Examining the importance of educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices for Senior Phase learners experiencing barriers to learning

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Abstract

In the study reported on here we investigated the significance of educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices within the classroom, particularly in respect of Senior Phase learners in the Tshwane North district, who experience barriers to learning. A phenomenological approach and a case study design were adopted, and qualitative data-collection instruments were used. The participants included 4 educators, 4 deputy principals, 4 institutional level support team (ILST) coordinators, and 4 school assessment team (SAT) coordinators from 4 different secondary institutions (i.e., a township, suburban, rural and an independent school). In addition, we interviewed 2 officials from the district office – the head of the district assessment team (DAT) and the head of the district-level support team (DLST) – who deal directly with assessment methods and practices. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data gathered in the study. The findings reveal that several barriers hinder the use of assessment practices in assessing learners who experience barriers to learning. We recommend that inclusive assessment practices be flexible and tailor-made to accommodate all learners who form part of the diverse learner cohort in South Africa.

Keywords: assessment; assessment practices; assessment techniques; barriers to learning; classroom assessment; classroom practice; differentiated instruction; inclusive education; learner diversity; support strategies

Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) has become a global pursuit in the quest to provide quality and equitable education for all children. This article is based on a study in which we investigated the importance of educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices for Senior Phase learners who experience barriers to learning. The focus areas were assessment practices in inclusive classrooms; strategies used to assist learners who experience barriers to learning; training needs for educators in inclusive education; challenges experienced during assessment; and stakeholder support for educators.

The primary objective of this undertaking was to explore educators' and other stakeholders' use of classroom-based assessment practices for Senior Phase learners in the Tshwane North district who struggled to overcome certain barriers to learning. The supplementary objectives were to

- assess the assessment practices that educators and other stakeholders use in their inclusive classrooms;
- critically analyse the in-classroom assessment strategies that educators and other stakeholders use to assist learners who face barriers to learning;
- examine the challenges that educators and other stakeholders experience in assessing learners experiencing barriers to learning; and
- critically examine the impact of inclusion on educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices.

This article has wide application within and beyond South Africa's borders as implementing IE in mainstream schools is a global pursuit. Brussino (2020) highlights that most countries experience assessment challenges in respect of learners with (and even without) disabilities, in mainstream and special schools alike. The fact that that this study was conducted in South Africa holds potential benefit for researchers, scholars, assessment specialists, educators, lecturers, early childhood development (ECD) and adult education and training (AET) practitioners, independent assessors and moderators, particularly in instances where most educators, despite their unique educational settings, share similar assessment challenges (Saloviita, 2020; Turner, Roberts, Proeve & Chen, 2023). In benefiting from the solutions proposed, these educational stakeholders should ultimately apply reasonable assessment accommodation measures in teaching and learning. We also propose best assessment practices which are crucial for the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Rasooli and DeLuca (2024) indicate that notable characteristics of the kind of assessment that accommodates diversity, are fairness, validity, credibility, realism, justice, equitability and accessibility. South Africa urgently needs a more holistic form of assessment, in the spirit of ensuring equal education for all.

South Africa, as one of the largest economies in Africa, affords students, learners and lecturers access to a range of resources for research and development purposes (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Technological advances have made the production and distribution of knowledge relatively easy (Toffler, 2022; Zwane & Malale, 2018). The continued prevalence of assessment-related problems, however, is what makes the audience for this study larger than a mere national issue. The findings reported on here could thus be of value to all stakeholders in the education sector throughout the world, since the inclusion of persons with disabilities is something that

practitioners from different parts of the world continue to debate, even as they share valuable ideas on best assessment practices.

Existing Literature
Assessment practice is a crucial component of teaching and learning at all educational levels. For Senior Phase learners who experience barriers to learning, effective assessment is particularly important in promoting their academic achievement and improving their scholastic outcomes. As various researchers (Alkharusi, 2011; Hamidi, 2010; McMillan, 2003) have noted, educators and other stakeholders require a thorough understanding of assessment-related concepts, principles, tools, techniques, strategies and procedures to be truly effective in inclusive classrooms.

As research indicates, the challenges confronting educators and other stakeholders in inclusive contexts do not appear to receive sufficient attention (DeMatthews, Serafini & Watson, 2021). The impact of inclusion on educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices is not fully known, and this gap continues to affect the transformation of assessment in inclusive classrooms. Eadie, Webb, Matome and Troy (2021) are among those who advocate that our relatively emergent understanding of 21st-century assessment practices in inclusive classrooms needs to be advanced. As researchers, we believe that by focusing on these aspects, educators can better assess their own practices, ensuring that they meet the demands of an inclusive environment. This includes using formative assessment that offers continuous feedback, differentiated instruction that accommodates individual styles and assessment literacy that provides different ways for learners to demonstrate their knowledge.

The Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa (DBE, RSA, 2011) describes assessment as an activity which involves gathering data on, and analysing learners' achievements by comparing those with the expected performance outcomes stipulated for a particular learning area and phase. Classroom assessment may help educators and other stakeholders to collect data on each learner's achievements (Atim, 2012). Mäkipää and Ouakrim-Soivio (2019) underscore the fact that educators and other stakeholders should be knowledgeable and skilled in selecting appropriate assessment practices, as assessment plays an important role in their day-to-day work. Hamlin (2016) identifies different forms of assessment for use in different phases of assessment: for instance, the diagnostic phase assesses what learners know at the very moment before the educator introduces new content or establishes where gaps in the content exists. According to Chauke and Tabane

(2024), the formative phase gauges learners' existing knowledge, identifies issues, motivates learners, and supports learners' learning improvement. The summative phase occurs at the end of an instructional period and evaluates overall learner achievement – often through standardised tests or final projects. Each phase plays an important role in shaping a comprehensive assessment strategy that supports learners' learning progress (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Lumadi (2013) highlights that the assessment method that an educator chooses often depends on the curriculum content being taught. Importantly, Willis and Klenowski (2018) propose that educators and other stakeholders constantly review and adjust their assessment strategies, not only to accommodate curriculum changes, but also to accommodate learners in their diversity. As Sewagegn (2013) advises, educators and other stakeholders must have assessment knowledge and skills if they are to execute related methodologies in a viable manner. These skills are important for adapting assessment to the diverse needs of learners, particularly those who experience barriers to learning. By mastering these skills, educators may ensure that their assessment practises are both viable and supportive to all learners' academic progress. This aligns with Maluma (2009) who argues that stakeholders in general and educators in particular must possess effective assessment skills to deliver appropriate assessment activities for their learners to complete. These skills include formative, differentiated, diagnostic and analytical skills.

Sewagegn (2013) found that most educators and other stakeholders lacked effective assessment knowledge and skills with regard to evaluating learners' achievements and attempts to improve the situation. Sewagegn (2013) adds that more research is required for a deeper understanding of assessment practices and skills if effective classroom assessment is to take place and warns that educators' attitudes towards classroom assessment can either positively or negatively affect the way in which they conduct assessment in the classroom. Mavuso (2023) concurs that teaching learners who experience barriers to learning requires competent educators who not only possess the necessary skills but also demonstrate positive attitudes towards learners.

As Looney, Cumming, Van der Kleij and Harris (2018) note, an educator's emotional, psychological and cognitive state can affect the way in which classroom assessment is conducted. Lumadi (2013) brands assessment practices as vital elements of classroom reform. Mavuso (2023) and Sanger and Gleason (2020) concur, noting that educators and other stakeholders require competency in using assessment to inform learners of what is expected of them, how to improve their

learning, and what skills and knowledge they require to progress in their learning.

To prosper in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), contemporary learners should acquire different skills, knowledge and competencies. For that reason, educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices play an important role in equipping learners with adequate and appropriate skills (Alakrash & Razak, 2022; Singaram, Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2023). These assessment practices may also help educators to determine whether their learners are progressing as stipulated in the curriculum. Educators and other stakeholders should thus constantly review and revise their assessment practices to reflect the expected deliverables.

According to Murray and Shapka (2023), effective assessment practices are key for encouraging positive learning outcomes in Senior Phase learners who face barriers to learning. Assessment for learning, formative and differentiated assessment, and assessment literacy are all important components of effective assessment practices (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Educators and other stakeholders must be able to identify the appropriate methods which will support their learners in achieving positive learning outcomes. Educators of learners who experience barriers to learning and other stakeholders should possess knowledge and the ability to identify the most relevant assessment methods to support their learners in their quest to achieve positive or intended learning outcomes. A brief discussion of what each of these types of assessment entails, follows.

Assessment for learning
Assessment for learning is critically important as it is designed, developed, and delivered to support meaningful learning. It provides feedback and activities involve all learners, including those who experience barriers to learning, in the assessment process. This includes engaging them with the content, procedures, environment, and support systems, while also helping them develop self-assessment skills at their own pace (Wiliam, 2011). Various authors declare that this type of assessment is particularly important for Senior Phase learners who experience barriers to learning, as assessment may contribute to positively identifying gaps in their knowledge and skills resulting in the provision of targeted support aimed at addressing those gaps. In their study of the effects of assessment for learning on the achievement of learners with barriers to learning, Didion, Toste and Filderman (2020) found that practices such as providing feedback and involving learners in the assessment process remarkably improved the academic performance of those learners.

Formative assessment
Formative assessment, on the other hand, is designed, developed and administered to assist all learners to develop their knowledge and skills by providing them with relevant feedback and supporting their learning encounters (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In addition, formative assessment is particularly relevant for Senior Phase learners experiencing learning-related challenges, as this type of assessment assist in the identification of gaps in learners' knowledge and skills and ensure that the educator provides targeted support to close those identified gaps. Alshammari and Al-Qahtani (2021), having examined the role of formative assessment in promoting learning outcomes for learners with learning difficulties, discovered that formative assessment practices, including and not limited to setting learning goals, providing feedback timeously, and involving learners in the assessment process, improved their academic achievement.

Differentiated assessment
According to Tomlinson (2020), differentiated assessment is intended to meet the diverse needs of learners by providing alternative assessment methods and adjusting, modifying, or adapting the level of difficulty of those assessments. Furthermore, differentiated assessment is particularly important for Senior Phase learners who experience barriers to learning because it plays a crucial role in accommodating their diverse learning needs and promotes positive learning outcomes to a certain extent. Li, Yan and Zhang (2022) who examined the effects of differentiated assessment practices on the academic achievement of learners with learning difficulties in an inclusive classroom, are of the fervent view that providing alternative assessment methods and adjusting the level of difficulty thereof, improved the academic achievement of those learners.

Assessment literacy
The concept "assessment literacy" should be understood as the knowledge, skills and attitudes critically required to implement assessment practices in an effective and seamless manner (Popham, 2020). Khalid, Latif and Yusof (2021) argue that educator's assessment literacy is an important link between the quality of assessment and learners' achievement. Therefore, Ashraf and Zolfaghari (2018) and Mellati and Khademi (2018) postulate that effective and efficient assessment literacy might help educators to positively perceive, evaluate, interpret and use learners' achievement data to recognise their instructional needs. It is advisable that educators and other stakeholders who work with Senior Phase learners who experience barriers to learning possess assessment literacy as it may help them to identify appropriate

assessment methods and support learners in achieving positive learning outcomes. The previous recommendation or suggestion is in line with the findings of Chen and Hu (2020) who stress the importance of educators' and other stakeholders' assessment literacy in implementing effective and efficient assessment practices.

Methodology
Research Paradigm
This study was conducted within the interpretivist paradigm, as we acknowledged that the experiences of educators, deputy principals, ILST and SAT coordinators, officials from the DBE and the head of the DLST, who deal directly with assessment methods, tools and techniques, have experience in the field of assessment. An interpretivist strives to understand people's actions, opinions and experiences. As Pervin and Mokhtar (2022) note, an interpretivist research paradigm is primarily concerned with meaning and seeks to understand social situations. Chowdhury (2014) indicates that an interpretivist researcher aims to understand how people attach meaning to their everyday experiences. Using an interpretive paradigm helps researchers to make sense of study participants' experiences, when interacting with them.

Research Approach
In this research we followed an exploratory and descriptive qualitative approach rather than a quantitative approach. Researchers use a qualitative approach in an attempt to explain human experiences. Primarily, they seek to understand and interpret meaning from the perspectives of the people who had experienced certain events. A qualitative approach involves studying human behaviour within a participant's own setting (Mohajan, 2018, Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011). For that reason, the participants in this study were interviewed in their natural settings. We believe that each person experiences the world differently and could, therefore, offer multiple perspectives on the importance of educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices (Creswell, 2013; Monteiro, Mata & Santos, 2021). We used a case study design to effectively capture the participants' experiences. Yin (2017) explains that in case study design, the findings are derived from the data collected, emphasising the distinctive features of an individual or organisation. In this study we used interviews to generate data.

Study Participants
The research sample included experienced educators, deputy principals, ILST and SAT coordinators from secondary schools, officials from the DBE, and the head of the DLST. Due to budgetary constraints and time limitations, four secondary schools in the Tshwane North district were selected using non-probability purposive

sampling. In addition to the 16 participants (four from each school), two district officials from Tshwane North – the head of the DAT and the head of the DLST – also participated, as they understand the challenges affecting educators' assessment practices in respect of learners who experience barriers to learning. The selection of these participants was due to their knowledge and skills in working with diverse learners. Educators provide school-level insight while district officials contribute their specialised knowledge of system issues. We selected 18 information-rich participants who were assigned pseudonyms (in the form of codes) to ensure anonymity. The codes were assigned as follows: AP1 to AP4 for School A, BP1 to BP4 for School B, CP1 to CP4 for School C, and DP1 to DP4 for School D. Additionally, two district officials, the head of the district assessment team (DAT) and the head of the district level support team (DLST), who deal directly with assessment methods and practices, were assigned the pseudonyms DATP and DLSTP, respectively.

Instrument and Procedure
We used an interview schedule as primary research instrument. Bryman (2016) describes an interview schedule as a structured outline or guide used by researchers to conduct interviews in a systematic manner. A schedule helps maintain focus, allows researchers to compare responses, and ensures that the research objectives are met. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted, which allowed the participants to express their views and perceptions on the topic under study. This method also granted us the flexibility to probe and elaborate on certain areas during the interviews. As part of the data-collection process, the interviews were electronically recorded and field notes were taken during each interview (Flick, 2018). Prior to recording, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were comfortable with the process (Seidman, 2019).

The interview schedule was based on five themes derived from the aims and objectives of the study. The major themes were:
- Assessment practices in inclusive classrooms;
- Strategies used to assist learners who experience barriers to learning;
- Training needs for educators in inclusive education;
- Challenges experienced during assessment; and
- Stakeholder support for educators.

Each interview was scheduled for 30 minutes and was conducted at the participants' respective workplaces in the afternoon after working hours. As noted, an interview protocol was developed to guide the administration and implementation of the interviews, and was used to ensure consistency between interviews and to increase the reliability of the findings.

The data-collection period was from January to June 2022 and was dependent on the participants' availability. The period included the planning of the interview protocol and procedure, the development of the instruments, as well as the actual data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis

To establish patterns and generate themes the data were analysed and interpreted according to the thematic analysis method (Anderson, TR 2007; Rugg & Petre, 2007). The steps in the data analysis involved the identification of the main themes. Thereafter, based on words, phrases or paragraphs that connected to the setting or themes of the study, codes were assigned to the themes. Coding was done to reduce the data reflected in the transcripts following a coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the open coding phase, data from the interview transcripts were closely examined under each of the aforementioned five themes. Categories, groupings, similarities and differences were identified in a systematic manner. Codes were assigned to each category or group. In the axial coding phase, the data were integrated revealing links between categories and subcategories. We clarified responses from the participants and integrated themes into the report (Kumar, 2011). A detailed description of the analysed data was provided within each theme. The findings were then interpreted against the findings stemming from a study of the literature.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness we employed triangulation, which involves using different methods to gain in-depth insight into a particular phenomenon (Shenton, 2004). Multiple data sources were used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the emerging themes. The data collected, based on the literature review, interview transcripts and field notes, were combined to achieve triangulation. Shenton (2004) identifies credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, and authenticity as prerequisites for trustworthiness. In turn, trustworthiness is ideal for ensuring rigour and quality in qualitative research (Mahlo, 2011).

Credibility is the ability to represent the participants' multiple realities in the research findings so that they are authentic and genuine to people who hold similar beliefs (Given, 2016). According to Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle (2010), credibility focuses on establishing whether the participants' perceptions align with the researchers' presentation thereof. We conducted member-checking to verify the participants' contributions (Creswell, 2009). According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014) credibility can be enhanced during data collection. In this instance,

we made provision to help ensure the participants' honesty to promote confidence that the phenomena under scrutiny have been accurately recorded (Shenton, 2004). The credibility of the data findings was supported by recording and transcribing the interviews. Transferability is one of the ways of making the findings of a qualitative study generalisable to other contexts or groups. The hope was that this study would reveal information that could lead to an improved understanding of the assessment practices that educators and other stakeholders followed and implemented to assist learners who experienced barriers to learning in order to transfer those to other Senior Phase classrooms.

Given (2016) defines dependability as the degree to which research findings are repeatable when research is conducted with the same participants or in similar settings. In an attempt to achieve dependability we used multiple sources of data to understand the challenges affecting educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices. Lodico et al. (2010) regard dependability as a necessary criterion for qualitative research that reflects the processes used to collect data.

According to Given (2016), confirmability is about ensuring that the reported findings reflect the study participants' actual views. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) believe that self-reflexivity is also relevant in the analysis process, requiring of researchers to be vigilant by thoroughly reading the data.

Ethical Considerations

The crucial ethical issue observed in this study included protecting the participants from harm. All participants were invited to participate voluntarily and could withdraw from the study at any time without fear of penalty. Their right to privacy and honesty was acknowledged. Thaanyane (2010) emphasises that researchers adhere to ethical stipulations when conducting research. To do so, we applied for, and received, ethical clearance from the university's ethics committee, before embarking on the study (ethics certificate reference number: 2018/09/12/073/88381/21/MC). Permission to conduct research in secondary schools was also received from the Gauteng DBE and from the district manager of the Tshwane North Gauteng Department of Education (GDE).

In order to secure written consent, letters of consent were handed to school principals for distribution to participating educators. The purpose of the study was explained to all participants beforehand, and they were informed about their right to withdraw at any time (Glesne, 2006; Thaanyane, 2010). To protect the identities of the educator participants, pseudonyms were assigned as indicated above. Participants' privacy was safeguarded by maintaining confidentiality and

securely storing the data. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed and upheld for all participants. Any information that may have identified a school was avoided. We informed the participants that hard copies of their responses would be stored securely for a period of 5 years.

Results of the Study

Data generated qualitatively through interviews were analysed and presented under five themes: assessment practices in inclusive classrooms; strategies used to assist learners who experience barriers to learning; training needs for educators in inclusive education; challenges experienced during assessment; and stakeholder support for educators.

Theme 1: Assessment Practices in Inclusive Classrooms

Assessment practices for learners experiencing barriers to learning in inclusive high schools in the Tshwane North district have been identified as problematic. Study participants indicated that these practices, including unadjusted and non-differentiated assessment, rendered education less conducive for learners facing such barriers. Additionally, the participants noted that the teaching and learning outcomes for these learners were generally below average compared to those without disabilities (Zwane & Malale, 2018).

The participants' responses to various questions during the interviews were transcribed, discussed and supported with findings from previous studies. The participants responded as follows to the question, Which assessment practices do you generally use in your classrooms to cater for learners experiencing barriers to learning?

Participants AP1, BP1, BP4, CP2, CP3, and DP1 shared a common perspective, noting that they used a portfolio of assessment as one of the techniques for evaluating and assessing learners experiencing barriers to learning in inclusive classrooms. Participants AP1, BP4 and DP1 agreed:

Participant AP1 said: "*Portfolios of assessment enables educators to evaluate learners' progress over an extended period.*"

Participant BP4 responded similarly: "*A portfolio of assessment is an evaluation method where educators compile a learner's formal assessments in a file for future reference.*"

Participant DP1 provided a response which indicated a clear understanding of the use of the portfolio as an assessment technique. The participant said: "*Portfolios are valuable assessment tools because they offer educators, learners, and parents a comprehensive view of learners.*"

The participants perceived portfolio assessment as an ideal tool for assessing learners in inclusive classrooms. This perspective aligns perfectly with that of Mokhtaria (2015) who describes portfolio assessment as a tool for documenting a learner's work over time. Portfolios are considered effective in adaptive or alternative assessment contexts because they accommodate the diverse needs of learners. Popescu-Mitroia, Todorescu and Greculescu (2015) describe portfolios as valuable alternatives or complementary assessment tools. Chere-Masopha and Mothetsi-Mothiba (2022) affirm this view emphasising that portfolios provide educators, learners, and parents with a comprehensive overview of a learner's progress throughout the academic year.

One major reason why learners who experience barriers to learning do not perform to the best of their abilities during assessment is that these assessments are not adjusted, modified, or adapted to meet their unique needs. The lack of tailored assessment compromises their academic performance. Research by Black-Hawkins (2020) and Sharma, Sokal, Wang and Loreman (2021) indicates that the attitudes of educators, learners, and other stakeholders such as heads of departments, principals, ILST and DAT coordinators, as well as government officials determine the overall success of an inclusive educational system.

Sadly, without implementing best assessment practices by educators and other stakeholders, learners experiencing barriers to learning in IE settings will not receive equal education. This was evident when participant AP1 declared the following: "*We often notice that learners with disabilities are not receiving the same level of instructional, assessment, attention and resources as their peers, which results in a noticeable gap in their learning outcomes.*"

Participant BP1 said: "*The teaching and assessment strategies used in inclusive classrooms seem to be more effective for learners without disabilities, leaving those with learning barriers struggling to keep up with the curriculum.*"

Despite these challenges, it also emerged from the results that educators were making significant efforts to accommodate all learners, despite their diverse differences. To this end, they employed alternative methods of assessment, as noted by J Anderson and Boyle (2015) and Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit and Van Deventer (2016). The use of alternative assessment methods demonstrated the educators' commitment to providing equal educational opportunities to all learners, regardless of their diverse needs (Phasha, 2010). Peer assessment, self-assessment, and portfolio assessment were among the most common alternative methods used.

To improve assessment practices, it is crucial that assessment workshops are conducted regularly. It is our view that capacity building workshops

equip educators with the capability and capacity to effect important curriculum and assessment changes. In addition, these workshops would help capacitate educators in setting alternative assessments without compromising their quality and intended goals. Moreover, workshops are essential in ensuring that educators stay current with the latest assessment trends (Kozleski, 2020; Slee, 2018).

Theme 2: Strategies Used to Assist Learners who Experience Barriers to Learning

Some participants appeared to understand the strategies necessary to support learners experiencing barriers to learning in the classroom. The participants responded as follows to the question, How do you currently assess Senior Phase learners who experience barriers to learning in your classroom?

Participant BP1 said:

I use a variety of assessment methods to cater to the diverse needs of my learners. For example, I provide oral assessments for those who struggle with written tasks and allow extra time for learners who require it. I also use visual aids and practical tasks to make assessments more accessible.

Participants AP2, BP3 and CP4 echoed similar sentiments. Participant AP2 asserted that "… [s]*elf-assessment provides learners with time to reflect on their performance and evaluate their performance against set goals.*"

Participant AP4 noted: "*As a department, we encourage the use of differentiated assessment strategies. We emphasise the importance of modifying tests and assignments to meet the specific needs of learners with barriers, such as using simplified language or providing alternative formats.*"

Participant BP4 said:

As an HOD [Head of Department] *and a SAT member I realised that implementing peer assessment and self-assessment has been beneficial. These strategies not only empower learners but also provide them with a sense of ownership over their learning and assessment processes.*

Participant AP3 noted:

Our school has implemented policies mandating educators to modify assessments to accommodate the needs of learners facing barriers. We, I mean myself as the Deputy Principal and the HODs, also provide training to educators on how to develop and apply these adaptations effectively, even though we have time constraints.

The above responses clearly reveal that self-assessment is an essential assessment tool which can effectively be used to assist learners in inclusive classrooms. Self-assessment is forward looking and progressive. The findings are corroborated by Nielsen (2014) who maintains that with self-assessment, learners check their work, revisit assignment drafts and texts, and reflect upon

their past practice. According to Wiesnerová (2012), assessment in inclusive classrooms should extend beyond traditional marks or grades. Learners should be actively involved in the assessment process and take ownership of their learning. Self-assessment creates opportunities for meaningful dialogue between learners and educators, enabling educators to provide constructive feedback and guide learners on how to enhance their learning more effectively.

To the question, What strategies have you found most effective in improving the assessment outcomes of learners experiencing barriers to learning?, the participants responded as follows.

Participant AP1 said: "*As an educator one of the major challenges is the scarcity of resources and time. Adapting assessments requires additional preparation, and with large class sizes, it can be difficult to provide the individual attention that these learners need.*"

Participant CP4 indicated:

As a SAT member what we experience is the inconsistency as far as support from parents is concerned. Some parents are very involved and help their children prepare for assessments, while others are less engaged, which impacts the learners' performance.

Participant DATP's view was:

As head of the district assessment team we found that in involving parents in the assessment process through regular meetings and updates has improved outcomes. These are schools with supportive parents. Additionally, providing educators with professional development opportunities focused on inclusive education practices has made a significant difference.

Participant DLSTP said:

Enhancing the flexibility of the curriculum to allow for more tailored assessments would be a significant improvement. Furthermore, ensuring that all educators receive ongoing training in inclusive education is essential for long-term success. This is our wish but lack of human resources is a serious issue.

The educators and other stakeholders interviewed highlighted that they were doing their level best to accommodate all learners despite assessment challenges encountered. They were using alternative methods of assessment to accommodate all the learners in their diversity. These educators' and other stakeholders' practices resonate with the rationale of inclusive education. Inclusive assessment practices should be adaptable and designed to offer customised evaluation methods that cater for the needs of all learners, regardless of their diverse backgrounds (Anderson, J & Boyle, 2015; Engelbrecht et al., 2016).

The use of alternative assessment methods also reflects educators' and other stakeholders' willingness to provide equal education benefits to all learners despite their differences (Phasha, 2010). It is also crucial for educators who assess

learners in an inclusive classroom to be guided by principles of social justice and provide learners with a conducive environment which eliminate all forms of educational inequalities and exclusions. The DBE, RSA (2011), instructed all educators to recognise and plan for inclusiveness and diversity in the classrooms. In view of this requirement participant CP4 said: "… *we should not assess our learners with one method*."

Theme 3: Training Needs for Educators in Inclusive Education

With this study we investigated whether educators and other stakeholders received adequate training in inclusive assessment. The findings reveal that the majority of educators were not prepared (when they were student teachers) for the arduous work or responsibility to reasonably accommodate learners experiencing barriers to learning. Poor educator training unfortunately results in unsuccessful implementation of IE (Chu, Craig, Yeworiew & Xu, 2020; McCrimmon, 2015). According to Zwane and Malale (2018), educators need adequate training and support. Without proper training, the effectiveness of IE is compromised, leading to the exclusion of learners with barriers.

Educators were also asked the following question: How did your previous educator training adequately prepare you to assess learners in an inclusive classroom? Responses from Participants AP1, AP2, AP3, and AP4 indicated that their training was insufficient. Participants AP1 and AP2 mentioned that they had only received a "*1-day training session*", while participant AP3 noted the reliance on "*private or independent service providers*" due to delays in support from the district level support team (DLST).

Participant AP4 said: "*We did not receive any intense training, but we try by all means to support our learners who experience barriers to learning, e.g., providing extra lessons for these learners and they are taught by different educators.*"

Participants AP2, AP3, and AP4 emphasised that many educators were not fully equipped to conduct inclusive assessment. Participants BP1, BP2, BP3, CP1, CP3 and DP4 reported that their training sessions were brief, often only "*2 hours in the afternoon*", which they found inadequate.

According to Participant BP2, "*Training was conducted for a day and in the afternoon at 14h00 and we knocked off at 16h00, the timing was totally wrong.*"

Participant BP3 shared the sentiments: "*I received training when I was an educator in Mpumalanga province, and I have never attended a workshop on inclusive education assessment in Gauteng province.*"

Participant CP1 lamented:
The training the district gave us was just 1 day and only 2 hours of which was not enough as me personally don't have any training of learners with

special needs. I am also worried that the training did not say much about the assessment of these learners.

Participant CP3 expressed frustration over the lack of training, learning about accommodating learners with barriers only through workshops. This frustration is echoed in studies by Saloviita (2020) and Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff and Pettipher (2002), who found that educators are not adequately prepared to conduct assessment in inclusive classrooms.

Contrastingly, Participants CP2 and CP4 stated that, while their training was insufficient, it provided a basic understanding of inclusive assessment practices. Participants CP2 and CP4, as well as ILST and SAT coordinators, emphasised the need for more comprehensive information to support their roles.

Participant CP2 said: "*I was trained for only 2 weeks, but I am happy that I did my B. Ed.* [Bachelor of Education] *Honours Degree and specialised with inclusive education which is now coming in handy.*"

These findings are corroborated by literature, suggesting that most educators are not sufficiently trained in IE assessment. According to Florian and Rouse (2009), inadequately trained educators cannot effectively address the assessment needs of learners experiencing barriers. Similarly, Engelbrecht (2006) and Johnstone (2010) argue that inadequate training severely threatens the successful implementation of inclusive assessment practices.

Overall, the findings indicate that the lack of training in assessing learners with barriers to learning poses a significant challenge for educators. The inability to conduct effective assessment due to insufficient training could have detrimental effects on learners, particularly in inclusive pedagogical contexts. Vandeyar and Killen (2007) conclude that educators must receive training to adapt to new assessment practices.

Theme 4: Challenges Experienced During Assessment

We also explored the challenges that educators and other stakeholders experienced while assessing learners in inclusive classrooms. The following question was posed in this regard: Which challenges do you experience in your assessment? Participants BP3, CP3, DP1, DP2 and DP4 lamented the lack of parental support, resources and overcrowding as impediments to effective assessment. Furthermore, participants AP3, AP4, BP1, CP1, CP3 and DP2 indicated that educators were confronted with challenges related to excessive paperwork, limited facilities, time constraints, and limited support from the DLST and ILST, as well as limited training to enable them to accurately assess learners who experience barriers to learning.

Participant AP4 mentioned: "*At the college where I was trained there was no subject or course that taught us how to design inclusive assessment tasks, so I lack the necessary skills in this area.*"

Participant DP2 commented as follows on the issue of overcrowding: "*Overcrowding hampers my progress in assessment. I teach 55 learners in my class and marking all their activities is not easy.*"

Participant DP3 further argued: "*Teaching is like a three-dimensioned structure; if one dimension is broken, the structure will never function as expected, so parents have to play their part too.*"

Participants BP2 and BP4 indicated that they both taught mathematics and that it was important for them to have the necessary resources to help their learners understand mathematics. Both indicated that some learners did not understand abstract mathematics concepts without concrete examples so they needed teaching aids that they could manipulate to facilitate understanding the concepts.

Participant BP4 said:

> *We do not have enough teaching aids. Sharing textbooks is a serious challenge because maths needs them to do exercises every day, so their lack of textbooks affects our assessment. I have several learners who fail to correctly solve problems using measurement.*

Participant BP4 suggested the following solution: "*With appropriate resources, I would definitely provide opportunities for learners to practice basic measurement skills using measurement tools in the classroom.*"

All participants highlighted the importance of resources, especially for those learners with learning difficulties who relied on learning aids. For Daniyan (2015), effective curriculum implementation and assessment are highly dependent on the availability and accessibility of resources.

Regarding the limited support received from the ILST, DLST and DAT the question was: How effective was their support provided to schools in their roles as ILST, DLST, and DAT?

Participant, AP2 being the ILST coordinator, argued:

> *We are not as functional as other teams in the school because we still lack the support from the district which is not happening. We only use the information that we have as educators who are passionate about our learners. We sometimes cannot address this due to the many issues occurring within the school.*

Regarding the role of the DLST, participant DATP remarked: "*It is heart-breaking to hear educators saying that the DLST is not supporting them as it should. Our district faces similar staffing shortages that contribute to the problem.*"

Participant DLSTP, took a deep breath before she responded as follows:

> *Our absence when needed is due to the fact that we are understaffed. As we speak now, we have only one permanent psychologist who is expected to support more than 80 schools, which is impossible. I just hope that one day the Department will take it seriously and employ more personnel.*

Theme 5: Stakeholder Support for Educators
The study revealed that educators cannot effectively manage inclusive classrooms on their own, as they bear the responsibility of supporting learners within the school environment (Turner et al., 2023). According to the DBE, RSA (2014), educators require assistance from various stakeholders including parents, the ILST, DLST, the Department of Health, and the Department of Social Development to adequately address learner assessment needs. To assess the quality and identify the gaps in the support provided to educators, the following question on the roles and effectiveness of these stakeholders was put to the participants: How helpful is the support provided by the parents? Participant AP3 responded by saying:

> *In our school, our parents are supportive. They help their children with homework and sometimes they even attend sporting activities, e.g., soccer and netball. Even if there are those who need a push before they try, they do try their level best to be involved. I can say assessment is a continuous method for learners so parents should be part of the team to see that their children get the best education ever.*

Participant BP1 said: "*I think many parents are ignorant. This issue extends beyond just our school. It is from Cape to Cairo. They are not aware of the importance of their role. Parental support is far from the expected or required support.*"

Participant BP2 said: "*... in our school parental support is quite minimal, some parents argue that supporting their children's education is not their job. One could realise that they are so naïve because this is about their kids.*"

Participant CP1 said: "*Very few parents help and support their kids in their schoolwork. Most of the parents are not learned and some are unfamiliar with other subjects like technology and some are poor with maths.*"

Many participants highlighted the lack of parental involvement as a significant issue. Several participants expressed concerns about insufficient parental support, noting that some parents worked far from home and returned late, leaving little time to check or assist with their children's homework. This lack of involvement is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where, as participant DP1 observed, parents often believed that learners in the Senior Phase were independent and no longer required the same level of attention as they did in primary school.

On the issue of parental involvement in schools, participants DATP and DLSTP

highlighted that when they visited schools as government officials, they always advised educators to involve parents in whatever they did because parental involvement was key to successful learner performance. They also advised educators to plan and to hold quarterly assessment programme meetings where they indicate tasks and dates for assessments, e.g., assignments or projects. They need to provide these programmes to parents during parents' meetings and explain why they should have such programmes – one of the reasons being to support their children.

When asked about support received from their ILST, Participant DP1 said: "*In our school, we do have the ILST, but it is only there by name just to add numbers; there is no time where you can see them sitting around assessing learners and giving us feedback.*"

Surprisingly, Participant DP2 confirmed that they were a team (ILST) but they did not have time to assess and discuss learner scholastic challenges and give feedback to educators.

Participant DP2 said: "*What we do most is to individually support those learners mostly who experience health problems because it is easy for us to refer them to health centres.*"

The DBE, RSA (2014) guidelines emphasise the critical role of parents in providing early intervention programmes for their children, underscoring the importance of parental involvement in both education and assessment. However, participants CP3 and CP4 reported that only two out of 10 parents actively supported their children. Many parents denied that their children faced learning barriers, and when called to discuss learner performance, they cited fatigue from work not to attend. Additionally, some learners were reported to be living with grandparents who were unable to assist with schoolwork (Martin & Brown, 2021; Williams & Green, 2022).

As far as efficacy of the support received from district level support teams was concerned, Participant AP2 said: "*I only see them when urgent documents need to be submitted at national level.*"

Participants AP3 and AP4 supported their colleagues by saying that they did not get regular support from the DLST as indicated in the policy. Participant BP2, the ILST coordinator, said: "*The DLST fails to fulfil its role, they frequently cite a lack of transport and human resources.*"

From the responses we conclude that the level of support was compromised. The DBE, RSA (2014) states that it is the responsibility of the DLST to support the ILST. Unfortunately, according to participant DP1, they seldom saw facilitators from the DLST visiting the school addressing issues of learner barriers.

Participant DP2 said:
> The DLST only visits our school when there's a specific request from the National DBE for data on progressed learners or other relevant statistics.

> Sometimes, they might come for compliance checks or to address specific issues identified by the department.

Participant DLSTP said:
> Honestly speaking, educators need more training on this issue and as the DBE we need to consider ways on how to deal with this issue quickly because learners are just 'micro-waved' and be allowed to progress to another class without mastering the assessment standards of the previous class. These learners need alternative assessments rather than being pushed to the next level being empty headed.

Discussion

Theme 1: Assessment Practices in Inclusive Classrooms

Using the interview schedule, we sought to establish which assessment practices were implemented by the participating educators to accommodate learners with learning-related difficulties in their inclusive classrooms. We posed the following question: Which assessment practices do you generally use in your classrooms to cater for learners experiencing barriers to learning? Educators administered peer, self- and portfolio assessment because these were the most common alternative methods of assessment. The participants' views expressed in the results section, especially on Theme 1, resonate with the definition of portfolio assessment provided by Mokhtaria (2015) who regards it as a tool for keeping a record of a learner's work, over a considerable amount of time. Portfolio assessments are deemed ideal tools to use in adaptive or alternative assessment contexts, as they cater for the diverse needs of learners. Popescu-Mitroi et al. (2015) describe the portfolio as an alternative or complementary assessment tool. In agreement, Chere-Masopha and Mothetsi-Mothiba (2022) highlight its usefulness and functionality, noting that portfolios offer educators, learners, and parents a detailed insight into a learner's progression throughout an academic year. The educators who were interviewed highlighted that they were doing their best to accommodate all learners, despite their differences, and for that reason they used alternative methods of assessment (Anderson, J & Boyle, 2015; Engelbrecht et al., 2016). The use of alternative methods of assessment reflected the educators' willingness to provide equal educational benefits for all learners, despite the diversity of the learner cohort (Phasha, 2010).

Theme 2: Strategies Used to Assist Learners who Experience Barriers to Learning

The following question was posed: What strategies have you found most effective in improving the assessment outcomes of learners experiencing barriers to learning? According to Wiesnerová (2012), self-assessment is an essential tool which can be effectively and efficiently used to assist

learners in inclusive classrooms. Self-assessment is forward looking and progressive. Nielsen (2014) maintains that with self-assessment, learners in general and those experiencing barriers to learning in particular, check their work, revisit assignment drafts and texts, and research and reflect on their past practice. Wiesnerová (2012) emphasises that assessment in inclusive classrooms should extend beyond traditional marks or grades. Learners should be actively involved in the assessment process and take ownership of their learning. Self-assessment also provides the chance for dialogue with the educator who could tell learners what they should do to make their learning more effective.

Theme 3: Training Needs for Educators in Inclusive Education

To establish whether the educator participants had received assessment-related training, they were asked the following: How did your previous educator training adequately prepare you to assess learners in an inclusive classroom? Through their responses the participants confirmed that they had not received sufficient training in inclusive assessment. A lack of knowledge on and training in IE have been identified as the main stumbling blocks in making a success of this approach (Chao, Forlin & Ho, 2016). Zwane and Malale (2018) reveal that a lack of adequate training is the key barrier impeding educators' capacity to effectively assess learners. All the participants interviewed admitted to lacking comprehensive knowledge of how to assess learners who grapple with barriers to learning – an opinion held by one of the participating educators on Theme 3. Given this oversight, Lumadi (2013) suggests that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) train and prepare educators adequately for inclusive education. Maguvhe (2005) concurs, pointing out that educator training should provide practicing educators with positive orientation on a more inclusive educational approach. Even though assessment is highly valued, only a small number of educators undergo formal training in designing and analysing assessment. According to Daniyan (2015), educators need training on how to recognize and address the needs of learners who have difficulty meeting the set goals of teaching and learning.

Theme 4: Challenges Experienced During Assessment

We also explored the challenges that educators experienced when assessing learners in inclusive classrooms. In that regard, the following question was posed: Which challenges do you experience in your assessment? One of the major challenges that educators were confronted with was that of lack of support from various stakeholders. A lack of resources and overcrowding were also mentioned as factors impeding effective assessment.

Furthermore, educators were confronted with challenges related to excessive paperwork, limited facilities, time constraints, and limited support from the DLST and ILST, as well as limited training to enable them to accurately assess learners who experience barriers to learning. There also was a noticeable scarcity of assistive devices for learners with learning difficulties who rely on learning aids. For Daniyan (2015), effective curriculum implementation and assessment are highly dependent on the availability and accessibility of resources.

Theme 5: Stakeholder Support for Educators

Views expressed by participants in Theme 5 clearly indicate that the level of support by different stakeholders was seriously compromised. The DBE, RSA (2014) states that it is the duty and responsibility of the DLST to support the ILST. In order for learners who experience barriers to learning to fully and actively participate in the education and learning encounters, and to perform to their full potential, they must receive unwavering support from different stakeholders including, but not limited to, educators, parents, ILST, SAT co-ordinators, DAT co-ordinators, government officials, community members, et cetera. The guidelines for the screening, identification, assessment and support ([SIAS] DBE, RSA, 2014) emphasise, for example, the pivotal responsibility that parents must play in providing early intervention programmes for their children, underscoring the importance of parental involvement in both education and assessment. Sadly, few parents actively supported their children. Many parents denied that their children faced learning barriers, and when called to discuss learner performance, they cited fatigue from work as reason for not attending. Additionally, some learners were reported to be living with grandparents who could not assist their grandchildren with schoolwork (Martin & Brown, 2021; Williams & Green, 2022).

Recommendations

We recommend that inclusive assessment practices be flexible and provide tailor-made solutions to accommodate all learners, despite their diversity. Bender (2012) notes that learners in inclusive classrooms possess varying learning abilities, which necessitates adapting classroom discussions to address their distinct and diverse needs. Educators should be encouraged to use alternative assessment methods, such as peer and self-assessment, projects and portfolios, among others, to level the playing field for learners from different backgrounds and with different abilities. Resources are essential for effective assessment; therefore, it is recommended that the DBE provides adequate resources to schools in line with the

requirements identified by the educators who work with children facing barriers to learning. As far as classroom size is concerned, it is recommended that the educator-learner ratio be addressed in a manner which will allow educators to provide individual attention to learners. It is crucial that formal assessment activities include alternative and competence-based tasks. It is also recommended that informal assessment is conducted through observations, discussions, and peer-to-peer interaction. Educators should receive comprehensive training and support from IE specialists to effectively assess learners who experience barriers to learning. Proper training may provide educators with clarity on what is expected of them as they undertake such assessment. The DBE should engage all educational stakeholders (including parents) in curriculum implementation and assessment processes. The assessment process should be known to, and involve, educators, parents, the school and the DLST, as well as other relevant professionals from the community. Finally, it is recommended that parents should be educated on their exact roles, especially in assessment, and should know what is expected of them to support their children's learning. Such education should encompass the full spectrum of educational needs, including curricular, assessment and behavioural support.

Conclusion

In this study we investigated the importance of educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices, for learners experiencing barriers to learning in the Senior Phase classrooms of four secondary schools in the Tshwane North district. The findings reveal how the participating educators and other stakeholders addressed those challenges through assessment practices by sharing their personal classroom-based experiences. The study revealed that several hindrances influenced the assessment of learners with learning difficulties, of which some were overcrowding, a lack of resources and assessment-focused training, a lack of parental involvement, and a lack of support from the ILST and the DLST. The objectives of the study were addressed thoroughly and comprehensively through the data collected, thereby serving to contribute to efforts aimed at improving educators' and other stakeholders' assessment practices.

The findings also show that educators should apply peer and self-assessment as inclusive strategies, as these have proven to be effective in enhancing teaching and learning. As Reinholz (2016) states, peer assessment encompasses several activities which allow individual learners to evaluate and judge each other's work. Peer assessment also gives learners a better

understanding of the assessment criteria applied (De Grez, Valcke & Roozen, 2012; Logan, 2009).

This study cannot be considered exhaustive, since it was conducted in only four schools in one district of the Gauteng province and not in all nine provinces in South Africa. Thus, a weakness of the study is that other educators, as well as coordinators of the ILSTs and SATs in other provinces may report different opinions and experiences regarding the challenges affecting educators' assessment practices in similar contexts. A possible limitation is that the secondary schools were purposefully selected because they were, at the time, implementing inclusive education. We believed this would allow us to observe how educators assessed learners experiencing learning-related barriers and help us answer the research questions about then current assessment practices. Finally, in this article we raise issues that have the potential to take the findings of this study further. South African educational stakeholders still need to try harder to transform secondary education so that it is more inclusive and accommodating of learners challenged by learning-related problems.

Authors' Contributions
NM conducted the participant interviews and took the lead in writing the article. NM and MM conducted the writing analysis. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

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