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Exploring teachers' experiences in implementing the Screening, identification, assessment and support policy in South Africa

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Inclusion and equitable education, as articulated by the fourth sustainable development goal and anticipated by 2030 seems hard to attain in a context where teachers' practices are inconsistent with inclusive national policies. In the study reported on here we investigated South African teachers' experiences in implementing the screening, identification, assessment, and support (SIAS) policy in their classrooms. The intersectionality of colliding worldviews and the pedagogy of discomfort were used as conceptual framework. We adopted a qualitative case study within an interpretive paradigm. Twelve teachers were purposively selected from 3 focus group discussions. The results reveal that a disconnect between the inclusive policy and classroom practices occurs because teachers have negative attitudes towards using the document and feel inadequately trained to implement it. We conclude with 3 essential lessons about teachers' disengagement with the policy: (i) teachers are reluctant to complete the SIAS documents because of the added administrative burden and a lack of knowledge about inclusive education; (ii) more experienced teachers influence the worldviews of newly qualified teachers (NQTs); and (iii) inclusive education training conducted by the district-based support team (DBST) is inadequate resulting in a disconnect between practice and pedagogical practices.

Keywords: inclusive education; pedagogical practices; SIAS policy; teachers; teachers' experiences

Introduction

In 2015 the United Nations member states adopted the sustainable development goals (SDGs) to end poverty and inequality by 2030. Goal 4 highlights the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education to achieve the main aim of the SDG. To implement SDG 4, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed a plethora of education policies (1994–2018) to ensure access to schooling for all learners, and that disabled, previously marginalised, and vulnerable learners are supported in the education system (Majoko & Phasha, 2018; Statistics South Africa, 2019). Although many of these education policies drive inclusive education (IE) (Dalton, McKenzie & Kahonde, 2012), teachers have expressed challenges with the implementation of these in the classroom (Akinsola & Chireshe, 2016; Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Nel, Tlale, Engelbrecht & Nel, 2016; Stofile, Green & Soudien, 2018).

Despite the pro-active actions of the DBE to address these challenges (Akinsola & Chireshe, 2016), such as developing the screening, identification, assessment, and support (SIAS) document (2014) to assist teachers in identifying barriers to learning and implementing the necessary support structures (Nel et al., 2016), realising IE pedagogical practices in South Africa remains complex and multifaceted (Stofile et al., 2018). Researchers in South Africa have identified these complexities as misinterpretation and incoherent understanding of IE policies (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Stofile et al., 2018), a lack of resources and specialist support to implement IE policies and practices (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Stofile et al., 2018; Tchatchoueng, 2016), inadequate teacher training to attend to the demands of an inclusive classroom (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Tchatchoueng, 2016), negative attitudes and a lack of buy-in from teachers to establish IE practices (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Nel et al., 2016; Stofile et al., 2018; Tchatchoueng, 2016), and learners in the South African context experiencing a wide range of barriers to learning (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Tchatchoueng, 2016).

The SIAS document is important in South Africa as it guides teachers on implementing inclusive pedagogical practices. The problem is that for some reason not all teachers adhere to what is stipulated in the document. Various research studies (Akinsola & Chireshe, 2016; Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Nel et al., 2016; Stofile et al., 2018) have been conducted to establish the challenges that teachers face in implementing IE practices. However, little has been documented about why teachers and educational stakeholders struggle to overcome these challenges. Therefore, with this article we explore teachers' experiences of implementing the SIAS document in their classrooms. The study was guided by one research question: what are teachers' experiences in implementing the SIAS document in their classrooms?

Background and Literature Review

The DBE developed the SIAS document (2014) to ensure that learners are supported in the education system (DBE, Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2014). Although the document articulates all the necessary inclusive pedagogical approaches, some teachers and school administrators do not follow it. Details about the SIAS document are provided in the following section.

The SIAS document

In response to the directive in the *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (EWP6) to implement an IE system (Department of Education [DoE], 2001), the DBE, RSA (2014) created the SIAS document. These two policy documents are valuable as they provide a framework for IE support. It is argued that the discourse does not inform policies of the contextual dilemmas experienced in the South African context (Nel et al., 2016). We postulate that the EWP6 and SIAS documents are too prescriptive and that senior management teams (SMT) and teachers are overwhelmed by the implementation thereof. Despite the critical nature of how the DBSTs and school-based support teams (SBSTs) experience the implementation of the SIAS document, limited research has been conducted in this area.

Typically, the SIAS document training begins with the DBST, who then trains the SBST and the SMTs and teachers (DBE, RSA, 2014). However, district offices have limited resources and manpower (Stofile et al., 2018). These challenges result in surface-level training (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Mkhuma, Maseko & Tlale, 2014; Nel et al., 2016) and confusion in the different responsibilities of the role-players (SBST, SMT, and teachers) (Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013; Nel et al., 2016). The DBST expects of teachers and SBST members to have all the necessary support and only refer to the DBST when all school interventions have been implemented and exhausted (DBE, RSA, 2014).

The hierarchical structures imply that the DBST has the most current and extensive information on the SIAS document. This makes the lower hierarchical structural members, such as the SBST members, the SMT and teachers dependent on them (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Nel et al., 2016). To ensure that SBST members and teachers understand their roles and responsibilities, teachers require continuous teacher training to implement the SIAS process and the necessary skills to assist learners who experience barriers to learning (Nel et al., 2016). The process of identifying learners who experience barriers to learning is crucial in this support process. If the members of the SBST do not have the knowledge and expertise to support teachers in identifying barriers to learning and implementing support strategies, the referral process

to the SBST becomes ineffective (Mkhuma et al., 2014). As a result, teachers and SBST members blame the DBST for inadequate support, creating a sense of resistance towards implementing IE policies (Roberts, 2011). The lack of training and support does not prepare teachers to transition from classroom teacher to case manager (Oswald & Engelbrecht, 2018; Stofile et al., 2018). Nor does it equip them with the understanding and skills to effectively complete the support needs analysis forms (SNAs), a component of the SIAS document, to identify learning barriers and plan support interventions accordingly.

In the past few years it has become clear that the goals of the referral process set out in the SIAS document are not always congruent with the roles and responsibilities experienced by the teachers (Hess, 2020; Nel et al., 2016). Therefore, the current implementation of the SIAS (2014) process fosters deficit discourse and practices, and teachers are struggling to shift towards an IE mindset (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Florian & Walton, 2018; Oswald & Engelbrecht, 2018).

The medical-deficit model vs. the socio-ecological model

In-service teachers who were trained before 1994 were instructed according to the medical-deficit model (DoE, 2001). This model provided teachers with limited inclusive pedagogical practices, and it carried the belief that children who experienced barriers to learning should be segregated into special facilities (DoE, 2001; Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The teachers were disempowered to assist their learners in their classrooms and had limited pedagogical strategies to support them (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Nel et al., 2016).

Teachers trained after 1994 were educated according to the socio-ecological model where differentiation and interventions are considered part of their everyday teaching practice (DBE, RSA, 2014). In this model teachers are trained to believe that all learners can be and should be included, and teachers must offer various levels of academic support. Their pedagogical training focused on providing an inclusive classroom environment, taking all their learners' barriers into consideration (DoE, 2001).

The current concern about implementing the SIAS process is that teachers of differing qualification levels work at schools and have different levels of knowledge and commitment towards inclusive pedagogical practices (Mkhuma et al., 2014). Due to the age of many senior teachers, the deficit model features predominantly in schools (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Nel et al., 2016). Although the ideology of education has changed from the deficit model to a socio-ecological model, many older teachers, who are now in managerial positions, are influenced by their historical

experiences of differentiation and intervention and are likely to affect the younger generation of NQTs (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Oswald & Engelbrecht, 2018). This historical influence further contributes to senior teachers' beliefs that they cannot set learners' support in motion as they feel unskilled and underqualified in their support role (Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013; Majoko & Phasha, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

The intersectionality of colliding worldviews and the pedagogy of discomfort form the conceptual framework of this study (Boler, 1999; Tilburt, 2010). The more experienced teachers, many of whom are in managerial positions and in positions to support NQTs, have an entrenched worldview (Hart, 2010) based on the historical deficit model.

As students, teachers, and managers, our worldviews develop throughout our lives through socialisation, attending workshops, further studies, and social interactions. Teachers are expected to uncritically accept the dominant knowledge presented by government stakeholders as the only belief system while attending workshops presented by such stakeholders. However, rooted within the historical past of lived experiences people apply biases to make sense of the social landscape (Hart, 2010; Winters, 2014). Teachers unconsciously or consciously influence others to accept their taken-for-granted beliefs and values. Worldviews are often incongruent and can change over time. The conflict arises when the NQTs graduate with alternative worldviews which they often relinquish in favour of the more dominant worldviews of SMTs and senior teachers. Using the worldview framework, we attempted to make sense of the various biases to critically reflect on the teachers' roles and responsibilities in engaging with the SIAS document (Tilburt, 2010).

As part of this study we used the pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) to understand how conflict is entrenched in worldviews and biases. The pedagogy of discomfort is an approach based on the notion that conflict or discomfort is important to challenge dominant biases and to reassess dominant worldviews. However, exploring these emotional dimensions can provoke emotional responses of anger, grief, disappointment, and resistance (Nadan & Stark, 2017). LeBaron (2017) suggests that to explore the teachers' conflicts and discomforts, teachers need to understand the issues of concern that need to be resolved (the SIAS process and learner support), the psychological aspects that hinder the issues from being solved (power, status, emotions and other relational parts of the conflictual interaction) and how the conflict will be addressed and supported. By exploring these conflicts and discomforts, we attempted to identify the change required for teachers to view the SIAS document

more positively (Boler, 1999; LeBaron, 2017). We closely investigated the psychological aspects that influence teachers' perceptions of the SIAS document and the conflicts that arise when challenging their dominant worldviews (LeBaron, 2017; Nadan & Stark, 2017).

Methodology

A qualitative approach and collective case study design were used within an interpretative paradigm to investigate teachers' experiences of the SIAS document. Creswell and Guetterman (2018) postulate that a qualitative approach enables researchers to have a close interaction with participants to obtain rich textual information from their perspectives, which is ideal in this study as it provided us with an opportunity to tap into the richness of participants' views (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). A collective case study design allowed us to investigate full-service schools in the Metro Central education district, Cape Town (MCED) and to obtain a better understanding of the implementation of the SIAS document within these schools. It further allowed us to view processes and outcomes across all cases and enabled us to gain a deeper understanding through the interaction with teachers from different schools in similar communities (Cohen et al., 2017; Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). An interpretive paradigm was chosen as we sought to interpret and understand the participants' experiences (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2015). This paradigm allowed us to view the world through the experiences and perceptions of the participants and how they make sense of the SIAS document in a full-service school context (Creswell & Poth 2018).

The schools included in this study were selected by the head of learning support at the MCED, Western Cape Education Department (WCED) and his multidisciplinary team. This team worked with schools across the Metro Central district and identified the full-service schools which actively worked with the SIAS document. After we presented the proposal of our study to the principals and teachers of all 10 full-service schools selected by the head of learning support, 12 teachers from two full-service schools agreed to take part in the study. The three schools were conveniently selected as the one researcher lived close to the community and worked with these schools as learning support educator.

Through purposive sampling, characterised by deliberately targeting information-rich participants (Cohen et al., 2017; Creswell & Guetterman, 2018), we selected the 12 participants who volunteered. They were committed to implementing IE practices in their classrooms and were representative of teachers who were actively working with the SIAS document (Cohen et al., 2017; Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). The teachers were all female

between the ages of 22 and 58; one White, two Muslim, and nine Coloured teachersⁱ of whom the teaching experiences ranged from 6 months to 38 years. Eight teachers taught in the Foundation Phase, two in the Intermediate Phase and one in the Senior Phase. All schools were quintile 2 schoolsⁱⁱ (DoE, 2006). Six teachers were from School A, one from School B, and five from School C.

To “elicit views and opinions from the participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017:187) qualitative data were collected from three randomly grouped focus-group interviews with four participants each, conducted in 2019. Smaller groups allowed for more meaningful interaction and yielded valuable information as participants shared their experiences and opinions on the SIAS document (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). During the focus-group interviews, semi-structured questions were asked (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012) to establish the participants’ knowledge and understanding of the SIAS document (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). However, a disadvantage of the focus-group interviews was that they yielded a collective rather than an individual view, and the group dynamics led to “non-participation by some members and dominance by others” (Cohen et al., 2017:533).

The data collected in this study were analysed through thematic analysis and an inductive approach was used (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). The thematic analysis allowed us to closely examine the data and identify common themes. After critically inductively analysing the current literature on this topic, the raw data were colour-coded to enable us to convert the data into useable themes and smaller units of meaning (Henning et al., 2004). An inductive approach assisted us in concluding the raw data gathered through the focus-group interviews (Henning et al., 2004; Lune & Berg, 2016).

To ensure that this research study was trustworthy, we created a credible and accurate account of the participants’ views on the SIAS document (Anney, 2014; Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams & Blackman, 2016) by capturing the voices of the participants through verbatim transcriptions and member-checking (Gay et al., 2012). To ensure dependability, we linked the theory on the SIAS document with the data from the participants (Anney, 2014), which resulted in stable data (Anney, 2014; Gay et al., 2012). Lastly, to ensure conformability, the results of the study were based on the experiences and preferences of the research participants rather than that of the researchers, ensuring neutrality and objectivity of the data (Anney, 2014; Gay et al., 2012; Moon et al., 2016).

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university since this study emanated from a doctoral research study, the WCED, the school principal and the teachers (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Louw,

2014; Yin, 2015). All participants were fully informed about the research study and that they were allowed to suspend their participation at any time without penalty. For confidentiality purposes, the teachers’ names were kept anonymous and they were referred to by codes, namely, HF, EB, RH, KJ, CP, CS, JG and SS.

Findings and Discussions

In this collective case study research we explored the teachers’ experiences with implementing the SIAS document and learner support. The following issues emerged from the analysis:

- Accessing the SIAS document;
- Inadequate training; and
- Disconnect between the SIAS document and classroom practices.

Accessing the SIAS Document

During the focus-group interviews we asked the teachers how they accessed this document in class. Their responses were as follows:

HF: *Like our copy of SIAS documents are in the one safe and the other safe. Nowhere.*

EB: *The stigma that it’s [SIAS documents] nice, it’s for the office [stored in the safe in the office].*

RH: *... I heard about the SIAS document. When I went for my interview, I opened it when the post was advertised; that was the last time I opened it.*

KJ: *... the SIAS document ... I have never opened it.*

CS: *... my husband ... he used to work at the SLES [Specialised Learner and Educator Support] department ... when I tell him about the problems at work, he says, ‘Because you people are not following the SIAS document. There is help. There is help out there but because you are not following it ... you find yourselves in the position you find yourselves in.’ So that document needs to be studied by everyone.*

Teachers HF, head of department (HOD) of the Foundation Phase (FP) and EB (resource teacher and SBST member) commented on the physical availability of this document at their schools. Despite these teachers receiving training by the DBSTs, the SMT and SBST members chose to store the SIAS documents in the safe. The SMT members, by nature of their dominance in the hierarchical school system, created a set of beliefs and influences that this document was of little importance, thereby hindering the SIAS process and learner support (Hart, 2010; LeBaron, 2017).

There was clear disengagement with the SIAS policy, as confirmed by teachers RH (who opened it for interview purposes) and KJ (who has never opened it). This is consistent with Tchatchoueng’s (2016) findings that teachers in South African schools disregard the SIAS policy, which leaves much to be desired. Teacher CS, an HOD of the Intermediate and Senior (Intersen) Phase, commented that she neither followed nor used the SIAS document. The mental lens through which this document is viewed is entrenching a view of

irrelevance, provoking an emotional response of resistance, which leads teachers not even to want to open it (Nadan & Stark, 2017). An implicit culture is developed in these schools, creating unconscious biases and prejudices against this document (LeBaron, 2017; Tilburt, 2010). Therefore, teachers must challenge these hegemonic thoughts to address the issues of concern regarding the SIAS document.

Challenging these worldviews, the DBSTs need to acknowledge this complexity to provide more effective communication and training sessions with the SBSTs who may not share their worldviews (Boler, 1999; LeBaron, 2017). One of the great challenges of the hierarchical educational system is its refusal to acknowledge that it has its own worldviews and cultures. These beliefs, values, and cultures result in implicit biases that mediate adverse outcomes.

Inadequate Training

We inquired about how teachers accessed the SIAS document in the previous section. Following this, we were interested in how effective their training, provided by the DBST, SBST and IE teams (teams consisting of educational psychologists, learning support advisors, social workers and occupational therapists), was.

Teachers HF (an FP HOD), JG, CS and SS commented on the training they had received to use the SIAS document as a learner support tool in the classroom:

HF: *Okay so far, I had one SIAS training session with the IE Team. I think it was very broad. They try to focus on the technical procedure, SNA1 that type of thing, timeframes that type of thing.*

JG: *[Teachers have to use the SIAS document to identify barriers to learning in the classroom] ... I thought to myself but 'joh' we are not doctors and I am not a doctor. How do I know how to handle these children 'cause they only taught me how to teach them the work?*

CS: *... I'm not a psychologist of course ... I cannot make this judgement call, a prognosis I think, and/or diagnosis....*

SS: *There is so much paperwork [SNA forms] and documents [the SIAS document] and things that we as teachers do not know about ... I am filling in 25 SNA forms and you look at yourself like do I seriously have to do this? ... My first thought was, how am I equipped to teach the child with, for example, a High Functioning Down Syndrome child? How am I equipped to teach a child like that ... ?*

We reported that teachers had received inadequate training to use the SIAS document and provide learner support. These teachers have unconsciously and uncritically taken for granted this new knowledge as the way things have to be in their full-service schools (Boler, 1999; LeBaron, 2017). The IE team's focus has been on training teacher HF to manage the administrative element of this document (Nel et al., 2016) rather than assisting her in using

the SIAS document as a tool for early identification and support of learning difficulties (DBE, RSA, 2014; Stofile et al., 2018). Teacher SS (a teacher with 8 years' experience) claimed that despite attending the SIAS document training at her school, she did not know about completing the forms or how to use the document as an effective learner support tool and felt overwhelmed by this task.

When attempting to implement the SIAS document, these teachers experienced discrepancies between their beliefs and those of the teams that trained them and who held the dominant worldview. These inconsistencies cause a conflictual interaction between the teachers, SBSTs and DBST, resulting in inciting feelings of anger and disappointment in the training teams (LeBaron, 2017; Nadan & Stark, 2017).

If the DBSTs are to address the challenges of using this SIAS document to influence teachers' pedagogical practices positively, they must also address the implicit bias that they have created (Boler, 1999; LeBaron, 2017).

Disconnect between the SIAS Document and Pedagogical Practices

Teachers CP, KJ, EB and CS commented on the disconnect between the training they had on how to implement the SIAS document and their actual experiences with the document:

CP: *...I am a novice teacher... I had lots of ... content-based learning on IE [a subject in her undergraduate training]... I can identify [learners who have barriers to learning] ... when I started [teaching], it was like ... How do I fill in a form? I was ... lost ... how do I fill in an SNA form? I do not know how to fill in this form. I do not know what to do.*

KJ: *... it [IE] is completely different practising it [IE] in your classroom, 34 children and with there being focus ... placed on paperwork [the SIAS document], there is no actual teaching taking place in the classroom.*

EB: *... it [training] was not in depth, it was very much skimming the surface and sort of rushing through. There was not ... enough examples ... It is [training] always paperwork and it is sort of monotone and ... this is the structure but it was not enriching and relevant you know.*

CS: *... it [training] was not a very practical thing where you know, we were very much involved with discussions. It was more of ... just the delivery of the slides and a batch of notes and off you go.*

Teachers CP and KJ, both NQTs, stated that the SIAS document was an impractical tool focusing on administrative tasks, and that the document did not assist them with their inclusive pedagogical practices. The DBE, RSA's (2014) directive to higher education intuitions is to include this document in all undergraduate programmes. Teachers EB and CS required practical examples rather than theory. As experienced teachers they required an in-depth connection to their classroom

experiences and real-world illustrations to assist them with the SIAS document and learner support in their classrooms.

However, it is clear that there was a disconnect between the dominant cultural worldviews of the DBE and everyday classroom practices, the latter being relegated to the periphery, often not acknowledged at all (Boler, 1999; LeBaron, 2017). Higher education intuitions, provisional departments, district offices and schools are often coerced to follow the ordinance of the DBE (LeBaron, 2017). This marginalisation and clash of worldviews lead teachers to experience feelings of discomfort and sacrifice (Nadan & Stark, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The SIAS document (2014) states that successful implementation of this policy takes place when the stakeholders (teachers, SBST, and DBST) “review their culture, policies, and practices” in terms of the extent to which they are cultivating inclusive pedagogies (DBE, RSA, 2014:15). With this research study we have shown that this is not implemented in practice as the stakeholders have not yet changed their worldview of inclusive pedagogical practices. The three lessons learned from this unique study are invaluable since there is limited empirical research in this particular area of entrenched worldviews and biases of implementing the SIAS document and learner support.

The first lesson learned is that teachers are reluctant to complete the SIAS documents. Most full-service schools have 40 to 45 learners per class and completing this document for over half of the learners in their class adds to the teachers’ already overload of administrative duties. The DBST needs to train the SBSTs and teachers to use the SIAS forms as an effective support document rather than add an administrative burden to their already complex contexts. The second lesson learned is that the more experienced teachers influenced the worldviews of NQTs. NQTs should receive mentorship from all stakeholders within the socio-ecological framework and be provided with continuous professional development. The third lesson is that the manner in which training is conducted by the DBST is inadequate and that a disconnect exists between practice and pedagogical practices. DBST training on inclusive pedagogical practices needs to be made specific to each school context and needs to include in-depth workshops on using the SIAS document as an effective tool in the classroom.

A recommendation is to build positive worldview consciousness into the DBST/SBST training sessions, including issues such as self-awareness and respect, which are necessary for concrete behavioural change. Worldviews can be fluid with strong overlaps but without acknowledging the “other” the training teams may

be unconsciously, perhaps consciously, leading their teachers to subjugation. By sharing their worldviews, values, and beliefs on the benefits of using the SIAS document, both groups may strengthen knowledge and practices. Early in the training sessions trainers and teachers could participate in frank discussions about their assumptions about the complex nature of the roles and responsibilities prescribed in the SIAS document. Worldview consciousness could begin to shape the necessary culture of training on the SIAS document towards one that is more acknowledging of the diversity of teachers’ beliefs in full-service schools, in mediating success.

This study was limited to 12 teachers’ views, including six SBST members. Future studies may include exploring a larger population of teachers and SBST teachers as well as the DBSTs’ experiences of using the SIAS document in the classroom.

Authors’ Contributions

CM was the original researcher. JC and LM were the supervisor and co-supervisor for this study and co-finalised the manuscript for publication with CM.

Notes

- i. Using the South African DoE’s racial categorisation distinguishing between Coloured, Muslim and White teachers (DoE, 1997).
- ii. Quintile 2 schools are defined by the DoE (2006) as poor no-fee paying schools.
- iii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- iv. DATES: Received: 5 July 2021; Revised: 22 April 2022; Accepted: 19 October 2022; Published: 31 August 2023.

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