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Article

Parental Perspectives on How Special Schools Address the Needs of Learners with Special Education Needs

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Abstract: Background: The inclusion of learners with special education needs is often hindered by challenges such as an inflexible curriculum and lack of monitoring and evaluation over school policies. Despite the importance of parental insights in shaping inclusive education policies, there is limited research on parents' perspectives regarding how effectively special schools address the needs of these learners. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of parental perspectives necessary to improve educational practices and policies in special education settings. **Aim:** The study explored perspectives of parents on how special schools responded and addressed the unique needs of their children with special education needs. **Methods:** A descriptive, qualitative exploratory design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with eleven parents of Grade 7 learners enrolled in three selected special schools. Participants were recruited using a purposive non-random sampling method through telephone calls and face-to-face. Transcripts were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed inductively using a six-step approach to thematic data analysis on ATLAS.ti version 9. A consensus agreement was used as a strategy to determine intercoder reliability between coders. **Results:** Three themes emerged with sub-themes. (1) Mismatch between child's needs and curriculum. (1.1) Lack of curriculum adaptation to meet the children's needs. (1.2) Learners repeat the same grade until they are progressed due to age. (1.3) Lack of skills projects. (2) Lack of collaboration between parents and educators. (2.1) Poor communication. (3) Limited availability of assistive technology. (3.1) Assistive devices pose a risk to learners' safety whilst awaiting replacements. **Conclusion:** Many parents perceived that special schools were not responding well to the unique needs of their children in terms of the curriculum delivery. Lack of assessments resulted in learners being retained in inappropriate academic tracks instead of transitioning into vocational pathways. **Contribution:** Understanding parents' perspectives can inform policies on resource allocation, teacher training, and curriculum differentiation, ultimately improving special education support.

Keywords: special schools; curriculum; learners with special education needs; progression and promotion of learners; parent perspectives

Introduction

Section 29 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (RSA, 1996b) ensures that everyone has the democratic human right to basic education. Acknowledging the constitutional mandate to promote equitable and quality education post-independence as a country, education

policies were introduced to solidify inclusive education, addressing, among other aspects, the special education needs of learners. These policies include among others, Three Stream Curriculum model within the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements (NPPPR) of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R-12 and the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy. Adoption of these policies fosters environments where previously disadvantaged learners and those with special education needs can live and learn together.

Curriculum

A well-designed curriculum plays a crucial role in preparing learners for a seamless transition from educational institutions to the workforce, thereby contributing to South Africa's economic growth. The Three-Streams Model aims at diversifying learning pathways and reducing learner dropout rates. The three streams refer to academic, technical-vocational and occupational stream. The academic stream is the traditional route focusing on theoretical knowledge which prepares students for higher education. The technical-vocational stream emphasises practical skills and provides opportunities for students to acquire technical knowledge. The occupational stream targets skills-based learning and is designed to prepare students for direct entry into the workforce or entrepreneurship, especially for those who might struggle in the traditional academic route like learners with severe intellectual disabilities. For these mentioned learners a Differentiated CAPS (DCAPS) curriculum is provided from Grade R to 5 of learners between the ages of 5 and 18 years (DBE 2021).

The DCAPS curriculum distinguishes itself from the standard CAPS curriculum by placing a significant emphasis on practical skills. The Indonesian education ministry approaches the DCAPS curriculum by assigning 40% towards academic material and 60% vocational learning skills (Wijaya & Huda 2018). Whilst South Africa allocates 80% of the curriculum to skill development and 20% to theoretical knowledge (Shaffeei, Razalli & Hanif 2020; Zhang 2009). Although allocation varies by 20% for both theory and skills components, the emphasis is still placed on development of practical skills to support learners struggling academically. Subjects covered in the DCAPS curriculum includes home language, mathematics and life skills. Vocational subjects may include agriculture, hairdressing, woodwork, plumbing, arts and crafts, hospitality, office administration, welding, among others. The selection of vocational pathways is largely shaped by a school's ability to cater to learners' independence needs and to align with the work-related activities or environments offered within the school setting. This adaptability ensures that the vocational training is both relevant and supportive of the students' transition into the workforce (Ratnengsih 2017).

Differentiated instruction can enhance both learner engagement and curricular achievement by tailoring teaching methods to meet diverse student needs (Reis et al. 2011). Effective pedagogical strategies include a mix of individual assignments, group activities, and additional work tailored for remedial classes (Adewumi, Rembe & Shumba 2017). In Indonesia, incorporating vocational education into the class schedule, supported by dedicated educators, has provided students with hands-on experience. This approach has facilitated work opportunities outside school through partnerships with Non-Governmental Organizations and private companies (Pasaribu & Harfiani 2021). However, the lack of curriculum specialists, adequately trained educators and poor infrastructure in schools often impedes the effective implementation of a differentiated curriculum (Du Plessis 2020; Maniram 2015). These barriers underscore the critical importance of high-quality program implementation in fostering positive outcomes for these learners during their transition to post-school environments, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address these shortcomings (Solomon, Luger & Ned 2024). Thus, the DCAPS curriculum requires educators to be competent and knowledgeable in theoretical content modification and practical skills training to suit the diverse needs of individual learners (Reis & Renzulli 2018; Akrim & Harfiani 2019).

National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R-12.

This policy is among the school policies implemented in the best interest of learners. The policy advocates for the progression of learners to higher grades although having not met the minimum pass requirements of that grade. The objective of this policy is to keep learners of the same age cohort together and boost self-esteem (Griffith 2006). As a result, the policy is referred to as either automatic pass or social promotion (Chataa & Nkengbeza 2019). In countries like South Africa and Namibia, the adoption of this policy became a crucial part of educational reform following independence. It was implemented to address historical inequalities and to align the education system with the principles of equity and inclusivity. Whilst in the United States of America, the policy was necessitated by the associated negative effects of retaining learners in the same grade. Aggarwal (2012) reported that learners tend to develop low self-esteem about themselves. Therefore, the position of this policy is that underperformance of the learner in the previous grade should be addressed in the next grade the learner is promoted to (NPPPR 2017).

Several researchers have highlighted challenges associated with implementing the social promotion of learners. Learners tend to be disruptive in the classroom during lessons and this behaviour may cause them to struggle even further in the specific subject or concepts (Lynch 2014). Learners may also feel the sense of helplessness as they feel they are incapable of obtaining pass requirements but, educators seem to accept their failures. As a result, learners stop trying their best (Lawrence-Turner 2011). As the number of learners progresses, the number of educators remains stagnant, leading to staff shortages in schools. This imbalance places pressure on existing educators and impacts the quality of instruction, as they are tasked with handling larger class sizes and increased responsibilities (Muziransa 2016).

Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support policy and special schools

The aforementioned policy advocates for the formation of School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs). These teams are the main support structures for the schools and are tasked with training and supporting educators in identifying and addressing barriers experienced in the classroom by learners (DBE 2014). According to the SIAS policy, special schools are to provide a high level of support to learners with extensive needs that are not covered in the norms and standards of mainstream schools. In addition, depending on availability, they should have access to specialised facilities and resources (including assistive technology, Learning and Teaching Support Materials), flexible curricula that can be differentiated to suit the needs of individual learners and daily access to therapists (Hayes & Bulat 2017; DBE 2014).

Access to reasonable assistive technology is a fundamental human right, alongside the right to education, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2006) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2030). Research indicates that less than 20% of individuals in low-income settings access the assistive technology they need (Visagie et al. 2017; Harniss et al. 2015). A significant challenge in providing assistive technology lies in the need for regular evaluations and the consistent provision of updated devices (Schoonover 2015). Without addressing these issues, devices risk being abandoned. Therefore, schools must not only have the resources to procure these technologies but also the capacity to maintain and routinely update them. It is the view of Solomon and colleagues (2024) that there is lack of mandatory enforcement in policy implementation due to the provision that implementation depends on availability of resources.

This study is significant as it offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of special schools in addressing the diverse needs of their learners from the viewpoint of parents. Understanding how these special schools meet learners' requirements is essential for educators and policymakers as it can guide efforts to improve the quality of education for learners with special education needs.

The role of parents

In countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, national school guidelines stress the significance of collaboration between educators and parents to support children's learning and development (Greater Good Science 2024). These policies advocate for shared efforts to establish supportive educational environments that nurture students' academic, social, and emotional well-being (Wong et al. 2018; Barger et al. 2019).

Similarly, in South Africa, the SAIS policy documents highlight the importance of parental involvement in education. For example, the Special Needs Assessment form one (SNA 1) requires class educators to work closely with parents to identify strategies for supporting learners facing classroom challenges. This process includes obtaining the parent's signature on the form as evidence of their involvement (DBE 2014). Such collaboration is essential in creating effective Individual Support Plans tailored to the learner's needs.

However, socio-economic barriers often prevent parents from fully engaging in their children's education (Munje & Mncube 2018). These obstacles have led to a perception among educators that parents lack interest in their children's education or are in denial about their impairments. This highlights the need for psychoeducation to help parents understand their child's disabilities and how they can collaborate with educators to provide effective support (Griepenburg et al. 2021). Conversely, parents often believe that educators should take primary responsibility for supporting their children during school hours, especially when parents cannot be present (Moleme 2020; Von Solms 2020). This misalignment of expectations underscores the need for clearer communication and role definitions between parents and educators to foster effective partnerships in supporting learners.

Methodology

The authors explored parents' perceptions on how they perceived special schools to be addressing and responding to the unique needs of their children in Limpopo Province.

Study design

The study undertook an explorative descriptive qualitative design using semi-structured interviews (Abu-Halaweh et al. 2021). This study design was chosen as it is suitable to describe and give insight into the views of parents of learners having special educational needs.

Setting

The study was conducted among parents of children with special education needs enrolled in special schools for learners with physical disabilities located in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The rate of individuals with disabilities in the province is estimated at 7 out of every 100 people, with one-quarter of the children experiencing disabilities (Stats SA 2023). Typical of rural provinces, Limpopo Province is among the resource constraint provinces in South Africa pertaining to infrastructure, staff and learning materials. In addition, schools lack adequate support to advance inclusive education from their support structures (Maapola-Thobejane, Ehiane, & Prudence 2023). The province only has 35 special schools accommodating learners with various special education needs amid the growing population of children with disabilities. These special schools are widely dispersed geographically among the ten education districts. To simplify data collection, only three nearby special schools were selected due to their proximity to the researcher.

Recruitment

The researcher communicated with school principals and chairpersons of School Governing Bodies of selected special schools by emails indicating the purpose of the research involving parents of all Grade 7 learners. The researcher was invited to staff meetings to discuss and clarify how parents will be involved and the questions that will be asked on the interview guide. Permission to contact parents was then requested. Letters were prepared (with the researcher's details included) to inform parents of the research project and to invite them to participate. These letters were issued to few

parents that visited schools. To reach more parents, contact details were retrieved from the South African School Administration and Management System (SASAMS). The researcher phoned parents individually. Most of the cellphone numbers were not working; for some, the lines did not exist. In school A, seven parents were reachable out of the 15. In school B, two out of seven, and in school C, two out of 11 were reachable. The process of recruitment occurred over a duration of three months.

Study population and sampling strategy

The study involved parents of Grade 7 learners enrolled in three selected special schools. A total of 33 learners from the three special schools were included, with the aim of securing at least one parent to represent each learner to indicate the population of parents. Purposive non-random sampling method was used to recruit participants through telephone calls.

Inclusion criteria

Only parents who were reachable via telephone and confirmed to have a child in Grade 7 from the three selected special schools participated in the study.

Ethical considerations

Approval to conduct the study was granted by both the University's Health Sciences Ethics Committee (Ref:668/2020) and the provincial Department of Education. The research adhered to the ethical principles of conducting studies involving human participants, following the guidelines set out in the Helsinki Declaration version 13 (General Assembly of the World Medical Association 2014).

Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted both physically and telephonically. The telephone medium was preferred to reach parents that were widely dispersed and would have involved high cost for travelling (Ilies, Schwind, Wagner, et al. 2007). The researcher prepared a spreadsheet to indicate cellphone numbers that were not working, whether consent was given or not, language preference of the parent, the date and time of the appointment to conduct the interview. In the cases where parents spoke in the language that the researcher was limited to understand, like Tshivenda, the services of a translator were employed. The researcher informed the translator about the study and coached her on how to probe questions. Interviews occurred via conference calls only when the translator was available. The researcher sent messages to remind parents about the interview appointment closer to the date and advised them to be in a quiet area. The researcher took notes whilst the interviews were in progress. On average the telephonic interviews lasted 30 minutes and 60 minutes for physical. Transcripts in Tshivenda were translated to English and transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was allocated a unique identity number for the sake of confidentiality. Transcripts were sent to parents to verify their statements through WhatsApp and email.

Data analysis

Inductive thematic data analysis was conducted following the six-step approach (Braun & Clarke 2006) to obtain the perceptions of parents concerning their views on how special schools addressed and responded to the unique needs of their children. Eleven transcripts were uploaded on ATLAS.ti version 9 and analysed retrospectively (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006). Two researchers coded the transcripts individually and the other became a referee during discussions of themes (Hennink, Kaiser & Weber 2019). Data saturation was reached on the coding of the 7th interview and, consequently, thematic analysis was halted. A consensus agreement was used as a strategy to determine intercoder reliability (Prieto-González, et al. 2019). This strategy allowed back- and-forth and in-depth discussions of themes among the authors yielding credible results. Reaching consensus through discussions helped in addressing nuances that statistical measures might have missed (Cheung & Tai 2023).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness for this study was achieved in various ways to ensure rigour including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Johnson, Adkins & Chauvin, 2020). Credibility was ensured through member checks. For transferability, details of the study pertaining to the context where the study took place, the mode, and duration of the interviews are provided. Dependability was established through an audit trail recording study activities for future replication (Johnson et al. 2020). Confirmability was maintained through collaboration with a co-coder, fostering consensus when coding discrepancies emerged (Nowell et al. 2017). The researcher worked with a co-coder to maintain consistency in coding.

Results

This study was successful in obtaining the perceptions of parents on how special schools addressed the needs of learners. The demographic characteristics of parents are presented in Table 1 whilst the quotations, overarching themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of parents (n=11).

	Gender	Age of parent	Marital status	Employment status	Relation to learner
P1.	Female	30 years	Single	Unemployed	Mother
P2.	Female	53 years	Single	Unemployed	Mother
P3.	Female	42 years	Single	Unemployed	Mother
P4.	Female	55 years	Single	Unemployed	Mother
P5.	Male	52 years	Married	Educator	Father
P6.	Female	35 years	Married	Unemployed	Mother
P7.	Female	33 years	Single	Unemployed	Mother
P8.	Female	45 years	Married	Admin Clerk	Mother
P9.	Female	43 years	Married	Nurse	Mother
P10.	Female	70 years	Widow	Pensioner	Grandmother
P11.	Female	38 years	Single	Unemployed	Mother

Overarching themes with sub-themes emerged with inductive thematic data analysis:

1. Mismatch between child's needs and curriculum.

1.1 Lack of curriculum adaptation to meet the childrens' needs.

1.2 Learners repeat the same grade until they are progressed due to age.

1.3 Lack of skills projects.

2. Lack collaboration between parents and educators.

2.1 Poor communication.

3. Limited availability of assistive devices.

3.1 Assistive devices pose a risk to learners' safety whilst awaiting replacements.

Table 2. Quotations, themes and sub-themes.

Quotations	Theme	Sub-theme
<i>"It seems they teach them the way they do at normal mainstream school from the way I see it. Eish to be honest I am not satisfied with how they teach them. If I'm not mistaken there is no class that my child does not fail. That is why my child is still in Grade 7 at 18 years. Ah last</i>	Mismatch between childrens' needs and curriculum.	Lack of curriculum adaptation to meet the child's needs.

<p>year I started giving up thinking that the child must leave school and stay home with me because I can't even see the child's report when it comes. I just see that...eish. Not long I just burned them. I got angry when I saw them. It's like I am wasting time. She gets one report and every time they progress her to be condoned. I remember asking her teacher which grade she is doing. They should try skills to see if the child can do it. When the child is like this, they want her to write. The child cannot write, even if the child writes eish" [P6]</p> <p>"Previously she failed and had to repeat. She is progressing and I am not happy. Because at the end of the day a progressed child because redundant and knows nothing. It means they will keep on progressing until Grade 12." [P8]</p> <p>"So, if he has 2 years in the same grade then they progress him. I realised that there is actually no progress. Again they said when the child is over 21 years is not allowed to return to school. It seems they don't have skills projects. We don't know when to be sure because there are those who don't need to be taught in class but can do vocational skills. I think if they had skills, my child would have been in that class." [P5]</p> <p>"The problem is that he repeated Grade 5 a lot of times. But, it's the same with where he is now. He repeated Grade 5 twice, he was just being progressed that is why I want him to do skills." [P2]</p>	<p>Learners repeat the same grade until they are progressed due to age.</p> <p>Lack of skills projects.</p>
<p>"They are complaining that the child is not doing schoolwork. Yes, the teachers are complaining... the child does not want to write. So, they were asking that I should speak to her. This is the third year the teachers have complained. So, I really don't know if they can't handle her at school how will I handle her better. I think they should be advising me on what to do but they don't. Because even if I try to talk to her she will still be spending a lot of time at school. I see her only during holidays." [P6]</p> <p>"So, I'm not even sure what is the main challenge. I also ask how I can assist or support however I can. But, some of the teachers complain about her sleeping in class. This one they complain about it...eish (hopeless) I think even if she is sleeping in class, they should wake her up. So that she can catch up. So, if they leave her sleeping it's obvious, she is not learning in class." [P8]</p> <p>"I just think it's the same because he is still failing in class. He does not understand anything. Teachers are always scolding him. they wanted to expel him in the first year." [P2]</p>	<p>Poor communication.</p> <p>Lack collaboration between parents and educators.</p>
<p>"That's another issue with wheelchairs at that school. She started there in 2012 but she has had so many wheelchairs since then. She recently received a wheelchair in January but you won't like it when you see it but its already broken and the year has not ended. Imagine since 2012 the child used about four wheelchairs. I don't know if they are careless or what. When I ask, she does not respond so I asked if other children are using her wheelchairs. She says they play with them. Eish...I am stressed to be honest because to get a wheelchair in hospitals it's tough. It's not simple. I cannot stand seeing her in that wheelchair. I rather save money and buy." [P6]</p> <p>"We have since applied for a wheelchair at the hospital. We still have not received it. The hand-rest are worn out and they are hurting her. I don't know what will happen next year at the new school the whole year if we don't get it." [P3]</p> <p>"We wait for her to come back from school so that we can change her crutches." [P1]</p> <p>"You will be doing certain exercises with the child but when she gets to school, she no longer does it because there is no one to monitor. You will just find her walking without callipers because she has no one to assist to put them on." [P8]</p>	<p>Limited availability of assistive devices.</p> <p>Assistive devices pose a risk to learners' safety whilst awaiting replacements.</p>

Discussion

Demographic characteristics of participants

The current study concurs with the findings by Dhada and Blackbears (2019) that in most cases for children with special education needs, mothers more so than fathers, predominantly assume caregiving responsibilities for their children (Table 1). The gender disparities in caregiving role is attributed to societal and cultural perceptions that recognises mothers as more fitting to address the complex emotional and physical needs of children with disabilities (Dempsey & Keen 2008). The caregiving responsibilities that single mothers assume often makes securing employment challenging, thereby exacerbating the family's financial difficulties and contributing to their poverty status (Nicoricu & Elliot 2023; Rupp & Ressler 2009).

Theme 1: Mismatch between childrens' needs and curriculum

Parents perceived that special schools were not responding well to the unique needs of their children in terms of the curriculum delivery.

1.1. Lack of curriculum adaptation to meet the child's needs.

The theme demonstrates that educators did not have the knowledge and competency in delivering the appropriate curriculum that fits individual learners. This finding highlights the challenges associated with implementing an education system capable of addressing the diverse needs of learners. Onyishi & Sefotho (2020) attributed this challenge to the lack of curriculum specialists whose functioning would be responsible for capacitating educators on curriculum related strategies. This function seems to be expected to be carried over by the School-Based Support Teams to mitigate for the knowledge gaps among educators. However, the SBSTs are limited in their functions and responsibilities to support educators and learners because of lack of training in assuming their roles (Makhalemele & Tlale 2020; Subramoney 2017).

Although there is a general perception of incompetence with curriculum adaptation at schools, there are isolated examples of success identified through case studies in Kwa-Zulu Natal (Hlalele et al. 2020) and Eastern Cape (Adewumi, Rembe, Shumba, et al.2017) Provinces of South Africa. In the study by former authors, Hlalele, et al. (2020) SBSTs were able to support educators in understanding curriculum differentiation and implementing it to address the diverse needs of learners. Adewumi and colleagues (2017) found educators committing additional time to conduct remedial classes through grouping learners. Grouping learners allowed the educators to engage as many learners as possible despite the shortage of educators at the school.

1.2. Learners repeat the same grade until they are progressed due to age.

Although the current study did not conduct a document analysis of the learner's report cards, the perception of automatic pass has been a concern (Hornby & Kauffman 2021). The study conducted among primary schools within the lowest quintile of the national school funding system (Quintile-1) in Cape Town, South Africa by Munje and Maarman (2016) conducted a document analysis of schedules and report cards of learners. The study revealed that the needs of learners were not sufficiently documented. For instance, no information was provided on who would deliver the necessary support, how it would be implemented, or when it would be provided in the next grade for a specific subject following automatic pass. The learners were found scoring poor ratings of between one and three (1- not achieved, 2- elementary achievement & 3- moderate achievement) in their report cards. The process of assessing and detailing the type of support required by learners is deemed tedious by educators (Von Solms 2020). This perception implies that there is lack of monitoring and evaluation over school policies and educators are left to implement as they see fit. The lack of support contributes to poor learner performance which frustrates parents as they do not see progress.

1.3. Lack of skills projects

A study by Basister and Valenzuela (2022) in the Philippines revealed that learners with special education needs who receive vocational education often acquire skills that enable them to contribute economically and achieve financial independence. This finding suggests that without vocational education, learners risk losing the opportunity to achieve financial independence. Consequently, this increases their reliance on parental support and government resources, as they are unprepared for employment to sustain themselves. However, in the South African context, the implementation of vocational education faces significant challenges, as reported through semi-structured interviews with teachers involved in vocational education programs for learners with special needs in Cape Town. These challenges included but not limited to inadequate training for educators, insufficient infrastructure, and limited access to resources necessary for practical skill development (Solomon, Luger & Ned 2024).

Theme 2: Lack collaboration between parents and educators

2.1. Poor communication

The theme showed poor communication skills between educators and parents. Parents perceived educators to be complaining about the academic abilities of their children instead of

providing solutions. The study by Harris and Jones (2019) showed that educators lacked communication skills that could attract the involvement of parents with their children at schools. The use of academic language, focusing on the learners' negative behaviours when communicating with parents did not attract the involvement of parents nor foster a positive relationship. It was found that the educators' main concern was the academic achievements of learners such that they overlooked the importance of building rapport with parents (Willemse et al. 2018). Similarly in this study, parents felt blamed for poor academic performance of their children. A misunderstanding appeared to exist regarding the respective roles of parents and educators. This issue could be addressed by fostering effective communication skills that promote collaboration and mutual understanding.

Theme 3: Limited availability of assistive devices

3.1 Assistive technology devices pose a risk to learners' safety whilst awaiting replacements.

Many schools struggle to maintain and replace mobility equipment due to constraints in budgets and the centralisation of procurement processes. This approach leads to allocations of assistive devices being made once-off and excluding additional costs associated with the maintenance and replacement of wheelchairs and crutches for example (World bank 2023).

A study involving parents of learners with physical disabilities in Iceland investigated the use, impact of mobility devices on activities and participation and satisfaction with the service delivery process of mobility devices (Gudjonsdottir & Gudmundsdottir 2023). Parents in the study reported dissatisfaction with the lack of follow-up and maintenance of the devices their children use at special schools. The lack of proper follow-up for assistive devices in schools can result in delays in necessary adjustments or replacements. The school's environmental conditions significantly contribute to the rapid wear and tear of these devices. For example, uneven playground surfaces, learners using the same devices for play and sports, and friends improperly propelling learners in wheelchairs along lengthy corridors connecting classrooms and hostels, all exacerbate device deterioration. These factors highlight the need for regular maintenance checks, user training, and tailored environmental modifications to ensure the durability and safe use of assistive devices.

Limitations

The findings of this study are limited to the parents the researcher was able to reach by telephone. As a result, their perspectives do not reflect those of parents who did not participate. The aim of the study was not to generalize the findings but to gain a deeper understanding and insight into the matter. Due to limited time and resources, the study did not include parents of learners from other special schools. Although the interview guide was not piloted, it was shared with participants in advance, allowing them to engage with the questions, seek clarification, and prepare their responses. Statistical intercoder reliability was not determined; instead, the researchers employed a consensus agreement approach to identify and finalize the three key themes that emerged from the data.

Conclusion

The study effectively captured parents' perspectives on how special schools addressed the unique needs of their children. Parents acknowledged the challenges educators face in adapting the curriculum to support learners with special education needs. Many perceived the curriculum as insufficiently meeting their children's requirements, which often contributed to learner failure. This issue was exacerbated by learners being promoted to higher grades without receiving adequate support, highlighting a disconnect between policy objectives and practical implementation in special schools.

Parents also expressed concerns about the absence of vocational education tailored to learners' abilities and interests. For children struggling academically in primary school, particularly as they grow older, early exposure to skills-based subjects aligned with their aptitudes could enhance their growth and engagement. However, the lack of assessments to identify these interests frequently

results in learners being retained in inappropriate academic tracks instead of transitioning into vocational pathways.

This study underscores the limited implementation of differentiated curriculum policies, particularly in special schools designated as resource centers for supporting mainstream schools. To realize the vision of inclusive education in post-apartheid South Africa, addressing curriculum differentiation must be a priority.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations can be helpful.

Teachers should be provided with professional development on how to modify the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of learners with special education needs. This includes adapting lessons to accommodate different learning styles and providing more individualized support to students.

Ensure that special schools, particularly as resource centers, are adequately funded and equipped to provide the necessary support for learners with special education needs. This includes providing resources for vocational education, accessible learning materials, and staff training to support curriculum differentiation.

Early identification of the learners' interests through assessments should guide curriculum stream to better align learning experiences with their strengths. These assessments should provide guidance to ensure that those who struggle with academics are not unnecessarily retained in grades but are instead steered toward skill-based subjects that foster engagement and development.

Collaboration between parents and educators needs to be strengthened to ensure that the support provided at school aligns with the child's needs.

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