

TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF IN-SERVICE TRAINING ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The object of research: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and describe teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education. While diverse literature has dealt with teachers' experiences of in-service training programmes and the conceptualization of inclusive education, the majority of these studies show limited focus on in-service training programmes tailored according to identified classroom needs.

Methods: This study adopted a phenomenological research design. The purposive and conveniently selected 8 participants enrolled in the BEd Honours (Learning Support) distance education programme participated in the study. Furthermore, the study's data collection process involved telephonic semi-structured interviews. The study used a thematic data analysis method.

The main scientific results: The findings in this study indicated that the themes of learning barriers and inclusive education training. Moreover, the findings indicated that BEd Honours is informative and necessary for professional development; however, some participants shared concerns about the limited application material in the training programme.

The area of practical use of the research results: This is for teachers in the in-service training. By identifying and uncovering teachers' needs to implement inclusive education, these findings can be used to improve in-service training programmes.

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1. Introduction

The South African education amendment that asserts the basic right to education merely opens the opportunity for all learners to access basic education [1]. This amendment only guarantees every learner's basic learning needs to be met; however, it does not cater for learners with learning disabilities. A study indicated that learners in Africa encounter challenges to learn for multiple reasons and in the Southern African context; this has resulted in exclusion from education [1]. In realization of this gap in the education system, the South African government implemented policies on inclusive education. The framework explains how important it is to include all learners in classrooms and attempts to address the various learning needs of learners through different amended policies [2]. For example, one policy states the right to include every learner irrespective of their learning disabilities. In 2014 the Department of Basic Education also published a framework introducing screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS) to aid and assist learners who need learning support in classroom [2]. Although these policies has been amended over several years, implementing inclusive education remains to be one of the challenges teachers are faced with in classrooms [3]. The South African policy that follows the Salamanca Statement and framework for action on special needs education emphasizes on the awareness and actions to combat discrimination in education through advocating for equal education for all [4]. This implies that in attempt to challenge the issues of discrimination against learners with special needs in mainstream education, inclusive education policies were established.

In addition, the policy on inclusive education stated in the South African School Act of 1996 and the [2] made way for the implementation of inclusive education [1]. This implementation does not only imply assisting learners in classrooms, but it also means ensuring that learners succeed and contribute to the development of the society [5]. This entails that inclusive education is support-

ing learners in classroom settings irrespective of their disability to ensure academic, occupational and social functioning success. In this study inclusive education was explored holistically through the lens of teachers' experiences. Teachers are required to complete a degree or diploma in education, which takes three to four years to complete. At the completion of their academic final year of study, the assumption is that they are ready for classroom challenges. In addition, the education system has pressurized teachers to effectively teach learners whose learning methods widely vary through the implementation of inclusive education [1]. Although the South African government has published a framework of inclusive education policies, a study argues that these policies are extremely complex to implement in classroom settings due to various factors [3]. These factors include overcrowded classrooms, and the lack of skill sets and resources. Therefore it is arguable that the problem in inclusive education is not a question of policy formation, but difficulties in implementing the policies. For these reasons, teachers require development training programmes that are focused on the integration of an inclusive education model in classrooms.

1. 1. The object of this research

The present study examined teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education in South Africa.

1. 2. Problem description

It is of great prominence that more in-service trainings are introduced for different teaching and learning needs. In efforts to expand and extend more training programmes that enhance professional developmental skills of teachers, it is also very significant to ensure that the programmes provided are addressing teachers' classroom challenges. Such in-service training programmes specific to teaching perspectives or needs can be achieved through careful planning before the in-service training is administered [6]. This requires a need analysis that can be achieved through an open dialogue between researchers and teachers. The problem most educators' encounter is supporting learners with disabilities without the skills and training that equips them for classroom challenges. In circumstances where educators are provided with professional development trainings such as in-service programmes, the concern is the effectiveness of the training to aid teachers' classroom needs to implement inclusive education. The implications of this is a gap in classroom inclusivity, hence this study is of importance to literature.

Inclusive education is a complex concept that celebrates diversity [7]. This implies that the value of inclusivity is placed on promoting diversity in different learning abilities. A study conducted in South Africa argues that there are many learners with learning disabilities in Africa [7]. Similarly, a study conducted in Kenya primary school reported that about 95 % of learners experience learning disabilities [8]. As a result, many learners are excluded from the curriculum and the education system. According to [2], inclusive education is described as learners' rights to learn and to be supported in a classroom environment irrespective of their gender, race, HIV status, culture, language, and disability. Inclusive education positions learners at the forefront, where learning challenges are not viewed as learners' disabilities, but instead as an education system that does not cater to all learning needs [3]. The value and aim of inclusivity is to ensure that every learner is included in the education system, and the focus is moved away from what disabilities learners have. Moreover, [7] describes inclusive education according to four principles that can be put into practice:

- a) creating an engaging classroom environment that challenges learners and the curriculum;
- b) embracing diversity irrespective of learners' strengths and weaknesses;
- c) using reflective strategies and a variety of instructive methods;
- d) expanding external support through collaboration of stakeholders. In this study, the focus is centred on learners with learning difficulties being supported in a mainstream education system.

There are various learning difficulties that learners may experience. For example, [9], describe learning difficulties as areas of needs (pg, 696). These areas of needs include: communication and interaction, cognition and learning, behavioral, emotional, and social development, lastly, sensory and physical needs [9]. A few decades ago, Special Educational Needs (SEN) were only categorized as physiological and psychological causes, however, since then social and environment factors have been accounted for [7]. Learning barriers discussed in this study encompasses of cognitive, psychological, sensory, communication and social needs that interfere with academical

function. Teachers are the primary caretakers of learning needs in classrooms and this has created a gap in professional development for teachers. Some teachers do not have qualifications and training to implement inclusion [5]. A study conducted in Gauteng, South Africa by [10] indicated that most interviewed teachers stressed the need for extensive training in inclusive education to cater for diverse learning needs. This illustrates a profound need to address the gap in professional development of educators. In a world that is constantly evolving with various challenges and information, teachers are in need of platforms to enhance existing knowledge and develop new skills. This gap can be addressed by distance education programmes such as in-service training [8].

Distance education plays an important role in South African education. The South African Government amended policies to expand and implement various in-service training programmes in South Africa [11]. However, the major concern in literature is the ineffectiveness of in-service training programmes [6]. There are various challenges that exist in establishing in-service trainings; such challenges include lack of research-based planning, and lack of careful administration [12]. The lack of careful planning in in-service training programmes results in content that is unrelated to classroom needs of educators [13]. This gap indicates a profound need to establish in-service trainings that are context specific through research-based planning. This study explores and describes teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education. The description of teachers' experiences can provide insight of the challenges teachers experience in implementing the content provided in the in-service training. This study can address the gap in literature by exploring teachers' needs to cater for inclusive education in classrooms.

1. 3. Theoretical Framework

The Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was adopted to guide this study. This theory argues that individuals are influenced by a variety of factors that function at different systems, and in order to understand an individual's experience, such factors need to be taken into account [14]. This framework provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education in a broader context. These systems give a broader perspective of an individual and form a network of relationships, which are in continuous interaction [15]. The major concern in literature revolves around the lack of in-service training specific to teachers' needs [6]. Bronfenbrenner's theory explains that schools are at a micro-level of the system in education, where the policies of inclusion are practically implemented and if there are challenges in implementation, this affect all levels [10]. By incorporating this theory to this study, different systems that are in interaction that influence teachers' experiences of in-service training were taken into account in order to gain a broader in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education. Teachers do not exist in isolation, and all the systems determine whether they will be successful in implementing inclusive education, and this includes in-service training programmes specific to their classroom needs effectively planned and implemented in other levels of the system. This theory assisted in understanding teachers' perspectives from a broader lens of all factors that may have contributed to their experiences.

1. 4. Suggested solution to the problem

The implementation of inclusive education require more than policies. Literature on inclusive education indicates that there are several factors that foster the implementation of inclusive education in educational settings [8, 9]. Moreover, [4] argue that inclusive education requires a culture of diversity promoted through a display of positive attitude towards learning disabilities. This highlights the importance and value of teacher attitude towards inclusion. Similarly, [3] argues that the success of every educational programme depends on teachers' attitude towards inclusivity in classroom. A study in Tran-Nzoia Kenya showed that some teachers have shown a good attitude towards inclusive education by implementing various strategies to promote inclusive education [8]. In addition, an average 58.6 % of teachers always apply support strategies in their classrooms, which include special attention; extra time to complete a task at hand; and classroom placement according to their learning needs [8]. This study has shown how a positive attitude toward learning disabilities encourages the implementation of inclusive strategies. Furthermore, teachers who have shown positive attitude towards inclusive education have a controlled classroom environment over the teachers who show negative attitude towards inclusivity [16]. In addition, a study conducted

in Spain argues that teachers' attitudes are a good predictor of their actions [17]. These studies validate the correlation of a positive teacher attitude towards inclusive education and the implementation of inclusive education. Therefore, it is of prominence to understand attitudes and beliefs teachers hold towards inclusion, to fully comprehend implementation of inclusive education.

Learners' grade progression and academic participation is highly dependent on teacher support [8]. This makes teachers prominent because they play a crucial role in promoting participation and ensuring academic success [3]. This also entails that teachers hold a prominent academic success responsibility for all learners. South African inclusive education laws and policies were established and amended to encourage teachers to promote inclusiveness in classrooms, for example [2] advocates for inclusive approaches in classroom settings. For this reason, teachers are the primary agents to ensure inclusive education is implemented in classroom settings. Their role includes identifying children with disabilities; referring them to professionals for further examination; placing children in classrooms according to academic benefits; preparation of teaching aid to assist children with disabilities; and developing a positive attitude towards all learners [3]. This emphasizes the notion that teacher's roles and responsibilities are not limited to teaching school subjects.

The importance of implementing inclusive education is not only dependent on teachers' attitudes, but it is also dependent on teachers' ability to recognize their roles and responsibilities to cater for learners with learning difficulties [18]. Inclusion requires teachers to accept their responsibility to ensure that children learn and feel a sense of belonging regardless of their disability [3]. This entails that teachers' understanding of their role in inclusive education is essential and critical for the implementation of inclusive education in classrooms. An online study focusing on the perspective of educators' needs, roles and barriers of supporting children's mental health was conducted in America [18]. The findings indicated that some educators showed acknowledgement and understanding of their roles and responsibilities to support learners with mental health problems [18]. This might be the case with some educators, however, some educators struggle to understand their roles and responsibilities of supporting learners with special needs because they feel incompetent to do so [5] as a result they do not implement support strategies. It is very challenging to assume a role that one lacks skills and abilities for.

Despite the fact that some teachers feel incompetent to support learners with learning disabilities, a study shows that some teachers use co-teaching as a method of promoting inclusive learning for learners [19]. Furthermore, this involves support methods where educators co-plan for lessons and co-teach in the same classroom environment to cater for different learning abilities [9]. This entails that teachers share skills-sets in the best interest of supporting learners with learning difficulties. The intention is not only to support learners with special needs, but also to enhance the curriculum content availability to all [9]. Although most educators reported the effectiveness of this strategy in enhancing support for learners' needs, this also has limitations, which may include lack of resources and skills to implement co-teaching [20]. Inclusion should be seen in proximity to teachers' abilities to influence learners academically and socially positively [21]. Therefore, it is arguable that teachers adapting a positive attitude towards learning disabilities, understanding their responsibilities in inclusion, and utilizing strategies such co-teaching, may positively influence learners academically. Although the implementation of inclusive education is essential to learners' academic progression, it is also challenging to support learners with little or no assistance. Some teachers argue that strategies of inclusion are inadequate to ensure academic participation [9]. In addition, [10] argues on the notion that teachers are capable of promoting inclusive education with support from parents, communities and the government.

The present study aimed to address the identified gap in literature, which includes introducing in-service training programmes that are specific to classroom needs; and adequately addressing challenges experienced by teachers when implementing inclusive education. Therefore, it is arguable that this study can contribute to the body of research and knowledge. The study also aimed to uncover teachers' needs to cater for inclusive education in classrooms. This study aimed at exploring teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education.

The Present Study.

The present study examined teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education.

Research Question.

The research question of the study was stated as follows: what are teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education?

2. Materials and Methods

2. 1. Research design

This study adopted the interpretative phenomenological research design. This design is used to describe individual's experiences on a specific phenomenon [22]. In addition, phenomenological design aims to identify human experiences of research participants and understand these experiences objectively from the researcher's own assumptions [22]. This brings a focus on the description of research participants' experiences with the intention to objectively gain a deeper understanding of the nature of individual experiences. Interpretative phenomenological design aims to uncover meaning underlying experiences [23]. Different individuals may experience the same phenomenon; however, the meaning drawn from the experience may differ from one individual to another. This design illustrates how shared experiences are mutually understood and how they can be various meaning drawn from the same experience [24]. This design was utilized in this study because it provides an opportunity for a systematic reflection on fundamental components of in-service training.

2. 2. Context of the study

This study regards the University of Pretoria as the context of the study because the sample was drawn from this context. The university consists of seven campuses with the Groenkloof campus being the specific context of the study. Groenkloof campus is a campus specifically for students enrolled within the Faculty of Education, and the participants of this study are enrolled at the Unit for distance education for BEd Honours (Learner Support) course.

2. 3. Research participants

The sample size in this research comprised 8 teachers who were involved in distance learning at the selected university. This sample of participants was considered to be appropriate because it led to data saturation, when information has reached a point of redundancy [25]. To obtain the 8 teachers, non-probability method, the purposive sampling was used to select research participants. Purposive sampling method reflects the purpose of the study and directs researcher in identifying participants that are information – rich to the phenomenon under investigation [26]. Moreover, unique purposive sampling is based on the occurrence of a unique phenomenon of interest; this determines the selection criterion of participants [25]. The purposive sampling method was suitable for this study since it guided the study to a selection criterion of relevant research participants. In addition, the selection of unique participants enabled the researcher to generate rich information that addresses the research questions of this study.

2. 4. Research Tools

This study used semi-structured telephonic interviews. Semi-structured interviews are interviews with guided questions that permit flexibility [25]. They are suitable for the study because, they allowed the researcher to explore experiences that could not be observed [24], and they also allowed the researcher to obtain more rich and detailed information [22]. Contrary to diaries, semi-structured interviews are uncomplicated and this was beneficial because fewer participants withdrew from the study. Conducting the interviews telephonically eliminated the possibility of geographical constrains [25]. Participants of this study are geographically scattered over Pretoria, South Africa. Conducting the interviews allowed the participants to participate in the study at the convenience of their space. In consideration of the global COVID-19 pandemic, conducting the interviews telephonically was also a health measure to prevent possible exposure to COVID-19 infection. Telephonic interviews are critiqued for possibly compromising confidentiality [25]. Although this is unlikely to occur, it was considered that confidentiality might be compromised through internet tools.

2. 5. Trustworthiness of qualitative data

In this study, the trustworthiness of interview data. The credibility of interview data was ensured by prolonged engagement, in which, instead of only relying on the guided questions, participants were also asked follow- up questions to gain more clarity [27]. In addition, It is critical that readers can transfer the findings of the study to their own context [28]. In this regard, transfer-

ability of interview data was ensured through thick descriptions of data, which was achieved, by ensuring that the methodology and the research process is thoroughly described.

2. 6. Procedure

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Department of Education. Thereafter, to conduct the semi-structured telephonic interviews in this study, teachers enrolled in the BEd Honours programme were contacted by the Unit of Distance Education, University of Pretoria. The eight teacher participants indicated their interest to participate in the study and were thus issued with consent forms, which they signed and handed back to the researcher. In addition, confidentiality during data collection was maintained by ensuring that information obtained is secured, by storing data electronically with a protective password. The smart phone used as a recording device has a protective password only available to the researcher. Moreover, anonymity was maintained by ensuring that participants' identity details were not written on the transcripts, instead it was coded using numbers such as p1, where this refers to "participant 1". Thereafter, the telephonic interviews were conducted, with each lasting between 45 minutes to one hour. The interview transcripts were safely stored in readiness for analysis.

2. 7. Data analysis

Data analysis is aimed at providing interpretation and contextual description through a back and forth movement with data in attempt to build in-depth understanding [29]. The data analysis method used for this study is thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis is defined as a systemic process of searching for themes from the data set [30]. This entails that the researcher identifies common threads from the information provided by participants, and this can be achieved through grouping information into themes. Thematic analysis design allows the researcher to collectively make sense of data set [31]. Themes depend on whether the researcher captures something prominent to the research purpose and aim [31]. Thematic analysis (TA) is widely used and there is no linear way on utilizing it and it allows for thick and rich descriptive information of a phenomenon under investigation [29]. This method also allowed the study to fully explore the teachers' experiences of the BEd Honours (Learning Support) in-depth.

3. Results and Discussion

This study examined teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education from a South African perspective. The findings of the study indicate that teachers reported two common themes of learning barriers and inclusive education training. The themes are discussed as follows.

3. 1. Sub-theme 1a: Learning Barriers

The participants in this study indicated that they have encountered learners with learning barriers; however, there seems to be a challenge in labelling the learning barriers. This is because some teachers do not know the correct diagnosis for the learning barrier. Learning barriers are cognitive, psychological, sensory, communication, and social needs that learners experience interfering with academic success [7]. Nonetheless, they seem to agree that learning barriers are a challenge that needs to be addressed. The data set shows that most participants have taught learners who experience learning difficulties. Participant 1 described various learning difficulties that learners experience in her classroom: "*Some have Attention-Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, some have Down syndrome and some have a slow development*" (P1: L75-76). Furthermore, participant 2 described how LDs are not only found in mainstream education but also in the context of a special school: "*Some of our learners already have a disability, either visually impaired or blind. A lot of my children also have Attention-Deficit Hyperactive Disorder or Attention-Deficit Disorder*" (P2: L115-116).

Participant 2 further elaborated on the challenges of teaching learners who are experiencing learning barriers alongside physical disabilities:

Obviously, it makes it more difficult because they already have a main disability but they also have learning problems. Some of them have dyslexia, and then a lot of them have more minimal learning school problems like fine motor skills (P2: L117-121).

Even though some participants were aware of some learning barriers, others were not aware of the formal terminology and diagnosis for the learning barriers. For instance, participant 3 expressed that it does not know what the learning problems are called, however, it is aware of the signs or symptoms:

Most of the children do not know how to read. When you read for them they understand, but when they actually need to read for themselves they can't pronounce words. When you ask them to come speak they can listen and speak to you about the story they have been listening to. Some of kids they don't have confidence, they lack that confidence and also there are learners who only recognise only numbers, but not sentences, words and how to use them to form sentences. So I have never given the learning problem a name, I could only explain what I have realised so far with the learners that am teaching, because am not a doctor. I could say maybe a child has Autism spectrum because it includes a lot of things, but it not like that (P3: L90-101).

The data set also shows a common thread on the main challenge contributing to learning difficulties. Some teachers brought forth concerns about educational transitions: *"All I can say is that most of the learners especially those who are transitioning experience learning problems. I am teaching grade 4, 5, 6, and 7"* (P3: L102-103).

Participant 6 agreed with participant 3's viewpoint by stating that some children are not school ready: *"I am in grade one. There are some learners that are not school ready, you know they are not ready for school"* (P6: L14-15). As vital as it is to take note of school readiness, participant 8 argued that the areas of difficulty are communication and behaviour:

I have a lot of kids who like... last year I had a child who came from Malawi and this year I have a child that came from Nigeria. So they struggle with English a lot; they do not understand what I am telling them. A lot of the kids from grade 3, when they come here they cannot read, they cannot spell, they can't sit still only for 10 minutes to do the work. They are very hyperactive, so it is difficult (P8: L58-65).

From the interview results above, it is evident that the teacher participants in this study expressed that some learners experience learning barriers. It is crucial to note that most participants in this study teach in mainstream education; therefore, it is arguable that learning barriers exist not only in special education but also in mainstream education. A study conducted in primary schools in Kenya indicated that 95 % of learners in general education experience LDs [8]. Similarly, [10] also reported that there is about 70 % of children with disabilities in South African schools. Although learners with LDs were historically segregated from mainstream education, [32] argue that this segregation was criticized for moral concerns. As a result, more scholars advocate for the inclusivity of students with disabilities in mainstream education [7, 9, 21].

Participants in this study further expressed that learning barriers may occur in various areas of need. This viewpoint is similar to [9] argument that highlights that every learner is unique and responds to different learning methods; moreover, learning barriers are broad and unique. The following are the areas of need that the participants in this study identified as unique according to their classroom context: communication, language, behavioral problems and academic transitions. Consistent with the data set, [33] argue that LDs can be characterized according to the following general classifications: language barriers; hyperactiveness; limited attention span; motor coordination problems; social or emotional problems; inadequate spatial organization; auditory challenges; and visual perception difficulties. One of the main characteristics that were commonly raised by participants was behavioral/emotional issues. According to [18], about 5 % to 9 % of children meet the criteria for mental health disorders in schools.

Moreover, participants in this study highlighted the issue of school readiness. Some participants argued that learners are not academically ready for school and as a result; they fail to meet academic standards. Some participants associated school readiness with academic transitions. Moreover, [34] contend that learning barriers are highly linked to self-regulation skills that are necessary for academic progression. These may include the ability to adapt to new academic requirements or a transition from one school to another. For this reason, school readiness may play a significant role

in understanding certain learning difficulties. Although participants in this study indicated that they have experienced various learning difficulties unique to their classrooms, some indicated challenges of labelling learning barriers. This challenge may arguably tie into the issues of conceptualizing LDs. For instance, various scholars conflate the term ‘learning disabilities’ with special needs, learning barriers, learning impairments and mental disorders [9, 34, 35]. However, the challenge of labelling the learning barriers may also show a gap in knowledge, skills and further training. Although [9] argues that it is of great importance for teachers to have the ability to identify learning challenges and shortcomings of learners in classrooms. This may be easier said than done.

3. 2. Sub-theme 1b: Inclusive education training

The results also reported a common thread in the data set is the need for more IE training. Inclusive education training is any form of an in-service training programme aimed at training teachers on inclusivity in classroom settings [3]. Participants explained the importance and the need for the government to provide IE training programmes. Some participants indicated that the benefits of the training would position learners at an advantage. Although some participants believed that they are already trained for IE, there seems to be a concern for other educators that have not yet been trained for IE. In consideration of this viewpoint, participants further argued the need for such training to be mandatory for all teaching practices. One participant in the study spoke for all professionals by indicating the need for all educators to be trained for IE:

I honestly think it's vital to let all professionals in education sector to be trained for inclusive education, so that all teachers and all professionals are able to assist all learners, irrespective of the barriers that they face (P5: L65-68).

It further indicated a gap in teachers’ knowledge and skills on IE:

I feel teachers are a little bit sceptical, they are not really clued up on the White Paper 6, and they not clued up on how inclusion works. So I think there has to be a mass training for teachers (P5: L79-84).

Similar to this viewpoint, another participant indicated the need to make IE compulsory as a teaching requirement:

I think it must be a requirement, you know for entry into the education system. If you do not know anything about inclusion, actually it is like you don't know what you are going to do in the field. You will just implement everything as it is for every learner in your class (P6: L35-42).

There seems to be a need for more opportunities to be trained for IE; for instance, Participant 7 argued that the South African government does not provide training for teachers:

We didn't have the training from the Department of Education to deal with learners who experience those problems. We need to be trained and skilled enough to deal with those learners to be able to support them and to workshop the parents, to remove the concept that their learners have learning difficulties (P7: L76-80).

Participant 7 further highlighted the benefits that come with being trained for IE:

If the departments can train us on how to support those learners, we will accommodate them, support and view them as unique, and embrace diversity in the school. This way we will be able to create an environment which will accommodate every learner irrespective of their learning abilities or physical impairment. I think we need training on this, on how to implement inclusive education in our schools (P7: L83-89).

From the qualitative results, it can be argued that teachers reported that with such a significant gap in skills and knowledge on inclusive policies and practices, IE training should be

compulsory. In addition, some participants further argued that IE training has several benefits and the main advantage is creating a better learning environment for all learners. Participants in this study showed a general concern for the need for IE training. On the same note, [36] state that 7 % of educators in African countries have little knowledge and skills to cater for all learning needs. Furthermore, [8] argue that educators show inconsistency in implementing inclusive strategies due to a significant gap in knowledge and skills. Some participants seemed to concur with this viewpoint and the main concern is for teachers that are currently not receiving any further training. In addition, [3] argues that there is a profound need for all teachers to be trained for IE. Furthermore, the author contends that the lack of knowledge and skills is largely due to a lack of training on learning barriers. Arguably, teacher training plays a significant role in teacher quality and IE.

The results of the study also showed a common pattern of teachers receiving limited governmental training. Some teachers indicated that they did not receive any training from the government excluding the BEd Hons (Learner Support) training. Literature indicates that there are very few teacher professional development trainings for specific schooling needs that are implemented [5, 36, 37]. The government plays such a significant role in ensuring teacher readiness and teaching quality. For instance, a study in Beaufort District Primary School, South Africa indicated that most teachers that participated in the study expressed concerns with regard to support from the education government district [5]. Moreover, [37] argue that a trained teacher is an effective teacher that takes into account the importance of implementing inclusivity in classroom settings. For instance, [38] state that in order to include diverse learning needs, teachers would need to use complex and diverse teaching methods. Similarly, [39] assert that professional development not only improves teaching quality but also improves the learning outcomes of all learners. Therefore, IE training can be viewed not only as a professional development tool but also as a strategy to improve the learning outcomes for all learners. Therefore, IE training is arguably a crucial element in creating an inclusive learning environment.

Despite the valuable data collected, this study has three main limitations. The first limitation is the low number of eventual participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic that forced only telephonic interviews on the researchers. Secondly, the study could have benefitted from additional data gathering methods aligned with this type of study. Lastly, participants were limited to only student-teachers. Richer data could have been collected by involving academics, the management and administrative staff members of distance education to further enrich the findings. Therefore, there are prospects for further research.

4. Conclusion

The study explored the teachers' experiences of in-service training on inclusive education. The findings indicate that the BEd Honours (Learner Support) training to be very informative. The BEd Honours (Learner Support) was described as a good tool that enhances knowledge on inclusive education. The emphasis was on how the training improved classroom teaching practices. Philosophy was one of the modules that were found interesting and insightful. However, the findings also reported about the limited application material in the training programme.

The findings imply that by identifying and uncovering teachers' needs to implement inclusive education, these findings can be used to improve in-service training programmes. The study therefore recommends that the Departments of Education should develop continuous training programs for teachers on inclusive education. This would enhance teachers understanding of inclusive practices and techniques which they could use in mainstream schools.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in relation to this paper, as well as the published research results, including the financial aspects of conducting the research, obtaining and using its results, as well as any non-financial personal relationships.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on reasonable request.

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