



The use of English to offer learner support and enhance perceptual skills development in South African township schools



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Research has identified the underdevelopment of perceptual skills as a cause of lifelong learning struggles and the restriction of developmental progress in learners. The literature also indicates that early intervention is one strategy that effectively mitigates the long-term effects thereof through learner support. However, the inadequacy of in-service teachers' skills to assess perceptual skills development, coupled with the implementation of the teaching and learning language policy, are issues for concern, particularly in South African schools.

This article reports on a module-aligned community engagement project conducted with 87 pre-service teachers to assess the perceptual skills development of Foundation Phase learners as part of their work-integrated learning (WIL). The two selected schools used English as their language of teaching and learning. Two lecturers and eight Grade 2 and Grade 3 in-service teachers from Pretoria East schools participated in the project. Play-based pedagogy was used as a resource for assessment as a qualitative approach, thus inspiring in-service teachers' and learners' creativity and enjoyment at the schools.

Kolb's cyclic theoretical framework consisting of four cycles underpinned the project. Firstly, the project confirmed literature findings of teachers' lack of skills to assess perceptual skills development using English in Foundation Phase learners. Secondly, the use of non-mother tongue language as a medium of instruction in early learning centres affected learners' knowledge acquisition. Thirdly, the use of the foreign medium of instruction affected the learners' speaking and listening skills, thus impacting language and cognitive development essential for learning.

Keywords: foundation phase; language of teaching and learning; medium of instruction; play-based pedagogy; perceptual skills development; pre-service teachers; in-service teachers.

Introduction

Whilst the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) has granted learners the right to receive education in the language of their choice,¹ the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study report states that 78% of South African Grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language. The latest research suggests that learners entering school can learn best through their mother tongue and that a second language is more easily acquired if the learner already has a firm grasp of their home language. Full acquisition of a mother tongue language enables the learner to learn a second and even third language without difficulty.^{2,3} However, some schools deviate from this policy and use English as a medium of instruction at the Foundation Phase. This deviation perpetuates the underdevelopment of perceptual skills in schools where teachers lack appropriate skills to assist the learners accordingly. Perceptual skills development is the brain's capability to process and act on what the eye has seen.⁴

The Department of Education in South Africa, in compliance with the Constitution, developed the Languages in Education policy,⁵ which states that Foundation Phase learners should be taught in their mother tongue. The government gazette⁶ also states that the first additional language should be introduced in Grade 1 as a subject, but not as a medium of instruction. Mother tongue is the most unique and direct means by which individuals think, formulate ideas and give meaning to emotions.⁷ It is the language with which one identifies oneself as a native speaker and by which one is identified by others. It is the language that the child uses from birth for important and impactful times in the child's life.² The home language, which is the language that learners know best when they first enter school, is recommended as the medium of instruction.⁸

The school governing body plays a role in deciding on the language to be used as the medium of instruction and determining the school's language policy. This is because the parents have the right to choose the medium of instruction through which they want their children to be taught.

It appears that some Foundation Phase schools in the semi-urban areas and township schools do not implement the language in education policy⁵ as expected. In addition, the progression policy states that learners should be progressed to the next phase if they have acquired the skills necessary to be promoted.⁹ Should the satisfactory skills not be acquired, the learner can only be retained once in a phase. However, this has implications for learners with learning difficulties, including those with underdevelopment of their perceptual skills.

This article outlines the pre-service and in-service teachers' experiences during a work-integrated learning (WIL) intervention programme, which was conducted to offer learner support using English as a medium of instruction, to enhance their perceptual skills development.

Literature review

Mother tongue language

Wardhaugh¹⁰ defined language as a knowledge of rules and principles and the ways of saying and doing things with sounds, words and sentences, rather than just knowledge thereof without understanding. Most current research suggests that learners entering school are able to learn best through their mother tongue and that a second language (such as English) is more easily acquired if the learner already has a firm grasp of their home language.³ Mother tongue always references the language that the child has used from birth for important and impactful times in the child's life.² For a child, their mother tongue is more than simply a language, because it encompasses the child's personal, social and cultural identity. Language is the most effective way of keeping and growing our tangible and intangible heritage.

Mother tongue as the medium of instruction

Medium of instruction is a controversial issue in South Africa as it is a multilingual country with a rich traditional history. There are 11 official languages with 9 being African languages. English is the language of the colonisers and home language to the minority group of people. However, it is also spoken by many people as a common language. The most important point to remember when deciding on the medium of instruction is that it should enhance the understanding of the learners.

Language is at the centre of all teaching and learning activities because it is the main source of information and knowledge transmission.¹¹ Furthermore, language is used to teach and impart instructions in any discipline, subject and at any level of learning; it is the medium of instruction. Yet the medium of instruction is a controversial issue at all levels of the education system, especially in the Foundation Phase. Language as the medium of instruction plays a crucial role in

learning as it is through language that learners develop ideas or concepts of the world around them. In addition, through language children make sense of the input they receive in the classroom from the teacher. Furthermore, it is through language that learners express their understanding of what they have learnt from the classroom input.^{12,13,14,15}

The selected medium of instruction should help in raising the cognitive abilities of the learners and the development of their individuality. It should not create a sense of superiority or inferiority amongst the learners. It should help them in conceptual formation instead of forcing them merely to memorise the written text. According to Desai,² if a foreign language is used as a medium of instruction, such as English, the learners' comprehension of the subject knowledge and conceptual development turns out to be inadequate.

Furthermore, when the language used for learning is not familiar to the recipients, in this case the learners, it becomes a barrier to learning.¹⁶ This barrier becomes more impenetrable when the teacher is not adequately proficient in the language of instruction, thus making the teacher's input even more incomprehensible.

The language factor in participation and exclusion

Language is a powerful instrument of identification and classification, but it can be manipulated for participation or exclusion.¹⁷ If the foreign language is used as a medium of instruction in schools, learners who are second- or third-language speakers can experience exclusion through illiteracy and exclusion arising from lack of familiarity with that language. The excluded speakers are unable to participate in most of the classroom activities, because they can only do so through intermediaries.¹⁷ Learners are also unable to fulfil language requirements because they are subjected to instructions and procedures in a language which is completely foreign to them.

Language and cognitive development

As expressed by Cummins,¹² the promotion of mother tongue in schools not only helps to develop the home language but also assists in the development of the learners' cognitive abilities. When children develop proficiency in their mother tongue, they are simultaneously fostering a whole host of other essential skills, such as critical thinking and literacy skills. It is these skills and concepts that they take with them into formal education, and the concepts gained in the learner's home language do not have to be retaught when they transfer to a second language.

In addition, Desai² alludes to the poor throughput rates in South African schools because of an inadequate grasp of the learning content by learners. Desai says that barely a quarter of African language learners who enter the schooling system reach Grade 12 because many drop out along the way. This seems to indicate that the current practice of using English as the initial language of learning and teaching might be a

contributing factor to this problem. In agreement, Cenoz¹⁸ stated that there is a close relationship between the language that the speaker knows and the second or third language that is to be learnt. Some authors attest that, at least in the early stages of third language acquisition, it is the first and second languages that exert a stronger influence on the pronunciation of the target language.^{19,20,21,22}

According to Clark,²³ children first set up conceptual then linguistic representations for talking about experiences. Learners get their language vocabulary from their parents, caretakers and the adults around them. The effect that previously learnt languages can have on the learning of a new language is commonly referred to as cross-linguistic influence. Cross-linguistic influence is viewed by Gass and Selinker,²⁴ Odlin²⁵ and Selinker²⁶ as one of the central processes in second language acquisition. The cross-linguistic influence can also determine what factors trigger which areas of language when it comes to how and to what extent the other language should be acquired.

Clark²³ continues that learners in their early stages understand that language reflects the speaker's intentions about how to learn another language. This is because words direct young children's attention and can influence how they organise and consolidate what they know about certain relationships. Language can also positively affect the learners' cognitive improvement. This can happen when children are able to draw attention to similarities between different categories across domains because of the existence of words or phrases that they already know. In addition, languages can give learners specific and unique views of similar and equal events. That way they can use the previously acquired language to grasp second, third and even fourth languages. Where a foreign language such as English dominates the indigenous African languages, the benefits attached to mother tongue teaching in the early years are compromised.⁷ It appears in the literature that teaching in the medium of instruction of an African language is not an easy practice, yet it has cognitive benefits for learners.

Language and culture

Using language is the most effective way to keep and grow a tangible and intangible heritage. Mother tongue is not only an effective means for communication but it also represents the valuable cultural heritage of the country in a person. Jiang²⁷ says that language is part of culture and plays an important role in it. Therefore, language simultaneously reflects culture and is influenced and shaped by it. It is the symbolic representation of a people because it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. Therefore, language and culture are interdependent.

In addition, Brown^{28,29,30} attests that language and culture are inseparable and are intricately interwoven so one cannot separate them without losing the significance of either language or culture. For those learners who are proficient in their mother tongue, an added benefit is that they will gain

more knowledge and be grounded in their culture. Wardhaugh and Fuller¹⁰ report that the structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world. However, the structure does not determine the worldview but is still extremely influential in leading the speakers of a language towards adopting their worldview.

Perceptual skills development and learning implications

A sizable body of evidence in the literature suggests that a growing number of learners in the early childhood development phase present learning delays associated with perceptual skills development.³¹ Klein and Hoffman³² conceptualise perceptual skills development as the ability to plan, implement movements and functions, discern and follow instructions in learning environments, amongst others. Perceptual-motor development also involves neuro-executive processes mediated by the prefrontal cortical functions necessary to create simple to more compound activities. The underdevelopment of these skills impairs coordination, listening, speaking and movement, to name a few.³³ Greenstone^{4,34} suggests that executive function training sessions adapt cognitive behaviour in response to changes in the environment. Therefore, teachers must understand perceptual skills development in teaching and learning to enhance verbal perceptual stimuli that could mitigate recognition impairment during learner support. Building teachers' expertise ensures that learners practise their spatial awareness, motor and auditory perceptual abilities and speaking skills. In addition, the skills mentioned here heighten curriculum access, learner development and learner progression in school phases. It is crucial to observe that the skills are interdependent and that infantile skills affect learning.^{33,35,36}

Speech and speaking repercussions on learner support sessions

The ability to produce and perceive sounds is the foundation for language development.³⁷ A language delay constitutes a communication disorder affecting both verbal and nonverbal communication. To perform well on tasks, learners must understand and produce various sound patterns during learning and guided play activities. Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff³⁸ consider guided play activities necessary in accelerating the development of language and the perceptual skills of those with learning difficulties. Sala, Tatlidil and Gobet³⁹ agree and consider teachers' acquisition of their assessment skills to be key in selecting effective games that enhance cognitive growth and prepare learners to produce sounds in various words and sentences during daily conversations. Furthermore, during learner support sessions, teachers can teach speech and comprehension skills positively to benefit learners' cognitive development.³²

Cognitive skills are not context-specific but can transfer to other learning activities to ensure learners' holistic development. The theoretical and practical goal of understanding the circumstances of cognitive skills transfer is that they cannot occur in vacuity.³³ Before understanding

what to transfer, it is vital to understand children's sequential developmental processes from thinking, reading, learning, remembering, reasoning and paying attention to identifying learner support intervention levels. Similarly, their interests, needs, learning styles and cultural backgrounds are considerations that warrant intervention effectiveness in learners with diverse abilities at school.⁴⁰

Listening comprehension and learner's support

The literature confirms that listening is the foundation for language comprehension in early childhood learning. Rudner, Lyberg-Åhlander, Brännström, Nirme, Pichora-Fuller and Sahlén^{41,42} indicate that mastering a second language starts with developing listening and speaking skills. Young learners need to establish figure-ground discrimination, memory, closure, form constancy and spatial relations skills to comprehend instructions. One consideration when assessing listening and speaking is determining learners' chronological and developmental ages against school grade expectations. Snelling, Dawes, Biersteker, Girdwood and Tredoux⁴³ argue that there is a scarcity of indigenous assessment tools that are informed by empirical evidence. The scarcity of African language assessment instruments also perpetuates delays in providing early interventions in learning difficulties. This results in learners progressing to subsequent grades without the required skills for learning, thus extending learning difficulties and repeating school grades.

South African progression policy expects learners in the Foundation Phase to progress through school following the ages specified, and they are only allowed to repeat a grade once in a phase.⁹ Policy implementation is a global challenge, but it is worse in developing countries with low socio-economic factors, teachers' lack of skills and the nonexistent political will to monitor progress. Literature also specifies peculiarly atypical learner development, necessitating support to enhance learner progression. Learner support sessions are impossible without teacher expertise to conduct them. Teachers must ensure that learners in the Foundation Phase develop the hearing and speaking skills to ensure successful teaching and learning whilst improving the acquired standard knowledge base.

Kolb's cyclic experiential learning theory

This study used Kolb's theoretical framework⁴⁴ to investigate teachers' abilities in assessing learners' perceptual skills development in the experiential learning project conducted at the two identified schools. Kolb views learning as an integrated process with mutually supportive stages and with one feeding into the next.⁴⁴ As a result, effective learning only occurs when the learners can execute all the practical stages of the learning process. This means that no learning stage is effective as a learning process on its own. Kolb's theory presents four cyclic stages of learning, namely concrete experience, reflective observation of the new experience, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. The

concrete experience is a stage that takes place through doing, whilst the reflective observation of the new experience occurs through reflecting or reviewing of the experience. During the abstract conceptualisation stage, learning occurs from the experience gained. Finally, during active experimentation, the new skills are applied.

Research methods and design

This study used a qualitative, multiple-case approach to investigate and describe teachers' complexities and realities when using a foreign language and providing learner support in the Foundation Phase. This study was conducted using participants from two township schools in the eastern part of Pretoria in South Africa. The selection criteria for the participating schools were that they used English as a medium of instruction in the area where the majority of learners spoke Sepedi and Setswana, and English was their second or third language. The data collection methods used were interviews with the in-service teachers, classroom observations and document analysis. These policy documents were analysed.^{5,9,45,46}

The main researchers for this project were two university lecturers. The participants were six in-service teachers from two Foundation Phase schools (three teachers from each school) with 35 learners in each class and 87 pre-service teachers. The study used purposive sampling and the selection criteria for inclusion was that the schools in the township used English as the medium of instruction.

Data collection

The data collection process was spread over 14 weeks, during which time pre-service teachers visited the schools once a week. To ensure the study's reliability, the primary researchers (lecturers) interviewed the in-service teachers to establish their knowledge of the perceptual skills concepts and whether they had the skills to assess the development thereof. This study used interpretivism as the method embedded in the notion that every historical and cultural situation is unique.⁴⁷

Data analysis

The project used interpretive data analysis to extract thematic and systematic meaning from the teachers' responses, observations of children playing and document analysis.⁴⁸ To assess the learners' listening and speaking skills, the pre-service teachers designed lesson activities using the resources that they made for learners to play with. The pre-service teachers gave learners instructions on how to play with the tools and they also asked them questions in order to find out whether the learners heard, verbally responded and acted on the instructions. The data sets were compared and analysed by hand, and the emerging themes were categorised to appportion meaning. As elucidated by Nowell, Norris, White and Moules,⁴⁹ data were descriptively presented in this article systematically and sequentially.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria (reference number: EDU081/19). The Department of Basic Education authorised the researchers to access the two identified schools. The schools used the proxy from parents to allow the researchers and pre-service teachers to investigate the perceptual skills development of learners and the teachers gave their consent to participate. The researchers promised the participants anonymity and confidentiality, to which they adhered and the participants were not coerced in any way.

Results

The next section presents the data collected through the interviews with the teachers, classroom observations and analysis of the policy documents. The data were triangulated and presented verbatim to enhance the results' reliability.⁵⁰ The results confirmed the suggestions in the literature: firstly, it was found that some learners' speaking skills were not well developed because they were not able to express themselves on how they experienced playing with the resources, and as a result their learning was negatively affected. Secondly, using English as a medium of instruction affected some learners' self-confidence to participate in a language they were not competent in. Thirdly, using English before developing the competency skills in home languages to transfer to other languages impaired the learners' language development and contributed to speaking challenges. The well-developed speaking skills encouraged language development and enhanced learning.

Interviews

The following section presents the themes that emerged from the interviews. For the sake of anonymity, the in-service teachers from School (TS) 1 will be referred to as TS1, TS2 and TS3, whilst teachers from School 2 will be called TS4, TS5 and TS6.

Poor conceptualisation of perceptual skills development

The project found the in-service teachers' conceptualisation of perceptual skills development to be generally limited. They also did not know how listening and speaking difficulties presented in a learning environment. On being asked what they understood the perceptual skills development concept meant and how learners with speaking and hearing issues presented in class, TS1 (Female, 47 years old, teacher) and TS5 (Female, 49 years old, teacher) responded as follows:

'Teachers did not know how listening and speaking difficulties presented in a learning environment. All the in-service teachers understood neuropsychology and its contribution to perceptual skills development and learners' challenges in class.'

TS1 (Female, 47 years old, teacher) and TS5 (Female, 49 years old, teacher) acknowledged that perceptual skills enhanced the learners' ability to learn. A follow-up question was asked to ascertain whether the in-service teachers understood

neuropsychology and its contribution to perceptual skills development and learners' challenges in class. All the participating in-service teachers were not able to respond to the question.

Teachers' mixed emotions about learners' reports

The researchers asked the in-service teachers if the schools conducted learners' hearing or auditory perception and speaking abilities tests. Most of the in-service teachers mentioned that the Department of Basic Education's health professionals conducted screening tests and compiled reports when the learners started school in Grade 1. The researchers followed up the question and asked what the teachers did with the reports. They responded that they did not have access to the screening reports' results as the principals and heads of departments managed those:

'I think we would not have used the reports even if we had access. We are overwhelmed with paperwork to report to the Department of Basic Education, which compromises quality teaching time.' (TS2, Female, 50 years old, teacher)

'Now that you are talking about the reports, I think they could have helped us understand the learners better. Many learners come to mind, and I suspect they may be having perceptual skills development challenges that I was not aware of.' (TS3, Female, 46 years old, teacher)

Another participant mentioned:

'I wish the heads of departments responsible for subjects and curriculum delivery at school would discuss the reports with us to understand learners' difficulties, so that we could know how to support them and refer them when necessary. I thought the learners were struggling with language comprehension as they are in the Foundation Phase and come from poor backgrounds with illiterate parents. However, I am beginning to understand the possible presence of other issues associated with perceptual skills development.' (TS4, Female, 35 years old, teacher)

The teacher's mixed emotions emanated from the lack of collaboration between them and the school's Heads of Departments. If the Heads of Departments in the two schools shared the reports, the teachers would have known about the learners presenting with delayed perceptual skills development. The teachers would have been able to provide appropriate support and early intervention.

The early intervention could have alleviated the pessimism that was portrayed by TS2 (Female, 50 years old, teacher).

Behavioural problems

One participant said:

'I agree that perceptual skills development might be the issue. I also think using English as the medium of instruction contributes to learners' behavioural problems and learning difficulties.' (TS6, Female, 44 years old, teacher)

This teacher further elaborated on a specific learner in her class who presented with behavioural problems, linking it to the literature's assertion that learners with well-developed perceptual skills can transfer those to other associated life skills.

Language barrier

It was found that most of the learners struggled to comprehend learning because of the fact the school used English as the medium of instruction in an environment where English was not spoken and was foreign to them.

A participant confirmed this by saying:

'I also think using English as the medium of instruction contributes to learners' learning difficulties.' (TS3, Female, 46 years old, teacher)

It was difficult for them to understand the learning with their limited or almost nonexistent English vocabulary. Furthermore, another participant alluded to the fact that their parents would not be able to assist the learners with schoolwork because they are illiterate by saying:

'The learners were struggling with language comprehension as they are in the Foundation Phase and coming from poor backgrounds with illiterate parents.' (TS4, Female, 35 years old, teacher)

The given results indicate a disjuncture between the teachers and heads of departments in the two schools and the departmental health officials. Collaboration could help the education stakeholders create perceptual skills awareness and provide schools with a referral trail for learners in need of support. If the schools' authorities had made the reports available to the in-service teachers, the reports could have assisted them in identifying specific challenges associated with the perceptual skills development of each learner. The in-service teachers' responses confirmed what the literature said about the use of foreign language as a medium of instruction that poses an exclusion in learning. Some learners from both schools presented with learning difficulties and behavioural problems; as a result, they could not understand instructions given in a foreign language. The learners presenting with the given challenges also struggled with speaking and hearing.

Classroom observation

The project used the four stages of Kolb's theory to collect the classroom observation data, which were conducted once a week for 14 weeks. The in-service teachers distributed three to four learners to each pre-service teacher who used play-based pedagogy and the resources they made as part of their module requirements to assess the perceptual skills development of learners. The play-based procedure encouraged the learners to participate, as they thought they were playing and attached no formality to the assessment process. The discussion meeting was held before the sessions to provide the in-service teachers with clear guidelines on how the assessment would be conducted and also what the expected outcomes were likely to be.

During the first stage, the concrete experience, the in-service teachers watched the pre-service teachers assess the learners. The pre-service teachers used their resources to tell stories to the learners. The learners were expected to listen and retell

the stories in class. All the teachers used journals to capture the assessment outcome and presented it before the next session. The first stage – to develop the learners' holistic intervention programme and improve learners' cognitive ability – took four weeks to complete until data saturation.

During the second stage, the reflective observation of the new experience, the in-service teachers went back to class to analyse the first stage's findings with regard to learners' difficulties in class. The analysis was based on the records captured in their journals during the listening and retelling of stories by the learners. The in-service teachers began to link the assessment results to the learning challenges experienced by some learners, particularly those associated with language delays, speaking and hearing. This process took four weeks to complete.

During the abstract conceptualisation stage, the in-service teachers began to understand the contribution of the underdeveloped perceptual skills to learning difficulties. During the abstract conceptualisation stage, in-service teachers were given a task to go and observe how learners with perceptual skills challenges presented in class during the teaching and learning. Thereafter, the in-service teachers acknowledged that they understood the contribution of the underdeveloped perceptual skills to learning difficulties. They did this by linking the findings from the training programme to how these learners presented in class. This stage took four weeks to complete.

During the active experimentation stage, which was the last stage, the in-service teachers were given an opportunity to use the resources that the pre-service teachers had developed. This was performed to determine if the in-service teachers had acquired the competency to assess perceptual skills development in the learners, and they proved to be competent. The pre-service teachers also achieved their module requirements and got first-hand experience in applying the theoretical knowledge learned in class on listening and speaking as part of the perceptual skills development. The last stage, which took two weeks to complete, exposed the following challenges faced by the in-service teachers in providing support to learners who experienced learning difficulties whilst using English as a medium of instruction in both schools:

- The in-service teachers did not know what perceptual skills development was and how these skills affected learning in class.
- The in-service teachers did not know that they could make and use resources to assess skills development in learners.
- The in-service teachers did not know the effect of listening and speaking on learning, which was aggravated by the use of English as a medium of instruction.

At the end of the project, the in-service teachers proved to be knowledgeable and competent in dealing with the challenges mentioned here. Also, the pre-service teachers

achieved their module requirements and got first-hand experience in applying the theoretical knowledge on listening and speaking as part of the perceptual skills development in class.

Document analysis

The study found that the identified schools did not adhere to the language policies but partially complied with the progression policy. The language policies advocated the use of a convenient language or mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase. However, the identified schools chose English as a medium of instruction, which was a third language to most learners at both schools. The repercussions thereof were the delay in the language acquisition related to speaking and hearing, and these repercussions are assumed to have contributed to learning difficulties.

Regarding the progression policy, the schools promoted learners to the next grade without the required promotional skills. The policy allows schools to retain learners once in a phase, and teachers were too overwhelmed to do the paperwork required to justify learner retention. These learners were moved to the Intermediate Phase and subsequently moved to the Senior, Further Education and Training Phases without acquiring the necessary perceptual skills related to listening and speaking. These are the learners contributing to the high dropout rates in the South African schooling system.

Conclusion

In this study, the pre-service teachers established the complexities and realities that existed whilst they were assessing perceptual skills development in learners from the two South African township schools that used English as the medium of instruction. The study found that there was no coordination between the school management teams and the in-service teachers to alert the educators of the learners' difficulties. The absence of transparency by the school management teams led to the in-service teachers not being able to assist the learners accordingly. Also, both schools did not comply with the policies. Unless the Department of Basic Education equips the in-service teachers with the skills to support learners in their classes, those with learning difficulties will continue to have challenges in accessing the curriculum. This might alleviate learning and behavioural problems, reduce dropout rates and improve the South African education system.

Recommendations

The prerequisites for learners with learning difficulties needing support and the fundamental individual differences must be appreciated and considered if schools aim to achieve progress and quality education. A rigid 'one-size-fits-all' method only propagates exclusive practices against these

learners. Therefore, the study recommends the following to enhance curriculum access and grade progression for learners:

- The Department of Basic Education should consider equipping in-service teachers with the necessary skills to identify learning difficulties in learners and provide early childhood education intervention to those who need it. The teachers and the district officials could collaborate in transferring learners to the relevant transdisciplinary teams.
- The schools should be encouraged to implement policies to enhance teaching and learning, which will benefit the learners accordingly. The schools in townships must be intentional in choosing the medium of instruction other than English to avoid learning barriers for learners who are non-mother tongue speakers of the language.
- The Heads of the Departments should be transparent with the in-service teachers and discuss learners' screening results to alert them of possible learning difficulties. They should also make a follow-up to ensure that learners' concerns have been attended to and where possible, referrals and concessions aligned to specific learning difficulties are granted.
- The health officials, the Heads of Departments and in-service teachers should work together in striving to create learning difficulty awareness and develop appropriate child-specific intervention strategies. Creating awareness could enhance the stakeholders' collaborative effort, strengthen teachers' skills to identify learning difficulties and seek early intervention services from other relevant professionals.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

N.S.T. and M.C.M. both contributed equally towards the research, data collection, data interpretation, the writing up and editing of this article.

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Data availability

The data collected are available at the Department of Early Childhood Education.

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