

The impact of teacher retirements on inclusive education: A dark cloud, or one with a silver lining?

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Overview

This policy brief will explore the consequences of the anticipated wave of teacher retirements for implementation of inclusive education. I will argue that retirements *could* lead to better implementation of inclusive education *if* new first-time teachers are better trained in inclusive teaching practices than retirees. This policy brief will examine the level of training in the current teaching stock and in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), focusing on general training on inclusive education and specialised training on supporting learners with specific disabilities.

Inclusive education refers to an education system which enables the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners in mainstream classes.^[1] In an inclusive education system, learners who have additional support needs or disabilities are supported such that they can access quality primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in their community.^[2] South Africa has adopted an inclusive education policy. The vision is that all learners, including those with disabilities, will be educated in their neighbourhood, with access to all necessary programmes of support.^[3] Implementation of this vision has, however, been uneven and slow.^[4]

Impending teacher retirements

The South African education system is facing a wave of teacher retirements. Almost half of all publicly employed teachers were 50 years or older in 2021 and are expected to retire by 2030. At the same time the number of learners in the public school system is increasing as the child population is growing faster than was expected.^[5] The consequences for the education budget and production of teachers have been discussed elsewhere.^[6] Essentially:

- Younger teachers will make up a growing share of all teachers in the coming period.
- Universities will have to increase the number of new teacher graduates each year until 2030 to maintain learner-educator ratios at 2021 levels (approximately 30 learners per educator).
- If teacher graduate numbers are not increased by at least 2 000 per year, there is a risk that learner-educator ratios will increase, and class sizes with them.
- However, a decrease in the average age of educators means that the average real salary will remain unchanged from 2022 to 2030, despite CPI-linked increases. This provides budgetary scope to increase the number of educators employed and to reduce the learner-educator ratio in the future.
- If universities can produce an additional 9 000 new teacher graduates each year and they are absorbed into public-sector schools, learner-educator ratios could return to 2011 levels, when the average was 27 learners per educator.

The role of teacher training in implementation of inclusive education

Inadequate training of teachers has been identified as a key factor in slow implementation of inclusive education in South Africa.^[7, 8, 9, 10]

Appropriate training enables teachers in ordinary schools to adjust their teaching methods to accommodate the needs of individual learners, including those who are experiencing barriers to learning or who have disabilities. It should also enable teachers to identify barriers to learning in the school or classroom environment. Initial teacher education (ITE) should produce teachers who understand and value inclusive education ^[11]

Recent research has shown that teachers who have some training in curriculum differentiation and assessment of learners who are experiencing barriers to learning, and/or qualifications in special or remedial education are more confident in supporting learners who are experiencing barriers to learning.^[7]

How well are teachers currently trained?

The multi-country, nationally-representative Teaching and Learning in Schools (TALIS) survey was conducted in 200 South African schools in 2018.^[12] In this survey, 34% of South African teachers reported they had participated in training that included teaching “special needs students”ⁱⁱ in the past 12 months. Despite this, 39% of teachers reported a high need for such training. This was significantly higher than in other countries surveyed. Furthermore, 53% of principals reported that quality instruction was compromised by the small number of teachers who were competent in teaching “students with special needs”.^[13] Overall, these results suggest that current training is inadequate to prepare teachers to teach learners with disabilities in a diverse, inclusive classroom.

These results are confirmed by analysis of the School Monitoring Survey (SMS) 2017 (a nationally-representative survey of 2 000 schools). While respondents in **74% of schools had received some training** in identifying learning barriers or supporting learners who were experiencing learning barriers, only **57% had been trained in curriculum differentiation** and only **43% had received any training on setting assessments for learners who are experiencing barriers to learning** (see Table 1). Curriculum and assessment differentiation are key strategies for supporting learners who are experiencing learning barriers.

Table 1: Indicators of teacher training in inclusive education (2017)

Proportion of schools where at least one teacher has:	Total	Primary schools	Secondary schools
Formal qualification in special or remedial education	0.45	0.47	0.39
Training in identifying &/or supporting learning barriers	0.74	0.78	0.63
Formal/informal training on curriculum differentiation	0.57	0.61	0.46
Formal/informal training on setting assessments [#]	0.43	0.47	0.33
Both formal qualification & some training in learning barriers	0.40	0.43	0.33
Sample	1 966	981	985

Source: SMS 2017, teacher questionnaires. Respondents were asked to report on training provided by their own school, the provincial education department or training they initiated themselves.

[#] for learners who are experiencing learning barriers.

In-service training on the Screening, Identification and Assessment Policy was rolled out from 2015 and should have reached all primary schools by 2016.^[3] Yet, the indicators in Table 1 suggest that this training has not imparted skills in identifying or supporting learners who are experiencing learning barriers, in curriculum differentiation, or in differentiation of assessments to all primary schools. This aligns with other research in which teachers reported that the quality of in-service training offered by DBE was inadequate and did not equip them for implementation.^[14]

Multivariate analysis of this data (see [7] for results) confirmed that **training coverage is better in primary schools**, and in schools in the **Western Cape, Gauteng**, and the **Free State**. There was no difference in training coverage between schools in quintile 1 to 3 and quintile 4 or 5.ⁱⁱ

Does Initial Teacher Education (ITE) prepare new teachers to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms?

The 2015 Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) state that “B.Ed. graduates must be knowledgeable about inclusive education and skilled in identifying and addressing barriers to learning, as well as in curriculum differentiation to address the needs of individual learners within a grade”.^[15] The MRTEQ 2015 further states that inclusive education is an important feature of general pedagogical knowledge and specialised pedagogical content knowledge.^[11]

Three studies were conducted in 2018 and 2019 assessing the extent to which the principles of inclusive education and inclusive teaching practices are sufficiently covered in ITE programmes in South Africa. All three studies found that inclusive education thinking had not infused the whole ITE programme. Where inclusive education was taught, it was often in one or two stand-alone, elective modules.^[11, 16, 17] These studies and another qualitative study^[18] concluded that from 2016 to 2019 ITE did not adequately prepare teachers to implement inclusive education (and did not meet the MRTEQ requirements).

Is the next generation of beginner teachers likely to be better trained?

Fortunately, most universities have redesigned the curriculum of B.Ed degrees since 2018/19 and are rolling out new ITE programmes to bring them in line with the MRTTEQ 2015. To illustrate some of the changes introduced, Table 2 shows the coverage of inclusive education in B.Ed courses in the four universities which produce the most public sector beginner teachers.

The coverage of inclusive education (in stand-alone courses) has expanded in three of these universities. While additional modules are now offered at several universities, it is not clear whether inclusive education approaches have been infused through the ITE curriculum. The quality of the courses also needs to be evaluated. But there is some hope that beginner teachers qualifying from these new programmes will be better prepared to implement inclusive teaching practices than their predecessors.



Table 2: Coverage of inclusive education in Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree in the four largest ITE programmes.

University	Coverage of inclusive education in B.Ed. (2017-2019)	Coverage of inclusive education in B.Ed. (2023)
A	2 elective modules: <i>Learner support</i> <i>Educational psychology</i>	2 compulsory modules: <i>Learner support</i> <i>Educational psychology</i>
B	1 module	B.Ed. (foundation phase) - 2 compulsory modules B.Ed. (Intermediate Phase) & B.Ed. (Senior Phase & FET) - 1 compulsory module
C	No modules, IE was not a key theme.	B.Ed. Honours: Introduction to IE
D	No modules, IE was not a key theme.	B.Ed. (intermediate phase) – compulsory module in inclusive education (General Pedagogy 2A). Barriers to learning and curriculum differentiation are covered in courses on teaching languages & mathematics in B.Ed. (Foundation phase & Intermediate phase)

Column 1 reproduced from Appendix A in Kelly & McKenzie (2018). Column 2 is based on details in annual handbooks and from personal discussions with staff at one university. Universities are anonymised.

Specialist training and skills

While all teachers need to be trained in inclusive education and curriculum differentiation, some teachers also need specialised training on teaching learners who are deaf, have visual impairments or severe to profound intellectual disabilities.^[16, 19] Unfortunately, from 2001 onwards, specialised courses on teaching learners with disabilities were scrapped in response to the introduction of inclusive education.^[19] As a result, teachers with these qualifications are now mostly 45 years or older and are concentrated in the group that is due to retire by 2030.

A comparison of SMS 2011 and 2017 shows that the number of teachers with specialist formal qualifications declined in this period. In SMS 2011, there was at least one teacher with a formal qualification in special or remedial education in 71% of schools.^[20] This declined substantially to 45% of schools in 2017, as shown in Table 1.ⁱⁱⁱ Analysis of SMS 2022 (forthcoming) will show to what extent this trend has continued.

The gap in specialist training has been acknowledged and some specialist university courses have been introduced. In 2018, two ITE programmes covered impairment-specific support (for learners with severe to profound sensory or intellectual disabilities).^[16] In 2023, there were three centres of

excellence in three Gauteng universities, each offering a specialised postgraduate course in impairment-specific support in education. The University of Pretoria now offers an Advanced Diploma in Visual Impairment. Wits University offers a postgraduate diploma in Deaf Education and the University of Johannesburg offers an Advanced Diploma in Remedial Education. Further, four free online short courses have been developed by the University of Cape Town for teachers (a general course on disability inclusion, and courses on educating learners who are deaf, learners with a visual impairment and learners with severe to profound intellectual disability).



The introduction of these specialist courses will allow some new teachers to learn the skills needed to support learners with specific disability types in special, full-service, or ordinary schools. However, we do not know whether the number of teachers graduating from these programmes matches the number of similarly-skilled teachers retiring in the next 15 years. Enrolment in these programmes may need to be expanded. The concentration of these specialist courses in Gauteng is problematic as Gauteng (and the Western Cape) already performs better than most other provinces on measurable indicators of inclusive education.^[7]

Beginner teachers will need to be supported.

Improved training alone cannot guarantee that schools will be better able to support learners who have additional support needs. Beginner teachers, in particular, need to be supported by effective school-based support teams, fully-staffed and effective district-based support teams and fully-staffed, fully-equipped special school resource centres. As a starting point, funding must be made available immediately to create all the posts specified in the norms for district-based teams. Creative strategies are needed to attract professionals to these posts.

So, do the imminent teacher retirements have a silver lining?

Updated ITE programmes may better prepare new teachers to address learning barriers in schools and classrooms and adapt their teaching methods to support a wider range of learner needs. There is hope that the levels of knowledge of curriculum and assessment differentiation may improve in coming years. In this respect, teacher retirements may have a silver lining. Although it is not discussed here, if lower learner-educator ratios can be realised this would also encourage inclusion. Teachers often cite large class sizes as an obstacle to inclusion.

However, most ITE programmes will not adequately prepare teachers to support learners with impairment-specific needs in their classrooms. For this, class teachers will need to be supported by other teachers who have specialist skills. Unfortunately, the coming wave of retirements will likely result in the loss of many of these specialised skills. Further analysis is needed to show if these skills can be replaced at the appropriate rate. If these skills are not replaced quickly enough, the coming retirements are a dark cloud which threatens the quality of education for learners with disabilities in special and ordinary schools.



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Endnotes

ⁱ Survey wording

ⁱⁱ Quintile 4 and 5 schools are allowed to charge fees, while quintiles 1 to 3 are non-fee charging schools. Classification into quintiles is largely based on the socio-economic profile of the geographic area in which schools are located.

ⁱⁱⁱ Direct comparison may be problematic due to differences in sampling techniques in 2011 and 2017.