



Exploring the Teachers' Understanding of the Role and Functionality of School-Based Support Teams

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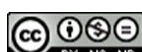
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ABSTRACT

Teachers' understanding of the role and functionality of School-Based Support Teams is critical in executing the responsibilities of teaching, learning, and provision of additional support to their learners. The study explored participants' views, experiences, knowledge, and practices on their understanding of the role and functionality of school-based support in education. A qualitative approach, interpretivism paradigm, and instrumental case study design were adopted. The purposeful sampling method was used to select 35 participants from five rural secondary schools (ten members of school governing bodies, five principals, fifteen teachers who were members of school-based support teams, and five district-based support team members). Questionnaires, field notes, focus groups, and individual interviews were used to collect data. The results showed that teachers had a clear understanding of the role and functionality of school-based support teams. However, due to time constraints, they prioritize the completion of a syllabus over engaging in support teams. The study's recommendations included the provision of additional human resources in schools to assist teachers.



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INTRODUCTION

This article is a product of a study conducted to explore the effect of school-based support in education and how its improvement could influence the access and success of rural learners (Netshipale, 2024). Teachers were found to possess the working understanding of the intricacies of school-based support; however, their understanding did not translate to practices, which negatively affects effective implementation of support strategies (Netshipale, 2024). Teachers are responsible for imparting knowledge to their learners and thus influencing the changes in their countries and contributing towards economic, social, and industrial development (Dirsa et al., 2022). It is imperative that they are knowledgeable about the responsibilities they are required to execute. They are the main resources in teaching and learning and, as such, should possess extensive knowledge of support services they are expected to implement in their schools. According to Sepadi and Molapo (2024), lack of understanding is one of the factors that impede the achievement of desired educational outcomes.

During the study by Netshipale (2024) on improving school-based support towards access and success of rural learners, it became apparent that teachers need to have a clear understanding of the importance of establishing and maintaining functional support teams in their schools. If they understand, they might be able to prioritize the establishment and sustenance of support teams in their schools and engage fully in the implementation of support initiatives. It appears

that teachers view school-based support as an additional chore or responsibility that they can only execute whenever time permits.

Although the issue of school-based support teams is a widely researched area, most of the recent existing studies focus on various aspects of education. For example, some studies examined the teachers' expertise, knowledge, or understanding of certain subjects school-based support teams support towards children with cancer understanding of gender-responsive pedagogy (Mdaka & Modiba, 2024; Irwin et al., 2024; Mukagiahana et al., 2024) and the implementation of inclusive education (Mokhampanyane, 2024). Studies such as the one conducted by Erlia (2021) explored the role of teachers in e-learning classroom environments. The study emphasizes the multifaceted role of teachers, such as "facilitators, mediators, and evaluators of students' learning process," and the provision of direction that learning should take (Erlia, 2021). Their understanding of the importance of establishing and maintaining effective support teams in their schools should be encompassed in these roles.

There is a need to determine what teachers outside of their support teams understand about the role that school-based support teams and their functionality play in teaching and learning and subsequent improvement of educational outcomes. Teachers play a central role in optimizing the functioning of school-based support teams, as their understanding and skills in managing and implementing support strategies significantly impact the quality of teaching and educational outcomes. To understand this role, teachers should also be knowledgeable about the importance of establishing and maintaining functional support teams and be able to interpret support strategies and programs they are required to implement (Sepadi & Molapo, 2024).

McDiarmid (2021) concurs that in addition to instructional roles in their classrooms, teachers also provide support towards refugee youths who experience challenges integrating into their new environments. To successfully support these youths, teachers should recognize what being a refugee entails and devise support strategies aligned to these youths' challenges that could be incorporated into classroom activities. Supportive roles played by teachers should have a positive impact on these youths inside and outside of their classrooms. They should ensure positive and meaningful interactions with their learners. All these aspects are rooted in and are influenced by understanding and knowledge.

This paper will focus on one of the objectives of the study conducted by Netshipale (2024), which is the teachers' understanding of the role and functionality of school-based support teams. The purpose of this article is to examine the teachers' understanding of the role of school-based support teams and the influence that the functionality of such teams has on teaching and learning and the improvement of learning outcomes. The appropriate way to achieve this aim would be to explore participants' views, feelings, and experiences conveyed through their statements or responses. This research is important because it fills a gap by providing current insights into how teachers' understanding of the role and function of school-based support teams can impact teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes, an area that remains under-researched in the current educational context.

The *verbatim* statements used were sourced from their responses to open-ended questionnaires and individual and focus group interviews. The use of participants' direct quotations is consistent with a qualitative approach that was adopted for the study, and it is appropriate because it conveys and reflects their experiences (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Furthermore, the use of *verbatim* statements provides an evidential value in the interpretation of data (Thorne, 2020) minimizes exclusion of participants' views, gives them voices, clarifies certain interpretations and supports researchers' interpretation of data authenticating findings of the study (Eldh et al., 2020; Cristancho et al., 2021; Eldh et al., 2020).

Understanding is key in different aspects of life, including teaching, learning, and support. Displaying an in-depth understanding of the importance of school-based support, its effects on daily classroom activities, and the fundamental value of its sustenance is one of the critical aspects in promoting access to equitable education and attainment of educational success (Karkouti et al., 2022). Such an understanding also contributes towards the identification of learning needs,

knowledge gaps, or barriers to learning; the development of any strategy to counteract such learning challenges; and the effective implementation thereof (Karkouti et al., 2022).

The next section will provide a literature review to establish what has been written on this topic and identify potential gaps that this paper can address (Leavy, 2022). This literature review also includes the methods used, the theory underlying the research, the results, and relevant discussions. By reviewing previous studies, this review aims to assess the existing knowledge, strengthen the paper's objectives, and determine the existence of other relevant findings, thus helping to clarify how this article can make new contributions to existing knowledge (Garrod, 2023; Sajeevanie, 2021).

We followed Sajeevanie's (2021) method of literature review, which entails "identifying published and unpublished literature" related to the topic that is easily accessible. Literature searches were conducted in databases such as ProQuest, ResearchGate.net, Centre, Google Scholar, and ERIC Education Resource Information. The literature selection was based on papers that were more relevant to the topic of this article (Pursell & McCrae, 2020). A combination of different keywords was used, for example, 'the role of school-based support,' 'teachers' understanding,' 'the role of school-based support teams,' and 'functionality of school-based support teams.' The searches did not produce studies that are precisely relevant to this topic. A substantial number of studies focus on the teachers' understanding, knowledge, views, and experiences of various aspects of education, such as inclusion, disabled learners, and curriculum. The flow diagram for the literature review is provided below.

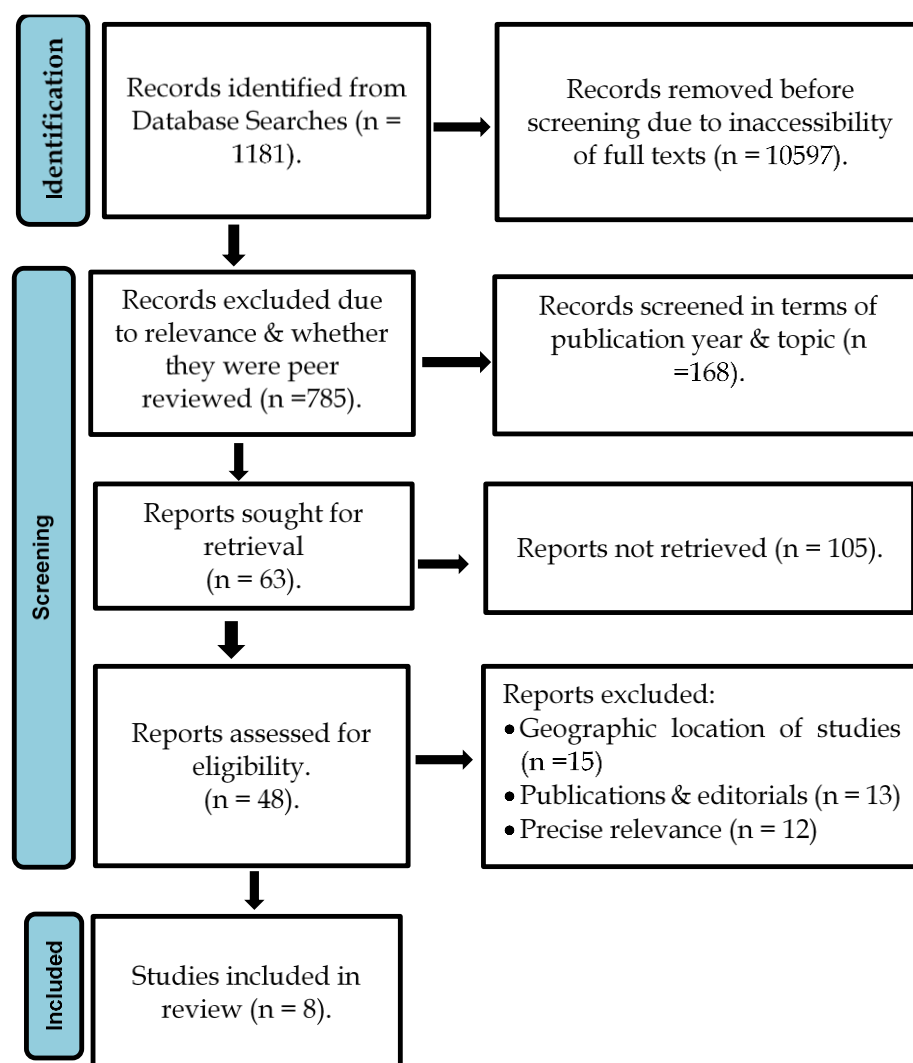


Figure 1. Flow diagram for literature search.

For schools to carry out their responsibilities in the provision of support, they ought to clearly understand the role that school-based support plays in educational improvement. They should be able to apply appropriate measures to alleviate identified challenges. The relevance of the course of action that schools or teachers undertake will depend on their understanding of the role that the support of their teams plays in the lives of their learners and what it entails to establish and maintain functional support teams. Teachers' understanding is cultivated through support (Sepadi & Molapo, 2024) from various educational stakeholders, including parents, fellow teachers, and district-based support teams. Even though teachers demonstrate knowledge and understanding of various phenomena they are entrusted to, there is still room for improvement to ensure that they execute their duties sufficiently (Boice et al., 2024).

Sepadi and Molapo (2024) conducted a study about teachers' understanding of curriculum and assessment policy statement document implementation in South African schools. They established that teachers displayed a deeper understanding of the policy document they are required to implement. However, there was a need for additional support to improve teachers' existing knowledge, skills, and capabilities. Their recommendation suggests that workshops alone are insufficient to capacitate and support these teachers. They further emphasized the importance of strengthening capacity building in improving teachers' knowledge and understanding (Boice et al., 2024).

Although the sample of their study was only 10 teachers selected using the convenience sampling method, they used multiple data collection tools such as individual, semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. The use of different data collection methods provided sufficient and analyzable data (Sepadi & Molapo, 2024). The use of multiple data collection tools enhanced the credibility of their findings. Data obtained through different collection tools corroborated each other, which, according to Stahl and King (2020), enhances the credibility of research.

Another study that we found relevant to the current paper was that of Vigren (2022), who studied teachers' understandings and attitudes towards teaching immigrant students. The essence of the study is the concept of understanding the need of migrant students to learn a second language. Their results show that teachers understand the importance of second language acquisition, and, as such, their understanding led to their dedication towards teaching migrants' students. Although these teachers were found to understand the importance of learning a second language, they were also found to lack knowledge of the significance of second language acquisition. Based on their findings, Vigren (2022) recommended teacher training to enhance teachers' knowledge. The findings and recommendations of Vigren (2022) demonstrate that understanding alone is insufficient; it requires knowing what one ought to understand. Effective implementation and extension of understanding rely on the knowledge that teachers need to accomplish.

Vigren (2022) used an online survey as a data collection tool. Using online surveys has its drawbacks; they lack rigor and triangulation, which could diminish the credibility of results. The use of one tool such as online surveys could provide "erroneous and skewed data" with the potential of producing unreliable results that compromise the integrity of a study (Bonnamy et al., 2025). Online surveys are characterized by ethical challenges due to possible robots' interference in data collection and the possibility of ingenuity of responses. Respondents are usually incentivized to participate in online surveys, which could lead to misunderstanding of questions and the possibility of providing ambiguous or inaccurate responses (Johnson et al., 2024). There is a lack of control over who the actual respondents are, the answers they provide, and the potential for non-response.

Mukagiahana (2024) examined teachers' understanding of gender-responsive pedagogy and its implication in the teaching process. Teachers' knowledge and understanding were assessed after training was provided. The findings reveal that teachers displayed high levels of understanding of gender-responsive pedagogy and were competent in its application. Their

findings imply that the teacher training provided had a positive impact on teachers' understanding and abilities to apply or implement gender-sensitive pedagogy in their classes.

Similar to Vigren (2022) and Mukagiahana (2024) used only web-based surveys in the form of questionnaires as a data collection tool, which, besides being convenient in terms of time and the high number of individuals who could be sampled, is marred by various challenges such as the potential to compromise participants' anonymity and being confidentiality and unreachable by many people due to connectivity-related issues (French et al., 2024).

In examining teachers' understanding of learner identity, Nazari and Tilaki (2021) found discrepancies in teachers' awareness of some aspects of learner identity. Some teachers considered learners' identity inconsequential, while others considered it an important aspect of education. Their findings demonstrate a need to "enhance teachers' awareness" of issues pertaining to learner identity in their schools (Nazari & Tilaki, 2021). The findings demonstrate the importance of training teachers to enhance their knowledge and understanding of various aspects of teaching, learning, and support in schools. This study employed one data collection tool; semi-structured interviews. This implies that data collected from the interviews was not corroborated with data obtained from a second or third tool.

Hlalele (2020) emphasized that an understanding of curriculum differentiation is crucial in the implementation of inclusive education, care, and support. When teachers understand the importance of establishing and maintaining a functional support system in their schools, they position themselves to act cohesively as teams. They endeavor to share their ideas and best practices to capacitate one another. Hlalele (2020) sampled six participants for their study and sourced their data through written and spoken narratives. Their subjects had diverse knowledge on the matter because of the different portfolios they held in schools, which added richness to the data collected from these individuals. This study emphasizes human experiences in relation to knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of school-based support.

Even though studies reviewed in this section were not all directly related to the topic of this article, they provided information regarding 'understanding' in any educational environment. These studies echoed each other by reiterating that teachers' understanding of various aspects of teaching, learning, and support are critical aspects of any classroom environment. Although the credibility and believability of some studies were questioned, their findings have one thing in common: teachers' understanding is crucial in teaching, learning, and support and could and should be enhanced through training programs (Mukagiahana et al., 2024). Understanding promotes teachers' attitudes, willingness, and dedication to their craft.

We chose Wenger's (2018) theory of communities of practice as the basis for this research. A community of practice can be defined as a group of people united by a shared purpose, interest, or concern to form a community (Brinton, Chilton, Echelberger, Koi, & Monh, 2021). In this context, a Community of Practice (CoP) is a group that comes together to share practices and learn together and from each other, driven by a common domain or endeavor and concern (McDonald & Mercieca, 2021). Members of this community define shared goals, agree on a schedule of engagement, and collaborate on various activities, allocating responsibilities according to their respective abilities and competencies (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023).

The emphasis of community of practice theory is collaborative efforts that are characterized by participation and engagements, which perfectly aligns with the provision of school-based support (Luft et al., 2022). Teachers, parents, and community members cannot positively influence educational access and success if they undertake solitary support measures. Partnering, congregating, consulting, and sharing can alleviate educational obstacles that hinder the accessibility of equitable education and success in education.

Various sectors have a crucial role to play in education. For example, the involvement of health practitioners in schools could have a greater impact on effective sexual education. Forming communities with local health facilities and engaging in regular interactions could provide additional support necessary for children's development (Kammer et al., 2021). Another example is that of Berzener and Deneme (2021), who found collaborative efforts instrumental in teaching

and learning. Even though traditional methods of teaching and learning have been proven effective, incorporating other efforts could improve learner performance, particularly for those in rural or disadvantaged communities.

Krasniqi (2021) and Sibanda (2021) indicate that success in education is also influenced by collaboration and participation, which are all advocated by a community of practice theory. When members of a community interact regularly, they create opportunities to mentor or guide each other. They create platforms to share their best practices, which others could employ in their environments to address challenges. Exchanging and sharing ideas and possible resolutions to challenges enhance one's understanding and knowledge base.

The above discussion reiterates the appropriateness of community of practice theory in this paper. Provision of support is more effective when there is a convergence of undertakings by various parties involved. Other undertakings such as attending workshops or training are also essential in improving teachers' knowledge and understanding (Jaye et al., 2020). Education is a societal issue, and its improvement is heavily reliant on collaborative efforts. Regular interactions with other members could assist in adopting the best practices to address similar concerns encountered by community members in diverse classrooms. Exchanging ideas could nurture collaboration and communication, which is important in continuous professional development. All these aspects are vital elements of effective school-based support. The purpose of this paper is to examine participants' responses to determine whether they understand the role that school-based support teams play in education and the importance of establishing and maintaining functional support teams in their schools.

RESEARCH METHOD

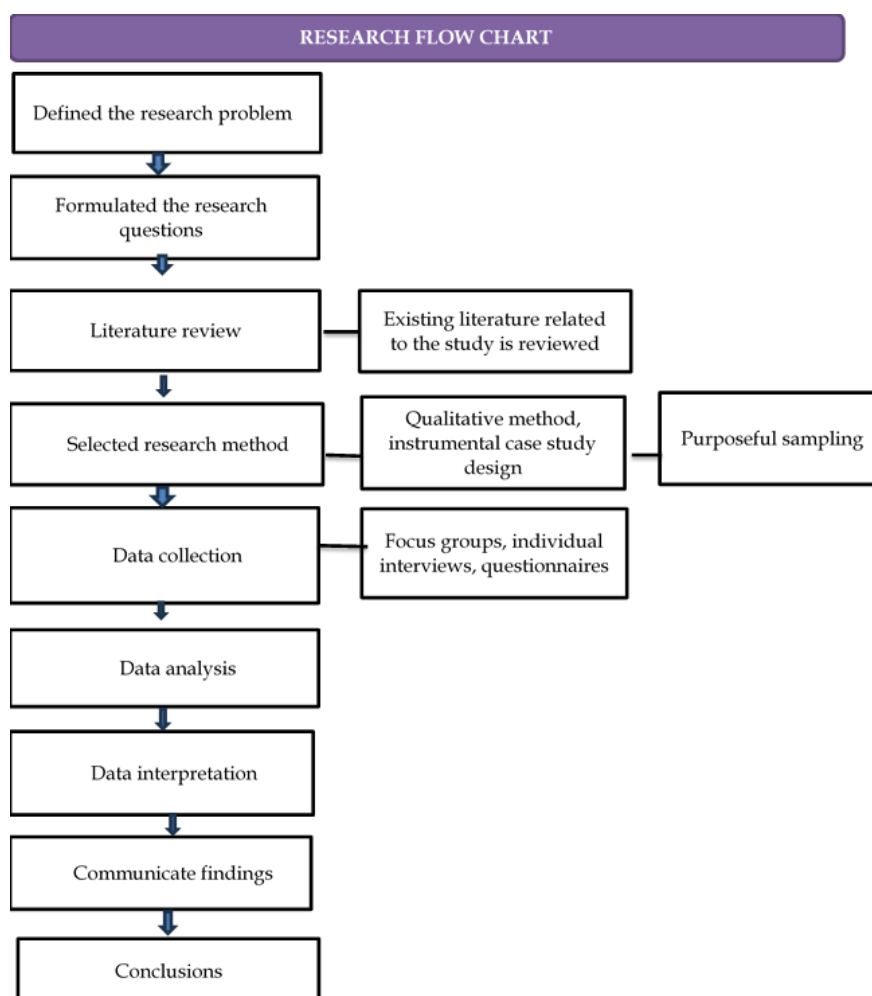


Figure 3. Research flow chart

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and views regarding the function and role of school-based support in teaching and learning. To achieve this, this study adopted a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm that allowed for in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences and gave meaning to participants' voices (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Ugwu & Eze, 2023). The qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed for the seamless exploration of participants' feelings, ideas, and experiences, while an instrumental case study design allowed the researcher to interact directly with the subjects within the context of the phenomenon being studied (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This combination of approaches, paradigms, and designs enabled the use of multiple data collection tools, enhancing the credibility and rigor of the research results. Therefore, the applied methodology aligned with the research aims, objectives, and questions (Leavy, 2022).

Data collection

Data for this study were collected from schools and district offices through a variety of methods, including focus groups, individual interviews, questionnaires, and field notes. Focus group interviews were conducted with teachers who were members of the school-based support team, members of the school governing body, and the principal at the school where the support took place (Turyahikayo, 2021). Individual interviews were conducted with members of the district-based support team at the district office. Additionally, questionnaires were distributed to all participants to complete independently at their own leisure. During these interactions, field notes were also taken to provide rich and contextual descriptions of the surrounding environment. These face-to-face interactions provided the researcher with the opportunity to observe participants' nonverbal cues and ask follow-up or clarifying questions. The use of multiple data collection tools, such as focus groups, individual interviews, and questionnaires, not only enriched the data but also increased the validity and rigor of the study through data triangulation (Stahl & King, 2020). A sample questionnaire and participant responses are presented below, with only the first two pages shown due to the document's length.

APPENDIX : QUESTIONNAIRE



UNISA
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN
SOUTH AFRICA

BACKGROUND

My name is Martha Netshipale and I am a Doctor of Education in Psychology of Education candidate at the University of South Africa (UNISA). The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information on the effect that the improvement of school-based support has on access to education and success of rural learners. Your responses to this questionnaire will only be used for purposes of this study and any information provided shall remain confidential. You are therefore requested to answer questions as freely and honestly as you can. The questionnaire will take approximately 45 minutes of your time.

INSTRUCTIONS

The questionnaire consists of three sections as follows:

SECTION A	BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION
SECTION B	QUESTIONS PROMPTING YOUR KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE, PERCEPTIONS AND VIEWS OF THE EFFECT OF IMPROVING SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT ON ACCESS AND SUCCESS OF RURAL LEARNERS
SECTION C	ANY OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION THAT MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN COVERED ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY, IT IS HIGHLY APPRECIATED!

SECTION A: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Please go through the questions and mark your answer with an (X)

1. Please indicate your gender: Male (X) Female ()

2. Please indicate your position in the school: HoD () Teacher (X) Principal () SBT () DBST () SGB () Other () please specify

3. How long have you been serving in your position? NINE YEARS

4. Please indicate your highest education level by crossing the relevant box: Post graduate degree () Diploma () Post matric certificate () Grade 12 (Matric) Degree (X) other () (please specify)

SECTION B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of school-based support in teaching and learning?

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1. What is the role of school-based support in teaching and learning?

The SBT is responsible for following Key Functions

Co-ordinating all learner, teacher, curriculum and school development support in the school. This includes linking the SBT to other school-based Management Structures and processes, or even integrating them in order to facilitate the co-ordination of activities and avoid duplication; (collectively) identifying school needs and, in particular, barriers to learning at learner, teacher, curriculum and school levels; collectively developing strategies to address these needs and barriers to learning. This should include a major focus on teacher development and parent consultation and support. Drawing in the resources needed from within and outside the school, to address these challenges; and monitoring and evaluating the work of the team within an 'action-reflection' framework.

Furthermore it relates to the following:

Study the report provided by the teacher on barriers identified and support provided/implemented up to that point and the impact of the support;

Access support needed and develop a programme for teacher and parents;

Provide training/support to be implemented in the classroom if necessary;

Evaluate/monitor after the proposed programme has been implemented for a period agreed upon by SBT, teacher and parents. The kind of support to be provided will determine the length of a formal report which should be compiled by SBT;

Identify further School-Based support assets and mobilise; Encourage collegial support/peer support;

Figure 2. A sample of questionnaire (two figures have been placed side by side to save space).

This study involved 35 participants: fifteen teachers (members of the school-based support team), five principals, ten members of the school governing body, and five members of the district-based support team. Participant selection was conducted using criterion purposive sampling, a purposive sampling technique in which researchers establish specific criteria that participants must meet in order to be selected. The purpose of this technique is to ensure that the collected data is relevant, comes from reliable sources, and aligns with the established research questions (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Participants were sampled through a purposeful sampling technique. Purposeful sampling involves the selection of individuals who are most likely to provide relevant and analyzable data for a study (Leavy, 2022). It is a choice of people who will potentially yield information that will enable a researcher to answer his or her research questions. These were easily accessible individuals. The sample was considered information-rich (Subedi, 2021) because selected individuals are all involved in school-based support. Their positions as principals, teachers, governing bodies, and district officials place them at the center of support.

Data analysis

Content was used to analyze research data because it takes participants and their contexts into consideration and allows for categorization of data and identification of similarities and differences in participants' responses. The initial data collection process produced a huge amount of raw data, which required to be organized and reduced for manageability purposes (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Researchers also needed to "discover meaning in textual data" (Kleinheksel et al., 2020) for informed interpretation of participants' views. Participants' responses were presented *verbatim*, which supported researchers' interpretations (Thorne, 2020).

Trustworthiness of this paper is displayed by using direct quotations of participants' responses. Researchers' interpretations are supported by participants' quotes. Even though this study relied heavily on researchers' interpretations, the methods used to conduct the study and triangulate data enhance its trustworthiness (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). The results are derived from participants' lived experience, and there is no interference of researchers' personal biases.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The study explored teachers' understanding of the role of school-based support teams in teaching and learning and the necessity of maintaining functional support teams. The aspects explored in this study are teachers' understanding of the role and function of school-based support teams, the importance of establishing and maintaining functional teams, stakeholder involvement in the implementation of support, the availability and effectiveness of support structures in schools, implementation barriers such as time constraints and gaps between understanding and practice, and the application of the principles of communities of practice in supporting teacher professional development and educational success. Brown and Buthelezi (2020) have shown that teachers' understanding of various concepts and undertakings influences their perceptions and willingness to support educational initiatives. Lack of understanding could contribute to negative attitudes towards certain support endeavors. It is imperative that the current study explore whether teachers are knowledgeable about what they are expected to do, in this case, provision of support towards their learners. Participants' direct quotations were used in this paper to substantiate their understanding of the role and functionality of school-based support teams, demonstrate the authenticity of data in terms of reflecting and capturing detailed participants' views (Eldh et al., 2020), and "enhance accuracy of information reported" (Hill et al., 2022). The table below contains pseudonyms that were used to refer to participants to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 1. Key pseudonyms.

Pseudonyms	Description
FGA 1	Focus Group Participants 1-6 from School A
FGB 1	Focus Group Participants 1-6 from School B
FGC 1	Focus Group Participants 1-6 from School C
FGD 1	Focus Group Participants 1-6 from School D
FGE 1	Focus Group Participants 1-6 from School E
DP 1-5	District Participants 1-5
AT 1	Teacher 1 from School A
BT 1	Teacher 1 from School B
CT 1	Teacher 1 from School C
DT 1	Teacher 1 from School D
ET 1	Teacher 1 from School E
FN A-E	Field Notes for School A-E
QSA-E	Questionnaire for School A-E
QDP 1-5	Questionnaire for District Participant 1-5
Total: 35	

Understanding one's role in any environment is crucial in fostering positive attitudes towards one's responsibilities. Individuals who participated in the study understood the role of school-based support and its impact on educational access and success. This is evident in some of the responses below:

"To support the learners with socio-economic challenges that is a barrier to academic performance" (questionnaire, school CT1).

"School-based support can help all learners to achieve desired academic results through identification of barriers and trying by all means to solve or minimise them" (questionnaire, school BT1).

Teachers' approach to their roles of support initiatives is largely influenced by their understanding (Brown & Buthelezi, 2020). A lack of understanding could cause reluctance to venture into unknown or unfamiliar territory with regard to support services. Consequently, teaching and learning could be negatively impacted. Participants from all participating schools and the district office demonstrated through their responses that they had a clear understanding of what school-based support is, its role in improving teaching and learning, and the significance of establishing and maintaining functional support teams.

"School-based support is meant for supporting learners with their psychological, not only limited to needs, which the school would have identified from the learner. It is mainly for attending to issues or challenges that disturb or make it difficult for the learner to learn effectively at schools. It is also about amending, where necessary, the curriculum to suit the special individual needs of the learners you are working with. It works to ensure that there are no learners who are disadvantaged because of their different socio-economic challenges that not only affect the learner, but the community at large" (questionnaire, school DT1).

Understanding influences the implementation process of any classroom activity (Mogashoe, 2022), and as such, it was of paramount importance to ascertain participants' knowledge of the role of school-based support in education. Similarly, the extension of knowledge to practice is key. The goal was also to determine participants' involvement in providing school-based support. One way of making this determination was to establish whether participating schools have support structures in place and their functionality thereof. Results show that even though all participants understood the role of school-based support in teaching and learning, not all the schools established and maintained functional school-based support teams. Results revealed that two schools did not have functional support teams in place, and they provided unstructured and uncoordinated support services. This is similar to research conducted by White (2023), which shows that interventions aimed at achieving complex school achievements, such as the formation of functional support teams, can also have a positive impact on psychosocial disorders, so that

the lack of structure and coordination in support services in the two schools allows for the non-academic conditions of students to be requested. Although teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of the role of school-based support teams and the importance of functional support teams, their inability to establish and sustain these teams could lead to inconsistent support services, which is detrimental in learners' ability to attain access and success to education (Sepadi & Molapo, 2024). Responses below substantiate the discussion above.

"Our school recently changed SBST structure because the old one was not inclusive; it did not include all the necessary stakeholders. The new team is not yet 100% functional. However, the structure is composed of teachers, parents and members of school governing bodies. We have a plan in place to ensure that the new school-based support team is fully functional and inclusive" (FGA 1).

"The school-based support in our school is partially functional due to time constraints. We do not have enough time to teach and still perform school-based support team functions" (FGB 3).

"We do have a plan in place to ensure that it functions soon. Teachers do not have time to attend to certain matters; all they can do with the time they have is to teach to ensure that they finish the syllabus" (FGB 1).

The above statements are evidence that some schools were unable to establish and maintain functional support teams. Dysfunctionality of school-based support teams is an indication of education that is ineffectively supported. Each teacher provides support as and when the need arises, which leads to chaotic-like support services. Teachers in such schools do not enjoy possible growth that comes with guidance, collaboration, and sharing of ideas that could be gained through engaging with others, as Hamamoto (2023) asserts that engaging in communities such as school-based support teams could enhance professional development.

There were other schools, however, that were found to have functional school-based support teams in place. These schools enjoyed the benefits of belonging to a community, which allowed them to learn from each other and uplift their schools' support functions.

"Our school-based support team is functioning in this school. The team meet regularly during scheduled meetings on a quarterly basis and is urgent whenever necessary or forced by events. We try all in our powers to support these learners" (FBC 3).

"We have a school-based support team that functions very well in supporting teaching and learning. It plays a major role in teaching and learning; it is where we identify socio-economic factors, and barriers to learning in its entirety. Learners might not learn because of certain factors. It assists in identifying what might have been missed in earlier grades" (FBE 6).

These responses demonstrate that schools from the same district conduct their support functions differently. Some schools were able to maximize their efforts to establish and sustain functional support teams, whereas others did not. Time constraints were one of the challenges cited by schools without support teams in place. Scholars such as Kostma (2022) suggest that there is a link between time constraints and a decline in performance or failure in goal attainment (Kostma, 2022).

Some participants found it difficult and time-consuming to provide support in overcrowded classrooms. Even though they understood the importance of support in education, time constrained their efforts to balance curriculum implementation and support activities.

"The problem is that it takes time in overcrowded classes like theirs. Some teachers are even too lazy to take all the steps, and as a result, they will ignore the problem or challenge that the learner is facing. The main cause of this laziness comes from the number of steps that SIAS policy requires teachers to follow, from identifying problems to addressing them. Some teachers find it time-consuming to follow all these steps, which means that some learners will still come to school with challenges that will not be attended to" (FGA 1).

"Sometimes teachers are not willing to go through the referral processes because it is long and time consuming..... A teacher who identifies a learning barrier or problem is the one who is supposed to see to it that all the steps are followed through. Some teachers are not prepared or willing to do that because it takes their time to finish their syllabus. This means that the learning

barriers experienced by these learners will not be addressed, and no referrals will be made at all. These learners will be stuck at the school where they will not be getting the necessary support they need" (FGA 5).

Participants' responses above stand in contrast to the tenets of the community of practice theory, which advocates for people who share interests and common objectives to converge to address mutual concerns and explore solutions to their challenges. The above descriptions demonstrate the loss of opportunities to gain knowledge and new ways of doing things (Irving et al., 2020). Consequently, opportunities to explore diverse supports are lost. Barriers to learning will go unchecked, which negatively impacts access and success in education. Struggling schools miss opportunities to learn from others or gain resources that might assist their support endeavors.

The study was able to determine teachers' and other participants' understanding of the role and functionality of school-based support despite the gap between understanding and application or implementation.

"...the school-based support team must be well balanced and meet regularly and provide feedback and support regarding each case. Encourage timeous support and referral to the district-based support team if necessary" (questionnaire, DP 5).

Results demonstrated that teachers understand the role of school-based support and the importance of maintaining functional teams in their schools. Regardless of their understanding, they are impeded from establishing support teams and, in some cases, sustaining the functionality of established teams. All these go against the prescripts of the policy on screening, identification, assessment, and support (SIAS), which mandates the establishment and sustenance of functional support teams in schools (Department of Basic Education, 2014).

DISCUSSION

The data shows that teachers' understanding of the role and function of school-based support teams is crucial in creating an inclusive and effective learning environment. Research participant responses indicated that most teachers recognized the importance of school-based support in addressing learning barriers, particularly those caused by socioeconomic and psychological factors. They also understood that this support should not only focus on the curriculum but also tailor interventions to individual student needs, including through curriculum modifications when necessary. This is reinforced by the findings of a qualitative study by Agulhas (2021) in two primary schools in the Cape Metropole that although School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) claimed to have carried out their roles in accordance with Education White Paper 6 (EWP 6) policies and understood inclusive education, their implementation still faced various challenges such as limited teacher knowledge, lack of specialist support, high workload, minimal parental involvement, and weak support from District-Based Support Teams, all of which indicate that the success of inclusive education is highly dependent on collaboration and concrete support at the school and community levels.

However, despite a good conceptual understanding, the research findings revealed a significant gap between this understanding and actual implementation in the field. The lack of formation or dysfunction of support teams in the two schools studied indicated that without a clear structure and effective coordination, support services tended to be inconsistent and less impactful. Time constraints and teachers' workloads were key barriers, leading them to focus more on synchronization than on implementing a comprehensive support role. This was exacerbated by the lack of collaboration that should exist through support teams, thus hindering opportunities for professional development through communities of practice, as emphasized by Hamamoto (2023). Thus, even though teachers understand the importance of school-based support, failure to form and maintain functional teams becomes a critical point that directly impacts the success of students, both in terms of academics and psychosocial well-being.

The data further revealed the dynamics of success and barriers to implementing school-based support teams across multiple schools within the same district. Schools that successfully established functional support teams demonstrated that the presence of an active, collaborative,

and consistently scheduled team structure significantly assisted in identifying learning barriers and providing timely interventions. This practice reflects the practical application of the principles of communities of practice, where teachers and other stakeholders work collectively to improve teaching and learning. In contrast, schools that failed to establish or maintain functional support teams revealed serious challenges rooted in time constraints, high workloads, and complex administrative procedures as stipulated by the SIAS policy. The findings of a qualitative study by Agulhas (2021) in two primary schools in the Cape Metropole reinforce this, revealing that although School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) claimed to fulfill their roles according to Education White Paper 6 (EWP 6) policies and understood inclusive education, they still faced challenges such as limited teacher knowledge, lack of specialist support, high workloads, minimal parental involvement, and weak support from District-Based Support Teams, highlighting that the success of inclusive education heavily depends on effective collaboration and strong support at both school and community levels. Although teachers in these schools understood the role and importance of school-based support, they were hampered by unsupportive operational conditions, resulting in unstructured, poorly targeted, and often delayed support services. This demonstrates a critical gap between conceptual understanding and practical implementation, ultimately hindering students' access to support services that should contribute to their educational success. This mismatch also reflects a lack of adherence to national policy, which emphasizes the importance of establishing functional support teams as part of inclusive education efforts. Thus, even if teachers have high levels of understanding, without adequate systemic and operational support, the effectiveness of school-based support programs remains suboptimal.

Previous studies, such as the one conducted by Sepadi and Molapo (2024), emphasized the importance of teachers' understanding in the implementation of curriculum policies. Even though theirs focused on teachers' understanding of the policy documents, their findings resonate with the current study. These authors highlighted that teachers' understanding of curriculum policy statement documents assists them in curriculum delivery and provision of additional support in teaching and learning environments. These assertions are also embodied in the current study, which sought to explore whether teachers understand the expectations when it comes to engaging in school-based support activities.

Participants of the current study were from mainstream schools that also accommodated disabled learners due to shortages of special schools in the area. There were obvious signs of inadequate resources, which were exacerbated by socio-economic conditions. Allocation of adequate resources will enhance the provision of support and implementation of inclusive education programs. Since these schools also accommodate learners with barriers to learning, they should also be capacitated with relevant training to improve their capabilities, which is vital in translating their knowledge and understanding of the role of school-based support into practice. Another study that explored teachers' understanding of the implementation of curriculum policy documents concurs that training will not only enhance their knowledge and understanding but also allow them to adapt to change and provide support informed by following school-based support policies and regulations (Sepadi & Molapo, 2024).

Teachers' inability to extend their knowledge into practice demonstrates that they missed opportunities to benefit from each other and growth and development through the establishment of communities. Engaging in regular interaction with others with similar interests and challenges could expand practical skills and expertise to resolve certain challenges encountered in educational spheres. In exploring South African foundation phase teachers' understanding, skills, and training needs in the teaching of phonological awareness, it was established that teachers were inadequately knowledgeable about the content, which hindered the effective teaching process (Shaffler et al., 2021). Inadequate knowledge was attributed to insufficient training and knowledge. What sets these findings apart from other scholars, including the current paper, is that teachers were found lacking in knowledge.

Other scholars found that teachers struggle with the provision of effective implementation of inclusive education in their schools (Mpanza & Govender, 2022). They assert that teachers fail to understand and implement inclusive education and attribute this to lack of resources and support from district-based support teams. Similarly, they suggest that capacity building should be intensified to capacitate teachers in matters of inclusivity and implementation of such programs. Even though findings of their study suggest that teachers lack knowledge and understanding, they share similar views with studies discussed above Shaffler (2021) and Sepadi with Molapo (2024), including the current paper, that teachers need to be supported or capacitated to improve their understanding and ability to implement support programs.

In addition, Mpanza and Govender (2022) found that teachers do not fully understand their roles when it comes to implementing inclusive education and the importance of ensuring the functionality of their support teams. This is exacerbated by a lack of time to devote to supporting learners with additional needs who, for instance, require individual attention. Similarly, the current study found that teachers cited time constraints as one of the challenges that hinders their ability to support their learners and implement support programs effectively.

To address time constraints, capacitating schools with additional human resources would alleviate the pressures. One of the initiatives that the Department of Basic Education undertook to curb youth unemployment was the teaching assistant program (Department of Basic Education, 2020). These youths were provided with basic training in curriculum, reading, and psychosocial support, which assisted teachers with classroom support, thus addressing time-constraint challenges. If this program is continued, it could be beneficial in alleviating pressures experienced by teachers. Funding for this program can be sourced through the expropriation of funds from non-essential activities such as free housing and amenities for ministers.

Implications for Theory

The study was underpinned by Wenger's community of practice theory, which promotes engagement and interaction of people who share common goals, interests, and concerns (Brinton, Chilmonik, et al., 2021). Teachers who understand the importance of school-based support and the need for functionality of their teams will share their best practices with those who are less inclined. Transference of ideas, knowledge, and understanding could occur through observation of others' behavior or actions during regular activities (Fish et al., 2022). Another principle of the communities of practice theory is collaboration, which could also promote sharing ideas and learning from each other (Yildirim et al., 2020). Although teachers are responsible for different subjects, their interests in promoting inclusive and equitable education are similar. Through creating communities of practice, like school-based support teams, they can facilitate collaboration, engage with each other, learn from one another, improve each other's knowledge and understanding and support teaching and learning in their schools (Wenger et al., 2023).

Implications for Research

There is a sizeable amount of research on school-based support; however, there is a need for further studies that focus on teachers' understanding of this phenomenon. Further studies are necessary to draw attention to the role that understanding intricacies of school-based support plays in teaching and learning. Additional research is necessary to improve existing information and knowledge and clarify emerging trends that could enrich teaching and learning (Sharma, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Teachers' understanding is key in enhancing their ability to plan their lessons, promote inclusion in their classes, and create a positive classroom environment conducive to effective teaching and learning (Mukagiahana et al., 2024). This article examined teachers' understanding of the significance of operational school-based support teams in teaching and learning. It is evident that teachers understand the role played by support teams and how crucial it is to ensure that such

teams are operationalized. Nevertheless, teachers are unable to transfer their skills, knowledge, and understanding into practice due to various hindrances such as time constraints and inadequate support from other educational stakeholders. Teachers view curriculum implementation as their core function, which should precede the undertaking of other programs or activities. Based on this view, teachers devote most of their time to teaching and learning, minimizing the importance of support in the process. It is admirable that teachers prioritize the actual teaching and learning; however, it should be equally important to create environments that are conducive to the attainment of positive educational outcomes. This could be attained through the operations of support teams. Capacitating teachers is also fundamental, and it will assist them in delving deeper into implementing support initiatives.

This study was limited and only focused on rural secondary schools, which necessitates further research with a broader scope. Findings of this study are limited to the environment under which it was conducted and cannot be generalized to other areas. There should also be comparison studies that focus on both rural and urban schools simultaneously to assess different levels of knowledge and how existing gaps could be bridged. Based on these findings, it is recommended that teacher capacity-building training be focused on strengthening the understanding and implementation of school-based support, accompanied by policies that encourage cross-stakeholder collaboration, and that studies be expanded to various geographic contexts to produce more representative and applicable recommendations.

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