, you learn as you go. The relevant training you get is through inclusive education module at the university.”*

Subtheme 4: No educator training tailored for special schools

Findings unanimously showed that a significant gap exists in educator training specifically tailored to the unique needs of special schools. Many training programmes do not adequately address the complexities of working with students with special needs. The lack of specialised training for special schools can leave educators ill-prepared to meet the diverse,

individualised needs of their students, potentially leading to suboptimal outcomes. This is reflected in the remarks by SCT3: *“I went to the college and studied a secondary teachers’ Diploma but my diploma doesn’t have inclusive education, that’s why I am struggling to deal with the special school learners with special needs. According to me, I thought that maybe the government would look at the teachers who are dealing with these learners and train us on how to handle these learners, we know their different disabilities and how to handle them and manage to understand and support them.”*

In another school, participants also agreed saying, *“In special schools I must point out that there is no pre service training, as an educator you are just thrown to the deep end and you see how you swim. Even in training colleges we were not trained in learners with special needs. So that is a challenge that we face in the special schools”* (SBT1). Referring to in-service teacher training, SAT1 said, *“... there are courses to help teachers when appointed, and these courses are either provided by the department that is LSM, at department level, or they are provided by independent trainers. And these are making the teachers to be fully acquainted or to be fully developed to meet the present day challenges on special education”*. SAT3 suggested, *“I think it is very important for the teachers to have in service trainings. Since they didn’t do it, in order for them to cope, they must do the in service training. According to my experience, special school’s teachers must get regular training in order to be able to handle the different situations and to deal with learners with special needs education”*. A participant from another school also agreed, *“The truth of the matter is that there is basically no in service training teachers are not trained as to how to deal with these learners which then puts the teachers at the disadvantage more especially in the classroom. These learners have got specific needs because these disabilities are not the same and others have got to do with the brain which needs a teacher really to be trained how to deal with them”* (SBT1).

This was also confirmed by SBT2 who responded, *“My answer on this is that, I never had any pre service training. I was just trained as a teacher who can teach at any ordinary or normal School. I really feel that teachers must be given the service training because, most of the teachers in special schools were never trained and if they can be given in service trainings like workshops and so on, they can be able to push and do what is good for the children’s future.”* SBT4 also agreed, saying *“The teacher development for special schools is improper, inadequate and not well structured. There was no formal pre-service training when I was training as a teacher. I got the training that every teacher gets when training to be a teacher. My training was very silent on special school needs education.”* SBT5 reiterated, *“I can say that the pre service training that I got when I was trained as a teacher did not have anything to do with special needs. I have never received any training in special needs. I think that the in service training is very important, I can be happy if I can get trainings regularly.”*

In another schools, SCT1 also said, *“The trainings that I got, has nothing to do with the special school. How to deal with learners with special needs. It was like any other training for any other educator like as if I am going to teach in a main stream. I never got any training for the special school. ...The school that I am in at the moment it’s my first school for my teaching with a special need, with the learners with the special needs as well and I never get any training regarding the learners with special needs.”* SCT4 also agreed that *“When I came to the school I came just as a teacher because my previous training did not speak anything to deal with special needs education. As a result, I went to the training as a normal teacher and it did not have any additions on special needs education. So as a result I did not go or undergo any training with special needs education. The experience is that, it doesn’t even have positive results in most of the schools in South Africa because, teachers can’t reach out to the learners with the special needs hence the trainings that we were given are not sufficient. Given that, people don’t have the required understanding, skills and knowledge on SNE.”*

Along the same wavelength, SCT5 said, *“Unfortunately, when I train as a teacher I didn’t train as a special school teacher.”* SBT2 also agreed, *“I was trained as a teacher but I didn’t have any background on special needs, and I was not even sure that I was going to work at a special school.”* SBT3 further agreed, *“I was trained as a teacher but a training for special schools I didn’t train to such an extent of special needs. I was just trained as an ordinary teacher.”* SET1 acknowledged, *“I have done a degree in education but, I didn’t touch any information about the special schools. It’s my first time to meet the experience on special school.”* Equally, SET3 indicated, *“I had no pre-service training relevant to special school, I think special school teachers who receive in service training teachers must receive the trainings regularly to further their knowledge understanding and skills in special school.”* SET5 sealed it, saying *“There is no much of pre training when it comes to being employed in special school and also we learn as we go. There is no relevant training.”*

Subtheme 5: In-service teacher training on inclusive education

The training of teachers in special education was not in vain. There was a view that, even though teachers did not initially possess the skills to teach in special schools, there were ongoing efforts to equip them. Below are verbatim words from SCT5. *“There are courses to help teachers when appointed, and these courses are either provided by the department that is LSM, at department level, or they are provided by independent trainers. And these are making the teachers to be fully acquainted or to be fully developed to meet the present-day challenges on special education”*. The same sentiments were echoed by SET3 who said, *“Generally, there are programs designed for special school development in South Africa. The pre-service trainings that I attend were relevant as the workshops would be specifically for special school and the topic would be based on learner diagnosis and support. Teachers who receive in service training are well equipped and gain*

knowledge on how to handle challenges in class.” SET4 also confirmed that “I received a lot of in service training specifically targeting SID learners which brought major growth as a special school educator for the past 11 years. It offers knowledge, attitude and skills so that the teacher can conduct classes effectively and efficiently.” SET5 also responded, “We do receive the in service training during the teaching years, but we teachers do go through the different workshops and stuff like but it’s not really specific.”

In the observation phase at school A, the first researcher noticed that both Teacher 2 and Teacher 4 exhibited signs of not having been trained to teach special learners. The first researcher also sensed that the teacher was not familiar with teaching those learners, especially during her presence. The teacher seemed to be very uncomfortable, and the first researcher found herself feeling threatened by him, as if she was a threat to him, because it was as if the person was not used to teaching while being observed. That person was not trained to teach those learners, which would pose a problem when teaching them because they were special, and the teacher did not have the required qualifications.

DISCUSSION

Nature of teacher development in special schools

This section sought to describe the nature of educational development in special schools. Among the various aspects that emerged from the results were in-service teacher training in special schools and ongoing teacher training in tertiary institutions. However, most participants indicated that there was no professional development for teachers in special schools, as they predominantly had mainstream teaching backgrounds. Darling-Hammond (2000) argues that effective teacher training is paramount in this country; yet, research shows that the traditional path to becoming a teacher is intrinsically flawed.

In-service teacher training on inclusive education

Results showed that ongoing in-service training on inclusive education is taking place in some schools. This training aims to equip teachers in special schools with the necessary skills and knowledge to address the diverse needs of learners with disabilities. It also provides opportunities for professional growth and adaptation to evolving pedagogical practices. However, in-service training is only occurring in a few special schools; in other schools, only one-time orientation sessions are conducted. The World Report on Disability (2011:222) stresses that ‘The appropriate training of mainstream teachers is crucial if they are to be confident and competent in teaching children with diverse needs’ and emphasises that this training should focus on attitudes and values, not just knowledge and skills. Jennifer (2022) highlights the benefits of professional development in enhancing teachers' ability to support diverse learners.

Ongoing teacher training in tertiary institutions

Findings revealed that tertiary institutions play a vital role in preparing teachers for special schools; however, this contribution cannot be quantified. While some participants reported receiving training that included components relevant to special schools, many teacher education programmes lack a strong emphasis on special education, leaving teachers ill-prepared to teach in these environments. Additionally, some tertiary institutions do not update their curricula to reflect current best practices in special education. It was emphasised that ongoing teacher training in these institutions should include special education components that address the diverse needs of students with disabilities. This aligns with Florian (2019)’s position that, to successfully adopt inclusive practices in a diverse classroom, instructors require both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Takalani (2021) argues that providing teachers with real-world knowledge and skills will improve their classroom instruction and their understanding of obstacles.

Limited pre- and in-service training

Participants also noted that the availability of both pre-service and in-service training for teachers in special schools is limited. This contradicts the literature. Latin America and Mexico align with the Millennium Development Goals, particularly Goal 2, which focuses on universal primary education and states that teachers need to be qualified, motivated, and supported (UNESCO, 2006). They bear the responsibility of delivering effective teaching, fostering student learning, and enhancing educational outcomes (Munna & Kalam, 2021). All teachers should have access to an excellent and equitable programme that provides solid support for their teaching and is responsive to their prior knowledge, intellectual strengths, and personal interests (Kotting, 2022). But they frequently face obstacles to their professional growth, including loneliness, a lack of support, scarce resources, and changing requirements (Sancar et al., 2021).

No teacher training tailored for special schools

Participants unanimously agreed that a significant gap exists in teacher training tailored specifically to the unique needs of special schools. Many teacher training programmes do not adequately address the complexities of working with students with special needs. The lack of specialised training for special schools can leave teachers ill-prepared to meet the diverse, individualised needs of their learners, potentially leading to suboptimal outcomes. According to research, instructors are among the most important elements influencing student achievement (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012). Given the global push for inclusive classrooms and the growing number of children recognized as having special learning needs, it is critical that classroom teachers are equipped and confident in teaching students with various abilities. In Malaysia, there are various hurdles to inclusive practice, the primary one being a lack of teacher

readiness to educate kids with diverse needs (Jelas, 2010). Historically, individuals with disabilities in America have faced exclusion in educational settings (Yell, Rogers & Rogers, 1998). Both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs in general and special education are frequently created and governed by separate departments with little cooperation between them (Blanton, Pugach & Correa, 2011). This practice is not limited to the United States; it is also practiced in countries such as Germany, Finland, and Norway (Hausstätter & Takala, 2008; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

The responses show that teachers are not prepared to teach in special schools. This is corroborated by Bhatnagar and Das (2014), who conducted focus group interviews with 20 secondary teachers drawn from four administrative zones in New Delhi. The study found that “a close scrutiny is warranted to fully understand the barriers that prevent teachers from successfully including children with disabilities in their classrooms. A sustained and comprehensive effort from all stakeholders is needed to address teacher concerns and perceived barriers. It is only then that the true inclusion imperative can be realised in India” (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014: 99).

In-service teacher training on inclusive education

The training of teachers in special education was not in vain. While there was a perception that teachers lacked the requisite skills to teach in special schools, ongoing efforts were made to equip them. Laurillard (2013) asserts that teachers should be empowered through training. Cummings (2022) emphasises that ongoing professional development helps teachers stay current with best practices, network with peers, and create inclusive learning environments.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to reimagine teacher development in special schools within the South African context, recognising the complex, dynamic, and specialised nature of teaching learners with diverse educational needs. The findings suggest that teacher development in special schools is uneven, fragmented, and often insufficiently contextualised, relying heavily on individual teacher initiative rather than on coherent systemic support.

The study draws the following conclusions:

- Regarding the nature of teacher development in special schools in South Africa, the study concludes that the current approach does not accommodate the development of teachers for special schools.
- The dominant professional development of special school teachers is not distinct from that of mainstream school teachers.
- Most participants had no teacher development specific to special schools, as they only had mainstream teaching backgrounds.
- In-service teacher development was the most widespread in special schools to enhance the skills of most teachers, as the majority had experience in mainstream development. However, in-service training is available only in a few special schools.
- Participants reimaged a system where special education is given a significant accord through the development of relevant teachers. Hence, the teacher development process should not happen at school level, but as early as possible, through proper pre-service training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on its findings, the study recommends the following.

- A new teacher training programme is needed in tertiary institutions. This will produce the exact type of teachers needed for special schools.
- The DBE needs to work hand in hand with the DHET to synergise and reconfigure special schools to make them ‘special’.
- Ongoing teacher training in these institutions should include components that emphasise the diverse needs of students with disabilities.
- There is a need for a bottom-up approach to policy development in special schools to ensure that teachers, who are always on the ground, provide valuable inputs relating to policy development for special schools.
- Reimagining teacher development, therefore, requires a shift from a teacher training model that upholds a context-responsive, career-long professional learning system that recognises special school teachers as specialised professionals. Such a reimagination positions teacher development as a strategic lever for improving the quality of teaching and learning.

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