EXPLORING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT TEAM IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS TO SUPPORT TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the effectiveness of School-Based Support Team (SBST)to support teachers from Special schools in Sedibeng West education District in the Gauteng Province. In line with Education White paper 6, it is an obligation that SBSTs in all schools should assist teachers to improve their knowledge and skills so that they can effectively provide appropriate support services to all learners experiencing barriers to learning irrespective of the severity of barriers. Data were generated by means of interviews using a qualitative approach. 12 members of the SBSTs, eight teachers from four Special schools and 3 district officials participated in this research. In this qualitative study, participants were purposefully selected and thematic data analysis were employed. The findings of the current study indicated that SBSTs from special schools wanted the knowledge to make them effective in supporting teachers whom regarded as already knowledgeable in education support services. The authors support the call for the professional development for the SBST members in Special school.

Keywords: Teacher support, Special school, School-Based Support Team, Inclusive education, Professional development

INTRODUCTION

Since the implementation of the policy of inclusive education, the Department of Basic Education has made progress towards ensuring that all teachers including those in special schools, are supported to protect the rights of the most vulnerable learners in the system. At school level, the SBSTs are assigned to perform this support role to co-ordinate learner and teacher support services (SA DoE, 2001). Despite this achievement, the support structured that aimed to perform this task are claimed to be ineffective in many instances (Nel et al., 2016), leaving teachers feeling unsupported and ill-equipped to face the challenges presented by the new education system (Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018). Nel et al. (2016) reported that should the SBST be properly organised, teachers will be better motivated as they will have knowledge, confidence and a change of attitude, while Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) highlighted that effective support to teachers is an assurance of positive outcomes for learners experiencing barriers to learning.

Literature indicated that in South Africa the support services at special schools for teachers is ineffective. In actual fact, teachers from these schools received support mainly from training workshops organised by the subject advisors (Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018) while the internal support structures, including the SBST, are unable to create a satisfactory support services available at the school and assist teachers with interventions to support individual learners in class (van Niekerk & Pienaar, 2018; Nel et al., 2016; Caputo & Langher, 2014). This concur with Boujut

et al. (2016) as mentioned that special school teachers observe their teaching as a challenge and they can count on receiving help from colleagues within their schools. Many studies (SAHRC, 2018; Khumalo & Hodgson, 2017; KZN DBE, 2017; Khumalo & Hodgson, 2016; Maguvhe, 2013; Williams, 2010) described the status quo for SBST to support teachers in special schools as non-functional or non-existing and teachers in existing special schools should receive rigorous training so that they can be able to deliver the curriculum and support learners.

This study seeks to explore the effectiveness of SBSTs in special schools to support teachers and the challenges thereof. To this end, it examines the perception of SBST members as well as teachers from the involved special schools related to: (a) what are some of the success of the SBSTs; (b) the challenges encountered on support services at school level; and (c) information on responsibilities of SBSTs for delivering support services to teachers. The aim is to provide an understanding on the level of support provided by SBSTs to teachers in special schools. It is hoped that such information may be helpful to stakeholders in the support services in special schools and thus strengthen the ability of the SBST to improve the level of support to teachers in these schools.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Special School as Resource Centre and District-based Support Team

According to the Department of Education (DoE) (2007), professional staff of Special School as Resource Centres SSRCs should be regarded as inclusive education branch staff and should be able to interchange between mainstream schools and SSRCs. To manage this, principals of the schools and SSRCs will ensure that clear arrangements and procedures are made to regulate the collaboration and exchanges of staff between these schools (DoE, 2007).

However, studies discovered that principals mostly jeopardise the smooth running of schools and become a barrier to the provision of support services in such schools. For instance, District-Based Support Team (DBST) members reported that it is difficult for them to show leadership because some principals disempowered them and reasserted authority when the DBST members were in conflict with teachers (Makhalemele & Payne-van Staden, 2018). Mashau et al. (2008) affirmed that some principal ran their schools as "closed units" with very little input from other parties. Motitswe (2014), reports that principals indicated having a lot of work and are unable to play a significant role in ensuring effective support services exist.

Another role of these support structures is to ensure that the existing scarce resources are used effectively (DoE, 2005). To implement this, the remedial classes were converted into learning support services. The teachers in charge of remedial classes were removed to permanent classes and their new role is to provide a learning support service in the school (DoE 2007). Nel et al. (2016) found that more resources are needed from the SSRCs and DBST to support the learning support teachers. Engelbrecht and Articles (2016) as well as Suc et al. (2017), also mentioned that lack of human and material resources are some of the challenges to the implementation of support services as envisaged. Again, Nkoma and Hay (2018) highlighted that DBST claimed that lack of resources was viewed as barriers because it hampers their roles and responsibilities immensely.

Providing specialised professional support in curriculum, assessment and instruction to full-service and mainstream schools is another role of the support structures (DoE, 2005; DoE,

2007). This include the training of teachers regarding barriers to learning, management of inclusive classrooms, support with different teaching styles, developing learning support material and life-skills programmes. Challenges that hamper the effective functioning of DBST and SSRCs to perform this role include geographic location, with many schools not able to access the resource centres. In some districts, one SSRC serves many schools and some of them are far away that they may be unable to access the services (Makhalemele & Nel, 2016).

Another role of the SSRCs is to coordinate the community-based support. Community-based education support would comprise of all the human resources and services that could support the system and work collaboratively to address priorities (DoE, 2005; DoE, 2007). The findings from literature review verified that there are challenges to involve the community to support schools. For instance, Nel et al. (2011) indicated that the community support was less readily available to schools although many of the cooperative community groups exist. Again, one of the findings from the study conducted by Makhalemele and Nel (2016), was that a large percentage (60%) of the respondents felt that the community did not recognise them (DBST). Nel et al. (2016), found that learners experiencing barriers to learning are referred to other community support structures such as the social workers, ministers of religion and nurses; however, they are not confident about whether the services they enlist are suitable for the problems they confront.

Full Service Schools and Ordinary Schools

In the Full Service Schools (FSS) and ordinary schools, the composition of the SBST depends on the size and needs of each school as well as the number of teachers available (DoE, 2005). It is proposed by policy that the SBST be co-ordinated by teachers or a school management member who has received training in areas such as life-skills education, counselling, or learner support (DoE, 1997). However, Motitswe (2014), is of the opinion that there is still lack of direction and guidance on the manner in which it should be compiled from one school to the other and how these teams should function. This is evident in research done by Makhalemele and Nel (2016), where many teachers are still uncertain about the specific roles of SBSTs.

Contextualise the Role of SBST in Special Schools

The general public usually view the roles and responsibilities of SBSTs in special schools as being different from that of the public ordinary schools. This is exacerbated by inclusive education policies that are not explicit on distinguishing the roles and responsibilities of this support teams in special schools and public ordinary schools. In the public ordinary schools these teams are involved in the teaching, identification, assessment and the referral of learners who perform poorly as well as assisting other teachers who experience difficulties in supporting learners in their classroom (Makhalemele & Nel, 2016). On the other hand, Rulwa-Mnatwana (2014: 57), mentioned that in the special schools their roles include teaching disabled learners, the development of Individualised Education Plans (IEP), feeding and dressing learners who have not developed these care skills, and also support other teachers. For the benefit of this study, it is important to note that the support teams in special schools continues with the roles they played in special education and in addition they are anticipated to support teachers. Therefore, one may

conclude that the adjustment of these teams to fit in such situations can be difficult and as a results they also need support from the department to execute such mammoth tasks.

The research question for this study is as follows: How are teachers supported by the School-Based Support Team in Special schools?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study followed the interpretive paradigm. On this study the qualitative data collection process was followed. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible (Creswell, 2014). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), things studied in their natural settings, in an attempt to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings brought to them. In this study interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. Denzin and Lincoln (2000:3), expressed that interviews, recordings and memos are some of the tools used to study objects in their natural setting in order to bring a clear picture and a clear meaning to the world in general.

This study was conducted in Sedibeng West education District in the Gauteng Province. The study population was teachers from the Special schools and their SBSTs in the mentioned district. The sample included 12 members of the SBSTs and eight teachers from four Special schools were purposively selected from those schools. The purposive convenient sampling technique was used to select participants who were affected by the phenomenon under study. Two teachers were selected from each of the four special schools under study and three SBST members were selected from each of the same schools. SBST members were selected because they support teachers and teach learners experiencing diverse barriers to learning directly. Moreover, their experiences were central in getting a rich data.

Furthermore, we considered the following research principles: permission to conduct the research, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy and protection from harm. Permission was sought through the Provincial department of Education. To gain access to schools, a goodwill permission was granted by the SGBs of the participating schools. We explained the contents in the consent form to the participants and allow them to sign once they understood them. Thus, the purpose of the study and the data collection process were explained to them. To ensure anonymity the pseudonyms names were used during the interview and transcription.

In this study the one-on-one interviews was used to collect data. We used the voice recording machine to capture detailed notes during interviews. Vogl (2013), asserts that the recording helps the researcher to capture every information during the interviews. Collected data was then analysed. During data analysis the tapes were transcribed for easy coding and analysis. All the transcriptions from all participants were carefully read. The codes and patterns of similar meaning led to categories and the themes emerged.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

From the data analysed, three themes emerged about the effectiveness of School-Based Support Team in Special schools to support teachers, namely: perceptions regarding the functioning of the

team; organizational challenges, and other influences on SBSTs in special schools. These themes are presented in the next section.

Perceptions Regarding the Functioning of the Team

Majority of participants indicated the nature of the approved functioning of the SBSTs as highlighted in inclusive education policy documents presents both the success and challenges. They expressed their success as to manage the balance between ensuring that quality teaching, learning and support takes place at their schools. However, it has been indicated that much of the support from the SBSTs is given to learners rather than teachers as they mostly perceived that their staff constitute of more knowledgeable teachers in the field of inclusive education and special needs. The implication is that they are capable to identify and address barriers to learning on their own. Some participant commented:

> *We perform our duties as spelled out in inclusive education policies and try to balance teaching, learning and support. However, in some instances support is given more attention* (S4).
> *It came to my attention that our SBST support learners more than they do to teachers. Perhaps it is because our teachers are capable to address many of the barriers without the help from SBST* (T8).

It was also notable that to some of these teams, their set goals are in line with the vision and mission of their schools. This was eminently realised during the analysis of documents as their master files have a covering page about the mission and vision of their schools. This was also coincidently discovered as the district officials were commenting on the functionality of the SBSTs in their schools. Their comments confirmed the functionality of the SBSTs by looking at what the majority of members from these teams are doing and this includes keeping the records, commitment, understanding the support procedures, sharing responsibilities and having sense of urgency. One of the district officials aptly pointed out:

> *I worked with many SBSTs from special schools and they always strive to accomplish part of their mission statement, namely to provide an inclusive support to all teachers and learners. Most members, especially the coordinators are very cooperative and ensure that the teams survive. They know their roles very well and complete the necessary forms as furnished in SIAS documents* (D2).

One of these teams specified their dysfunctionality on support especially that for teachers even though they attempted to address some of the cases referred to them. According to participants from this dysfunctional team thing such as inability of the coordinator to convene meetings, poor communication between team members and teachers, lack of interest to serve on the team, and poor support from school management are some of the factors that contributed to raid the functionality of their team. These mentioned factors seem not to frustrate only teachers serving in this team but also the entire provision of education support services at school level. This was evident from the district official (D1) as mentioned: "*In some special schools the provision of support from SBSTs to teachers is non-existing, as a result majority of teachers are demotivated and loose interest to teach in special schools*". One district official however, appreciated the attempt to support provision made by these teams from such dysfunctional schools and further

highlighted that the inexistence of teacher support enhances poor school performance and consequently schools experience high failure rate.

Organizational Challenges

Organization seems to be problematic for the majority of the SBSTs in special schools. It was noted that special schools are mainly failed to gain the benefits that these teams can provide because of its poor organisations. First, the composition of these teams from participants' point of view was critically seen as hampering the success of support to learners, teachers and schools themselves. It was indicated that this composition differs from one special school to another and policies are not specific at this point. A remark in this regard was:

> *The main challenge is the way the SBSTs are constituted in special schools. For example, in our team we do not have a teacher specialised in either counselling or learner support as compared to that of some other special schools. That really disadvantaged our team, although we try our best to support teachers and learners with the little knowledge we have* (S12).

Second, participants pointed out the unfair selection of team members in special schools as a contributing factor to the inability of the SBSTs to provide necessary support. This seems too facilitated by favouritism from principals as they mostly appoint members of these teams without a clear communication and negotiations. Consequently, the performance of such teams is rest on the influences from principals whether they are functional and supportive or not. One of the district officials commented:

> *Principals are guided by policy on how to set up SBSTs in their schools but in many special schools' teachers complain that principals just dictate who should serve in these teams. Worse is that most of such teams are not performing their duties very well* (T4).

Third, members who do not contribute their individual knowledge and skills were also revealed as a hindering factor to the success of the SBSTs. This was referred to those members who have necessary knowledge and skills to somehow, but do not have courage to utilise their expertise. In this regard, participants highlighted some reasons that made the individual knowledgeable members not to contribute and these includes: teaching workload, struggling to contact DBST, involved in many school committees, lack of resources, and poor support from principal and parents.

Fourth, the inclusion of teachers who do not have relevant knowledge and skills was claimed as another element for poor organisation of these teams. It has been noted from participants that such inclusion was facilitated by members who frequently resigns in these teams and need to be replaced by inexperience others. Participants alluded that though DBSTs are conducting workshops to members of these SBST in special schools, the impact of such training was not as such noticeable in schools because mostly those trained teachers are not serving longer in these teams. An official from district stated:

> *To my experience, most members from these teams are not serving the entire term as agreed by the schools. I'm always seeing new faces in my workshops. When I go to some schools to find the reasons, they always tell me that they have just resigned in the team* (D3).

Finally, participants also brought up that other account relate to organisational challenge of SBSTs was that the co-ordinators were mostly not involving other members to the activities of

the team. Thus they run the team without considering the participation of other members and they own the team themselves. In this regard One SBST member alluded:

> *Our co-ordinator doesn't like to share the work with us because she owns this team. She decides which cases should involve the DBST* (S2).

Other Influences on SBST in Special Schools

The characteristics of SBST members in special schools were also emerged as a serious challenge. Participants agreed in one word that the effectiveness of their SBSTs is also influenced by the type of teachers included in the team. In this regard, unequal number of male and female members, unequal number of older and younger teachers in the team, and having no same educational view were highlighted as tempering the expected support that the SBSTs should provide to teachers. For instance, one of the participant said:

> "*There are many females than male and as a result managing such team become a challenge. It is difficult for them to support others especially if it is the female who happened that she need support*" (T3).

Furthermore, it is an understanding from the researchers that some of the above mentioned were culturally influenced. For instance, the co-ordinator of one of the participating SBST have less experience and far younger than the other members. It has been disclosed by this participant that culturally speaking it is very difficult for her to give orders and be hands-on to support elders (seniors). This participant said:

> *Distribution of gender in this team disadvantage us. Worse, as young as I am and with less experience I should support older and well experienced teachers. This is merely against my culture* (S7).

Participants also indicated that another challenge they experienced is that of being unable to reprimand each other in the team as well as not reminding members to stick to the role of supporting teachers too. It is the understanding of most of the participants that when things go wrong in their teams, they should address each other's weaknesses and stick to the agreements that had been made. Certain participant mentioned:

> "*We all know that teachers should be supported at a certain point but we overlook it since we hope that they have adequate skills to address the barriers. This is our faults as we fail to confront each other for this failure*" (S10).

Furthermore, it is the opinion of the departmental officials that team members should confront each other about their behaviour and remind themselves about their responsibility to work together with other teachers. This official participant said:

> "*...for those who does not made effort to support teachers, they deserve to be reprimanded openly. They should be charged for not performing their duties*" (D3).

Inadequate time for the team to meet during the school day were also presented as a challenge for the SBSTs in special schools to perform their duty of supporting teachers. Participants indicated that they found it difficult to design a school schedule that allowed teachers the opportunity to meet them after school since they also utilise that time to monitor learners who have extra lessons and those who will be waiting to be transported to home. Thus after school hours, majority of teachers are having different responsibilities to meet the demands of learners experiencing barriers to learning. Some of the participants mentioned:

> *Due to limited time during the working hours it is difficult for us to schedule a meeting with teachers. Also, the time after school does not allow us to meet many teachers who might seek our attention* (S5).
>
> *Lack of complete school schedule after working hours for supporting teachers recurrently disadvantaged coordination efforts, planning and decision options for our team* (S9).

Teacher participants unanimously affirmed that these support teams have less number of committed members who are able to work together. This corroborate the opinion of one of the departmental officials who strongly emphasise that most members of the SBSTs from special schools does not works together smoothly and are not keen to belong in the team. Participant (T3) said:

> *I see most of them no working together and having no passion to support teachers and learners.*

Majority of participants often reported that paperwork involved in their job have a great impact on both the functionality of their SBSTs as well as to them. Thus these teams struggle to support teachers because the support process involves lot of forms to be completed. This also should be taken into considerations that same members of these teams are also expected to complete many intervention forms for learners. To them seems supporting both teachers and learners brings a burden to work with many different forms used in the support process. Some of the participants mentioned:

> *To support teachers involves completing some forms in that process and at the same time I have to complete another forms for learner interventions in my class. It's all about many forms that reduce our interaction time with learners* (S2).
>
> *To support both teachers and learners exposed us to many different forms to be completed. This is really frustrating us and we end up not performing our duties as an SBST* (S11).

DISCUSSION

Participants also indicated the need for school-based support team (SBST). School-based support team one of the main players in addressing some of the barriers. Unfortunately, some of the SBSTs are not functional. The Department of Education (2011), also emphasises the special role of the SBSTs in providing support for the education of learners that are experiencing barriers to learning. Findings from the study revealed that there was low level networking among teachers such that they could not learn from each other. The lack of networking leads to teachers falling behind on developments in education. This has negative effect on how teachers address barriers to learning of their learners (Edwards-Kerr, 2017).

The participants indicated the need to assist and support staff members in their schools to help other teachers through school-based mini-workshops and meetings. The SBST members stated that their efforts are aimed at trying to make special schools work by making sure that the district is brought on board in terms of the challenges experienced in the affected schools. The participants indicated that they have developed a supportive relationship between the school and the district office, so that when assistance is needed it is always given.

Lack of training is revealed when teachers cannot identify barriers to learning. The participants specified that the department of education offered minimal and uncoordinated support

for curriculum adaptation. Furthermore, participants felt that monitoring by subject specialist from the district office was not effective enough because of limited awareness of the needs of learners. Moreover, participants felt strongly about the need for a multidisciplinary approach to support teachers and they include physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, nurses, and social workers (Kirk, Gallagher & Anastasiow 1997:110).

Collegial support appears to be a positive factor and boosts the morale of the educators of inclusive classes. The teachers teaching inclusive education, however, do not have a thorough knowledge of how to handle inclusive classes because the principals, too, lack the skills of teaching inclusive classes and rely on external support in the form of referrals to special schools. This kind of support does not cater for inclusivity as it works against the demands of an inclusive education policy. Teachers felt that information on inclusive education should not only be communicated in staff meetings, but should also be made available to all stakeholders. Participants expect teachers to develop themselves by attending workshops and meetings so that they may become experts in their field of work. They should know and understand the learners that they are dealing with. Most teachers teaching inclusive education have not completed any remedial courses in their teacher education and, therefore, find it difficult to teach or deal with learners in these classes.

The district officials assist teachers by providing them with advice about how to identify learners with barriers to learning, organise meetings with teachers and assist with learner referrals to other institutions. Despite these efforts, teachers are in need of practical solutions on how to support learners who experience barriers to learning and the teachers find the referral procedure tedious. The school-based support team are also functional to a degree. They conduct meetings to discuss learners who experience barriers to learning. However, teachers are reluctant to refer learners discussed in school-based support team meetings to the district-based support team for intervention. Teachers also feel that community collaboration is limited. For teachers to receive long-term support, educational systems need to mentor new teachers and provide appropriate professional development on a continuous basis.

CONCLUSION

This article explored effectiveness of School-Based Support Team (SBST) in Special schools to support teachers. The study has revealed the challenges encountered by School-Based Support Team (SBST) members and phase teachers in the support of teachers in special schools. Schools do not have systems in place for implementing inclusive education in terms of the policy set out in White Paper 6 guidelines. Aspects that address the support of teachers teaching in special schools are not dealt with. The school-based support team members are given the powers of overseeing education in special schools but they, too, do not have the relevant skills. They rely mostly on the guidelines which are provided by the Department of Education and their own discretion. Some teachers do not even understand the content of White Paper 6 and how to implement it at school level and they are left to struggle because their managers are not empowered in this area.

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