Research Article

Supportive Mechanisms in Enhancing Teachers' Agency for Inclusive Educational Practices in Rural Lesotho Schools

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Abstract: Recently, the government of Lesotho has intensified its focus on promoting inclusive education across all sectors, driven by a commitment to enhance access to quality education and improve learners' success. Despite these efforts, challenges persist, particularly in rural schools, which are often disadvantaged and face difficulties in fully implementing inclusive educational practices. Although the overarching goal of inclusive education remains vital for ensuring access and success for all learners, effective implementation necessitates enhanced teacher skills and knowledge. This paper explores the supportive mechanisms that enhance teachers' agency for inclusive educational practices in rural Lesotho schools. It further examines their perspectives on fostering inclusive education. A qualitative transformative approach was adopted through a participatory case study design. Data were generated through focus group discussions with two groups of six teachers, totalling twelve participants, from two rural primary schools in Lesotho. These discussions were then analysed using a thematic approach. The findings illuminate supportive mechanisms that can enhance teachers' agency in fostering inclusive educational practices. Additionally, the paper identifies a significant lack of explicit acknowledgement of teachers' agency within Lesotho's inclusive education practices. There tends to be a tendency to blame teachers rather than recognise and build upon their strengths. Consequently, acknowledging and leveraging teachers' resilience is highlighted as crucial. The paper advocates for the effective implementation of inclusive education in Lesotho by strengthening rural educators, emphasising the significance of an asset-based approach to challenge the notion of rural insufficiency rather than the richness of resources needed for successful inclusive education.

Keywords: Asset-based approach, inclusive education, Lesotho, rural schools, teacher agency.

1. Introduction

Lack of participation in inclusive educational practices among teachers in rural schools globally, including in Lesotho, is a pressing concern for educational stakeholders (Mosia, 2022). Contributing factors such as constraining learning environments, limited teaching and support resources, and inadequate facilities impede effective inclusive education (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Research indicates that students in rural schools often have restricted access to quality education compared to their urban peers, presenting challenges not only for learners but also for teachers tasked with implementing inclusive education (Kizilaslan, 2020; Negash & Gasa, 2022). Although inclusive education aims to transform the standard of education, it challenges teachers to shift from traditional roles to more advanced ones in meeting the diverse needs of all learners (Tseeke, 2021). Consequently, these circumstances contribute to teachers' reluctance to actively engage in inclusive educational practices (Liu, Li, & Zhao, 2021). Historically, rural schools are disadvantaged due to resource shortages, negatively impacting educational provision (Landsburg, Kruger & Swart, 2019). This situation aligns with the observation that, in many low-income countries, the significant challenges faced by education administrators and teachers are largely attributable to prevailing

poverty, particularly in rural areas (Shikalepo, 2020), thus lowering the quality of education provided in these contexts. Against this backdrop, there is a need for more research to promote teachers' agency, enabling them to participate meaningfully in the development and implementation of education within their rural schools.

Enhancing teachers' agency requires an asset-based transformative approach that values individuals with the skills, ideas, and capabilities necessary to contribute to change (Dunst et al., 2017). Building on this approach might help teachers in rural schools in Lesotho to be recognised as human agents of change who, through their inherent strengths, skills, knowledge, and abilities, can exercise their agency to contribute to change and actively engage in the implementation of inclusive education. Damoah, Khalo, and Omodan (2023) concur, finding that rural communities and schools affirm and acknowledge positive actions and practices by building on what is available rather than what is missing. It is interesting to understand how an asset-based approach could promote teachers' agency in rural primary schools in Lesotho since this approach values the development of existing assets.

This paper details a study conducted in 2019, which investigated teachers' perceptions of improving the well-being of learners with visual impairments in rural Lesotho schools. The findings from the study indicate that teachers' perceptions were influenced by how they valued their capabilities to manage the inclusion of these learners. Based on the results of that study and various other studies (Tseeke, 2021; Negash & Gasa, 2022) that support the significance of teachers' agentic building, it is essential to explore supportive mechanisms that can enhance teachers' agency in managing inclusive educational practices within rural primary schools in Lesotho.

1.1 Research questions

This paper responds to the following research questions:

- What support mechanisms can enhance teachers' agency in effectively implementing inclusive educational practices in rural schools?
- What are the perspectives of teachers on fostering inclusive education in rural schools in Lesotho?

2. Theoretical Framework

Asset-based theory, which views individuals as unique beings with inherent potential (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), was adopted to frame this paper. According to Forrester et al. (2020), this theory posits that individuals possess various abilities that can be leveraged to influence community development. This implies that when teachers utilise their diverse abilities to engage in the construction of inclusive education, they are likely to succeed. The study predicts that employing asset-based perspectives to enhance teachers' agency in practising inclusive education is crucial. The theory recognises and values individuals' gifts, abilities, and capabilities, asserting that using these skills enables people to achieve their desired goals.

In Lesotho's rural schools, teachers possess capabilities, talents, and skills that can be harnessed to effectively overcome challenges and implement inclusive education. Therefore, the asset-based theoretical framework focuses on mobilising and utilising local resources, skills, and assets to address problems while rejecting a focus on deficiencies within the community (Damoah, Khalo, & Omodan, 2023). This theory is pertinent to this study as it helps in understanding and valuing teachers' agency for the effective implementation of inclusive education in Lesotho's rural primary schools.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) developed the asset-based theory to shift focus towards finding solutions and fostering community development. This aligns with Dunst et al.'s (2018) assertion of valuing teachers as agents of change, making it suitable for studying how teachers can positively influence inclusive education. Additionally, this study views teachers' exercise of their agency in

managing inclusive education and overcoming challenges within their rural schools as a valuable aspect of agency (Missingham, 2017), which contributes to positive outcomes in inclusive education.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a transformative paradigm, which aims to include diverse voices from marginalised communities (Omodan, 2020). The transformative paradigm is grounded in the philosophical assumption that it addresses disparities and seeks solutions to issues that could lead to marginalisation (Jackson et al., 2018). This paradigm was chosen to facilitate social change by empowering teachers and listening to their perspectives on implementing inclusive education in rural schools. It emphasises the importance of considering the voices of those often overlooked, thus aligning with the study's goal of harnessing the agency of rural educators.

The researchers situate this paper within the qualitative research approach as an umbrella concept that allows for the consideration of the perceptions, skills, and experiences of participating teachers who have in-depth knowledge of the situation at hand and are well positioned to provide the required information concerning inclusive education practices (Damoah, Khalo & Omodan, 2023). This approach is adopted to explore and establish how strengthening teachers' agency can enable effective implementation of inclusive education.

A participatory case study research (PCSR) design facilitates active participation among teachers. According to Hudon et al. (2021), PCSR emphasises collaborative engagement among all stakeholders to conceptualise and understand the case. This design is similar to the asset-based research approach, which focuses on identifying and leveraging the strengths and assets of individuals and institutions to address issues comprehensively. By adopting PCSR, the study aims to foster rich dialogue between participants and researchers, allowing for a deeper exploration of inclusive education in Lesotho's rural schools. The design provides participants with opportunities to share their extensive experiences and insights, yielding a variety of perspectives on the challenges and solutions related to inclusive education. Hudon et al. (2021) note that PCSR helps researchers gain a nuanced understanding of specific problems, with results directly addressing the issues at hand. This approach is particularly effective in involving teachers from two primary schools in the study, actively engaging them in addressing the implementation of inclusive education in rural schools in Lesotho.

3.1 Selection of participants

The researchers employed purposive sampling techniques to select twelve participants from two rural primary schools in Lesotho. This approach was chosen to recruit individuals with in-depth knowledge and experience of inclusive educational practices. Teachers were purposively selected to ensure that only those with at least three years of experience in inclusive educational practices participated. Each school contributed six teachers, comprising both males and females, to provide diverse perspectives and rich insights (Maree, 2017). The two schools were specifically chosen for their geographical proximity and ease of access for the researchers, which facilitated efficient data collection. Importantly, selecting these schools allowed for a detailed exploration of their unique contexts and approaches to inclusive education. By focusing on schools within the same rural area, the paper aimed to capture a nuanced understanding of common challenges and effective strategies employed by teachers in fostering inclusive educational practices. This case selection process was essential for generating rich findings that could inform broader discussions on inclusive education in similar settings.

3.2 Data collection

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were the primary data collection method used in this paper. Two groups of six teachers, totalling twelve participants, were selected from two different rural primary

schools to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences regarding inclusive educational practices. This approach was intentional; by drawing from two distinct schools, the study aimed to capture variations in teaching contexts, challenges, and strategies that might influence teachers' perceptions and practices related to inclusive educational practices. According to Colom (2021), FGDs allow researchers to engage participants in discussions that reflect their shared experiences related to the research topic. In this paper, FGDs provided a platform for the twelve teachers to collectively discuss their views and experiences concerning inclusive education. This method facilitated a rich exchange of ideas and insights among the participants, emphasising the importance of collaborative dialogue in understanding and promoting inclusive practices across different educational environments.

3.3 Data analysis

Creswell and Plano-Clark (2018) explain that, to make sense of the generated data, qualitative researchers must analyse it according to participants' explanations of the situations in order to reveal patterns, themes, and categories. In this study, the researcher listens to audio recordings to understand the participants' experiences. This information was analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2022), based on the perspective that thematic analysis is conducted to identify, analyse, and report patterns. This process included examining the generated data to develop appropriate meanings and using initial codes to identify similarities in the data. Coding was performed manually, and the identified codes were categorised into themes. Thematic analysis was carried out to give meaning to the participating teachers' experiences of implementing inclusive education practices in rural schools in Lesotho.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount in this paper. Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of the Free State (Ethics number: UFS-HSD2019/00930205). Participants provided informed consent, as detailed in a consent letter outlining their voluntary participation. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, and participants were assured of anonymity in the dissemination and publication of the research findings. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms (T1-T12) were used to refer to participants in the reporting of results.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Supportive mechanisms for effective inclusive education

To address the first research question, two key sub-themes emerged: (1) Understanding teachers as agents of change, and (2) Providing appropriate training.

4.1.1 Understanding teachers as agents

A crucial supportive mechanism for implementing inclusive education in rural schools is recognising teachers as agents of change. This perspective was consistently highlighted by participants, particularly those specialising in inclusive education. For instance, see the below statements:

> T2: *Given the expectation for us to fully implement inclusive education, it is crucial that the government, through the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), acknowledges our potential. However, proper arrangements and support must be in place.*

> T11: *As a specialist teacher, it is vital that the Ministry recognises our role and considers it crucial for effective inclusive education practices.*

> T9: *To achieve better results in inclusive education, it is essential to recognise that teachers possess the ability to contribute to change.*

> *T12: What we are implying is that the government must acknowledge our capabilities, provide clear guidelines, and offer structured plans to support better outcomes in inclusive education.*

The findings from this research underscore a shared understanding among participants regarding the critical role of recognising teachers as change agents in the successful implementation of inclusive educational practices. This perspective is essential, as it highlights the transformative potential of educators who are empowered to lead inclusive practices within their classrooms and communities. The asset-based theory proposed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) provides a robust framework for understanding how the recognition of teachers' unique skills and talents can facilitate the advancement of inclusive education. According to this theory, communities should focus on identifying and mobilising the existing strengths within their members rather than solely concentrating on deficiencies. In the context of this paper, recognising teachers as agents with skills, knowledge, and experience can serve as vital assets that not only enrich the learning environment but also foster a culture of inclusion. Supporting literature further emphasises the importance of leveraging local school agencies to promote rural development and inclusive practices. Damoah, Khalo, and Omodan (2023) assert that recognising and utilising the capabilities of local educators is crucial for addressing the specific needs of rural communities. This aligns with Forrester et al. (2020), who suggest that a comprehensive understanding of rural assets enables communities to effectively tackle their unique challenges. By recognising teachers as essential assets, it is important to note from asset-based perspectives that schools can foster an environment where inclusive education thrives and where teachers, as assets, are more likely to implement innovative strategies and practices tailored to the diverse needs of their students.

4.1.2 Offering proper training

The importance of proper training in supporting inclusive education was a recurring theme in the focus group discussions with teachers. Participants expressed that adequate training is essential for enhancing their skills and knowledge, as reflected in the following quotations:

> T6: *Implementing inclusive education can be challenging, especially for those of us who lack proper training. Success in this area can be achieved through comprehensive workshop training.*

> T7: *I concur with my colleague. Our skills and knowledge must be adequately addressed for improved outcomes in implementing inclusive education. Training is necessary for all teachers to become effective agents of change in the context.*

> T10: *Effective inclusive education practices require well-trained teachers to achieve better outcomes.*

The responses highlight that many teachers face significant challenges due to insufficient training. Since teachers are central to the implementation of inclusive education, there is a strong need for targeted training to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills. The emphasis on becoming 'true agents' suggests a focus on actively engaging rural educators, aligning with Missingham's (2017) notion of active rural agents. This approach closely aligns with the asset-based theory, which posits that enhancing the capabilities and agency of teachers is essential for fostering school development and meeting community needs. This paper posits that by focusing on the strengths and potential of rural educators, one can create a framework that not only addresses their training needs but also empowers them to take the initiative in promoting inclusive practices. This perspective reinforces the asset-based theory, which advocates for enhancing teachers' agency and skills to positively impact school development and address community needs (Forrester et al., 2020). The paper also hopes that overcoming deficiencies and supporting teachers through training can contribute to the advancement of inclusive education.

4.2 Teachers' challenges faced in implementing inclusive education

To address the second research question, two key sub-themes emerged: (1) Scarcity of Qualified Specialist Teachers, and (2) Teachers' lack of skills and knowledge.

4.2.1 *Scarcity of Qualified Specialist Teachers*

In this paper, the participants identified a shortage of qualified specialist teachers as a significant barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education. The following quotations from participants illustrate this challenge:

> T4: *The problem of a lack of qualified specialist teachers negatively impacts the implementation of inclusive education.*

> T8: *The low ratio of specialist teachers in our school creates more challenges to them, and are also workloaded to provide assistance to other teachers.*

The above responses underscore the difficulties faced by rural schools due to the insufficient number of teachers with the necessary skills to implement inclusive education. While the Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training has introduced inclusive education policies, the scarcity of specialised educators remains a significant obstacle. The findings align with Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), who note that rural communities and schools often struggle with resource scarcity. In contrast, Shahen (2021) emphasises that effective inclusive educational practices rely heavily on the presence of special educators who have the ability to practise inclusive education. This aligns with Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) asset-based theory, which posits that focusing on the existing strengths, abilities, and resources of a community can foster resilience and innovation. In the context of this paper, rural schools may leverage the available assets, such as special education teachers, for support in implementing effective inclusive educational practices.

4.2.2 *Teachers' lack of skills and knowledge*

The participants also found that teachers' lack of skills and knowledge adversely affects the implementation of inclusive education. Their responses on this issue include the following:

> T1: *Teachers' lack of skill is a problem, and many schools, especially in rural areas, are still lagging in effectively practicing inclusive education.*

> T5: *While there are many qualified teachers in our country, our school here is fully staffed with qualified personnel. However, I've realised that being qualified is not sufficient for the current inclusive education practices. It seems that only specialist teachers are effectively implementing these practices.*

> T3: *Implementing inclusive education requires more knowledgeable individuals. From my experience, many learners' diverse needs are not effectively met due to the lack of skills and knowledge among teachers.*

According to T5, the implementation of inclusive education often relies more on specialist teachers than on general teachers, despite their qualifications. This sentiment is echoed in the participants' responses, highlighting a significant challenge due to insufficient knowledge and skills for inclusive practices. In line with the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP, 2018), effective inclusive education should be the responsibility of all teachers. However, this expectation presents challenges, particularly for those who are less literate or semi-literate (Asamoah et al., 2018). Tseeke (2021) underscores the necessity for self-efficacy skill development and comprehensive teacher training to ensure effective inclusive educational practice in Lesotho schools. Since one of the primary benefits of the asset-based theoretical framework adopted in this paper is its capacity to identify and leverage existing strengths within the educational community (Dunst et al., 2018), the findings from the participants in this paper acknowledge that teachers possess strengths that only need training for

their empowerment. This paper thus considers leveraging the strengths and resources that teachers and rural schools possess as necessary for effective inclusive educational practices.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The paper revealed that teachers face significant challenges in implementing inclusive education, primarily due to a shortage of specialist teachers and a lack of requisite skills. Participants in the study identified these issues as major barriers to effective implementation. To address these constraints, supportive mechanisms from the government are essential. These mechanisms include recognising and understanding teachers' agency and providing adequate training. The findings underscore the importance of acknowledging rural educators as pivotal agents of change within their communities. This perspective aligns with asset-based theoretical frameworks, which challenge traditional views of rural inadequacy by highlighting the inherent capacities and resources available within local communities. The asset-based theory suggests that local communities and individuals possess valuable assets that can be empowered and mobilised for development, thereby contributing positively to the advancement of inclusive education.

In this paper, the researchers acknowledged several limitations, including the potential for biased responses from participants and the challenges of generalising findings across diverse rural contexts. Additionally, the study may not fully capture the complexities of implementing inclusive educational practices in varying settings. Against this backdrop of limitations, several recommendations are proposed. Firstly, the paper highlights the essential need to establish comprehensive training and support programmes specifically designed to enable inclusive educational practices in rural schools. These programmes should be structured to address the unique needs of teachers, enhancing their skills and knowledge related to inclusive practices. Secondly, it is vital to empower rural school agents by shifting the perception of these areas from being deficient to recognising the strengths of local educators and stakeholders. By leveraging the capabilities of individuals within these communities, we can foster development and improve inclusive education outcomes. Finally, there is a need to mobilise local resources by encouraging communities and educators to identify and utilise their often-overlooked assets. By harnessing these local capabilities, rural educators can effectively exercise their agency, contributing to the success and sustainability of inclusive education initiatives.

6. Declarations

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