

# **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: FORGING ALLIANCES FOR SUPPORT OF INCLUSION AT SCHOOL LEVEL IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to report stakeholder views on the role of the educational psychologist in supporting inclusive education at schools in South Africa. An interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative case study design provided insight into the challenges associated with inclusive education and the potential supportive role of educational psychologists. We followed a purposive sampling procedure to select the following participants: a) two education officials b) seven teachers c) one educational psychologist d) one counsellor e) three district officials and f) one parent. Data was gathered from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with participants at a public school in Pretoria. Non-participant classroom observations were conducted. Through a process of thematic content analysis, the following themes emerged: a) Perceptions of the role of the educational psychologist in supporting inclusion and b) Improving educational psychology services to support inclusion. Findings suggest that the successful implementation of inclusive education remains a challenge in South Africa and that educational psychologists play a supportive role in implementing inclusive practices. Conclusion: The findings confirm that by means of forging alliances and collaboration between educational psychologists and stakeholders, the implementation process of inclusive education practices could be better supported.

**Keywords:** Barriers to learning; collaboration; educational psychologist; inclusive education; stakeholders; support

## **Introduction**

Internationally, inclusion policy is seen as a means to level the playing fields and thus, articulated in numerous policy documents, including: the UN Convention

on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990); the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994); the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments (UNESCO, 2000) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), amongst others. At the World Conference on Special Needs Education (June, 1994), 92 governments and 25 international organisations endorsed the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action. Hence, they endorsed inclusive education, proclaiming that “every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs” and that “those with special education needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them with a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting those needs” (UNESCO, 1994, cited in Peters, 2004:5). The argument is that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are “the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all” (Ainscow, 2009:xi). Such schools supposedly can “provide an effective education for the majority of learners and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system” (Ainscow, 2009: xi). Despite inclusive education being embraced internationally (Engelbrecht, 2006; Forlin, 2010; Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011), the successful implementation of the policy at school level remains a challenge worldwide.

Including learners with barriers to learning within South Africa’s mainstream education system has been a publicly stated priority objective (Department of Education, 2001). *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education* (Department of Education, 2001) expects that barriers to learning be removed and support provided to enable all learners develop their potential (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002: xv; Department of Education, 2001). Since the introduction of the Policy on Inclusive Education in South Africa in 2001, the Department of Basic Education has devised ways to change the system so that learners can attend their local neighbourhood schools and receive educational support.

Despite the fact that inclusive education requires a system-wide approach to making schools accessible for all learners (Oswald & De Villiers, 2013), a confluence of challenges has been hampering the process. Initiatives proposed to develop such a system have not been implemented. Cost implications and lost opportunities to harness resources as a result of poor planning and management, have been cited (Naicker, 2006) at different levels of the education system. Furthermore, inter-professional aspects of the implementation process, such as information sharing and cooperation may be characterised by differing attitudes (Ineland & Jens Umeå, 2015).

### **The field of educational psychology within inclusive education**

Given the challenges hampering the successful implementation of inclusive education, an extended community of support is encouraged to collude with learners, parents and schools (Mohangi, 2015) to support inclusion. Professionals such as educational psychologists, health workers, social workers, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and other para-professionals may work in a transdisciplinary manner to eliminate certain causes of barriers or confirm others, and where necessary provide support to the learner over and above that being provided by the school. Individual educational psychologists as well as the proponents in the field of educational psychology need to engage and collaborate with other professionals, as well as teachers, families and communities in overcoming difficulties, and helping to prevent and address barriers to learning (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2010; Mohangi & Archer, 2015).

Educational psychology must be reflective of, responsive to, and proactive toward the multiple and changing systems within which one operates (e.g. school, family, societal, legislative systems), including the increasingly diverse populations that is served (e.g. learners, families, educators, administrators, community leaders) and the settings in which they function (e.g. homes, schools, education support services) (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000: 489, in Engelbrecht, 2012).

Educational psychologists contribute to these objectives through individual assessment of learners, consultancy, intervention and training (Mitchell, 2010). In the US, the National Association of School Psychologists views educational psychologists as playing a fundamental role in developing the knowledge bases for both psychology and education, using effective strategies and skills to help learners succeed academically, socially, behaviourally and emotionally. Educational psychologists may also collaborate with families and schools in relation to knowledge of principles and research related to family systems, strengths, needs and culture, evidence-based strategies to support family influences on learners's learning and mental health, and strategies to develop collaboration between families and schools (Mitchell, 2010). Farrell, Long, Moore, Sharpley and Sigafoos (2007, cited in Mitchell, 2010) found that educational psychologists contribute to promoting learner's physical, mental, emotional and sexual health, assisting learners and young people in being safe

from maltreatment, neglect, violence and sexual exploitation, and bullying and discrimination. They also help to ensure learners are ready for school, attend and participate meaningfully in school, achieve their potential, and are able to engage in decision-making and support their communities and environments, as well as achieve economic wellbeing once they leave school.

In South Africa, a university graduate with an educational psychology qualification is equipped with a range of knowledge, skills and competencies for supporting learners facing barriers to learning and their affected families (Mohangi, 2015). Educational psychologists aim to make a difference to individual learners, and support the teacher in effectively delivering quality education in an inclusive learning setting. However, realising these aims require complex dialogue and collaborative decision making at multiple levels with the teacher, other teachers, the head of department and/or the principal of the school and district officials.

In this paper, the authors argue that for successful and effective inclusion, there is a need for all stakeholders in education to consider how best to collaborate to effectively available resources utilise and achieve improved provisioning to support inclusion (Wedell, 2005). Collaboration and alliance forging are required between the various stakeholders within the system in which the learner exists if the individual learner is to receive the required support. Collaboration requires knowledge of how the system works, how the various role players view their roles, and a common understanding of roles and approaches (Hanko, 1999). Role players need to share a common understanding of challenges and possible solutions.

According to Sheridan and Gutking (2000:499), if educational psychologists are to be effective in their roles, changes are needed 'in the way services are conceptualised, proffered, and delivered'. The authors posit that as a profession, educational psychologists require a sound conceptual vision of their role and be prepared to act as advocates for forfeiting practices that are seen to be impeding their growth and viability. Similarly, Stobie (2002:206) argues that educational psychologists must continually review their practice and reflect on change, especially that which is of external influence given that most systems "are controlled by managerial aims and objectives, policies and politics".

### **Problem statement, goal of the study and research questions**

Considering the preceding discussion, there seems to be a need in the South African education system to consider the challenges experienced in implementing inclusive education practices and the contributory role of the educational psychologist in mitigating the challenges and supporting inclusion.

Thus the goal of this study was to understand stakeholder perceptions on how to further utilise available human resources to better meet the needs of the teaching and learning communities. The primary research question in this study was: *What do participants view as the role of educational psychologists in inclusive classrooms and schools?* The secondary research question was: *How could educational psychology services be improved to support inclusion?*

### **Theoretical perspectives**

In this study, the researchers adopted a constructivist lens for meaning-making and to actively engage participants in metacognitive processes regarding their views on inclusion and the link to educational psychology. According to Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2010:79), the constructivist perspective offers “a view that sees knowledge not as given, but as actively and continuously constructed and reconstructed by individuals, groups and societies”. Unlike the previous education system which appeared anchored in positivism, the adoption of inclusion principles in education encourages role-players to seek alternate solutions to problems, to scaffold and build on prior knowledge and to actively and continuously engage in cooperative practices (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2010).

In order to further understand how constructivist principles may be utilised, there is a need to analyse the setbacks in the inclusive education system. Thus, we outlined three matrices that explain “rigidities that hamper inclusion” (Wedell, 2005:4) and adapted the framework (Athanasou, Mpofu, Gitchell & Elias, 2012), to depict horizontal and vertical relationships.

The nature of the vertical and horizontal relationships within the schooling and education support system appear to be a critical issue. The educational psychologist works within a macro-level framework of policy and administrative structures developed nationally, within educational districts and in schools. At

a micro-framework level, the educational psychologist works with learners, parents and the teacher.

The learner and parent relate to the teacher and the school in a hierarchical relationship. The relationship between the school and the education department is conducted through the district office, with districts national policy, legislative and provisioning frameworks. Horizontally, there is the relationship between the parent and the teacher, and how the needs of the learner are negotiated within that relationship. Professionals such as the teacher, educational psychologist, occupational therapist, speech therapist (amongst others) (Department of Basic Education, 2010) require specific skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes towards inclusion and how to manage it in order to implement it effectively.

**Matrix One**

Matrix One (see figure 1) “provides the framework for discussing some of the rigidities emerging from the education structures listed in the vertical dimension of Matrix One”, as well as policy and administrative frameworks “listed in the horizontal dimension” (Wedell, 2005, p. 4). According to Wedell (2005), some of the rigidities that impact on inclusive education, and hence on the tasks of the educational psychologist, include: funding; national education policies that may conflict with practice; inflexible timetables and staffing; the dichotomy whereby the school is being urged to pursue inclusive ideals but also need to produce good learner test results; the way learners are grouped within schools; conventional teaching methods; and curriculum and assessment specifications. The challenge in this study was to pinpoint specifically the rigidities in the system as a whole.

<b>EDUCATION SYSTEM</b>	<b>POLICY AND ADMINISTRATIVE FRAMEWORKS</b>
	<b>National</b> extent to which policies, funding norms, systems and processes support national policy
	<b>District</b> extent to which resources allocated at district level and the processes for accessing them support national policy
	<b>School</b> extent to which schools are able to access resources and implement national policy

**Figure 1:** Matrix One (adapted from Wedell, 2005)

In Matrix One, the vertical dimension of the education system is concerned with the rigidities in the system that affect all learners, teachers, parents and others who are in the education system. For example, services such as health, social welfare and education are segregated, funding is fragmented and diverse learner needs are not being addressed appropriately (Wedell, 2005:4). Rigidities in individual schools that impact on inclusive education include inflexible timetables, lack of innovation in service delivery and reluctant staff. There are schools that still tend to set classes based on traditional dominant groupings of learners into grades, and place learners who do not fit in with these groupings into alternative streams or refer them to other schools.

The horizontal dimension of the matrix refers to the policy and administrative framework. For the purposes of this study (outside the scope of this paper), we considered how the national Department of Basic Education, as the policy-making body, viewed the inclusive education policy and its implementation, how the District Office and school participants adapted their service delivery, human resources, staff training, timetables, curricula and assessment procedures to operationalise tenets stipulated in *Education White Paper 6*, and how the policy ideal is interpreted in schools.

### **Matrix Two**

Matrix Two measures the interrelatedness between learner diversity and expectations, and emphasises that this diversity has to be taken into account when the education system is being planned (Wedell, 2005).

In addition, an essential principle of inclusion is that it is not just about the “type of school that learners attend: it is about the quality of their experience; how they are helped to learn, achieve and participate fully in the life of the school” (DfES 2004:25, cited in Wedell, 2005:6). The key determinants of an education system are the skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes (Wedell, 2005:6) that are essential to ensure successful implementation of inclusion (see figure 2).

<b>LEARNER DIVERSITY</b>	<b>Skills</b> extent to which the skills of teachers and other professionals enable inclusion	<b>Knowledge</b> extent to which knowledge of supporting diverse learners enables inclusion	<b>Understanding</b> extent to which understanding of inclusion enables policy implementation	<b>Attitudes</b> extent to which attitudinal change within the system enables inclusion
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**Figure 2:** Matrix Two (adapted from Wedell, 2005)

Matrix Two suggests a “different starting point for moving towards [the] flexibility” (Wedell, 2005:6) required for success. The interrelatedness between learner diversity and the expectations of those implementing inclusion at various levels is clear. The matrix shows that what is required is a change in attitude and an understanding of the nature of diversity and the types and levels of needs that includes individual and unique needs but also common needs (Lewis & Norwich 1999, cited in Wedell, 2005:6). These varying needs have implications for the types of expertise that are required to support inclusion. In this paper, we focussed on educational psychologists collaborating to share expertise to support the inclusive system.

### **Matrix Three**

Matrix Three (see figure 2) examines the problems of implementing inclusive education in conjunction with the concern that the present system fails to prepare learners for their adult lives. Wedell (2005) argues that what is required is a realistic evaluation of the changes that need to be made if inclusive education is to be successful, including the interrelatedness of teaching–learning approaches, the nature and level of expertise and collaboration required, and the variety of learner groupings and locations where learning occurs. Studying these features could have implications for policy and practice, and could also indicate how the educational psychologist can support inclusion.

<b>IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES</b>	<b>Teaching–learning approaches</b> extent to which teaching and learning approaches support and enable inclusion
	<b>Nature and levels of expertise and collaboration</b> extent to which expertise and collaboration mechanisms are in place to enable inclusion
	<b>Varieties of learner groupings and locations</b> extent to which the location, socioeconomic background and diversity of learners impact on inclusion

**Figure 3:** Matrix Three (adapted from Wedell, 2005)

Matrix 3 offers a framework for a realistic evaluation of the changes that are needed for a more inclusive system, especially the interrelatedness of teaching–learning approaches, the nature and levels of expertise, and the variety of learner groupings and the locations in which learning occurs (Wedell, 2005). We were interested in how educational psychologists could support greater levels of inclusion in schools. In other words, how could educational psychologists support the implementation of personalised learning for learners in schools, encourage collaboration between themselves, teachers, district officials, parents and other professionals, and suggest how classes can be grouped for learning.

These matrices were pertinent to the main issues in this study. Matrix One focussed on how the understanding of inclusive education by national and district government officials as well as school personnel shaped the school system and policy implementation, and how this was played out in individual classes. Matrix Two highlighted how the understanding of inclusive education influenced the school in terms of its learner population, as well as the skills of its teachers and other support staff. Matrix Three addressed how the understanding of the inclusive system affected the school’s attempts to make itself more inclusive.

### **Context of the study**

The purposively selected case study was a government (public) primary school in Pretoria’s inner city. A selection criterion for this school was the presence of

an effectively functioning institutional level support team (ILST) which worked cooperatively with the educational psychologist.

This school serves learners predominantly from Pretoria's central business district and surrounding areas. The area is characterised, inter alia, by language challenges (the learners' home languages being different to the school's language of teaching and learning, which is English), unemployment and poverty. The school has a multi-grade class for approximately 20 learners with special education needs (LSEN), a learning support teacher. Language enrichment support is offered to learners who require this intervention.

The school receives resources from professional support staff in the school district and from external psychological service providers. The Gauteng Department of Education does not provide financial funding for educational psychologists in schools (except in selected schools for learners with special educational needs), and thus, schools that employ educational psychologists generally require that parents pay for the services.

## **Methodology**

### **Research paradigm, approach and design**

Interpretivism constituted the meta-theoretical paradigm (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) of the study with a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2007a) to explore key stakeholder's perceptions of the potential role that educational psychologists can play in supporting an inclusive education system. We worked from the assumption that different interpretations regarding the challenges facing the implementation of inclusive education and the role of the educational psychologist in supporting inclusion exist. A strength of this case study design lay in the extensive data that were collected from multiple sources (Nieuwenhuis, 2007a).

### **Sampling**

A purposive sampling procedure provided the researchers with potentially information-rich cases. Individual stakeholder participants were selected on the basis of defining characteristics that meant they were holders of the data needed for the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2010b, Creswell, 2007a). Participants in this study had been involved in implementing inclusive education at their school, or in supporting the school, or in developing and ensuring the implementation of

*White Paper 6* (Department of Education, 2001); they were thus perceived as having in-depth knowledge of the topic. The participants were:

- a) Two education officials from the Department of Basic Education-Gauteng Province (DBE)
- b) Seven teacher participants from the school (research site)
- c) One educational psychologist who provided educational psychology services to the school
- d) One counsellor from a Pretoria-based church who offers counselling services to learners at the school
- e) Three district officials
- f) One parent whose child received psychological support from the educational psychologist

### **Data collection**

The data collection methods utilised were: interviews, focus group discussions, and observations (Creswell, 2007a). Field notes and a research diary for descriptive and reflective notes supplemented the data (Creswell, 2007a). Data gathering sessions were recorded on a voice recorder and later transcribed.

### **Data analysis**

The primary data analysis technique used was thematic content analysis. This process required identifying, analysing and reporting emerging themes from all data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Commonalities and patterns were clustered into themes. In order to validate the findings, triangulation and member checking strategies were used (Creswell, 2007b).

### **Ethical considerations**

The researchers adhered to the ethical considerations of informed consent (Strydom, 2005), anonymity and voluntary participation (Glesne, 2006). Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria's ethics committee. Written permission was also obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education. The researchers verbally explained the nature of the research and expectations from participants before eliciting their informed consent (Strydom, 2005).

## Results

Patterns that emerged from the analysis and interpretation of the raw data coalesced into the two main themes. Theme 1 answered the research question: *What do participants view as the role of the educational psychologist in inclusive classrooms and schools?* Theme 2 answered the research question: *How could educational psychology services be improved to support inclusion?*

### **Theme 1: Perceptions of the role of educational psychologists in supporting inclusion in schools**

Different views on the role of educational psychologists within an inclusive schooling system emerged. Teacher participants regarded educational psychologists as professionals who can screen learners experiencing barriers to learning as well as to mentor and advise teachers. Moreover, educational psychologists were perceived as assessors and counsellors to learners as well as managers and coordinators of support in an inclusive system, thereby contributing towards the effective functioning of the ILST. One teacher commented as follows:

*When a learner is identified as having special educational needs, the school will get the ELSEN teacher to have a look at the child, perhaps test the child, interview the parents, and because she is qualified to do that, we will then obviously have the child tested with the parents' consent, get the Department in, and that's now all to identify the child as LSEN*

Another teacher said:

*But we also need therapy, remediation, we need assistance with the child. We've got the teacher doing bridging and remedial in the afternoons. We're trying everything we can but it's not enough. We need an educational psychologist at the school.*

Participants mentioned that educational psychologists can advise parents and teachers on the most appropriate support for a particular learner. Participants commented on the roles of educational psychologists as follows:

*She assesses the learners in the first place, forming a bond with the parents, working with parents and teachers and learners, giving advice to teachers.[She*

*provides] therapy with the learners during school time [and] also emotional support for the teachers, they can knock on her door.*

*[They] identify and diagnose the kids with the problems that haven't been diagnosed before. And then to make the teacher aware of a specific child's needs*

If a learner is experiencing social or emotional difficulties, the process followed is similar, but a psychologist will be consulted. One participant mentioned the following:

*The same process [is followed] but then we'll get a psychologist in [school], or the Department's psychologist and we take it from there*

There is a psychologist who provides services to the school community for a fee, or the psychologist from the District Office will be asked to go to the school if there is a problem. A teacher commented as follows:

*Then we will also notify the Department through the school-based support team and they would most probably come. We've got [a psychologist from the District] who comes to the school and he is quite religious about it.*

## **Theme 2: Improving educational psychology services to support inclusion**

Participants commented that one of the ways by which educational psychology services could be enhanced could be through collaboration between educational psychologists and teachers. This is considered to be an important aspect to the teacher and this point is clearly illustrated in the following statement by the teacher:

*Psychologists should be part of a multidisciplinary team in identifying barriers to learning and what kind of support needs to be packaged together*

According to teacher participants, educational psychologists ought to assist teachers by providing expert advice on how to cope in an inclusive classroom. Government participants agreed that training and empowering teachers, through mentoring and skills transfer, are substantial tasks expected of the educational psychologist. Participants commented as follows:

*You fulfil a kind of a mentoring role and empower people to take ownership of issues. In a nutshell, that is what it was about.*

*So for me, it would be that if there are individual cases, they can advise the teacher, but their main role would be to train and mentor the teachers.*

National government participants suggested that educational psychologists, as highly skilled professionals, should be managers and coordinators of support in an inclusive system, rather than focusing on working one-on-one with learners. One participant stated the following:

*They need to be managers and coordinators of support in an inclusive system, because of their short supply in developing countries.*

According to a district participant, district-based educational psychologists have become managers of cases out of necessity. The participant pointed out that:

*There are only four educational psychologists serving 260 schools. So there is no way we can give intense support to a child in need. We gather information on what is the reason for referral and then we network with other external service providers.*

There seems to be an agreement that external support can be utilised to assist with the multiple challenges they [teachers] face in their classrooms. The following comment elucidates this point:

*I think that all, you know, outside support people should be geared at enhancing the skills of the teachers in order to differentiate and support each other.*

Looking to the future, the school supported the inclusion of an educational psychologist in its on-site support team (ILST). This need for support is clear in the following comments by a teacher:

*We need help, we want help. We want to improve.*

From government's perspective, the educational psychologist should be part of a multi-disciplinary team that identifies barriers to learning and possible approaches to address the barriers. This appears to be more of a case management role than working one-on-one with learners and their families. Teachers commented that they would welcome help, feedback, advice and a

desire for collaboration from educational psychologists as indicated in the following words:

*The way this lady is doing it, she is giving us advice. You can take it or you can leave it. It will have to be a situation where you work closely with the teacher, in a perfect world.*

## **Discussion**

One way by which inclusive education can achieve success depends on the availability and quality of educational support that is offered in mainstream schools (Farrell, 2004, cited in Engelbrecht & Green, 2002:85), and educational psychologists can help to ensure this. In this study, the participants' views are supported by literature, which states that educational psychologists can advise on the benefits of placing learners in an inclusive school environment; advise and support teachers on how to develop learning programmes for individual learners, types of support, and how the curriculum can be adapted to accommodate the needs of diverse learners. At a systems level, they can also support staff in reflecting on their practice, and how to plan and implement change and develop the whole school for the benefit of all learners (Farrell, 2004:12-13; Mohangi, 2015).

In support of such collaboration as outlined by the participants in this study, Forlin (2010:617) states that the role of the educational psychologist has moved from a case-based, individual withdrawal model to a more collaborative whole-school based approach. Participants in this study agreed with other authors that educational psychologists needed to collaborate by listening carefully to teachers to understand the support they need and how they can possibly provide it (Anderson, et al 2007:146).

International literature conceptualise the tasks of an educational psychologist (school psychologist) in a similar manner to the participants in the current study. In Hong Kong, for example, along with the stated tasks, educational psychologists are responsible for supporting and consulting with schools on the provision of appropriate intervention for learners with special educational needs and supporting schools in adopting a whole school approach for learners with diverse educational needs (Forlin, 2010).

Engelbrecht and Green (2002), confirm that educational psychologists play a role in empowering teachers with the skills to address the unique needs of all learners in their classrooms. Similar to the participants' views in this study, Muthukrishna (2002:149-150) agrees that educational psychologists provide a mentoring and supportive role for teachers. In schools that employ an educational psychologist, he or she serves as the leader of the ILST and coordinates the individualised education programmes. However, it is also clear that in many schools across South Africa, the extent of tasks performed by educational psychologists is limited (Mohangi, 2015).

Wedell (2005) considers it necessary to study the nature and level of expertise and collaboration required, the variety of learner groupings and locations where learning occurs in order to understand the implications for policy and practice. Numerous aspects relating to collaboration and coordination were mentioned by participants in the current study, including the need for supportive structures to ensure that collaboration is not *ad hoc*. There is a need for regular meetings and discussions about classroom practice. These views are supported by the literature, where findings show that collaborative partnerships require supportive structures characterised by joint planning and participatory leadership. Participants in this study confirmed Engelbrecht and Green's (2002) view that critical collaborative processes would involve frequent teacher discussions of teaching practice while sharing resources and decision-making thereby emulating constructivist principles.

Teacher training and networks of support (cluster schools and resource centres) reduce the need for identification and referral (Peters, 2004:43). In this study, participants spoke about full-service schools which are intended to be resourced and staffed so as to be able to support clusters of schools. South Africa also has a system of collaborative support teams – the District Based Support Team (DBST) and the ILST. This correlates with the reviewed literature which refers to collaborative support teams. These can extend beyond being district-based and school-based education support to including collaboration with other sectors such as health. A government participant in this study talked about the need for South African government departments to work in a more coordinated and integrated way, and to ensure that scarce resources and expertise are shared. An example of such a team approach is in Vietnam where collaborative support teams link education and health sectors to provide joint training, and is fully integrated into the Primary Health Care Network. There are also local community support teams with community leaders, education, health and social workers, representatives from women's and youth unions, and

parents of learners with disabilities (Peters, 2004:20). These ideas are at a fledgling stage in South Africa.

Enabling teachers to effectively manage inclusive classrooms emerged as an issue during this research. Schwille (2007, cited in Ntombela, 2011:7), suggests an alternative approach to teacher development, including opportunities to collaborate and collectively decide on their professional development needs within schools. Cutter et al (2002:196) found that teachers in a collaborative professional development community recognised, acknowledged and adopted new understandings of how to better support identified learners in challenging science instruction. Again, participants in the study spoke about the need to develop teachers' capacity, but how this should be done was not clear.

### **Recommendations for strengthening alliances**

Educational psychologists could engage collectively with District Offices to structure planning and implementation. At school level, one could consider ways of collaboratively managing critical issues such as crime, substance use, language and culture that create barriers, xenophobia and other social challenges that affect learning and development (Mohangi, 2015).

To participate meaningfully in an inclusive schooling system, there will be a need for preparatory work and research that will help to understand some of the dynamics that unintentionally create barriers. Educational psychologists could seek opportunities to attend staff meetings, address parent meetings and invite parents to join the team in supporting their child with special education needs.

### **Conclusion**

This paper offered views on stakeholder constructions on the role of the educational psychologist in supporting inclusion at school level. From the findings, it is clear that educational psychology services are required at schools. Adopting new and different skills, an activist mind-set and engaging with the socioeconomic realities of schools and families would be crucial. Collaboration with key role-players within the education system implies coalescing skill sets with a common interest that could support the successful implementation of all inclusive education policy ideals.

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