DO SCHOOL MANGEMENT TEAMS UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLES IN DEALING WITH INCLUSIVE LEARNING SUPPORT? A SOUTH AFRICAN CASE STUDY

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Abstract- Inclusive school settings, characterised by diverse and distinct layers of complexity, typify the South African education environment. Consequently, it is imperative that managers in inclusive schools possess competencies to provide learning support to Special education needs (SEN) learners while addressing the barriers to learning. Copious research studies focus on teachers providing learning support as critical to these learners achieving academically, however, a lack of management competencies to address SEN learners' learning support is evident. This study aims at illuminating the competencies that SMTs of clustering pubic primary schools should possess to render learning support to Special Education Needs (SEN) learners. The theory underpinning this research is the ecosystem theory which suggests that inclusive learning support should not only be directed at individual learners but extended to all systems that surround the learner. Employing a qualitative interpretive methodology, the study utilised a case study design where four clustering schools in an education district in the Free State Province of South Africa were purposefully selected. Employing focus group interviews, group discussion and semi-structured interviews as the research tools, the target population comprised School Management teams (SMTs) and School-Based support Teams (SBSTs) to yield the data for this study. A key finding revealed that SMTs of the public primary schools researched in the Motheo District cluster are not fully attentive to the managerial competencies required to render inclusive learning support.

Key terms- Inclusive Education, School Management Team, Inclusive Learning Support, Management Tasks, Clustering public primary schools.

I. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, the discourse in education, mainstream schools in particular, should be reflective of an alignment toward learning instead of merely schooling (Gathumbi, Ayot, Kimemia&Ondigi, 2015). South Africa's answer to the global call for inclusion in education is ratified by the EWP 6, an initiative geared toward the transformation of the education system to ensure quality education for all learners (Department of Education [DoE], 2001). Inclusion is not only a special education issue but has broader implications (Srivastava, de Boer, &Pijl, 2015, Florian & Linklater, 2010, Hanushek &Woessman, 2010; UNESCO, 2005).

Research on inclusion which identified an overarching category termed 'additional support needs', used for learners who require extra support, revealed that teachers are most supportive of inclusion (Maciver, Hunter, Adamson, Grayson, Forsyth & McLeod, 2018). The essential competencies that are needed in order for a teacher to be considered as "inclusive" have been identified in the Competence Framework for Inclusive Teachers (CFIT) (Navarro, Zervas, FabregatGesa& Sampson, 2016). Education geared in this way requires decisive managerial action to improve inclusive learning support (ILS) which inevitablynecessitates sound managerial competencies for all decision makers who participate in and control learning. Sittert (2011) affirms that control in ILS is an aspect of the utmost importance and a total quality management imperative. In this way quality is assured where resources and other assistive devices, if any, are controlled to ensure that learners with learning barriers and development utilise them optimally. In ILS, control has to be done by the co-ordinator, who should be an SMT member (DoE 2010 and Sittert 2011) or Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) known as an Inclusion Manager in the United Kingdom (UKDoE, 2013). Contemporary South African discourse mirrors the importance of sound management practices with the primary goal being that of teaching and learning (Grobler Bischoff &Beeka, 2012). In addressing the challenge of managing IE and transforming South African schools, the role of SMTs is linked to the potential for inclusive, enabling transformative development.

(Rayner, 2007; Mbelu2011; Tulgan 2014). In transforming schools, researchers contend that there is a dire need for competency improvement and knowledge development among SMT members with regard to inclusive learning support at certain public primary schools in South Africa. The reasons for this could be the alleged lack of knowledge and understanding of inclusive policies and application of suitable management skills in inclusive learning support. In view of the latter, ILS remains a challenge in public schools. With this article, we argue that competent school leaders and managers will recognise their role in creating ILS environments and generating positive learning outcomes for all learners. In our view, the principle of support encapsulates the notion that all barriers to learning should be removed while meeting learners at the level of support they require.

II. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT ROLES FOR ILS

Providing effective ILS in general is a contentious issue in IE. In rendering ILS, we contend that school management roles and competencies may be regarded as context-specific. The onus is on SMT members to have competencies in educational change and school reform in order to provide equal prominence to leadership and management practices for their schools to render effective ILS support (Bush, 2010; Gathumbi, Ayot, Kimemia&Ondigi, 2015).

Planning, often described as a time-consuming management task for the ILS role of SMT members, manifests in supporting ILS educators with resources needed, common planning time, manageable teaching schedules, heterogeneous classroom rosters and professional development opportunities to perform their jobs well (Tondeur 2008; Barton 2009). At the same time, SMTs must systematically organise and co-ordinate a centre for educators providing the necessary equipment for staff development and train other staff members on inclusive support practices (Van der Merwe, Prinsloo, & Steinmann, 2005; Sittert 2011). The purpose of co-ordination is to synchronise people and activities to achieve set goals, develop team spirit and promote team work, ensure co-operation between educators and ensure that policy is uniformly applied (Qeleni 2013). Inclusive schools are organised and managed through shared decision-making structures, unlike the traditional hierarchical authority-based models so often observed in schools (Lehohla 2011). We contend that ILS should be community-based and contextually relevant which implies that each school utilises its community resources which need to be harnessed to add to the capacity to support SEN learners. It is clear then that it is a management imperative. Control is one of the issues that led to this article and is regarded as the most important task that should be performed by SMTs to ensure collaboration (Calitz, Viljoen, Moller & van der Bank, 1992; Van der Merwe et al. 2005). Control suggests a process of monitoring activities to determine whether individual units and the organisation itself are obtaining and utilising their resources effectively and efficiently (Sittert 2011, Calitzet al. 1992). For monitoring to be effective and efficient it can be done by controlling teachers' and learners' work with the use of methods including preparation; presentation; evaluation and formal meetings (Rayner 2007; Van der Merwe et al. 2005 &Calitzet al. 1992, Sittert 2011). For the success of ILS support at Motheo clustering schools, SMT members will have to plan for control or monitoring of educators' and learners' work. In this way they will be able to establish if the objectives of the initial plan have been accomplished. Through control, the co-ordinators of Motheo clustering schools will ensure that all activities at all levels of the school accord with school's outcomes, that quality of teaching and learning and client satisfaction is reached, that effort put in planning, organising and leading is worth-while (Van de Venter& Kruger, 2005).Timeous support is a precondition for learning and in this way, control is inevitable management practice (Mpaya, 2009, DoE, 2001)).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ecosystem theory grounds this study. This research, by means of a literature review, highlights the paradigm shift in inclusive education internationally and particularly in South Africa. The empirical research investigated the eco-system management role of SMT members and the challenges they face in rendering ILS to learners experiencing barriers to learning. The eco-system used is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, including the micro-system, the meso-system and the exo-system (Ryan 2006). This theory looks at the learner's development within the context of the relationships that form his or her environment. It is against this background that the ILS rendered by SMT members as inclusive leaders was investigated. The learners' school environment was explored with the help of the SMT members, SBST members, SGB members and educators. The research base in South Africa is relatively small and quiet in its management and leadership of inclusive education (Kalenga& Fourie, 2011). It tends to support the continued need for special education and its focus on individualized teaching, while showing the positive benefits of inclusion.

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

A case study design was used, and conventionally applied in qualitative research so that the researchers could understand the phenomenon in depth, regardless of the number of sites or participants of the study (McMillan and Schumacher 2001:398).The case study method offered the researcher a multi-perspective analysis in which the views, voices and perspectives of the individuals and relevant groups of actors and the interactions between them (Creswell, Ebersohn, Eloff, Ferreira, Ivankova, Jansen, Nieewenhuis, Pieterson, Plano Clark & van der Westhuizen, 2010). Purposive sampling was used. Participants were drawn from four of the eight clustering schools, five SMT members were chosen because of their management and teaching and learning knowledge and experience and five SBST members were selected because of their learner support experience.

Data analysis involved two levels of coding. The first level of coding is called open coding where data was labelled or tagged, then logically grouped into themes. In order to distinguish between responses from the focus groups of the four schools, letter codes "SMTA

1,2,3,4, SMTB 1,2,3,4, SMTC 1,2,3,4, and SMTD 1,2,3,4," were assigned to the SMT members.

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Data gathered through focus group interviews

SMTA 1, SMTA 2; SMTC 1 and SMTB 4 aligned themselves with the DoE position and that of Clause 5 of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO), which articulates the following issues: combating discriminatory attitudes; creating welcoming communities; building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; providing an effective education to the majority of children and improving the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. SMT members described their conversance with ILS and leading all the stakeholders in its execution through underlying policies. They articulated a general understanding of the term 'Inclusive' and indicated that it is about including learners in mainstream schooling and upholding non-discriminatory practices. "What I know is that learners with learning abilities should be included in mainstream schools. In the past learners with learning barriers were strictly sent to special schools, but with inclusive they need to be accommodated and supported here in a mainstream (SMT member, 10 years' experience, male). Participants acknowledged inclusive education as the main policy imperative to respect SEN learners, remove barriers to learning, improve outcomes, and remove discrimination. Commenting on the functionality of SBST participants reiterated that their role is crucial in the execution and coordination of ILS. "SMT members make sure that the SBST members have necessary skills and qualifications. The leading role and co-ordination of ILS is done by the HOD" (SMT member, 15 years' experience, female). Management Tasks, such as consultation and collaboration with all stakeholders, the DBST and educators from other sectors or departments were regarded as critical. "SMT members ensure that SBST consult with DBST for the support and assistance needed to render ILS to learners. The principal ensures that the school budget include ILS to provide the ILS educators with necessary learning and teaching material" (SMTB 3, 4, 5 and SMTC 1, combined 20 years' experience, males). The above responses indicated that the majority of the participants acknowledged the need for ILS to be successful, educators to perform their duties and the SBST to be established by the principal.

5.2 The extent to which SMT members are involved in ILS

SMTA 1, 2, 3, 4, SMTB 3, 4 SMTC 1, 2, SMTB 3 and SMTD 1, 2, 3 highlighted the importance of having the competence to be involved as SMT members in ILS matters. It is required by the DoE (2008:13) that the principal and at least one SMT member, be SBST members and coordinators of such SBST activities. Participants' responses, however, indicated that there were differences in their levels of involvement. "The principal, one deputy principal and two HODs are members of the SBST. They also assist teachers to identify learners with learning barriers and ensure that ILS educators have all the necessary learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) (SMTB 3). "For me the SMT is not fully involved. It is true it is there but not functional because most of the problems are referred to me and solved by me. I will always go to the ILS educator for assistance or advices. The SBST is there but it is not fully functional. We all need to be involved, especially the principal (SMTA 4). SMTD 1 endorsed the importance of curriculum management, the application of management skills and the execution of management tasks, such as leading and control of ILS by SMT members as a way of supporting SEN learners. She made the following comment: "It is also the responsibility of the SMT members to see to it that learners are attending ILS class regularly and whether the ILS educator is doing her work, but not the ILS educator only also mainstream educators need to be monitored whether they also support SEN learners".

5.3 Management support provided to ILS educators

For ILS educators to accomplish their goals they require management support from SMT members. "The resources that we must supply them with, for example by empowering them with finance, meaning providing them with necessary resources because dealing with SEN learners need funds" (SMTA 1, 12 years' experience). In managing ILS, SMT members outlined their roles thus: "We SMT members need to ensure that the co-ordinator and ILS educator have necessary resources because we need to have resources to test learners and other educators. We must also ensure that educators apply didactic teaching to learners. We also provide them with a time table" (SMTC 3, 16 years' experience).

The importance of their involvement as SMT members in all levels of ILS was also reiterated (SMTA 2 & 3 and SMTD 1 &3). "On the other hand, educators are also supported when going to workshops of focus areas related to ILS. We also invite SES from DBST to assist educators with ILS matters. There are also days where educators are individually sent to their respective Subject Advisors to assist them with teaching and learning matters as well as how to address challenges like those met in ILS".

The responses of SMT members from school B designated constructive support for the accomplishment of inclusive education goals. The responses of schools A, C and D indicated the schools' intention of becoming fully involved in ILS activities

and arrangements. SMT members from school A, however, highlighted the need to take the school forward with regard to the establishment of ILS. To provide effective management support to educators, SMT members need to focus on learners' learning and teachers' development. This may be achieved by: constantly defining and communicating the school's educational mission; managing curriculum and instruction; supporting and supervising teaching and learning; monitoring learner progress and promoting an effective learning climate. Undoubtedly, effective leaders need to display skills of communicating, motivating, conflict management and negotiating.

CONCLUSION

In order for ILS to be effective and educators to perform their duties well the support from SMT is invaluable in establishing the SBST at school level. Thus, SMT members' role requires that their attitudes and approaches enable SEN learners from gaining access to the curriculum. This requires well trained educators in ILS, indicating that planning for ILS should identify the in-service training needs of teachers about inclusive principles. Findings indicate that the co-ordination of ILS has to be done by the SBST co-ordinator, who should be a SMT member Although other schools are trying to implement inclusive education, it is clear that the un-involvement of SMT members is the cause of the in-effective implementation thereof. Even the SMT members acknowledged that their involvement is crucial, irrespective of their workload, however they lack knowledge and understanding of how to render and facilitate inclusive education. Another key challenge facing schools is the poor support service from the District Based Support Team (DBST) as well as the special schools which do not accommodate learners from mainstream schools as they have to. This study may contribute by improving the perceived lack of and ineffective management of learner support at Motheo clustering schools, where inclusive education is apparently practiced. It also aims to conscientise SMT members of clustering schools where inclusive education is not implemented and on their role with regard to supporting learners with barriers to learning and to stimulate establishment of support classes.

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