

Foundation Phase Teachers' Experiences of School Based Support Teams: A Case of Selected Schools in Johannesburg

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Abstract : The South African Education system recognises the need for all learners including those experiencing learning difficulties, to have access to a single unified system of education. For teachers to be pedagogically responsive to an increasingly diverse learner population without appropriate support has been proven to be unrealistic. As such, this has considerably hampered interest amongst teachers, especially those at the foundation phase to work within an Inclusive Education (IE) and training system. This qualitative study aimed at investigating foundation phase teachers' experiences of school-based support teams (SBSTs) in two Full-Service (inclusive schools) and one Mainstream public primary school in the Gauteng province of South Africa; with particular emphasis on finding ways to supporting them, since teachers claimed they were not empowered in their initial training to teach learners experiencing learning difficulties. Hence, SBSTs were created at school levels to fill this gap thereby, supporting teaching and learning by identifying and addressing learners', teachers' and schools' needs. With the notion that IE may be failing because of systemic reasons, this study uses Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecosystemic as well as Piaget's (1980) maturational theory to examine the nature of support and experiences amongst teachers taking individual and systemic factors into consideration. Data was collected using in-depth, face-to-face interviews, document analysis and observation with 6 foundation phase teachers drawn from 3 different schools, 3 SBST coordinators, and 3 school principals. Data was analysed using the phenomenological data analysis method. Amongst the findings of the study is that South African full- service and mainstream schools have functional SBSTs which render formal and informal support to the teachers; this support varies in quality depending on the socio-economic status of the relevant community where the schools are situated. This paper, however, argues that what foundation phase teachers settled for as 'support' is flawed; as well as how they perceive the SBST and its role is problematic. The paper conclude by recommending that, the SBST should consider other approaches at foundation phase teacher support such as, empowering teachers with continuous practical experiences on how to deal with real classroom scenarios, as well as ensuring that all support, be it on academic or non-academic issues should be provided within a learning community framework where the teacher, family, SBST and where necessary, community organisations should harness their skills towards a common goal.

Keywords : foundation phase, full- service schools, inclusive education, learning difficulties, school-based support teams, teacher support

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