

Teachers' challenges in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classroom at a selected primary school in Oshana region, Namibia

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Abstract

Teachers supporting learners with learning difficulties face numerous challenges in schools. The study investigated the challenges faced by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms at a selected primary school in Oshana region, Namibia. The study sort to identify relevant instructional teaching strategies that teachers may use to provide effective support to learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms. The researchers used a qualitative case study approach to examine one elementary school in Oshana region. Ten teachers were selected using a criterion sampling strategy. Data was gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the help of interview guide. The collected data was analysed and interpreted using a thematic approach. Findings of the study showed that there were a number of variables that contribute to this issue, including large class sizes, diverse set of abilities among learners, lack of resources, and insufficient time for specialized instruction. The study found that there were a number of potential solutions that could assist teachers in coping with their challenges. The research found that although teachers had positive attitudes toward including learners with learning difficulties in their classrooms, it appeared that they lacked the necessary knowledge and skills on how to support these learners because they were not trained on inclusive education discourse. This was the case despite the fact that teachers had positive attitudes toward including learners with learning difficulties in their classrooms. The findings of the study prompted the researchers to draw the conclusion and advocate for in-service training as well as strong advocacy in order to ensure that the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education is effectively implemented in all schools across Namibia.

Keywords: *mainstream classroom, learning difficulties, learning disabilities*

Introduction

The global movement now favours inclusive systems, which allow learners with special needs to participate in regular classrooms. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2018) defines inclusion in a school context as a place to address and respond to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing their participation in learning, culture, and community, and reducing exclusion from and within education. That's why, to truly include all learners, you need to adapt your material, your support, your approach, your structures, and your methods to fit that shared vision. The purpose of the educational system is to provide all pupils with the opportunity to increase their economic standing in the community. According to Bayat (2020), the drive to include children with disabilities in all facets of society began in the 1970s in the industrialized world. Therefore, the school chosen for this study is one of the few institutions that began adopting integration by incorporating learners with

special needs in regular classrooms after independence. It was also reported by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (2019) that after Namibia's independence in 1990, the government made a commitment to establish an inclusive education system by ratifying and enacting a number of international agreements, national legislation, and policies, including the Salamanca Declaration (1994) and the Namibia's Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (Ministry of Education, 2013). "In 2016, there were a total of 1661 schools in Namibia, including nine special schools, and the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture aims for the implementation of inclusive education at all schools where every child matters" (Breilling, 2017, p. 1). According to the definition of "inclusive education," all learners, including those with special needs, are welcome in regular classrooms (Walsh, 2017). The inclusion of learners with special needs in general education settings has been a hotly debated topic for a long time (Walsh,

2017). Learners with learning disabilities do not need to be segregated into a separate classroom because of inclusive education's emphasis on including all learners in the school's community. Although the UNESCO (1994) Salamanca statement states that all learners must be provided with help in an inclusive context, many teachers are still confronted with the difficulties of doing so. A study by Collins (2018) and Agoabas (2019) shows that many teachers will struggle to teach learners with and without learning disabilities in the same classroom if they have not received training in the field of Inclusive Education.

According to Zimba, Mostert, Hengari, Haihambo, Mowes, Nuugwedha and February (2016), many general education teachers lack the knowledge and skills necessary to support learners with learning disabilities when they are taught in general education classrooms with other learners. Teachers play a crucial part in making inclusive education a reality, but they face many obstacles when trying to help learners with special needs in regular classes. Their morale suffers as a result, and they are less productive as a result of their sentiments of hopelessness and low self-esteem. The difficulties experienced by teachers in regular classrooms are a potential stumbling block to the successful implementation of Namibia's Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (Ministry of Education, 2013). Nonetheless, these difficulties have not been fully investigated as of yet. In order to expand an inclusive and equitable education system in which learners with learning disabilities feel included and supported by instructors, it is crucial to conduct research focused on the obstacles faced by teachers in mainstream classes.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

This study was guided by Goldratt's (1995) theory of constraints which is linked to social constructionist theory. Burr (2016, p. 56) refers to social constructionism as "a tradition of scholars tracing the origin of knowledge and the meaning and nature of reality to a process generated with human relationship". Goldratt's (1995) theory of constraints (TOC) is defined as "management paradigms shift that view that any management system can have some challenges in achieving its goals and there must be strategies to overcome those constraints" (p. 180).

As Collins (2018) indicates, Social

Constructionist Theory has multiple functions, including the following: it is a method for finding personal truth, problem solving, the reduction of anxiety and guilt, symptom removal, gaining relationship skills, reduction of alienation from the self, others and society, finding reasons/causes and understanding others. The main focal point of this study was the challenges that teachers experienced in teaching learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms, as well as finding possible solutions for mitigating these challenges as experienced by teachers. The TOC has been linked to social constructionism, with Agoabas (2019) highlighting that it has been applied widely in social research. TOC has made significant contributions to studies of social problems or challenges, social movements, education, health, race and other areas where interactions occur and relationships form, thereby giving rise to the construction of reality.

The challenges teachers face in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream settings

Studies have shown that teachers may encounter a number of challenges when teaching learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms. The study conducted by Fuchs (2021) in Britain on teacher challenges in inclusive schools highlighted the following themes from the data collected: "(1) teachers' negative attitudes, (2) uncondusive physical environment, (3) lack of administrative support, (4) lack of teachers' support to learners with learning difficulties, (5) lack of teacher in-service education programs and (6) lack of time to plan" (Fuchs, 2021, p. 48).

The above literature makes it clear that many teachers, not only those in Namibia but also in other countries, perceive the inclusion of learners with special needs as a problem. Many feel ill-prepared for inclusion, hence the multiple challenges they experience. A study conducted in the United States revealed that "most teachers lack an appropriate knowledge to educate learners with learning difficulties effectively" (Hyunjeong, Tyler-Wood, Kinnison, & Morrison, 2020, p. 17). Hyunjeong et al. (2020) further showed that although teachers are prepared to have learners with special needs in their classrooms, they did not feel prepared to teach these children and it became a challenge for them. Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2021, p. 53) also indicate

that “teachers facing challenges in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms have existed ever since the implementation of inclusive education in various countries and these challenges could be lack of support from school administrators, lack of in-service teacher training, class size, collaboration and inadequate time planning”. Fuchs (2021b) further argues that despite the fact that learners with learning difficulties are accommodated in mainstream classrooms, their inclusion is not fully secured, and it is likely that they may not receive the same attention as that accorded to their counterparts (average and above average learners) in the same classroom.

The literature has also shown that, over the past decades, it was not possible for children with learning difficulties to be educated in the same classroom as the average and gifted learners because the learning pace is different. According to Topping (2019, p. 24) “despite all learners are required to be taught in the same classroom, some teachers in mainstream classrooms display apathy support towards learners with learning difficulties”. Emvula (2007), Haihambo, February, Brown, and Hengari (2009) and Mayumbelo (2019) note that some of the challenges that teachers encountered in the effective provision of inclusive education were embedded in actual aspects of the school like an uncondusive physical environment, overcrowding, inaccessible classrooms that do not take cognisance of learners’ special needs, as well as a lack of both support and teaching and learning materials such as assistive devices.

In addition, Eleweke and Rodda (2022, p. 230) revealed that “the biggest teachers’ challenge in mainstream schools seems to be a lack of resources for organising support to learners with learning difficulties in the mainstream schools especially in developing countries”. The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (2016) in Namibia has noted that a lack of additional resources such as computers and other information technology supported learning devices for learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms may hamper the effective implementation of the inclusive education policy.

Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2021) surveyed the in-service training needs of teachers in mainstream schools and found that there is a need for teachers to be trained on a regular basis in order to provide necessary support to learners with diverse needs in

mainstream classrooms.

Mixed ability classes is a term used to describe classes made up of learners with varying levels of proficiency. Rieser (2019) revealed that some of the challenges experienced by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classroom are learners’ different abilities. However, it must be noted that all classes are, to some degree, made up of learners who differ in many ways. They have different strengths, weaknesses and approaches to learning while they may respond differently to various teaching methods and classroom practices (Ur, 2022).

Relevant instructional strategies used by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms

One of the objectives of this study was to identify relevant instructional teaching strategies that teachers may use to provide effective support to learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms. It was, therefore, deemed imperative to learn from the literature the best practices of effective instructional teaching strategies which teachers may use in supporting such learners. Studies have shown that teaching and learning will be effective only if teachers apply relevant teaching strategies in order to respond effectively to learners with different abilities. Globally, as Westwood (2016) cites, there are numerous instructional strategies that are used by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms. It is the researchers’ views that, in many cases, the challenges experienced by teachers in mainstream classrooms may be attributed to a lack of awareness on the part of teachers about the correct use of adaptive teaching strategies as well as a lack of training in inclusive education. These factors are likely to contribute to teachers’ failure to provide support to learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms.

According to Tomlinson (2020, p. 50), “the use of instructional strategies such as co-teaching; differentiated teaching, individualised teaching and collaborative teaching strategies, in mainstream classrooms is believed to be relevant, especially in teaching learners with different abilities (gifted learners and non-gifted learners) in the same classroom”. Unfortunately, teachers in Namibia do not make use of such strategies despite their relevance to inclusive education.

Co-teaching may be defined as the partnering of a general education teacher with a specialist for the purpose of jointly delivering instruction to learners with diverse needs in a way that flexibly and deliberately meets their learning needs (Friend & Cook, 2021).

Critical elements for creating inclusive and effective school communities

The Sector Policy on Inclusive Education was implemented in 2016 with the aim of ensuring that inclusive education practices should be implemented at all mainstream schools in order to cater for all learners' needs, irrespective of their differences. However, Breilling (2017) revealed that despite the Namibian government having implemented the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education in 2016, the majority of teachers were still not aware of such a policy at the time of the study. Others were aware of it, but had not yet implemented it in their schools.

Many schools applied integration and mainstreaming as a way of accommodating learners with learning difficulties, while others simply excluded such learners by advising them to seek admission to special/resource schools. There is, therefore, a need to disseminate information on the inclusive education policy to ensure that all stakeholders in the community and school levels and in other institutions understand the policy. Mackey (2020) stresses teacher education as a key to the effective implementation of inclusive education because this is largely dependent on the attitudes and skills of the teachers. It is noted that inclusive education may be a challenge if teachers are not trained in the inclusive education, discipline and lack an awareness of the constitutional right to education for all.

Research indicates that the success of inclusive education depends primarily on the availability and quality of the educational support that is offered in mainstream schools (Forlin, 2021). It must be pointed out that teacher training alone does not change practices in schools unless schools and teachers are regularly and continuously supported. The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (2016) recommends that "careful preparation of a plan to support teachers and schools through a range of means is necessary and the necessary resource allocation must be secured" (p. 45). This strategy was deemed relevant to the purpose of this study, because to ensure effective teaching and learning in a school community, teachers must be supported

in order to provide effective instructional strategies to mitigate the challenges that teachers face in supporting learners with diverse needs in mainstream classrooms.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach that resonates with a qualitative case study design. A qualitative case study design was employed in order to explore the challenges faced by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms by providing them with an opportunity to express their views on the challenges they were experiencing in supporting such learners. The case study involved one primary school in the Oshana region, Namibia. The population for this study consisted of all 18 teachers employed at one school with a long history of mainstreaming of learners with learning difficulties. The school was purposefully selected for this unique characteristic. In this study, criterion sampling was employed to select all teachers at the target school because they had the same experience of teaching learners with learning difficulties. The teachers who participated in the study were identified as T1 to T18.

The school was selected with the idea that it had a history of integration and mainstreaming as a forerunner of inclusive education and, because of this experience, they were able to easily adapt to inclusive education and to ensure effective implementation of the Sector Policy of Inclusive Education of 2016 compared to schools that practiced segregation. A one-on-one interview was used due to its capacity for yielding rich data and providing immediate feedback. In addition, it allows room for issues to be clarified on the side of both the interviewees and interviewers. However, one of the disadvantages of one-on-one interviews is that such interviews are extremely time consuming. The researchers obtained permission from the Director of Education, Arts and Culture of the Oshana Directorate of Education that allowed them to collect data at the target school. Qualitative data analysis was conducted through the use of Thematic Analysis (TA). Braun and Clarke (2016, p. 77-101) describe Thematic analysis as "a widely-used qualitative data analysis method and it is one of cluster methods that focus on identifying patterned meaning across data sets. Patterns are identified through a rigorous process of data by familiarizing with data, coding and theme development".

Results

The researchers' interpretations and analysis are integrated with the literature, which serve as evidence of the themes and concepts (Holloway & Wheeler, 2018). The themes were identified through sequential phases which are data familiarization, data coding, searching for themes and theme development,

reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally writing up the themes. The data were then presented in themes with transcribed quotations of the respondents being included to support the findings. The themes and concepts that emerged from the analysed, transcribed collected data are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Developed themes and subthemes

MAIN THEMES	SUB THEMES
Theme 1: Challenges which teachers face in supporting learners with learning difficulties	Sub-theme 1.1: Insufficient time
	Sub-theme 1.2: Lack of in-service training
	Sub-theme 1.3: Learners' varying abilities
	Sub-theme 1.4: Class size
	Sub-theme 1.5: Inadequate resources
Theme 2: Relevant instructional strategies used by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties	Sub-theme 2.1: Co-teaching
	Sub-theme 2.2: Differentiated teaching
	Sub-theme 2.3: Remedial/compensatory teaching
	Sub-theme 2.4: Individualised/personalized teaching
	Sub-theme 2.5: Collaborative teaching
	Sub-theme 2.6: Peer teaching
Theme 3: Recommended strategies to mitigate teachers' challenges in mainstream schools to ensure inclusive and effective school communities	Sub-theme 3.1: Integrate Sector Policy on Inclusive Education into other legal frameworks and policies in other educational sector
	Sub-theme 3.2: Raise awareness about constitutional rights, attitudinal change
	Sub-theme 3.3: Widen support of institutional development through developing human and instructional resources
	Sub-theme 3.4: Expand and develop educational support services
	Sub-theme 3.5: Strengthen and expand in-service training for teachers

Insufficient time

Participants in the study revealed that insufficient time is one of the factors affecting the teaching in the mainstream classrooms. Most of the teachers in mainstream classrooms were challenged by the time factor because of the limited time available; this means that they were not able to provide support to all learners who needed it. This was evident in the view expressed by T10 that:

“In the current classroom situation, a single period lasts for 45 minutes only; and it is difficult to allocate activities to all learners and, at some point, class activities are not always completed and I will end up not giving activities to the slow learners because they cannot catch up in the given time”.

The results of this study concur with the findings of Eleweke and Rodda (2019, p. 58) that “although teachers are required to educate a broad range of learners in the mainstream classroom setting, they sometimes feel that time is not always sufficient to plan and support learners with different abilities”. In light of the above, the researcher is convinced that the time factor remains a major challenge in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream schools and that this factor not only prevalent in Namibia but in other parts of the world.

Lack of in-service training

The results of the study revealed that a lack of in-service training, specifically in terms of the inclusive education discourse, remained a

challenge for teachers. This was evident in the following comment made by T10:

“I did not attend any in-service training or any workshop with regard to (IE) inclusive education; hence I am not able to support learners with learning difficulties in my class”.

These findings revealed that teachers lacked in-service training for them to manage mainstream teaching. These findings further suggest that because some teachers were not trained in inclusive education, and had not even attended any workshops on inclusive education most teachers lacked knowledge on the use of inclusive education strategies. The findings of this study further concur with the results of a study conducted in the United States, which revealed that “most of education teachers lack an appropriate training to educate learners with learning difficulties in mainstream effectively” (Hyunjeong et al., 2020, p. 17). The study indicated that although teachers did try to accommodate learners with learning difficulties in their classrooms, the challenge remained as they lacked knowledge and skills on how to provide support for learners with diverse needs in general education and sometimes they do not feel fully prepared for teaching this category of learners (Brenner, 2018).

In support of this finding, Zimba (2011) revealed that one of the main challenges experienced by teachers in mainstream schools is a lack of in-service training on how to provide support for learners with diverse needs in inclusive settings. Moreover, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (2016) reported that a lack of teacher pre-service training on inclusive education might impede the effective implementation of the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education in Namibia.

Learners’ different abilities

Varying abilities among learners were one of the challenges experienced by teachers that impeded teachers from providing learning support for learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms. This was confirmed by T2 who clearly indicated that:

“It is challenging to teach learners with different abilities because it requires a teacher to teach according to their level of understanding and this could result in the topic of each lesson being repeated over and over again”.

Brenner (2018) and Silverman (2015) also revealed that teachers might feel frustrated by the challenges they faced in their mixed ability classrooms and they might not know how to create successful learning and teaching environments that met the needs of all learners. In addition, Simanova (2021, p. 48) clearly states that “most teachers in mainstream schools lack the knowledge of using effective strategies in supporting learners in the classroom for a wide range of ability; only a few teachers who are familiar with managing mixed abilities and they are much better equipped to meet the learners’ diverse needs”.

In this study, six teachers indicated that they did not know how to manage the classroom with a wide range of learners’ abilities especially in overcrowded classrooms, hence it was a challenge. In light of the above, it is clear that the issue of teaching learners with different abilities in overcrowded classrooms should not be overlooked in Namibian schools; because it needs qualified teachers in the field. Moreover, if the teacher is not trained on how to manage a class with learners of mixed abilities effectively, this becomes a problem requiring immediate interventions.

Overcrowded classrooms

The respondents in this study had various views and opinions on the issue of overcrowded classrooms in mainstream schools. This was affirmed by T3 who stated that:

“Overcrowded classrooms hamper effective support to learners with learning difficulties because one cannot manage to provide support to all the learners in a larger group and this frustrates most of the teachers in mainstream classrooms”.

Studies have shown that many African countries are characterized (Brenner, 2018) by a high number of learners per teacher – a practice which is common in previously disadvantaged areas and that class size (overcrowded classrooms) is regarded as one of the biggest obstacles to effective teaching and learning. Studies by Breilling (2017), Zimba et al. (2016) and Rieser (2019) revealed that one of the challenges experienced by teachers in supporting learners with mixed abilities in mainstream settings is overcrowded classrooms. In such classrooms, teachers are unable to provide effective support for learners

with diverse needs. In light of the above, it is evident that the overcrowded classroom has a negative effect on the provision of support to learners with learning difficulties because the teachers are not able to attend to each individual learner as required as a result of their heavy workload.

Inadequate resources

On the issue of inadequate resources in mainstream schools, seven teachers mentioned that lack of teaching and learning materials such as computers and other ICTs especially in more remote schools were some of the challenges that teachers were faced with. T4 clearly stated that:

“I am concerned by the fact that many teachers use only textbooks in the classroom due to the lack of other teaching materials such as computers and other assistive teaching technological devices”.

Eleweke and Rodda (2019, p. 230) also found that “the biggest teachers’ challenge in mainstream schools seems to be a lack of resources for organizing effective support to learners with learning difficulties in mainstream schools, especially in developing countries”. In addition, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (2016) also noted that lack of resources such as computers and other assistive learning devices for learners with special needs can adversely hamper the effective implementation of the inclusive education policy especially in rural-schools. It is being suggested in this study that the equal distribution of teaching and learning materials in inclusive schools in the country should be realized.

Strategies used by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms

On the issue of the relevant instructional strategies identified that should be used by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties; the results of this study revealed that the majority of teachers interviewed used only one size-fits-all strategy in mainstream classrooms. The results of this study further revealed that since teachers were always fatigued by teaching learners with mixed abilities in overcrowded mainstream classrooms, teachers suggested the use of co-teaching to be introduced in Namibia; although it is regarded as costly in terms of

remunerating two teachers per class. The results of this study revealed that most of the teachers interviewed, did not know how to use other relevant teaching strategies used in inclusive settings in supporting learners with learning difficulties.

Co-teaching

The results of this study revealed that most of the teachers interviewed indicated that they did not use co-teaching strategy in Namibian schools because it is regarded as costly by having two teachers do teach parallel in one classroom; in terms of remuneration of both teachers (double action) rather than remunerating for only one teacher per class. As a result, most of the teachers in Namibia use only one size-fits-all (lecture method), even in inclusive schools where learners with diverse needs are taught in mainstream classrooms. This was asserted by T4 who clearly indicated that:

“We appeal to the government of Namibia to allow two teachers teaching synchronously in one classroom whereby – one teacher should be responsible for the slow learners while the other teacher should be responsible for the fast learners”.

Furthermore, T5 and T8 also commented that although co-teaching was regarded as costly in Namibia, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture should introduce it in mainstream classrooms where learners with different abilities are taught in order to relieve the burden placed on single handed teachers in one overcrowded classroom. Studies have shown that the principle of co-teaching involves pairing teachers as part of an initiative to create more inclusive classroom and share the workload in the classroom and this benefits both teachers and learners. However, Rosen (2016, p. 174) argues that:

“... Although co-teaching received momentum in the field of inclusive education recently, it is not a panacea for the effective teaching of learners with different abilities. It holds greater promise if applied by qualified teachers in that field through effective collaboration and mutual understanding between teachers and individual learners; otherwise if not so, it could be a mere action without tangible results.”

In light of the above; it is evident that there is need to introduce co-teaching strategy in all-inclusive schools in Namibia in order to respond to the learners' diverse needs.

Differentiated teaching

Tomlinson (2020, p. 32) defines differentiated instruction as the process of "ensuring that what a learner learns should demonstrate how he or she learns and teachers can differentiate through content, process, product and learning environment based on the individual learner". The results of this study revealed that some of the teachers used differentiated teaching without knowledge on how to apply it correctly. T10 stated that:

"I separate the learners according to their learning abilities and give them separate activities according to their individual level of understanding (differentiated) teaching but it is not always easy to manage because of limited time".

T4 also affirmed that:

"I always allocate tasks to a group of fast learners and also to a group of slow learners to learn at their pace; however, the group of slow learners never complete their task as required hence it is really difficult to support them."

In addition, Limbu (2019) indicates differentiated teaching is the instructional theory that allows teachers to structure the learning environment in such a way that it addresses the variety of learning styles and interests of diverse learners in a classroom setting.

Remedial/compensatory teaching

On the question of the strategies that the interviewees used to support learners with learning difficulties in the classroom, the results of this study revealed that, because of the overcrowded classrooms, teachers were using mainly remedial/compensatory teaching strategy as a "one size-fits-all" (teacher centred – lecture method) approach to support learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms. Owing to the limited time available and the overcrowded classroom's conditions, teachers were not able to provide effective remedies-teaching that was introduced by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture known as Learning Support plans

which is mandatory in Namibian schools (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2016). Hence, the use of a one size-fits-all by teachers in mainstream classrooms as the only way of providing remedies for learners with diverse needs in mainstream classrooms is pointless; and this might seriously disadvantage learners with learning difficulties.

Individualized versus personalized teaching

The results of this study revealed that the majority of teachers cannot use individualized teaching strategy due to overcrowded classrooms. On this aspect, this is what T8 had to say:

"Although, individualized strategy is relevant to support learners with diverse needs and thus had to be addressed separately, teachers lack knowledge on how to use individualized teaching effectively in mainstream classrooms."

T4 also added by saying that:

"Teachers tend to opt for the one size-fits-all strategy instead of individualized strategy that responds to learners' diverse needs".

The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture in Namibia in collaboration with National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) had developed a Teacher Learning Support Manual in 2021 as intervention support plans known as Individualized Learners Support Plans (ILSPs) and Individualized Education Support plans (IESPs) (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2016). The ILSPs are specifically meant to support learners with diverse needs in mainstream schools, while IESPs is intended to support learners with severe intellectual impairment who cannot be catered for in mainstream schools but are taught in Resource Schools (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture - Teacher Learning Support Manual, 2021). In light of the above it is evident that teachers in Namibia lack knowledge on how to use individualized teaching in mainstream classrooms; despite the fact that the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture had introduced mandatory support plans such as ILSP and IESP in mainstream classrooms. However, teachers usually opted for one size-fits-all strategy due to time and overcrowded classroom factors.

Collaborative teaching

The results of this study revealed that only two (T1 and T2) out of the ten teachers interviewed indicated that they used collaborative teaching in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms by using scenarios without knowing exactly which method they were referring to. T1 clearly stated that:

“I used to ask my colleague as how to provide learning support for learners with learning difficulties in my classrooms.”

In addition, T2 indicated that:

“If I get stuck in how to handle learners with mixed abilities in my classroom; I usually consult my colleague who is trained in IE”.

According to Rosen (2016), inclusive education is always successful if there is sound collaboration between the teachers themselves and other stakeholders in order to ensure good partnerships in education.

Peer teaching

The findings of this study revealed that only T5 indicated the use of peer teaching in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms by giving the following scenarios:

“I sometimes mix learners with learning difficulties with the best ones in one group so that fast learners teach slow learners”.

In view of the above it is evident that the majority of teachers did not believe in peer teaching to support learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classroom despite it being regarded as one of the relevant strategies in inclusive settings. The researchers in this study came to the conclusion that the majority of teachers opted only to use a one size-fits-all strategy, which was not responding to the learners' diverse needs in mainstream classrooms. It is, therefore, advisable for the teachers in Namibia to follow Limbu's (2019) useful strategies in teaching a mixed abilities classroom by using co-teaching and individualized teaching strategies and relevant teaching methods.

Strategies for mitigating teachers' challenges in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms

The results of this study revealed that the

respondents had recommended various strategies that might mitigate teachers' challenges in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms to ensure inclusive and effective school communities. They stated that they found these strategies effective in mitigating the challenges faced by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in particular, and when rolling out the smooth implementation of Inclusive Education policy in general.

The integration and implementation of the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education into all other legal frameworks and policies of the educational sector to be strengthened

Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (2016) advocates for integrating the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education and related legislation throughout the whole education sector and articulating education values and rights at all levels. Teachers must comprehend the integration of the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education and its legislation, policies, and stakeholders, including schools, and education funding should be a shared responsibility. Thus, this study's respondents advised major education stakeholders, particularly management, to assist instructors and stick to teacher-learner ratio and staffing regulations to minimize overcrowded classrooms.

Raise awareness of constitutional rights and attitudinal change to ensure effective school communities

The respondents said mainstream instructors must be sensitized and enlightened about the rights to education for all children regardless of race, gender, or disability to accept diversity in inclusive classrooms. According to Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution and Education for All, instructors must encourage inclusiveness and attitudinal transformation (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2016).

Support of institutional development by developing human and instructional resources

Forlin (2021) indicates that the success of inclusive education depends on the available infrastructural resources, human and instructional resources as well as the quality of the educational support in mainstream schools in general. According to the respondents, in-service training, especially in inclusive education should be provided by the Ministry

of Education, Arts and Culture to all teachers in inclusive schools through regular workshops and seminars for human capacity building to enhance teaching skills. They further recommended that enough classrooms should be built to avoid overcrowding and that all schools must be inclusive while special schools must become resource schools. All in all, resources must be equally distributed in all schools, especially in remote areas to ensure inclusivity.

Widen and develop educational support services

UNESCO (1994) indicates that support of inclusive education should be mandatory, with teachers needing to be supported from school management to provide necessary teaching and learning materials. Equally learners need to be supported by teachers in classrooms in order to reach their maximum potentials. Every child is unique and needs to be fully supported. As Josua (2016) states the school management plays an important role in ensuring that the school environment is safe; and by so doing teachers are supported through extrinsic motivation. Therefore, it is important to note that if teaching and learning materials are available and teachers are trained or capacitated to use relevant instructional strategies effectively in inclusive settings, then teachers' challenges in supporting learners with diverse needs are likely to be insignificant.

Strengthen and widen in-service training for teachers

The results of this study concur with Haihambo Ya-Otto, February, Brown and Hengari (2009) suggest that information on inclusive education should be disseminated to both novice and experienced teachers through teacher education training institutions and in-service training. T3 indicated that:

“There is a need for in-service training, especially in the inclusive education discourse and principles that should be provided to all teachers in inclusive schools to enable them keep abreast with inclusivity and accept diversity holistically”.

Based on the respondents' five recommended strategies, it is anticipated that if these strategies are implemented effectively in all-inclusive schools; the challenges faced by teachers in mainstream schools currently could

be a thing of the past. The researchers concur with the respondents' views in this regard.

Areas for further research

This study was conducted in the Oshana region, and was a case study of one primary school in the region. Thus, further studies should be conducted in more schools in other regions of Namibia. Accordingly, this study recommends the following:

- Compare the findings of the current study with other studies to be conducted so as to fill the gap that might be left during this study. This would ensure a better understanding of the challenges teachers face in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms.
- Finding ways to mitigate the challenges faced by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms and also implement the eight strategies recommended by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture to ensure the effective implementation of the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (2016) in Namibia.

These strategies are in the reviewed literature and if all eight of the strategies were to be implemented as documented, then the challenges faced by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms would be minimised or eradicated.

Discussion of the findings

The findings of the study revealed the following as the most prevalent challenges that were experienced by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties when they were taught together with learners without learning difficulties in the same classrooms: Based on the findings, it is evident that teachers did experience challenges in supporting learners with diverse needs in mainstream schools. The findings of this study concur with those of a study conducted by Ngungi (2021b) in Kenya, which revealed that “some of the challenges faced by teachers in supporting learners with diverse needs are a lack of resources, lack of teacher training, limited time, inadequate support and classroom size factors” (Ngungi, 2021b, p. 43). It is thus evident that the challenges faced by teachers in supporting learners with diverse needs in

mainstream settings are apparent not only in Namibia but in other countries as well. The results of this study were also in line with the findings of Emvula (2007), Haihambo (2022) and Mayumbelo (2019). These researchers found that the challenges faced by teachers in the effective provision of inclusive education are embedded in an unconducive physical environment, lack of in-service teacher training and professional development, large class size, the curriculum choices available and a lack of support, as well as a lack of assistive devices and teaching materials.

Conclusion

The study used a qualitative approach and a case study of one primary school in the Oshana region, in Namibia, to answer the research questions and thereby realize the research objectives. The results of the study provided insights into the challenges teachers experienced in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms. The findings of this study revealed that there is a need for the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture to provide in-service training to equip teachers with the relevant knowledge and skills on how to use relevant instructional strategies and manage diverse classes effectively. Further, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture in Namibia should, by way of in-service training, ensure that teachers are trained on how to manage their time in the classroom effectively and also ensure that relevant teaching strategies are employed within a given time to allow all learners to learn at a different pace yet in the same classroom. Teacher in-service training and continuous professional development are indispensable key areas and should not be compromised. Therefore, it is critical for the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture to ensure that all teachers in mainstream schools are provided with in-service training on a regular basis to enable them to remain abreast of any changes or any new developments in the education sector. A number of recommendations were made to the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture based on the results of the study.

Therefore, one would recommend that intensive teacher training and in-service training on the use of co-teaching and other relevant instructional strategies by experts from Namibia and other countries should be organized for Namibian teachers to serve as a benchmark; to enable them to acquire co-

teaching skills for application in mainstream settings and to collaborate effectively. In conclusion, the study is expected to contribute knowledge to the limited body of literature on the challenges faced by teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream schools in Namibia. This is an important study because teachers in many countries are faced with a number of challenges of supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms.

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