

The use of screening, identification, assessment and support policy to support vulnerable learners

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Abstract

South African schools are becoming overwhelmed by the large numbers of learners who experience various vulnerabilities, including socio-economic issues and psychosocial factors. The policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) serves as a guiding tool to teachers, in providing necessary support to vulnerable learners. This study sought to explore the teachers' views on the implementation of the SIAS policy to support vulnerable learners. The qualitative research approach was employed. The study is interpretive and selected the case study research design. Purposive sampling was employed to sample five secondary schools for participation. Within the five sampled schools, ten teachers, five school-based support team members, and five principals were selected for participation. The sampling criteria was based on participants' experiences in implementing the SIAS policy. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document review. The data were analysed thematically. The study revealed misconception of the SIAS policy, the incredibility of school-based support teams, inappropriate learner profiling, lack of comprehensive psychosocial support systems, poor parental involvement, the teachers' preparedness in contributing towards enabling schooling environments. It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education develop comprehensive policy guidelines to address psychosocial support to vulnerable learners in rural schools, provide sufficient resources to enhance the support measures and devise strategies to continuously assess the efficacy of the support systems. Lastly, the Department of Education should make it a priority to actively engage parents or guardians in the learners' academic activities.

Keywords: *enabling environments, learner profiling, psychosocial support, SIAS policy, vulnerable learners*

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1. Introduction

Learners need nontoxic and supportive schools for them to participate and have progress in their academic activities, as well as to unleash their full potential. Schools have a mandate to cater for the diverse needs in the communities which they operate. It is against this effort that schools should cater for the needs of all learners, regardless of the level of their various needs. It is for this reason that schools need to be inclusive in order for them to ensure that all learners are presented with equal educational opportunities (Engelbrecht, 2017). South African schools are overwhelmed by large numbers of vulnerable learners from diverse social backgrounds. This study recognises vulnerable learners as those experiencing socio-economic and psychosocial factors such as poverty, child-headed families, lack of proper nutrition, bullying, abuse, rape, discrimination, insolvency, cultural prejudice, disabilities and the problem of identities (Drane et al., 2021; Rollins, 2020). These contextual challenges, expose vulnerable learners to emotional and psychological insecurity, and lessen their participation in academic activities (Mosia & Lephoto, 2015).

The South African Department of Education adopted numerous policies and guidelines to ensure that all learners receive relevant support and quality education in schools, such as the South African Schools Act (SASA), No. 84 of 1996, the Education White Paper 6 (EWP) of 2001, Guideline for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom through Curriculum of 2011, the Policy on Care and Support for Teaching and Learning 2008 and the policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support 2014, to mention a few. However, despite the availability of the policies and guidelines to respond to the needs of learners, teachers, particularly in the rural contexts, seemingly do not have or have less appropriate intervention measures that are sincerely comprehensive, and thereby disadvantaging vulnerable learners from getting relevant support which they need (Nxumalo & Lukhele, 2011).

The availability of the legislations and guidelines was initially meant to provide psychosocial support, to create enabling environments for all learners (Themane & Osher, 2014). Moreover, vulnerable learners need to be provided with environments that have sufficient support, care, respect, and are free from physical and emotional harm. In 2014, the Department of Basic Education in South Africa, introduced the SIAS policy as the guiding tool to identify and support vulnerable learners and environments for all learners which aimed to launch a unified system of early identification and effective intervention to cater for the needs of all learners. This policy was enforced by the Education White Paper 6 2001, which expected

the schools to ensure safe environments in which all learners, including those which are vulnerable can develop academically, socially, morally and mentally (Mabasa, 2017), and to minimise learning interruption by providing relevant psychosocial support (DoE, 2014). It is against this background that influenced this study to focus on how teachers implement the SIAS policy to ensure that relevant psychosocial support is provided to vulnerable learners.

Previous studies have addressed the issue of applying the SIAS policy to support learners with specific learning impairments such as autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia. However, less work has been done on finding the remedial assistance for vulnerable learners in the rural schools of South Africa, and to work on creating enabling environments for learners who experience psychosocial factors that expose them to vulnerability. Olivier (2017) and Karimupfumbi and Dwarika (2022) provided an insight on the positive outcomes of using SIAS in providing support to learners with dyslexia. Therefore, this study concludes that less is done on effective psychosocial support for vulnerable learners. Hence, this study sought to explore the teachers' experiences in using the SIAS policy to address the psychosocial needs of vulnerable learners, which is an intervention aimed at contributing towards the creation of enabling schooling environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The significance of the policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) in schools

It is heart-wrenching that 30 years after apartheid, South Africa is still grappling with educational inequalities, inhibiting it from providing decent quality education to most black and coloured learners (Piliso, 2024). Roberts (2021) posits that this represents the legacy of apartheid, which is evident in most South African township and rural schools. Notably, in support of this argument, the 2020 report by Amnesty International maintained that the “South African education system is characterised by crumbling infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms and relatively poor educational outcomes, is perpetuating inequality” (Amnesty International, 2020, para. 6). It is critical to note that these conditions are more prevalent in rural areas and townships where a majority of black and coloured people were forced to reside during apartheid (Mokgwathi, 2023; Piliso, 2024). Most of them are still residing there to date. Most children residing in these areas are grappling with a plethora of psycho-social and psychological issues resulting from factors such as poverty, domestic abuse, crime, substance

abuse, poor infrastructure, violence and many more (Breetzke, 2020; Ngidi, 2022; Rachel et al., 2022). In the context of education, these factors may be the determinants of barriers to learning, leading to most learners underperforming and dropping out (Bianchi et al., 2021). This is the case because schools and the curriculum in their natural states cannot cater to the needs of learners experiencing barriers to learning due to its one-size-fits-all design (Reynolds, 2015). In response to this calamity, the Department of Basic Education vouched for implementing inclusive education to eliminate educational inequalities and achieve quality education for all learners in South Africa (DBE, 2014; Graham, 2020). This necessitated the adoption of relevant policies to guide and regulate the implementation of inclusive education. Consequently, in 2014, the SIAS policy was introduced. The policy's main purpose is “to provide a framework for the standardisation of the procedures to identify, assess and provide programmes for all learners who require additional support to enhance their participation and inclusion in school” (DoE, 2014, p .9). SIAS outlines all the steps and procedures to be followed when screening, identifying, assessing, and supporting vulnerable learners and those experience barriers to learning (Melane, 2022). It must be carried out as a mandate for teachers to ensure that the needs of all learners are catered for. Further, the SIAS policy aimed to ensure fair and equal access to mainstream education for every learner, regardless of their learning differences and challenges. Moreover, the policy encourages schools to adopt a social model approach to children's education. According to Bunbury (2020), this is a way of knowing that problems occur not only within the learners but also in the schooling environments. Hence, the education system should conform to the diverse needs of all learners instead of the learners conforming to the system's demands (Athira & Rajendran, 2023).

The SIAS policy placed teachers on the front line of inclusive education implementation. The policy provides clear-cut roles for teachers in their quest to support vulnerable learners. Teachers must ensure diversity by accommodating all learners' needs in classroom programmes, curriculum assessments, and learning materials. The policy maintains that for teachers to achieve diversity, they should prioritise developing and maintaining learner profiles (Dreyer, 2015). These documents capture learners’ profiles, which teachers should use as the primary tool to plan and implement interventions to support vulnerable learners (Cloete, 2016). These profiles are key because learners can move with them as they proceed in their schooling grades; this ensures that teachers in the next grade would easily know how to support the learner without in-depth screening (Fodo, 2023). According to DoE (2014, p.37), “the

support will include differentiation of content, adjustment of classroom methodologies and classroom environment and applying the necessary accommodations in assessment and examinations”. All these guidelines are meant to help teachers create an enabling schooling environment for all learners.

Sufficient research has generally been conducted on implementing this policy to determine its successes and challenges. In relation to success, Ndlovu (2022) and Singh et al. (2020) posit that through the SIAS, schools and teachers have been exposed to the nitty gritty of inclusive education. This was facilitated through inclusive education workshops as mandated by the SIAS policy on pages 21 – 23 (DoE, 2014). These workshops equipped teachers with the necessary skills to make schools inclusive and poised towards quality education for “all students”. Moreover, the policy enabled schools to establish school-based support teams (SBST), which is a structure responsible for inclusive education matters (Makhalemele & Tlale, 2020; Mahlangu et al., 2023). This cleared the confusion on who is responsible for the implementation in a school. In relation to challenges, Ntseto et al. (2021), Hess (2020) and Matolo and Rambuda (2021) maintain that implementing the SIAS policy is heavily inhibited by poor training of teachers, lack of resources, limited support from the National Department of Basic Education, and poor infrastructure. These studies have provided a general analysis of the implementation of the SIAS policy, which is good for determining its efficacy. However, all the studies evaluating the implementation of SIAS have not captured teachers' views on how it is used to support vulnerable learners in South African Schools.

Those that are closely related have addressed the issue of applying the SIAS policy to support learners with specific learning impairments such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia. However, less work has been done on finding remedial assistance for vulnerable learners and to work on creating enabling environments for learners who experience psychosocial factors that expose them to vulnerability. To mention few studies, Olivier (2017) was based on teachers providing support to learners with dyslexia, while Karimupfumbi and Dwarika (2022) focused on teachers' use of the SIAS strategy to support learners with the characteristics of dyslexia. Therefore, the literature is silent on the teachers' experiences of using the SIAS policy in supporting the needs of vulnerable learners. Hence, this study sought to explore the teachers' experiences of using the SIAS to support or address vulnerable learners' needs. It is critical to solicit teachers' views on supporting

vulnerable learners because they are the frontline of turning schools into enabling environments for all learners.

2.2. Teachers' contribution towards enabling schooling environments

Themane and Osher (2014) describe an enabling school environment as a school context wherein teachers and learners feel safe, supported, respected, and cared for. This is a school condition that provides learners with security from both physical harm and emotional toxicities (such as bullying and prejudice) and where healthy participation is encouraged. As in other teaching and learning contexts, learners experience safety in situations where they are confronted by individuals, group of other learners, or in risky situations that make them anxious and vulnerable but still manage to survive and be rescued. A school that is optimistic or has a positive atmosphere of psychosocial support enables learners and teachers to feel at ease and share worries with one another (Osher et al., 2014). Furthermore, Mabasa (2014) asserts that safety is perceived differently by individual learners. To some individuals, safety is determined by the extent to which they are regarded as school community members. To some learners, it is affected by the extent to which they are vulnerable. For instance, if they have been victims of anxiety and trauma, learners will not feel safe and accommodated. Developing strategies to encourage maximum participation in the school environments could consequently minimise toxicities and enhance peace (Masitsa, 2011).

According to Engelbrecht (2013), teachers are responsible for developing the type of teaching methods and tactics that will contribute to physical, emotional, and psychological safety within learning environments. Most importantly, teachers should learn to make learners feel protected against harmful or unkind behaviours such as abuse, bullying, and conflicts within the schooling environments. Learners who learn in safe environments become more responsible and make adequate decisions in their academic activities (Themane & Osher, 2014). On the contrary, if teachers and learners feel unsafe, they do not respond well in focusing on and acquiring information within the teaching and learning process. Uys (2012) explains the importance of screening learners to know, understand, and view learners as natural and participative beings. Moreover, it stimulates learners' participation and a sense of acceptance. Hence, the study explored how teachers use the SIAS policy as a tool to support vulnerable learners.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by Erick Erikson's theory of psychosocial development established in 1959. According to Erikson (1959), children develop a sense of identity and self-esteem through a series of stages influenced by their interactions with the environment and people around them. He further postulates that people succeed through life stages based on how they adapt to social challenges (Erikson, 1959). Learners' success also depends on how the challenges direct them to react towards the environment around them. Erikson's theory shows the prominence of an environment in shaping young people's personalities, values and beliefs. In the case of this study, Erikson shows that an environment has a powerful influence on learners' behaviour. This exemplifies that vulnerable learner and those from poor psychosocial backgrounds may portray deviant behaviours that alienate them from other learners. Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) reiterate that children who encounter social problems are likely to lack social standing, have low self-confidence, low social standing in the peer group, and other adjustment problems. Consequently, such children may resort to aggressive behaviours. Through these kinds of discussions, it can be confidently pointed out that with proper implementation of policies such the SIAS, schools can have environments that are safe and welcoming.

In addition, Espelage et al. (2015) assert that learners with poor psychosocial support have a limited concentration span, and this harms their academic performance, especially after disclosure when the consequences of telling may intensify anxiety. The study intended to find ways to create schooling environments that are more welcoming, which will be of greater benefit to every learner, especially the vulnerable learners. Erickson (1959) emphasised that environments provide opportunities for children to develop feelings of trustworthiness, self-sufficiency, and creativity. Hence, the study focused on using the SIAS policy to provide necessary and relevant support to vulnerable learners, thus creating schooling environments that will enable learners to thrive academically, feel safe, think independently, and make necessary choices throughout their lives. Erikson emphasises the impact of social and environmental factors in shaping human development in the following aspects, amongst others: Firstly, Erikson (1959) explains cognitive development as an intellectual and mental ability, wherein he states that offering safer and more stimulating schooling environments that support holistic development to learners, allows them transformation in intellectual or mental abilities such as thinking, reasoning and understanding. It includes the acquisition and linking of

knowledge to practical life situations. Learners who are provided with sufficient support and exposed to positive structured environments have better opportunities for cognitive development, as well as social and emotional interaction, which is very crucial for vulnerable learners in the case of this study. Lastly, the theory shows that a supportive environment can provide learners with an opportunity to succeed academically, while a negative environment can hinder it. As such, creating a supportive or enabling schooling environment provides learners with better chances to thrive academically and reach their full potential. Hence, this study posed the following research questions:

1. What are the teachers' perspectives of the implementation of the SIAS policy to support vulnerable learners?
2. What intervention measures can best be used to address the psychosocial needs of vulnerable learners?

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach; it was found relevant as it enabled the researchers to generate in-depth information regarding the use of the SIAS Policy to support vulnerable learners, intending to contribute towards enabling schooling environments in the secondary schools.

3.1 Data Collection

An interpretive paradigm was applied to yield relevant data on the teachers' implementation of the SIAS policy in identifying and supporting vulnerable learners. The case study design was employed to allow the researchers to have an in-depth understanding of the case of learners who are vulnerable, and ways to support them using the SIAS policy. Data were collected directly through semi-structured interviews with individual participants to listen and understand their perceptions in relation to the implementation of the SIAS policy. Documents such as the SIAS policy, learner profile records, and the support needs assessment forms were used to gather additional data to complement the information provided by participants.

3.2 Data analysis

In this process, the collected data were presented raw as they were without adding or subtracting the participants' attributions. Thereafter, the data were arranged into manageable units and interpreted through a thematic approach. Details of how data from different sources of data collection were handled, managed and analysed.

3.3 Sample

The study was conducted in Lebopo Circuit, which is situated in the Capricorn-South Education District, in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Lebopo Circuit has nine secondary schools; five secondary schools were sampled for participation. The sampling frame consisted of ten teachers, five school-based support team members, and five principals from the selected secondary schools. The participants were selected following a purposive sampling strategy. The sampling criterion was that participants must be working at the secondary schools of Lebopo Educational Circuit, and must have relevant experience in the implementation of inclusive education policies, particularly the SIAS policy.

3.4 Ethics

Regarding ethics in this study, participants were informed that they are not obliged to take part in this study. This meant that, they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time they feel they want to do so. During data collection or rather the interview process, participants were assured of their privacy, and to indicate whenever they felt uneasy. Furthermore, the participants were requested to sign consent forms to confirm that they give the researchers a consent before taking part in this study. Lastly, the participants were assured that the data gathered during the study will be kept confidential, and that their information will not in any way be disclosed to unauthorised entities or individuals.

4. Results and Discussion

The study was based on the use of SIAS policy to support vulnerable learners, with the intent of contributing towards creating enabling schooling environments for vulnerable learners. Teachers were interviewed on their knowledge of using the SIAS policy and their perspective on exploring strategies to create enabling schooling environments. The following sub-themes and issues emerged: misconception of SIAS policy, SBST functionality in schools,

learner profiling, psychosocial problems, teachers' scepticism, lack of interest in scholarship, parental involvement in schools, the teachers' motivation to contribute towards schooling environments that are enabling. The sub-themes that emerged were used to guide the discussions. In the same line, Erikson's theory was used to reinforce or improve the findings.

4.1 Misconception of the SIAS policy

The study found that the first step to successful practices in teaching, particularly in inclusive education contexts, is to understand the policies. However, the study revealed that teachers misconceive SIAS as a policy that concerns learners with special needs or disabilities. Moreover, the teachers confuse the Education White Paper 6 and SIAS.

The implementation of policy of SIAS is hindered by the fact that most of us teachers do not find the meaning in it. Our confusion lies in whether this policy involves learners with disabilities or every learner. When it was first introduced, we knew EWP 6, then we understood that learners with disabilities should be catered in general education. To add on our confusion, there is SIAS. We now have to accommodate learners with social problems, we are no longer sure if it is all the same policies. Remember even curriculums unfolded in a way that one was reviewed after the other. (TA)

DoE (2014) describes SIAS as a framework that provides for standardised procedures for early screening, identification, assessment, and provision of support relevant programs for vulnerable learners. Not only does it focus on providing academic support, but advocates for psychosocial support. We believe that caring teachers strive to balance academic activities and cater for learners needs by providing a holistic approach to support. Hence, SIAS provides opportunities for remedial support to improve the learners' participation. Polikoff et al. (2016) argue that if teachers misunderstand a policy, they are likely to reject or accept it based on misinformation, and this would have negative impacts on the implementation process. Hence, Sinatra and Broughton (2011) propose the use of teacher guidance or training as the strategy to address the misinterpretation of educational policies such as SIAS. However, teacher CB reiterated the fact that teachers do not receive adequate training, hence the misconception:

The implementation of inclusive education is unsuccessful in our schools, because not all the teachers are called when there are capacity workshops. They call the majority of SMT members, and they do not provide full training to us when they

come back. Yet we are expected to know what to do. We do not implement, because we do not understand the policy. (CB)

Against this background, this study concludes that teachers lack training on the SIAS policy. It is for this reason that most of the educational policies are not successfully implemented in schools. The participants acknowledge the availability of the SIAS policy in their schools but confirm that it is not effectively utilised. Based on the discussions with the participants, it is undeniable that the teachers do not receive sufficient training on the SIAS policy, whereas they are mandated to implement it. Hence, the fruitless practices of inclusive education practices.

4.2 School-based support teams' functionality in schools

The school-based support team carries the responsibility to assess and identify learners' barriers and develop a plan to counteract such barriers. It is the duty of the SBSTs to develop a strategic and intervention plan to address the challenges in inclusive classrooms. Both learners and teachers should then have access to the plan because it would encourage them to be involved in the practices of inclusive education. On the contrary, the study revealed that SBSTs are very substantial structures to plan, support, and provide guidance and support to teachers on the implementation of the SIAS policy. However, teachers pointed the incredibility of the SBSTs in terms of executing the roles as the drivers of the implementation of the SIAS policy and in ensuring that relevant psychosocial support is provided to vulnerable learners. Additionally, Principal PA confirmed that the SBSTs are not effective in terms of performing their duties.

The only way to successful practices of inclusivity will be when the SBSTs are functioning well in our schools, and can guide teachers on the implementation of the SIAS policy. Unfortunately, we have them on paper, but they are not performing their duties as they supposed to. (PA)

In agreement, teacher CH acknowledges that the efforts, attitude and knowledge of the SBSTs predetermine the success of implementing the SIAS policy and the provision of sufficient psychosocial measures to support vulnerable learners. However, teachers are overloaded with more administrative work, hence, the lack of progress in the implementation of policies. Moreover, teacher ZB pointed that despite the efforts, attitude and knowledge there

should be specific teachers to perform the role of executing SIAS policy, providing explicit psychosocial support measures to vulnerable learners, and to also ensure that relevant resources are provided in the process.

We need teachers who will be specifically trained to handle the challenges through SIAS. Teachers who will not be allocated to teach and assess, because otherwise this issue of inclusivity will never work. Teachers have a lot of admin tasks to carry out, and to force all of them to form part of implementing the SIAS policy add to the existing burden, and they will not perform the practices with excellence. The DBE should choose teachers who will be delegated to serve the needs of vulnerable learners. Teachers who will work with social workers and psychologists to provide appropriate psychosocial services to the respective learners. More resources should be provided in our rural schools, because it is difficult to keep up quality and the standard of education while we have lack of proper resources. (CH)

In concurrence with teacher CH and ZB, Mahlo (2011) emphasised the best strategy in enhancing quality implementation of inclusive education practices, which she proclaimed it as to equip and empower the SBSTs with the necessary skills and resources to guide and support teachers and learners in the implementation process. In addition, Naicker (2019) showed that in the process of providing necessary support to vulnerable learners, the SBSTs have important aspects to fulfil, which are: the Whole School Development (WSD), which determines the needs of the whole school; the Learner Support Portfolio (LSP), which is responsible for the early identification of needs and provision of exact interventions for all learners who encounter challenges; and the Educator Support Portfolio Committees (ESPs), that are responsible for guiding teachers in minimising the hindrances of effective teaching and learning (DBE, 2014).

4.3 Learner profiling

Learner profiling plays a vital role in the implementation of inclusive education since it allows teachers to do pre-planning and discover suitable teaching methods for learners experiencing barriers to learning or those with diverse needs (Walton & Nel, 2012). The Department of Basic Education (2014) further shows that by profiling learners, puts teachers in a better position to build positive relationships with learners and assist them in preparation to unleash their full potential in the academic journey. Participants identified the process of learners profiling as a way to good way to have a clear picture and understanding of learners,

their problems, and their socio-economic and psychosocial statuses. Moreover, it is a good way to planning, classroom arrangements, timetabling, and plan remedial lessons. However, it is sad that the participants acknowledge the importance of learner profiling and assert that their reluctance in profiling the learners.

Learner profiling is important, but we do not administer it. The thing is we generalize the issue of remedial lessons. We do not do it appropriately. When we teach extra lessons, we concentrate on the grade twelve learners only, and we do it for the sake of reaching good results at the end of the year. (Teacher TA)

Therefore, this study assumes that inappropriate learner profiling is the reason for schools not being aware of the challenges experienced by learners and the amount of assistance they require. In support of our assumption, Shah et al. (2014) acclaim learner profiling as a process that assists learners in becoming, among others: inquirers, critical thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, reflective individuals who have self-concept and self-awareness. Erikson (1959) indicates that an environment has a great impact on a learner's behaviour. This means that vulnerable learners may portray deviant behaviours that alienate them from other learners. Hence, this study argues that profiling the learners will present teachers with an opportunity to develop strategies to know and win the vulnerable learners' interests in academic activities. In turn, this will make the schooling environment more interesting and enabling for all learners.

To supplement the previous argument, Bourdieu's theory (1979) hints that for teachers to be able to shape the learners' behaviours in classrooms, they must know them and understand their social backgrounds through assessment and support. The best method to know and understand the learner is through learner profiling, which is a critical part of the SIAS policy. Teacher PB showed that teachers perceive the process of learner profiling as a responsibility specific group of teachers, such as the subject teachers having to understand the learners according to their behaviours and attitudes towards different content subjects.

As teachers we allocate the responsibility to profile learners to teachers in their various content subjects. Subject teachers know their learners. Even though, we know it is not supposed to be this way, but for the sake of saving time and the whole lot of admin, subject teachers should identify the learners according to their actions or behaviours in the class, like an English teacher will know learners who are unable to write or read properly, a Mathematics teacher will

know learners who are slow in understanding calculus learners and an Economics teacher will know learners who confuse graphs. (Teacher TB)

The participant elucidated the process of profiling of learners to be important as required in the SIAS policy, because it simplifies the process of identifying learners experiencing vulnerabilities. Yet, it is not employed in the schools because it is regarded to be time consuming and complex.

4.4 Lack of comprehensive psychosocial support systems

The participants expressed concerns in relation to the provision of psychosocial support to vulnerable learners in the rural schools, due to several challenges. In addition, teachers stressed the difficulty of having to respond to the needs of learners who are affected by poor psychosocial factors, such as low socio-economic status, orphans who are raised by extended family members who do not take a good care of them, child-headed families, unemployment, sexual abuse, learners raised by parents who are alcohol addicts. Such learners perceive learning from a negative point of view, which weakens their motivation to learn, especially during lessons (Humble & Dixon, 2017). Teacher PD and ZA contemplated the impact of the lack of comprehensive psychosocial support systems on the level of responding to the needs of vulnerable learners:

We are faced with the issue of insufficient resources (both human and physical resources), lack of comprehensive policies to address psychosocial problems to vulnerable learners. The existing policies are not context conscious, as they provide uniform measures to respond to the learners needs. Whereas, the needs of learners vary according to their contexts, in the sense that the way that we, teachers in the rural contexts may respond to the needs of the learners may be distinct from the way that teachers in the urban contexts do. It is, therefore, imperative for policy makers to consider such factors. In some instances, we find ourselves failing to respond to the needs of learners, because they require special expertise, and its painful. For instance, some of our learners walk long distances and must cross in the bushes to reach the school in time, and girls get raped at times. Health and other facilities are far for their locations. (Teacher PD)

In corroboration, the teachers explained how the strenuous situations drain their strength to teach and affect their mental health, as much as all the situations affect learners.

The participants suggested an urgent training for teachers to enable them to address the psychosocial problems that learners experience so that the implementation of SIAS will be effective and beneficial to vulnerable learners.

Teacher in some instances, some teachers in the rural context find themselves in situations in which they develop strategies to address problems such as sexual abuse (which happens within the families or communities), domestic violence, and parental negligence, which is beyond their scope of knowledge, and sometimes infringe some of the teacher's limitations, to respond to the needs of learners. They however forced to intervene as the mandate that must be carried out as directed by the SIAS policy. It is so down hearting that teachers must manage multiple responsibilities within the teaching field and perform the duties that they are not qualified for. (Teacher ZA)

Even though factors constraining psychosocial support of learners are context related, teachers have various views of blaming the Department of Education to alienate rural schools from getting adequate resources, which impact negatively on learner performance. Clearly, teachers seem to have a keen to respond to the various needs of learners, but the challenge of SIAS policy with its implications, and the Department of Basic Education is seeming not taking suitable actions to overcome such challenges in the rural schools and ensure sustainable support to vulnerable learners and teachers.

4.5 Parental involvement in schools

Parents are the pillar of the implementation process because without them schools cannot operate fully well. Participants, particularly principals, had a concern regarding parental involvement in inclusive education issues. The principals disclosed that most of the parents do not show up to provide academic support to their children. Some parents feel ashamed when they are called to discuss their children's academic progress due to the family conditions. These assertions are the attested by Sheppard (2019), who said that some parents do not have an opportunity to be involved in their children's academic issues because of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment to name but a few. In this regard, teachers TP, CP and PP narrated how their unproductive struggles to convince parents to prioritise their children's education were met with inflexible reluctance, as parents complained of busy work schedules, some about

seeking jobs in town, thus putting more emphasis on their different demands at the disadvantage of learner academic progress.

Some parents around here do not attend meetings when we call them, not because they don't want to, but they hustle or work from Monday to Saturdays due to poverty. They find it difficult to attend because they have to ensure that they put food on the table at the end of the day. (TP)

In concurrence, Mambo (2011) explains that illiteracy and poverty as the dominating factors causing mishaps between schools and parents because their interaction becomes limited. This poses challenges to the teachers as they cannot reach to parent to discuss the academic needs or challenges of the learners. Some of the parents spend most of their time in the fields fetching wood that they sell to provide for their children.

Our learners are from the backgrounds that are very heart breaking. Some parents wake up in the early hours to the fields where they fetch woods that they sell in so that they can be able to put food on the table for their children. When you call them for meetings few parents turn in and there is nothing we can do. Even though some just decide not to come. (PP)

Bernstein (1975) in his theory of pedagogic discourse, affirms that with lack of proper communication and inter-relationships between education stakeholders, it becomes difficult for teachers to implement and execute their duties because they are on the receiving end. In corroboration, Phasha et al. (2017) assert that communities need to understand issues around inclusive education practices so that when there are problems among learners and teachers, they will be able to provide remedial support.

4.6 The teachers' contribution towards enabling schooling environments

The participants expressed their interest in working towards enabling schooling environments because they uttered that not only does it benefit productivity but contributes immensely to their psychological well-being. However, teachers are demotivated by their working conditions. Moreover, the participants PD and CH asserted that the education system does not have explicit methods to cater for the teachers' wellbeing but prioritises learners.

We try our level best to support the learners, to ensure that all of them reach their full potential. We utilise the little resources that we have on our disposal to ensure welcoming and safe environments. Even though our department does not

acknowledge our efforts. Some schools, have Learner Support Agents, whereas we do not have such in rural schools. (PD)

Participants referred to the working conditions as non-enabling and slackening their interest in engaging in educational discourses. Furthermore, the participants reiterated that the Education Department does not acknowledge the efforts that the teachers put in ensuring that teaching and learning run smoothly. Instead, they said that the Department imposes loads of administration work on them, which leaves them with limited time to really care for the vulnerable learners. As explained by Themane and Osher (2014), schooling environments should be contexts in which both teachers and learners feel welcomed, supported, respected, and well taken care of. It is the responsibility of the Department of Basic Education to ensure that the challenges that the teachers face are taken into cognisance to maintain peaceful schooling environments.

5. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Department of Basic Education develop comprehensive policy guidelines and measures to address psychosocial support to vulnerable learners in rural schools, provide sufficient resources to enhance the support measures and devise strategies to continuously assess the efficacy of the support systems. In addition, the Department of Education should make it a priority to actively engage parents or guardians in the learners' academic activities. Collaboration between teachers and parents in consideration of vulnerable learners should be prioritised to promote enabling school environments. It is unarguable that the active engagement of parents or guardians in the learners' academic activities is a strong indicator of learners' positive outcomes. The SBSTs can expand the parent-teacher collaboration to involve influential members from the communities, such as the traditional leaders (kings or *indunas*), community policing forums (CPFs), the '*sangomas*' (traditional doctors), and leaders of different churches. Furthermore, initiating awareness campaigns and workshops to educate parents or the society on the psychosocial problems that inhibit effective teaching and learning can help facilitate a successful implementation of inclusive education policies. All these efforts could save the teachers from having to play the role of psychologists and social workers. It can also provide some relief among teacher of trying to address the psychosocial challenges that vulnerable learners are facing.

The Department of Basic Education could employ social workers and psychologists to ensure that they strengthen their reward system by offering satisfactory salary packages to attract and retain them. The study also recommends that the Department of Basic Education provide extensive training for teachers through effective and sufficient workshops and in-service training regarding the implementation of the SIAS policy. To clarify the issues of misconceptions of the policies, the incredibility of the SBSTs and the inappropriateness of learners profiling could only be clarified through adequate training, which could be done by using effective teacher-training models.

6. Conclusion

This study discussed the teachers' experiences of using the SIAS policy in supporting vulnerable learners. The study also discussed how the Department of Basic Education can assist towards the creation of inclusive schooling environments that are enabling for teachers and learners. This study focused on how best the SIAS policy can be implemented to create schooling environments that are safe and welcoming for vulnerable learners. Teachers, as agents and custodians of the implementation process, are responsible for ensuring that necessary support measures are put in place to cater for the needs of vulnerable learners. As researchers, the study acknowledges that teachers feel burdened by all the responsibilities that are put on them. This includes having to fulfil their teaching roles and cater for the needs of the vulnerable learners. However, the SIAS policy is a well-structured tool in terms of providing guidelines to cater for the diverse needs of all learners. Hence, the implementation of the SIAS policy will continue to be challenging for teachers if the Department of Basic Education and all the relevant stakeholders do not take into cognisance all the hinted factors in this research.

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