Creating capacity for change through short learning programmes for professional learning for inclusive education of teachers in South Africa

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Teachers are critical to any new initiative to take root in schools. Therefore, creating capacity through learning and professional development is fundamental to any change in schools. With this article we analyse teachers' experiences of taking a short learning programme (SLP) for the implementation of inclusive education in the Limpopo province, South Africa. We used a qualitative research methodology and adopted a case study design. Ten teachers were recruited through purposive sampling to participate in the study. The selection criteria included teachers who had at least 10 years of teaching experience. The data collection process involved conducting individual semi-structured interviews, and the subsequent analysis was undertaken using Luckett's (1995) theory of modes of learning. The findings of the study indicate that teachers articulated a need for learning and professional development programmes. They expressed satisfaction with the SLP strategy, the knowledge acquired within the programme and appreciated the quality of facilitation and facilitators. These findings have influential implications on how learning and professional development programmes should be structured to advance inclusive education in South African schools.

Keywords: inclusive education; professional development; short learning programmes; teachers

Introduction

Inclusive education in South Africa was introduced in 2001, however, it has taken longer to take root despite sporadic good practices here and there (Walton, 2011). This apparent lack of success has been attributed to various factors, including teachers' lack of knowledge and skills to implement it (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Numerous efforts have been made to address the problem by introducing courses such as 1-day training workshops, seminars, and offering diploma and degree programmes (Dreyer, 2017; Makofane, 2019; Thomazet, 2009). Various other professional development models such as professional learning communities, action research, mentorship and coaching, tailored and practical training, and reflective practice also exist (Kennedy, 2014). However, these approaches have not significantly improved teachers' proficiency in implementing inclusive education.

Recently, universities and colleges have introduced short learning programmes (SLPs) to mitigate this challenge. Whether the SLPs have any significant influence in South Africa, especially in Limpopo, remains unknown. Such information may be useful to the designers of these programmes as well as to policymakers who are hard-pressed to find answers on the progress in the implementation of inclusive education. Our aim was to understand teachers' views about how the SLPs contribute to learning and professional development. Research such as this should be regarded from a broader perspective because education and new trends in education are occurring at a fast pace. Emerging trends such as inclusive education are not widely documented and implemented, especially in Africa. In this article we present a model of teacher education that can be used to train in-service teachers in and out of South Africa. The model presented here could be used to reskill and upskill in-service teachers to inclusive teaching.

We sought to address the following research question in this article: What are teachers' experiences of short learning programmes as a strategy for learning and professional development in the implementation of inclusive education?

Literature Review

To situate this question in its proper theoretical context, we conducted a literature review from which three themes emerged: a) what learning and professional development programmes entail; b) inclusive education, and c) what SLPs are and how effective they are.

No agreed-upon definition exists for learning and professional development programmes. It may be defined as various activities and tasks that seek to improve an individual's skills, knowledge and expertise (Walton & Rusznyak, 2014). Learning and development of teachers is necessary because their responsibilities and roles are ever changing, and teachers need to adapt to those changes. Therefore, the definition by Walton and Rusznyak (2014) seems to be fitting. Firstly, the definition implies that development can be provided in many ways, ranging from formal to informal. Secondly, it can be made available through external expertise in the form of workshops, formal qualification programmes, and collaboration between schools or teachers across schools (e.g., observational visits to other schools or teacher networks), or within the schools in which teachers work. However, many teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of continuous professional teacher development (CPTD) that they had received on inclusive education – especially when the workshop model was

used (Hancock & Miller, 2018). Therefore, it was imperative to employ a more engaging and effective model to train teachers for the implementation of inclusive education such as the SLPs discussed here.

Teachers are being asked to teach in increasingly diverse classrooms; to place greater emphasis on integrating students with additional learning needs in their classrooms; to make more effective use of information and communication technologies for teaching; to engage more in planning within evaluative and accountability frameworks; to do more to involve parents in schools (Nabhani, Nicolas & Bahous, 2010). No matter how good pre-service training for teachers is, it cannot be expected to prepare teachers for all the challenges that they will face throughout their careers. Education systems, therefore, seek to provide teachers with opportunities for in-service professional development to maintain a high standard of teaching and to retain a teacher workforce of high quality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005).

Teachers want and need support to develop their practice in inclusive education so that all the learners may benefit (Sepadi, 2018). Mestry (2020) notes that teachers need to acquire new classroom skills to keep abreast of emerging trends and those skills must be acquired through continuous professional development programmes. Teaching is a noble profession, however, it is dynamic, therefore, there is a need to continuously develop new skills and strategies to be used in the didactic situation to be relevant in striving towards inclusivity (Mestry, 2020). For a continuous development programme to be efficient it must include the following: training, practice, provision of feedback, and must provide adequate time and follow-up for support (Sepadi, 2023). Efficient programmes include learning activities for teachers that are like those used with their learners and thus encourage the development of teachers' learning communities. There is growing interest in developing schools as learning organisations, and in finding ways for teachers to share their expertise and experience more systematically. Therefore, it is important to identify clear goals that need to be achieved in the ongoing professional development of teachers.

Rowls and Swick (2000) identify four goals of ongoing professional development. These are described as (a) considering learning as an instructional strategy, b) assisting teachers to explore education in various teaching-learning contexts, c) helping teachers to acquire and practice new instructional strategies learned through tertiary training and d) enriching understanding of the educational context and issues directly involved in the school settings. In most countries or regions teachers are not adequately trained. Therefore, the non-availability of comprehensive and quality ongoing professional development programmes for in-service teachers has resulted in slow progress in achieving the goals set in Education White Paper No. 6. (Department of Education [DoE], 2001).

The above goals are to be guided by the following principles which seek to make professional development effective: provide a strong foundation in the pedagogy of disciplines, ensure depth of content knowledge, provide more general knowledge about teaching and learning processes, schools, and institutions and provide sufficient time, support, and resources to enable teachers to master new content and pedagogy and integrate these into their teaching practice. Furthermore, to contribute to measurable achievements in student learning, and finally, to reflect on the best available research (American Federation of Teachers, 1995).

Despite teachers having a similar view of what good professional development looks like or should look like in terms of inclusive education based on the above goals and principles, there is a need to investigate teachers' experiences regarding SLPs as a learning and development strategy. There is a need to establish this as there seems to be a disconnect between teachers' satisfaction with the professional development they were offered by their school or district and the content taught in the programme (Florian, 2012). The need for a more detailed plan of action such as relevant classroom strategies for delivering lessons has been what many teachers said they lacked (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

The DoE relies heavily on workshops as a means of capacitating teachers which yields little results due to a lack of structural field-based content knowledge, which has led to most teachers not feeling ready to implement inclusive education (Makofane, 2019). With this article we aimed to explore the experiences of teachers to support the use of SLPs as a primary model for ongoing professional development programmes.

Theoretical Framework
The theory of modes of learning by Luckett (1995) was identified as the most suitable theoretical lens for the research. Luckett (1995) proposes an epistemically diverse curriculum in which four ways of knowing and learning are developed for learning and professional development of higher-order knowledge. These are propositional knowledge (basic knowledge); learning by doing for the application of disciplinary knowledge (second-level knowledge); learning experientially (third-level knowledge), and fourthly, developing epistemic cognition (upper-level knowledge) to be able to think reflexively and contextually about one's learning. We used the upper level to frame

our study. Luckett (1995) argues that such an epistemically diverse curriculum could respond to international demands while at the same time address the ever-changing nature of knowledge. We deemed the upper level as an ideal form of learning for SLPs if teachers are to cope with the fast-moving changes in teacher education. Through this level, we looked at what teachers in the sample said about what they had learned in the SLP (short course on inclusive education). We found the framework useful in understanding the various ways of knowing that could underpin how SLPs should be structured. Additionally, Luckett's theory guided us in checking what pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) the teachers gained from the programme. We used the four modes of learning to check whether the teachers' knowledge covered foundational competencies, which are the practical, personal, and reflexive competencies, as these are key to the kind of teacher who qualifies to teach in the 21st century. Furthermore, the theory was useful in the data analysis as it was used to deduce whether the teachers had achieved the requisite competencies to teach inclusively in their classrooms.

Research Methodology
To understand teachers' experiences in the use of SLP as a learning and professional development strategy we adopted the qualitative research approach and used a case study research design. Yin (2009) defines a case study as an examination of one set, a programme, a single subject, an institution, or one event, that varies in complexity. Our aim was to gain an understanding of teachers' experiences of an SLP as a learning and development strategy of a particular situation. Specifically, we used the instrumental case study to understand how teachers viewed the SLP as a learning and professional development strategy for the implementation of inclusive education. In an instrumental case study researchers use a case to gain insight into a phenomenon, which, in this study was the short learning programme.

Sampling
We used a purposive sampling technique to select 10 teachers who were part of the 2018 cohort who had enrolled for an SLP in inclusive education. The cohort was part of a group of 100 teachers who were selected by the Limpopo Department of Basic Education to undergo professional training in inclusive education. The sample of 10 teachers consisted of three teachers from special schools, three from full-service schools, three from ordinary schools, and one official from the DoE in the Limpopo province. All the teachers were qualified in Foundation Phase teaching with over 10 years of teaching experience each.

Data Collection
Data were collected through two methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Individual interviews were considered the core method of data collection, with document analysis playing a supplementary role. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a detailed representation of the participants' beliefs, perceptions, and accounts of their experiences with the use of SLPs as a learning and professional development strategy (Creswell, 2007). The semi-structured interviews allowed us some flexibility and allowed us to probe interesting avenues that emerged during the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted within Luckett's (1995) four modes of learning theoretical perspective and permitted us to be focused, conversational, and have two-way communication (Cresswell, 2007). Semi-structured interviews involve a set of pre-set questions, which initiate discussions (Cresswell, 2007). Further questions usually arise from the discussions, which allow more flexibility during data collection and create space for the interviewer to pursue more questions stimulated by the interview.

Document analysis is defined as the documents that are available as bases of data to be accessed by researchers and readers. Myers (2008) defines document analysis as a collection of documents and other sources, which are relevant and valuable for information. Document analysis includes documents such as public documents, journals, books, public documents, media reports, articles, and other recognised publications. The method enabled us to gain access to primary sources such as key policy documents for inclusive education, for example, White Paper 6, the *Policy on Screening, Identifying, Assessment and Support* ([SIAS] Department of Basic Education [DBE], Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2014), and the guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education. We used the policy documents to gauge the advances of the goals set out in White Paper 6 (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Data Analysis
The data collected were analysed using thematic content analysis. The analysis saw the emergence of themes and codes from the interviews and document analysis. Qualitative data can be analysed by reducing data into emerging themes through coding and condensing the codes (Hossain, 2011). The data analysis was done in two ways: narrative analysis of the in-depth interviews as it enabled us to listen for the interpretations and meanings and to understand how much the content had prepared in-service teachers and facilitators, as well as becoming aware of the challenges in the teaching and learning of inclusive education.

Comparative analysis for document analysis was used by comparing the curriculum content to that of White Paper 6 and other policy documents to check whether the content was aligned with what was envisaged in the policy document. The checking of documents elucidates how the pedagogical content in the curriculum knowledge prepares in-service teachers for implementation of inclusive education. The key factor in document analysis was to investigate how the PCK in these programmes aligns with the context of schools in the Limpopo province. By context, we refer to the knowledge and skills being relevant to schools in Limpopo in terms of teaching, learning, and assessment inclusively. The PCK draws positive results from diverse learners and the teachers who have been trained can use those skills, strategies and knowledge in a real classroom.

Trustworthiness of the Study

We made a great effort to ensure that our study was trustworthy We attended to matters related to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. As discussed in the section on sampling, we ensured that we selected participants who were well-informed about the learning and development of teachers. Furthermore, we used more than one method of data collection. We also described in detail how the data were collected. We also ensured the transferability of the results by providing a detailed explanation for each step.

We obtained ethical clearance from the relevant bodies in the province and the university that hosted the study. We ensured that we followed the appropriate procedures to ensure the safety of the study participants and to ensure their anonymity.

Findings and Discussions

We sought to answer the question, What are teachers' experiences with the use of SLPs as a strategy for learning and professional development in the implementation of inclusive education? Overall, the indications were that the teachers were satisfied with the use of SLPs as a learning and professional development strategy. Four findings emerged from the data analysis, namely: a) teachers expressed the need for learning and professional development programmes, b) teachers indicated that they were satisfied with the SLP strategy and duration, c) teachers were satisfied with the knowledge acquired in the programme, and d) the quality of facilitation was exceptional. These findings have far-reaching implications for how learning and professional development programmes should be organised to advance the inclusive education agenda in South African schools. Each finding is discussed briefly in the following section.

Theme A: The Need for Training

The results from the in-depth interviews show that the teachers perceived continuous teacher professional development programmes as necessary in their implementation of inclusive education. Teachers emphasised that they were passionate and eager to accommodate or embrace learner diversity, thus they needed constant training through short course programmes and other consistent and constant means to keep them informed. The teachers' responses revealed a concern about including learner diversity in their schools and they were willing to fully implement inclusivity to adhere to the requirements of the present education system, which upholds inclusion and nurtures the learners' strengths. However, they needed adequate knowledge, skills, and attitudes to do that. The following quotes from the interview transcripts reflect the teachers' perceptions or opinions.

> P1: *We are aware of the policy that requires schools to be full-service schools, but we need to be trained to be able to offer our best to all learners, therefore, professional training for us in-service teachers is important in that regard.*
> P3: *We often hear in meetings about Education White Paper 6 and how it encourages schools to be inclusive. For schools to be inclusive teachers need training, especially us who are new to this concept of inclusive education.*

Literature shows that teachers hold positive attitudes toward inclusive education (Florian, 2012; Kgatule, 2013; Nel, 2013). In-service teachers believe that inclusive education is a critical aspect of improving educational access to all learners (Engelbrecht, P 2006). Teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusive education is a positive indicator that, with proper training, teachers are willing to adapt their teaching to be able to teach diverse learners.

Theme B: Satisfaction with the Programme

Our findings reveal that the teachers were positive about the short course in inclusive education as an appropriate strategy for CPTD as compared to other models of training such as 1-day workshops. The teachers felt that the programme helped them to become more inclusive in their approach to teaching than the training they had undergone before. One teacher (P1) expressed this as follows: "*The short course helped me a lot because it exposed me to various content and types that are within the teaching inclusively, I was enlightened with the short course.*"

Another (P3) said the following:
The way they structured these sessions was impressive because it was a 3-day session whereby we were taught the whole day, the facilitators called them block sessions. These block sessions helped me understand the importance of teachers being able to teach inclusively.

This finding is consistent with what Makofane (2019) found. He argues that teachers often complain that once-off workshops or seminars did not improve or change the teachers' pedagogy in the classrooms. The block sessions also allowed in-service teachers enough time to better grasp the content delivered. The short course structure also allowed teachers to engage more with their facilitators regarding the content knowledge within the modules. Teacher P4 made the following remarks: "*The short course is necessary over workshops, I've attended workshops before that aimed at professional development but they were not as informative and interactive as these 3-day sessions we had monthly.*"

> *As a teacher of many years in the system, the current structure of the short course impressed me, the knowledge we received in the programme we attended was coherent, relevant, and easy to understand as well as used in our teaching back at our schools.* (P6)

Teachers reported on the positive impact of this model of training; the sessions seemed to provide clarity on what inclusive education was and why it was important in the South African schooling system. Teachers felt that the structure and the rigour of the course showed that the province was indeed serious about transforming schools to be inclusive. The transformation of schools is in line with the Department's vision of promoting social justice and equal access to education (DoE, 2001).

Theme C: Knowledge Acquired Within the Programme

Content knowledge is defined as a body of knowledge, theories, ideas, vocabulary, theories, principles, and facts that teachers must master to be effective (Shulman, 1986). CPDT programmes aim to capacitate in-service teachers with relevant knowledge and skills to stay abreast of current trends in education. The key purpose is to capacitate teachers to be able to offer quality education to diverse learners in an inclusive environment. The training was different from that which they had received when they were still at college or university.

Content knowledge within the short course programme was organised in the form of five modules, namely, foundations and legislative framework of inclusive education; the inclusive curriculum; inclusive pedagogy; assessment in inclusive education; and portfolio of evidence. The purpose of an SLP is to upskill in-service teachers in the implementation of inclusive education.

The key learning outcomes as outlined in the programme handbook are a) interpreting concepts, theories, policies, guidelines, and principles of inclusive education challenges encountered in the line of duty, b) identifying teaching and learning barriers to inclusive education, c) value and understand learner diversity, and d) demonstrate assertiveness and serve as proactive agents of transformation and social justice.

The content of each of the modules was paced and sequenced in a specific manner. The in-service teachers were first taught about various policies and frameworks that govern inclusive education. This knowledge and the associated skills about such frameworks were rooted in the module "Foundations and legislative framework of inclusive education." The focus in the module was on policies and frameworks because policy informs practice. The focus was on the understanding of policies that govern inclusion in South Africa, namely, education White Paper 6 (EWP 6), the policy on SIAS, the curriculum assessment policy statements (CAPS), and so forth. Therefore, teachers were able to understand what the policies were and why they were important.

Education White Paper 6 (EWP 6) aims to ensure the access of education to diverse learners and calls for a radical and practical shift towards development and provision of a system in which diverse people are accommodated. The teachers seemed to have understood what they learned about different policies on inclusive education: "*We are now aware of the policies that require schools to be full-service schools, but we need to be trained to be able to offer our best to all learners*" (P10).

Teachers were exposed to the aims and purpose of EWP 6 which is the bedrock of inclusive education in South Africa. The policy outlines key strategies to establish an inclusive schooling system that in-service teachers must help implement (Kennedy, 2014).

It is imperative to transition away from the use of special schools, particularly for learners with mild to moderate barriers to learning, and to establish an inclusive framework that emphasises the central roles of educators, lecturers, and parents in supporting these learners (Mbengwa, 2010). Mbengwa (2010) elaborates on the strategies by highlighting the importance of mobilising children and young people of school-going age with disabilities who are currently out of school. This involves identifying and addressing the barriers that prevent their access to education, raising awareness about their right to inclusive education, and implementing targeted initiatives to ensure their enrolment and active participation in the schooling system.

Furthermore, active district-based support teams must be established to provide coordinated professional services drawing on expertise from higher education and local communities. Their focus should include special schools, full-service schools, and other educational institutions. Furthermore, a national advocacy campaign is necessary to promote the inclusion mode. The programme should focus on the roles, responsibilities and rights of all learning

institutions, parents and local communities. It should highlight the focal programmes and report on their progress (DoE, 2001).

Teachers being able to interpret and understand why the policy is important is the key foundation to implementation (Walton, 2011). Teachers need to understand the purposes and aims of policies if the policies are to be implemented successfully (Walton, 2011). In the past new policies in education were not discussed with teachers and no explanations were provided on why the policies were introduced. This resulted in teachers being resistant to implementing such policies (Nel, 2013). This assertion is backed by a report on the challenges that teachers faced in implementing the national curriculum statements (NCS). Teachers alluded to that among other challenges. The key comment was that they did not fully understand what the policy statement was about (DoE, RSA, 2009). Lessons from that report highlighted a gap in CPDT, namely, that those policies and frameworks were not given proper attention and not fully explained to teachers, which is addressed in this SLP: "*The understanding of the facilitator of the policies module was important. That module taught us why the implementation of the white paper is so important in ensuring access to education by all different students who experience different learning barriers*" (P4).

A correlation exists between positive attitudes and teachers' understanding of the policy. This positive correlation is a key driver in teachers being able to start participating and showing interest in implementing policies (Pretorius, Jackson, McKay, Murray & Spaull, 2016). W Engelbrecht and Ankiewicz (2016), and Kretchmar, Nyambe, Robinson, Sadeck and Zeichner (2012) argue that the initial stage of teacher education for inclusive education is the understanding of why the policies must be implemented by in-service teachers. In-service teachers' attitudes become more positive when they understand why policies are important. Teachers engage in CPTD programmes when the foundation is rooted in understanding the goals and the aims of why they are participating and why their participation will bring about change (Kretchmar et al., 2012).

Content on inclusive education that put the policy into context and explained what it was about (DoE, 2001), and how other policies and frameworks worked together to realise an inclusive education system were explained to the participating teachers. The teachers learned and showed evidence of learning about frameworks and policies that govern inclusive education.

> *Having been struggling with working with diverse students for some time, it felt like a relief to be taught about how to pace my teaching and how to use policy documents like SIAS. I used to stress about filling the SNA [Special Needs Assessment] forms but now I navigate them with ease.* (P6)

The theoretical framework suggests that, based on the nature of this study, only Mode 1 (foundational competence) was achieved. To understand the other three modes, a classroom observation-based study will be required. Teachers have achieved this foundational competence because they now understood the aims and policies that required them to become inclusive educators. Teachers achieved foundational competence because they were positive about learning more about how to implement inclusive education. The foundational competence shown by the participating teachers is clear as teachers were now eager to engage more in making the implementation of inclusive education possible.

The narratives from the teachers show that teachers were more likely to accept changes when they had foundational knowledge about why these were necessary. The teachers built on this foundational knowledge of the frameworks and policies that introduce changes such as inclusive education (Steyn, 2011). Steyn (2011) elaborates that understanding policies and frameworks enable teachers to engage with the reasons and processes of new developments. Background information is key for teachers to be positive about acquiring new skills and knowledge to implement the changes that the teachers had learnt about.

Since teachers in the study understood why these policies were important and that the policies aimed to provide access to education to diverse learners in their communities, the next step is to empower teachers with the knowledge, skills, and strategies to teach and assess those learners. The use of SLPs in capacitating teachers can be a viable model because it has proven to increase teacher skills and knowledge regarding inclusive education. SLPs can be primary models of teacher development throughout the education domain, not only on inclusive education.

Implications

These findings have at least three implications for policymakers, teacher education institutions, and teachers. Firstly, it is incumbent upon policymakers to consult teachers when drafting learning and development programmes for teachers. If they do so, programmes will not be irrelevant to their needs. A key understanding is that teachers should actively participate in the design and development of educational interventions. Additionally, a single, one-off approach to teacher training is insufficient to address their professional development needs effectively. Teachers need time to assimilate and embrace any initiative. From our findings we observed that teachers needed more time for training. Lastly, it was observed that flexible and context-sensitive content should be included in the programmes for these to have an impact on the teachers' work.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on SLPs in inclusive education should critically examine the long-term impact on teachers' professional practice, evaluate the effectiveness of varied delivery models such as online, face-to-face, and blended learning, and explore the integration of SLPs with other professional development frameworks. Additionally, it is essential to conduct a thorough analysis of the curricular content of SLPs to identify which areas most effectively enhance teachers' competencies in inclusive education. Research should also assess the differential impact of SLPs across diverse school contexts, including special and mainstream schools, and investigate how education policies influence the design and implementation of these programmes. Further studies should explore the role of technology in improving accessibility to SLPs and assess the scalability of these programmes to ensure that they can be effectively expanded to a broader audience of teachers across various educational environments. This would provide a comprehensive understanding of how SLPs can be optimised for greater efficacy in promoting inclusive education.

Conclusion

With this article we aimed to analyse the teachers' experiences of an SLP on implementing inclusive education. SLP programmes should be encouraged and used as the primary model of CPTD as they critically engage teachers in terms of dispensing knowledge, skills and strategies for implementing new trends in education. Teachers participating in our study highlighted the importance of using qualified facilitators with relevant qualifications as a key factor to upskilling teachers for any change in the education field. The professional development of teachers should be a main focus if we are to achieve the goals outlined in White Paper 6. A study of this nature is imperative in the sense that it may inform policy to practice from the perspective of the people who are supposed to implement change at school level. This study also contributes to the theoretical framework of how an effective continuous professional development programme should be structured (a bottom-up approach) to see real progress in the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa.

Authors' Contributions

Both authors contributed to the writing of the article and reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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