

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Inclusive educational practices: Psychological challenges in South Africa

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*Inclusive Educational Practices: Psychological Challenges in South Africa*

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the specific challenges faced by practitioners in the field of psychology directly related to inclusive educational practices in South Africa. Intern psychologist, psychologists, psychometrist and other practitioners in the field of mental health provide crucial support to the Department of Basic Education in terms of Inclusive Education. These practitioners are situated in various fields for example, within Government Departments (Health, Education, Social Development, etcetera), private practice and Non-Government Organisations or Community-Based Organisations. The practitioners usually work within a multi-collaborative framework and often from a multi-systemic perspective to provide support to a network of colleagues and teachers, parents and learners who require intervention at schools within an inclusive education environment. A group of mental health practitioners who worked directly in inclusive educational practices (non-probability - purposive sampling), in a variety of sectors, were interviewed to determine the challenges they faced related to inclusive educational practices in South Africa. A variety of practitioners (n = 5) from each group of participants were approached (psychologists, intern psychologists, social workers) and interviewed. The total number of participants is n = 20. The participants completed a consent form, offered complete anonymity and confidentiality if they so desire and provide consent to complete the questionnaire. All institutional ethical procedures were followed. The findings revealed that South African practitioners in the field of psychology who worked directly in inclusive educational practices experienced challenges, and these are sometimes based on the setting in which they practiced. The study provided possible recommendations that may be implemented.

**Keywords:** mental health practitioners; psychologist; inclusive education; special needs education; interventions

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, nationally, and locally everyone is working tirelessly to work towards uplifting young people out of the endless cycle of poverty and various policies point researcher continually in this direction. Education is a key factor and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) is relevant to the process. Whilst 'Quality Education' directly and inextricably linked to some Goals, there are other Goals where the connection is less apparent. For the researcher the link to education should be made to all goals but others may not agree. Education can be seen as a direct link to some Goals like, 1 – 'No Poverty' – it is with quality education that one can eradicate poverty, 5 – 'Gender Equality' – through quality education communities can achieve gender equality or, 6 – 'Clean Water and Sanitation', 7 – 'Affordable and Clean Energy', 8 – 'Decent Work and

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Economic Growth’, 9 – ‘Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure’, etcetera. Upon examination of the various SDGs, the researcher felt that it was apparent that most, if not all, of them relied heavily on ‘Quality Education’ and without ‘Quality Education’ it would not be possible to adequately develop the other SDGs<sup>[1]</sup>.

South Africa (SA), per Sustainable Development Goal Number 3: Good Health and Well-Being, has made Mental Health a priority – since it has become evident that mental health is directly related to physical health. Low socio-economic countries face a high treatment gap, and SA is no different with a disparity between public and private health services, revealing that SA has a 92 percent mental health treatment gap with less than one in ten people receiving the care they need<sup>[2]</sup>. Many people with a mental disorder do not receive any treatment at all and often face isolation, discrimination, and violations of their basic human rights. Despite decades of post-apartheid training of educational psychologists, there still exists critical issues that require immediate consideration. The mental health care system focuses on responding to problems that patients are currently experiencing rather than preventative approaches or early interventions<sup>[2]</sup>,

Article 24 which refers to Education in the ‘Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’<sup>[3]</sup> speaks to the right of all people with disabilities to access lifelong education without any form of discrimination and with the same opportunities as all other citizens. Article 24 has been very difficult for many countries with large low socio-economic population groups to address adequately and as a result learners with disabilities have been under-represented in formal academic settings and in SA this is no different. Human Rights Watch found that as many as 600 000 children with disabilities do not attend school in SA<sup>[4]</sup> but less than 12 000 children were on special schools waiting lists. The question remains where were the other 580 000 children and what education or support will they be receiving?

Pillay<sup>[5]</sup>, mentioned that “the number of educational psychologists and the role they play are critical concerns in Sub-Saharan Africa ... there were significantly more school-aged children than there were educational psychologists, the proportion of which was the lowest in the world” and quoted the following statistics: SA: 1,178 educational psychologists servicing more than 10 million school-age children, Namibia: 18 for 624, 820 school-age children, Botswana: 12 for 502, 884 school-age children, Nigeria: 500 for more than 44 million school-age children, Zambia: 10 for more than 4 million school-age children, Uganda: 18 for more than 11 million school-age children, Kenya: 15 for more than 11 million in school-age children and Tanzania: 3 for more than 13 million school-age children.

Teichmann<sup>[6]</sup> in the Mail and Guardian explained that in SA there were only 451 psychologists in the public sector with extremely hefty vacancy rates in Mpumalanga, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape Provinces of between 80 and 83 percent. The Department of Health revealed that more than 6.5 million people need professional mental health intervention with almost 1.3 million of these people with severe psychiatric conditions and SA hospital only have 19 752 beds available in public and private mental healthcare facilities to support these patients. These statistics very clearly reveal that the country cannot manage the influx of mental health needs of the people.

This study examines inclusive educational practices of participants with psychological training working in SA inclusive educational settings and the challenges experienced and tackled the following issues:

- What is the nature of inclusive educational practices of participants with psychological training working in South African inclusive educational settings?
- What challenges do participants with psychological training working in South African inclusive educational settings face?
- What type of support do participants with psychological training working in South African inclusive educational settings require?

Educational psychologists are specialist who work in the field of psychology according to the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) an Educational Psychologist is defined as someone who is "... a specialist within the field of psychology that supports the learning, behavioural, social and emotional development of learners of all ages with an emphasis on children and young people"<sup>[7]</sup>. Educational psychologists work systemically focusing on children, the family unit as well as the environment within which the child may be located (such as extended family members, caregivers, teachers, and the wider educational system within which they may function<sup>[7]</sup>. In SA educational psychologists can choose to practice privately or work for a government-based organisation or institution. The scope of practice for educational psychologists in SA has been quite contentious for some time with heated debates and a legal battle going on between the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and The Educational Psychology Association of South Africa<sup>[8-10]</sup>.

Educational psychologists in SA play a multifaceted role in numerous contexts with various authors<sup>[11-13]</sup> having attested to this fact in their research. However, there is still much that educational psychologists need to consider in the way of inclusive education, in particular "... educational psychologists have been challenged to critically review their roles and professional identities in order to play a meaningful role within a transformed society"<sup>[13]</sup>. According to a study conducted titled "A Changing Role? Educational Psychologists in South Africa: Two Decades Beyond Democracy"<sup>[14]</sup> educational psychologists need to be placed within schools if inclusive education strategies hope to be effectively implemented.

The various issues raised regarding challenges experienced with implementing policy into practice still exist<sup>[15]</sup>. It is evident that educational psychologists are sparse at a grassroots level and inclusive education practices are not being practiced at many schools. Rottaro<sup>[15]</sup> examined how psychologists and learning support teachers collaborated with psychologists to support learners with barriers to learning using the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) Policy<sup>[16]</sup>. This National Strategy is part of the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System which strives to ensure that all learners are included in the teaching and learning process.

The collaboration of stakeholders has become very important for schools and research conducted revealed that very few schools in selected provinces in SA [Western Cape Province (88%), Eastern Cape Province (0.5%), Limpopo Province (0.3%)] have the support of health professionals<sup>[17]</sup>. Whilst stakeholders like psychologists may not be placed in schools they can provide support, through collaboration, to schools with issues regarding inclusive education.

The system theory by Niklas Luhmann was used to examine the general education system and which has as one of its goals and function "an integrational institution in society, and inclusive education is often seen as the way to reach this goal"<sup>[18]</sup>. The entire notion of inclusion education is intricately linked to the concept of segregation within society since people tend to be born into "social classes in segmented societies"<sup>[18]</sup> and schools as microcosms of society mimic the reality of society.

## **2. Materials and methods**

This section examines the methodology of the research study. This study used a qualitative research design, and the researcher used an interpretivism paradigm. An open-ended questionnaire was used to gather data that examined the challenges participants with psychological training experienced working in various SA inclusive educational settings.

## 2.1. Participants

The study aimed to include a total of twenty participants (n=25). Five (5) categories of participants were originally identified: psychologists (n=5), student psychologists (n=5), intern psychologists (n=5), social workers (n=5) and psychometrists (n=5), so the researcher chose to use judgement or purposive sampling, which allows the researcher to decide who participates in the study. The participants were chosen because they have the knowledge or information that the researcher requires and judgement sampling provides the researcher with the opportunity to “directly communicate with the target audience”<sup>[19]</sup>. However, when the researcher attempted to access the intended population, the researcher noted that there were very few practitioners within KZN within an inclusive education environment. A total of twenty-five questionnaires (n=25) were handed out to selected participants [psychologists (n=5), student psychologists (n=5), intern psychologists (n=5), psychometrists (n=5), and social workers (n=5)] however, not all participants returned the questionnaires and final questionnaires returned are detailed in **Table 1**. A total of sixteen (n=16) completed questionnaires were returned.

**Table 1.** Participants in the research study.

No.	Participant	Age (Years)	Gender	Qualification	Geographical location	Work Environment
1	P1	31-35	Female	Masters	Peri-urban	Non-government organisation Private practice
2	P2	25-30	Female	Masters	Urban	School Private practice
3	P3	36-40	Male	Masters	Peri-urban	Government department
4	P4	46+	Female	Masters	Rural	Non-government organisation
5	P5	46+	Male	Doctorate	Rural	HD University
6	IN1	25-30	Male	Honours	Township	Community-based organisation School
7	IN2	25-30	Female	Masters	Rural	Community-based organisation
8	SP1	25-30	Female	Honours	Rural	Student
9	SP2	25-30	Female	Honours	Urban	School
10	SP3	31-35	Female	Honours	Township	School
11	SP4	31-35	Female	Honours	Township	School
12	SP5	31-35	Female	Masters	Township	School
13	SW1	36-40	Female	Undergraduate	Township	Government department
14	SW2	25-30	Female	Undergraduate	Rural	Government department
15	PS1	41-45	Female	Honours	City	Private Practice Other
16	PS2	46+	Female	Honours	City	School Private Practice

**KEY:**

- P - Psychologists
- IN - Intern
- SP - Student psychologist

SW		Social worker
PS	-	Psychometrist

The following criteria were used by the researcher to include participants in the study:

- (i) Participants were willing participants in the research study and completed a consent form.
- (ii) Participants are psychological practitioners engaged in one of the following fields: psychologist, student psychologist, intern psychologist, psychometrist, and social worker.
- (iii) Participants are engaged in SA inclusive educational practices settings.

## **2.2. Data collection instrument**

The data collection instrument was a questionnaire which all participants were required to complete. It consisted of two sections: A and B. Section A consists of Demographic Information and includes each participant's: professional registration category, age, gender/sexual identity, level of study completed, geographical location/area, and work environment and Section B is the Questionnaire and includes: a series of open-ended questions that all participants were required to complete. Open-ended questions require in-depth responses from participants.

## **2.3. Data collection procedure**

Each participant was individually briefed on the data collection process. The informed consent as well as the data collection processes were discussed in detail, so that participants were afforded the opportunity to make informed decisions. Once participants signed the informed consent forms for participation in the research study, they then completed the questionnaire. The researcher was available for clarification should participants experience any problems with the questions and require any explanations.

## **2.4. Data analysis procedures**

The researcher summarised the information gathered using thematic data analysis and there are six (6) ideal steps to follow when attempting to analyse the themes from the data collected<sup>[20]</sup>:

- (i) Familiarizing Yourself with Your Data
- (ii) Generating Initial Codes
- (iii) Searching for Themes
- (iv) Reviewing Themes
- (v) Defining and Naming Theme
- (vi) Producing the Report

The researcher read the data collected more than once, examining information for initial codes. Once the codes were identified the themes were generated and further fine-tuned or reviewed. Appropriate themes were defined or named and discussed in details and the final findings or report created.

## **2.5. Validity and Reliability**

When considering issues of reliability and validity in qualitative research the concept of trustworthiness is at the very core of the "research report"<sup>[21]</sup>. Stahl and King<sup>[22]</sup> explain that due to the complexity of trustworthiness, credibility makes for an appropriate tool for validating and ensuring the reliability of a qualitative research study. To start with credibility, this study employed triangulation and environmental triangulation in particular - where the researcher studied more than one intended "situation or context" (i.e., various mental health practitioners in the field of psychology, in inclusive education contexts).

## **2.6. Ethical Consideration**

All necessary ethical issues were taken into considerations.

### **2.6.1. Permission to conduct research**

The researcher sought permission from all necessary regulatory bodies and the University of Zululand's research committees. The Health Profession's Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and all other relevant monitoring organisations ethical guidelines were followed closely during this research study.

### **2.6.2. Informed consent**

The participants had to complete informed consent forms prior to agreeing to participate in the research study which plainly indicated the nature of the study in a language that participants indicated that they clearly understood, and the researcher also made sure that participants who were involved in the study all had the capacity and ability to consent. Participants were made aware that participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time should they so desire without any consequences.

### **2.6.3. Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity**

The researcher explained the concept of confidentiality to participants, who were informed that the information will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the study and no identifying information will be used. Participants can withdraw from the study at any point in time should they so desire and if they feel uncomfortable, at any stage of the process. Participants are guaranteed complete anonymity and special keywords or phrases will be used to identify each participant.

## **3. Results**

If learners are experiencing barriers to learning then practitioners in the field of psychology directly related to inclusive educational practices in SA, such as educational psychologists, student psychologists, psychometrists, social workers, and other practitioners in the field of mental health may be called upon to provide crucial Inclusive Education support services to the Department of Basic Education. The research study revealed that the settings within which mental health practitioners tend to work with young people and their communities vary and participants described their work environments as follows:

### **a. Schools:**

There are a wide range of school environments (e.g., primary school, full-service schools, schools that cater for learners with specific special needs, etc.) within which mental health practitioners work. Most of the participants work in a school environment:

- Member of a multidisciplinary team at a Special Needs School that provides support for students that require psycho-educational assessments, IEPs and a diagnosis to ensure they receive individual support (P2)
- School in township within secluded offices that were built for special learners ((IN1)
- Schools, community and child guidance clinic (IN2)
- Primary School ... foundation phase (SP1)
- Preparatory School ... in the urban area of Empangeni (SP2)
- Full service school ... use a classroom which is vacant to conduct assessments and intervention (SP4)
- Rural school ... full-service school ... teachers and principal are very supportive (PS5)
- ... former model-c school (PS2)

#### **b. Department of Education (DoE) – Office-based**

The Department of Education has mental health practitioners at various Office-based positions. These practitioners provide support to teachers who work with learners experiencing barriers to learning and the learners with special education needs (LSEN):

- Office-based position that caters for the entire district (P3)

#### **c. Higher Education Institutions (HEI)**

Two psychologists worked in institutions of higher learning and reportedly supported students in this environment:

- Higher education Institutions with learners with specific learning needs (P1)
- Historically disadvantaged institution ...greatest majority of learners come from poverty-stricken background (P5)

#### **d. Department of Social Development**

Social workers reported that they provide support to learners and parents when the families are sent to the Department of Social development for support:

- Department of Social services (SW1)
- Social Welfare (SW2)

#### **e. Private practice**

Some mental health practitioners also practice privately with three participants indicating that they have a private practice:

- ... clients in private practice ... (P1)
- Private practice focusing on psycho-education assessment (PS1)
- Private practice (PS2)

### **3.1. Nature of inclusive educational practices of participants with psychological training working in South African inclusive educational settings**

The nature of inclusive educational practices of participants with psychological training working in SA inclusive educational settings refers to the type of services rendered by the participants, and these vary.

#### **3.1.1. Diagnosis**

Participants who work in mental health environments are focusing psychoeducational assessments for the diagnosis of LSEN, often working as part of a multidisciplinary team with relevant stakeholders like speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, etcetera. These assessments are conducted for a variety of reasons as outlined by participants:

- Psycho-educational assessments to determine the nature of the problem (P2)
- ... member of the transversal team, working with a Speech Therapist, SES, OT, physio and myself (Psychologist) (P3)
- Transversal itinerant outreach team members, caregivers, teachers, in-service therapists and officials are trained on the Learning Programme for LSPID, and other programmes that support delivery of the Learning Programme (P3)
- ... Conduct Cognitive Assessments of LSPID enrolled in the schools/care centres (P3) ... assist with mainstream schools/cases (both therapeutic and assessment cases) (P3)

- Diagnosis of learning disabilities and assessments to apply for concessions during exams (P4)
- ... perform psychological assessments... (IN1)
- ... assisting with diagnosing them... (IN2)
- ... psychological and scholastic assessments ... (SP1)
- Assessments (SP2)
- ... psychological assessment using tests suitable for each case that is referred to me. (SP4)
- ... results ... help me come up with a diagnosis then I intervene accordingly. (SP4)
- Learners are first interviewed and screen to identify specific activities. (SP5)
- Diagnosis of learning disabilities (P4)
- Assessments to apply for concessions during exams (P4)

### **3.1.2. Referral and placements**

One of the core inclusive educational practices of participants with psychological training working in SA is referral to relevant stakeholders, placement at suitable institutions such as full-service schools or resource centres.

- Educational placements for individuals involved in motor vehicle accidents (P1)
- I normally refer them to remedial facilities ... (P1)
- Conduction assessments for school placements (P4)
- ... Conducting assessments for school placement (P4)

### **3.1.3. Remedial support**

Remedial support as suggested by participants fell into two categories (i) support of learners on a personal level – social, emotional and communication development and (ii) support in terms of their academic ability -

- ... allow students to communicate with each other. (P2)
- ... make friends and regulation of emotions. (P2)
- ... ensure that each learner is heard ... (P2)
- ... feels a sense of belonging ... (P2)
- ... monitor and report on these learners' progress (P3)
- ... remedial assistance. (P1)
- ... take them to school during the weekend so the learner has a better idea about the location (toilet, sport field, library, which field to go to for break, where to find the secretary, etc) (P4)
- ... do remedial work/interventions with regards to writing and reading ... (SP1)
- ... used to organize remedial classes for them in the module I taught (P5)
- ... gave them some additional homework, so that they get more practice to enhance understanding ... (P5)
- ... ask one or two fast learners to assist those who are struggling (P5)
- ... do one on one scaffolding sessions ... (IN2)
- ... giving them extra time to finish their task ... (IN2)
- ... assist with homework ... (IN2)
- ... going back to the lowest grade to assist them academically ... (IN2)
- ... taking into consideration the different learning styles of these learners ... (SP3)
- ... using counters in math ... (IN2)
- ... playing games ... (IN2)



- ... building puzzles to help with visual perception. (IN2)

### **3.1.4. Therapeutic intervention**

Here participants with psychological training working in in South African inclusive educational settings provided a wide variety of therapeutic mediations for learners with special education needs and teachers. These can be for the individual needs of the LSEN, for groups learners, or even the family structure.

- ...students work in smaller groups... (P2)
- ...receive individual support ... (P2)
- to implement concessions in order to help them adapt ... At university level the same applies (P1)
- ... or advice educators to implement concessions in order to help them adapt ... (P1)
- intervention includes formulating Individual Support Plans ... (SP4)
- ... focus on breathing techniques, using stress balls, taking about how you feel and keeping a diary. (P2)
- Counselling activities are more interactive. (P2)
- ... and counselling for learners' mental wellbeing ... (IN1)
- ... providing them with counselling in order to address their psychosocial problems and physical disabilities. (SW1)
- Therapy (SP2)
- ... then I do intervention (ISP) for those learners ... (IN1)
- ... provide therapeutic intervention to learners and families (P3)
- Family therapy to prepare everyone for transition (P4)
- ... conduct an evaluation (home visit) in order to see how the environment is impacting on the child's problems and how we can assist. (SW1)
- ... refer to psychologist ... (SW2)

### **3.1.5. Training and support**

Participants are involved in the training and support of teachers, parents, and caregivers at various levels of dissemination – Province, District, School, etcetera on various special needs issues such as: concessions, accommodations, implementation of LSEN matters.

- ... train caregivers on learning programme for LSPID (P3)
- ... member of Provincial-Based Support Team for concessions and accommodations (P3)
- Monitor and report caregivers' implementation of the learning programme for LSPID (P3)
- Psychoeducation (SP2)
- psychoeducation to parents. (SP4)
- ... conduct workshop on certain psychosocial topics (P3)
- ... psychoeducation for parents and teachers ... (IN1)
- ... train and support teachers, on learning programme for LSPID (P3)
- Providing educators with relevant psychoeducation on accommodating the learners ... (SP3)
- ... making teacher aware on what activities to use during lessons for a specific learner ... (SP5)

Participants were asked if they received support whilst helping LSEN needs to integrate into an inclusive education learning environment and the responses were varied showing that the levels of support was dependant on the nature of the environment that the individual worked in. Most participants indicated that they received the necessary support they required to provide learners with the help they needed.

**Table 2.** Participants response to support provided.

No.	Participant	Geographical location	Work Environment	Support Provided
1	P1	Peri-urban	Non-government organisation Private practice	Yes
2	P2	Urban	School Private practice	Yes
3	P3	Peri-urban	Government department	Yes
4	P4	Rural	Non-government organisation	Yes
5	P5	Rural	HD University	No
6	IN1	Township	Community-based organisation	Yes
7	IN2	Rural	School Community-based organisation	Yes
8	SP1	Rural	Student	Yes
9	SP2	Urban	School	Yes
10	SP3	Township	School	No
11	SP4	Township	School	Yes
12	SP5	Township	School	Yes
13	SW1	Township	Government department	Yes
14	SW2	Rural	Government department	No
15	PS1	City	Private Practice Other	No
16	PS2	City	School Private Practice	No

### **3.2. Challenges participants with psychological training working in South African inclusive educational settings face.**

Although two participants with psychological training reported that they had not experienced any challenges during their time working in SA inclusive educational settings, other participants revealed an array of challenges that impacted on effective service delivery, and they are mentioned under the following headings and sub-headings:

#### **3.2.1. Infrastructure**

Regarding infrastructure the environment in which participants were located determined the nature of the infrastructure challenges experienced with participants highlighting the needs of specific learning disability needs like those of students who are deaf or mentioning more generalised issues that are a national issue such as placement at full-service centres and resource centres (former special schools).

- ... the university does not have adequate infrastructure to accommodate all the individuals with learning needs or infrastructure to accommodate learners with specific learning needs. (P1)
- Sometimes difficult to support students who are deaf and students with physical disabilities as the infrastructure at the university is not accommodating of the needs. (P1)
- In private practice it is sometime difficult to find placement for learners who have been identified as learners with special educational needs. (P1)
- ... have to be in a waiting list for a long period of time without adequate assistance. (P1)
- We have 2 special schools ... makes it very difficult to place learners ... they are full. Learners end up being misplaced in SCCs (Schools as Centres of Care and Support) (P3)

- Majority of LSEN cannot be accommodated in special schools since such schools are rarely found... (P5)
- Classroom size impacts on the support the children receive. Physical space in the classroom can be complicated (P4)

### **3.2.2. Resources**

The availability of resources to support LSEN needs has always been a point of contention with institutions of Higher Education, the Department of Education, other Government organisations or community-based organisations. Participants mentioned challenges with the following resources, including the Department of Education's South African School Administration Management System (SAMAS), learners' hygiene, health and cleanliness and referral to local clinics, availability of transportation, amongst other issues:

- SASAMS is still a challenge as it works hand in hand with the tracking tool (P3)
- Hygiene, health, and cleanliness is a major challenge ... area where the learners spend most of their time is dirty and smells of urine. (P3)
- ... Others have pressure sores and are referred to (the) clinic but the caregivers do not take these learners to the clinic ... (P3)
- ... some learners still have transport problems and were not present during the centre visits. (P3)
- ... learner may need assistive technology and an assistant. (P4)
- Limited hours that the school can afford to pay for my services. (PS2)

### **3.2.3. Human resources**

The human resource challenges faced by participants working with learners experiencing special learning needs included the following individuals: caregivers, teachers, and School Learner Support Agents (LSA) who all worked in **educational** environments supporting learners with special education needs.

#### **(i) Caregivers**

Caregivers who work at care centres are not always adequately trained and this may place them at a disadvantage. They may find themselves overwhelmed with far too many tasks and responsibilities to content with.

- Caregivers under pressure at their respective centres. Too much activities and roles at the same time and this affect them emotionally and otherwise (P3)
- Not all caregivers from these centres receive training, some are absent and too busy with learners during the time of empowerment. (P3)

#### **(ii) School Learner Support Agent**

School Learner Support Agents' (SLAs) key role/responsibility is to support teachers in the classroom as they work with LSEN. Participants explain that LSAs do not: receive adequate training, have an adequate scope of practice, intervene appropriately or support teachers or learners aptly. The lack of support from the LSAs may consistently impact on how the teacher will be able to provide provisioning for LSEN. This valuable human resource needs to be used optimally.

- ... Schools' Learner Support Agents should be trained and assist teachers with supporting these children ... (SP3)
- ... huge gap when it comes to LSA's scope of practice, and they don't know how to intervene. (SP3)
- ... LSA's (in a full-service school) do not seem to offer the support that they should be offering to both teachers and learners. (SP4)

### **(iii) Teachers**

Teachers are the most valuable human resource for LSEN, however a number of participants revealed that, from their experience as SA practitioners in the field of psychology who worked directly in inclusive educational practices, teachers are not providing the necessary support that LSEN so desperately require from the teacher in the classroom. Some schools have an issue with staffing and the teacher to pupil ratio does not adequately support the needs of learners who may require special support plans and attention from the teacher. Participants mentioned that they noticed the impact that large classes and staffing had on mainstreaming of learners with special learning needs:

- Lack of support from the teacher ... (SP2)
- ... many schools, they are short staffed, and classes are then combined ... (P4)
- Some schools don't have the manpower ... (P1)
- Large number of learners ... with different needs and these needs are not fully met by teachers, hence inclusion rendered unsuccessful. (IN1)
- The size of the classrooms make(s) it difficult for teachers to assist learners with special needs. (PS2)

Teachers' negative attitudes, beliefs and opinions can either have a detrimental impact on classroom practices irrespective of whether it is a mainstream school, full-service school, or resource centre. Participants with psychological training and working in a SA inclusive educational setting reported that teachers in mainstream schools may not be trained to identify LSEN, and even if they are trained, they may not necessarily use the skill to identify a LSEN because they want LSEN to be accommodated at a "special school".

- ... integrating them in the mainstream becomes a challenge as teachers still believe LSEN must go to special schools which are not there. (P5)
- ... teachers expect a child with a special learning needs to be accommodated in another facility and not the school, ... (SP3)
- ... learner with special learning needs should be accommodate(d) somewhere else and not in the mainstream school. (SP3)
- There is still that stigma amongst some teachers that LSEN will not make it in the mainstream... (P5)
- ... needs of the learners with special needs are not met (SP4)
- ... teachers who lack the skills and patience in and when assisting learners with special needs. (SP5)
- ... teachers might have been trained on inclusive education, most of them do not practice it in the classroom. (SP4)
- ... teachers sometimes not identifying learners early. They do not want to be involved. (IN2)
- ... even with the recommendation that is made that the child (is) to be supported in this manner, you find teachers reluctant to offer extra support ... (SP3)
- ... teacher not being involved ... psychologists can only do so much (SP2)

#### **3.2.4. Skills, knowledge, and training**

According to the participants learners, caregivers and teachers experienced challenges acquiring skills, knowledge, and training. Even if they had been trained, they did not necessarily put these skills, knowledge, and training into action in the classroom. The nature of the training referred to was not psychological skills and knowledge, but participants did mention hygiene, health, cleanliness, physical health, wide ranging special learning needs or inclusive education.

- Hygiene, health and cleanliness is a major challenge ... (P3)
- Learners are sick and coughing ... Others have pressure sores and are referred to (the) clinic but the

caregivers do not take these learners to the clinic ... (P3)

- Educators are not all trained to support learners with special learning needs. (P4)
- Most teachers ... not trained or have been trained on inclusive education but they do not practice or have forgotten it. (IN1)
- Teachers still need special training ... to accommodate learners with special needs in their classrooms. (SP3)

### **3.2.5. Parental support**

Inclusive education practitioners who work in psychological services spaces find the lack of parent support extremely difficult. Some parents actually oppose the efforts of psychologists and therapists working in the inclusive education spaces and refuse to access the services of therapists and other service providers. Sometimes parents simply lack the resources to support LSEN.

- Many parents are against the idea ... children are not supported when they arrive. (P4)
- ... parents that are unavailable in supporting the learners. (SP5)
- Parents cannot always afford other therapists to aid their children. (PS2)

### **3.2.6. Stakeholder support**

Stakeholder support is a complex issue as the necessary network needs to be created before the failure can be reported. The participants report a lack of support from stakeholders; however, it is important to determine the level of stakeholder engagement prior to the breakdown in support. Some of the support the participants mention that stakeholders do not provide are related to Health, Budget, Education, Staffing, etcetera. These are all related to various government departments: Departments of Health, Social Development, Finance, Education, etcetera. It appears these departments need to liaise with each other in order to better understand the needs of their clients – learners with special education needs – and how to economically provide the necessary resources for their clients so that the participants have better access to the resources available.

- Learners' clothes are dirty, the wheelchairs are dirty and learners smell of sweat urine. There are flies in, on and around the learners who drool, many whom are physically, and intellectually impaired and cannot chase the flies away. (P3)
- Hygiene, health, and cleanliness is a major challenge ... area where the learners spend most of their time is dirty and smells of urine. (P3)
- Learners are sick and coughing ... Others have pressure sores and are referred to (the) clinic but the caregivers do not take these learners to the clinic ... (P3)
- Complaints about budgeting constraints ... (P5)
- Lack of support from the Department of Education. (PS2)
- No tangible support from authorities. (P5)
- Some of the problems we encounter are outside of our scope and they need psychologists. (SW1)
- Shortage of people with expertise to help our learners. (SW1)

### **3.2.7. Learner challenges**

Participants expressed concern regarding the challenges experienced with learners with special learning needs. Whilst academic challenges are the most apparent others include social adaptive, emotional, health, and behavioural challenges. Participants expressed their concern with the following issues:

#### **(i) Academic challenges:**

- ... focuses on reading, writing, comprehension in English and extends to the different subjects ... (P2)

**(ii) Social adaptive challenges:**

- ... learners adaptive skills are not age appropriate due to the cognitive and physical disabilities ... (P2)
- Learners have not returned to the centre due to social circumstances ... (P3)

**(iii) Emotional challenges**

- ... one of the largest challenges that children are facing ... (P2)
- ... learners do not understand the process of grief ... (P2)
- Some learners are absent during our visits, ... huge challenge ... not receiving the necessary therapeutic intervention and some still haven't been cognitively assessed which makes reporting impossible. (P3)

**(iv) Health challenges:**

- ... health related issues ... (P3)
- Hygiene, health and cleanliness is a major challenge ... (P3)
- Learners are sick and coughing ... Others have pressure sores and are referred to (the) clinic but the caregivers do not take these learners to the clinic ... (P3)

**(v) Behavioural challenges:**

- ... tend to display their feelings with their behaviour ... (P2)
- ... children who do not want to co-operate ... (IN2)
- Reluctant learners who are aware of their challenges. (SP5)

**3.2.8. Advocacy and psychoeducation**

Advocacy and psychoeducation for the community, parents and teachers was suggested by participants. Despite more than twenty years of inclusive education practices in SA it would appear that advocacy and psychoeducation are still necessary on every level especially if schools try to access appropriate resources and work collaboratively with the relevant stakeholders in the community and with parents.

**(i) For community:**

- ... psychoeducation is still needed since some authorities may view supporting LSEN as a waste of resources. (P5)
- Community is difficult because they expect miracles... our clients are not open & that makes our work more difficult. (SW2)

**(ii) For parents:**

- Some parents in denial that their children need special learning because at home they are competent socially & practical. (IN1)
- ... learners do not receive all the help they (should) at home; ... (IN1)
- Most of the parents are in denial of their children's state. (IN2)
- They do not want to be involved. (IN2)

**3.3 . Type of support participants with psychological training working in South African inclusive educational settings require.**

Although some participants reported that they did not require support to effectively render psychological services for LSEN however other participants mention the need for detailed provisioning that they would like to have made available to ensure effective service delivery for LSEN.

### **3.3.1. Resources**

Participants noted that learners needed resources to access teaching and learning optimally. Assistive devices is one type of learning resources suggested by participants to support learners with special education needs whilst other participants mentioned teaching and learning strategies.

- Need to also accommodate other students with different learning needs such as deaf students (P1)
- Learning assistive devices such as reading glasses, hearing aids, etc. (P5)
- Some learners/students need access to the lecture halls but ... using wheelchairs. (P5)
- Students who are wheelchair bound find it difficult to access lecture's office (which) located in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc. floors as some buildings do not have lifts. (P5)
- ... their learning pace is different. (SP3)
- ... simple things like that as accommodating strategies for these learners. (SP3)

### **3.3.2. Skills, knowledge and training**

Some of the skills and training that participants reported involved specific training (e.g., sign language) and then other participants mentioned the more generalised issue of "inclusive education" which is concerning since participants working in an environment with learners with special education needs should have extensive knowledge of inclusive education policy and White Paper 6.

- Could be done by involving specialists who are trained in sign language that will interpret or convey what is learnt in class or introduce a course a course for lecturers to learn sign language. (P1)
- Training particular in inclusive education and the implementation of WP6 can give insight of what inclusivity is like or should look like. (IN1)
- ... more training on inclusive education. (SP4)
- ... training ... (SW2)

### **3.3.3. Stakeholder involvement**

The most apparent support mechanism that participants mentioned was collaboration between stakeholders. Ensuring that all relevant stakeholders work together to ensure that LSEN benefit from holistic intervention.

- ... team of health professional that can help learners ... working as a team with the class teacher to assist the learners (PS2)
- Working with learners with special needs requires team collaboration from psychologist, teachers & parents but, teachers always don't come through. (SP2)

Parent support was also mentioned as an important support process with mention being made that parents should play a more proactive role in the LSEN life.

- ...like to get support from the parents – they must be proactive. (SP4)

The Department of Education officials are another stakeholder's support that participants made mention of and their contribution was highlighted in the way of finance and placement of learners at resource centres.

- Proper and faster response from district officials in placing learners without financial stability ... (IN2)
- 'kids' need remedial school ... (IN2)

Teacher support is another suggestion from participants. As stakeholders, according to participants, teachers need to be more engaged and involved with both learners and other stakeholders.

- Teacher engagement, support, and willingness to accommodate learners with special learning needs. (SP1)

- ... would like to receive more support from the teachers. (SP2)
- ... good working relationship with the teachers since they are the ones who spend more time with the learners ... (SP4)
- ... should be understood that their learning and grasping of content is special. (SP3)
- ... importance of being committed and patient with each learner everyday until there is improvement. (SP5)

Participants mentioned that stakeholders should be able to identify if necessary and diagnose under appropriate circumstances the various learning disorders.

- ... teachers and parents maybe psycho-educated about the different disorders that learners may be identified with ... (SP5)
- ... involvement of educational psychologist to assist with proper diagnoses and early and early intervention. (SW1)

Another stakeholder is the School Learner Support Agencies (LSAs) and support from the LSAs is also vital.

- ... support from Learner Support Agencies (LSA) in order to help with dynamic assistance. (SP4)

#### 3.3.4. Personal support

One participant felt like there was a need for emotional support and caring for carers should be a mental health priority. We should ensure that since SA has such a small population of mental health practitioner that we take care of their mental health needs.

- ... emotional support ... (SW2)

## 4. Discussion

Mental health practitioners working in inclusive education environments experienced challenges and felt that support was needed to effectively execute their functions and provide efficient service delivery to LSEN. The participants of the research study worked in a variety of environments and as a result the challenges experiences varied accordingly, and the support requested by participants was dependant on the environment in which they were situated.

**Table 3.** Environments - practitioners practice inclusive education.

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Environment of Practice (Inclusive Education)
Schools
Department of Education
Higher Education Institutions
Department of Social Development
Private Practice
Combined

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### 4.1. Resources

Mental health practitioners need to be provided with appropriate resources for them to be able to support LSEN so that “the South African government departments work in a more coordinated and integrated way, and to ensure that scarce resources and expertise are shared”<sup>[11]</sup>.

Berger<sup>[12]</sup> mentions that “without additional financial resources, professional staff such as educational psychologists could not be employed within government or in schools” and this is true of all other mental



health professionals. Without the necessary funding mental health professionals will not be hired in the public sector to provide support to LSEN.

#### **4.2. Skills, knowledge, and training**

Successful implementation of Inclusive Education is dependent on the skills, knowledge, and training of the teacher, and “the lack of knowledge at the exosystem has direct bearing on the microsystems and the ability of educators to work effectively with diverse learners”<sup>[23]</sup>. Here the exosystem refers to local government departments and the microsystem are the local schools.

Government Departments need to make a concerted effort to engage all involved parties in compulsory skills and training sessions to ensure that all stakeholders at schools and other government buildings and organisations working with LSEN are adequately trained on issues related to LSEN.

#### **4.3. Stakeholder involvement**

A team of multidisciplinary stakeholders (such as occupational therapists, social worker, nurse, speech and language therapists, etc.) is often far more effective when it comes to supporting a LSEN with severe learning barriers<sup>[22]</sup>.

Collaboration on all levels of governmental systems need to be implemented. Although inclusive education cannot be imposed on people it is a legal required at all government schools and teachers are legally required to comply with the policy: White Paper 6: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System. Ensure that governmental schools are efficiently implementing the policy and enlisting the help of relevant stakeholders. <sup>[13]</sup> explains that “this type of teamwork allows for a creative sharing of knowledge and skills in developing appropriate interventions for children”.

#### **4.4. Personal support**

Teachers are overwhelmed since there is the need for speciality knowledge which teaching LSEN requires, and this may create “feelings of inadequacy and add to the emotional burden” that they may already be placed under<sup>[23]</sup>. However the best support that teachers can find is amongst their peers<sup>[16]</sup> since they share a common frustration and a problem shared is a problem halved.

Staff can create peer support groups within schools, circuits and possibly across the district and provide one another with valuable resources and support mechanism to help them cope with LSEN in the classroom.

### **5. Conclusion**

The study revealed that practitioners in the field of psychology directly engaged in the field of inclusive educational practices in South Africa usually work within a multi-collaborative framework and often from a multi-systemic perspective to provide support to a network of colleagues and teachers, parents and learners who require intervention at schools. The challenges experiences varied depending on the environment within which collaborators practiced and the recommendations were based on the support that was requested by colleagues.

### **Conflict of interest**

“The author declare no conflict of interest.”

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