

PERCEPTION OF M.Ed STUDENTS TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to present the perception of M.Ed students towards inclusive education. Inclusive education is an educational approach that aims to provide equal learning opportunities to all children, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, gender, caste, religion, language, social background, or economic status. It means that children with and without disabilities learn together in the same classroom and participate equally in school activities. The main purpose of inclusive education is to remove barriers to learning and ensure that every child receives proper support according to their individual needs. Teachers use different teaching methods, learning materials, and classroom activities to make education accessible and meaningful for all students.

Inclusive education promotes equality, respect, cooperation, acceptance, and a sense of belonging among children. It also helps students understand and appreciate individual differences and reduces discrimination and social exclusion. Parents, teachers, schools, and the community all have an important role in making inclusive education successful. It not only improves academic development but also supports the social, emotional, and overall development of children. Therefore, inclusive education helps create a fair, supportive, and child-friendly learning environment where every child is valued, respected, and given the opportunity to reach their full potential.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Education, Convenience Sampling, Perception.

Introduction

Philosophies involving inclusive education have changed dramatically over the past two decades (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). In the past, segregation of special education needs students seemed an easy solution, however, it denied those students the right to develop their personality in a social and school environment (Koutrouba, Vamvakari & Steliou, 2006). Special education needs is described to include the view that learning and behaviour problems are the reciprocal product of individual and environmental interaction (Landsberg, 2005). Inclusive education should not just be about addressing a marginal part of the education system, it should rather constitute a framework that all educational development systems should follow (Booth, 1999).

Inclusive education is aimed at increasing the participation of students in the curricula, cultures and communities of governmental educational systems (Booth, 1999; Landsberg, 2005; Gross, 1996). Inclusion should involve creating an environment that allows all students to feel supported emotionally, while being given the appropriate accommodations in order to learn. Most importantly, those students need to be respected and appreciated for all their personal differences (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Gaad, 2004). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) proposed that integration can take on three forms. Locational integration, which allows special needs students to attend mainstream schools. Social integration, which is the integration of special needs students with mainstream peers. Finally functional integration, which is the participation of students with special education needs within the learning activities that occur in the classroom

(Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Engelbrecht (2006) states that inclusion is culturally determined and depends on the political values and processes of the country for it to become effective. Even taking this into consideration, it is extremely important to realise that there is not just one perspective on inclusion within a single country or even within a specific school (Engelbrecht, 2006). In 2001, the South African Government promulgated Education White Paper 6: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System. This was intended to address the difficulties surrounding the inclusion of students with barriers to learning within the mainstream school (Engelbrecht, 2006). The only way to really determine if this policy has been effective is through the understanding and information gained from the one group of individuals who has constant contact with students with barriers to learning, namely the educators. This study is intended to focus on the perceptions of educators towards inclusive education. As Landsberg (2005) states perceptions are assumptions, beliefs and attitudes that are directly translated into actions and teaching practices and can be seen to inform decision making. The future success of inclusion policies in any country will ultimately depend on educators' perceptions towards inclusive education (Hammond et al., 2003; Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Educators have the ability to affect their students' emotional, social and intellectual development (Parasuram, 2006). Educators' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes influence their acceptance of the policy of inclusion and their commitment to implementing it (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Landsberg, 2005).

To fully understand the results of this study it is fundamental to understand the concept of a perception. Perceptions are the means by which we sense the world we live in and so it is the basis of our basic human functioning (Wylde, 2007). The way in which all individuals interpret the world is controlled by our unique perceptions (Wylde, 2007). In this research, perceptions will involve all aspects of how one senses the world, such as a person's personal attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and views.

When reviewing previous research done in this area, it is vital to see the importance of researching educators' perceptions towards inclusive education as perceptions have the ability to guide behaviour, attitudes and beliefs (Parasuram, 2006; Gaad, 2004). Hammond et al. (2003) highlighted the connection between educators' attitudes and the implementation of inclusion; however, they state that there is very little research that exists on educators' attitudes and namely perceptions towards inclusive education. This study aims to understand the perceptions of educators towards inclusive education which would assist in informing inclusive educational practices in South African schools. Restructuring of mainstream schooling is vital in order for all schools to be able to accommodate every child, irrespective of their specific special learning needs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Department of Education, 2001).

Rationale for study

The South African Education Department implemented Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) to address the rights of all South Africans regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, disease, culture or language to receive basic education and access to an education institution (Engelbrecht, 2006; Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). It aimed at providing training programmes in inclusive educational policies and strategies in order for educators to successfully implement inclusive education within the school (Department of Education, 2001).

There is limited research in the field of inclusive education in South Africa (Schimper, 2004; Wylde, 2007; Hays, 2009; Gordon, 2000; Christie, 1998). Furthermore, only a few studies have been conducted on educators' attitudes towards inclusive education in this country. These studies have mainly focussed on research samples from independent schools (Wylde, 2007; Schimper, 2004). This current study aims to add insight into educators' perceptions towards inclusion using a sample of government schools within the Gauteng area. The School Survey Checklist (Appendix C) could also contribute to future research which looks at the link between resources of a school and educators' perceptions towards inclusive education.

South African research has stressed the importance for educators to attend training programmes involved in inclusive education practices (Amod, 2004; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). The Department of Education (2001) stated the importance of training educators in order for inclusive education to become successful however, little to no research has been conducted in the last few years to assess the impact of these training programmes that have been implemented in South Africa. Research has not focused on educators' perceptions on the effectiveness of training programmes implemented within South Africa. The current study provides data on the training that has occurred within a sample of schools in Gauteng, and this could lead to further research being conducted within this area. It is extremely important for further research to be conducted on training programmes as they have a direct influence on educators who are the implementers of inclusive education.

Education White Paper 6 is intended to focus on recognising the needs of all learners and overcoming barriers that may hinder optimal learning (Department of Education, 2001). There are many factors that affect and create difficulties in fully implementing inclusive education policies within the South African context. This study aims to explore the factors that educators perceive to influence their ability to implement inclusive education policies. This is vital as this policy has a 20 year plan and this year it is almost mid-way through the implementation of inclusive education as outlined in Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001).

Theoretical background

Inclusive education means different things to different individuals in different contexts, however there are some commonalities. These being a commitment to building a more just society, a commitment to building a more equitable education system and a conviction that the extension of the responsiveness of mainstream schools to students' diverse barriers to learning can offer a means of translating these commitments into a reality (Engelbrecht, Green, Swart & Muthukrishna, 2001). Inclusive education is meant to not only offer individual students educational equality, but also social, economic and political equality regardless of that student's intelligence, disability, gender, race, ethnicity and social background (Shongwe, 2005).

As this study focuses on educators' perceptions towards inclusive education it is necessary to look at those perceptions that they may bring into the classroom. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, people create perceptions based on reality as well as subjective experiences (Hays, 2009). This allows this current study to gain an understanding of the reality of educators' reality of teaching students with barriers to learning while taking into account their own subjective

accounts. In terms of the barriers to learning that will be discussed in this study it is vital to define what

„Barriers to learning“ involve. „Barriers to learning“ involve both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that can either prevent optimal learning or that can lessen the extent to which learners can benefit from education (Amod, 2003). „Barriers to learning“ are seen to result from pervasive social conditions and attitudes, inappropriate education policies, unhelpful family or school conditions, or a classroom situation that does not match the learning needs of a particular student (Booth, 1999; Engelbrecht, Green, Naicker & Engelbrecht, 1999). In the past „disability“ was one of the many factors that caused segregation within schools. Disability is referred to as an affliction from which a minority of individuals may suffer and is often attributed to physical and medical causes, however, different cultures and countries will have different views on disability (Engelbrecht et al., 1999).

International perspective on inclusive education

Inclusive education is not a newly formulated goal; it emerged many years ago on an international level. Inclusive education has become an important international policy issue of the past decade (Frederickson, Dunsmuir, Lang & Monsen, 2003). To fully understand inclusive education it is important to discuss the history of inclusive education found in the literature.

International United Nations“ policies that affirm the right of all children to receive equal education without discrimination include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), and the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) (Florian, 1998). The most commonly discussed and fundamental policy was the Salamanca Statement, which will be discussed in more detail. At the Jomtiem Conference in 1990, the United Nations adopted the term “education for all” to dictate the growth and movement that is needed for universal rights in education (Booth, 1999). The most fundamental and revolutionary act towards inclusive education was formulated at the World Conference on Special Education. This occurred in 1994, where representatives from 92 countries signed the Salamanca Statement, which called on all Governments of those countries to adopt the principle of inclusive education (Frederickson et al., 2003). This statement requires governments to enrol all students in regular schools unless there are valid reasons for not doing so (Frederickson et al., 2003; Smith & Thomas, 2006). This statement describes inclusion as not only being about reconstructing provision for students with disabilities, but it also implies extending educational opportunities to a wide range of marginalised groups who may have historically had little to no access to schooling institutions (Gordon, 2000).

In many countries over the past decade, the inclusion of students with barriers to learning has become a key government policy objective due to the Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001 (Smith & Thomas, 2006). Internationally, most legislative frameworks have now included inclusion into their educational laws. In 1985, the Greek education system started to implement special classes within the schools, which allowed students with learning difficulties of a moderate to severe level to be incorporated when parental consent was obtained (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). In America in 2001, the „No Child Left Behind Act“ was formulated to guide educators in reconstructing the academic content for students with special education needs in line

with local and state-wide grade level standards for students with no special education needs (Cushing, Clark,

Carter, & Kennedy, 2005). In 2004, the Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA), was formed to make provisions for students with physical disabilities, cognitive difficulties and behavioural disorders to be taught in mainstream classrooms (Hays, 2009). In the UK, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act stated that students need to be educated in a mainstream school unless parental wishes differ or if fellow students' education gets compromised (Frederickson et al., 2003).

International studies have focussed on the inclusion of particular students within the mainstream schooling system. These studies particularly focussed on intellectual disabilities as being more „serious“ barriers to learning within the classroom (Gaad, 2004). In the United Arab Emirates this particular barrier to learning namely intellectual disabilities, were dealt with by placing those particular students into separate classes (Gaad, 2003). Intellectually disabled students were viewed as having different ability levels and therefore required different teaching methods and curriculum compared to other students. An international study conducted by Avramidis & Kalyva (2007), focused on the students' „disability“ as being the predominant barrier to learning. A study on Greek educators found that educators tended to have more negative attitudes towards students who were blind, deaf, had mild mental retardation or who had serious behavioural problems (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). In Cyprus, the two major factors that were seen to hinder inclusive education practices were the lack of infrastructure and a lack of knowledge, skill and confidence amongst their educators (Hays, 2009; Koutrouba et al., 2006). This resulted in Cyprus changing their legislation in order to adapt the attitudes of various role-players in the education system into accepting difference (Hays, 2009).

These countries mentioned above, all follow the Salamanca Statement however; even these countries that are committed to inclusive education face considerable difficulties, dilemmas and contradictions that often result in poor implementation (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). Through assessing international literature in the field of inclusive education, it is interesting to note that developed countries where resources are not scarce, like the USA, Australia, UK, Cyprus and Spain to name a few, educators' perceptions of the ability to cope was not based on resources. Educators in these studies reported knowledge, skills and experience as being fundamental aspects to the implementation of inclusive education (Hays, 2009). International legislation on inclusion aims at creating multilevel shifts in attitudes of all participants involved in the successful implementation of inclusive education (Koutrouba et al., 2006)..

Educators perceptions of inclusive education

Factors that may influence educators' perceptions towards inclusive education

Educators need to ensure that students with barriers to learning are provided with opportunities, just like other students, to construct and engage with knowledge necessary for living in society (Chappell, 2008). Many educators feel that teaching children with barriers to learning is beyond their area of expertise and so they should not be expected to teach those students without assistance (Engelbrecht, 2006; Gaad, 2004; Fox, 2003). Educators have reported several

obstacles that prevent the successful inclusion of all learners in the classroom; namely class size, lack of resources and teacher training (Lifshitz, Glaubman & Issawi, 2004). Past research has shown that regular educators lack the appropriate knowledge, support and assistance needed to effectively meet all the needs of their students (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Engelbrecht et al. (2003), identified five areas that are proposed to be the most stressful to educators, namely administrative issues, lack of appropriate support, issues relating to students behaviour, educators self perceived competence and a lack of interaction with parents of students. O'Rourke & Houghton (2008), found that the perceived lack of teaching expertise, limited allocated planning time and a limitation of resources were the most frequently raised concerns in relation to the implementation of inclusive education.

The perceived needs of educators who are seen to accommodate a diversity of learner needs in mainstream classes needs to be addressed (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). The failure to address the educators' needs and concerns may result in difficulties with the implementation of inclusive education as well as contribute to educator stress. Inclusive education aims to eliminate barriers to learning which are inherent in the system itself, which may consist of physical barriers to access, curriculum barriers or barriers that are created by the climate of the learning environment, to name a few (Engelbrecht et al., 2001). The barriers educators experience in implementing inclusive education practices will be discussed in detail as it often affects perceptions towards inclusion.

Teacher attitudes towards inclusive education

Landsberg (2005) states that assumptions, beliefs and attitudes are directly translated into actions and teaching practices and can also then inform decision making. Attitudes are defined as educators' positive or negative perceptions of what is happening within their classroom with regard to the students who have barriers to learning (Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi & Shelton, 2004) 2009). It is fundamental to look at educators attitudes towards inclusive education and students with barriers to learning as it influences their perceptions as well as their behaviour, actions and as a result their teaching practices that will inform their decision making (Engelbrecht et al., 2001; Moolla, 2005). Attitudes are seen to be set once they are formed and are experienced to be very difficult to change, therefore if educators develop positive attitudes towards inclusion before they start teaching, then their attitudes towards implementing inclusive education will become more positive (Lambe & Bones, 2007). Research has indicated that educators often have very different definitions of inclusion and inclusive education, and the definition that they believe in is seen to affect the way educators implement inclusive practices in the classroom (Hays, 2009).

A limited number of studies have been conducted on the attitudes of educators towards inclusion in South Africa (Schimper, 2004; Wylde, 2007; Hays, 2009; Gordon, 2000; Christie, 1998). Research conducted by Schimper (2004) and Wylde (2007) reported that the majority of their respondents were positive towards inclusive education, and this indicated the educators dedication to the underlying rationale for the practice of inclusive education. Studies that have been done on educators attitudes towards inclusive education have suggested that attitudes are strongly influenced by the nature of the students disabilities. Educators were seen to be more positive towards including learners with barriers to learning do not require extra instructional or

management skills on the part of the educator (Engelbrecht et al., 2003; Hays, 2009). There is evidence that suggests that educators' improved positive self-evaluation regarding their ability to teach students with barriers to learning was associated with higher positive attitudes towards inclusive education (Lifshitz et al., 2004).

Another possible reason why inclusion has struggled in South Africa is due to the African culture and beliefs on disabilities (Gaad, 2004). Many Africans associate disabilities with witchcraft, juju or as a phenomenon of God mediated forces. Many negative attitudes towards disabilities stem from these previously held misconceptions and the lack of proper understanding towards the medical side of disabilities (Gaad, 2004). These perceptions may filter down into the community, school and the educators whose attitudes and perceptions could hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education (Gaad, 2004).

Educator Stress

Educator stress is best described as a complex process that involves an interaction between the educator and the environment that includes a stressor(s) and a response (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). This is seen to involve unpleasant emotions such as tension, frustration, anxiety, anger as well as depression (Engelbrecht et al., 2003; Moolla, 2005). Educators are seen to experience four types of stress in terms of their profession. These being namely, difficulties with learners, time pressures, poor ethos due to poor staff relations and poor working conditions (Engelbrecht et al., 2003; Engelbrecht, 2006; Moolla, 2005). The implementation of inclusive education could be seen to place additional demands on educators, potentially causing stress. It is assumed that educator stress will be reduced if there are minimal discrepancies between educators' perceptions of the availability of resources and support and their perceived need for those resources and support that are seen to be used in an inclusive educational environment (Engelbrecht et al., 2003).

Curriculum related issues

The curriculum within a school reflects the economic, social and cultural conditions of the community and gives all members of society a voice (Chappell, 2008). However, this is not always that easy to achieve. Educators were expected to shift their teaching to Outcomes Based Education (OBE), this resulted in many educators feeling overwhelmed, frustrated and helpless due to the changes that occurred (Engelbrecht et al., 2001). OBE is „inclusive“ by nature and focuses on students learning at their own pace, and takes into consideration the barriers to learning found in the classroom (Hays, 2009; Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). Educators became concerned and worried about meeting governmental standards that the Educational Department emphasised and then also meeting the individualised goals for each special needs student (Cushing et al., 2005). The governmental standards educators need to meet involves the adapting of the Government Curriculum as well as their teaching styles in order for inclusion to become successful (Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Engelbrecht et al., 1999). Research has indicated that educators are generally too inexperienced to be able to handle the demands of the new curriculum (Curriculum 2005), and this could result in educators being reluctant to introduce new concepts and approaches to their teaching (Hays, 2009). Recently, Curriculum 2005 has changed and this may require educators to once again adapt themselves to further changes. This

is due to many educators perceiving themselves as incapable of managing diverse classrooms (Hays, 2009).

The curriculum is classified as an inflexible standard, which results in the lack of relevance of subject content to all students. This could result in high levels of failures and drop outs (Department of Education, 2001; Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). The curriculum is seen to be an external barrier to learning and it therefore obliges educators to use different teaching methods to address these concerns (Hays, 2009). Therefore, curriculum differentiation is a vitally important aspect to assist in the effective implementation of inclusive education (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). Ghesquiere, Moors, Maes and Vanddenberghe (2002) indicated that educators differentiated teaching methods in the hope of differentiating the curriculum; however, the educators in their study did not adapt the goals, content and evaluation methods to each individual need. Avramidis et al. (2000), reported that educators perceived material resources as vital components in adapting the curriculum to students with different barriers to learning. Changes to existing educational aids are fundamental to enable students to participate in classroom activities and routines (Hays, 2009; Wylde, 2007).

O'Rourke & Houghton (2008) and Moolla (2005) mentioned mechanisms or skills that are effective in the implementation of inclusive education, these being co-operative learning, explicit and individualised instruction, peer support, curriculum differentiation and instructional strategies as well as teacher collaboration. Shongwe (2005) reported the following effective strategies for teaching in an inclusive classroom, namely group work, which provides support for students with barriers to learning from their educators and their peers in the classroom. Group work may also create a better understanding of cooperative learning and is beneficial to effective classroom management (Shongwe, 2005). Fox (2003) stated that if educators used a structured teaching style, and appropriate support was provided, then the successful inclusion of students, irrespective of the type or severity of their barrier to learning is possible.

Training issues

In South Africa, teacher education has been characterised by fragmentation and involves deep disparities in both duration and quality (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). Many educators are seen to be disadvantaged due to their poor quality of their training within the field (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). Research has indicated the need for professional development including initial teacher training and continued professional development as being central to the effective development of inclusive practices (Avramidis et al., 2000; Pearson & Chambers, 2005).

In the past, in-service training was predominantly provided by universities, teacher training colleges and non-governmental or private organisations (Logan, 2002). These were generally uncoordinated with no clear overall policy guidelines formulated by government education departments (Logan, 2002). This resulted in educators determining their own development programmes to be able to meet the needs and knowledge necessary (Logan, 2002). The problems found with these in-service training programmes were that they were predominantly inaccessible to all educators in South Africa; this was due to their cost, entry criteria and qualifications, language proficiency of the educators, travelling costs as well as the workload (Logan, 2002).

All of these factors mentioned created barriers that prevented educators from benefiting from these training services.

Internationally funded government programmes within South Africa like The Danish Development Agency (DANIDA project) and the South African-Finnish Co-operation Programme in the Education Sector (SCOPE) funded various in-service programmes in which a cascade model was used to introduce and support inclusive education in several South African provinces (Amod, 2004; Logan, 2002). The cascade model was designed for one or two representatives from each school to attend the programmes and then relate the knowledge and skills they learnt to their fellow colleagues (Engelbrecht, 2006). Problems occurred when representatives had to transfer their knowledge and skills to their colleagues, who often seemed disinterested in the activity or time constraints made it impossible to relay all the information (Engelbrecht, 2006). Another cause for the poor outcomes of training programmes in South Africa has been poor teacher collaboration, which has resulted in educators working in isolation (Logan, 2002). The absence of a team or whole school approach in many school districts results in external professional development courses being restricted to individual educators and classrooms; this resulted in small pockets of students benefiting (Logan, 2002).

Studies have shown that professional development courses on inclusive education have resulted in less resistance towards inclusive practices by educators and a reduction in educators stress levels when coping with inclusion (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). Educators' prior knowledge of inclusive education from pre-service training, as well as in-service training were found to have more positive attitudes towards inclusion than teachers who had not gained that knowledge (Downing & Williams, 1997; Hays, 2009; Logan, 2002; Wylde, 2007). Training that involves administrative issues surrounding inclusive education, exposure to the best inclusive practices, collaboration with colleagues and parents, as well as the availability of support structures are viewed as fundamental aspects of educator training in inclusive education (Amod, 2004; Engelbrecht et al., 2003). Engelbrecht et al. (2003) stated that educators should be provided with extensive training in managing emotional and behavioural problems of students in the classroom in an attempt to address barriers to learning within the classroom.

Educators that were trained to teach students with barriers to learning expressed more positive attitudes towards inclusion compared to educators that had not had any previous training (Lambe & Bones, 2007; Lifshitz et al., 2004). Research has suggested that students who complete a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course have very different school experiences and are often exposed to different levels of barriers to learning in the classroom, which has resulted those universities to assess their training course to allow all educators to be exposed to the same teaching experiences (Pearson & Chambers, 2005). The researchers of this study found that students were largely positive about the principle of inclusion, however, challenged by the implementation of the policies. Emotional and behavioural changes were seen to occur when educators were informed and exposed to practical experiences involving disabilities and barriers to learning (Lifshitz et al., 2004). A study conducted by Lambe and Bones (2006) found that positive attitudes are seen in student educators at the start of their pre-service training, it concluded that educators attitudes should be nurtured during that period and this could be done by the provision of high quality training.

Research conducted by Engelbrecht (2006) found that in-service training for South African educators was fragmented and short term and often lacked in-depth content and knowledge. These training programmes often do not take into consideration the unique contextual influences of each school. The National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA) criticised the trainers of many of these programmes for discouraging educators from being critical and asking questions within the training programmes (Logan, 2002). Inclusive education would be a difficult task if there is no future education and training for educators. This is due to the proven fact that educators' perceptions or attitudes become more favourable and positive with more training in the inclusive policies and skills (Amod, 2004; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Thomas et al., 1998). A study completed by Scott (2006), reflected the frustration educators felt towards promised classroom support and curriculum training by the government. As these studies mentioned above purely focused on educators' perceptions of the training courses, this study needs to take into consideration that perceptions represent subjective experiences and not always reality. Educators may have had excellent training in reality but they may have perceived it to be insufficient and unhelpful (Hays, 2009; Logan, 2002). The researcher reiterates the views of others such as Logan (2002) and Moolla (2005) on how possible training in South Africa can become given the large amount of educators needing training with the limited financial resources available.

Support structures and systems

In the past, the inadequate resources provided to mainstream education was seen to be the cause of educational stress for educators interested in helping students with special needs (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). The active involvement of parents is a central factor in the child's effective learning and development (Amod, 2004; Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Hammond et al., 2003; Engelbrecht et al., 2003). The South African Schools Act mentions the recognition of parents as the primary caregivers of their children and therefore they are the central resource to the education system. This however, does not occur frequently in government schools and educators report the increase of stress surrounding the limited contact with parents of students especially with intellectual disabilities. The socio-economic status of the parents was seen to be the main contributor of parents' lack of involvement with their child's education (Amod, 2004; Engelbrecht et al., 2003). The reasons for this may be due to the difficulty for parents to attend after school meetings, parents who work long distances away from home as well as poor health affecting their ability to get involved in school activities. In poorer communities, educators need to take initiative to reach out to parents to make them a part of the school community (Engelbrecht et al., 2003).

The support provided to educators, namely from parents, principals, colleagues and special needs educators is often lacking in schools or just ineffective in helping the educators deal with the pressures of inclusive education (Hammond et al., 2003; Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Educators have reported the need for consultation with other professionals namely psychologists, speech and language therapists to name a few (Moolla, 2005; Shongwe, 2005). Engelbrecht et al. (2001) and Amod (2004) mentioned the enabling structures and mechanisms that could be put into place to help support educators. These include the establishment of school-based support teams (SBST), district support teams (DST), special schools as resources, School Governing Body (SGB), School-Based Staff Development Programmes (SBSDT) as well as the use of local

community resources, and learner-to-learner support. A study completed by Avramidis et al. (2000), reported that 56% of educators stated they needed more support with students with barriers to learning, this was not just more people in the class (extra teachers) but a stronger Special Educational Needs Department and Learning Support Team. Students with barriers to learning are often seen to require social support in an inclusive classroom. This is broadly viewed as the process by which individuals feel valued, cared for, and connected to a group of people which as a result will shape that individuals values, belief systems and thought processes (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001). The sense of belonging and membership at school, receiving instrumental assistance and emotional support from key members in ones social network, impacts positively on the social well being of students with barriers to learning (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Wylde, 2007). Research indicates that inclusive classrooms promote reciprocal friendships between students with learning difficulties and their peers, and this then enhances students social satisfaction at school (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Shongwe, 2005). However, there is conflicting research that indicates that inclusive education could be disastrous to disabled peers, detrimental to students with no barriers to learning and students with barriers to learning may suffer from peer rejection and inferiority complexes (Shongwe, 2005; Wylde, 2007).

Studies have reported that students without any particular barriers to learning become more accepting, understanding and acknowledge similarities with students with special educational needs when they are exposed to them in the classroom (Downing & Williams, 1997). These students become more aware of other children's needs, more comfortable around people with disabilities, more accepting of differences as well as an improved social and emotional development (Downing & Williams, 1997; Hays, 2009). However, even though inclusive education can be a positive factor to students with no barriers to learning, it is also reported to be detrimental to these students at times (Shongwe, 2005). This can be due to parents reporting educators' lack of time spent assisting all learners in the class (Shongwe, 2005).

Educators personal characteristics

Research has shown mixed views on the relationship between educators' age and gender and their views towards inclusive education. Avramidis et al. (2000) stated that none of those variables were

found to be significantly related to educators' attitudes. Research conducted in South Africa did not produce any significant relationships between the age of the educator and their attitudes towards inclusive education (Wylde, 2007). In contrast Parasuram (2006) reported that educators in the age range of 20-30 years had more positive attitudes towards inclusion compared to 40-50 year olds (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Christie, 1998). This could be due to the younger generation being exposed to changes such as globalisation, information technology and internet growth (Parasuram, 2006). Some studies found that woman tend to have more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities (Parasuram, 2006; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002), while others reported that gender was not related to attitudes towards inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Research has also shown mixed views on the relationship between the number of years of teaching experience and educators' views towards inclusive education. According to a study reported by Parasuram (2006), educators who had 5-10 years experience had more favourable or positive attitudes compared to those with 10 to 12 years experience. A recent study conducted in South Africa showed that educators who had been teaching for 12 years or more really struggled to change their perceptions towards effective teaching methods (Scott, 2006). The inability to adapt their teaching methods can result in added stress for educators which could possibly result in negative perceptions towards inclusive education (Scott, 2006; Lambe & Bones, 2007). The amount of years educators have been in contact with special education needs students is also an important factor to consider (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Lambe & Bones, 2007; Avramidis, et al., 2000; Hays, 2009). Avramidis & Norwich (2002), found that the more experience educators had with special needs students the more favourable their attitudes towards inclusion tended to be and the more confident the educators became. However, according to a study conducted by Moolla (2005), the majority of educators reported limited experience working with students with barriers to learning and this resulted in educators' lack of confidence to teaching in new situations.

Class size

A very commonly reported barrier to effective learning in an inclusive classroom is class size (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Shongwe, 2005; Wylde, 2007). The more students with barriers to learning in a class, the less time is given to all the other students as majority of special education needs students need more one-on-one time from the educators (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Avramidis et al. (2000) reported that educators agreed that class size should be reduced to 20 students per class, in order to allow for the effective implementation of inclusive education. Educators also may struggle with too many students as the discipline and behaviour issues become more of a problem. Many of the barriers to learning mentioned above relate to the insufficient allocated time educators have in order to fully address inclusive education practices, namely time to plan the following day and time to adapt the curriculum in order to address the students with barriers to learning (Avramidis, et al., 2000).

Due to all these barriers to learning mentioned above, it can be seen that it is vital to take into account the unique context of the school when planning and developing inclusive educational programmes (Engelbrecht, 2006). Research has indicated that while educators support inclusive education on the whole, many have concerns regarding its implementation (Amod, 2004; Hays, 2009). Salisbury (2006, pg. 70) states "The capacity of schools to address the diverse needs of students who differ in their ability, language, culture and socio-economic standing will require that schools alter not only their structures, policies and practices, but the underlying philosophy of the school and the attitudes and beliefs of school personnel".

Conclusion

In some international government schools where inclusive education is a law, there are many examples where students with barriers to learning are fully included and successful. However, most of the time the implementation of these policies is the real challenge (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). Without a strong view on the development of an inclusive education and training system for educators, the goal of implementing inclusive education throughout South Africa will not

become a reality (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001; Hays, 2009). Education White paper 6 defined one aspect of inclusive education and training that is vitally important in this research. This is the ability to change perceptions, attitudes, behaviour, teaching methods, curricula and the environment in order to meet the needs for all students (Department of Education, 2001). This study aims to research the perceptions of educators as perceptions can only be changed if you know what they are to begin with and by changing people's perceptions often their behaviour can be changed as well. The way that inclusion is perceived by educators is seen to impact significantly on the way students' barriers to learning are perceived and addressed.

Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used within the research study. It begins by describing the aims and methods used for the investigation and then describe the methodology used in the study.

Aims and Research Questions

The aim of this research study was: To explore educators' perceptions towards inclusive education.

The specific research questions in relation to the above aim of the study were:

What are the educators' views and understanding of inclusive education within a sample of government primary schools?

What do educators perceive to be barriers to learning within the classroom?

What are the skills educators think they need in order to implement inclusive education?

What are the support structures educators use to assist them in the implementation of inclusive education?

What are the training programmes educators have participated in involving inclusive education and their perceptions of these training programmes?

What are other training programmes educators would like to assist them in implementing inclusive education?

Is there a relationship between the number of years of teaching experience and the perceptions of educators towards inclusive education?

Context of the study

In the current study six government primary schools in the Gauteng region participated in the research. Government schools were used within this study as they follow the policy of Education White Paper 6: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of education 2001). These six schools selected were from the Johannesburg East District and were all located in the northern suburbs of Gauteng. These schools had different numbers of educators who taught from Grade 0 to Grade 9 in a co-ed environment. According to the School Survey Checklist, all the schools fall within a similar socio-economic bracket in terms of resources present at each school. Many of the schools in this current study do not have specialised professionals at the school, however, they stated that they have professionals to whom they refer

students and with whom they communicate with on a regular basis. All the schools in this study indicated that they had no ramps for wheelchairs, and this will be discussed in terms of barriers to learning within the discussion section. The schools were not consistent with the relation of the number of students per educator within a class, and as a result this fluctuated between less than 30 students to one educator to 40 students per one educator, the average being in the range of one educator per 30 to 35 students. The results of the ratio of students per class teacher will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Research Design

As the aim of this study was to explore educators' perceptions towards inclusive education, a qualitative research design approach appeared to be the appropriate strategy to use. The aim of a qualitative research design is to understand experiences as they are „lived“ or „felt“ according to each individual (Sherman & Webb, 1988). The research was a non-experimental, descriptive study that used a survey approach to explore the perceptions of educators towards inclusive education. The non-experimental design described by Terre Blanche & Durrheim (2002) was used to meet the descriptive nature and aims of the study.

Sampling

A non-probability sampling method of convenience sampling (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002) was used and the sample was chosen according to their geographic location. This is due to the study's aim to focus on a wide range of government primary schools in the Gauteng region. The sample size of this study was aimed at approximately 100 educators in total, from the selected ten government primary schools in Gauteng. However, after all questionnaires were collected from the schools only six schools had collected completed the Inclusive Education Questionnaires (Appendix B) while the other four schools responded that the educators were too busy and none had responded. After collecting all the completed forms from the six schools, only forty Inclusive Education Questionnaires (Appendix B) were collected in total.

In relation to sample description, there were equal amounts of educators from the ages of 20 – 30 years as there were educators above the age of 30 years. The majority of the sample (53%) of the sample had less than 5 years of teaching experience and had been teaching at their current school for less than 5 years (70%).

Instruments

The principals of the government primary schools that participated in the study completed the School Survey Checklist, which involved a checklist of resources available in the school and the demographic data of each school (Appendix E). Each Checklist was allocated a unique two digit code that was then placed on the Inclusive Education Surveys that the educators completed. This was used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants as no identifying information was required. The School Survey Checklists took approximately five minutes to complete by each principal. The questions included the number of learners in the school, the teacher-pupil ratio, physical resources, teaching materials and human resources that are present in the school. This helped form part of the demographic data for each school that participated in this research study.

The educators who participated in this study completed the Inclusive Education Questionnaire, which was a self adapted questionnaire that involved different aspects related to the implementation of inclusive education. Internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach Alpha coefficient (Huck, 2004). Initially the result of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was 0.65 which is a weak result according to the reliability of the test. The researcher removed Question i and j from the analysis which related to the perception of inclusive education being successful at different schools. The therapist then reran the reliability which yielded a more positive Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.8. The questionnaire consisted of three biographical questions to describe the sample: the number of years the participants had been teaching, the number of years they had been teaching at their current school and their age range. Each Inclusive Education Questionnaire that was administered was given a unique two digit code (same as the one used on the School Survey Checklist) and a unique number that gave each questionnaire a separate coding system. The questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

The questionnaire was based on previous questionnaires developed by Schimper (2004) and subsequently used by Wylde (2007). The questionnaire originally devised by Schimper (2004) consisted of a 44 questions based on a Likert type scale. The quantitative type questions (question 5 of the Inclusive Education Questionnaire) were adapted from Wylde's (2007) Inclusion Questionnaire. Fifteen questions from Wylde's (2007) questionnaire were chosen as they aimed at addressing necessary perceptions towards inclusive education. Question 5 of the Inclusive Education Questionnaire is broken up into 15 questions (from a to o). These questions are Likert type questions on a five point rating scale going from strongly agree (which indicates negative perceptions) to strongly disagree (which indicates positive perceptions). Three of these questions, namely question c, h, and i are of a reverse scoring nature and will relate strongly agree to more positive perceptions and vice versa. The reverse scoring questions will be reversed when they are analysed, to prevent any misunderstandings.

The qualitative questions devised involved the educators' perceptions of inclusive education, barriers to learning, skills necessary for inclusive educational practices as well as perceptions on the training programmes educators have attended. In Section B of the Inclusive Education Questionnaire open ended questions were formulated in order to gain a better understanding of educators' perceptions towards inclusive education. Question 1, 2 and 5 addressed Research Question 1 in order to gain information on the views and understanding educators had towards inclusive education. Question 3 and 4 addressed Research Question 2 which gained insight into the educators' perceived barriers to learning that they find within the classroom. Question 6 and 7 addressed Research Question 3 as it looked at the skills necessary for inclusive education to be successful. Question 8 addressed Research Question 4 which looked at the support structures of the school, Question 9 and 10 addressed Research Question 5 and Question 11 addressed Research Question 6 which both looked at the training programmes on inclusive education. Research Question 7 looked at the demographic data obtained from each participant and then analysed the results to educators' perceptions towards inclusive education.

Pilot testing was completed on a sample of six educators from government primary schools that were not part of the sample used in the study. The pilot testing assisted the researcher to make modifications to the questionnaire based on the educators' written and verbal comments. Pilot testing of the questionnaire indicated that the questions were fairly easy to understand and no modifications to the language were necessary. The sample used in the pilot testing were all recently qualified educators and as a result reported pre-service training was received in the past year. However, after data analysis the researcher realised that Question 9a should have been adapted to include any training done and not just in the past year. The pilot study also indicated the need to allocate the participants more time to complete the questionnaire as many of the educators responded that it took them longer than 30 minutes to complete. Participants of this study were then allocated two weeks to complete the questionnaire, as the educators did not have 30 minutes or more to complete the questionnaire with the researcher present.

Procedure

The procedure for the study was:

An open ended questionnaire (with a quantitative question) was designed to investigate the perceptions of educators towards inclusive education. (See Appendix B)

Written permission to conduct the study was gained from the Gauteng Department of Education research officials. (See Appendix G)

The principals of the schools selected for the sample were approached telephonically to determine whether they were willing to allow their educators to participate in the study.

Once permission was obtained from the principals, they were handed the Principal Information Sheet (See Appendix C) and requested to sign the Principal Consent Form (See Appendix D) and complete the School Survey Checklist. (See Appendix E)

Each School Survey Checklist was given a two digit coding system that assisted the researcher in identifying each school and the relevant data that was obtained from the educators.

Once consent was obtained from the principals, a meeting was held with the educators of each school. In this meeting an overview of the research study was presented to the educators by the researcher. Request for participation in the study was strictly on a volunteer basis.

Educators that wished to partake in the study were handed the Participant Information Sheet (See Appendix A) as well as the Inclusive Education Questionnaire. (See Appendix B)

Due to school time constraints the researcher was allocated 30 minutes with the educators to discuss the study and allow the educators to fill in the Inclusive Education Questionnaire. Educators took the questionnaires with them and were requested to place them in the sealed box that was placed in each staff room. Consent for educators' participation in the study was obtained by them completing the Inclusive Education Questionnaire (Appendix B).

Completed questionnaires were placed in the allocated box and collected by the researcher two week later. All completed questionnaires were then allocated a code to correlate with the School Survey Checklist (Appendix E) completed by the principals. The coding system was assigned to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Once all of the data was collected it was analysed and all information obtained was kept confidential and only seen by the researcher and the supervisor.

Data Analysis

The final results of this study were analysed using qualitative analysis and a number of appropriate statistical tests. The open ended questions of the Inclusive Education Questionnaire were analysed qualitatively by examining and categorising the results into themes for further description and analysis. Thematic content analysis was used as it emphasises both the commonalities and the differences found in the educators' responses and relates them to the dominant themes found within the research (Breakwell, Hammond, Fife-Schaw & Smith, 2006). Thematic content analysis was used to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within a set of data. It is able to minimally organise and describe the data set in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to increase the validity and reliability of the results, data was analysed by reading and re-reading the questionnaire responses, assigning codes to portions of the data and then identifying emerging themes (Maxwell, 1992). The researcher reached theoretical saturation when no more new themes emerged from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The quantitative section was analysed using a variety of statistical tests. For analysis of the descriptive statistics, Statistical Analysis System (SAS) was used. Descriptive statistics, as outlined in Howell (2002), was used to describe the set of data that had been obtained from the results of the questionnaire. Question 5 of the questionnaire comprised of Likert-Type questions in which educators rated their perceptions of certain aspects of inclusive education from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Before responses from the Likert-Type scale could be analysed, all items that were negatively phrased were reversed, for example, "strongly disagree" was changed to 1, "disagree" to 2, "agree" to 4 and "strongly agree" to 5. Only the "neutral" rating did not change. With this reversal, any score that is above 3.5 is considered to be a positive response whereas a score below 2.5 is considered to be a negative response.

When comparing the number of years teaching, number of years teaching at the present school and age of the educators with educators overall perceptions towards inclusive education, a parametric test (t-test) was used. A t-test was run, as the data was interval data, and a test for normality was checked as well as a test for homogeneity in variance was tested which all indicated that a parametric test should be utilised. The categories for the number of years teaching was compressed to two categories, namely less than 10 years and 11 years and above. The categories for the number of years teaching at the present school were also compressed to two categories, namely less than 5 years and more than 6 years. Then finally the categories for the ages of the participants were compressed to two categories, namely below 30 years of age and above 30 years of age. Each of these categories described above became the independent variable for the analysis.