



HANDLING LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN THE CLASSROOM AT PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL: A CASE OF TEACHERS IN THE MANZINI REGION OF ESWATINI

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine how teachers handle learners with learning difficulties in the classroom. The study was based on the following objective: establish how teachers handle learners with learning difficulties in the classroom, identify the challenges faced by teachers when handling learners with learning difficulties in the classroom and establish possible solutions to minimise the challenges faced by teachers when handling learners with learning difficulties. The study was underpinned by the theory of social constructivism by Vygotsky. A qualitative approach was adopted for this study where a case study was chosen as a research design. A convenience sampling technique was used to sample 10 teachers who participated in the study. Data were obtained through individual in-depth interviews and thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. The findings of the study revealed that teachers encourage learner participation during lessons. Teachers also encourage and learners to work collaboratively with their peers and this help and enable those with learning difficulties to understand the content from their colleagues. The study further revealed challenges faced by teachers such as the congestion of the learners in the classroom and the time allocated per period. The teachers suggested that schools should build additional classes and constantly be equipped with skills and knowledge on how to handle learners with learning difficulties in the classrooms. The study recommends that teachers should be continuously be equipped with skills and knowledge to handle learners with learning difficulties. It is also a recommendation in this study that learners with learning difficulties be awarded with an opportunity to access quality education proper infrastructure and instructional resources.

KEYWORDS: learning difficulties, disabilities, primary school, classroom, learners

INTRODUCTION

Learning difficulties are general expression of some of the individual difficulties encountered by learners. Learning difficulties refers to a variety of heterogeneous disorders, which result in difficulty in learning, speaking, writing, reading, information processing, mathematical computation, attention retention and in the coordination of movements (Antonis, 2022). The origin of learning difficulties is due to the dysfunction in the central nervous system of the learner and can cause problems throughout the life of the learner (Gugoumi & Lau, 2015). The learning difficulties which occur to each learner vary, which makes the role of the teacher difficult, since one is called to deal with each case separately (Malik et al, 2014). Teachers of young learners must know the different ways of giving instructions for learners, taking into consideration their special needs (Karunanayake et al, 2020). Many teachers, are not well aware of the nature of learning difficulties and how to plan interventions or treatments to mitigate their effects on children's learning. Failure to consider learning difficulties in the early childhood education curriculum for learners can make it difficult to achieve the goal of developing any educational system which is the success of learners in their academic performance.

HOW TEACHERS HANDLE LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN THE CLASSROOM

There is research evidence to suggest that teachers try their level best in helping and accommodating learners with learning difficulties in the classroom (Martínez-Álvarez, 2017; Yakubova, Hughes, & Chen, 2020). Avramidis & Kalvya (2007) revealed in their study that teacher uses monitoring seatwork in handling learners with learning difficulty. Such monitoring involves teachers moving around the classroom, being aware of how well or poorly the learners are progressing with their work or assignments and working with learners one on one as the need arise. Monitoring seatwork helps teachers to arrange learners in the classroom where learners with hearing problems sit in the front. Powel and Kusuma (2011) indicated in their study that teachers motivate and manage each learner's individual learning need. The learners feel a sense of personal, active engagement with the material, rather than passive, just show up kind of class. The combination of teaching approaches and teaching methods in the classroom helps learners with diverse learning difficulties. Learners with speech and language



communication issues, teaching approaches and methods will be different from those having behaviour, emotional and social developmental problems. A study conducted by Mukhopadhyay et al. (2012) showed that teachers use teaching methods that help to get attention from learners. The study further revealed that the teachers use pictures, divide learners into small groups. Similarly, Borja, Soto, and Sanchez, (2015) revealed that teachers use teaching methods such as role-plays, songs, and pictures in accommodating learners with learning difficulties in the classroom. These approaches reinforce the teaching and learning process in a positive way (Danda, 2009).

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS IN HANDLING LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Teachers face a number of difficulties in teaching learners with learning difficulties in the classroom when learners need extra attention, group activities, handle bad behaviours, and to teach learners (Matsenjwa, Ntinda, & Makondo, 2020; Udoba, 2014). A study done by Lama (2019) revealed that lack of classrooms is a challenge to teachers when handling learners with learning difficulties. Learners with learning difficulties have different individual requirements in order for them to learn and thus they need enough space to do many activities. Another study done by (Kuyini & Ishwar, 2013) showed that the overcrowding of learners in the classrooms make teachers to be disadvantaged especially when helping learners with learning difficulties. Creating a good learning environment help learners with learning difficulties to concentrate on their tasks and improve their academic performance. Learners who have physical difficulties will need to be able to move around the classroom easily and safely in the classroom with their sticks, on crutches or in wheelchairs to avoid any unnecessary obstacles on their way. The overcrowding of learners in the classroom negatively affects the process of teaching and learning.

Another challenge faced by teachers is the lack of learning materials that the teachers need to support the learners with learning difficulties. Mangope et al (2013) showed that teaching materials are one of the most important things a teacher needs to consider before entering a class especially for learners with learning difficulties. When a teacher you do not have appropriate teaching materials, the teaching and learning is very difficult. Teachers need teaching materials such as pictures of different drawings, chalk, and dust boards to help the learners in the teaching and learning process. In addition, Humphrey (2014) conducted a study on the challenges faced by teachers when teaching learners with developmental disability in Tanzania. The study revealed that teachers lack training in special needs education for learners with learning difficulties in the classroom. Gama and Thwala (2016) also showed that teachers experience a lot of challenges originating from the lack of inclusive education training, knowledge and monetary support in the classroom in Eswatini schools.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite many efforts being put forth for the successful implementation of handling learners with learning difficulties in the primary schools of Eswatini there are still numerous challenges teachers' faces when handling learners with learning difficulties. A number of teachers find it difficult to handle learners with learning difficulties in the classroom (Gama & Thwala, 2016; Ntinda, Thwala & Tfusi, 2019). Tzivinikou, (2015) assert that the challenges emanated from the class size, lack of suitable teaching materials as well as the style used by the teacher. Learners in the classroom have individual needs and experience different barriers. Some of the learners have learning difficulties which include visual, hearing, physical, and speech impairment hence teachers must have practical skills, knowledge and ability to handle the complex behavioural disabilities in the classroom. This study, therefore, provided an in-depth exploration of how teachers handle learners with learning difficulties in the primary schools of Eswatini. This is necessary in order to deal with the challenges faced by the primary school teachers in handling learners with learning difficulties in the classroom. The study also has implications for positive academic outcomes for the learners if challenges encountered by teachers are known then interventional strategies can be mounted to improve teaching methods.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was underpinned by the social constructivism theory by Vygotsky 1978 (Vygotsky, John-Steiner, Scribner & Souberman, 2021). Vygotsky et al. (2021), social constructivism is seen as an approach according to which individual knowledge relies on its social construction. Constructivists are certain that knowledge does not have objective reality which is externally located but that it is individually constructed inside people's minds through their activities and interactions with others in the world (Kanno, 2018; Vygotsky et al. 2021). Social constructivism also states that in context of collaborative learning, group members who have higher levels of understanding can help the less progressive members learn within their zone of proximal development. According to Kapur (2018), teachers often apply these concepts by assigning tasks that students cannot do on their own, but which they can do with assistance from their peers or teachers; they should provide just enough assistance so that students learn to complete the tasks independently and then provide an environment that enables students to do harder tasks than would otherwise be possible. Teachers can also allow students with more knowledge to assist students who need more guidance. Therefore, Vygotsky perspective seems to insist on the ideal role of the teacher in providing support in assisting learners on tasks within their zone of proximal development. When a learner fails to achieve a given task but that task is within the learner's ZPD, using the right tools and appropriate assistance the learner may be able to accomplish the task. Vygotsky's social constructivism theory highlighted the need for peers and teachers, to work collaboratively to help the learners to master



ideas that he or she cannot understand on his own. Social constructivists believe that learning must be active, contextual and social.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Establish how teachers handle learners with learning difficulties in the classroom.
2. Identify the challenges faced by teachers when handling learners with learning difficulties in the classroom.
3. Establish possible solutions to minimise the challenges faced by teachers when handling learners with learning difficulties

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Gounder (2012) define research methodology as a systematic way to solve a problem and studying how the research is to be carried out. These are the procedures by which investigators go about in the describing, explaining and predicting phenomena. The study was conducted using a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is a study of attitudes towards and approaches for conducting an exploration that is aimed at discovering how human beings comprehend, experience, understand, and produce the social world (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research seeks an in depth understanding of the social phenomena within their natural setting. Explorable (2016) explains that a qualitative approach in research is used extensively by scientists and researchers studying human behaviour and habits.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a case study research design. Yin (2009) indicates that a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and setting are not clearly obvious. Creswell (2014) further argues that a case study is a good research design when the inquirer has recognisable cases with boundaries and pursues to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases. A case may refer to a person, a classroom, a programme, and a process, a series of developments, an institution, a community or even a country (Rule & John, 2011). The researchers chose a case study so as to totally investigate and understand perceptions of teachers on how the handled learners with learning difficulties in the classroom.

DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study was collected from a convenience selected sample of ten (10) teachers for one primary school in the Manzini region. According to Palikas (2013), a convenience sample is commonly used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the topic of interest. Benard (2014) posit that the main assumption associated with convenience sampling is that the members of the target population are homogeneous. The sample size is usually small, and participants are selected to give a rich description about the phenomena under study. In this study, the researchers used one-on-one interviews in collecting the desired data. The researchers explored individual in-depth interviews which helped to uncover more detailed and in-depth information and enable the eliciting of explanations on the handling of learners with learning difficulties in the classrooms. Table 1 shows the participants demographic information.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information for the study (n=10)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Sex		
Male	5	50
Female	5	50
Age Group		
25-35	4	40
36-46	4	40
47-60	2	20
Qualification		
B.Ed.	4	40
PGCE	3	30
PTD	3	30
SEN Training experience		
2-5 years	3	30
6-10 years	4	40
11- 20 years	3	30
Total	10	100

Note: B. Ed. = Bachelor of Education Degree; PGCE= Post Graduate Certificate in Education; PTD= Primary Teachers' Diploma; SEN= Special Education Needs.



DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for data analysis that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyse, and report repeated patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Braun & Clark (2012) further mentioned that thematic analysis is used when seeking to understand a set of experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a set of data. Michelle et al (2020) stated that themes are actively constructed patterns (or meanings) derived from a data set that answer a research question, as opposed to mere summaries or categorizations of codes and that themes can be generated inductively or deductively. The researchers chose thematic analysis because the data were narrative and interpretative as teachers outlined how they handle learners with learning difficulties in the classrooms.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study were presented according to the themes that developed from the data generated from the research participants. Direct quotations from the participants were used by the researchers in presenting data. The themes that emerged from the study were, how teachers handle learners with learning difficulties in the classroom, challenges faced by teachers in handling learners with learning difficulties and the possible solutions to the challenges faced by the teachers in handling the learners with learning difficulties.

How teachers handle learners with learning difficulties

Teachers were asked how they handled learners with learning difficulties in the classroom. Teacher 1 mentioned that: *"I encourage my learners to be creative and this will engage and enable them to expand their ideas and thinking. I also encourage the learners to work collaboratively with their peers and this helps and enables those learners with learning difficulties to understand the content we are learning from their peers"* (Teacher 1, school A, female, 28 years old, 4 years teaching experience).

Teacher 10 concurs with teacher 1 and mentioned that *"I make learning participative in class; I also make sure that the students that are without learning difficulties help those learners with learning difficulties"* (Teacher 10, school A, female, 32 years old, 8 years teaching experience) The theory of social constructivism emphasized that for learners to master ideas one needs to work collaboratively with their peers as well as their teachers.

Teacher 2 stated that, *"...giving learners activities to do after every lesson helps to identify learners with learning difficulties and once I identify the learning difficulties they have I then handle the learners according to their needs"*. (Teacher 2, school A, Male, 35 years old, 10 years teaching experience)

Teacher 4 stated that *"I present content and information to my learners both visually and verbally. This helps the learners with hearing problems and those with sight problems. I also use diagrams, pictures and graphics to support the delivery of instruction in the classroom"* (Teacher 4, School, and A male

42 years old 10 years teaching experience). Similarly teacher 6 posited that: *"I normally let learners discuss a picture on the learners' book and from their discussion I find their problems and start to work with them"* (Teacher 6, 49 female years old 15 years teaching experience). In addition, teacher 7 revealed that *"I have a number of learners in my class with learning difficulties and I use simple language that they can all understand and I also repeat words and clarify their meanings. I also observe the learners learning styles of the learners and make sure that I help my learners accordingly"* (Teacher 7, School, and A male 46 years old 16 years teaching experience).

The participants revealed that they are trying their level best in making sure that the process of teaching and learning is successful regardless of the learning difficulties among the learners. They showed that they encourage their learners to work collaboratively so that those without learning difficulties will help their peers with learning difficulties.

Challenges faced by teachers in handling learners with difficulties

The participants were asked about the challenges they face when handling learners with learning difficulties. Resources are critical to inclusive education implementation and the lack of it is usually a problem. The participants expressed a concern about the need to have the necessary support services for the inclusion to be successful. Teacher 4 stated that:

Students with learning difficulties need special equipment that can help them perform some skills in the classrooms. We lack the necessary desk and chairs designed for such learners in the classrooms and the learners find it difficult to write on the normal desk used by the normal learners (Teacher 4, School, A male 42 years old 10 years teaching experience).

On the same note teacher 8 concurred with teacher 4 and stated that *"my school lacks the specialized equipment for the learners with learning difficulties"*.

On the same note the participants revealed that they have a large number of learners in the classrooms which is a challenge and they have some difficulties in accommodating all the learners in the classrooms. Teacher 7 says that

"I always try to handle all the learning difficulties that the learners have, apparently I am not able to handle them mainly because my classroom is congested, so having a large class size always gives me a challenge" (Teacher 7, School, A male 46 years old 16 years teaching experience).

Similarly, teacher 6 stated that *"the main challenge I encounter when handling learners with learning difficulties is the number of learners in the classroom. The learners are too many, so it is not possible to attend to all of them at the same time"* (Teacher 6, 49 female years old 15 years teaching experience) Similarly, teacher 7 stated that *"the number of learners always gives a challenge. When the period ends, you find that I did not check the progress of the other learners because they are too many in the class"* Teacher 7, School, A male 48 years old 16 years teaching experience).



The participants also revealed that the time allocated for the lessons was also a challenge as they cannot finish their lessons due to the limited time allocated. Teacher 5 mentioned that *“some of the learners are slow learners, even when writing. Therefore time factor is always a problem. The time allocated per period is not enough when you want to take care of all the learners’ differences in class”* (Teacher 5, School, A male 45 years old 15 years teaching experience).. Similarly, teacher 9 revealed that *“I do not have enough time to attend to all the learners with learning difficulties because of the time factor. Time is wasted and I end up not finishing a lesson in the given time”*. Moreover, teacher 3 showed that *“instructional resources in the school are not adequate to support learners with learning difficulties. We also lack of specialised training through in service on how to handle such learners because at college we were not taught much on the subject”* (Teacher 3, School, female 39 years old 10 years teaching experience)..

Teachers complained about the number of learners in the classroom. They complained that having a large number of learners in the classroom is a problem to them because they cannot attend to every learner learning difficulties because they have varied learning difficulties. It also appeared that the time allocated per subject is limited and the teachers fail to attend to all the learners especially those with learning difficulties.

Possible solutions to minimize the challenges faced by the teachers

The teachers were asked to suggest a way out to the challenges they encounter when handling learners with learning difficulties. Teacher 5 stated that *“the schools should minimize the number of learners in the classroom for easy handling learners with difficulties and for easy assessment. The allocated time per lesson should also increase at least to one and a half hours per lesson”* (Teacher 5, School, A male 45 years old 15 years teaching experience). Similarly, teacher 9 revealed that, *“children with learning difficulties disabilities are different from children without disabilities in terms of acquiring knowledge because they somehow tend to be slow so taking them to regular classes will disadvantage learning especially for normal children, so I would suggest that those learners with learning difficulties have their own classes so that we will take extra care when teaching them”* (Teacher 9, School, A male 44 years old 12 years teaching experience)

Teacher 10 stated that, *“...there should be an additional stream in every level so that learners are distributed to classes equally leaving a manageable number of learners in each class as it is difficult to attend to learners’ individual needs in an overcrowded class* (Teacher 10, school A, female, 32 years old, 8 years teaching experience). Teacher 5 also suggested that *“...teachers should be constantly be equipped with skills and knowledge on how to handle learners with learning difficulties in the classrooms because learners display different learning difficulties that need different skills*

and techniques to handle them”. (Teacher 5, School, A male 45 years old 15 years teaching experience). The teachers suggested that the schools should minimise the number of learners in the classrooms so that they could give full attention to all the learners in the classroom. The participants further suggested that teachers should be equipped with knowledge and skills on handling learners with various learning difficulties.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of the study revealed that in the classroom, teachers are making every effort to support learners who are having difficulty learning including those with living with disabilities learning. The findings showed that teachers present information to learners both verbally and visually. The teachers make learning participative in the classroom and they make sure that the learners that are without learning difficulties are helping those learners with learning difficulties. They use diagrams, pictures and graphics to support the delivery of instruction. This makes the learners with learning difficulties not to be left behind in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. This finding is in support of those of Sharma et al (2009), which revealed that teachers were positive about including students who display learning difficulties in the classroom. Additionally, the finding also mirrors those of Matsenjwa, Ntinda, and Makondo (2020) which revealed that teachers used pictures and diagrams to teach learners with intellectual disabilities in mainstream primary schools, in Lubombo region of Eswatini. The teacher in the case of the current study is the more knowledgeable other which can successful assists the learner with learning difficulties by using appropriate teaching strategies to delivery instruction. This finding also validates the concept of more knowledge other of the social constructivism theory (Vygotsky, John-Steiner, Scribner & Souberman, 2021). It further showed that teachers are more willing to include those students who do not require significant changes and modification of teaching strategies. Similarly, Sharma et al (2006) showed that teachers are modifying their reaching strategies in making sure that they include learners with difficulties in the classroom.

The teachers revealed a number of challenges associated with handling learners’ with learning difficulties in the classroom. Among the challenges, the study had revealed that teachers feel disadvantage about the number of learners’ in the classroom. The classes are very large and congested and this makes teachers not to successfully help learners with learning difficulties in the classes. This finding is consistent with those of Ntinda, Thwala and Tfungi (2019) which indicated that large numbers of learners with learning difficulties made it hard for teachers to effectively assist such learners. Time was also revealed from the study to be limited when teachers are trying to assist the learners with difficulties in the classroom. This is similar to the findings of Gama and Thwala (2016) which stated that the hour time allocated per day for teaching English was not enough to help dyslexic learners. The study also showed that instructional



resources in the schools are not adequate to support learners with learning difficulties. The participants also reported that they lack specialised training through in service on how to handle such learners because at college they were not taught much on the Special Education Needs. This mirrors what Matsenjwa, Ntinda, and Makondo (2020) reported that primary teachers of learners with intellectual disabilities lacked Special Education Needs training in mainstream primary schools of the Lubombo region of Eswatini. This is also in relation with Manope et al (2013) which stated that in their study that teachers are not receiving enough training towards inclusive education and they are not usually equipped with enough skills, knowledge which special education require.

The research findings were also concerned about possible solutions in solving the challenges faced by teachers when handling learners with learners' difficulties. The analyses showed that teachers suggested that schools should minimize the number of learners in the classroom for easy handling learners with different learning difficulties. The teachers also suggested that the allocated time per lesson should also increase at least to one and a half hour. Equipping the teachers with skills and knowledge in handling learners with learning difficulties was revealed as another solution that can help teachers in handling learners with learning difficulties.

CONCLUSION

The essence of this study was to explore how teachers handled learners with learning difficulties in the classroom. The participants revealed that they are trying their level best in making sure that the process of teaching and learning is successful regardless of the learning difficulties among the learners. The study revealed that physical infrastructure and instructional resources are not available and adequate to support learners with learning difficulty in the classroom. Teachers complained about the number of learners in the classroom. They complained that having a large number of learners in the classroom is a problem to them because they cannot attend to every learner learning difficulties because they have varied learning difficulties. There was general lack of specialised training through in service on how to handle learners with learning difficulties for the teachers and therefore, they do not have satisfactory instructional pedagogical knowledge base to handle students with learning difficulties.

Recommendations

Based from the findings of the study it is recommended that:

- ❖ School principals must ensure that all learners, irrespective of their learning difficulties, physical, mental or social nature, are given equal opportunity in accessing quality education, but also attain their respective goals in life.
- ❖ Since it has been revealed from the teachers that they lack the pre-requisite training in handling learners with learning difficulties, there is need for teachers to be capacitated with in-service training in Special

Education Needs for successful teaching and learning process.

- ❖ Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini could consider providing schools with infrastructure and instructional resources so that the teachers can successfully teach all the learners regardless of their learning difficulties

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