AN INVESTIGATION OF TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN A RURAL PRIMARY MAINSTREAM SCHOOL IN ESTCOURT, KWAZULU-NATAL

By

Sibusisiwe Thelma Zondi

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Education University of KwaZulu-Natal

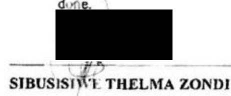
Supervisor: Dr Melanie Martin

December 2022

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, **Sibusisiwe Thelma Zondi,** declare that:

1. The work contained in this study, except where I indicated, is my original work.
2. This study has not been submitted to any other institution for any degree or examination.
3. This study does not contain any other person's data, diagrams or graphs; if it does, it is acknowledged as being taken from other sources.
4. The words from other researchers have been used both as direct quotes and re-phrased. However, references and acknowledgement of others' work have been done.



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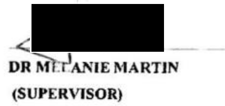

DR MELANIE MARTIN — 28 February 2023 — **DATE**
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ETHICAL CLEARANCE

10 February 2021

Miss Sibusisiwe Thelma Zondi (211545143)
School Of Education
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Miss Zondi,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00002303/2021
Project title: An investigation of teachers experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in a rural primary mainstream school in Estcourt, Kwa Zulu- Natal.
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 12 January 2021 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 10 February 2022.
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,

Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

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INSPIRING GREATNESS

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I am grateful to my family, especially my daughter, Nolwazi S'phesihle, who supported me throughout this arduous journey. I am grateful for your steadfast support.

Finally, my special thanks go to my friends and colleagues, who encouraged me when all hope of finishing had dissipated and kept me going.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my late mother, Elsie Margaret (Kina) Zondi and my daughter, Nolwazi S'phesihle Mbonambi.

ACRONYMS

ACE	Advanced Certificate in Education
ANA	Annual National Assessments
ATPs	Annual Teaching Plans
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
DBST	District-Based Support Team
EFA	Education for All
EFAL	English First Additional Language
GET	General Education and Training
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HOD	Head of Department
ILST	Institutional-Level Support Team
ILST	Institutional Level Support Team
KZNDoE	KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education
NPDE	National Professional Diploma in Education
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PL1	Post Level 1
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
SIAS	Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support
SMT	School Management Team
SOS	Socially Responsible Society
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNISA	University of South Africa
USA	United States of America
WSDC	Whole School Development Committee

ABSTRACT

The importance of education as a fundamental human right was first declared by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (United Nations, 1948). To this end, this study sought to explore the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities in a rural primary school. Essentially, the intention was to explore the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influenced whether teachers could meet the educational needs of these learners, and how the teachers negotiated exclusionary factors to ensure that their learners' learned and succeeded. The study adopted the qualitative approach and was located within the critical paradigm. The study generated the data to respond to the key research questions using telephonic semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews.

The findings of the study revealed that teachers had different understandings of inclusive education. However, what was common was that inclusive education was understood as an aspect of accommodating all learners and ensuring that they can learn and succeed. Teachers reported a range of factors which made it difficult for them to effectively implement inclusive education for learners with learning disabilities, including inadequate skills arising from the lack of training; overcrowding in their classes; tensions between curriculum coverage and teaching at the pace of learners; effects of the outbreak of COVID-19; discrepancies in parents' understandings of inclusive education; and inadequate parental involvement. Although the teachers reported experiencing a range of challenges and frustrations in ensuring that learners with learning disabilities had access to education, they did not give up on their learners.

The findings point to the opportunity provided by the agency and the willingness of the teachers to ensure that learners with learning disabilities learned and succeeded. However, it also points to challenges and tensions that must be addressed to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education. This suggests the interactional dynamics between inclusion and exclusion as two sides of the same coin, which must always be kept in mind if the implementation of inclusive education is to be effective.

Keywords: inclusive education; learning disability; exclusionary and inclusionary factors

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

"*If a child can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn*"
Ignacio Estrada.

1.1 Introduction and background

The right to education is an enabling right necessary for access to and the achievement of other rights (UNICEF, 2007). The significance of education as an essential human right was first established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (United Nations, 1948). In the same year in South Africa, the National Party won the polls, ushering in an era that legitimised exclusion, racial prejudice and racism (Mulaudzi, 2022). This decision to legitimise exclusion and segregation disenfranchised a significant proportion of the country's citizenry in many respects. For instance, the education of black children with disabilities received lesser attention than that of their white peers (Department of Education, 1997). In addition, black children with disabilities, who were 'lucky' to be admitted to a school, were often pushed into special schools, often far away from their families and communities (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

As South Africa transitioned away from apartheid to democracy in 1994, this historical pattern of unequal education, placed the democratic government under immense pressure to ensure that everyone could enjoy their right to education (Levy et al., 2021; Tomlin, 2016), in terms of section 29 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). As part of the country's efforts to ensure access to education, the democratic government reinstated its affiliation to international declarations, treaties and conventions (Kilkelly & Liefaard, 2019). This was followed by a raft of legislation and policies which sought to give expression to these instruments, as the country was welcomed back into the international community (Mulaudzi, 2022).

In respect of the necessity for inclusivity, as expressed in Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the government set out to adjust policies and legislation to lay the foundations for a democratic South Africa and enhance the living standards of citizens (Republic of South Africa, 1996). For instance, in respect of education, the White Paper on Education and Training prioritised education and located it within the democratic government's national Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (Department of Education, 1995). The White Paper intended to dismantle the exclusionary education bureaucracy and replace it with an inclusive education and training system, which would cater to and accommodate the needs of all learners, including learners with disabilities, learners from low socio-economic backgrounds as well as learners from diverse cultures (Department of Education, 1995; 2001; Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

In line with the above, in July 2001, South Africa promulgated Education White Paper 6, which is the policy on inclusive education (Department of Education, 2001). Education White Paper 6 intended to overhaul the dual education system of special and mainstream education and build inclusivity in the education and training system, which would cater for all learners, including those with disabilities (Department of Education, 2001). In other words, the policy on inclusive education sought to establish an education system that is inclusive in the sense that it would cater for the education needs of all learners, irrespective of their differences (Department of Education, 1997). The policy on inclusive education promised that the place of learners with disabilities will no longer be out of schools, but with their peers in schools in their communities (Department of Education, 1997).

1.2 Statement of the problem

The introduction of the policy on inclusive education in South Africa in July 2001 was an audacious move toward building an inclusive education and training system, which would lead to the learning and participation of all learners in education of adequate quality (Department of Education, 2001). For the country that had been providing education in a racially segregated manner, this was a tremendous breakthrough for all learners, especially black learners with disabilities, for whom education provisioning was inequitable (Department of Education, 1997). For instance, this move signalled a

breakaway from schooling that was segregated in terms of disability, and in which education provisioning in schools serving the learning requirements for black children was grossly inadequate (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001).

This was a far-reaching shift which required teachers to reflect on issues of access and the sources of learning difficulties or barriers to learning differently (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). This suggests that teachers were required to effect a paradigm shift away from thinking about learners from the assumptions that located barriers or difficulties in learning only within the learner, and to begin to interrogate and question systemic deficiencies and inefficiencies (Department of Education, 1997; Department of Education, 2001). As a result of this policy shift, there has been an increase in learners with disability numbers in public ordinary schools from 77 000 in 2002 to 121 461 in 2021 (Department of Basic Education, 2021). As Malahlela (2016) argues, this policy declared it acceptable for learners with learning disabilities, not only to be in schools but to share the common space with their so-called able-bodied peers in the same classrooms and schools. As argued by the World Health Organisation (2017), this was in line with the call to make education inclusive as a mechanism for responding to and addressing the exclusion of the learners who are most marginalised by education systems.

The inclusive education policy in South Africa underlines the inclusion and accommodation of all learners, including learners with learning disabilities (Engelbrecht et al., 2015). This policy gives expression to the requirements for the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, which replaced the Education Acts of the apartheid regime and underlines the requirement for all ordinary public schools to deliver education of good quality to all learners regardless of their differences (Republic of South Africa, 1996b). For instance, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 states that “a public school must admit learners and serve their educational requirements without unfairly discriminating in any way” (Department of Education, 1996b:2A-6).

However, research has shown that whilst learners have access, the question is the quality of education learners have access to (see, for example, Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Equal Education Law Centre, 2021). Often while learners with disabilities are

physically in the classrooms, they are not included academically because teachers are often unable to appropriately respond to their educational needs (see, for instance, Hay et al., 2021; Conway, 2017; Deghaye, 2021; Ndinisa, 2016). Other studies have reported that teachers often face a range of difficulties when implementing the policy of inclusive education and in ensuring that their learners are accommodated and included (see, for instance, Raphadu, 2021; Majoko & Phasha, 2018; Dreyer, 2017; Andrews et al., 2019). This suggests that, although the policy on inclusive education was welcomed as a mechanism for ensuring that all learners enjoy their constitutional right to education, implementation has not yielded the expected results. For instance, as argued by Donohue and Bornman (2014), implementation has not led to the inclusion of all learners, especially learners with disabilities.

The purpose of the research study is to explore the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities in a rural primary school. Essentially, the aim was to explore the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influenced the level to which teachers could meet the learning needs of learners with learning disabilities within a mainstream primary schooling setting. Furthermore, the study sought to explore how teachers negotiated exclusionary experiences or factors in their attempts to meet their learners' learning needs.

1.3 Focus and purpose of the study

The focus of this study was on the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities in a rural primary schooling context. In doing this, the study also explored the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influenced whether teachers could meet the learners' needs. Furthermore, the study explored how teachers negotiated exclusionary experiences or factors in their attempts to meet their learners' learning needs.

1.4 Rationale of the study

The motivation for undertaking this research emanates from personal, professional and conceptual/theoretical levels. On a personal level, I received my education when learners with disabilities and learners without disabilities went to different schools. Learners with disabilities often went to schools far from their families, peers and

communities. Growing up I assumed that the reason for this may have been that learners with disabilities required special schools with special teachers, which was not available in the mainstream schools I went to as a child. As a child, I assumed that the education of learners with disabilities required them to be pulled out of and away from their communities, families and peers, if they were to be educated, at schools of their type. When this happened, I gradually forgot what it is like to have people with disabilities in our midst, and began to absorb the stereotypical assumptions about them, until my career path led me to this study. I began to question myself about the dominant constructions of disability which I had come to accept as natural. This study is, therefore, my attempt to hold a conversation with myself and try and resolve the discords, mysteries and confusions that I experience when I am confronted with questions of access to education for learners experiencing disabilities.

At a professional level, I was motivated to conduct this study by my observations as a school principal at a mainstream or ordinary public primary school. For instance, when I was analysing learner performance in my school, I noticed that annually, without fail, a significant number of learners with learning disabilities were performing poorly in almost all their subjects. This concerned me and I, therefore, wanted to understand the factors which accounted for such performance and, possibly, what I could do about it. I assumed that if these learners were failing, then this meant that they were not learning and not getting the education that they deserved, despite the constitutional and legal guarantees for this to happen. In reviewing literature relating to this study, I came across literature that pointed out that learners with disabilities were still accommodated in special school settings in South Africa; mainstream schools were still regarded largely as a place of admission for learners without disabilities. However, I have seen some schools which have admitted learners with disabilities, and I know that, even if we are unaware, we already have learners with learning disabilities within our schools. Therefore, given this reality, it was important for me to explore the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities within an ordinary mainstream primary school setting, the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influenced the education of learners with learning disabilities, and the ways the teachers negotiate such factors to ensure that learners with learning disabilities can learn and succeed. In this regard, I needed to develop and enhance my professional understanding of the way

teachers who teach learners with disabilities are experiencing it and navigating the challenges reported in the literature.

Lastly, at a theoretical/conceptual level, although the literature has pointed to the important challenges that teachers experience in ensuring access to education for learners with disabilities, this empirical research, however, continues to position inclusive education as very difficult and filled only with challenges. It is for this reason that Engelbrecht (2020), in particular, calls for research that provides an understanding of how, despite difficulties, teaching continues to strive towards inclusive education. It is only in this way that the negativity that surrounds inclusive education can be negated. Therefore, this study attempts to meet this call from Engelbrecht (2020). In providing a platform for teachers' stories to be heard about what they are trying to do to include learners with learning disabilities, one can see what is possible. Given the catalogue of challenges that have been reported in the literature on the implementation of inclusive education (see, for example, Mpu & Adu, 2021; Engelbrecht, 2020; Adewumi et al., 2019; Donohue & Bornman, 2014), I feel it is worthwhile to explore the experiences of teachers who are teaching learners with learning disabilities and may tell a different story. I believe that this will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the teaching of learners with learning disabilities and enhance our theoretical understanding of what it would take to construct an inclusive education and training system.

1.5 Key research questions

The key research questions for the study were as follows:

1. What are the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in a mainstream rural primary school?
2. What are the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influence the teaching of learners with disabilities?
3. How do teachers negotiate these factors to facilitate learning?

1.6 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

- Explore the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in a mainstream rural primary school setting;
- Explore the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influence the teaching of learners with learning disabilities; and
- Understand how teachers negotiate exclusionary factors to facilitate learning.

1.7 Methodological approach

In conducting this research study, a narrative qualitative approach, located within the critical research paradigm, was employed as the intention was to explore the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities. According to Hennink, et al. (2011), qualitative research studies the daily life experiences of people. Narrative inquiry provided a means for discovering and capturing the teachers' narratives or stories of their experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Furthermore, the narrative approach enabled me to access the complexities of the ordinary situations of the participants, which were teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities, to obtain a better understanding of their experiences (Hennink et al., 2011). The participants, through semi-structured and focus group interviews, which were employed to generate data for this study, shared their struggles and victories in teaching learners with learning disabilities, including how they negotiated exclusionary factors in their attempts to ensure that learners with learning disabilities could learn and succeed. Through the narrative inquiry approach, rich comprehensive data could be generated, as this provided a space for participants' declarations to be elevated and emerge, allowing me to understand the challenges which teachers experienced during the teaching of learners with learning disabilities, and the ways they negotiated these to ensure that their learners learned.

1.8 Conceptual framework for the study

This study intended to explore the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities within a rural mainstream primary school context. Thus, the intention of the study was to foreground the voices of teachers to understand the dynamics of their situations. Therefore, to delve into the teachers' experiences, the study deployed concepts from various social justice theorists, including Young (1990), Tatum (2003) and Hardiman et al. (2007). For this study, I deployed Hardiman et al.

(2007) notion of oppression. According to Hardiman et al. (2007), oppression refers to a system that encourages, maintains and reinforces advantages and disadvantages based on membership in specific social groups, which may operate, both intentionally and unintentionally, at the individual, cultural and institutional levels. This means that the core of the notion of oppression is the concept of difference, which, for this study, was a learning disability. Oppression takes advantage of and categorises based on the multitude of differences, which exist among individuals and social groups. The concept of social groups refers to a subset of individuals who belong within a specific category and share specific cultural, physical or social characteristics like being members of a particular race, gender, socio-economic class or disability group (Hardiman et al., 2007). Thus, for this study, the notion of social identity served as an organiser that was used to classify categories of identities according to specific social groups, for instance, learners with a learning disability. Herein, I could identify the access to power the members of a social group had or did not have. In this study, teachers were seen as members of a dominant group concerning their age, profession and socioeconomic class, and learners were seen as a subordinate or marginalised group based on their race, age, socioeconomic status and disability.

1.9 Introducing the participants

This section provides a brief insight into the lives of the teachers, who contributed to this study, and who were teaching learners with learning disabilities in a rural ordinary primary school setting. There were six (6) participants stratified across gender, and each had not less than five (5) years of teaching service in the Intermediate Phase (i.e. Grades 4-6). The following section provides brief portraits of the teachers who contributed to the study and who allowed me to listen to their narratives of teaching learners with learning disabilities and how they negotiated the exclusionary factors to ensure that their learners learned.

a) Hlengiwe

Hlengiwe, during the time of data collection, had five (5) years of teaching experience. However, she had been working at the current institution for one and a half years. Hlengiwe obtained her initial teaching qualification, the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE), at the University of Free State in 2016. At the time of

the study, Hlengiwe was pursuing her studies in the Advance Certificate in Education (ACE) also at the University of Free State. Hlengiwe is a Post Level 1 (PL1) educator. Hlengiwe believes that patience is critical when teaching learners with learning disabilities, as most of these learners require teachers to keep repeating themselves over and over to move with them. In respect of ensuring that learners with disabilities learned and succeeded, Hlengiwe placed great emphasis on the importance of adapting teaching strategies to accommodate the learners' learning needs.

b) Thobeka

Thobeka is a thirty-six years old Post Level 1 (PL1) educator. She obtained her National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) at the University of Free State. During the time of the study, Thobeka was teaching English (Grades 4-6), Life Skills (Grades 4-6) and Life Orientation (Grade 7). Thobeka believes that when teachers prepare their lessons, they must do this with all learners in mind, even those experiencing learning barriers. Following the policy on inclusive education in South Africa, Thobeka believes that mainstream schools must integrate learners with disabilities into their classrooms. However, Thobeka believes that conditions in mainstream schools are often more challenging for teachers than those in special schools. For instance, classrooms are often overcrowded in mainstream schools, making it difficult for teachers to provide individualised teaching for learners who require more time to learn, especially learners with learning disabilities. She, therefore, believed that the Department of Education must support teachers in their efforts to include learners with learning disabilities.

c) Sihle

Sihle is a male teacher who has worked for more than ten years in the current school. He obtained his National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) at the University of Free State in 2016. He has majored in Mathematics but has taught many other subjects. He teaches Grades 4 to 7. Sihle believes that although learners with learning disabilities must be educated in similar schools as their counterparts without learning disabilities, the capacity of mainstream schools is sometimes inadequate to provide for the educational needs of these learners. For Sihle, learners with learning disabilities are sometimes better off in special schools than in mainstream schools.

d) Ayanda

Ayanda has studied at the University of South Africa (UNISA). She has obtained Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and further done an Honours degree in Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She teaches English in Grades 4, 5 and 6. She started working in 2013 and became permanently employed in 2015. Ayanda was concerned about the tensions between the accountability measures to finish the syllabus and the need to teach at the pace of learners with learning disabilities. For Ayanda, teachers are always caught between a rock and a hard place: They understand the importance of completing the syllabus so that learners can write the exams, but they also know that they must be responsive to the educational needs of learners with learning disabilities.

e) Thembisile

Thembisile started teaching in the current school in 2019, specialising in the Intermediate and Senior Phases. She is thirty-eight years of age. She teaches IsiZulu home language and Life Skills. She had taught for eight years before she came to the current school. Thembisile believes that the inclusion of learners with learning disabilities and the meeting of their educational needs are outside her responsibilities and that, instead, the "*principal and SMT must go find the helpful ways of helping learners*". For her, this is a precondition for learners with learning disabilities to be allowed to enjoy their right to basic education.

f) Nomalizo

Nomalizo is a Post Level 1 (PL1) educator, with a teaching experience of five (5) years. Nomalizo obtained her teaching qualification, namely, the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE), at the North West University. At the time of the study, Nomalizo was teaching Social Sciences and Economic Management Sciences from Grades 4 to 7. Nomalizo reported frustration with the parents' inadequate understanding of her attempts to differentiate the curriculum so that learners with learning disabilities can access the curriculum, which she said, were often met with complaints. Nomalizo reported that some parents of the learners with learning disabilities believed that she was depriving their children of equal opportunities when

she was using curriculum differentiation, as they believed that their children should be doing the same work as other learners.

1.10Clarification of key concepts

For every study, it is important to demarcate and contextualise the meaning of the concepts used. This is critical as concepts have multiple meanings, which are conceptual representations in human knowledge (Barsalou et al., 1999), depending on where they are used, who is using them, and why they are using them. For this study, two key concepts stand out, namely, inclusive education and learning disability.

1.10.1 Inclusive education

Inclusive education involves ensuring access to quality education for all learners, with or without disabilities, accommodating their learning needs and assisting them to attain their full potential within an inclusive educational setting (Thomas & Kumar, 2020). The main objective of inclusive education is to identify and address barriers to learning and growth and all forms of discrimination and provide equitable opportunities for all learners (Department of Education, 2001). This means that, from this perspective, inclusive education is about creating circumstances and providing chances within an education system that allows and inspires all learners to learn and succeed. However, given the myriad of meanings and definitions attributed to inclusive education, despite the policy on inclusive education has provided a definition and meaning, this study adopts the definition and meaning of inclusive education as described by participants of the research study. I shall engage with the definition of inclusive education in greater depth in Chapter 2.

1.10.2 Learning disability

Learning disability could be understood as a condition of the basic psychological processes affecting understanding or the use of spoken or written language (Misciagna, 2022). The disorders regarding the learning disability may present in listening, thinking, reading, talking, writing, spelling, or arithmetic and may be due to visual, hearing, or motor impairments, environmental deprivation and other sources. For this study, the definition and meaning of learning disability are as defined by the

participants of this research study. I shall engage with the definition of learning disability in greater depth in Chapter 2.

1.11Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation comprises five chapters, the summary of which is provided in the section below.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study. In this chapter, I present the introduction and background of the study, the statement of the research problem, the focus and purpose of the study, the rationale of the study, the aims and objectives of the study, and the key research questions that this research sought to answer, the synopsis of the methodological approach, the discussion of the research site and the theoretical framework. The introduction of the participants in the study is also presented in this chapter. Finally, the structure of the dissertation is provided.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature relating to the teaching of learners with learning disabilities. The focus of the chapter is based on national and international literature on teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities. The chapter also provides and discusses the conceptual framework, which was used to read, analyse, interpret and understand the findings and discussions for this study.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology and research design considerations that were made in this study. The chapter describes and discusses the research approach, research paradigm, the sampling of the participants, the data production methods and instruments used in the study, the method of data analysis adopted in this study, the limitations of the study, and ethical issues and considerations made to ensure the protection, upholding and respect of the rights of the participants.

Chapter 4 presents the data generated and discusses the findings of the study. The chapter discusses the key themes and sub-themes in the stories of the teachers who participated in this study. The analysis in this chapter links the literature and findings of the study to locate the study within the scholarly conversation concerning the focus of the study.

Chapter 5 concludes the study. In this regard, this chapter provides a summary of the purpose and significance of the study and reflects on the theoretical and methodological issues. The chapter also provides key insights from the research and concludes by presenting recommendations and ideas for future research.

1.12 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the study. In this regard, I, therefore, presented the introduction and background of the study, the statement of the research problem, the focus and purpose of the study, the rationale of the study, the aims and objectives of the study, the key research questions that this research sought to answer, the synopsis of the methodological approach, the discussion of the research site and the theoretical framework. The participants in the study were also introduced. Finally, the structure of the dissertation was provided.

The next chapter will focus on the literature reviewed and the theoretical framework through which the findings and discussions in this study must be read, analysed, interpreted and understood.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

Alongside an increase in the number of children diagnosed with learning disabilities internationally (see, for example, The World Bank, 2019; Grünke & Cavendish, 2016; Nel & Grosser, 2016), there have been increasing concerns about the experiences and competencies teachers have to teach learners with learning disabilities, which influences their teaching and how they negotiate their teaching and learning space (Willard-Holt et al., 2013). With South Africa moving away from legitimising discriminatory and segregationist tendencies, which defined the country before 1994, there has been a significant shift towards an inclusive education system which will ensure access to education for all learners, including those with learning disabilities.

In this chapter, I explore the definitions of inclusive education and learning disabilities within the South African context, as conceptualised in Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001). Essentially, this chapter will review the literature relating to teachers' experiences of teaching learners with disabilities. The chapter will then discuss relevant domestic or national education legislation and policy, and international commitments regarding the teaching of learners experiencing learning disabilities. Lastly, the chapter will review the literature on the challenges and opportunities in the application of inclusive education policy in South Africa.

2.2 Understanding learning disability

The literature reviewed suggests that there are various definitions of what constitutes a learning disability. For example, the Ministry of Education in Swaziland (Republic of Swaziland, 1998) defines learning disability as a variation of ailments affecting the acquisition, retention, understanding, organisation, or use of verbal and non-verbal information. The term learning disability, as applied within the South African context, is similar in definition and specifically refers to the condition of having an average to above average intellectual capacity, which may present in learners through scholastic difficulties, particularly concerning literacy (Flack, 2008). Flack (2008) argues that the notion of a learning disability applies to a heterogeneous category of children, who are

not developing or learning typically, and who do not fit into traditional categories of disability. Further, Flack (2008) asserts that children with learning disabilities are often slower in attaining developmental milestones, such as walking and talking, and are likely to fall behind in their learning. The notion of learning disability is also an umbrella term for conditions such as Down's Syndrome, Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Dyslexia, Epilepsy and Hydrocephalus.

The notion of a specific learning disability refers to a psychological condition in processing the understanding and use of language, spoken or written, which may manifest in an inadequate ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations (Kirk & Kirk, 1983). In addition, Kirk and Kirk (1983) contends that the notion of learning disability may refer to delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, spelling, writing, or arithmetic, resulting from a possible cerebral dysfunction rather than mental retardation, sensory deprivation, cultural or instructional factors. This conceptualisation of learning disability locates disability within the medical model, as it presents disability as the fault of the child, owing to their inability to function in the way that developmental theorists expect. However, Sleeter (1986) argues that the notion of learning disability is socially constructed, and has been created for parents who want a more palatable explanation of a child's failure. For Sleeter (1986), the framing of learning disability within the medical tradition of disability fails to consider the configurations of power that may exist within a particular societal context, which may ultimately disempower certain categories of learners.

In line with Sleeter's (1986) argument, Wentzel's (2016) study conducted in the Eastern Cape, revealed that teachers believed that learners experiencing learning disabilities were incapable of meeting the educational requirements within an ordinary schooling setting. However, the inability of the learners to meet the expectations was brought about by the fact that there was inadequate attention given to the dominant constructions of the teaching and learning environment. This was an act of power that laid the blame for learning disability at the door of the learner. Wentzel et al. (2016) found that in thinking about learning disabilities in this manner, teachers followed departmental regulations and the same curriculum intended for learners who did not experience these challenges, which made it difficult for learners with learning

disabilities to achieve academically (Wentzel et al., 2016). This resulted in this category of learners performing poorly academically, as they had not developed the literacy and mathematical skills required to achieve academically, which was often compounded by their experiences of other socio-economic barriers with which they had to contend in their contexts.

2.3 Defining inclusive education

The major principle of inclusive education is that all children can and ought to learn together, where possible, irrespective of their disabilities and differences (UNESCO, 1994). Eleweke and Rodda (2002) define inclusive education as the accommodation and education of learners with disabilities in mainstream education settings. This understanding presents a common misunderstanding about inclusive education as being about disability only. UNESCO (2005) argues that inclusive education is about responding to individual learner differences and diversity, and sees diversity and difference as opportunities for enhancing learning and teaching. This supports Chauhan and Matry's (2018) position that the notion of inclusive education refers to a process of identifying barriers to learning, and celebrating and responding to the diverse range of learners' needs through improving access and involvement in learning processes. In this instance, it could be concluded that inclusion is not only about disability but rather about the inclusion of all learners within an education system. In line with this, Barton (1999) has argued that inclusive education goes beyond concerns of disablement and is about creating and ensuring an inclusive educational setting (Leijen et al., 2021). Whilst acknowledging this conceptualisation of inclusive education, this study focuses on disability and thus literature herein discusses inclusive education as it concerns disability.

Klang et al. (2019) argue that learners with learning disabilities have a right to enjoy educational opportunities in mainstream classrooms with their age-appropriate peers and to attend the same schools as their peers. This means that learners with disabilities must not be confined in secluded specialised settings away from their families, peers and communities (Bunch, 1994). As noted by Naicker (2000), this rethink requires a shift from pathological assumptions of disability to a social rights framework (Motitswe, 2017). In other words, within an inclusive setting, the education system

must ensure that all learners, notwithstanding their abilities and disabilities, receive appropriate educational support that will advance their capabilities and abilities (Deghaye, 2021). For instance, for this to happen, inclusion may require the full-time placement of learners with learning disabilities with their peers; provision of services in mainstream or 'regular' schools instead of special schools and classes; and opportunities to interact, as much as possible, with peers in the least restrictive environment (UNESCO, 1994).

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the fact that inclusive education cannot be achieved simply by including learners with disabilities in mainstream schools. This means that teachers, schools and educational systems must reconfigure and adapt their operations to cater for the diverse educational needs of learners with disabilities and ensure that they are involved in all parts of school life (Sanger, 2020). In this instance, inclusive education involves identifying and addressing a range of barriers that may hinder learning (Peters, 2004). In addition, this conceptualisation and characterisation of inclusive education focus on developing positive attitudes, behaviours, teaching methodologies, teaching environments, and curricula to meet the needs of all learners, and enhance learners' strengths such that they can participate actively in the learning processes (Department of Education, 2001).

2.3.1 Inclusive education: A global perspective

Inclusive education emerges from human rights and social justice calls for the recognition of those who are vulnerable and marginalised. In 1994, this message was conveyed through the declaration of the *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994). The *Salamanca Statement* argued for the inclusion of all learners in an integrated education system and called on all governments to improve their education systems to make this a reality (UNESCO, 1994). The founding principles of the *Salamanca Statement* are discussed in the section that follows.

Firstly, the *Salamanca Statement* was a call to all governments to improve their education systems and provide for all children, irrespective of their differences. Secondly, governments were called upon to adopt the policy of inclusivity in education. Thirdly, governments were called upon to establish relationships with

nations which have established inclusive education systems. The fourth principle of the *Salamanca Statement* was to develop decentralised mechanisms for planning, monitoring and evaluating the educational provision. The fifth principle was the necessity to involve families and societies of children with disabilities in planning for an education system that can accommodate all. Finally, emphasis was placed on the importance of early identification and intervention and the recognition of the need for systemic change (UNESCO, 1994).

In 2000, the *Dakar Framework for Action for Education for All* was adopted and committed by governments to achieving quality education for all (UNESCO, 2000). However, within the framework, the focus of education for those with a disability, which was the focus of the Salamanca Statement in 1994, was ignored. To this end, UNESCO established the Education for All (EFA) Flagship, namely, *The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion*, as an instrument for achieving education for all. Following this, in 2006, the right to inclusive education became international law, for which the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provided a framework for achieving inclusive education systems (United Nations, 2006).

From the above, it could be discerned that inclusive education aims to challenge discriminatory and exclusionary practices within education systems, communities and society in general. To this end, inclusive education sought to provide all learners with access to equality of opportunity to learn and for their educational needs to be met. Countries in different parts of the world have committed themselves to the development and implementation of policies in respect of inclusive education. In this regard, policies, values, skills and knowledge have been changed to cater for the introduction of inclusive education. However, early research began to expose difficulties in implementation. For instance, Carrington and Robinson (2006) warned that effective implementation of inclusive education for schools calls for, teachers' beliefs, skills and knowledge to be improved for them to be able to accommodate the educational needs of all learners (Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

This was a critical finding by these researchers who also reported that in European countries and Australia, more and more learners with learning disabilities are being

accommodated in mainstream or regular schools. It was, therefore, imperative to begin by looking at teachers' responses to inclusive education.

Studies conducted on inclusive education confirm that there are benefits which occur in inclusive schools (see, for example, Steffens, 2021; Mag et al., 2017; Szumski et al., 2017; Vinodrao, 2016). However, these issues point out that inclusive education is not easy to provide, and there is still significant work required to make all schools inclusive (Armstrong et al., 2011; NSW DoE Legislative Council, 2017). Thus, in many contexts, the implementation of inclusion remains a work in development, though it has been around for almost 30 years of being carried out in different countries (Westwood, 2018).

2.3.2 Inclusive education: A South African perspective

In South Africa, the policy of inclusive education was promulgated in July 2001 (Department of Education, 2001). The principles of the policy are enshrined in the country's Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), the White Paper on Education and Training (Department of Education, 1995) and the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Nel et al. (2016) note that Education White Paper 6 has paved a way for the introduction of inclusive education and the setting up of associated support structures as pivotal aspects of implementing EFA principles within the South African context. According to Education White Paper 6, the Constitution declares the right to basic education for everyone (Department of Education, 2001). This provision in the Constitution is in line with section 9 of the Constitution, which states that everyone is equal before the law (Republic of South Africa, 1996). In addition, section 9 states that no one should be directly or indirectly deprived of their constitutional rights on any specified grounds, including disability. Within this context, inclusive education serves as a mechanism to facilitate access to learning and education for all learners, including those with disabilities. Hence, inclusion is not only about learners being in a class physically, but also about access to quality education so that they can succeed and contribute effectively to the development of society, the economy, and the country at large (Limaye, 2016).

Education White Paper 6 symbolises the country's commitment to the development of an inclusive education and training system, capable of promoting education for all (Department of Education, 2001). To do this, Education White Paper 6 enabled the improvement of inclusion and a supportive learning environment for all learners, which would enable them to actively participate in the education process so that they can grow and extend their potential and contribute as equal members of society. In this respect, in South Africa, inclusive education is defined as acknowledging and respecting dissimilarities and similarities among learners and building on these to ensure their effective access to education (Department of Education, 2001). For this reason, inclusive education in South Africa is about supporting all learners, teachers and the system as a whole, so that the full range of learning needs can be met (Department of Education, 2001).

In December 2012, the South African Minister of Basic Education declared 2013 as the Year of Inclusive Education – the year of consolidating and strengthening systems for the full-scale implementation of inclusive education (Department of Basic Education, 2013). The intention of the Minister's declaration of 2013 as the Year of Inclusive Education was to focus on and enhance implementation to ensure that it happened across all education districts and schools (National Education Evaluation and Development Unit, 2013). All schools now have a responsibility, duty and necessity to have in place and implement inclusive policies (Ydo, 2020). However, the reality is that the majority of learners with learning disabilities have not been fully accommodated in ordinary mainstream schools and are instead being accommodated in full-service and special schools (Human Rights Watch, 2015). This is contrary to the vision of inclusive education and the need to ensure that all learners feel welcome and belong. This policy-practice disjuncture suggests that teachers and schools may not be adequately equipped to accommodate the diverse range of learning needs of learners, especially those with disabilities (British Council South Africa, 2018). Ten years ago, D'Amant (2012) argued that many teachers, working in rural settings still experienced challenges in integrating ideological contradictions and tensions between the old and familiar, and the new and the unfamiliar. On the other hand, Pillay and Saloojee (2012) shared the same sentiments about the community of teachers working within the dynamic contexts of rurality. This means that there is a need for school communities to reflect on what it means to serve, lead and teach within inclusive

schooling contexts. This is an important consideration for teachers working to become life-changing agents for all those who inhabit what is sometimes construed as an uninhabitable and unbearable position (Saloojee, 2012). This suggests that, for years now, the employment of inclusive education continues to be marred with challenges that make it difficult for the country to fulfil its constitutional promise in respect of access to basic education.

2.4 Strategies for the implementation of inclusive education – Departmental initiatives

The above discussion suggests that inclusive education in South Africa involves recognition and respect for differences of learners and building on similarities, supporting all learners, teachers and education systems for the full range of learning needs to be met. Structures and procedures at all levels of the system that prevented learners from achieving success were emphasised as a key focus area for intervention (Department of Education, 2001). Accordingly, ordinary mainstream schools have been earmarked as a potential mechanism for accommodating the diverse learner population experiencing barriers to learning, given their numbers and proximity to communities compared to special schools. As a mechanism for strengthening support services in mainstream schools, the Department of Basic Education has established support teams at district and school levels (Department of Basic Education, 2021), whose role is the identification and addressing of barriers to learning experienced by learners in their contexts.

This has necessitated the establishment of the Institutional-Level Support Teams (ILSTs), which comprise three school-based portfolio committees, namely, a Whole School Development Committee (WSDC), an Educator Support Committee and a Learner Support Committee (Department of Education, 2001). The key functions of the ILST are to identify, address and support learners experiencing barriers to learning (De Boer et al., 2011); and to ensure that teachers are critical role players in the implementation of inclusive education. The ILSTs provide a mechanism through which to develop and strengthen the capacity of the education system to prevent and overcome barriers which may arise and promote the development of desirable learning and teaching environments (Department of Education, 2005). However, despite the

setting up of these systems and structures, especially in mainstream schools, learners continue to be channelled to special schools (Department of Basic Education, 2021). Where they are enrolled in general mainstream schools, the quality of education they are receiving is often inadequate (Equal Education Law Centre, 2021). In this regard, South Africa may have to consider drawing lessons from the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) which have developed structures in which ordinary or regular schools can provide support and accommodate the diverse educational needs of learners, including those with multiple educational needs (Adewumi et al., 2019).

Within the South African schooling context, the process of identifying a learner with disabilities must follow a process according to the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Firstly, a learner who has been identified as experiencing a barrier to learning and the teacher has intervened without much progress, the case of the learner is referred to the ILST for intervention, as indicated in the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support. This suggests that only once the teacher has intervened to support the learner, can they refer to the case of a learner. This means that there is an assumption that the teacher will have the knowledge and skills to assist the learner who is experiencing a barrier to learning. However, in 2018, the Auditor-General, in their investigation of the functionality of full-service schools, found that learners who had been identified as experiencing barriers to learning had not been adequately supported as required by the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (Auditor-General, 2019).

In the event of the school-based ILST being unable to assist the learner, further support is to be sought from the District Based Support Team (DBST). The DBST reviews all documentation provided by the ILST and then guides concerning the appropriate intervention, which the teacher and school must implement. Guidance is also provided to the school in respect of support for the parent. Counsellors and psychologists are also part of the programme and are required to provide input about the learner and their disabilities. Hereafter, an assessment report is generated based on the conclusions and commendations (Department of Basic Education, 2014). In addition, not only have there been challenges with the implementation of the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support, there have been challenges with the ILST and

DBST, which are structures that must support teachers in implementing these processes. For instance, Maphumulo (2019) and Mpanza and Govender (2022) found that the inadequate functionality of ILSTs and DBSTs was a big challenge to the implementation of inclusive education in schools.

Despite this intricate and extensive support system in place for the identification and subsequent support of learners with a disability, the reality shows something different for various reasons. For example, teachers in South Africa support the introduction of inclusion in principle, however, they believe that the education system does not have the resources required to enable them to implement inclusive education (UDOBA, 2014). Teachers’ ambivalence regarding the implementation of inclusive education increases as they become more concerned with teaching subject matter and completing curriculum requirements, rather than diversifying instruction to meet a range of learner needs (Mpu & Adu, 2021; Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Jali, 2014; Engelbrecht, 2020; Nel et al., 2014; Magnusson & Walton, 2021; Kern, 2022). Although recent curriculum transformation has incorporated the principle of inclusive education, which by implication suggests that curriculum implementation should be flexible concerning teaching methods, assessment, the pace of teaching and the development of learning materials (Department of Education, 2001), the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) does not support the requirements of a flexible curriculum as stated in Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001; Makgato, 2018). The results of learners being unable to cope with the curriculum were evident in annual national assessments (ANA), conducted in 2012 and 2013 by the Department of Basic Education, on literacy and numeracy in Grades 1-6 and 9, where it was found that learners experienced serious challenges in these areas (Department of Basic Education, 2013).

Collaboration is one of the functions of the ILST which is required to coordinate activities of effective teaching and learning. Therefore, ILSTs are expected to collaborate with teachers to develop activities that will be of benefit to all learners experiencing learning difficulties. The interests, goals and needs of learners inform decisions taken, responsibilities, accountability and problem-solving initiatives implemented. This is in line with Wenger’s theory in respect of professional learning communities, which contends that there must be ongoing engagements, collaboration

and learning together, which makes them a social community (Wenger, 1999). As a community, planned activities require the ILST to work actively as a team to provide the support required to address the identified learning needs.

2.5 Factors influencing teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities

During their engagement with the Department of Basic Education in Cape Town, members of the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education registered their concern based on their field observations that inclusive education implementation was not taking place as expected (Department of Basic Education, 2016). Bruno and Do Nascimento (2019) argues that if inclusion is to work, much needs to be done in society and, in particular, within education to support the implementation of inclusive education. There are various reasons for the apparent 'failure' of inclusive education. Some of these are discussed in the section below.

2.5.1 Capacity of teachers to implement inclusive education

Bortoli et al. (2012) researched the experiences of teachers and their findings revealed that teaching learners with learning disabilities is often difficult, overwhelming, frustrating and daunting, as teachers often struggle to find ways to support both learners with disabilities and those without in the same classroom. Makgato (2018) and Warnes et al. (2022) further argue that through the media, teachers have raised a range of worries regarding the inclusion of learners experiencing barriers to learning, particularly those experiencing learning disabilities. These worries include teachers experiencing difficulty coping with diverse learners in their classrooms, inadequate training, difficulties in adapting to an individualised curriculum, lack of funding, inadequate teacher support, lack of knowledge, lack of time, heavy workloads and inappropriate policy development issues (Zwane & Malale, 2018; Molakeng & Möwes, 2020; Skinner, 2016). Given these challenges reported by teachers, it is unclear what may be taking place at the school level in terms of the implementation of inclusive education. Furthermore, Walton et al. (2014) and Nel et al. (2016) in their studies found that the implementation of inclusive education was often stressful for teachers and that contextual factors such as lack of support from the Education Department added to their stress. In this regard, these researchers argued for the

implementation of appropriate and consistent teacher training programmes, classroom support, as well as retraining of teachers so that they can implement inclusive education in schools.

International and national studies conducted by Abed and Alrawajfh (2017) and Woodcock et al. (2019) showed how effective teachers can be in their responsiveness to the needs of learners with disabilities in ordinary mainstream schools. Abed and Alrawajfh (2017) reported that as Saudi Arabian teachers worked with learners with learning disabilities, they learned how to adapt resources, attitudes and practices so that there is more effective learner engagement. Moreover, they found that, as a result, there was active learning taking place in the classrooms of these teachers (Abed & Alrawajfh, 2017), which they attributed to the teachers' willingness to adjust their teaching environments and practices to ensure the accommodation of these learners. Furthermore, Woodcock et al. (2019) reported that teachers with high self-effectiveness had less frustration and more empathy towards learners with learning disabilities. Teachers with high self-effectiveness had less frustration and more empathy towards learners with learning disabilities, and teachers' changed attitudes generated more caring relationships between themselves and their learners (see also: Chao et al., 2016; Woodcock et al., 2019; Raath & Hay, 2016; Wahl, 2017; Msomi, 2020).

2.5.2 Lack of learning and teaching resources

Due to the historical legacy of significant economic inequalities during the apartheid era and the consequently insufficient physical and human resources, the implementation of inclusive education continues to be riddled with serious challenges (Badat & Sayed, 2014). This is especially evident in rural areas that lack infrastructure and thus fail to attract development and people to live there. One of the major areas where there is a lack of physical resources relates to transport and road infrastructure. Zungu (2014), in a study conducted in Mpumalanga province, South Africa, found that many of the teachers who teach in rural schools often had to travel long distances to and from school using public transport which is unreliable and limited. Added to this is that the teachers in the study did not live in the same area as their place of work and had to make the long journey to their schools on roads that were dangerous and muddy.

This is directly related to the serious neglect and lack of funding for schools and homes that are located in rural areas. However, having to travel daily has repercussions on learning and teaching. Zungu (2014) found that teachers in his study did not have sufficient time to support their learners after school hours, as they must use common transport to commute and leave at set times (Zungu, 2014). Furthermore, teachers and learners sometimes arrived late which meant that teaching and learning were affected, and often the teachers did not have sufficient time to spend on individual learners who were experiencing learning problems (Zungu, 2014).

The other contextual challenges that teachers reported included a shortage of teaching aids and equipment, as well as a lack of administrative and financial support from district offices and significant obstacles to enabling teachers to enact inclusive classroom practices. Matolo and Awelani (2021) pointed out that schools, as well as district offices, must be adequately resourced to enable them to ensure that learners experiencing barriers learn and teachers teach (Mahlo, 2011).

2.5.3 Curriculum as a form of exclusion for learners with learning disabilities

An additional constraint that learners with disabilities encounter and which teachers must manage relates to an inflexible curriculum. According to Kozleski and Suity (2015) and Loreman et al. (2010), the curriculum for mainstream schools does not allow for the specific needs of learners with learning disabilities to be catered for. They found that the curriculum was prescriptive and inflexible, and these were reported as additional challenges in addressing learners' educational needs. In ensuring that inclusive classroom practices are effective in accommodating learners' educational needs, the national curriculum must be flexible to enable teachers space to effect modifications to suit learners' particular contexts and diverse educational needs (Kozleski & Siuty, 2015; Loreman et al., 2010). It is crucial to recognise the ongoing dynamics, intricate impacts, and intricate interactions among the contextual factors that affect the implementation of inclusive education as well as how it affects the teacher as a whole.

2.5.4 Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education

Attitudes of teachers are a significant factor in the success of the implementation of inclusive education (Saloviita, 2020). This is important given the fact that in some instances, teachers harbour negative attitudes toward the inclusion of learners with learning disabilities (Greene, 2017). How teachers implement inclusive educational practices in their classrooms is, therefore, not only likely to be influenced by systemic contextual factors, including, for example, the ethos within their schools as well as the wider educational system's approach to inclusive education but importantly, also by teachers own understandings of inclusive education.

In a study conducted by Singh et al. (2020) which sought to investigate how a range of aspects of inclusive education, including teacher education, experience and training, contributed to the attitudes of teachers in mainstream or regular classrooms, findings revealed that teachers had a positive attitude towards inclusive education. However, the findings of the study by Greene (2017) revealed that teachers often had negative attitudes towards the philosophical and conceptual facets of inclusive education, which differed significantly according to their level of education and teacher training. The findings of these studies are important because they reveal that teachers frequently have their own beliefs, values, and attitudes and that these have a big impact on their teaching practices (Bruno & Do Nascimento, 2019). According to Malahlela (2017), an attitude is a set of feelings, beliefs, and actions towards people, things, events, and objects. That is, an attitude is a way of thinking and acting. This means that the attitudes of teachers must not be taken lightly in the implementation of inclusive education.

Young and Neupane (2018) reported that attitudes and negative perceptions and beliefs towards people with disabilities impeded the effective implementation of inclusive education in Nepal. For instance, some of the teachers' attitudes were that learners with disabilities had inferior capacity as compared to their peers without disabilities (Young & Neupane, 2018). Additionally, it was noted that these attitudes, beliefs and unfavourable impressions of failing to enforce the policy frequently undermined teachers' commitment to their work. Teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward learners with disabilities often determined how they behaved toward these learners.

Some of the stereotypical attitudes and negative perceptions of teachers in Bruno and Do Nascimento's (2019) study in America were marred by discourses of pity and awkwardness. Treating learners with disabilities with pity and uncertainty resulted in teachers not going the extra mile to ensure that learners were learning. Discourses of pity, for example, often meant that teachers believed that learners with disabilities were incapable of intellectual thought and growth. Instead, the teachers in Bruno and Do Nascimento's (2019) study reported that they did not possess the appropriate knowledge and skills to accommodate learners with learning disabilities as a way to explain their inability to support learners. Other teachers even recommended that learners who had severe learning disabilities may be better off receiving their education in self-contained classrooms with specially trained teachers (Öslund et al., 2021). This made teachers feel a lack of responsibility and accountability for the teaching and learning of learners with disability and rendered teaching efforts ineffective with learners who had learning disabilities (McConkey & Bradley, 2010). It is these kinds of exclusionary factors and pressures that impede the progress towards the achievement of inclusivity.

In South Africa, not all the experiences of teachers suggest negative attitudes, as reported in Mahlo et al.'s (2017) study. The findings of the study, conducted in the North West Province, South Africa, revealed that teachers in mainstream or regular schools were friendly to learners with learning disabilities and that their friendly and welcoming attitudes assisted learners with a disability to achieve academically. However, findings of the study also revealed that when learners felt that teachers did not care for them, they struggled to learn effectively, resulting in teachers labelling them as slow. The labelling proved most disempowering for learners who failed to learn properly. Leseyane et al. (2018) found that teachers are crucial for the development of learners with disabilities and ensuring that they learn and succeed.

Magumise and Seftho (2018) also reported that some teachers in mainstream schools in Zimbabwe were open to including learners with learning disabilities. Often, these teachers reported feeling optimistic about the success of the learners with learning disabilities. They were proponents of inclusive education (Magumise & Seftho, 2018) For instance, one of the teachers in the study emphasised how much she enjoyed working with learners who had learning impairments. She made sure to fully prepare

for her classes as a consequence (Magumise & Seftho, 2018) According to Nel et al. (2016), educators who support the teaching of learners with learning difficulties and possess the knowledge and capacities to do so support the inclusion ethos.

De Bruin et al. (2019) view co-teaching as critical for assisting teachers to build relationships with one another and their learners. Co-teaching is a service by which teachers collaborate to provide learners with and without disabilities access to the general education curriculum with specially designed instruction (Magira, 2020). Typically, co-teaching takes place for a specific period of the instructional day. Co-teaching pairs gives the entire class more in-depth instruction based on the general education curriculum and the learning objectives for students with disability by carefully planning together. When teaching simultaneously, the two instructors frequently create smaller learning communities for more individual sessions.

Research on teachers' attitudes toward mainstreaming and inclusion (Pottas, 2005) has revealed that in countries, such as the United States of America, Canada and Australia, teachers often support the idea of inclusion, but anticipate problems in its implementation. Zukani (2018) and Mamabolo et al. (2021) argue that teachers not participating in inclusive programs had strong negative feelings about inclusion and that decision-makers felt disconnected from the realities of the classroom. Among the limiting factors for the successful implementation of inclusive education identified by teachers included class size, inadequate resources, the extent to which all learners benefit from inclusion, and inadequate teacher preparation. However, in studies in which teachers experienced rich inclusion experience, contradictory findings were reported. For instance, a study by Veerabudren et al., (2021) revealed that teachers supported the inclusion of children with learning disabilities in mainstream or regular schools. This was mostly because teachers recognised the vulnerability and marginalisation of learners with disability within mainstream schools. Thus, whilst teachers were cognisant of the reasons why inclusive education was critical, they are also aware of concerns that could influence how implementation could be derailed as seen in studies conducted by Aniftos and McLuskie (2003) and Subban and Sharma (2006).

Certain attitudes and beliefs that could derail the implementation of inclusive education were evident in the study conducted by Molakeng and Möwes (2020) about South Africa. This issue suggests that teachers' beliefs and understandings about disability could be generated and influenced by discourses on the medical model of disability. In South Africa, these beliefs and attitudes had been propagated and entrenched by the apartheid education system, which created segregation between special and ordinary schools (McKinney & Swartz, 2015). As a result, when the policy of inclusive education was introduced, teachers often felt they lacked the necessary knowledge and personal efficacy to teach inclusively (Zwane & Malale, 2018).

While these challenges have been there for more than seventeen years, since they were reported by Pottas (2005), very little seems to have changed. Studies conducted by Nel et al. (2016), Malahlela (2017) and Rusznyak and Walton (2021) suggest that although some progress has been made in the implementation of the policy, this has not been sufficient to ensure access to education for all learners. For instance, in respect of teacher training, as reported by Malahlela (2017), teachers still perceived the implementation of the policy of inclusive education as being negatively impacted by their inadequate training, unwelcoming and inaccessible school premises, lack of appropriate facilities, devices and equipment, and overcrowded classrooms in ordinary schools.

2.5.5 Demands placed on teachers

According to Cornoldi, Capodieci and Diago (2016) and Wetzel (2016), teachers' experience in teaching learners with learning difficulties is negative and professionally difficult for them. Both studies show that this is because teachers are forced to implement strategies without their being consulted. Teachers often felt that they, "were unfamiliar with White Paper 6 initiatives or inclusive education as envisioned for South African schools" (Engelbrecht et al., 2006, p. 126). In addition, teachers in the studies reported that they were often not trained to prepare them for the implementation of the policies (Willard-Holt et al., 2013). Their lack of training also caused them to feel incompetent to perform their roles and responsibilities in respect of these policies. For instance, teachers reported that they had not been equipped with the knowledge and skills required to accommodate the educational needs of learners

with learning disabilities. Therefore, they found teaching learners with learning disabilities alongside those who did not, daunting and demanding. They experienced repeated failures in teaching the learners who could not grasp the content despite trying to accommodate them. This became exhausting and debilitating for them.

Teachers also complained about the lack of time to prepare for these learners (Engelbrecht & Green, 2007; Singh, 2010; Skinner, 2016). Often, teachers felt that the implementation of inclusive education added to their administrative burden, creating more challenges for them (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). Teachers often struggled to come up with ways to respond to and accommodate the educational needs of both learners with disabilities and those without in the same classroom. Teachers' past experiences and beliefs about disability impacted their teaching practice negatively. For instance, teachers in Bruno and Do Nascimento's (2019) study were still steeped in the medical model and tended to view learners with disabilities as abnormal and a burden on them. This was exacerbated by inadequate support and resources and the significant amount of time required to teach diverse classes (Bruno & Do Nascimento, 2019; Magumise & Sefotho, 2018). Bruno and Do Nascimento (2019) contends that findings from his study suggest that negative attitudes, together with the lack of support, placed much demand on teachers and could explain why barriers persist in the implementation of inclusive education.

Teachers have expressed several concerns about the inclusion of learners with disabilities in their classrooms (see, for instance, Ainscow, 2012; SOS Children's Newsletter, 2012). These concerns include teachers who find it difficult to accommodate learners with different learning needs in their classrooms; insufficient training; difficulty developing individualised support plans; lack of funds; insufficient teacher support; lack of knowledge; lack of time; and heavy workload (Engelbrecht & Green, 2007; Singh, 2010; Skinner, 2016). Mpu and Adu (2020), West and Meier (2020) and Adewumi et al. (2019) have added their voices to the question of increased workload demands placed on teachers in the studies above. For instance, Mashele (2018) contends that teachers' administrative workload has increased with the new curriculum policy, namely, CAPS (Department of Basic Education, 2011). This suggests that despite the curriculum developers' intentions to decrease teachers' workload and provide more guidance and consistency for teachers, this does not seem

to have occurred. If anything, CAPS, according to the teachers in Nel et al.'s (2016) study, still imposes significant demands of time on teachers, which results in the reduction of teaching time as the focus is more on assessment than teaching and learning. To this end, teachers in a study by Nel et al. (2016) often felt that the teaching time that could have been spent teaching learners with disabilities had been significantly reduced by the demands of the CAPS. The consequences were dire as teachers reported feeling pressure to assess learners, as this was often used to reflect on their teaching abilities and to hold them accountable (Nel et al., 2016). Thus, providing learners with the necessary support is undermined by the fact that teachers must teach to the test, as opposed to ensuring that learners learn. This added to the pressure that the teachers were experiencing although they understood the need to complete the Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs). However, whatever happened the people most disempowered in this regard were the learners with disabilities. Teachers questioned whether learners could participate in learning and achieve success in such circumstances.

2.5.6 Teachers' reactions to teaching and learning failure

When teachers continue to experience a lack of success when teaching learners with disabilities, it influences what they do within the classroom. Wetzel (2016) conducted a study in the Northern Cape and the findings revealed that teachers experienced difficulties when teaching learners with learning disabilities. For instance, learners struggled to learn the necessary academic skills, such as reading with comprehension, which made it difficult for learners to achieve at higher levels (Wentzel, 2016). Because learners could not achieve at grade appropriate level, teachers instead focussed on learners' negative attributes often labelling them and using negative words to describe their behaviour. This was because they did not reflect on what they could or could not do in the classroom. That is, they did not think that their teaching practices needed to change.

Teachers who provided support according to the general teaching principles and processes in Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) found that despite their best interventions, learners with mild intellectual disabilities continued to

perform poorly due to difficulties with mathematics, comprehension, writing and reading (Wentzel, 2016).

2.5.7 Constraints to the pedagogies of possibility

The point of departure for learning support is “the pedagogy of possibility that takes into consideration barriers to learning, different intelligences and different styles” (Department of Education, 2002, p. 22). This suggests that teachers must do their teaching in a manner that makes it possible for every learner to achieve and succeed. This would ensure that every learner can reach their full potential. Cabual (2021) argues that learners’ learning styles must first be determined before choosing learning strategies. In this regard, teachers should guide learners through the learning process, which means that the learning process should include a variety of teaching strategies that provide learners with sufficient opportunities to succeed in their learning (Yoro et al., 2020).

While the recent transformation of the curriculum has incorporated the principle of inclusive education, which implies that curriculum implementation must be flexible in terms of teaching methods, assessment, the pace of teaching and development of teaching materials (Department of Education, 2001), the current CAPS do not support the requirements of a flexible curriculum as stated in Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001; Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013). Literature suggests that teachers in South Africa perceive inclusive education within a human rights framework, thereby recognising that there is no difference between the general idea of inclusion and the concrete idea of recognising human rights by including learners with disabilities in their mainstream classes, but that their sense of self-sufficiency in doing is inadequate (Engelbrecht et al., 2013). However, their Finnish counterparts, on the other hand, perceive inclusive education as a pragmatic implementation issue and would prefer learners with, for example, learning difficulties, for example, to be supported by other professionals within their mainstream schools (Engelbrecht et al., 2013). This may explain the inconsistencies in the success of the implementation of inclusive education in these two countries. For example, a pragmatic perspective adopted by Finland opens itself up to experimentation and a willingness to seek ways to support learners.

Teachers also expressed frustration about some policies, which they believed did not take account of their learners' contextual realities (Nel et al., 2016). For instance, teachers reported that learners were often promoted without having achieved a grade-appropriate level, which they believed pointed to the fact that learners' learning needs were not adequately considered and supported. Wetzel (2016) contends this has severe repercussions for learners' self-esteem because repeated experiences of failure and lack of support potentially expose learners to the risk of dropping out and engaging in antisocial activities. For those learners that remain in school, teachers often had to deal with learners' behavioural problems, resulting from these negative experiences (Wentzel, 2016).

However, Maguvhe (2015) maintains that inclusive education maximises the participation of learners with learning disabilities in mainstream classes. This participation goes beyond the physical placement of learners with learning disabilities and includes an environment that promotes a sense of belonging and acceptance of all learners. It would require that teachers rethink their teaching practices, methods and strategies appreciate and accommodate individual differences.

This section looked at empirical literature in the international and national arena as it relates to inclusive education and teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities. The literature revealed that for the most part, teachers often find it difficult to meet the needs of learners with learning disabilities for various contextual and institutional reasons – inclusionary and exclusionary. The following section provides insight into the conceptual framework that underpinned this study.

2.5.8 Language of learning and teaching

For Section 6(1) of the Founding Provisions of the Constitution, the official languages of the Republic of South Africa are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Section 6(2) of the Constitution obligates the state to take practical and positive steps to elevate the status of and encourage the use of indigenous languages as a form of redress. Article 6(4) of the Constitution places a further duty on the state

to set up appropriate mechanisms to ensure that all languages enjoy parity of esteem and are treated equitably. This provision has important implications for determining language policy in schools. This is particularly important in the context of recent debates over the status of English as LoLT (see, for instance, Pule, 2020; Odeku, 2018; Milligan & Tikly, 2016).

Thobejane (2018) conducted a study to examine the challenges that second language (L2) English speakers face when learning English as a first additional language (FAL), and as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT). The findings of the study revealed that learners experienced several challenges in reading and creative writing and showed a weak understanding of English texts (Thobejane, 2018). Regarding teaching learners with dyslexia, Karimupfumbi and Dwarika (2022) conducted a study on the implementation of the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support, focusing specifically on the support provided by teachers once the learners had been identified. The findings of the study revealed that teachers struggled to assist and accommodate learners who presented with dyslexia (Karimupfumbi & Dwarika, 2022).

2.6 Conceptual framework

This study explored the experiences of teachers who taught learners with a learning disability within a rural mainstream primary schooling context. This required that the study foreground the voices of teachers, who were participants in this study, to understand the dynamics of their situations. Therefore, to delve into these experiences, the study deployed concepts from various social justice theorists, including those by, Hardiman et al. (2007), Tatum (2003) and Young (1990). The discussions in this study are located within the dynamics of how power is deployed, which results in the inclusion or exclusion of learners with learning disabilities.

According to Hardiman et al. (2007), oppression refers to a system that encourages, maintains and reinforces advantages and disadvantages based on membership in specific social groups. Oppression operates, both intentionally and unintentionally, at the individual, cultural and institutional levels (Hardiman et al., 2007). Oppression works with the understanding that teachers are agents who have access to power that

can be either used to reinforce the oppression of learners with learning disabilities or can work towards transformation by challenging normative understandings of disability. This suggests that the core of the notion of oppression is the aspect of difference, which, for this study, may be a learning disability. In the section below, I discuss and analyse these constructs, to create a theoretical foundation and lens through which discussions, arguments and conclusions must be understood in this study.

Norms and stereotypes exist that support discourses of the dominant groups, excluding those of the subordinate groups, such as learners with disabilities in the context of this study. For instance, the medical model of understanding disability results in the idea that people with disabilities require treatment to eradicate the cause of or fix the disability (Muthukrishna, 2002). Within the education system, for instance, fixing a disability is achieved through the placement of learners with disabilities in special schools and segregated special education classrooms (Lalvina, 2013). This supports the medical model, whereby a learner with a disability is expected to change, adapt and assimilate to the dominant schooling context. Lalvina (2013) contends that in these instances teachers go to the extent of recommending that the 'othered' learners with a disability must be placed in secluded, self-contained classrooms with their specially-trained teachers.

From the above, it could be discerned that this way of thinking causes teachers to perpetuate the marginalisation, segregation and exclusion of learners with disabilities. Marginalisation, othering and segregation were key ideas that informed the organisation of schooling contexts during apartheid (Lalvina, 2013). However, the embedded nature of dominant discourses of ableism still exists even today and many teachers have internalised this idea, which has influenced their thoughts, attitudes, behaviours and practices towards learners with disabilities (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). From this perspective, the notion of oppression is operationalised as an unfair advantage and disadvantage and categorises individuals and social groups, such as learners with learning disabilities, based on their valued and devalued differences.

Tatum (2003) has argued that individuals have multiple social identities and based on their positioning and location may experience both advantages and disadvantages.

However, learners with disabilities may only find that they belong to marginalised or target identities, which is an issue that teachers must consider seriously. Failing to consider that learners with disabilities are some of the most marginalised groups would certainly ensure that all that they experience is disempowerment. This was evident in the study by Lalvani (2013) where because teachers felt disempowered and alienated from their work, they instead developed mixed feelings about teaching learners with learning disabilities and ended up leaving them behind, effectively marginalising them. In such a context, learners who are the most marginalised are deprived of their right of receiving the same kind of education in the same classrooms as their able-bodied peers. Teachers, therefore, may be accomplices in the institutionalisation of the forms of exclusion that serve to reinforce hierarchies within the schooling system and construct some learners as others (Lalvani, 2013).

The theory of oppression also comprises the notion of internalised oppression. This suggests that oppression thus exists and operates as a social system (Hardiman et al., 2007; Mulally, 2002; Young, 1990) and comprises mutually reinforcing and structured ways or mechanisms for generating and reproducing a range of forms of inequality (Young, 1990). This is often achieved through how society and institutions operate and function. For instance, within the context of this study, communities and schools may operate and function in ways that encourage, reproduce and reinforce discrimination against learners with learning disabilities. Young (1990) characterises structural oppression as constitutive of the injustices and inequities experienced by oppressed social groups. Young (1990, p. 41) contends that the sources and causes of inequities and injustices "are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences for following those rules" (p. 41). This means that injustices and inequities are reinforced by how individuals and social groups involved respond, both consciously and unconsciously, to the sanctions and incentives from their context, what Young (1990, p. 41) calls the "normal processes of everyday life" to maintain the status quo. For instance, if the culture of a school is not to challenge discriminatory practices against learners with learning disabilities, members of the school community, including teachers, will go on with their lives and accept, and even participate in, ableist tendencies and practices.

Unequal and differential treatment tends to be systematic and institutionalised (Hardiman et al., 2007). To this end, oppressive behaviours "often do not require the conscious thought or effort of individual members of oppressor group but are a part of normalized practices, policies and beliefs that become embedded in social structures" (p. 37). When this happens, it is pointing to the fact that oppression has become embedded within the structures and ways of functioning of a society, and has become their normal way of working. For instance, teachers may not see the need for finding ways of ensuring that learners with learning disabilities benefit from their teaching, and their parents will have to accept and not challenge the teachers and the school to ensure that their children learn. This would mean that ableism would have become normalised and naturalised as an acceptable way of handling the education of learners with learning disabilities. This will further conceal and become institutionalised in the normal workings of the school, which will ensure its perpetuation, given the fact that members of the school community will find it difficult to identify or change something that they cannot see (Williams, 2012).

The systematic nature of oppression means that it operates on multiple levels (Hardiman et al., 2007), namely, individual or personal level; structural or institutional level; and cultural or societal level. These are discussed in the section below.

The personal or individual level of oppression denotes the unconscious or conscious thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, actions and behaviours of individuals that contribute to, perpetuate, and collude, actively or passively, with oppression (Hardiman et al., 2007). For instance, teachers may hold beliefs that learners with certain disabilities are not deserving of access to education, and not take steps to ensure that they learn. Inequality and injustice at the individual or personal level comprise both prejudice and discrimination (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993). However, the personal or individual level must be supported by the institutional and cultural levels to fully enable access to sufficient power for dominant groups (Hardiman et al., 2007).

The societal or cultural level of oppression comprises patterns of thought, explicit and implicit values, beliefs, norms, viewpoints and discourses that perpetuate and reinforce oppressive practices (Hardiman et al., 2007). For instance, dominant discourses regarding disability may propagate and reinforce beliefs that learners with disabilities

must only receive their education in special schools and classrooms, and make it difficult for these learners to be admitted to mainstream or regular schools and classrooms. Often, dominant cultural norms justify such operationalisation. For instance, the discrimination of persons with disabilities concerning access to education may be supported in their community through beliefs that they must receive social grants instead of education. This implies that having a learning disability may be viewed as unnatural or as a curse or punishment, or as an object of pity, and thus an anomaly (Sullivan, 1991).

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states that everyone has a right to basic education (Republic of South Africa, 1996). However, despite this, learners with learning disabilities are still denied access to their right to basic education. How the curriculum is structured, the lack of resources and the inability or unwillingness of their teachers to accommodate them in their teaching, continue to exclude learners with learning disabilities (see, for instance, Nthibeli, Griffiths & Bekker, 2022; Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The failure of the Department of Education to provide the required resources and professional development for teachers disempowers teachers and makes it difficult for them to teach learners with learning disabilities, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). Given the fact that a significant number of teachers in South Africa received their training during the apartheid period, the embedded nature of oppressive understandings is highly likely.

Under apartheid, for instance, teachers were ideologically and systematically trained to think that being different was abnormal and that separation was a necessary phenomenon (Shunmugam, 2002). This institutionalised the advantage of ableist views and reinforced inequality and oppression based on learning disabilities. The remnants of the apartheid ideology evident in the medical model have tended to continue into today and are still evident in how teachers think about and respond to learners with learning disabilities (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022; Meltz et al., 2014; Pather, 2011). Palacios (2008), however, points out that the implementation of inclusive education does not mean that teachers will respond positively toward learners with disabilities. Instead, he points out that teaching in an inclusive environment can sometimes be oppressive, as it may demand skills that teachers do not have (Palacios, 2008). Furthermore, the training of these teachers may not have provided them with

the knowledge and skills required to implement inclusive education and ensure curriculum access for learners with disabilities; hence, teachers may feel alienated from their work by the system that seeks to include these learners.

The structural or institutional level of oppression comprises the rules, laws, processes, policies, and practices of societal institutions, which intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate and reinforce oppression (Hardiman et al., 2007). The institutional level of oppression codifies and legitimises oppression through formal societal arrangements and structures (Hardiman et al., 2007). For instance, a policy of education may segregate education according to schools for learners with and without learning disabilities. As such, this may reinforce beliefs that learners with learning disabilities are not deserving of access to education in mainstream or regular schools, and must be sent or referred to special schools. This may lead to teachers in mainstream or regular schools being unwilling to have learners with learning disabilities in their classrooms, or where these learners are present in their education, they may not make any effort of ensuring that they learn. This means that, at this level, oppression is engraved and institutionalised in the workings of institutions.

In respect of the application of the conceptual framework, for this study, the principle was to keep an understanding that it was intrinsically linked to the literature review. Therefore, the conceptual framework was used as a guide for logically developing arguments, interpretations and understandings regarding the phenomenon under investigation. In other words, the conceptual framework was used as a lens for reading, analysing, interpreting and understanding how the data responded to the key research questions of the study. This means that the conceptual framework was used as a device to ensure the logical formulation of the arguments regarding the phenomenon under investigation, namely, the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities.

2.7 Conclusion

Chapter 2 presented a review of literature on learning disabilities, a definition of inclusive education, a global as well as South African perspective of inclusive education, strategies for implementing it as well as factors that influences teachers'

experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities and the systematic issues affecting inclusive education.

The next chapter will focus on the research design; research methodology; data collection instruments; data analysis method and profile of the six selected rural primary school teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities in a mainstream primary school.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGICAL AND DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, considerations regarding the research design and methodology of this study are described and discussed. The chapter will do this by describing the research paradigm that constructs the epistemological and ontological framework in which the study is situated. Secondly, I examine the methodological approach underpinning the study. The relevance and accuracy of decisions made regarding the research setting, sampling techniques, data collection process and methods, and how the data was collected are presented. The chapter concludes by discussing the limitations and ethical considerations of the research study. It is important to reiterate that the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities in a rural mainstream primary school.

3.2 Critical research paradigm

Paradigms can be defined as perspectives or ways of looking at reality, which implies that they serve as the frames of reference we use to organise our observations and reasoning (Babbie, 2007). In this regard, Babbie (2007) contends that paradigms shape both what we see and how we understand it. From a research perspective, a paradigm provides researchers with a way of thinking about their research, and a basic set of beliefs that they can use to guide their research action (Creswell, 2014; Guba, 1990; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). Therefore, a research paradigm could be regarded as a researcher's philosophical orientation or outlook on reality, the social world and a set of assumptions that they bring into the research endeavour (Creswell, 2014). A research paradigm, thus, derives from the epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions of the researcher (Gough & Scott, 2000).

This research study adopted a critical research paradigm. The critical paradigm emerges from a reformative and transformative agenda residing within the critical theory (Horkheimer, 1982). As a result, the critical paradigm seeks to liberate humans from oppressive circumstances and situations and transform the world into a better place (Asghar, 2013; Horkheimer, 1982; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). For this study, the

transformative nature of the critical paradigm did not change or transform the world of the participants. This was not possible for this small-scale study. However, what it did enable was a space for self-reflection for the participants. The various data collection methods used allowed the participants to reflect on their working lives and experience a measure of change in their perspectives.

The critical paradigm was important for this study as it provided me with the tools for understanding how participants' narratives shaped their teaching and interactions with learners with learning disabilities. In other words, for this study, the critical paradigm enabled me to ask questions that went beyond the status quo and acknowledged the role of power and social positioning in the manner in which the participants understood their experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities. In this regard, the adoption of the critical research paradigm enabled me to trouble the status quo to expose the consequences of the unequal power relations, rather than confirm the status quo (Asghar, 2013). In doing this, I interrogated the participants' narratives to such a degree as to question their underlying messages. Therefore, the critical paradigm enabled me to bring to attention how the participants negotiated the exclusionary forces to ensure all learners could learn.

3.3 Qualitative research

According to Hennink et al. (2011), qualitative research studies people's daily life experiences. Qualitative research has become a source of knowledge in social research. Experiences are personal and social (Bruno & Do Nascimento, 2019). The position taken in this regard, as guided by Creswell (2014), is that a more precise distinction lies in the philosophical assumptions a researcher brings to the study, the type of research strategies they use, and the methods of data collection and analysis, which he uses to answer key research questions. This implies, therefore, that for this study, the research approach was chosen based on the nature of the study and my philosophical assumptions regarding research into participants' experiences of teaching learners with disabilities.

For this study, qualitative research was adopted. The choice of qualitative research lay in its potential to generate rich, context-bound data and its usefulness for exploring

and understanding the meanings participants assign to their experiences of their social worlds (Creswell, 2014). For instance, for this study, participants ascribed different meanings to their experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities. In this regard, the choice of qualitative research enabled me to read the participants' experiences in a manner that acknowledged their different experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities. In addition, the adoption of qualitative research enabled me to understand the participants' experiences as multi-dimensional, with a multiplicity of meanings (Creswell, 2014).

Therefore, the qualitative research tradition enabled me to read the experiences of the participants from a multi-layered perspective rather than through a thin, unifocal lens (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In addition, the fact that the qualitative research tradition enables the deployment of an assortment of data collection methods provided more options that made flexibility possible (Flick, 2002). Thus, locating this study within qualitative research enabled me to focus the interpretive lens on the experiences of teachers within a particular teaching context and to attempt not to capture one, but multi-dimensionalities of the participants' experiences and social realities (Merriam, 1988).

In light of the above, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) contend that experiences are personal and social and are essential for understanding the world and its complex phenomena. Thus, in this regard, the adoption of qualitative research gave credence to the participants' narratives, remembrances, reflections, perspectives, and beliefs. For this study, qualitative research enabled the understanding and responding to questions that placed social experience as a key aspect of human perspective. This means that qualitative research was compatible with the purpose of this research study, which was to understand the experiences of teachers regarding the teaching of learners with learning disabilities. This was possible because the focus of qualitative research is real-world phenomena and how people create and interpret meanings from their experiences of the world (Merriam, 2009). As eloquently expressed by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), for this study, I could "reconstruct reality from the standpoint of participant perspectives, as the participants they are studying see it" (p. 322).

3.4 Narrative inquiry as the research approach

Qualitative researchers use a range of approaches to explore people's experiences of their social realities (Merriam, 2009). Narrative research posits that human beings come to understand and ascribe meanings to their lives and social worlds through story (Andrews et al., 2008). For Riessman and Speedy (2007), the notion of narrative:

> "…carries many meanings and is used in a variety of ways by different disciplines, often synonymously with story (...) the narrative scholar (pays) analytic attention to how the facts got assembled that way. For whom was this story constructed, how was it made and for what purpose? What cultural discourses does it draw on – take for granted? What does it accomplish?"
>
> (Riessman & Speedy, 2007, pp. 428-429)

Josselson (2006) contends that narrative research provides a researcher with the means to understand the complex, tension-filled world of people. For this study, a narrative research approach was adopted. The narrative approach was appropriate for the study as it captures how participants construct their stories, for whom and for what purpose, including the cultural discourses from which their stories draw (Trahar, 2009). Thus, for this study, the narrative approach enabled me to get a glimpse into the participants' experiences through the stories that they told about their experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities. In addition, narrative inquiry enabled me to collaborate with participants in the construction of their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative inquiry includes temporal, societal and spatial dimensions. This means that stories involve gathering "*knowledge from* the past and not necessarily *knowledge about* the past":

> "Making stories from one's lived history is a process by which ordinarily we revise the past retroactively, and when we do we are engaged in processes of languaging and describing that modify the past. What we see as true today may not have been true at the time the actions we are describing were performed. Thus we need to resist the temptation to

> attribute intentions and meanings to events that they did not have at the time they were experienced" (Bochner, 2007, p. 203).

Thus, in this instance, the narrative inquiry was used to enable the in-depth exploration of participants' narratives in respect of their experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities. In addition, for this study, narrative inquiry provided the researcher with a way of inquiring into and understanding participants' experiences in respect of teaching learners with learning disabilities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Dewey's (1938) theory of experience provides a basis for narrative inquiry. In particular, Dewey's (1938) notion of interactions, provides a way of understanding how our earlier experiences are maintained and that they influence how we live our lives going forward. For this study, I was aware that there was always a connection between their current and previous experiences, which means that although these would have been modified somewhat, they would not be too alien to their previous experiences. In addition, for this study, narrative inquiry provided the researcher with a way of thinking about and understanding experience.

As a methodology, according to Clandinin (2013), narrative inquiry provided me with an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation in a deeper manner. For instance, for this study, the narrative inquiry was useful in that it provided a mechanism for sharing a detailed account of the unique experiences, perspectives and understanding of the participants of their experiences of teaching learners with disabilities. The purpose in this respect was to get a glimpse into the meanings that the participants ascribed to their experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities and, as indicated above, the intention was not to find objective, decontextualised truths (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, from the perspective of this study, the narrative accounts, which were sourced through dialogue and explanation, of the participants provided a rich and detailed preview of the participants' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities.

3.5 Context of the study

This research was conducted at Siwela Primary School[1] (pseudonym), a mainstream rural school in UThukela District, province of KwaZulu-Natal. The school has 637 and 18 teachers and learners respectively and runs from Grades R to 7. The school is a Quintile 1[2] school and thus relies entirely on the Department of Education for all its financial requirements. The school is a no-fee paying school, which means that parents of learners enrolled at the school do not have to pay school fees. The school has a Section 20 status and requires that the Department of Education procures all teaching and learning support materials on behalf of the school. Often what occurs is that the school must wait for the often-slow supply chain processes of the Department of Education to access the learning and teaching support materials. The school is approximately 40km away from the nearest town and is one of the biggest schools in the education circuit.

The community in which the school is situated is sparsely populated, with inadequate access to basic services: no electricity, running water, or proper sanitation. A few communal taps are available for the entire community. People spend hours and hours queueing for water, which impacts negatively the study and play-time for children in the area, as they must assist their families with the fetching of water. Transport in the area is expensive and erratic as the roads are in poor condition. The community surrounding the school experiences high rates of unemployment, the prevalence of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and poverty. Some families are headed by children, which impacts their chances to succeed in school negatively. Parents who are fortunate to have jobs are often employed as domestic workers. Most families rely on social grants, and the elders, usually grandparents, head most of the households in the area.

The adverse socioeconomic circumstances of the community make it difficult for parents and grandparents to help children succeed at school, as most have to focus their energies on the survival of themselves and their families. Thus parents and

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[1] Not the real name of the school

[2] The quintile ranking is based on the unemployment rate and literacy rate of the community in which the school is located, with a Quintile 1 ranking indicating a poor/impoverished school, and a Quintile 5 ranking indicating a wealthy/affluent school.

grandparents rely entirely on the school to deal with the academic and psychosocial challenges that their children, especially those with disabilities, experience in their lives and schoolwork. This places undue strain on teachers who must juggle multiple roles over and above their professional responsibilities. The learners who attend the school are all Africans, from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

3.6 Selection of participants

Sampling can be defined as a process of selecting a few potential participants, called a sample, from a larger target population (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Kumar, 2011; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). A target population refers to "an entire group about which some information is required to be ascertained" (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010, p. 5). For this study, the target population was all the teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities at a school in a rural context. Creswell (2014) contends that for a sample to be acceptable and representative, it must adequately share the characteristics of the target population. For this, study, a sample had to comprise a subset of teachers who are teaching learners with learning disabilities. From the above, it is evident that, in sampling, a sample of a target population was selected to respond to the key research questions of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 222).

This study used purposive sampling as the intention was to select participants based on specific criteria, which were considered important for meeting the objectives of the study (namely, the participants had to be teachers who had taught learners with learning disabilities). This suggests that, in this instance, the researcher made a judgment as to which members would be eligible for selection and be appropriate to obtain information from to respond to the objectives and key research questions for the research study (Kumar, 2011). As a result, the participants for the study were selected from a primary school in a rural community, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The reason for selecting this school was its proximity to the researcher's place of residence and the fact that it was the only school with the longest history of admitting learners with disabilities from surrounding communities. The latter reason for the selection of the school was in line with the caution that has been provided by Durrheim (2006) that sampling must not only rely on the availability and willingness to take part in the study but that participants must be selected based on having

displayed specific attributes for the desired population. In this regard, six (6) teachers, both males and females, were selected to participate in the research study to explore different perspectives, and how teachers coped with the challenges. The teachers were teaching in the Intermediate Phase (i.e. Grades 4-6) of the General Education and Training (GET) Band (i.e. Grades R-9). The choice of teachers from the Intermediate Phase was based on the assumption that the phase requires teachers and learners to make a big transition from the Foundation Phase, as the number of subjects suddenly increases from three (3) to seven (7). All the participants were recommended by the school principal, based on the criterion that they had to have been teaching learners with learning disabilities for more than five years.

3.7 Methods of data production

There are numerous research methods and techniques to collect data to respond to the central research questions of a study. Research methods are all those means, procedures, and techniques used to generate data to respond to the key questions of the study (Kothari, 2004). Research methodologies and techniques were used for this study that would, as much as possible, allow participants to speak freely about their experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities. This means that this study intended to use methods that do not limit and disrupt the participants' stories about their experiences concerning the focus of the study (Bergold, 2007; Bergold & Thomas, 2012). The rationale for adopting this view was based on the understanding that participants are active actors in their social world and that they can understand their situations and express their opinions about what they are experiencing.

The following section discusses the data collection methods used for this study.

3.7.1 Semi-structured interviews

For this study, semi-structured interviews were held with the six (6) teachers selected. A semi-structured interview refers to a short list of questions that are used to guide the flow of the interview and which may be supplemented using probing and follow-up questions, depending on the participant's responses (Kallio et al., 2016). All questions should be open-ended, neutral, and clear and avoid leading language. Given the fact that data collection for this study was conducted while the country was under

lockdown due to the outbreak of COVID-19, online semi-structured interviews were chosen to ensure adherence to the country's protocols to contain the spread of the pandemic. As guided by Johnson (1994), semi-structured interviews were initiated by the researcher to elicit specific information from the participants. For this study, the process of interviewing required the participants to respond to a set of predetermined questions (Maree, 2007), which were, however, only flexibly followed. The advantage of using semi-structured interviews was that this defined the line of inquiry while allowing for probing and seeking clarification where there was a need to do so (Creswell, 2014).

For this study, I developed a set of predetermined open-ended questions in advance to address the research questions of the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were held with six teachers who, as indicated above, had been selected purposively. Notwithstanding the advantages of using semi-structured interviews, there were certain limitations. For instance, as I explored and probed to identify emerging lines of inquiry (Nieuwenhuis, 2007), I always had to guard against getting side-tracked by issues not related to the present study. In addition, sometimes participants tended to understand questions in different ways, which led to different interpretations (Hobson & Townsend, 2010). To prevent this from happening, I had to rephrase the questions concerned to ensure that participants understood them as intended. However, given the fact that the study was located within the critical paradigm, this rephrasing was used only to ensure that the participants understood the broad intention of the question asked. In other words, I allowed the participants to respond to the questions in terms of their subjective realities. In some instances, the questions were not rephrased, especially where the participants were raising issues that I had not thought about in crafting the questions.

To eliminate distractions and not take the participants away from their teaching obligations, the interviews were conducted after school hours in a private setting and at a time that was convenient for them. Often this was when participants were in their homes. For each interview, a period of 30 to 45 minutes was allowed. However, in a few instances, participants' responses went beyond the estimated interview time. The value of using the online platform Zoom was that the interviews were recorded and

saved. The interviews were only conducted once I had received consent from the participants. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim.

3.7.2 Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews can be defined as a focused discussion with a group or groups of participants whose intention is to generate information in respect of a specific research topic or question (Cohen et al., 2007). This implies that data generated from focus group interviews emerges from the discussion with participants on that specific topic, usually facilitated by prompts from the researcher (Burton & Bartlett, 2005). To this end, a focus group interview provides participants with an opportunity to share their views on a specific topic.

For this study, a focus group interview was held with the six teachers who were participants in the study. The decision to conduct the focus group interviews using an online platform was again based on the necessity to comply with the country's protocols for containing the spread of COVID-19. The intention of holding focus group discussions with the participants was to explore their understanding of the experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities within the context of a school that had a history of admitting learners with disabilities.

Before the commencement of the focus group interviews, an orientation virtual workshop was held with the participants to familiarise them with the use of the technology that was going to be used during the focus group interview. Before the day of conducting the focus group interview, an invitation to participate was sent to the participants, to attend the meeting, which they had to accept or reject. All six participants accepted the invitation. The invitation contained the link and ID to be used to join the discussion. The focus group interviews were conducted on a Zoom platform.

During focus group discussions, participants were invited to respond in the language of their choice, whose intention was to reduce the impact of language as a communication barrier. In this instance, participants used a mixture of IsiZulu and English, depending on the question to which they were responding. The focus group interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and later

translated and transcribed verbatim. To ensure that participants' stories were not lost in translation, recordings were verified with a professional language specialist, who was requested to sign a declaration of secrecy to ensure the confidentiality of the participant's responses.

For this study, the focus group interview was useful in that it enabled interactions among the participants, which strengthen the richness of the responses that they provided (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Secondly, the use of the focus group interviews assisted with the fact that the researcher could have one with all the participants, which prevented situations where the researcher had to deal with the situations of each participant in respect of the logistics. Lastly, as argued by Krueger and Casey (2000), Morgan (1988) and Stewart and Shamdasani (2015), it would seem that the context of the focus group interviews provided an environment which the participants regarded as safe for providing information in response to the key research questions of the study individually. However, as advised by Stewart and Shamdasani (2015), it was important, from time to time, to encourage all participants, instead of a few dominating the session, to talk, share their thoughts freely and express their opinions. In this regard, as a researcher, I had to moderate the participation of individuals who seemed to be dominating the discussions, and allow others' voices to be part of the discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015).

3.8 Data analysis: Semi-structure and focus group interviews

Data generated were qualitative data and obtained from transcripts from semi-structured and focus group interviews. The analysis of the data began immediately after the commencement of the data collection process. This was informed by the fact that data analysis within qualitative research tends to be an ongoing and iterative (non-linear) process, which implies that data collection, analysis and reporting are intertwined, and not successive steps (Maree, 2007, p. 195). That is, for this study, data analysis involved a process in which I made meaning of the data generated in respect of the focus and key research questions of the study, the reviewed literature and the foundations provided by the theoretical framework (De Vos, 1998). In the section below, I provide a discussion of how the process of analysing the data was conducted in this study in respect of the data generated. However, it is important to point out that

the analysis focused on each data set before the different phases of the data collection process were pulled together. The importance of doing this was based on the intention to ensure that the participants' voices were always audible and not lost in the process of data analysis. The section below provided a discussion of how the process of data analysis was undertaken in this study.

Data generated through semi-structured and focus group interviews were analysed qualitatively. The analysis of the data generated happened concurrent to the data-gathering process, as suggested by Carmichael and Cunningham (2017), which means that the process commenced as soon as data collection started. The process of data analysis involved making notes of ideas occurring to them, reading transcripts and identifying themes, which were used to organise the data (Creswell, 2014). This means that I transcribed the data from the audio recordings of the interviews. Data were then read and coded by dividing them into units of analysis. The coding of data involved the marking of data segments with symbols, descriptive words or unique identifying names, as advised by Maree (2007, p. 105).

The process of making sense of the data comprises the identification of themes across datasets, describing connections between patterns and themes, and reading them (Nowell et al., 2017) against the key research questions of the study, theory and existing and reviewed literature. However, this process of comparing patterns and themes to the key research questions of the study, theory and existing and reviewed literature was conducted in such a way as not to exclude responses that fell outside of these parameters. In addition, to ensure that the participants' voices remained visible and audible during the process of analysing the data, direct quotations of the responses of the participants were used to elucidate and substantiate claims and conclusions made regarding the key research questions of the study and the literature reviewed.

3.9 Trustworthiness and credibility

Instead of considering the information collected as 'valid', 'reliable', and 'objective', qualitative researchers must consider the quality of their data and findings in respect of credibility and trustworthiness (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). To enhance the

credibility and trustworthiness of this study, specific measures were put in place as discussed in the section below.

Firstly, to enhance credibility, I allowed sufficient time to engage with the participants before reaching any conclusions regarding the findings of the study (Mertens, 2010; Seale, 1999). Throughout the data collection process, I allowed time to build trust with the participants so that they were reasonably comfortable about and not self-monitoring their responses (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2013). In addition, I also shared the findings of the study with my peers, critical readers working in the field of inclusive education and my supervisor. These parties were asked to read the findings with a critical mind to ensure that there was sufficient rigour in how the process of data analysis had been conducted (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, member-checking was conducted, which involved the participants allowed to, as advised by Cohen et al. (2011), Creswell (2014) and Hittleman and Simon (2006), go through the transcriptions, to verify their authenticity and provide feedback.

Secondly, throughout the present study, to ensure the dependability of the findings, I provided detailed descriptions of the data collected, and sourced data through various methods and techniques (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012; Hittleman & Simon, 2006), namely, online semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. This was useful for cross-checking information, confirming findings and searching for and identifying common themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Furthermore, I ensured that I reflected on my positionality in the research process. I, therefore, kept a journal of all the critical events throughout conducting the study, which I used for reflecting on the research process and discussion with my supervisor (Maree, 2007). During this reflection, I went through the journal entries to identify and address any biases that may have resulted from my preoccupations and assumptions. I also relied on peer examination and discussions regarding the data I collected by using multiple methods of cross-checking information and confirming findings (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To do this, I cross-checked participants' responses in respect of semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews.

Thirdly, to enhance the confirmability of the findings, I kept an audit trail of all the processes and activities. For this study, the audit trail comprised documents for

keeping track of how the study had been conducted and contained raw data gathered during the data collection process and how the working assumptions were developed, refined and tested (Creswell, 2014). The intention was to enable other researchers and interested persons to track the sources and processes that were used to make interpretations and conclusions (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Seale, 1999). As an additional measure, I constantly sought advice and guidance from my research supervisor and other scholars working in the field of learners with learning disabilities during the whole research process to ensure that my understandings of the data were in sync with the debates in the discipline (Creswell, 2014).

Lastly, a rich, detailed description of the research setting and participants was provided to enable a fuller understanding of the genesis of the findings and the interpretations that were made (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This, to a certain extent, was intended to assist other researchers to decide if the findings of the study could have implications for other settings and teachers (Patton, 2015). In this regard, detailed information and description of the findings were provided to enable readers of the research report to make judgements in respect of the generalisability of the research findings to other settings and contexts (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Lincoln & Guba,1985; Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 2010). It must be noted, however, that this study did not intend to generalise findings but rather to provide a situated understanding of teachers working in a particular school in a rural area.

3.10 Ethical issues

This study involved humans. Therefore, it was important to adhere to strict ethical requirements and standards related to respecting, safeguarding and protecting their rights. As ethical considerations apply both within the research field and within the study itself, I followed all relevant legislation and ethical guidelines (Creswell, 2014; Morgan & Sklar, 2012). In doing this, I took into account ethical criteria, such as permission to conduct research, voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, right to privacy, protection from harm and access to study results (Morgan & Sklar, 2012).

First of all, I obtained clearance from the Ethics Committee of the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal to conduct the research study. Hereafter, I obtained permission to conduct the research study from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (KZNDoE) (Appendix A).

Second, after obtaining permission from the KZNDoE, I contacted the principal of the research school and shared permission from the KZNDoE to obtain permission to do research at the selected school. In this regard, an initial meeting was held with the school principal, which followed health protocols for curbing the spread of COVID-19, to explain the nature of the study, request permission to conduct the study and share my expectations regarding the conduct of the study. For example, the school principal was requested to identify potential participants with the most experience working with learners with learning disabilities.

Fourth, I then approached the selected teachers and invited them to participate in the study. The nature of the study was explained to the teachers, who were then given the document outlining the topics to be covered during the interviews. Hereafter, the teachers were requested to participate in the study. Informed consent was obtained from the teachers who were willing to participate in the study (Blanche et al., 2006). Before this, the teachers were made adequately aware of what I expected from them before they committed to participation (Kumar, 2011). However, I was careful not to pressurise potential participants to provide consent. After providing verbal consent for participation in the study, participants were requested to sign a consent form as assurance that they had voluntarily consented to participate.

Fifth, I followed the guidance provided by Berger (2013) that qualitative researchers must develop relationships with their participants, although such a research relationship may always be unequal. In doing this, I held initial virtual meetings with each of the individual participants. These meetings were intended to build rapport before the commencement of the data collection process. I also took responsibility for reasonably safeguarding both the participants' rights to privacy and confidentiality as well as the information that they provided so that their identities could not be recognised (Cohen et al., 2011). In this regard, to protect the identity of the participants as well as that of the school, I used pseudonyms and stored all the participants' names

and other personal details under lock and key. To further enhance ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the name of the school and the participating teachers were only known to my research supervisor and me.

Lastly, all interviews and all associated discussions were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data was then verified with the participants through a process known as member checking (Guba, 1981). All the information that could potentially be traced back to individual respondents, was treated with confidentiality and anonymity and passwords were created to protect electronic data and all hard copies in respect of the participants were kept under lock and key.

3.11 Limitations

This study was limited to one mainstream primary school in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Thus, the findings of this may not be generalisable across primary schools. However, it was not the intention of this study to generalise findings, but it was to understand experiences teachers encountered in the teaching of learners with learning disabilities. The outbreak of COVID-19 also limited and sometimes constrained how the study was conducted. For instance, as part of the protocols, movements and contacts were limited to minimise the transmission of the virus. This compelled me to use online platforms for all communication, including data collection, which possibly posed a challenge in respect of the face-to-face interactions with the participants. This also meant that costs were incurred that I had not planned for. This was because I had to pay for data for the participants to be able to access the internet and complete the interviews and focus group discussions.

3.12 Conclusion

The chapter described, discussed and analysed the research methodology and design considerations that I made for the conduct of the study. The chapter included a discussion of the research paradigm, research design, selection of participants, research methods used, and data analysis methods and techniques. The study concluded with a discussion of considerations to ensure the respect, upholding and

protection of the participants' rights and the limitations that the study had to contend with, and how these were managed to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

The next chapter will present, discuss, analyse and interpret the findings in line with the key research questions of the study.

CHAPTER 4
PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the research methodology and design that was adopted in this study. This chapter presents and discusses the findings generated from the data generated through semi-structured and focus group interviews, on the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities within a rural mainstream primary school setting. The data was analysed using existing literature in the area as well as the concepts from various social justice theorists, including Hardiman et al. (2007), Tatum (2003) and Young (1990). In this study, discussions are located and understood within the framework of how power is deployed, resulting in the inclusion and/or exclusion of, for instance, learners with learning disabilities. This research was guided by the following key research questions:

- **Research question 1**: What are teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in a rural mainstream primary school?
- **Research question 2**: What are the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influence teaching learners with learning disabilities?
- **Research question 3**: How do teachers negotiate these factors to facilitate learning?

This chapter will begin with a presentation and discussion of data generated to respond to the first and second key research questions. In this regard, I begin by initially providing insights into what teachers understood inclusive education entails as well as their understanding of learning disabilities. This provides details of how their understandings are both inclusionary and exclusionary to the education of learners with learning disabilities. This is followed by the broad theme entitled: Factors affecting the experiences of teaching learners with disabilities. What becomes evident is that teachers' experiences of teaching learners with disabilities are largely negative. The second section of the chapter focuses on how teachers negotiated exclusionary factors they encountered in their efforts to facilitate learning for learners with learning disabilities.

In presenting the extracts from the participants' responses, I used footnotes to indicate those that were sourced from the focus group interviews and no footnotes for those that were quoted from responses from semi-structured interviews.

4.2 Teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities

4.2.1 Teachers' understanding of inclusive education

All the participants indicated that they had some idea of the notion of inclusive education. Research suggests that if the implementation of inclusive education is to be successful, teachers must have an understanding of what it means (see, for instance, Jia, Tan & Santi, 2022; Ngidi, 2020; Ntombela, 2015; Pantić & Florian, 2015). The extract from data below provides an understanding of how teachers, as participants of this study, understood inclusive education:

> Thobeka: *Inclusive education stresses out that you must include all learners even learners with learning barriers. So, when I mean what I was explaining that a lesson should accommodate all learners. When you prepare your lesson, it must accommodate all learners even those with learning barriers.*

> Thembisile: *The school must be built first, the buildings and grounds must be built the way that is suitable for all learners at the school and then the Principal and the SMT must go find the helpful ways of helping learners.*

> Sihle: *learners may have different ways of learning, so our school does try the best of our ability to use different methods of teaching to ensure that all learners are accommodated. The policies that are in place and are implemented by the school are very inclusive, they cater for all learners even those with learning disabilities. Sometimes we do identify learners that we cannot cater for, we even refer them and just the way the school is, the classrooms, even outside though not fully complete but if we had learners with physical disability though we currently not have any, they*

can also be taken care of based on the layout we had in the classrooms so they can fit too.

Nomalizo*: it is difficult because at the same time you try to do that maybe you give them some work that is in their level, the learner will take the work home. Then their parents intervene, as you know how parents in rural areas are. They will complain that my child is in the same grade as my neighbour's child however they are doing different work*

From the data above, one can ascertain that inclusive education is understood as based on the accommodation of the needs of learners. Both Sihle and Thobeka seem to understand White Paper 6, which states that schools are required to integrate learners with disabilities into their mainstream classrooms (Arbeiter & Hartley, 2002). For Thobeka, inclusive education means ensuring that all learners are made to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. This is in line with the social model of disability, which stresses that a person should be respected irrespective of their disability status. Diversity should be welcomed and all learners included in learning (Siwela, 2017) Sihle recognises that learners are not the same and thus for example "*they have different ways of learning*". This shows that, for Sihle, embracing diversity is critical and not only does he see this but the school at which he teaches practices the policies of inclusive education because they attempt to "*ensure that all learners are accommodated*". Moreover, his reference to section 9 of the Constitution(Republic of South Africa, 1996) shows that he and the school acknowledge that learners with disabilities have the right to be in the same space as able-bodied learners. This is because the Constitution states that everyone is equal before the law. However, for Sihle, there are still some stereotypical ideas, where teachers believed they "*feel they cannot cater for*" learners with disabilities, and that they should, thus, be referred to other institutions that should cater for these learners. Sihle's comments can be interpreted in another way also, where he understands that sometimes there are learners which mainstream schools are unable to "*cater for*" and thus they should be "refer[red]" to a school that can provide them with the appropriate support. This could be because of the lack of capability within his school to accommodate these categories of learners, as pointed out by Ntombela (2015).

Thembisile points to an important consideration about inclusive education. For her to be fully successful and inclusive as expected by the policy, schools must be able to cater for all learner needs and that includes things like "*buildings and grounds*" so that all learners can be accommodated. Failing to provide the basic amenities would mean that inclusive education would be a failure (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). However, what is also evident from Thembisile's narrative is that she seems to think that the inclusion of all learners and their needs are outside of her responsibilities and instead the "*principal and SMT must go find the helpful ways of helping learners*". In this regard, she evades her responsibility as a teacher, which means that her ideas and thinking can become a barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools.

Nomalizo finds it difficult to practice inclusivity and points to the differences that can impede the successful implementation of inclusive education. Her attempts to differentiate the curriculum so that learners with learning disabilities can access the curriculum are being met with "*complaints*". For parents, Nomalizo is depriving their children of the education that they deserve, as they believe that their children should be doing the same work as other learners. This shows the lack of understanding of inclusive education within the parent community. For instance, it would seem that parents who complained, often understood inclusive education as assimilation into the mainstream classroom, with no differentiation mechanisms set up to accommodate the diverse educational needs of the learner. For them, it would seem, inclusion involves using a one size fits all approach for all learners which occurs in some schools as evident in research conducted by Clark (2017). This, however, is contrary to how Nomalizo thinks and works and it makes it difficult for Nomalizo to set up accommodative practices for the learners with learning disabilities in her class. In the end, the attempts made by Nomalizo to ensure that learners can access the curriculum were rejected by the parents of the children whom she wanted to help.

4.2.2 Conceptualising learning disability

The literature suggests that defining and conceptualising learning disability is a contentious issue (Gow, Mostert & Dreyer, 2020; Smith, 2010). Generally, the literature indicates that 'learning disability' is commonly used to describe a broad

range of neurodevelopmental impairments, which affects an individual's basic cognitive processes required for perceiving, processing and understanding information for purposes of learning. In this study, a learning disability is understood in a particular way, based on teachers' own experiences within the classroom:

> Thembisile: *actually, there are no physical or identifiable learners with disabilities in my class. I have those learners who we can see as a teacher that they are slow learners, they are not catching up their studies like others. They cannot even write their names, it's something you cannot even read. Some write in the middle of the line not on it.*
>
> Sihle: … *sometimes you find that there are learners that they are coping but in terms of their ability to grasp are slow or they may be those challenges not necessarily that there is a barrier as such with that learner, it's just that maybe there are barriers that are systemic.*
>
> Nomalizo: …*because according to me, I think a person with a disability is a person with challenges physically or mentally, that person cannot do things. A learner with barriers is a person who can do everything I can do as a normal person but he or she does not catch up with the school work*[3].
>
> Thembisile: …*a learner who has a problem maybe in focusing when a teacher is teaching in something or maybe it's not easy to catch up or follow the lesson properly*[4].

From the data above, one can deduce that the participants identified learners with a learning disability as those who "*cannot catch up their studies*", "*cannot do things*", "*write in the middle of a line*", "*cannot focus*" and whose ability to grasp learning content is "*slow*". These ideas are consistent with those raised by Smith (2010) and Gow, Mostert and Dreyer (2020) and Rudiyati, Mumpuniarti and Pujaningsih (2017). For Thembisile, a learner who has a learning disability is different from those with

[3] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[4] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

physical disabilities which she describes as easily "*identifiable*". What is important also is that all these teachers decide whether or not a learner has a learning disability based on what they experience within their context. Thembisile's ideas are also interesting as she sees the learners as having a "*problem*". Nomalizo goes so far as to speak about "*a normal person*". However, when Nomalizo discusses what a barrier is she seems to suggest recognition that a person with a barrier can do everything abled-bodied can do. However, her use of the words "*normal person*" suggests that there is a binary construction of able-bodied versus disabled with the disabled person being seen as abnormal. This view is normative, meaning that people are considered disabled on the basis that they are unable to function as so-called normal persons (Mitra, 2006; Roush & Sharby, 2011). Such ideas are in keeping with the discourses located within the medical model of disability, where the problem lies with the child rather than with the education system or possibly with teachers such as Nomalizo and Thembisile. In this regard, their ideas present and reproduce the discourses that the disability a person has becomes their defining characteristic (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Such ideas, however, have hazardous consequences as they can potentially prevent teachers from being able to meet the needs of learners who are "*different*". Here, we see the power associated with belonging to a dominant class as the teachers make judgements about who the learners with learning disabilities are and what they can and cannot do. Thembisile and Nomalizo in particular use these normative understandings and prescriptions based on their experiences and influences. In this instance, teachers like Thembisile and Nomalizo's responses are an embodiment of attitudes toward those that are unlike them (Martin, 2015; Brenner, Serpre & Stryker, 2014; McKinley, Mastro & Warbner, 2014).

Sihle, on the other hand, seemingly understands the discourse of inclusive education and tends to work within the social model of inclusive education. For him, barriers that are "*systemic*", suggest that the learner is not to blame but rather the system that fails to meet the needs of the learner. This is in support of the social rights model, which views the deficit as not existing within the individual but in the institution or the system resulting in learners not coping. The consequence of this is that learners cannot access and participate in learning through no fault of their own (Shunmugum, 2002; Johnson-Jones, 2017).

4.2.3 The centrality of teacher-learner relationships

The previous sections presented and discussed participants' conceptualisation of inclusive education and learning disabilities. This section presents and discusses the relationships that teachers had with learners with learning disabilities. According to Olivier (2017), teacher-learner relationships are important for the success of learners. The extracts from the data below discuss the teachers' attempts to do this:

> Thembisile: *You need to be more patient. You are always behind because you are trying to make them all catch up.*
>
> Hlengiwe: *… patience is critical when you are teaching learners with learning disabilities ... learners require that you keep repeating yourself over and over … I strive to push them with passion and care….*
>
> Sihle: *... they do want to … get an education … even though it won't be a hundred per cent, but they do show that they want us to work together.*
>
> Thobeka: *It's really difficult, it's hard because they also deserve their own time so you can take baby steps with them, … the period is only one hour so you have to try and accommodate all of them … and you still have to cover the whole lesson … there just isn't enough.*
>
> Nomalizo: *… you have to try to accommodate them all.*
>
> Ayanda: *... you need to first give them attention and ...you don't finish the syllabus sometimes until it's even time to write the exams, you haven't covered other chapters … you had to attend to the learners with problems.*
>
> Sihle: *According to the constitution … it allows them to be in mainstream school, but it's very, very challenging to deal with them in the mainstream. (interview) …. I think that it's not naturally okay… there is nothing we can*

do ... because there is this right that they have, but, honestly speaking ... it doesn't fit in well[5].

Hlengiwe: *Even for them ... the ones with a disability ... find it difficult to be accommodated in the mainstream. The normal learners, treat them differently*[6].

Nomalizo: … *we feel ashamed, we feel sorry for them*[7].

From the above, one can see the nuances of the teacher-learner relationships when attempting to help and support learners with learning disabilities. This is perceived in various ways. Firstly, there is an attempt by some teachers in particular Hlengiwe, Sihle, Thobeka and Thembisile, to meet the needs of the learners with learning disabilities. This, as they describe it, requires that teachers like Thembisile and Hlengiwe must have "*patience*" with the learners. They are aware that concerning the curriculum, "*you are always behind*", but that as responsive inclusive education teachers, one must "*move with them*". They have read and understood their learners who often took a long time to understand and Hlengiwe, in particular, highlights the significance of the teachers' patience when one must "[repeat] *yourself over and over*", and believed that this was a "*critical*" factor for learners with learning disabilities not to be left behind. Such an attitude suggests that Hlengiwe and Thembisile understood the importance of inclusive teaching to meet the diverse educational needs of all learners.

Secondly, Hlengiwe and Sihle point to the importance of having high expectations of the learners, mostly because for Sihle teaching is a calling. With this idea in mind, they do things like "*pushed them with passion and caring*" because they know that all learners regardless of disability "*want to be enlightened and to get an education*". It can be deduced that the participants, namely, Hlengiwe and Thembisile, placed great emphasis on the importance of adapting teaching strategies to accommodate learners with learning disabilities. Sihle's ideas encompass aspects beyond the school that

[5] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[6] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[7] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

influence what learners can achieve. It is for this reason that he wants learners to believe in themselves and that whilst achievement will not be a hundred per cent and may be difficult, some achievement is possible. In addition, Sihle understands the barriers experienced by the learners as being outside of the learners, instead pointing to the disadvantage of the place they come from as influencing what they can achieve as it is disadvantaged.

However, another interesting idea that emerges is that Ayanda and Thobeka's responses point to a challenging relationship with their learners. This is because of the persistent fear of accountability measures when not being able to "*finish the syllabus*". They show the difficulty of knowing that learners with disabilities "*deserve their own time*" in accessing the curriculum. Thobeka initially "*takes the baby steps*" with learners in trying to include them in the classroom. However, both Thobeka and Ayanda are aware of all the other learners who also need to be taught and accommodated. They realise also that they have to complete the syllabus so that learners can write the exams, but knowing that they have not covered the other chapters and that time will not allow them to be fully responsive to the needs of all their learners. The consequences of the accountability regime (Nadelson et al., 2012) is that both learners with disabilities and other learners that do not have learning disabilities miss out on learning opportunities. This points to the negative consequences of teachers being accountable for results, for completing the syllabus and still meeting the individual needs of learners with disabilities which is too much for teachers to handle. That is, there is frightening tension between curriculum coverage and the need to ensure that all learners can learn and succeed.

Sihle was the one teacher who openly questioned the rights of learners with learning disabilities to be in a mainstream class. He believed that including learners with learning disabilities in mainstream or regular classrooms was a challenge for teachers. For instance, he believed that it was "*not naturally okay*", but that, as teachers, they could not question it, although they would prefer the learners to be somewhere else. This suggests that, instead of challenging the understanding that learners with learning disabilities must not be taught and learn in mainstream classrooms and schools, he reproduced the normative discourses that prevail about learners with disabilities not belonging in mainstream schools. In other words, although this was their constitutional

right, it did not sit well with him: "*I think that it's not naturally okay ... It doesn't fit in well*". The normative discourses of disability as abnormal, where learners with disabilities are seen as objects of pity (Shunmugum, 2002) and where teachers like Nomalizo see them as people to "*feel sorry for*", reinforces the discourses of ableism where learners with learning disabilities do not belong. Even though it causes shame for Nomalizo, it is not something that she feels can or must be challenged.

Hlengiwe supports Sihle's sentiments, albeit for different reasons. For Hlengiwe, inclusive education was about the peer relationships that were effected in the classroom. For her, the presence of learners with learning disabilities caused a challenge for teachers, as learners without disabilities often believed teachers gave learners with disabilities special treatment and this was unfair. This, and the responses from other participants, point to the complexities the teachers faced in their attempts to ensure that all learners can learn and succeed.

4.2.4 Marginalisation of learners

For teachers in this study, the contextual realities they experienced seemed to overwhelm their efforts to ensure that their learners benefitted from their teaching. The following excerpts from their responses point to this fact:

> Hlengiwe: *To be honest ... as teachers* [we] *tell ourselves that this is how these learners are and they will not change ... We simply turn a blind eye; we say there is nothing we can do. If the learners cope then they cope, if they don't cope, then there is nothing that we can do.*
>
> Thembisile: *When the learner is identified, they fill the form, send that form to the district ... they take that learner to the special school.*
>
> Sihle: *I'm not saying that learners are not supposed to be in a mainstream class, but it becomes a challenge ... the issue of targets that teachers need to meet ... they end up moving with the children that have no learning disabilities.*

Ayanda: *I myself don't know what I should do with them.*

Nomalizo: *The learners with learning disabilities ... are not in the right school. Actually, they need to be in their own specialised school ... they are subjected to a great deal of difficulty here ... they never raise their hands ...always get zeros, ... can't write properly.*

Ayanda: *We don't know how to help them ... we just teach as normal although I think they require special treatment*[8].

Nomalizo: *To tell the truth, we just overlook them*[9].

Thembisile: *To tell the truth, when I identify that this learner has a learning barrier actually, I don't do nothing ... I don't punish her when she doesn't finish the work. I don't do nothing ... I can't leave the whole class, the overcrowded class with one learner*[10].

Sihle: *... those who knows and who are good, they know that this learner has got some challenges ... they tell you' hhay Sir don't worry about, we'll try and help you, please leave her'*[11].

From the data one can understand that the teachers who participated in this study shared the same sentiment that learners with learning disabilities were not in the correct school: "*they are not in the right school*"; they had to be somewhere else, in "*their own specialised school*" context, suitable for learners with learning disabilities. These responses suggest an understanding or treatment of disability as a disease (Retief & Letšosa, 2018), which resides within learners with learning disabilities, and which can be cured in special schooling contexts. The construction and understanding of learning disability as a deviation from normalcy and a pitiable, personal tragedy (Carlson, 2010) for learners with learning disabilities is problematic in many ways.

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[8] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[9] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[10] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[11] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

For instance, in this study, such an understanding potentially encouraged, reproduced and reinforced discrimination against learners with learning disabilities.

Young (1990, p. 41) contends that the sources and causes of inequities and injustices "are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences for following those rules" (p. 41). For this study, the injustices and inequities manifest through the teachers believing, both consciously and unconsciously, that learners with learning disabilities should be made invisible (i.e. from the mainstream schooling context) and pushed to the margins (i.e. to the special schooling context). In this way, their responsibility and accountability for their inability to help the learners can be negated, that is, such an understanding encourages them to throw their hands in the air: "*I myself don't know what I should do with them*" instead of finding ways to ensure that these learners can learn and succeed. These ideas, behaviours and thoughts are what Young (1990, p. 41) calls the "normal processes of everyday life" to maintain the status quo.

For instance, in line with what Young (1990) points out, Nomalizo felt that learners with learning disabilities were "*pressured*" within a mainstream school setting. Furthermore, she points to the idea that learners with learning disabilities experience uncertainty and fear because they "*never raise their hands*", "*…get zeros…*" and "*cannot write properly*". Nomalizo makes these comparisons to entrench this idea of a binary divide between learners with disabilities and those without, because, according to her, they cannot function on par with their peers without disabilities. In this regard, Nomalizo does not see and hence does not question the prevailing excluding institutional arrangements in her school.

Furthermore, it could be argued that learners without learning disabilities themselves have also internalised this idea that learners with learning disabilities are different and incapable to be taught as they would even tell the teacher "*don't worry … we'll try and help you, please leave her*". This shows the extent to which learners with disabilities are easily made visible and invisible. They are made visible because everyone can see that they are struggling and have "*got some challenges*" so much so that they would tell the teacher "*please leave her*". On the other hand, learners with learning disabilities are made invisible because the teachers seemingly do not know what to do with them:

"*we simply turn a blind eye*" because they "*don't know what I should do with them*"; thus, it is easy to just overlook them and pretend they do not exist. This points to the embedded nature of dominant discourses of ableism in the internalised understandings of these participants, which has influenced their thoughts, attitudes, practices and behaviours towards learners with learning disabilities (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997).

Thembisile believes that her responsibility and accountability were in the ability to "*fill in the form*", and send it to the district level and not in ensuring that the learners have access to education. Her preoccupation was to ensure that they are removed from her school for treatment in a special school: "*thereafter, they take that learner to the special school*". This suggests that, instead, of being provided with support, teachers often completed forms to have learners with learning disabilities removed from their school. It is important though that this may be attributed to a range of reasons. However, whatever the reasons, the result is that teachers believed that learners with learning disabilities were not welcome in their school and belonged in a special school. The exclusion of and the intention to have these learners placed elsewhere reflects a hierarchy in which some learners who belong to dominant classes, like non-disabled learners, are more welcome than those with disabilities (Ainscow et al., 2012).

Hlengiwe provided an interesting glimpse into how teachers failed to be responsible and accountable to learners with disabilities. For her, this was because they believed that "*…this is how these learners are and they will not change*". A reference such as "*this is how these learners are*" points to the teachers' exclusive focus on the learners' limitations and less questioning of the institutional arrangements that exclude them (Kasser & Lytle, 2005). This suggests a dead-end for the learners with learning disabilities in the classes of these teachers, as teachers believed that there would be no benefits for them, as long as they were in their school. This is evidence of what Young (1990) refers to as extreme marginalisation and exclusion. This is because by failing to try to be responsive to the learners' needs, the teachers are preventing learners with disabilities from being able to participate in a vital part of their lives. Without the support, they cannot become educated, which then means that they could drop out of school and become part of an ever-increasing employment problem in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2021).

Sihle's and Thembisile's responses are even more confusing: "*I'm not saying that learners are not supposed to be in a mainstream class but it becomes a challenge*". There is some understanding, though, in what Sihle is saying for it points to the helplessness that Sihle is experiencing regarding the teaching of learners with learning disabilities. The accountability of teachers for results, pass rates and "*the issue of targets that teachers need to meet*" forces Sihle and Thembisile to make difficult decisions because both end up "*rushing with the so called syllabus and working with learners who do not have disabilities*". The decisions they make are forced decisions, but may also be considered practical decisions, given their challenging context where overcrowding is an issue. They have to choose between trying to be responsive to individual learner needs by teaching inclusively, having to complete the syllabus or deciding whether to leave the whole class behind for the sake of "*one learner*". They both decide to sacrifice the learners with disabilities even though Sihle, for example, acknowledges that insufficient time is dedicated to learners with disabilities. The consequence, however, is that learners with disabilities are removed from the educational equation and placed into obscurity.

The views expressed within the focus group interviews were echoed by Thembisile as she confirmed that when she had identified a learner as having a learning disability, she often did nothing to support that learner: "*I don't punish her when she doesn't finish the work. I don't do nothing*". This suggests that Thembisile turned a blind eye to learners who were experiencing barriers to learning and often moved on with her work, leaving those learners behind. This suggests a situation where constitutional guarantees are deficient in assisting learners to sufficiently enjoy their right to basic education. That is, their being in a schooling context does not automatically mean that they will be learning (Pritchett, 2013), as they continue to be excluded in their presence.

4.3 Factors affecting the teaching of learners with learning disabilities

4.3.1 Language of learning and teaching

The issue of language was seen as being a cause of barriers to learning for learners with learning disabilities. In this regard, the participants had the following to say:

> Hlengiwe: *The instruction comes in English and it becomes difficult for learners to understand. I try to mix English with a bit of isiZulu to help the learners to understand better.*

> Ayanda: … *in Grade Four, there are subjects that are added and ... you find that the learners were used to the Foundation Phase to learn in isiZulu ... they need to learn these new subjects in English ... they start struggling, even when you give the learner a question they can no longer answer and it really becomes difficult … you don't know where to start teaching them … they can't even read simple words.*

The above excerpts suggest that the participants for this study pointed to the language switch as a cause of difficulties for their learners. For instance, their understanding was that switching from their mother tongue to English was problematic, as learners must jump an additional hurdle of language to understand subject content in Grade 4, what Ntombela (2020, p. 22) refers to as "a double jeopardy". Not only is switching to an additional language a problem but having to learn all nine subjects in English in Grade 4 was also problematic. So much so that "*when you give a learner a question, they can no longer answer*". This points to the long-standing debate of mother tongue instruction versus English instruction (see, for instance, Magocha et al., 2019; Mohohlwane, 2020) and that, as found by Karimupfumbi and Dwarika (2022), the capacity of teachers to support learners with learning disabilities was inadequate. This also has consequences for teachers like Ayanda who "*don't*[doesn't] *know where to start teaching them*" when learners have not grasped content knowledge and skill development in the Foundation Phase "*they cannot even read simple words*" in English. To assist learners to continue to learn, participants tried several interventions. For instance, Hlengiwe used code-switching, using IsiZulu to explain content taught in English as a way of accommodating and supporting the learners for whom the foreign language was a challenge. This intervention is her way of attempting to meet the needs of her learners with learning disabilities and is in keeping with studies conducted by Maluleke (2019) who found code-switching can be a useful teaching strategy for helping learners to improve performance in mathematics.

4.3.2 Performance of learners

The performance of learners is one of the major challenges in South Africa (Munje & Maarman, 2016; Spaull, 2015). Participants for this study understood the performance of learners with learning disabilities as one of the major challenges, for a range of reasons, they had to deal with the teaching of these learners with learning disabilities. The following represents some of the issues they raised in this regard:

> Thembisile: *They perform badly, actually they don't pass actually. We just use the so-called push forward to move the learner to the next grade….*

> Ayanda: *... consider the COVID and the learners cannot perform as before, because even their attendance is no longer the same.*

> Sihle: *When I'm talking about barriers which are systematic… when we are trying to implement our policies of the Department, things like this thing of age cohort ... I think that thing makes the learners to struggle more … taking a learner that has repeated a class … that have to move forward, because of their age or because of years in a phase then they go to Grade Four ... this is a systematic error, because this person he/she is not ready to move to the next grade … they have met the necessary requirements.*

> Nomalizo: *... this cohort thing ... we found that so many learners move to the next grade knowing nothing*[12].

Thembisile argued that learners with learning disabilities perform badly in their schoolwork, and that '*actually they don't pass*'. When this happened, Thembisile reported that they used what she called a "*push forward*" method or "*cohort*" system, which meant that they moved learners to the next grade without them having met the minimum requirements, because of their age and that they must not repeat more than twice in three years. This, for the teachers, is an institutional form of oppression (Hardiman & Jackson, 2007) for the learners who at the end of it go to the "*next grade knowing nothing*". One could claim that the cohort system sets both teachers and

[12] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

learners up for failure because learners continue throughout their schooling careers without knowledge and are constantly having to play catch up. The comments by the participants above also show their frustration of having to pass their learners into the next grade knowing that they have not acquired the necessary knowledge and skills to perform in the next grade. For these teachers, however, there is also the understanding that the problem was located within the learner and policy, but did not have anything to do with the possible deficiencies in their teaching. That is, although they perceived the problem as 'systemic', its consequences could not be attributed to their teaching. In other words, although they are attributing the problem to the system as a policy, as Retief and Letšosa (2018) and Sullivan 1991 assert, they have removed themselves from the equation and continued to believe that learners with disabilities are part of that problem. In this instance, the participants are not questioning and reflecting on the support that they are providing to learners with learning disabilities under the circumstances; they are absolving themselves, which silences and disables their agency and whatever action they could have taken to support these learners.

The above participants' view is problematic because even if learners are made to repeat the grade, and no adjustments are made to the teaching – that is, there is a recycling of the old methods and approaches that did not work in the first place, that learners cannot be expected to pass. It reproduces continued failure for the learners and is a form of inequality and discrimination. Actually, the finding points to a gross lack of service to the learners with learning disabilities in a system with no regard or safety net for learners who are falling behind. In other words, what is happening here is that learners are excluded and further marginalised, as their perceived inability to perform is presented as their trouble, with no responsibility taken for the situation by their teachers.

4.3.3 Lack of teacher training and development

For this study, the teachers who were supposed to devise and implement support strategies for their learners with learning disabilities struggled with capacity challenges. This points to issues of teacher development, support and training:

Sihle: *A mainstream school normally focuses a lot on normal learners ... I don't blame it a bit on the way that the school is. ... we do not have teachers who are qualified to deal with learners with learning disabilities ... they may be qualified, but you find that the knowledge that they have is not enough; the teachers themselves don't have adequate knowledge.*

Nomalizo: *I do have an idea of what inclusive education ... I do have a bit of a clue about inclusive education.*

Hlengiwe: … *we are not trained to properly assist learners with learning disabilities. I, myself, am a parent to a child with a learning disability. So, this has helped me to understand my learners better. I apply the same methods that I use to my child to teach them.*

Hlengiwe: *We are not trained to assist these learners. We do try ... to accommodate them, but it's not enough … there is that skill that I lack that is supposed to help them ... I just give them what I have. It's either they take it or you don't*[13].

Nomalizo: *They should have started by training teachers ... Now they started with inclusive, putting those learners to teachers who does not know how to work with them*[14].

Sihle: *... educators are not well trained to deal with them, to teach them. We just try, we are not trained, we are not experts ... we got training but it was not enough. So that's the challenge they must face when they go to mainstream ... If some of us did it, its fine, but I never did it at the university or college. I wouldn't say that it was a course or a whole module per se, but it was just basics. That's how we learnt inclusivity…. (interviews) … I am as an educator a barrier to the learners. So you can't expect these learners to perform whereas I am lacking skills to educate them*[15].

[13] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[14] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[15] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

Sihle's notion of a mainstream school is that it must cater for 'normal' learners. That is, he uses the dominant constructions of schooling based on discourses of normality and pathology, as discussed by O'Reilly and Lester (2016). By using words like "*normal*", "*these learners*" and "*those learners*", teachers like Sihle and Hlengiwe understand learners with disabilities as the opposite of normal, which means that they are abnormal. In this regard, learners with learning disabilities are thought of as unnatural, different and thus not belonging. Zwane and Malale (2017) have argued that teachers need appropriate training in inclusive education. The above excerpts point to the deficiencies in teacher training and development and the possible lack of agency on the part of the participants to take action to remedy these deficiencies. For instance, the participants use the following phrases to define their responses to the situation: "*we do not have people or teachers who are qualified*"; "*they may be qualified, but ...*"; "*we are not trained to properly assist*"; "*putting those learners to teachers who does not know how to work with them*"; "*we are not trained, we are not experts*"; and "*it was not a course ... it was just basics*". These phrases are fatalistic in their consequence; they suggest resignation and a gross lack of agency to diligently respond to the situation. The participants' initial teacher education studies should indeed have addressed these areas. However, it is naïve to expect that initial teacher education would cover everything that the teacher will be confronted with in their teaching. Therefore, this lack, apparent in the participants' voices, may point beyond pedagogies to issues regarding teacher agency and resilience, as discussed by Bartel et al. (2019). This is in line with what Bruno and Do Nascimento (2019) found that teachers often carry their own beliefs, values and attitudes within themselves and that these have a significant impact on their teaching practices. For this study, this means that the attitudes of teachers must be taken seriously as they influence their abilities to make education accessible to all their learners.

As can be discerned from the participants' responses above, participants of this study tended to extract or bracket themselves out of the equation of inadequate support for learners with learning disabilities. That is, they did not see their inadequacies or themselves as part of the systemic challenges. For instance, Sihle attributed their inability to teach learners with learning disabilities to the nature of the situation in their school: "*it's how the school is*". For him, the situation to which learners with learning

disabilities had been subjected had been caused by authorities, who had not employed qualified teachers who can teach learners with learning disabilities properly.

The participants, thus, reaped an unfair advantage from the circumstances of the learners with learning disabilities, appearing as heroes and victims wherever it suits them, as argued by Tappan (2006). Although Sihle is raising an important point, he is doing very little or nothing to influence and change the status quo and does not seem to know or is unwilling to use his dominant agent status as a teacher who is a professional to support and aid learners who are constantly being marginalised. Sihle's explanation of the lack of support for learners with learning disabilities is that the training they received did not include skills and knowledge to cater for learners with learning disabilities. The biggest question is: Does this mean that nothing can, therefore, be done at the level of the participants, as teachers of learners with learning disabilities?

However, having said the above, it is important to point out that some participants, such as Hlengiwe, were doing something to assist their learners to learn, despite the systemic challenges that they were facing. That is, they were challenging the status quo (Harro, 2010; Freire, 1970) albeit in small ways. For instance, Hlengiwe indicates that although "*we are not trained to properly assist*", her experience as a parent of a child with a learning disability, meant that she could use the skills and knowledge she had acquired in this regard to support her learners. Her own contextual experience had the additional benefit in that she could "*understand my learners better*" and thus use the "*same methods that I use to my child*" to adequately teach her learners. In this regard, Hlengiwe shows a sense of agency and she can use her knowledge and skills and not wait to be trained as she already has pragmatic and real knowledge of how to teach learners with learning disabilities. As argued by Jenkins (2019), Hlengiwe used her agency to influence her situation to produce positive outcomes for her learners.

The absence or inadequate training for the teachers who participated in this study tended to silence and kill their agency and resilience, which was redirected to their learners with learning disabilities. From the findings of this study, it could be argued that these teachers bought into the pathological discourses of normalcy, which set them up for tyranny and exclusion in how they managed issues regarding the support they

provided to learners with learning disabilities (Agbenyega & Deku, 2011). For instance, Hlengiwe and Sihle argued that they were not trained to support learners with learning disabilities and that they were not "*experts*" in this area. For them, whatever teachers were doing to accommodate these learners, they are trying "*their best*", and they knew that it was insufficient to support their learners adequately. Sihle in particular acknowledges the repercussion of not having the required knowledge of how to be an inclusive teacher but institutional practices like pushing teachers to teach subjects that they have not been trained to do meant that he is a "*barrier to the learners*". For him, systemic inequalities reinforce the discrimination against learners with disabilities and he wonders how he can expect "*learners to perform whereas I am lacking skills to educate them*". He is unable to challenge such systemic and institutional practices; instead, as Harro (2010) points out, he colludes by accepting that he cannot do much to help his learners. By colluding with something that they can see is disempowering for themselves and more importantly their learners, they are instead watching their learners' dreams perish. They cannot emulate the example of Hlengiwe who uses her power, knowledge and agency to support her learners. Instead, the participants are waiting for the Department of Education to do something about the situation, as suggested by Nomalizo, but this may only exacerbate the situation of their learners.

4.3.4 Class sizes

The teachers who participated in this study were teaching grades across phases, namely, Grade Four (4) to Seven (7). These teachers reported that none of them had a class of fewer than sixty learners, which they believe presented unique challenges for their teaching. In this regard, the participants had the following to say:

> Ayanda: *It's about one hundred and fifty-four learners ... There is overcrowding in classrooms. So, you find that you are unable to give the learners individual attention so you teach on really without knowing how many of the children managed to grasp.*

> Sihle: *... we have more than fifty in a class. I have one on ones with them, but sometimes I feel that there is not sufficient time.*

Thobeka: *I have one hundred and thirty learners that I teach.*

Nomalizo: *We have way too many learners in a class … you find that you can't really reach out to ... I don't have enough time to take those that are struggling.*

Thembisile: *They are one hundred and five altogether. Grade Four is seventy and Grade Five is thirty-five.*

Nomalizo: *... to help them is so difficult … because we are teaching many grades with many learners inside*[16].

Sihle: *One teacher must have thirty-five learners in a classroom, but you find yourself teaching more than sixty learners*[17].

From Ayanda and Nomalizo's responses, it is evident that they found it difficult to reach out to all their learners with learning disabilities, owing to the large number of learners that they had in their classes. Ayanda explained their situation as follows: "*there is overcrowding in classrooms so you find that you are unable to give the learners individual attention*". For them, large classes posed significant challenges as they, in line with West and Meier's argument (2020), limited their ability to ensure that all their learners were learning. For Sihle, having more than fifty learners in class meant that he could only try to provide individual attention to learners with learning disabilities. However, according to him, it was insufficient because very little could be achieved within the available time for a lesson; there was just too much to do within too little time. This means that teachers' attempts were often constrained by adverse systemic conditions, further pushing to the periphery learners are already marginalised by the devaluation of their lives with a disability (Rinaldi, 2009)

[16] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[17] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

The envisaged average teacher-learner ratio for the province of KwaZulu-Natal, where the study was conducted, was thirty-two learners per teacher (32:1) (Department of Basic Education, 2019). Although there is a clear policy regarding the teacher: learner ratio at all schools, certain school-level factors, like the ones at the schools where these teachers teach, influenced the sizes of classes. It is for this reason that sitting with over a "*hundred and fifty-four learners*" or "*teaching more than sixty learners*" is a norm. It is evident in this study that, in some rural areas, learner numbers are still above the norm, which the participants reported as a challenge to achieving effective teaching and learning in their schools. This again points to systemic inequalities that schools in rural areas are constantly plagued with and that schools in rural areas are marginalised and forgotten about, as pointed out by Du Plessis (2014) and Du Plessis and Mestry (2019). Nomalizo, argues and makes a valid point that for inclusive education to be effective, there was a need for learner numbers per class to be reduced to, at least, meet the envisaged norm. With the large numbers, effective implementation was almost impossible. Based on this, it could be argued that the teacher-learner ratio, as a systemic issue, required serious consideration if the teachers who participated in this study were to adequately accommodate learners with learning disabilities in their teaching.

4.3.5 The influence of COVID-19 on teaching time

According to the participants in this study, little or no provision was made for the implementation of intervention activities to support learners with learning disabilities during COVID-19. For the participants, the time constraints and COVID-19 restrictions were a source of contention. COVID-19 presented real constraints on what teachers were able to do to help learners with learning disabilities. The participants had the following views regarding this matter:

> Thobeka: *If you look at Grade Seven ATP, it is designed for seven days a week, I only teach three days. So, we are still doing first term's work ... our learners [with disabilities} aren't learning the right way, because of the situation we are currently faced with ... if they can't write this current year, it'll still be the same for the upcoming year.*

Nomalizo: *A person only comes twice to school per week and they just sit all the other days, they don't do anything.*

Ayanda: *Though we cannot place a blame on them, but we also look at the time that we spend with them that it is far too little.*

Hlengiwe: *It's difficult for me ... there are time factors to consider. The time with the learners is not enough. COVID has affected us impeccably ... When they do come to school, we first have to refresh them ... because most of them would have already forgotten. ... At times, it takes the whole week to complete work that should have been done in two days. For learners with disabilities, it is double that.*

Thembisile: *COVID has affected us badly ... so they are left behind. With learners with learning disabilities, the situation is far worse.*

Sihle: ... *they are staying far from the school so they cannot be left behind with the teacher ... even if we are willing to do so*[18].

Nomalizo: *COVID affected us all, teachers and learners, because we are like behind with the syllabus, with the work ... way, way behind with the work ... some of them they felt that it was a bargain for them because they felt it was nice being at home. When they come back to school, you just have to start afresh*[19].

All the teachers above believed that COVID-19 had influenced what they could achieve with all learners, including those with disabilities. For example, Thobeka argued that the ATP from the Department of Education was designed for seven days a week, yet learners attended classes only three times a week. The result was that she could not complete the syllabus: "*we are still doing first terms' work*". Whilst the restrictions implemented by the Department of Education and the government, in

[18] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews
[19] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

general, were necessary, the result was that, especially for learners who were experiencing barriers to learning, learning became more difficult and trying to catch up proved to be almost impossible. Thobeka foresaw that if a child cannot write this current year, then the learning deficit would worsen in the following year. This was mostly because the time to teach learners effectively was inadequate, resulting in both teaching and learning losses.

Hlengiwe and Thembisile concurred with Thobeka in that the time available for teaching and learning was insufficient. Hlengiwe, in her response, underlined the fact that COVID-19 had affected schools in a significant way: "*impeccably*". For her, this could be attributed to the loss of time that happened as the country was implementing measures to save lives. For instance, Thembisile shares the fact that "*at times, it takes the whole week to complete work that should have been done in two days*". Thus, for Thembisile, the loss of time due to the outbreak of COVID-19 will account for a substantial amount of damage to the lives of learners, especially those who had already fallen behind when the pandemic broke out. In a context that is mired in inequality, COVID-19 exacerbated the inequalities that were already there. Despite the attempts by the government to implement rotational learning for learners in rural schools and those with learning disabilities this proved to be detrimental and accounted for the idea that learners who struggle will continue to struggle. This finding regarding Thobeka's and Thembisile's understanding of COVID-19 as imposing systemic deficiencies is in line with Sullivan's (1991) call for a move from the understanding of problems as a personal tragedy to the understanding that locates them within the framework of social oppression.

Ayanda argued that they, as teachers, could not blame this on learners, as the situation was no fault of anyone. Like the other participants, Nomalizo also blamed the situation on COVID-19. For her, they were "... *way, way behind with the work that*" they were "*supposed to teach*". However, Nomalizo, unlike Ayanda, apportioned some of the blame on learners, whom she believed "*felt that it was a bargain for them because they felt it was nice being at home*". Although there may be some truth in this statement, the problem is that this locates the deficits and inadequacies of the system within learners. In terms of the national curriculum, the time allocated for teaching in a primary school is thirty minutes to one hour per lesson per subject a day (Department

of Basic Education, 2011). However, as could be deduced from the findings of the study, due to the additional challenges that teachers experienced as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, the teachers who participated in this study often could not cover the curriculum within the allocated and prescribed times. In this regard, COVID-19 worsened inequality and further worsened the socio-economic burden for the learners from sections of society that were already relegated to the lowest rungs of the social ladder (Silva & Ribeiro-Alves, 2021).

4.3.6 Parental involvement

Narratives of the teachers who participated in this study painted a bleak picture of the participation of parents in the education of their children. The teachers shared their experiences of parental involvement which are reflected in the following excerpts from their responses:

> Sihle: *Most parents of the learners that we teach are illiterate; so, the parents do not care about education ... so, they rely heavily on teachers to see. Whatever the teachers do or say, it is right ... even if they come to school to view their children's work, they just come for the sake of coming.*

> Thembisile: *… most parents just send the learners to the school as a place of keeping them ... They just send them as a jail ... they don't even see that the learner is not getting the correct marks from the teacher ... They are not part of the school.*

> Hlengiwe: *Most of the parents themselves are not educated; it becomes difficult for parents to assist their children at home.*

> Ayanda: *There is a great lack of parent participation in our school ... even from the parent's meetings ... they do not come ... we need to actually postpone the meeting because of poor attendance ... you phone the parent to come see you regarding their child, but they don't come ... The parents tell you that they are busy and can't get off work ... It is even worse with*

the parents of learners with learning disabilities. I think they are ashamed of their children's poor performance.

Nomalizo: *The parents themselves do not want to admit that their child has a learning problem.*

Thobeka: *The parent's participation is gradually dropping ... If you call a learners' parent to school regarding issues that their child might have ... the parents won't come.*

Sihle: *It's very difficult for them to accept ... Most parents they deny; they deny that their children have got challenges ... They see them as normal.*

... parents are illiterate; so, they don't value education ... there's not much support you can receive from them ... they don't even come. Some just say, 'thisha sewobona nawe' meaning 'teacher you will also just see'. 'Umshayemayebheda' 'hit him if he is being bad or misbehave'[20].

The participants above, concurred that the parents of their learners were not actively involved in the education of their children. The reasons for this, as mentioned by Sihle and Hlengiwe, ranged from parents being "*illiterate*" to them being '*uneducated*'. For Sihle, the result of such a lack of parental involvement in the education of their learners was that parents often left everything on their shoulders as teachers: "*they rely heavily on teachers to see*" and despite efforts, very few parents respond to teachers' requests to meet with them to discuss their children's schoolwork. This is disturbing for him because even those who do come to "*view their children's work*", instead just "*come for the sake of coming*". This suggests to him that parents are not interested, given that their children are performing poorly academically and require extensive support.

The participants' views of parents are largely negative with them seeing the parents as largely uninterested. For them, coming to view their children's work is essential and school should be a place of value but instead, schools are seen as a jail. Here, the

[20] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

metaphor of jail is important to understand and can be viewed in various ways. Firstly, it is seen as a place of keeping their children even if they are not learning. In this regard, the consequence of such a view is that parents do not play an active role or any role at all. They do not even question why their children are "*not writing in class*" or getting the correct marks from the teacher; instead, the school is merely a place to incarcerate their children for a while. On the other hand, a metaphor for jail could also be understood as referring to a place where the needs of the learners are not taken into account on the part of the teachers, as evident previously and where the rights of the learners are taken away. Here, learners with disabilities are the incarcerated subject to the will (or not) and ideas and beliefs of teachers about them. However, Thembisile and Hlengiwe do acknowledge that the environment or the community is not educated and could explain why they are not involved. Literature has also revealed that parents sometimes do not know how to participate and be involved in their children's education (see, for instance, Matshe, 2014; Msila, 2012; Munje, 2018).

The lack of parental involvement, however, may also be determined by contextual issues. For example, some parents have work-related issues that prevent them from responding positively to requests from teachers. Prioritising their jobs is a practical decision given the adverse socio-economic ills that they encounter. However, for participants like Ayanda, this priority is frowned upon mostly because it causes teachers to have to postpone meetings and, for them, prioritising a job over the critical needs of their child needs is unacceptable. However, this positioning of parents may be problematic in that it conveniently disregards the circumstances that parents often must face in their lives to provide for their families.

Nomalizo and Mchunu pointed to yet another reason why some parents did not respond to the requests for meetings from teachers. This is based on denial and refusal to accept that their children have a disability. For Nomalizo and Sihle "*...parents ...deny that their children have got challenges. They see them as normal*". However, characterising this as denial has a problematic dimension in that it may mask deeper issues in respect of the stigma of having a child with a learning disability, as discussed by Lalvani (2015). Interestingly, Sihle tended to blame poor parental involvement on systemic issues, citing the fact that his learners came from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, where parents are often illiterate and do not have adequate resources or capital to value

education. According to Sihle, such parents cannot often offer any support to the school and their children. As a result, they leave everything to the school and say "*thisha sewobona nawe*", which means that the teacher must decide what they want to do with the situation, and "*Umshayemayebheda*", which means that the teacher must administer corporal punishment if the child misbehaves. This may be characterised as complete resignation, shifting all responsibility to the school and teachers.

The above findings support Sedibe's (2012) argument that there is a general lack of parental involvement in the education of children. Sedibe (2012) concludes that this lack of parental involvement contributes to a lack of successful academic achievement in children. The findings also support Motitswe (2012), who indicated that parents are often not interested in their children's education, especially children experiencing learning disabilities. This suggests that there is a need to dig deeper to generate remedies for this malady, as it compromises the enjoyment of the children's constitutional right to basic education (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The tendency to see the complex problem of the challenges of learning and teaching as the lack of parental participation in their children's education resides within the deficit constructions of parents and parenthood. For instance, as pointed out by some participants, teachers are already aware that parents must battle difficult socio-economic circumstances. However, teachers choose not to see this reality and instead use stereotypical constructions of parents from socio-economically deprived contexts as uninterested, ashamed and abdicating responsibility. This construction and definition of parents and parenthood in deficit terms may point to the unequal power relations between teachers and parents.

4.4 Teachers' negotiation of inclusionary and exclusionary factors

4.4.1 Supporting learners with learning disabilities

The narratives of the teachers below suggest the importance of supporting learners with disabilities. In this regard, the participants had the following to say:

> Thembisile: *... give them more time and then try to give them even the homework ... I understand that they are not moving with the other learners ... I put them in groups ... giving them their special classwork ...*

Sihle: *I plan the lesson that will suit them … where I identify some gaps, I do remedial trying to cover work that is lagging behind ... I give them worksheets … homework that is different from the other ordinary children ... I try to empower myself by learning to deal with them.*

Thobeka: *You don't just say something as is, but you must simplify things in a manner that all the learners understand … formulate your own strategies of how you will help these learners …*

Nomalizo: *We also give them opportunities in class to also show that they know something like, for example in life skills, we give them tasks to do more and work that needs them to use their hands and again they also do things like drama. This gives us a chance to see that there are actually certain things that these learners can do.*

Hlengiwe: *I try to mix English and a bit of isiZulu to help the learners to understand better.*

Ayanda: *… the way you teach them; you have to come up with other methods of getting them to understand …*

Despite earlier responses of lacking professional knowledge, training and support, the participants tried various ways in which to ensure that learners had access to learning opportunities. This was done through, for example, individualised homework; giving them more time to complete tasks; curriculum differentiation; simplifying concepts; differentiated assessment; code-switching; and using teaching methods that suit learners' learning styles.

The participants shared specific ways in which they accommodated and supported learners with learning disabilities in their teaching. For Thembisile, more time and extra work were necessary for learners with learning disabilities to learn. In doing this, Thembisile often grouped the learners and gave them work that had been customised to their level of functioning. This means that Thembisile understood that one size does

not fit all in the teaching of her learners. Sihle, on the other hand, in concurrence with Thembisile, differentiated his teaching to accommodate the different learning styles of his learners. In this regard, Sihle acknowledged and accommodated the diversity among his learners. Where he identified gaps, he conducted remedial teaching to address them. This means that he implemented measures to assist his learners to learn and succeed. This supposedly prevented the accumulation of learning deficits, which could result in learners repeating grades or dropping out. Sihle often did this by giving learners activities that are appropriate to the learners' levels of functioning, in which he accommodated learners with learning disabilities. Giving learners activities that are appropriate to their developmental functioning suggests that Sihle valued and utilised the individuality of his learners.

On the other hand, Thobeka simplified learning activities so that all learners could understand, whilst Hlengiwe mixed isiZulu and English, that is, code-switched, in her teaching. Another important issue, according to Thobeka, was the importance of teacher agency: "*You must formulate your own strategies of how you will help these learners*". What Thobeka suggests here is, as a teacher, one must do something about their situation and that of their learners to ensure that learners can learn. Ayanda used different methods to get learners to understand, especially to accommodate learners who were struggling to read. Nomalizo believed that giving learners with learning disabilities opportunities for doing practical things, potentially allowed them to realise that there are things that they can do, that is, to experience success in learning.

From the excerpts of the participants above, it could be concluded that they understood the implementation of inclusive teaching in respect of learners with learning disabilities. By using these strategies, teachers accommodated, rather than excluded, their learners in their lessons. That is, as much as they reported experiencing challenges, they understood that they had a responsibility and agency to accommodate such learners especially learners with learning disabilities in their teaching. This suggests that there was a real opportunity that their learners could feel welcome and that they belonged, as long as teachers continued to open up opportunities for them to learn and succeed.

4.4.2 Support for teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities

4.4.2.1 Support from the SMT

Support from the school management team (SMT) for teachers in the implementation of inclusive education is an important ingredient for successfully including learners who are experiencing barriers to learning (Naicker, 2019). In this regard, teachers who were participants in this study had the following to say:

> Ayanda: *... we do get support ... I had a learner who is a foreigner ... they did not know isiZulu; so, I had to see what I can do … the learner could not even write the simple word. I approached the management team … They came up with a solution ... We decided that the learner should attend with the lower grades on other days for them to learn the basics.*

> Sihle: *I get tremendous support from the school … The school called the parents and the District arrived to assess and examine the child ... the child was moved to a specialized school for learners ... the child was removed from the mainstream. The principal does try to … even try to contact the district but nothing really gets done.*

> Nomalizo: *… they also come with strategies that we should not isolate the children with learning disabilities ...*

> Thembisile: *They are providing me with the teaching aids ... all those things.*

> Hlengiwe: *My HOD and the school principal are highly supportive. They teach me how to teach the learners of ways that can make the learners to understand better.*

> Nomalizo: *… we do have class visits from the principal ... she tries to support us*[21].

[21] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

Sihle: *They motivate us somewhere somehow ... not to give up, try this, try that. Give us more alternatives in terms of teaching those learners*[22].

All teachers, who were participants in this study, reported that they received support from their school management team. The teachers reported that when the school management team was asked to intervene, they did. For instance, Ayanda reported having received support regarding the case of a Grade 7 foreign learner who could not understand isiZulu, as their school is doing isiZulu as a home language. Ayanda reported that the school management team advised her to refer the learner to the lower grades, where the learner would be equipped with the basics of the IsiZulu home language. The decision to place a learner in a lower grade has both benefits and disadvantages. Firstly, placing a learner in a lower grade may be disempowering for the learner who has to learn with children who are not his age. For instance, an older child who is placed in a lower grade may become visible, which could open them to being teased by children younger than them. Secondly, placing a learner in a lower grade may be the most practical contextual response for the teacher, such as Ayanda, who is trying to ensure that at least the learner has some access to learning.

Nomalizo, on the other hand, reported that the school management team encouraged teachers like her not to isolate learners with learning disabilities, but to keep them as part of their class to allow for cooperative teaching. This is similar to what Magira (2020) and De Bruin et al. (2019) argue for. This is indicative of responsive management who firstly can observe that learners are being quiet and sitting in a row where there is a lack of activity. They are aware that this could lead to feelings of isolation and alienation. In response, they ensure that learners are made to feel as though they belong by mixing the learners so that learners with learning disabilities never find themselves alone. This is an act of agency and the productive use of power (Tatum, 2003) to ensure learners not only access learning but feel as though they are valued and affirmed. Other ways in which members of management support and aid teachers is through the provision of resources such as charts, which Thembisile found useful in her teaching. Management has recognised the critical role that resources play in ensuring that the process of teaching and learning can continue.

[22] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

The function of the school management team also is emphasised by the various ways in which they motivate and support the teachers (Brolund, 2016). One of the role functions of the SMT is to help teachers like Hlengiwe and Sihle to learn teaching strategies that will ensure that "*learners understand better*". This is critical to ensuring that social justice and equitable education are achieved for learners most in need. Furthermore, by allowing teachers to experience failures they are also there to help them '*solve them*' and learn. Here, the school management team failing is a way to motivate teachers that, despite the challenges, they must never give up instead, they must continue to "*try this and try that*". This is a way of inculcating the value of perseverance and learning because they understand that teaching learners with disabilities is not easy and there are often possibilities of failure. However, the SMT motivated teachers to continue to try and do so also by providing "*alternatives to teaching*". The result is that the school will have teachers who feel the support, and are motivated to work hard and that most vulnerable learners have access to supportive teachers who have their best interests at heart. Thus, despite the challenges that the participants reported, their school management team played a vital role in assisting them with teaching learners with learning disabilities.

4.4.2.2 Support from the ILST

Education White Paper 6, which is the policy on inclusive education in South Africa, requires that institutional-level support teams (ILSTs) be established in public schools (Department of Education, 2001). Regarding support from the ILST, participants had the following to say:

> Ayanda: *It does function ... when you have a problem, they do give you support ... Support like when you have a shortage of textbooks, they do help you.*

> Hlengiwe: *My HOD is a member of ILST. When I inform her of any challenges, she does try to talk to the parents. They tell us to be patient with the learners ...*

> Thembisile: *They write the letter about that learner to the district office so that they can place that learner to the suitable place.*

Whilst from the above discussion, it is obvious that the participants in this study did not have a clear understanding of an ILST and that it does function. For instance, what the participants listed as the functions of an ILST is not in keeping with policy imperatives and the role function of the ILST. For instance, Ayanda reported that their ILST provided textbooks where there were shortages. For Hlengiwe, her HOD was a member of the ILST and she received support from her, although her parents did not respond. Here, it is unclear how what the HOD does is associated with the ILST. For Thembisile, the ILST wrote letters to District regarding the placement of learners. This suggests that Thembisile has no understanding of the implementation of the Policy on SIAS, which is a major function of the ILST and herself as a teacher. However, although the ILST did not do what is prescribed in the policy on inclusive education in terms of its roles and responsibilities, it could be argued that its responses to the teachers' needs contributed to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. That is, the ILST's actions contributed to the expansion of access to education for learners, including learners with disabilities.

4.4.2.3 Support from the District

Education White Paper 6, which is the policy on inclusive education in South Africa places support by the education district as a significant factor in ensuring that schools can teach inclusively. The following is what the participants of this study had to say in this regard:

> Ayanda: ... *the workshops help us a lot because they give us things that we need to assess each term, and topics you need to touch on more.*

> Nomalizo: *I think they can come to school if we tell them about the problem we have. If the school does not tell the District ... about the problem ... they'll assume that the school is normal*[23].

[23] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

For Ayanda, the Department of Education supported them on what to teach in response to the loss of teaching time due to COVID-19. For instance, she reported that they received trimmed ATPs, which they used to teach within the context of COVID-19. Support from the District, in the form of workshops, is key for teachers to know how to teach and assess learners given the influence of COVID-19 on teaching and learning. This support enabled teachers, like Ayanda, to understand their role as a teacher within the context of teaching and learning losses. Nomalizo, on the other hand, is pointing to the importance of being aware and keeping the communication lines with the Department of Education open. In this way, according to Nomalizo, support from the District Department of Education can be reached and ensured. However, this also suggests understanding from Nomalizo that if teachers and schools do not inform the district or somebody that teachers and learners are experiencing problems, then there is a real possibility that learners with disabilities, teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities and schools in rural areas can again be forgotten and become invisible.

4.4.2.4 Peer support, collaboration and networking

Collaborative action and networking among teachers and schools are important mechanisms for supporting continuing professional teacher development and the improvement of teaching practice (Serrano et al., 2017). Teachers who participated in this study collaborated and shared experiences amongst themselves. That is, they constituted some form of a professional learning community (Department of Basic Education, 2015). Participants shared the following in respect of the networking experiences:

> Ayanda: *We do discuss issues of learners with disabilities and try to assist each other ... I am able to ask them what normally works for them in similar situations. ... We have certain groups that we have for subjects ... share knowledge with teachers from other schools.*

> Hlengiwe: *We are currently busy planning with the school principal on starting extra classes.*

> Sihle: *We do discuss at length about learners with learning disabilities in the meetings that we have as staff ... have discussions to seek which interventions we can come up to help learners ... we come up with different ways, inputs, suggestions and ideas ...*

> Sihle: *... what we normally do is we just discuss within the school maybe during break. We normally talk about those learners like, hey, what can I do? Mam so and so, I've got a challenge with this learner, how can I treat this learner? No try this, I've been trying this ... We give each other support, but its limited*[24].

For the teachers who participated in this study, networking relations were confined to their colleagues within their school. That is, peer support and networking were major sources of support for them. This suggests collective agency (Mavunga, 2021) with teachers as agents of action and change (Priestley et al., 2015), to get things done in their school to ensure that learners, including those with learning disabilities, can learn and succeed. However, for Ayanda, networking went beyond her school to sharing knowledge and skills with teachers. For Ayanda, networking involved sharing knowledge and skills with teachers from other schools. However, what the participants' narratives point to is that the collaboration in which they were involved was through informal networks, which were largely used when there was a need. However, having said that, it is important to note that the teachers utilised networking and collaboration with others as a support mechanism for their teaching of learners, including those with learning disabilities.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings from data gathered through semi-structured and focus group interviews. This chapter presented and discussed findings using three research questions about teachers' experiences in teaching learners with learning disabilities in rural mainstream primary schools.

[24] Extract from participants' responses in focus group interviews

The next chapter, which is the last chapter, provides the limitations and the concluding comments, drawing from the discussions from previous chapters.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on the conceptual and methodological considerations and to consolidate and elevate the key findings of the study. In this chapter, I will discuss the limitations that impacted the conduct of the study, requiring the adjustment of my plans. This will be followed by specific recommendations, based on the findings, for the teaching of learners with learning disabilities to ensure that they can enjoy their constitutional right to education. The last section of this chapter will present ideas for further research based on the findings of this study. The chapter will conclude by highlighting the key issues that emerged from the study in respect of the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities.

5.2 Purpose and significance of the study

This study sought to explore the experiences teachers encounter in teaching learners with learning disabilities in rural primary schools. In doing this, the study also explored the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influenced the extent to which teachers were able to meet the needs of learners. Furthermore, the study explored how teachers negotiated exclusionary experiences or factors in their attempts to meet their learners' learning needs.

To this end the study responded to the following three key research questions which were:

- What are teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in a rural mainstream primary school?
- What are the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influence the teaching of learners with learning disabilities?
- How do teachers negotiate these factors to facilitate learning?

The significance of the study is that findings contribute to the understanding of the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with disabilities. Herein, the complexities were multi-varied and difficult but also show how teachers negotiate these

complexities to ensure that their learners could learn and succeed. For instance, in this study, although teachers experienced challenges in ensuring that their learners could learn, they often always exercised their agency to ensure that their learners could learn and succeed. In other words, they did not succumb to their situations, but always found ways out of their situations and realities to ensure that their learners could learn and succeed. This is a significant finding in respect of how teachers could be supported to teach learners with learning disabilities. For instance, it points to the fact that there may be teachers out there who are already doing something about their situations.

Findings also detail, the importance of acknowledging and recognising that teachers require support to accommodate a range of learning needs for their learners. For instance, it points to the fact that teachers must not be left to deal with the challenges of ensuring that all learners learn alone; they need support to productively navigate their situations in a manner that ensures that their learners can learn and succeed. This means that the education department must "*come to the party*" and assist teachers to teach learners with disabilities. For this study, teachers believed that schools must inform the education department of the challenges they are experiencing in teaching learners with disabilities so that they can organise relevant and appropriate support. This means that there must be a capable education department that can respond to the teachers' calls for assistance and support.

For this study, the structures that had been established for the implementation of the policy on inclusive education were not effective. However, statutory structures, such as the SMT, did things that assisted the teachers in ensuring that their learners learned. For instance, in one instance, the departmental head ensured that there were sufficient learning and teaching support materials for teachers. This is a provisioning issue that is significant for ensuring that teachers can respond to the needs of learners. For instance, without sufficient and appropriate learning and teaching support materials, it will be difficult for the teachers to ensure that their learners learn. The significance of this finding lies in the fact that although structures set or established in respect of the policy on inclusive education may be deficient, it is important to understand that schools and teachers may be utilising alternative avenues to get inclusive education happening in their schools. In other words, there are a multiplicity of ways for ensuring the inclusivity of learning and teaching, which may be happening outside of the

traditional structures responsible for the implementation of inclusive education. That is, in this instance, teachers are using what works, although they may be unaware, to ensure that their learners learn. Such findings are of significance and respond to Engelbrecht's (2020) call for research that provides evidence of the situational ways in which teachers are meeting the goals of inclusive education. In this way, the persistent negativity that surrounds inclusive education teaching and learning can be challenged. Furthermore, the contribution that this study makes shows the importance of understanding how contextual realities inform practice. It is only through a deeper appreciation of the context and efforts to understand individual and collective stories that we can open up the moral and political space for effective educational reform efforts (Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014).

5.3 Reflection on the conceptual and methodological issues

This study deployed concepts from various social justice theorists. Hardiman et al. (2007) notion of oppression to understand teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities proved key. In this respect, this study also explored how the influence of social equality played out in the teachers' situations to encourage, maintain and reinforce advantages and disadvantages when teaching learners with learning disabilities (Hardiman et al., 2007). For instance, Hardiman et al. (2007) notion of oppression was useful to understand how social advantage and disadvantage operated and played out in the teachers' experiences, both intentionally and unintentionally. Further various factors at the individual, cultural and institutional levels, influenced and constructed particular ways in which the teachers responded to learners with learning disabilities. Thus, the notion of oppression, as used in this study, assisted in understanding the various ways in which the notion of difference in respect of learning disability was, in each instance, deployed in ways that advantaged and/or disadvantaged learners with learning disabilities. The category of learning disability was a major determining category of what teachers felt learners deserved or did not deserve.

For this study, the notion of social groups was useful in understanding how teachers understood and experienced their teaching of learners with learning disabilities. This served to situate learners with learning disabilities within social strata as a category

whose educational rights are at risk, as a result of differential access to power and advantage (Hardiman et al. 2007). Therefore, the notion of social identity was useful in understanding how teachers' actions constructed experiences of learning for learners with learning disabilities. In large part, the notion of social identity enabled an understanding of the agency that teachers used to ensure that learners with learning disabilities learned. This suggests the teachers, who were participants in this study, understood that the social identity of having a learning disability rendered learners vulnerable and targeted, which required them to use their social power to navigate the challenges that the learners were experiencing.

Using the critical paradigm assisted me to understand the participants, who were teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities. In addition, the use of the critical paradigm also determined the kinds of relationships that I had to develop with the participants in keeping with the characteristics of the paradigm. The adoption of a qualitative approach to understanding the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities is based on the understanding of the importance of listening to the voices of teachers as active and agentic social actors in their own lives. It is through this methodological mix that the study could generate rich data on the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities. The qualitative approach provided a space for the participants to share their experiences about teaching learners with learning disabilities. In this way, it became possible to position teachers, as participants in this study, as active agents who are aware of their situations and as agentic individuals who can make improvements, however small, in their teaching of learners with learning disabilities.

5.4 Summary of key findings

This section summarises the key findings that were evident in this study concerning the three key research questions as set out above.

5.4.1 Experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities

The first key research question sought to investigate teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in rural mainstream primary schools. For this research question, participants' responses revealed that they had different

understandings of the notion of inclusive education regarding the teaching of learners with learning disabilities. However, what was common was that the notion of inclusive education was understood as an aspect of accommodating learners with learning disabilities and ensuring that they can learn and succeed, often under trying circumstances. This understanding of inclusive education was in line with the social model, which understands "disability as socially imposed oppression", and means that, in respect of this study, barriers that learners with learning disabilities may have been experiencing are not traits or deficits within them (Cologon, 2020, p. 396), but they are sometimes systemic.

Although the participants reported experiencing a range of challenges and frustrations in ensuring that learners with learning disabilities had access to education, they did not give up. Instead, they reported findings on ways to ensure that learners with learning disabilities learned. However, in some instances, teachers reported that there were instances where, as a mainstream school, they could not accommodate learners with learning disabilities, and that, in such instances, these learners needed to be referred to appropriate schools. At the face value, this could be perceived as passing the buck and transferring learners to other schools, instead of finding ways to ensure that learners learn and succeed. However, it is important to understand this could bear a different dimension, which may suggest that the participants were aware that sometimes there are learners which mainstream schools cannot "*cater for*" because they do not have the capacity or resources to do so, and thus the educational needs of these learners may have been better served in schools that appropriately equipped, as pointed out by Ntombela (2015).

Participants, such as Nomalizo, reported experiencing difficulty in practising inclusivity and pointed to the cultural differences that could impede the successful implementation of inclusive education. For instance, Nomalizo's attempts to differentiate the curriculum so that learners with learning disabilities could have access to the curriculum were often met with "*complaints*" from their parents, who misconstrued curriculum differentiation as a way of depriving their children of the opportunities and exposure that the rest of her class was receiving. This finding suggests that although parents may want their children to be included in schools, they may construe (different) ways that may benefit their children, as ways of short-

changing them. When this happens, the attempts of teachers who are prepared to find ways to ensure that learners enjoy equitable access to the curriculum may come to nought.

5.4.2 Inclusionary and exclusionary factors

The second key research question sought to investigate exclusionary and inclusionary factors that influenced the teaching of learners with learning disabilities. For this study, participants reported a range of factors which made it difficult for them to effectively implement inclusive education for learners with learning disabilities, including inadequate skills to cater for the learning needs of learners with learning disabilities, often arising from the fact that they had not received training for dealing with such learners.

In addition, participants also reported tension between having to cover the curriculum within a prescribed time and teaching at the pace of learners with learning disabilities to ensure that they do not fall behind. In this regard, teachers, who were participants in this study, reported that, if they were to adequately accommodate learners with learning disabilities, they were likely not to cover the curriculum, as annual teaching plans were differentially paced to accommodate the learning pace of all learners. Often, they had to rush through the curriculum, without due regard for all learners, to cover work within the prescribed time. With the advent of COVID-19, challenges were exacerbated as learners had to follow a rotational timetable, which means that they could not attend school every day. The reduced learning time was compounded by the requirements of maintaining social distance, which required smaller classes, forcing schools to only accommodate a fraction of the number of their learners per day. Often, this resulted in learners who were already behind, falling behind even further, putting them at risk of failing or dropping out.

Language also posed a challenge as the medium of instruction was not a mother tongue, but English First Additional Language (EFAL). This, together with the increased number of subjects from four to nine, presented challenges for learners with learning disabilities causing them to struggle with their academic work. This finding points to the importance of taking into cognisance theories of language learning and

teaching, which posit that the mother tongue must be introduced first to provide a foundation for the effective learning of a foreign language (Krashen, 1981). For instance, the finding points to challenges that English, which was not the home language for the learners, impeded successful learning, and presented as a barrier to learning. For this study, therefore, language, although meant for communicating subject messages, tended to impede communication, resulting in learners with learning disabilities falling behind even further, putting them at risk of failing or dropping out, where learning deficits are too heavy to bear.

The teachers, who were participants in this study, reported that they either did not receive any training or the training was inadequate to prepare them to ensure access for the learners with learning disabilities. The absence of or inadequate training for these teachers tended to silence and kill their agency and resilience, which, in turn, was redirected to their learners with learning disabilities. From this perspective, it could be argued that these teachers bought into the pathological discourses of normalcy, which set them up for tyranny and exclusion in how they managed issues regarding the support they provided to learners with learning disabilities (Agbenyega & Deku, 2011). In addition, the findings of the study pointed to the fact that the accountability of the teachers for results and pass rates compelled them to make difficult decisions about teaching at the pace of learners or rushing to cover the curriculum.

In terms of the above, it could be discerned that the decisions they made were, thus, forced decisions, but they may also be regarded as practical decisions given the hard choices they had to make. Often, the teachers had to choose between trying to be responsive to individual learner needs by teaching inclusively, having to complete the syllabus and deciding to leave the whole class behind for the sake of '*one learner*'. In this instance, the teachers often decided to sacrifice the learners with disabilities, even though some acknowledged that insufficient time was given to learners with disabilities. The consequence, however, was that learners with disabilities were removed from the educational equation and placed into oblivion. However, the teachers also reported that some parents wanted their children to be taught the same way as other learners who learned differently. In other words, some parents mistook differentiation of teaching as depriving their children of the learning opportunities that

other learners were enjoying. When this happened, the attempts of teachers who were prepared to find ways to ensure that learners enjoyed equitable access to the curriculum came to nought.

5.4.3 Teachers' negotiation of the exclusionary factors

The third key research question sought to investigate how teachers, who were participants in this study, negotiated exclusionary factors to ensure that learners with learning disabilities could learn. Participants' responses revealed that despite lacking professional knowledge, training and support, they tried different ways to ensure that learners had access to learning opportunities. For instance, the participants used individualised homework; giving them more time to complete tasks; curriculum differentiation; simplifying concepts; differentiated assessment; code-switching; and teaching methods that suited their learners' learning styles.

It could be concluded that the teachers, who were participants in this study, understood the importance of making their teaching accessible to learners and therefore teaching inclusively. By using these strategies, teachers accommodated, rather than excluded, their learners in their lessons. That is, as much as they reported experiencing challenges, they understood that they had a responsibility and agency to accommodate learners, especially learners with learning disabilities in their teaching. This suggests that there was a real opportunity that their learners could feel welcome and that they belonged, as long as teachers continued to open up opportunities for them to learn and succeed.

The findings of this study suggest that the support from the SMT for teachers in the implementation of inclusive education was an important consideration if learners with learning disabilities were to be adequately included. All teachers, who were participants in this study, reported that they received support from their SMT. The teachers reported that, for instance, the SMT encouraged them not to isolate learners with learning disabilities, but to keep them as part of their class to allow for cooperative teaching. The teachers also reported receiving support from their ILST. For instance, the ILST provided textbooks where there were shortages. However, although the ILST did not do what is prescribed in the policy on inclusive education in terms of its roles

and responsibilities, it could be argued that its responses to the teachers' needs contributed to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. That is, the ILST's actions contributed to the expansion of access to education for learners, including learners with disabilities.

5.5 Limitations of the study

Firstly, a major limitation of this study is that it involved six teachers from the Intermediate Phase (i.e. Grades 4 to 6) from only one school. Therefore, the findings of the study cannot be generalised to teachers in other primary schooling contexts. However, it is important to point out that it was not the intention of this study to generalise findings to other contexts; the intention was to investigate and explore teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities within a specific context, namely, a primary schooling context within a rural area. One of the positive aspects of providing a contextual understanding is that the findings in this study potentially contribute to knowledge in the field of inclusive education that Engelbrecht (2020) argues South Africa must provide to challenge normative understandings of the difficulty that surrounds the implementation of inclusive education.

Secondly, the outbreak of COVID-19 reconfigured and constrained the conduct of this study. For instance, data collection was delayed as the outbreak of the pandemic prevented me from holding face-to-face interviews with the participants. This means that there was a need to adopt online semi-structured interviews, which required significant logistical preparation. This often caused challenges as some participants could not be easily reached, as some got sick while others could not honour their appointments for a range of reasons. The only communication channel was through their phones from which they were sometimes unreachable. Even during the interviews, signal challenges became a major issue as the reception was not always strong enough. This resulted in recordings sometimes not being sufficiently audible, which required me to undertake follow-up interviews. This resulted in the inevitable readjustments of time and additional costs incurred for the study.

5.6 Implications of the study

Based on the findings of the study, the following implications are made concerning ensuring that learners with disabilities have access to quality education but are also able to participate in education.

The findings reveal that there is a need for the professional development of teachers to equip teachers with skills and knowledge to teach learners with learning disabilities: It is critically important that the Department of Education arrange regular professional development activities to build the capacity of teachers to respond to the learning needs of learners with learning disabilities. Such workshops must build the capacity of the teachers to teach inclusively and accommodate a wide range of learning needs. For inclusive education to work, its implementation must be supported with rigorous advocacy, communication and support, especially focusing on parents and guardians of learners with learning disabilities. For instance, awareness must be raised among parents and guardians of learners with learning disabilities, on the importance of the school differentiating learning and teaching to ensure that all learners are accommodated and can access the curriculum. In this way, parents and guardians must be assisted to understand that instruction may have to be differentiated to accommodate learners with learning disabilities, but that this does not mean that they are being short-changed. This has the potential to build school-parent-community relationships

There need to be concrete institutional mechanisms to support the effective implementation of inclusive education: The Department of Education must ensure that all schools establish functional school-based support teams. However, where this does not work, the Department of Education must build the capacity of school management teams to ensure that teaching, learning and assessment are inclusive and that no learner is left behind. This means that the Department of Education must also strengthen its district support to ensure that schools are supported to implement inclusive education.

5.7 Ideas for future research

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made for ideas for future research in the teaching of learners with learning disabilities:

- As pointed out in the section above, the findings of this study may not be generalised to or represent the situation or teachers' experiences in other primary schooling contexts. Therefore, there is a need to expand the current research theme to other schooling contexts to obtain a more complete understanding of the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities. This could contribute to the understanding of the success of implementing inclusive education.

- This study focused on the teaching of learners with learning disabilities. Learning disability is but just one aspect of difference or learner diversity. There is, therefore, a need to explore the teaching of learners experiencing other types of barriers to obtain a more comprehensive picture of how teachers are responding to the learning needs of learners experiencing other types of barriers to learning and development. In other words, research into how for example race, class and gender intersects with disabilities will provide a more comprehensive understanding of disability experiences.

- This study focused on the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities within a primary schooling context. There is, therefore, a need to investigate teachers' experiences of teaching learners with disabilities within secondary schooling contexts.

5.8 Conclusion

This study focused on the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities within a rural mainstream primary school setting. The findings of this study pointed to the importance of ensuring that teachers are properly prepared and equipped to respond to the diverse learning needs of learners. For this study, teachers shared a catalogue of exclusionary factors that were making it difficult for them to ensure that learners with learning disabilities could learn and succeed. However, despite these challenges, the teachers did not give up; they used their agency to ensure that learners with learning disabilities could learn. This did not mean that teachers were always able to challenge taken-for-granted ideas and ways of doing things but this study shows the

importance of teachers challenging deficit understandings of teaching learners with disabilities even in small ways. However, the teachers also reported that some parents wanted their children to be taught the same way as other learners who learned differently. In other words, some parents mistook differentiation of teaching as depriving their children of the learning opportunities that other learners were enjoying. When this happened, the attempts of teachers who were prepared to find ways to ensure that learners enjoyed equitable access to the curriculum came to nought.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Permission to conduct research in schools

KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
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Enquiries: Phindile Duma/Buyi Ntuli **Ref.**:2/4/8/7047

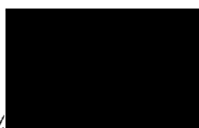
Ms Sbusisiwe Zondi
P.O. Box 1403
ESTCOURT
3310

Dear Ms Zondi

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"AN INVESTIGATION OF TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN A RURAL PRIMARY MAINSTREAM SCHOOL IN ESTCOURT, KWAZULU-NATAL:**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 17 November 2020 to 10TH March 2023.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma/Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.



Dr. EV Nzama
Head of Department: Education
Date: 17 November 2020

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

APPENDIX B: Schedule of semi-structured interview questions

Introduction

I am Sibusisiwe Zondi, a Master's student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am doing a study on the experiences of teachers teaching learners with learning disabilities as part of the requirements of my qualification. I have identified you as a person who has experience in teaching learners with learning disabilities, and I believe that your input in this study would be invaluable. I, therefore, request you to respond to my questions as honestly and precisely as possible. Remember that there are no wrong or right answers; all that I want to know are your thoughts and experiences about teaching learners with learning disabilities. Please be assured that I will do everything in my power to ensure that your responses are confidential and that they are used for academic purposes for this study only

1. **Please tell me about yourself**. *Probing points*: names; level of education (schooling and post-schooling); age; capacity or rank at the school; teaching experience; teaching experience in the current school.
2. **What are the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in a mainstream rural primary school?**
   2.1 How many learners do you have in a single class?
   2.2 How are your classes grouped?
   2.3 How many learners do you teach altogether?
   2.4 Of those, how many have learning disabilities?
   2.5 What do you enjoy most about teaching your learners?
   2.6 What challenges do you encounter teaching your learners?
   2.7 Do you currently teach learners with learning disabilities?
   2.8 What are the experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in a mainstream classroom?
   2.9 How do you support your learners to ensure that they all learn?
   2.10 How do you support learners with learning disabilities to ensure that they can learn?

2.11 What support have you received (specifically, from the school and district office) to assist you to ensure that you adequately teach all your learners, especially learners with learning disabilities?

2.12 In your assessment, do you think the learning and education that learners with learning disabilities are receiving during your lessons is equivalent to what learners without disabilities are receiving? Why? In what ways?

2.13 Do you know about the policy on inclusive education or Education White Paper 6?

2.14 If yes to the above, does your school implement the policy of inclusive education? If so, how?

2.15 Describe your experience(s) of implementing the policy of inclusive education in a rural, primary mainstream school.

3. What are the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influence the teaching of learners with learning disabilities?

3.1 Please share with me your experiences in respect of the academic performance of your learners.

3.2 What are your experiences with learner discipline in this school?

3.3 Given the fact that corporal punishment is prohibited, how do you maintain discipline among your learners?

3.4 How would you describe the involvement and participation of parents in the education of their children in your school? Please explain.

3.5 Has your school established an institutional-level support team (ILST)?

3.6 If yes, how is its membership constituted? How were these members selected/identified?

3.7 In your assessment, would you describe the ILST as functional? If yes, on what basis?

3.8 Are you a member of the ILST? If yes, what is your role in the ILST and what are the key lessons that you have learned from the work of the ILST?

3.9 Have you received any support from the ILST? If so, what support have you received?

3.10 What support do you receive from the school management regarding the teaching of learners with learning disabilities?

3.11 Do you receive any support from the circuit management centre or district in respect of the teaching of learners with learning disabilities? If yes, what kinds of support have you received?

3.12 Have you heard about the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS)? If yes, where, what does it say and how have you used it to support your learners?

3.13 Have heard about curriculum differentiation? If yes, where?

3.14 Have you been trained in the implementation of curriculum differentiation? If yes, how do you implement it in your classrooms?

3.15 Have you heard about the Policy on Accommodations and Concessions? If yes, where? Have you been trained in the implementation of accommodations and concessions? If yes, how many of your learners have benefitted from it and what kinds of accommodations and concessions have been awarded to the learners? Do all your learners who require assistive devices have them? Please provide examples.

3.16 In your meetings, do you discuss support for learners, especially those with learning disabilities? Please explain.

3.17 Before I close the session, is there anything else you would like to say, that you were unable to cover or say?

Closure

Now I would like to thank you for sharing your time and giving me such a full and helpful account of your experiences, which will be very valuable for my research project. I wish you well in your work going forward.

APPENDIX C: Focus group interview schedule

My name is Sibusisiwe Thelma Zondi, pursuing a Master's Degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus. My supervisor is Dr Melanie Martin. My study focuses on the teachers' experiences in teaching learners with learning disabilities. Thank you for agreeing to share your experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities with me. Please be informed that the information you will provide will only be used for purposes of the requirements of my studies. Rest assured that all the information that you provided will be kept confidential and will not identify you in any way. As requested, this conversation will be audio-recorded and the recordings will be password-protected and locked in a safe place.

1. What are the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in a mainstream rural primary school?
   1.1 How many learners do you have in class?
   1.2 What is the duration of your periods?
   1.3 Is that time enough for effective teaching? Why do you say that?
   1.4 What is it like having learners with learning disabilities in your classroom?
   1.5 How do learners with learning disabilities behave in class? Do they fully participate in teaching and learning?
   1.6 How do you view the issue of learners with learning disabilities sharing the same classroom with the so called 'normal' learners? Why?
   1.7 In your training years, were you exposed to such kinds of learners?
   1.8 What is the relationship among your learners in class?

2. What are the inclusionary and exclusionary factors that influence teaching learners with disabilities?
   2.1 What challenges do you encounter when teaching learners with learning disabilities in a mainstream classroom?
   2.2 How do you overcome those challenges? Give examples.
   2.3 Do you get any support from the department? Please elaborate.
   2.4 Are the parents supportive of the education of their children? Why do you say that?
   2.5 What support do you give to those learners with learning disabilities?

2.6 Is it effective? Why?

2.7 In terms of assessment, how do you assess learners with learning disabilities? Why?

2.8 With this COVID-19 pandemic, how does it affect your teaching?

2.9 What do you say about the closure of schools, was it a good move?

3. How do teachers negotiate these factors to facilitate learning?

3.1 How do you prepare for your lessons? Do you prepare a separate lesson plan to accommodate learners with learning disabilities or do you use one lesson plan?

3.2 What methods of teaching do you use? Do they accommodate learners with learning disabilities?

3.3 Are there any supports or hindrances that affect you in teaching learners with learning disabilities? What do you think could be done to improve these?

3.4 What strategies and support systems do you use to aid you in your teaching of learners with learning disabilities? How did these come about?

3.5 What impact does that have on the service delivery?

3.6 Do you have platforms for the development of one another?

3.7 When does that happen?

3.8 Is there anything that could be done to enhance your role as a teacher, teaching learners with learning disabilities?

I thank you for your participation and contribution.

APPENDIX D: Sample consent form: Participation in the study

I ……………………………………………………… **(Full names of participant)** hereby confirm that I have been informed about the focus and nature of the study titled "*Investigating teachers' experiences in teaching learners with learning disabilities in rural mainstream primary school in Estcourt*", which will be conducted by Ms S'busisiwe Zondi. I understand the contents of this document, the nature of the research study, and the expectations of me as a participant, and I consent to participate in the research study.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study, and I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

I voluntarily permit the interviews to be audio-recorded.

My identity will not be disclosed and pseudonyms will be used to protect my identity.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at siwe.zondi@gmail.com or +2783 293 3570 or her supervisor at Martin.M@ukzn.ac.za and +2783 651 4564.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researcher, I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

APPENDIX E: Sample consent form: Audio-recording

I…………………………………………… (**Full names of participant**) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document, the nature of the research project, and the expectations of me as a participant and I consent to participate in the research study.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the research at any time, should I decide, for any reason whatsoever, that I no longer desire to continue. I hereby provide consent to audio-record of the researcher's interviews and focus group discussions with me. Please the applicable option below.

	WILLING	**NOT WILLING**
Audio recording of interviews		

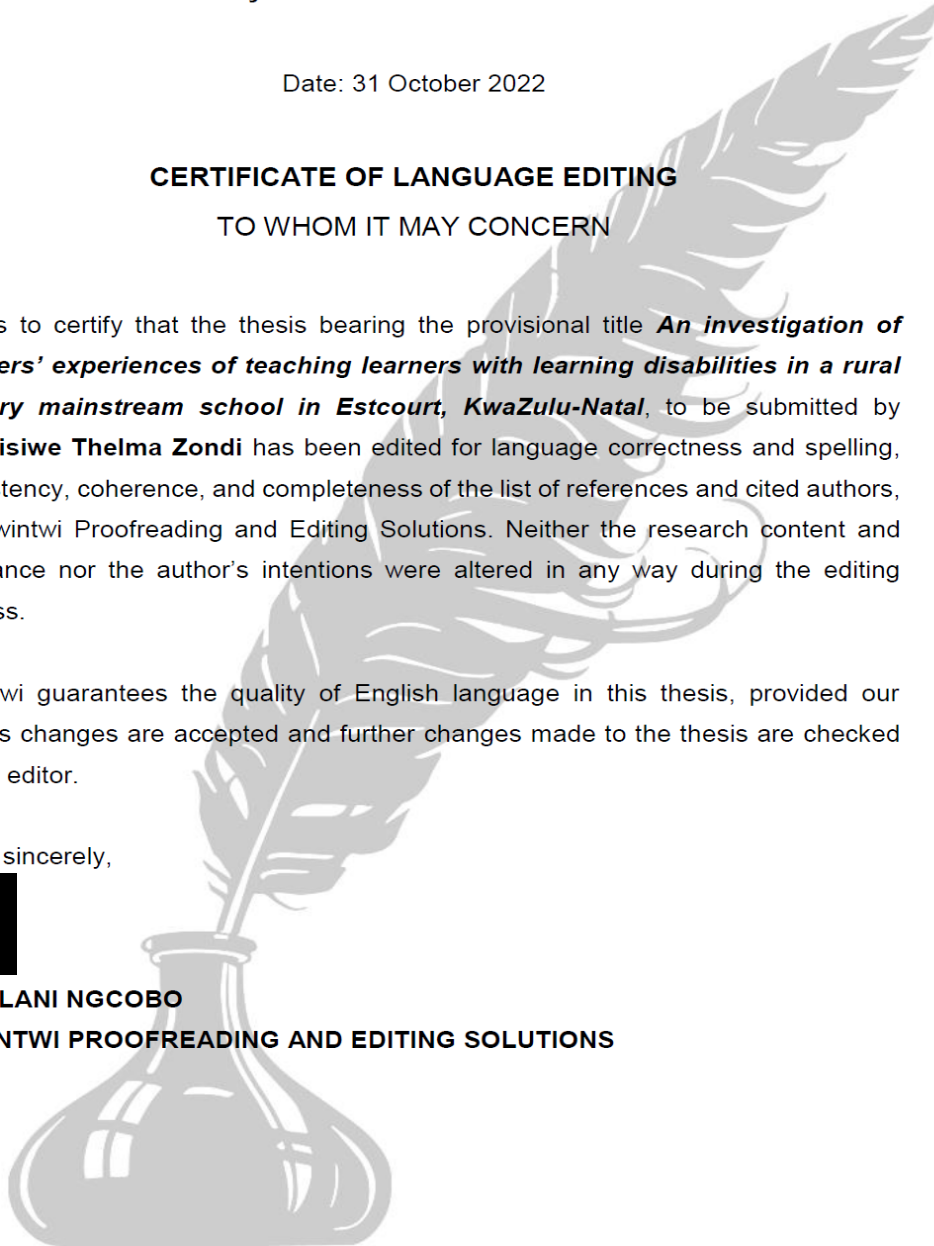
__________________________ _______________________________

NAME OF PARTICIPANT **SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**

____

DATE

APPENDIX F: Certificate of Language Editing



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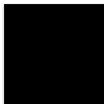
This is to certify that the thesis bearing the provisional title ***An investigation of teachers' experiences of teaching learners with learning disabilities in a rural primary mainstream school in Estcourt, KwaZulu-Natal***, to be submitted by **Sibusisiwe Thelma Zondi** has been edited for language correctness and spelling, consistency, coherence, and completeness of the list of references and cited authors, by Ntwintwi Proofreading and Editing Solutions. Neither the research content and substance nor the author's intentions were altered in any way during the editing process.

Ntwintwi guarantees the quality of English language in this thesis, provided our editor's changes are accepted and further changes made to the thesis are checked by our editor.

Yours sincerely,



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APPENDIX F: Originality report

Masters Thesis

ORIGINALITY REPORT

12%	12%	4%	%
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