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Educators as mediators in teaching English as First Additional Language in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms in South Africa

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Educators are one of the stakeholders in the education system working to ensure learner success. According to the *Minimum Requirements For Teacher Education Qualifications*, educators must fulfil 7 roles in their quest to impart education. In the study reported on here, we investigated Grade 6 educators' knowledge and use of mediation as one of their roles in teaching English as First Additional Language (FAL) in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms. We further investigated how educators responded to learners who had diverse learning needs in English as FAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms. Six educators who taught English as FAL were purposively selected to participate in this study. Data were collected using qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews and observations, in addition to document analysis. The participating educators indicated that large classes, a lack of training on inclusive education, and the scarcity of teaching resources made their mediation roles in teaching English as FAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms very challenging.

Keywords: barriers to learning; First Additional Language; full-service schools; mediation; ordinary schools; zone of proximal development

Introduction

The inclusive education policy as informed by the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in Spain in 1994 encourages countries around the world to review their education policies – among others to ensure that every person is catered for in the schooling system (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994, 1999). In South Africa, the inclusive education policy is informed by Education White Paper 6, Special Needs Education Policy and is based on the ideal that inclusion involves recognising and respecting the differences among all learners and building on similarities (Department of Education [DoE], 2001:17). Subsequently, the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disability Act, Article 24 requires of parties to ensure that children with disabilities are able to access an inclusive, quality and free primary and compulsory education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live; and that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education. (Department of Social Development [DSD], 2016:80)

This is an important position taken by the state since the education system plays a greater role in building an inclusive society, providing equal opportunities and helping all South Africans. The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disability Act, Article 24, further advocates the provision of inclusive education that enables everyone to participate effectively in a free society and ensuring that all children with disabilities have access to quality education that will help South Africa meet its employment equity goals in the long run (DSD, 2016:82).

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, (hereafter referred to as the Constitution) embraces language as a basic human right and provides for 11 official languages, including South African Sign Language (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). This variety of languages complicates the provision of education, particularly since mother-tongue (home language) enjoys high priority in the Constitution. English is accepted as the official school language for many schools in South Africa, however it is unavoidable that there are certain learners who do not receive mother-tongue instruction in their learning and this could lead to learning problems and underachievement by these learners.

Teaching second language learners can be a challenge for most educators. The inclusive education policy (Department of Basic Education [DBE], RSA, 2014) implemented in South Africa requires of all educators to be able to teach and accommodate diversity in their classrooms. Stein (2017) asserts that the choice of the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is of fundamental importance since it is about the life quality of South Africans, access to basic rights and privileges, the fight against the unfair distribution of resources, poverty and inequity as well as the fight against biasedness and exploitation. Inclusive education involves a commitment to educate all learners to the maximum extent appropriate in the school they attend or the classroom in which they are taught. A policy of inclusive education strives for a more equitable, quality education system, and places the onus on ordinary schools to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners in mainstream education (DBE, RSA, 2014; DoE, 2001).

The Aim with the Article

This article was derived from a doctoral study entitled, *The experiences of educators in management of inclusive classrooms*. The aim with the article was to investigate Grade 6 educators' knowledge and use of mediation as one of their roles in teaching English FAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms.

Literature Review

Learning contexts as provided by, among others, different socio-economic status, educational level, culture, different abilities and disabilities, brings with it diverse learners into one physical classroom, playground, and school. Educators are expected to teach and treat these learners equally, and to ensure that teaching and learning takes place. Thus, “the educator is expected to mediate learning in a manner that is sensitive to the diverse needs of learners, including those with barriers to learning; as well as constructing learning environments that are appropriately contextualised and inspirational; and communicating effectively, in a show of recognition of, and respect for, the differences among learners” (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], RSA, 2015:58).

An educator in a diverse classroom is expected to demonstrate sound knowledge of subject content and various principles, strategies and resources appropriate to teaching in a South African context. As mediators of learning, educators are expected to know how to teach their subjects, as well as how to select, determine the sequence and pace of content in accordance with both subject and learner needs (DHET, RSA, 2015). Therefore, educators must know who their learners are and how they learn; they must understand their individual needs and tailor their teaching accordingly.

According to Vygotsky (1978), teaching can take place successfully through the teaching process called mediation. This refers to the process of assisting a learner through systematic explanation, demonstration, guided questioning, and feedback. Thus “mediation is the process through which a learner appropriates, or takes possession of, the cognitive tools that makes the construction of knowledge possible” (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2011:54). Mutekwe (2018) asserts that a mediator is not only a human being such as a teacher, parent or more competent peer collaborator, but can also be tool(s) used to enhance learner understanding of the concepts covered in the teaching and learning process. The role of mediation in learning is, therefore, to transform the learners’ skills from lower to higher cognitive functions as the learner progresses from prior to new knowledge (Kozulin, 2001). However, the learner cannot do this on his/her own, but rather an educator, parent or other person who has already acquired those skills is required to actively mediate the process. Development, in this case, occurs within a social context in which social relationships take place. In this process, new skills and higher mental functioning are produced. We deduce from this that teaching should always lead to active learning and that educators ought to search for effective teaching and learning methods to include

all learners and promote the teaching of English as FAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms.

The learning mediator role thus requires of the educator to understand the diverse needs of learners, and to accommodate learner differences, to adapt his/her teaching strategies to the differences and shortcomings of learners, to use the medium of instruction effectively, especially in the case of English as FAL, and to create a warm, learner-friendly environment. This requires that the educator should have a thorough knowledge of his/her learning area, and that he should be an inspiration to his learners. A sound knowledge of inclusive education and learner support is essential for educators to teach English as FAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

According to Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is constructed based on social interaction and experience. Knowledge thus reflects the outside world, as filtered through and influenced by our cultures, languages, beliefs and interactions with others, as it is used to direct teaching and modelling. Guided discovery, teaching models, and coaching as well as an individual’s prior knowledge, beliefs and thinking, all affect learning. The constructive theory of learning postulates that learners are active in constructing their own knowledge, building understanding and making sense of information (Vygotsky, 1978).

Educators mediate learning, guide and teach by using different teaching strategies, which include the zone of proximal development (ZPD, more on this later), differentiated instruction and learning through scaffolding. All of these strategies aim to support and develop learners as they work to overcome barriers to learning. For example, when learners are beginning to learn new tasks or topics in English as FAL, educators should provide models, prompts, sentence starters, coaching and feedback. Consequently, as learners grow in competence, educators should provide less support and more opportunities for independent work. The constructivist perspective thus does not view knowledge as a given, but as actively and continuously constructed by individuals, groups and societies (Donald et al., 2011).

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of ZPD provides a framework for effective inclusive teaching and learning in the classroom. According to this theory, learning represents a path through the zone or the space between that which a learner cannot do alone and that which he/she can do with the help of capable others, such as peers or educators (Donald et al., 2011). Thus, learners need to move from the known to the unknown with assistance – that is, the mediation of capable others in their environment. From this, Rowland (2006) argues that teaching

happens most effectively when assistance is offered at those particular points in the ZPD where the learner requires help, and where there is a distinction between what the learner has mastered and where s/he is in the process of learning.

Methodology

In keeping true to a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013), we posed questions on the views of the participants; they were broad or general questions with a focus on the phenomena of the study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participatory observations and document analysis largely of words or texts from the participants exploring the focus of the study.

The qualitative research approach begins with certain assumptions and uses interpretive theoretical frameworks to inform the study of research problems, which address the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2013:44).

These allowed us to gain a thorough understanding of the challenges that educators face in mediating English as FAL, particularly in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms in this country.

De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delpont (2011) note that qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study. In following this approach, a researcher goes to the participants, to where they live or work, and gathers their stories before writing a persuasive, literary account of their experiences.

Research Sites

The sites comprised three schools in the Gauteng province. Two of the primary schools were in the Tshwane Metro Municipality, and the third one was in the township of Hammanskraal, north of the city of Tshwane. According to the school district demarcation boundaries, the two former schools resort under the Tshwane South District Office (D4), while the latter falls under the Tshwane North District Office (D3). To ensure anonymity, the schools were named School A, B and C respectively.

The three selected schools

The three schools selected were categorised as inclusive, “full-service schools” by the DBE. Such schools are ordinary institutions that are especially equipped to address a full range of barriers to learning, which learners might experience within an inclusive education setting (DBE, RSA, 2009). In addition to the “ordinary” or “mainstream” learner population, such schools should be accessible to most children residing in the feeding area, including those who experience barriers to learning. Inclusive schools should provide the necessary support to learners with diverse educational needs, including second language

teaching (English as FAL), which is the focus of this study. To qualify, such schools should have effective school-based support teams (SBST) that meet every week to discuss the educational needs of learners who experience barriers to learning. In particular, SBSTs should support educators with intervention strategies, which are aimed at assisting struggling learners, among others, by teaching English as FAL. As required by the *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support* (SIAS), SBSTs should work closely with the Department of Education’s District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs), with a view to responding to learners’ needs in a systemic manner (DBE, RSA, 2014).

School A was located in the inner city of the Tshwane Metro Municipality, and resorted under the Tshwane South District Office (D4). Enrolment was 700 learners from Grades R to 7. The staff consisted of a principal, a deputy principal, four heads of department and 28 educators. Included on the permanent staff were two guidance counsellors, one learning support educator, one resource educator and one home/school/community liaison educator. The learners were largely drawn from the inner city and various townships in the Tshwane Metro Municipality. The majority of learners came from middle- and working-class families who could afford to enrol their children in inner-city schools.

School B was located in the township of Mamelodi East, in the Tshwane Metro Municipality. Like School A, it resorted under the Tshwane South District Office (D4). At the time of the study the school had 1,235 learners from Grades R to 7. The staff consisted of a principal, two deputy principals, four heads of department, 27 educators and three learning support educators. The learners were largely drawn from the informal settlement of Mamelodi East. Many of them came from families where the parents were unemployed and relied on pension grants and/or child support grants received from the DSD.

School C, which was located in the rural community of Stinkwater in Hammanskraal, resorted under the Tshwane North District Office (D3). The school had 972 learners from Grades R to 7. The staff consisted of a principal, two deputy principals, four heads of department, 25 educators and one learning support educator. The learners were largely drawn from the Stinkwater community. Many came from child-headed families and were orphans or vulnerable children.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study was the following: What is your understanding of the role of educators as mediators in teaching English as First Additional Language in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms in South Africa?

The participants were also asked to describe how, as educators, they adapted their teaching strategies to accommodate learners who experienced barriers to learning in English as FAL.

Data Collection

Three methods of data collection were used: in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis.

In-depth interviews are focused and discursive and allow the researcher and participants to explore an issue (Creswell, 2013). Such interviews were conducted to determine the educators' perceptions, opinions, known facts and forecasts, as well as their reactions to the experience of teaching learners who face barriers to learning in English as FAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms in this country.

The participants and the researchers agreed on an interview schedule. The interviews took place in the participants' natural settings, i.e., their schools. Interview protocols were developed beforehand to ensure that the interviewer puts the same questions to all participants.

The interviews lasted 30 minutes per participant, and follow-up sessions were conducted with the same participants to cross-check the credibility and trustworthiness of the data collected. The interview data were audio recorded to complement the note-taking done by the researchers to ensure that data were captured in their original form.

Observation is one of the techniques that researchers use to see and hear what is occurring naturally in the research site (McMillan & Schumacher, 2013). Our role during the field observations was that of non-participant observer. A non-participant observer "can record data without direct involvement with the activity or people" (Creswell, 2013:167). As a non-participant observer, the researcher observes without taking an active part in the social setting (Bryman, Bell, Hirschsohn, Dos Santos, Du Toit, Masenge, Van Aardt & Wagner, 2014:244). We visited the schools and observed the selected educators during lessons or during breaks, yet always within the school context, to obtain a rich understanding of their experiences in teaching learners who encountered barriers to learning in English as FAL.

During observations we used the Term 1 lesson plans for Grade 6, English First Additional Language framework to observe how educators prepared their lesson plans, learners' activities and assessment tasks to teach and scaffold learners who experienced barriers to learning in English as FAL (DBE, RSA, 2012).

The official documents analysed included the *Education White Paper 6: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (DoE, 2001); *Guidelines for the Implementation of Full-Service Schools* (DBE, RSA, 2009); the *Minimum*

Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) (DHET, RSA, 2015); *the National Curriculum Statement (NCS)*; *Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)*; *Guidelines for responding to learner diversity in the classroom – English, grades R–12* (DBE, RSA, 2011); *Term 1: Lesson plans for Grade 6, English First Additional Language* (DBE, RSA, 2012); *the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS)* (DBE, RSA, 2014) and the *White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (WPRPD)* (DSD, 2016).

Data Analysis

Interviews of educators were transcribed verbatim and the information obtained from documents were thematically analysed through content analysis, which, according to Kumar (2019), provides the basis for identifying the main themes that emerge from the responses given. The final stage of analysis involved identifying and interpreting the dominant themes in each learner's experience in the mainstream schools.

Results and Discussion

The Role of Educator as Mediator of Learning

The participants in this study seemed informed about the role of an educator as mediator of learning, as outlined in the *MRTEQ* (DHET, RSA, 2015). According to Participant A, "*the educator as a learning mediator has the occasion to mediate learning in a manner which is sensitive to the diverse needs of learners, including those who experience barriers to learning.*" This requires educators to contrast learning environments that are appropriately contextualised yet inspirational, and to communicate effectively, showing recognition of and respect for the differences between individuals. Participant A added: "*to mediate learning, I will demonstrate sound knowledge of subject content and various principles, strategies and resources appropriate to the teaching of English FAL in the Grade 6 inclusive classrooms.*"

Participant B indicated: to mediate learning, "*I would be expected to understand and interpret [an] existing learning programme, design [my] own learning programmes, select and prepare suitable textual and visual resources for learning.*"

Participant D mentioned:

when I teach learners, I don't only concentrate on the subject matter, but also on the child as a total being, because teaching prepares these children for the outside world, that is why we have to bring along the lived experiences in the classrooms.

Participant D also added the following:

As we know that in an inclusive classroom, we have to accommodate all learners with different abilities, teaching them grammar/language structure. For instance, I am going to ask them about verbs. Teaching them, one ha[s] to do some

action and learners have to give their own examples, say the word and do the action, before we can move to constructing sentences, or before we can go into teaching tenses, and so on. They must understand also [that] the use of flash cards and pictures is very important.

Participant E indicated:

the role of an educator is to act in loco parentis, i.e. the educator becomes the source of guidance and support for learners while they are at school. In my classroom there are rules which I expect learners to obey, and if they don't obey the rules, I reprimand them with guidance and love as children, because at that time, I am acting as a loco-parentis.

This means that quality teaching and learning take place in well-disciplined classrooms.

Participant F stated:

I understand [the] learning mediator role in two ways: firstly as a subject facilitator in English as FAL, and also to mediate between the learners family and other professionals, because learners who experience barriers to learning need somebody who must inform support services how they manifest themselves; so [as] to make others understand that they need particular support for them to learn effectively.

Apart from Participant C, all the participants in this study demonstrated a sound knowledge of the role of a learning mediator, his/her knowledge of the learning area, the content and the contrast in learning environments which must be appropriately contextualised and inspirational to learners who experience barriers to learning. Thus, the educator is expected to mediate learning in a manner that is sensitive to the diverse needs of learners, including those with barriers to learning; as well as constructing learning environments that are appropriately contextualised and inspirational; and communicating effectively, in a show of recognition of, and respect for, the differences in others (DHET, RSA, 2015).

According to Razali, Toran, Kamaralzaman, Salleh and Yasin (2013), educators need to understand inclusive education, which involves an awareness of the type and extent of barriers to learning experienced by learners. Educators' poor understanding of learning barriers and the way they impact on the learners, as well as the ways in which educators can change their teaching strategies to support them is a concern. Educators' poor understanding or their lack of learner understanding and support exacerbates poor learner progress and thus impacting on their academic progress – locally and internationally. However, participating educators in this study indicated that, in principle, they did understand the policies of inclusive education, however, they were extremely challenged by large classes, lack of training and teaching resources in teaching English as FAL.

Mediation in the Teaching of English FAL in Grade 6 Inclusive Classrooms

Participant A argued: *“educators should use the language of instruction appropriately to explain, describe and discuss key concepts in the Grade 6 inclusive classrooms.”*

Educators should thus prepare thoroughly and thoughtfully for teaching, by drawing on a variety of teaching methods and resources, as well as the knowledge, skills and processes involved in teaching English as FAL. Further, they should bear in mind each learner's existing knowledge, skills and experience when using key teaching strategies such as high-order questioning, problem-based tasks and projects, appropriate group work, whole-class teaching and individual self-study.

Educators should also adjust their teaching strategies to meet the developmental stages of their learners to align with the knowledge requirements of English as FAL. In this regard, Participant B noted:

I would equip learners with [the] necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to be able to mediate learning and use community libraries; I will also support learners, who experience barriers to learning by giving extra classroom activities or assignments, and they will assist one another in group work and I will also monitor and facilitate the learners' progress.

Participants E and F agreed that when teaching reading comprehension in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms, it is vital for educators to utilise as many learning aids as possible, including concrete aids, semi-concrete aids, pictures, etc. These materials would benefit even those learners without barriers to learning. The participants highlighted the importance of making sure that the stories the learners are reading at the time, and the words that learners already know, are frequently included in reading lessons.

Best Practices of Educators as Mediators Dealing with Learners who Experience Barriers to Learning

Participant A indicated that, to mediate learning in the teaching of English as FAL in the classroom,

I used texts in which learners were required to read individually in order to be in a position to identify learning barriers. I have noticed that some learners had sensory problems, late enrolment at school, rooted inappropriate pedagogy and overcrowded classrooms that contributed to learning barriers.

Participant A added that for learners who experienced sensory barriers such as hearing loss,

I notified their parents, and hence some learners were taken to medical practitioners. I also placed the learner in front of the class, and I spoke louder when [I am] teaching to accommodate all learners, and I use open-ended questions and statements to assist learners who do not write

properly as a result of perhaps overcrowding or [a] lack of basic and appropriate learning support materials. Further to that, learners who do not write properly [are] given hand-outs/worksheets so that they could practise how to transcribe, hoping that these activities would assist them, to improve their writing skills.

Participant B stated: *“I encourage my learners to become independent learners and take responsibility for their own learning and [to] support one another while working in groups.”*

Participants D and E agreed that, for reading lessons, learners first had to identify the title of the book, analyse and discuss the title and pictures on the cover, along with reading the name of the author. Afterwards, the whole class had to make predictions (from the cover pictures) as to what the story was about, the possible ending and the theme (moral of the story). Every learner was given a chance to analyse “A bad end to fun day” story.

Thus, learners who experience barriers to learning had an opportunity to learn from their classmates, and this exercise boosted their self-esteem when it came to reading. Participant F indicated that assessment was integrated with teaching and learning, and when it was time for assessment, she *“would consider doing curriculum adaptations to give learners who experience barriers to learning the activities that suit their level of ability as a scaffolding strategy.”*

Curriculum Adaptation to Accommodate Learners who Experience Barriers to Learning

Curriculum is what is taught and what the learner is expected to learn, that is, to know, understand or be able to do. It includes facts, concepts, and skills that learners will acquire within their learning environment (DBE, RSA, 2011). In curriculum adaptation, educators are encouraged to modify the content to some extent to help learners to attain knowledge, skills and competencies required. This can be done by adapting the content, delivery (including tools or resources), and assessment.

According to UNESCO (2004:13), there are two types of curriculum, namely the formal and the informal/hidden curriculum. The formal curriculum is based on a prescribed set of educational outcomes or goals and is prescribed by an authority – in this case, the DBE, RSA (2011) prescribed the CAPS, which made educators feel constrained as they were required to implement it rigidly.

By contrast, the hidden curriculum (2014:para. 1) describes the informal or hidden curriculum as the unwritten, unofficial and often unintended lessons, values and perspectives that learners learn at school. Whereas the formal curriculum consists of the subjects, lessons and learning activities learners participate in, as well as the knowledge and skills educators intentionally teach the learners, the hidden curriculum consists of the unspoken or implicit academic, social and

cultural messages that are communicated to learners while they are in school.

According to the DBE, RSA (2014), curriculum adaptation entails adjustments to the curriculum, learning activities, content demands, modes of assessment and classroom environment in the process of addressing different learning needs. Responding to the question of how educators adapt the curriculum to accommodate learners who experience barriers to learning in English as FAL in the Grade 6 inclusive classrooms, all the participants mentioned that they could not make changes to or decisions about CAPS since it was the prescribed curriculum. CAPS implies a predetermined selection of textbooks (e.g., DBE textbooks) and the Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) which must be adhered to (DBE, RSA, 2011, 2012; DoE, 2012). The educators are thus bound to teach from the textbooks and teach an average or representative group of learners. In many schools, educators do this because the system has content-loaded examinations that learners must pass, where an educator’s success is measured by the learners’ performance in these examinations – one example is the systemic evaluation of the Annual National Assessments (ANAs).

We argue that, to support learners who experience barriers to learning in English as FAL, educators need to adapt the curriculum such that it fits the learners’ learning needs. Curriculum adaptation would involve a process of modifying or adapting the curriculum according to the different ability levels of the learners in a single class. Educators can modify a curriculum by changing the content, their teaching methods, or the learning content (sometimes referred to as the processes) and the methods of assessment (sometimes referred to as the products).

It might mean, for example, dividing the class into four groups based on ability, or creating mixed-ability groups in which learners with more experience help those with less experience. This is what Vygotsky (1978) describes as the zone of proximal development, i.e., the difference between what children can achieve in isolation, as opposed to what they can accomplish with guidance. This notion allows us to understand that educators have a role to play in mediating learning for learners who experience barriers to learning, as in the context under study.

Responding to the question of how educators adapted their teaching practices to accommodate learners with barriers to learning, all the participants gave detailed explanations of the activities they used to accommodate all learners. Greater emphasis was placed on what was taught, and on the pace of teaching and learning. Participant A, for example, stated:

I take the learners' limitations into account by not using difficult language to ask or say something, and I speak directly to learners in an interested manner and in a normal, natural voice, and I do not use idiomatic expression in every [day] language.

Participant B mentioned that she adapted her teaching practice to accommodate learners by assessing them differently, according to their abilities, by means of classwork activities, tests, assignments or adapting the curriculum, in such a way as to help learners reach their full potential.

Participant C gave reasons for using differentiated lesson planning, stating that learners' levels of ability are a priority to teaching and learning, therefore, they can also be assessed orally by using pictures and objects or bodily expressions (e.g., singing and dancing).

Participants C added:

to accommodate learners who experience barriers to learning in my classroom, I should consider the multi-level teaching approach, that assumes the principle of individualisation and [is] flexible for inclusion, and it allows [the] different levels of thinking for learners. Thus, as educators we need to design different learning programmes that promote one lesson with a variety of teaching levels to accommodate all learners in the classrooms.

Participant D indicated that she adapted her teaching practice to accommodate struggling learners by giving all learners the same test, but assisting those who cannot achieve the expected results. In a comprehension test, for instance, where they have to write a paragraph, *"I assist the learners by showing them the pictures so that they speak about the pictures and when they write they have a clue of what to write."*

Participant E mentioned that, at the beginning of the year, they screened and identified learners who experienced barriers to learning to determine their strengths and weaknesses before communicating with the parents. While the educators did not always receive much support from the parents, due to a lack of parental involvement in school-related activities, Participant E highlighted that when she asked parents to assist their children with schoolwork, one Grade 6 parent in School C stated: *"I didn't go to school and I can't assist my child with the school work."* The parents were nonetheless encouraged to support and monitor the manner in which their children do their schoolwork.

Participant F mentioned: *"I adapt my teaching practises, the learning outcomes, the pacing, learning materials and the teaching methods to accommodate learners who experience barriers to learning in my classroom."*

Based on the data gathered during the in-depth interviews and non-participatory classroom observation, all participants were very positive

about the issue of curriculum adaptation, agreeing that

whenever we teach we use different teaching methods, pictures, real objects and other relevant teaching aids, and we make sure that the teaching aids are attractive and visible enough so that our lessons' activities become inclusive and accommodate all learners within the classroom.

All participants in this study agreed that they adapt their teaching practice and methods to accommodate learners who experience barriers to learning. Vygotsky (1978) supports the view that teaching practices and teaching methods ought to be adapted during mediation, to accommodate learners facing barriers to learning: educators should ensure that learning is matched in some manner to each child's developmental level, within the ZPD.

Intervention Strategies Used by Educators as Mediators

The participants' responses differed, since their classrooms comprised of learners of differing ability levels and required different intervention strategies in terms of learning support. Participant A indicated:

I compile a questionnaire to use during my conversation/interview with the learners, trying to find out [the] various language errors the learners make, during my observation and to analyse each error in terms of dimension of language. Thus, the information will assist me to know which intervention strategies [each] learner needs in order to be supported in his/her learning barriers.

Participant A added that, to effectively support learners, she encouraged them to perform certain actions after a listening (oral) activity, to show understanding. Basic sight words were taught to learners, to allow them to practise reading at home, so that they could write a spelling test the next day.

Participant B mentioned: *"I would identify and assess learners who experience barriers to learning on [the] basis of school work and deal with [the] problems that occur inside and outside the classroom."*

Participant D stated that, supporting learners who experienced barriers to learning in the context under study, depended on the assessment standard that the educator was using at that particular time, for instance in reading lessons.

I would use pictures, and with writing a paragraph I would use a mind map with keywords. For example, I would write the heading of a particular topic and explain to the learners and write the introduction and the keywords until the conclusion. Thus, the learners would be able, with the assistance of pictures, to construct sentences in a point form, and after that, learners are supposed to join the sentences, of which by then I would have explained the conjunction to the learners.

Participant E indicated that she provided more time to learners to complete their tasks and allowed

them to learn through picture association. For example, she provided a story with pictures, and asked learners to answer open-ended questions. With regard to writing, pictures were supplied from which the learners had to develop a story and construct sentences point by point, discuss it with their peer tutors and later with their educator in a whole-class situation.

Participant F explained that, to support learners who experienced barriers to learning she would start by motivating them and ensuring that the learners became interested in reading. She also analysed what the learners needed to do, breaking this up into pieces and making sure that they did adequate work, rather than too little or too much for them to progress at their own pace. *“I would say task analysis and motivation are inevitable during mediation of learning.”* All the participants (apart from Participant C) agreed that they adjusted their teaching strategies to continuously support learners who experienced barriers to learning to meet their educational needs.

Recommendations

Knowledge of inclusive policies would assist educators in screening, identifying and assessing learners who experiences barriers to learning in the context of English as FAL in inclusive classrooms. It will enable educators to provide support to those learners by allowing them to adapt the curriculum and use different teaching strategies and resources in their role as mediators in teaching English as FAL.

The MRTEQ expects of educators to demonstrate sound knowledge of subject content as well as various principles, strategies and resources, which are appropriate to teaching in a South African context. As mediators of learning, educators are expected to know how to teach their subject, how to select content, and how to determine the sequence and pace at which it is taught, in accordance with learners’ needs (DHET, RSA, 2015). For this reason, we recommend that educators should know who their learners are and how they learn (different learning styles), and that they should demonstrate sound knowledge of content and do thorough preparation before presenting English as FAL lessons to support learners who experience barriers to learning in their classrooms.

Conclusion

We investigated how educators responded to learners who experienced barriers to learning in English FAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms. We report that even though educators mediated learning in a manner that was sensitive to the diverse needs of learners and created learning environments that were appropriately contextualised, inspirational and communicated

effectively by showing a recognition of, and respect for the differences between individuals, they had experienced some difficulties in teaching English as FAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms. The results show that all the participating educators were extremely challenged by large classes, a lack of training, a lack of teaching resources and understanding of inclusive education policies and practice in teaching English as FAL.

Authors’ Contributions

MC took the lead in writing the manuscript and conducted the participant interviews. RT conducted the writing analysis. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the doctoral thesis of Margaret Chauke.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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