

Exploring the changing role of learning support teachers in the Western Cape, South Africa

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The South African education system is continuously changing and adapting to address the challenges to provide access, equal and quality education in a new democratic dispensation. One such challenge is the way in which learning support is provided to learners who struggle in mainstream classrooms. The department of education opted for a systemic approach to learning support services. The Western Cape Education Department (WCED), in particular, adopted a learning support model which reflects the changed role of learning support teachers. Research confirms that the role of learning support teachers is more comprehensive and complex within an inclusive education system. Learning support teachers in South Africa (like their counterparts across the world) have their roots in the individualised medical paradigm. Therefore, as key role players in establishing inclusive education in schools, learning support teachers are currently faced with the challenge to make a paradigmatic shift from the traditional narrow focus towards addressing learning support systemically.

This article explores the experiences of learning support teachers in a district of the WCED as they engage and adapt in their new role as part of a collaborative team addressing barriers to learning systemically within a whole school approach

Keywords: South African education system, access, equity, quality, democratic, Western Cape Education Department (WCED), learning support model, inclusive education system, collaborative, systemic approach

Introduction

In response to inclusive education, an international metamorphosis is taking place in the provision of learning support in schools. This transformation towards an inclusive education system implies a change in perceptions about diversity. Inclusive education now has a direct bearing on the way in which learning support teachers view their current role in schools. Thus, the basis of learning support provision is shifting from a problem-focused approach to one which determines the levels of support needed for a child to participate fully in the diverse classrooms of the 21st century (Bornman & Rose, 2010).

With the emphasis on equity, quality and access, South Africa has included the notion of “education for all” in the country’s overall social, political and economic transformation (Dyson & Forlin, 1999). Inclusive education is, therefore, much wider than the mere placement or acceptance of students with learning impairments or other barriers, such as age, gender, ethnicity, language, class or HIV status, in an educational institution (Dreyer, 2011). It impacts significantly on the “transformation of philosophy, values, and practices of entire educational systems” (Artiles, Harris-Murri & Rostenberg, 2006). In this transformation, learning support teachers are regarded as key role players in establishing inclusive education in schools (Lorenz, 2002). Research confirms that the role of such teachers is more comprehensive within an inclusive system (Harker, 2010).

This transformation in the South African educational landscape has widespread implications for the way in which learning support has traditionally been provided. As in many countries across the world, learning support teachers in South Africa have their roots in the individualised medical paradigm. The challenge, therefore, lies in adapting their traditional role to the changing nature of learning support (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). This challenge explicitly calls for a paradigmatic shift from the traditional narrow focus on the “specialness of children and the education they need” to one which increases

participation in the removal of barriers, allowing children to reach their full potential (Bornman & Rose, 2010:6). However, despite the inclination to follow international trends, little research has been undertaken on the changing role of learning support teachers in the South African context.

The Western Cape Education Department (WCED) has adopted a systemic approach to providing learning support in primary schools. This model is based on a continuum of support provision in which learning support teachers have to fulfil their newly defined duties (Theron, 1999; Western Cape Education Department, 2002). The model is based on the notion that, while the first level of support should be provided within the general education class, small groups of learners can be withdrawn for additional support (Dreyer, 2008). It thus allows those learners who otherwise would not be able to afford highly specialised or individualised support services to gain access to such services. In addition, Harker (2010) recently identified three other roles that learning support teachers currently play in primary schools in the WCED. These involve the support teacher as an agent for change, as a collaborative team leader, and as an information-consultation agent. It includes the empowerment and support of general classroom education teachers, as envisioned by the Department of Education (2001). The role of learning support teachers has thus become more comprehensive and complex than was the case a decade ago.

Acknowledging the importance of equity, quality, and access to learning support in South Africa, this article draws on the data from an evaluation study of a learning support model (Dreyer, 2008) which explored learning support teachers' experiences of their changed role. In this article, I particularly map the experiences of learning support teachers in primary schools in the WCED, with reference to their changing role and the provision of learning support in primary schools, set against the backdrop of international trends.

The findings indicate that, while the role of learning support teachers in this study showed similarities to the international trends, there remains a considerable disjuncture between national and provincial attempts at educational transformation and the contribution of the learning support teacher as currently played out in some primary schools in the WCED. It is argued that, to be effective agents of transformation in schools, learning support teachers must be enabled to work at a whole-school level.

Provision of learning support reconceptualised

Although the role of the learning support teacher has expanded considerably in recent years, Szwed (2007) points out that little contemporary research has been undertaken solely in the area of special needs coordination, especially in primary schools. Several authors have called for a reconceptualisation of this role and its responsibilities (Rose, 2001; Layton, 2005). This reconceptualisation is directly related to inclusive practices designed to enable all learners to participate (Moran & Abbot, 2002). It is thus committed to an inclusive definition of learning support, one which embraces all the activities and practices used in response to the diverse needs of all learners, staff and the entire school as a system (Dreyer, 2008).

Several countries have adopted various approaches to addressing the provision of learning support in schools (Mitchell, 2005; Artiles & Dyson, 2005). Due to its political heritage and discrepancies in the provision of learner support, South Africa is faced with contexts similar to those in both developed and developing countries (Dreyer, 2008). The all-encompassing term 'barriers to learning' is used to refer to a diverse range of factors that may lead to the failure of the system to accommodate diversity and, in turn, may lead to learning breakdown or prevent learners from accessing educational provision (Department of Education, 1997).

Many affluent countries have appointed specialist teachers and teaching assistants. However, the traditional role of such specialists has undergone a number of transformations in recent years, becoming more proactive and aligned to building the capacity of general education teachers and enabling them to address and overcome barriers to learning and participation in mainstream classrooms (Forlin, 2001a; Szwed, 2007).

According to Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), it has become imperative to orientate and train learning support staff in their new role in the provision of support. The WCED responded to this challenge by appointing learning support advisors to facilitate the placement of learners

from adaptation and special classes in general education classes. In addition, these advisors had to support the learning support teachers in their changed role regarding the systemic provision of support within the whole school (Dreyer, 2008). The initial team of learning support teachers came from the previous system of special, remedial and adaptation classes (Western Cape Education Department, 2000). In the Education White Paper 6, the Department of Education (2001) envisioned that education support personnel would be oriented and trained to provide support within the whole system, thus addressing the full range of learning support needs.

The new role of the learning support teacher

It is clear that the role of learning support teachers has expanded within the inclusive education framework. However, according to Vislie (2003), although different designs to support learners in the general education classroom have been put into practice since the 1970s, these efforts have actually expanded special education thinking and practices into general education. The result is that approaches to the provision of support vary widely and are further influenced by variations in context (Mitchell, 2005).

Nonetheless, the changing role of support teachers internationally promises to be valuable in relation to the South African desire to provide equitable access to quality education and support, redressing the disparities of the past and systemically offering access to support on a wider scale, thus reaching and supporting more learners in the system.

Rhetoric

One way to encourage the move away from a narrow medical approach to support is to eliminate terminology such as ‘remedial, special or adaptation class teachers’. The rhetoric used when referring to specialists in the field of learning support varies from country to country. The WCED (2002) in South Africa has, as in Australia, opted for the term “learning support teacher” (Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Fielding-Barnsley, 2005).

Changing roles and functions

Various attempts have been made to explore the changing roles and functions of the learning support teacher (Layton, 2005; Gerschel, 2005). Research comparing the roles of such teachers in England, Spain, the Netherlands and Australia offers valuable insight into their changing role and functions (Hegarty, 2001). Practices in Canada (Porter, 1997), the USA (Vallecorsa, De Bettencourt & Zigmund, 2000) and research done by Fielding-Barnsley (2005) in Australia provide further insights into this phenomenon.

An important feature common to all countries is that their current position evolved from a long tradition of separate special education systems and specialist teachers (Crowther, Dyson & Millward, 2001). In this tradition, learning support teachers were expected to give specialised and, in many cases, individualised support, either in the mainstream class or in a ‘special class’. However, the current ‘curriculum view’ (Symeonidou, 2002) which, in essence, is more systemic in nature, is based on the assumption that any learner may experience difficulties in school. The curriculum should, therefore, be adapted in such a way as to respond to all the learners in a class.

This new approach places the role of the learning support teacher in a totally new framework. It gradually metamorphosed into its current form in response to these challenges (Crowther *et al.*, 2001). The traditional practices of providing support in small groups, or by engaging learners in individual ‘remedial programmes’, now have to be replaced, as support teachers are increasingly expected to play a more *proactive role* in addressing the needs of a diverse learner population in schools (Forlin, 2001a). They are expected to provide *professional guidance and support* for general education teachers to enable them to implement modified programmes in the regular classroom (Symeonidou, 2002; Florian, 2005). They also have to *coordinate provision* for learners who experience barriers to learning in schools (Layton, 2005).

In principle, learning support accentuates collaboration (Bouwer, 2011). Learning support teachers are, therefore, increasingly becoming *consultative and collaborative* (Forlin, 2004; Carrington & Robinson,

2004; Fielding-Barnsley, 2005), while Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) (as in the UK) are appointed as *catalysts, facilitators and managers* to support general education teachers in carrying out their responsibilities while accommodating the great diversity of learner needs (Mittler, 2000).

Although learning support is generally planned and delivered through collaboration (Mittler, 2000), there are variations in the organisational structures providing learning support (Vaughn, Bos & Schum, 2011). Some countries favour a flexible model, with a continuum of services available to support learners (Emanuelsson, Haug & Persson, 2005). This continuum ranges from support given in the general education classroom in consultation with specialists, to individuals or small groups withdrawn from the classroom, to a full-time special education classroom in a mainstream school, and ultimately to a residential school, as in the USA (Vaughn, Bos & Schum, 2011).

While there is considerable variation in their roles internationally, it is clear that being a learning support teacher cannot be regarded as merely another way of being a remedial teacher, offering a remedial curriculum via remedial approaches (Symeonidou, 2005; Forlin, 2001b).

In comparing the roles of support teachers from these countries, Emanuelsson (2001) draws the conclusion that the similarities between the roles of support teachers are more striking than their differences at an international level. The roles appear to be closely related to the reconstruction of educational systems, as they increasingly focus on including all learners. It is, therefore, reasonable that learning support be rendered within the whole-school system, through a collaborative process responding to the needs of all learners, thereby reducing exclusion from the curriculum (Cowne, 2005).

However, as the role of learning support teachers evolves, so does the need for training to improve their knowledge, skills and confidence (Gerschel, 2005; Cowne, 2005). It is also imperative that the role of learning support teachers be fully understood and supported by school principals, senior staff and school governing bodies (Mittler, 2000).

Learning support in the WCED

Recently, South Africa introduced the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support Strategy (Department of Education, 2008) as a tool to assess and provide learning support collaboratively and systemically. This feeds into the new role of learning support teachers which includes collaboration as part of the newly established Institution Level Support Team (ILST). In addition, it encourages them to share their expertise with general classroom teachers, in order to give them support on a wider basis (Department of Education, 2001). In its attempt to spread the provision of support, the WCED opted for a continuum that reflects similarities with models used in countries such as the USA, Britain and New Zealand. The implementation of this support model in 1999 preceded the publication of the Education White Paper 6 of 2001 (Theron, 1999).

Learning support teachers play a vital role at the first two levels of support in mainstream schools. At the first level of the continuum, they are expected to provide collaborative systemic support in conjunction with the ILST. In addition, they support the general education teacher in addressing the diverse needs in their classrooms. Support on level two allows the learning support teacher periodically to withdraw learners who experience barriers to learning from the general education classroom for individual or small-group support (Theron, 1999).

This new role of the learning support teacher clearly reflects the move towards a systemic and collaborative approach, as well as an alignment with international trends regarding the changing role of such teachers.

Method

The research methodology that guided this study was the multi-method design, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This pragmatic approach enabled the researcher to better understand the research problem and made it possible to be practical, contextually responsive and consequential (Creswell, 2003).

Research population and sample

The sample was purposefully selected from the geographical area of the West Coast district in the WCED. The region consists of a mix of urban, rural and semi-rural areas. Only 43 of the 60 learning support teachers serving 87 primary schools (at the time of the study) could be reached for this research. This resulted in questionnaires being administered at 63 schools in the district.

The reason for including all the schools which had a learning support teacher was that the sample-population relationship is important with regard to representation (Punch, 2003). These information-rich cases provide valid knowledge and meaningful insights.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section one sought personal information relating to background variables such as gender, age, qualifications and teaching experience. Section two focused on aspects related to implementation and functioning of the learning support model in the school. For the purposes of this article, I focus on data elicited from the questionnaire pertaining to the views and opinions of learning support teachers about a new learning support model.

Prior to being distributed, the questionnaire was piloted with five teachers (not part of the study), a senior official of the WCED, and a statistician, to ensure that the questions were well framed and well structured (Merriam, 2009). The participants in the pilot study reported some typographical errors, which were corrected. The statistician proposed some formatting and codification of the questions.

The focus of this article is on questions directly related to teachers' views and experiences regarding their changing role in the provision of learning support in schools. The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data. The data were used to frame the interview schedule for the next phase.

Dissemination of questionnaires

The questionnaires were disseminated with written permission from the WCED as well as the head of the Specialised Learner and Educator Services (SLES) of the district. The researcher explained the questionnaire and assured the teachers of their anonymity and confidentiality regarding information given during their circuit meetings with the learning support advisors. These meetings were held in all nine circuits of the district. Some teachers were absent from the meetings, with the result that only 43 of a possible 60 questionnaires were distributed. Due to time constraints and the vast distances involved, this was the only opportunity to reach these teachers. They were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it to the learning support advisor for the specific circuit within a week, in the envelope that was provided. The completed and sealed questionnaires were collected by the learning support advisors and brought to the researcher on their next visit to the district office. Of the total of 43 questionnaires, 41 were completed and returned.

Focus group interview

Six of the eight learning support teachers who were selected attended the semi-structured focus group interview. These teachers were systematically selected from Circuits 3 and 4. The reason for this decision was that the teachers were widely dispersed over the geographic area of the district. Circuits 3 and 4 were in close proximity, however, allowing teachers within a radius of 13 kilometres to travel to the interview venue at a school in Circuit 4.

Data collected through the questionnaires were used as a guide to the interview. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit more qualitative information (Merriam, 2009). This enabled the interviewer to explore, in some depth, the participants' opinions on inclusive education and the learning support model, their expectations and actions (such as the way in which learning support was provided in schools. Respondents understood that they could withdraw at any stage and that a coding system would be used

to protect their identity. The interview was recorded with permission from the participants and lasted approximately one hour.

Results

Creswell (2003) argues that the point of integration, where qualitative and quantitative methodologies are varied, can occur either during data analysis or during the reporting of the results. In this study, integration occurred during the results phase.

Terminology

Responses from both the questionnaire and the focus group interview revealed that the terms ‘learning support teacher’ and ‘LSEN teacher’ were used when referring to the teacher providing learning support in the school. However, although the abbreviation ‘LSEN’ (Learners with Special Educational Needs) is generally accepted by the Department of Education and the title of Education White Paper 6 refers to ‘Special Needs Education’, this terminology perpetuates perceptions ingrained in the medical model.

Mode of service delivery

The quantitative data revealed that 51% of the respondents served only one school, while the rest worked itinerantly, with 47% serving at two schools and 2% at three schools.

According to the qualitative responses, both mainstream and learning support teachers were clearly of the opinion that the need for learning support was very high and that the support given by the class teachers in the mainstream was inadequate. They argued that the itinerant learning support service delivery did not allow sufficient time for effective support. Questions about operational structures elicited further data on the direct support given to core groups, grade groups withdrawn for additional support, and the learning areas supported.

Direct support

The survey revealed that 24% of the learning support teachers still had core groups who needed a high level of support. These were groups of learners who remained with the learning support teachers for instruction, either for the whole school day, or for the major part of the day. In the pre-inclusion era, these would have been referred to as special or adaptation classes.

According to the data, 95% of the respondents withdrew small groups of learners from the mainstream classes in order to give them direct support. However, only 85% reported that all the learners they supported through withdrawal were referred through the Institution Level Support Team (ILST), as required. Whichever need was identified as a support priority at the school determined, to a large extent, the groups and learning areas they supported; there was, therefore, a wide variation of support through withdrawal.

Nonetheless, the findings showed that the majority (41%) of the respondents withdrew groups of learners from Grades 1-7, while 27% focused on the foundation phase, i.e. Grades 1-3. A small percentage (2%) concentrated on support in the intermediate phase only (Grades 4-6).

Table 1: Groups withdrawn for additional support (n = 39)

Groups withdrawn for support	Count	%
Grades 1-7	16	41%
Grades 2-7	4	10%
Grades 1-3 (Foundation phase only)	10	27%
Grades 2-5	1	2%

Grades 4-6 (Intermediate phase only)	1	2%
Grades 1-6 (Foundation and Intermediate phase)	5	13%
Other	2	5%
TOTAL	39	100%

With regard to specific learning areas, the data showed that the majority (73%) of the respondents focused on both literacy and numeracy in the groups that they withdrew. Where the focus of support was on either literacy or numeracy, 25% supported literacy, while only 2% supported numeracy.

Consultative, collaborative and peer support role

Collaborative provision of learner support, by both mainstream and learning support teachers (and other support professionals), is a major feature of the WCED learning support model. The questions in this section, therefore, focused on aspects such as support for the mainstream teacher, with the aim of improving learner support as well as establishing the extent to which mainstream and learning support teachers collaborated in providing learner support.

The quantitative data indicated that 44% of the respondents often provided support to mainstream class teachers, while 17% reported that no support was given to mainstream teachers. The main conclusions on consultation, collaboration and peer support which emerged from the qualitative data were that:

- the learning support teacher compiled resource files, and
- helped teachers with programmes and differentiation.
- Learning support teachers also consulted with class teachers and parents,
- and gave input at Institution Level Support Team (ILST) meetings.
- In addition, they were responsible for diagnostic testing of learners' scholastic ability, and
- management of referrals to special schools.

The following response from one of the learning support teachers incorporates the main themes:

I adapt the curriculum; compile relevant programmes and materials, cooperative learning, support parents, arrange for learners to be tested to identify specific areas of need.

The qualitative responses revealed that the resource files contained activities, worksheets and other learning materials designed to support learners who experienced learning barriers. These focused on activities that would help the teacher to address the needs of slower learners, such as graded reading passages. Learning support teachers further helped general classroom teachers to develop support programmes and to adapt the work for the learners. This included showing them how to simplify the work. Most of the qualitative responses to the open-ended sections of the questionnaire showed that learning support teachers offered professional input at ILST meetings on the support that mainstream teachers could provide in class. Some reported that they presented work sessions for general classroom teachers in which they gave them guidelines for addressing specific barriers to learning.

The learning support teachers consulted with mainstream teachers and parents on a regular basis, both in person and through the term reports on the learners. They also gave the general classroom teacher a written report on learners' progress.

Consultation and collaboration with classroom teachers on an individual or group basis are essential elements of support. The ILST offers a structure through which teachers can collaborate as a collective to support the teaching and learning process. However, the learning support teachers in this study experienced very little cooperation from general classroom teachers.

The learning support teachers designed their own direct support by diagnostically testing the learners referred to them. Alternatively, this was done at the request of the general classroom teachers. Support

teachers were also responsible for handling the referrals of learners identified as candidates for special schools, and for obtaining external help from school psychologists or social workers, where necessary.

Although the response from some learning support teachers was that there was not enough time to give support in the general classrooms, some reported physically offering help in the classroom (collaboratively). Some support teachers also mentioned that they gave moral and emotional support to motivate the classroom teachers.

Collaborative planning

The survey revealed that only 12% of the respondents did planning in collaboration with their general classroom colleagues. The qualitative responses supported this data. The major reason given was that learning support teachers who were working in two or more schools found it difficult to plan with their general classroom colleagues. They did, however, report that they tried to plan according to the contexts used in the general classroom. Some respondents discussed the gaps in learners' understanding with the classroom teachers and planned accordingly. A further reason for not planning in collaboration with general classroom colleagues was that they did not work on the level of the learners, but worked more quickly through the learning outcomes and assessment standards. While one of the learning support teachers found it easier to plan with foundation phase teachers than with intermediate and senior phase teachers, another preferred planning with other learning support teachers. It was felt that general classroom teachers should ask for help in planning for learners experiencing barriers to learning. It was also reported that classroom teachers sometimes planned on their own, using tips and advice from the learning support teacher.

Coordination of learning support provision

The survey revealed that 66% of the participants considered themselves to be the coordinators of learning support in the schools where they worked. Those who did not view themselves as coordinators came from schools which had a well-functioning ILST, or where they argued that it was the responsibility of the principal to plan and coordinate learning support in the school. Other support teachers stated that serving more than one school made it difficult to coordinate learning support. The general theme that emerged from those who considered themselves to be coordinators was that they felt that it was expected of them, because they were qualified to do so.

General responsibilities

The qualitative responses to the question of the responsibilities relating to the position of a learning support teacher generally included the following: setting up and chairing ILST meetings; testing and grouping learners; providing activities; supporting mainstream colleagues, and managing referrals of learners to hospitals, therapists, social workers, school psychologists and special schools.

Discussion

While the role of support teachers has been adapted, research (Dreyer, 2008) has shown that the deep-rooted and persistent values and behaviours based on the old medical model still prevail. This is clearly reflected in the medical model rhetoric and the focus on direct support to core groups. The prevalent terminology (LSEN and Special Needs), though also used internationally, contradicts the whole notion of 'barriers to learning and participation' in referring to the internal as well as external systemic barriers that learners face in mainstream schools. Nonetheless, the use of 'learning support teacher' does signify a move towards a socially more acceptable, human rights perspective on learning support.

The data collected revealed that the changed role of the learning support teachers and services rendered in the WCED does correspond with international trends. Nonetheless, while many learning support teachers help general classroom educators in various ways, a significant number (17%) do not support learners through collaboration. In fact, according to the literature (Mittler, 2000), general classroom teachers do not really want to collaborate on this level; they prefer learners to be withdrawn

for additional support. Itinerant learning support teachers, on the other hand, find that serving more than one school impedes collaborative planning. It thus appears that support for mainstream teachers is rather fragmented, in that teachers can refer to resource files and individual support when required.

Learning support teachers are expected to implement strategies to improve literacy and numeracy in schools. It is evident, however, that schools' needs differ in these two crucial learning areas. Consequently, although the majority of the respondents supported both, provision in these areas differed from school to school. This corresponds with Harker's (2010) findings on the impact of the different contexts in which learning support teachers work.

In the light of their changing role, it is regrettable that learning support teachers only regard themselves as support coordinators, because it is expected of them as specialised teachers. However, it is acknowledged that serving more than one school makes it difficult to coordinate support in any particular school.

Conclusion

The role of the learning support teacher as it has evolved from special education is still vague and is still deeply rooted in the medical model paradigm, in spite of statements to the contrary. This, however, allows a new role in the South African context to be identified, that of making quality education and support in schools more accessible to all learners.

From the discussion above it is clear that there is a dire need for more and improved collaboration between general classroom and learning support teachers.

Although learning support teachers in the WCED have a specific job description (Western Cape Education Department, 2002), there is no national directive, such as the SENCO code of practice in the UK (DfES, 2001), for example, to serve as a guide to schools and learning support teachers alike. The Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) provides a broad framework for practice. Nonetheless, if learning support teachers are to coordinate learning support in schools and support and train general classroom colleagues, they will need to be given more authority. In recognition of their changed role and job description, they should be acknowledged as part of senior leadership, working strategically to promote systemic changes in schools for the inclusion of pupils with diverse learning needs (Layton, 2005).

By embracing this new and challenging role, learning support teachers could ensure collaborative support, both in the classrooms and the schools as a whole. This would enable them to affirm their position on a national as well as an international level.

Endnotes

- 1 In this article, the term 'teacher' is used instead of 'educator'.
- 2 Although the term 'disabilities' is still commonly used internationally, the author opted to use the South African term 'impairments' in this article.
- 3 Internationally, various terminologies are used to refer to collaborative support teams in schools, such as teacher support teams and school support teams. In this article, the terminology 'Institution Level Support Teams (ILST)' is used, as officially referred to in Education White Paper 6.

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