



Exploring teachers' experiences on the implementation of inclusive education in Thabina Circuit mainstream schools

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore teachers' experiences with implementing inclusive education in mainstream schools in the Thabina circuit. The study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design. An interpretive paradigm was used. The population was drawn from 231 teachers working in mainstream schools in Thabina Circuit. Purposive sampling was used to select 12 teachers who have learners living with disabilities in their classrooms. Data was collected using individual semi-structured interviews and observations. Implementing inclusive education in mainstream schools was interrogated using different stages distinguished by Kolb, which are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. A thematic approach was used to analyse data by formulating themes that emerged from interviews. The study's findings revealed that for full inclusion in mainstream schools, teachers must consider how learners learn by borrowing Kolb's lenses, as indicated above. The study further found that teachers struggle to implement inclusive education policies due to misinterpretation and inability to interpret them in the context they find themselves in. The study recommends in-service training of teachers on inclusive education policies and practices. Furthermore, integrating Kolb's lenses was also recommended for the total inclusion of learners.

Keywords: Inclusive education practices, in-service training, inclusivity, implementation.

Introduction and background

When the South African policy of inclusivity was introduced in 2001, its ultimate objective was to ensure equal access to education for all learners despite diverse needs and learning needs. According to Makofane, Malatji and Mphahlele (2023), inclusive education policy aims to provide equal opportunities to all learners and enable them to have access to education. Teachers' understanding of the policy of inclusive education plays a critical role in inclusive education (Bagree & Lewis, 2013, p. 13). However, teachers, in their daily practice of inclusive education policy, continue to experience challenges. Consequently, the challenges result in a slow pace of the success of inclusive education policy. Teachers should be supported with resources and measures that will promote the practice of the quality of inclusive education to accommodate all learners especially

learners with special needs. Uka (2025) concedes that an inclusive education policy was introduced to establish equal access to education and accommodate all learners in mainstream schools. In the South African education system, teachers still experience challenges in implementing inclusive education (Bhutta & Muzaffar, 2025).

When the democratic government came into power in 1994, numerous policies of inclusivity, such as the white paper on education and guidelines for the practice of inclusive education, were introduced to move away from apartheid policies and create education that is inclusive and does not segregate learners across racial lines. The primary objective of the new democratic South Africa was to bring access to equal education and ensure that everyone is treated fairly and opportunities are created for everyone. Therefore, it was because of the need for equality

that inclusive education was established. A study conducted by Shongwe (2021) in Swaziland on inclusive education highlights that although the practice of inclusive education is effective, teachers are still experiencing challenges such as policy misinterpretation. While Gal, Ryder and Raveh Amsalem (2025) in their study on inclusive education revealed that in countries such as China and Japan, there is no common practice of practice of inclusive education, which makes teachers struggle in the practice of the policy. Although inclusive education policy was introduced to accommodate all learners despite their diverse learning needs, there are still challenges that teachers experience in the practice of inclusive education in Thabina Circuit. Inclusive education is about accommodating all learners, and teachers, in the whole system of education so that various needs of learners can be accommodated. The white paper 6 acknowledges a broad range of various learning needs exists among learners, and those needs should be met; hence, if not, learners may fail to learn effectively (DBE, 2014). This study aimed to explore teachers' experiences in implementing inclusive education in mainstream schools in Thabina Circuit and suggest intervention strategies to enhance the practice of inclusive education.

When full-service schools were introduced in 2001, it was not intended to replace the current schooling system of special schools, but rather to strengthen the role that special schools play (Mutanga, 2024). Both types of schools aim to provide quality education to all students, regardless of their learning needs or educational challenges (Department of Basic Education, 2001: 3). According to White Paper 6, full-service schools must be responsive and flexible to the diverse needs of their students (Guideline for Full-service schools, 2010). Many factors contribute to the school's responsiveness and flexibility, including a lack of resources, teacher training, and learning barriers. However, the importance of teachers' competencies in delivering an inclusive curriculum cannot be overstated or understated. Teachers play a key role in curriculum implementation in mainstream schools. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences in the implementation of

inclusive education in mainstream schools at the Thabina circuit.

When South Africa became a democratic country in 1994, the system of education evolved to open a room for education that accommodates all learners. The United Nations in 1994 affirmed that all children should be provided with equal access to quality education regardless of their learning deficiencies (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). This implies that it was of paramount importance that South Africa had to follow suit and practice inclusive education to provide opportunities of inclusion to all learners including learners with special needs. Opuku (2024) agrees that implementing an inclusive education strategy is vital and necessary since it enables equal access and opportunity to quality education. However, the practice of inclusive education is hampered by certain factors, one of them emanating from teachers' negative attitudes towards inclusive education policy (Boyle & Anderson, 2020). In addition, Boyle and Anderson (2020) remark that it is disturbing that some teachers assume that there is no space for learners with special needs in mainstream classrooms. As a result, there is little clarity regarding how inclusive education should be practised at the school level, leading to no defined criteria to judge the quality of inclusive education (Boyle & Anderson, 2020). This suggests that there has been slow development in the practice of inclusive education in South Africa (Alsolami, & Vaughan, 2023). Therefore, it is due to the above remarks that this study intends to explore teachers' experiences in implementing inclusive education in mainstream schools at the Thabina circuit to recommend enhanced practices that will result in better integrated, collaborative, and inclusive models for mainstream schools.

Research Question

- What are teachers' experiences with the implementation of inclusive education?

Research Objective

- To explore teachers' experiences with the implementation of inclusive education.

Literature review

The global agenda of inclusive education resulted in changes in the education system of countries worldwide, South Africa also included. Inclusive education moved for equal education for all (EFA) to be realised. It also improved the participation of all learners in education and the quality of education received by learners with special needs (Islami, Amaldi, Salsabilla, Salsabilla & Setyowati, 2025). Before 1994, the education system of South Africa was characterized by segregation and discrimination that was rooted along racial lines (Jali, Tan & Santi, 2024). Before 1994, colour and disabilities were the base and justification for discrimination. Thus, the new democratic constitution came in with a new mandate that guarantees that everyone has a right to equal education (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Consequently, this meant that South Africa had to adopt a single education system and training that is flexible and can be differentiated to accommodate all learners, ensuring equal access to quality education.

Additionally, in South Africa, the inception of inclusive education became a way of ensuring that the education system of the past, of race and exclusion, had to be abolished (Awuma, Nyamamor & Dzage, 2024). As a result, the inclusive education policy brought new hope, principles, and values towards a democratic country that promotes the rights and access of individuals, acknowledging their differences and embracing that all children can learn and are capable hence, they need support.

It is equally important to note that South African inclusive education does not merely involve placing learners with special needs in mainstream schools. The Department of Education (1999) believes that all learners have the same rights and capabilities to pursue their learning needs to the fullest despite their barriers and disabilities. According to StEvens (2024), the Constitution of South Africa requires that education be transformed in line with the values of equality, human rights, dignity, and freedom. It is evident that inclusivity is about embracing and respecting the difference that exists among various learners.

The inclusive education policy was first established in Canada in the 1950s, with the primary goal of providing equal access to education to learners who were isolated from communities since it was believed that they could not be educated (Klefbeck, 2024). According to Nembambula, Ooko and Aluko (2023), countries such as India and Canada were the first ones to initiate the policy on inclusive education. However, to date, teachers in those countries still experience challenges in the implementation of inclusive education. Inclusive education is not a new phenomenon in South Africa, unlike in any other part of the world. According to Mutanga (2024), inclusive education is recognized internationally as a philosophy for achieving social justice and equity. This is to ensure that learners with special needs, who were historically disadvantaged, are now accommodated in the system of education. Therefore, inclusive education enables the education system to be inclusive and ensures that learners with special needs are accommodated in mainstream education. South Africa is also counted among the countries trying to offer inclusive education. However, the practice of inclusive education is met with various challenges. Nukula, Pihlaja and Tapoi (2024) state that teachers' understanding of inclusive education policies and teacher training are important in implementing inclusive education. Therefore, teacher training on the practice of inclusive education plays a critical role in ensuring that teachers are equipped with resources and tools to better the inclusive education policy.

Challenges experienced by teachers in the implementation of inclusive education.

According to Uka (2025), one of the most shared challenges facing the implementation of inclusive education is to train teachers to conceptualize the policy of inclusive education. He further stated that teachers are willing to practice inclusive education but, at times, a lack of understanding of the policy framework impacts the practice of the policy (Klefbeck, 2024). This implies that if teachers do not have a proper understanding of the policy of inclusivity, they will not be able to practice the policy effectively. Mutanga (2024) highlights that most teachers feel

that they do not have the proper understanding to implement inclusive education policy.

Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) argue that South Africa has adopted inclusive education from other countries; hence, the quality of inclusive education practices cannot be tracked. The segregation of learners among racial lines dominated the South African education system. Opuku (2024) concedes that inclusive education policy provides learners with learning barriers with access to equal education. However, inclusive education aims to accommodate all learners. There seem to be multiple challenges facing the implementation of inclusive education. Jali, Tan and Santi (2024) assert that inclusive education was introduced at a time when teachers were not prepared with its implementation processes. They further concede that when it was introduced majority of teachers displayed negative attitudes that were caused by a lack of understanding of the policy (Jali, Tan & Santi, 2024).

StEvens (2024) argues that most learners with special needs drop out of school hence they feel not welcomed and rejected. All these factors raise a few eyebrows about the skills and understanding of teachers on inclusive education practices. Islami et al. (2025) highlight that the South African education system is still in search of proper models to equip teachers with the relevant tools and skills to implement inclusive education. Challenges experienced by teachers in the implementation of inclusive education continue to create crises in the education system in various countries (Makofane, Malatji & Mphahlele, 2023). The above-reviewed literature paints a picture that there is still a long way to go in terms of the implementation of inclusive education. Therefore, this study's objective of exploring the experiences of teachers in the implementation of inclusive education is relevant. Moreover, this study seeks to explore the experiences that teachers have in the implementation of inclusive education and recommends possible strategies that will assist teachers in the daily practice of inclusive education policy. From the above submissions, it can be deduced that there should be a detailed literature review on teachers' understanding the practice of inclusive education policies. Looking at the above-reviewed literature, it is evident that there is a need

to explore teachers' understanding of the practice of inclusive education.

Theoretical Framework

Brief description of Kolb's (1974) learning style in the context of the implementation of inclusive education

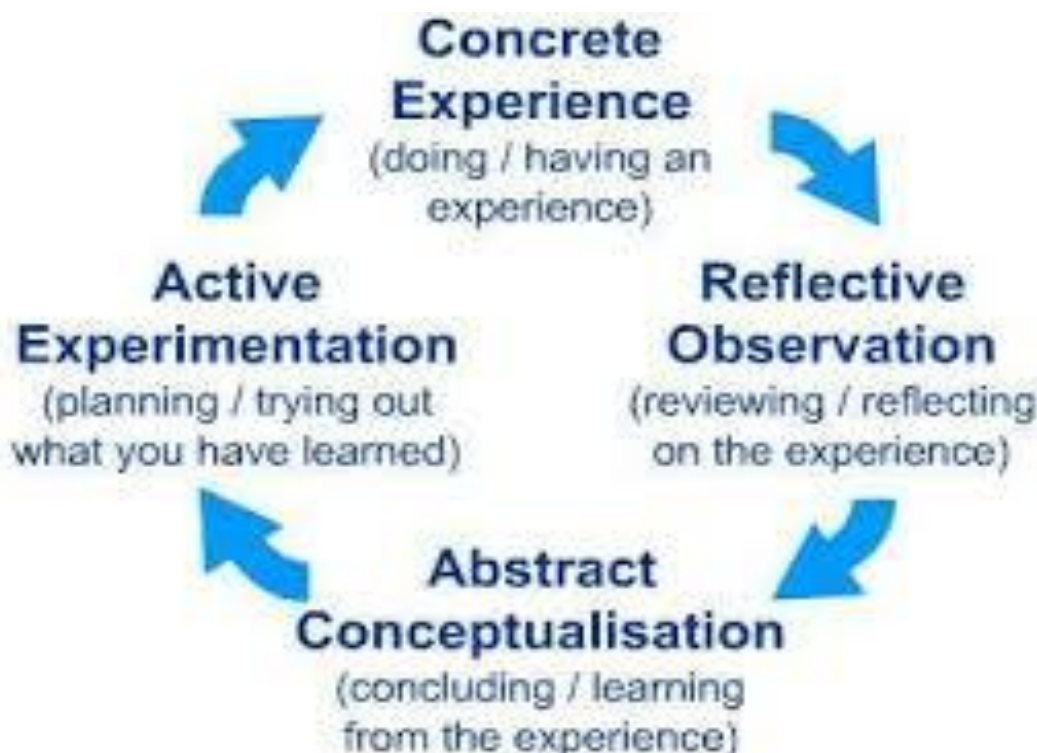
Kolb (1974) sees learning as a process that is interconnected, with each step building on and supporting the previous one. According to Kolb's learning style perspective, it is possible to enter the cycle at any given moment. In the context of the implementation of inclusive education, Kolb's perspective seems to suggest that there is no single stage that operates in isolation. Kolb's theory (1974) paves the way for a learning style that occurs through stages. This theory holds the notion that learning takes place through stages that are mutually integrated and feed one another. In the context of the implementation of inclusive education, the widespread practice is to do theory and then go into practice. However, this theory seems to suggest that the practice of inclusion will take place effectively when the learner can practice all the stages. Therefore, the practice of one stage cannot be warranted into an effective learning procedure alone. Kolb argues that different individuals are comfortable with a certain learning style that suits their needs. In the context of the implementation of inclusive education in secondary schools under study, there is a clear indication that one style of teaching and learning cannot accommodate all learners in schools. This implies that there are elements that influence how one prefers a learning style; for example, elements such as educational experience, social factors, or cognitive abilities of an individual influence the preferred learning style of an individual. According to Kolb (1974), the following are models of learning styles.

Kolb seems to believe that variables of a single axis cannot be performed at the same time for example, (feel and think). This implies that our choice of learning is the product of various variables. In the context of the implementation of inclusive education, teachers are encouraged to teach learners about thinking and feeling. In this theory, learners should be encouraged to voice out how they feel about certain issues. The application

of Kolb's theory is often noticed through the matrix of two by two. The diagram also highlights Kolb's four learning styles which are applicable in

the implementation of inclusive education which are; assimilating, converging, accommodating, and diverging.

Figure 1: Kolb's learning styles



Application of Kolb's learning styles in the context of the implementation of inclusive education

Diverging

Learners can view things from various perspectives. Learners are sensitive, and at times, they prefer to learn through watching rather than doing. They tend to collect information and use imagination to deal with problems. Learners are good when it comes to viewing complex situations from various perspectives. According to Kolb (1974), this is called diverging because learners do well in situations that propel idea generation. People who prefer diverging learning styles enjoy data-gathering activities. People with diverging abilities are interested in people; they tend to have imagination and emotional abilities that enable them to be strong in the arts. Individuals with diverging skills, like working with groups, enjoy listening with an open mind to give and receive personal feedback. This learning style is relevant in the context of the implementation of inclusive education. As such, teaching and learning styles

enable learners to observe the learning process and give their opinions on how they understand and feel about certain issues. It also enables teachers to take learners outside the classroom to engage in fieldwork. This is crucial in the implementation of inclusive education as learners do not experience learning the same way; hence, others are good in the classroom while others do well outside the classroom.

Converging

In this learning style, learning is used to find practical solutions to problems. Learners who prefer this learning style usually want to work with technical tasks and are less concerned with tasks that involve interpersonal relations (Kolb, 1974). Through this learning style, learners can solve problems using ideas and theories. In the context of the implementation of inclusive education in secondary schools, teachers can use this theory to accommodate learners who are good with technical abilities to solve problems in their learning. Kolb seems to suggest that researching and finding solutions to existing problems is

important in the implementation of inclusive education. Converging learning style enable teachers to develop special abilities and enjoy experimenting with new ideas and working with practical applications.

Assimilating

The assimilating learning style is for a logical and concise approach. This learning style is meant for good, and it is where concepts are more important than people. In the context of the implementation of inclusive education, learners should be introduced to certain key concepts that will be of assistance to their learning process (Kolb, 1974). Introducing key concepts to learners will ensure that it becomes easier to understand a wide range of information and be able to organize it in a logical format. Individuals with assimilating skills are more interested in abstract ideas and concepts than people. This learning style is relevant in the implementation of inclusive education for the effective practice of the policy.

Accommodating

The accommodating learning style is the kind of style that is hands-on, and it heavily relies on intuition rather than logic. In this kind of learning style analysis of people is used, and it involves making use of practical and experimental approaches (Kolb, 1974). People with accommodating skills take actions that are propelled by instinct rather than logic. They are interested in activities that bring new challenges and allow them to conduct plans and strategies. People who prefer accommodating learning styles normally rely on others for their analysis. The accommodating learning style is applicable in the practice of inclusive education for teaching and learning to ensure the accommodation of all learners.

Methods

In this study, a qualitative research approach was employed. A case study research design was used for this study. A qualitative approach was deemed fit for this study; hence qualitative research approach intends to obtain an understanding of people's events and experiences in their natural setting (Hill & Tyson, 2008). With the use of purposive sampling, a total of twelve (12) participants were selected. Data was collected

using semi-structured interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain first-hand information from teachers regarding the practice of inclusive education. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) assert that interviews allow the researcher to ask individually formed questions and do not limit the inquiry. Teachers were observed while teaching to get a sense of what challenges they experienced in the classroom. The schools' environment and surroundings were also observed to determine whether the environment is inclusive and sensitive towards learners with special needs. A thematic approach was used to analyse data using themes that emerged from interviews. The process of the thematic data approach involved transcribing data from the recordings that were obtained during interviews with participants; moreover, patterns were derived to formulate themes.

Population

In this study, the population consisted of principals, heads of departments, and teachers of the three sampled schools in the Thabina Circuit.

Sampling procedure

Purposive sampling was employed in this study to purposefully select three schools that are practicing inclusive education. From each of the selected schools, the principal, head of department, and two teachers were selected. The reason for sampling the principal, head of department, and teachers was that they all possess in-depth knowledge about experiences of implementing inclusive education.

Ethical considerations

In terms of ethical considerations in this study, the researcher obtained a letter of permission to conduct a study in identified schools. An ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the University of South Africa. Furthermore, permission was sought from the Limpopo Department of Basic Education, District, and Circuit to involve their teachers in the study. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants' identities were protected as pseudonyms, and codes were used to protect the identity of participants. In addition, participants were informed of their right to take part and withdraw from the study at any given time.

Teachers who were part of the study were given consent forms to permit them to be part of the study and were provided with relevant information that is crucial to the study. Data that was collected was only used for this study.

Results

Challenges experienced by teachers in the implementation of inclusive education.

Challenges that are faced by teachers when implementing inclusive education are a lack of understanding of inclusive education policies and misinterpretation of the practices of inclusive education.

Misinterpretation of inclusive education policies

The participants indicated that when inclusive education was introduced, they struggled to find meaning and understanding of its practices. Participants emphasized that the issue of inclusive education is not even included in the workshops of teachers. The participants further indicated that school management teams are often called to attend workshops with the intention that they would brief all the other teachers remaining at the school. In addition, teachers acknowledged that they lacked a clear understanding of inclusive education practices. During the interview, the participants expressed the frustration they go through as they do not have a clear understanding of the policy practice.

BP: The challenges of implementing inclusive education emanate from the fact that some of us teachers do not even understand the policy of inclusive education itself. Most of the frustrations we have are that we do not even know where to start in practicing the policy. (Semi-structured interview).

ZP: I know about the white paper 6 policy. I do not know how to practice it as I don't even know where to start.

Based on the responses above, it is evident that teachers are struggling to make meaning and understanding of the concept of inclusive education. This means that participants have little knowledge as to what inclusive education is, as they find it challenging to put it into practice.

Lack of clear understanding of the policy of inclusivity

Participants lack a clear understanding of inclusive education policy. According to their responses, it is obvious that they possess little knowledge about the policy of inclusivity. The participants indicated that their idea of inclusivity is that it is all about including all learners in education. Participants seem to struggle to gain a deeper knowledge of the practices and processes of inclusive education. The following are the responses of the participants:

PBP: Oh ok, inclusive education is a policy that aims to include all students regardless of their challenges such as, can I say their learning barriers can I say physical disabilities or to be included in a curriculum of any school.

TB2 What I understand is that we must include every learner despite their learning challenges, this is what I know, and my knowledge is limited to this, to be honest with you.

BPHOD: Inclusive education is not long since it was introduced. what I can say is that I do not have more information on the policy itself but what I know is that all learners should be included in education.

From the responses above, participants do not have critical knowledge that they possess on the policy of inclusivity. On the contrary, teachers are expected to implement policies and if they struggle to interpret the policy, it leads to the ineffective practice of such policy.

Findings

The study found that the challenges that teachers experience in the implementation of inclusive education are a misinterpretation of the policy of inclusive education. Moreover, the study found that teachers have misconceptions concerning the implementation of inclusive education. As a result, this impacts their effectiveness when it comes to putting the policy into practice. Teachers are regarded as agents of change. Therefore, if they indicate any signs of confusion towards policy implementation, this means that the whole implementation process will be affected, and as such, the satisfactory results

that the policy is supposed to produce will come to fail.

Discussion

The study sought to explore teachers' experiences in the implementation of inclusive education policy. To this end, the findings of the study revealed that teachers face several challenges in the implementation of inclusive education. Misinterpretation of inclusive education policies and lack of clear understanding of the policies of inclusivity were cited as some of the challenges that hamper the swift practice of inclusive education.

Misinterpretation of Inclusive Education Policy

The findings of the study revealed that understanding of inclusive education policies is key to the successful practice of inclusive education policy. Moreover, the study revealed that a lack of understanding and misinterpretation of inclusive education policy by teachers is a concern. Misinterpretation experienced by teachers includes a lack of adequate understanding of policy language and putting the policy into context. Although the misinterpretation of inclusive education policy remains a barrier to the effective practice of inclusive education policy, the study also established that some teachers put an effort into practicing inclusive education. Opuka (2024) asserts that misunderstanding a policy can lead to teachers rejecting or accepting it based on false information, which can have a beneficial or bad effect on how the policy is implemented. Ferrero, Tom, Emmanouil and Miguel (2020) recommend using the texts of refutation as a tactic to deal with the misunderstanding of education policies like inclusive education.

In addition, Schroeder (2022) defines refutation of texts as a method for dispelling misunderstandings about a subject. Furthermore, the study found that certain schools try to implement inclusive education policies. However, the schools fall short of the quality and standard of executing the policy. Uka (2025) argues that the goal of implementing inclusive education was to improve the quality of life, foster social and personal growth, and ensure the quality of education. However, Klefbeck (2024) indicates that teachers do not devote much time to the

implementation process because they believe it is not necessary. Hence, the policy is intended for special schools. Kolb (1974) talks of the reflective observation stage which allows teachers to look at the inclusive education policies and reflect if they are implementing them as expected.

The impact of misconceptions of the policies of inclusive education

This study has established that a lack of understanding of the policies of inclusivity has dire consequences not only to the policy itself, but it derails already obtained results that the policy has already achieved. Mutanga (2024) concedes that schools would be safer and better places for teachers and learners if an inclusive education policy were implemented appropriately. For example, no one would be discussing issues such as drug abuse, bullying, harassment, and homicides in schools. Malatji, Mavuso and Malatji (2018) argue that through partnership with different stakeholders, inclusive education policy can be implemented effectively. However, these issues are common in educational institutions. On the other hand, Nikula, Pihlaja and Tapio (2024) assert that practicing inclusive education entails carrying out all inclusion policies, of which in this study was the main concern, teachers are unable to execute inclusive education policies in mainstream schools. Kolb (1974) talks of the importance of active experimentation, which allows teachers and schools to learn from their experience and benchmark with other schools that are doing better when it comes to the implementation of inclusive education policies. Bhutta and Muzaffa (2025) suggest that to ensure learners with barriers to learning obtain equal learning opportunities as learners who are in mainstream schools, teachers should be given the freedom to apply their unique skills, knowledge, expertise, and other traits. According to Dignath (2022), a misunderstanding of the inclusion policies leads to circumstances in which teachers are deemed to be incompetent and unable to manage burning issues in schools.

Lack of clear understanding of policies of inclusivity

The findings indicate that teachers are still struggling to understand the policies of inclusive education. Teachers as implementers of the policies should demonstrate a prominent level

of understanding of the policies they are expected to practice. A study by Makofane and Malatji (2022) revealed that teachers are not confident enough to interpret the theory of inclusive education into practice. Kolb (1974) talks of the concrete experience stage, which allows teachers to learn by doing. In this case, they need to implement the inclusive education policy in the mainstream, make mistakes, and learn from their mistakes. Similarly, Van Vuuren (2020) found that teachers are not fully aware and do not understand the policy of inclusivity. Based on the findings of this study, it was evident that teachers only have basic knowledge of the policy of inclusivity, although they struggle to give further clarity on what the policy entails. The study revealed extensive frustration that teachers encounter in their daily activities in trying to implement the policy of inclusivity and ensure that learners with diverse learning needs are accommodated. Consequently, these hurt how the policy of inclusive education is practiced.

Summary of findings

The findings revealed that teachers in full-service schools do not have a clear understanding of the practice of inclusive education. Teachers do not have a conceptual understanding of inclusive education policies, hence the slow progress in the implementation of inclusive education. The study revealed that the Department of Education does not prioritize the training of teachers regarding the implementation of inclusive education because workshops are organized, and only a few teachers, particularly members of the school management team, get to attend such workshops with the expectation that they will train other teachers at the respective schools. The study further indicates that a lack of understanding of inclusive education policy is a contributing factor to the slow progress in the implementation of inclusive education. The practice of inclusive education is complex; hence, there is a need for teachers to be trained in inclusive education.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to explore teachers' experiences in the implementation of inclusive education practices in Thabina Circuit, Mopani-West district of Limpopo province. The

study found that there is a lack of understanding by teachers regarding policies of inclusive education hence the slow progress in the successful practice of inclusive education. Reflecting on the findings of the study of teachers' understanding of inclusive education policy, it is evident that the Department of Basic Education does not provide adequate training and support on inclusive education policy. Therefore, this study concludes that teachers need in-depth training on the policy of inclusivity to enrich their knowledge and skills for the development and practice of inclusive education.

Recommendations

The study recommends that teachers should be trained in the practice of inclusive education. Furthermore, the study recommends that teachers get trained on conceptualizing inclusive education through workshops on inclusive education. The practice of inclusive education is not being properly implemented because teachers misconceive the policy. Continuous meetings are recommended; hence, it will assist teachers to share ideas that would improve the practice of inclusive education.

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Teachers' experiences on the implementation of inclusive education

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