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**Incomplete
resourcing of
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Implications for the
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Incomplete resourcing of inclusive education in South Africa: Implications for the reading crisis

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ABSTRACT:

In 2021, teachers instructing the average Grade 4 student in South Africa faced reading abilities spanning almost four grade levels in one classroom (Böhmer & Wills, 2023). In this context, curriculum or instruction differentiation is a necessary classroom strategy. The South African curriculum and inclusive education policies recognise learner diversity and envisage class teachers as responsible for curriculum differentiation supported by district and circuit experts. As discussed in this paper, however, large gaps exist between expressed policy on curriculum differentiation and learner support and the actual realities in the system. Combining findings from existing empirical studies with new analysis of administrative data, we consider whether teachers have received sufficient training in curriculum differentiation and whether they receive the support they need as envisaged in the 2014 Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support Policy. The evidence is clear that curriculum differentiation is not a common practice in foundation phase classrooms. Teachers are insufficiently trained in this area. Furthermore, administrative data reveals a dearth of learning support specialists in districts and circuits. Delays in finalising inclusive education policies, a human resources plan and a funding strategy for inclusive education are likely contributing to the current vacuum in learner support. Whereas inclusive education policy in the area of curriculum differentiation should be an enabler for identifying and supporting children at significant risk of not learning to read, incomplete resourcing for these policies has stunted the effectiveness of inclusive education policy as tool in addressing the reading crisis in South Africa

Key words: inclusive education, special education, remedial education, remediation, South Africa, early grade reading, curriculum differentiation.

JEL: I21, I24, H52

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite large gains in learning from 2006 to 2016 (Gustafsson, 2020), it is well documented that South Africa faced a reading crisis even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016, 78% of South African Grade 4s did not meet the low international benchmark in the Progress in International Literacy and Reading Study (PIRLS), a signal that they were unable to read for meaning in their home language (Howie et al., 2017). Unfortunately, the reading crisis was further exacerbated due to COVID-19 disruptions to schooling. The percentage of Grade 4 learners unable to meet the low PIRLS international benchmark increased from 78% in PIRLS 2016 to 81% in PIRLS 2021 (Department of Basic Education & Centre for Evaluation and Assessment, 2023). The percentage unable to meet a very low PIRLS score of 200 points doubled from 2016 to 2021 (from 13.4 to 26.5%). A closer examination of the reading skills of those scoring less than 200 PIRLS points, indicates that they typically did not attempt a single question, implying very underdeveloped decoding, fluency and writing skills (Böhmer & Wills, 2023). These very discouraging results are confirmed in results from Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) studies in three provinces, in which large COVID learning losses were observed (Ardington et al., 2021; Wills & van der Berg, 2024) and significant proportions of children in no-fee schools failed to master the most basic decoding and fluency skills in the first three grades (Wills et al., 2022). Large proportions of children also enter school with learning deficits reflected in under-developed oral language and numeracy skills (Giese et al., 2022)

All this evidence points to a situation where many early grade learners are struggling with foundational reading and writing skills and need some form of remediation (Böhmer & Wills, 2023) or additional learning support.

Heterogeneity in learner proficiencies within classrooms has also increased significantly due to pandemic disruptions to learning (Böhmer & Wills, 2023). Analysis of South Africa's PIRLS 2016 data reveals that before COVID-19, the average difference in reading scores between a student at the 10th percentile and a student at the 90th percentile within a school was already almost 200 PIRLS points, equivalent to 3 and half years of learning. This gap widened to 221 points or about 3 years and 10 months of learning in 2021 (Böhmer & Wills, 2023). As a result, the average Grade 4 teacher in 2021 instructed students with abilities spanning almost four grade levels.

Curriculum differentiation (or instruction differentiation) is a key strategy teachers should use when faced with a diverse group of learners in one classroom (Department of Basic Education, 2014; Leballo et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Curriculum differentiation refers to the process of modifying, adapting, extending and varying teaching methods and strategies, assessment strategies and the content of the curriculum so that students with different levels of functioning can learn effectively (Department of Basic Education, 2014). It is a central concept in inclusive education. Teachers can differentiate four elements in the classroom: curriculum content (what is taught, at what level of difficulty), process (which learning activities are chosen, which methods of instruction), assessment tools and

the learning environment (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Differentiation de-emphasises whole-group instruction and promotes the setting of tasks for learners of different levels of readiness. (Tomlinson et al., 2003). The national Department of Basic Education's Learner Recovery Programme guidelines of 2023 also emphasised the need for differentiation, although it devolved responsibility for its implementation to senior management in individual schools (Hoadley, 2023).

South Africa has also developed a set of inclusive education policies that recognise learner diversity and promote curriculum differentiation. Current education policy categorises vulnerable learners into three groups: learners with low-level, moderate-level and high-level additional support needs (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Most learners who are having difficulty learning to read will fall into the category of learners with low-level additional needs, while some may have specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia and have moderate- or high-level support needs. Policy envisions that learners with low-level additional support needs should be accommodated in ordinary schools where their learning needs should be met through curriculum differentiation, low-frequency access to specialist personnel support and through equipping teachers through training with new teaching approaches (Department of Basic Education, 2014, 2018a; National Department of Education, 2001). That is, class teachers are responsible for curriculum differentiation but should receive support to implement it (Department of Basic Education, 2014).

Unfortunately, however, there are large gaps between expressed policy on curriculum differentiation and learner support and then current realities. This paper aims to shed light on these gaps by reviewing existing empirical studies, tracing policy developments and through new analysis of administrative data. We consider whether teachers have received sufficient training in curriculum differentiation and whether they receive the support they need as envisaged in a framework of learning support in the 2014 Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support Policy and the proposed (draft) National Guidelines for Resourcing an Inclusive Education System (2018). We evaluate capacity for specialist learning support in the public education system through new analysis of large-scale administrative data. In lieu of the incomplete implementation of inclusive education policies identified here, we consider the implications of this for the capacity of class teachers to respond to the current learning crisis through curriculum differentiation. While we acknowledge that the rigidity and appropriateness of the primary school curriculum must also be addressed, curriculum analysis falls beyond the scope of this paper.

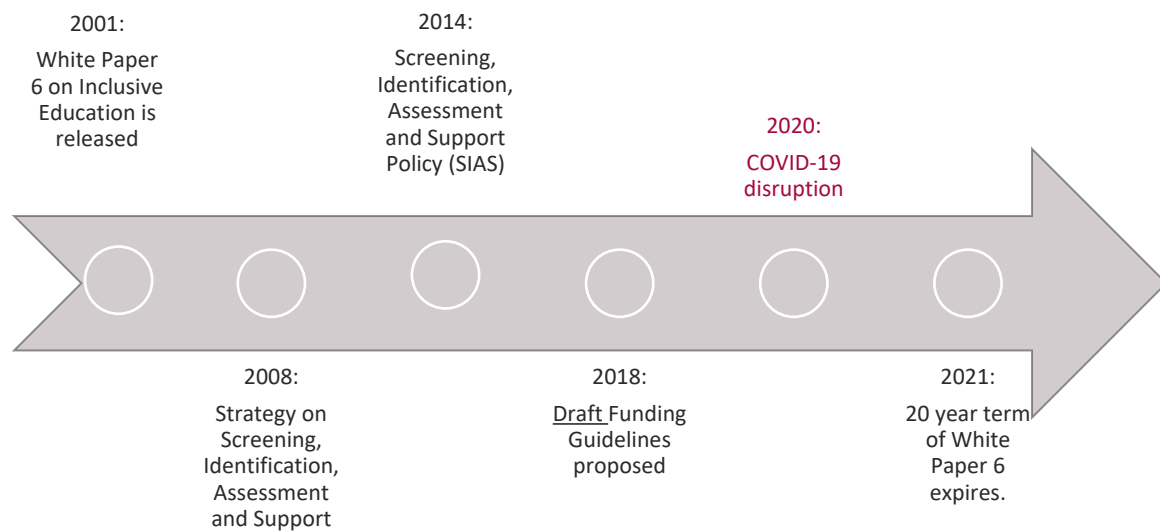
2 BACKGROUND: THE POLICY SHIFT TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Up until the early 2000s, support services for learners with learning difficulties were provided in special schools that were located mainly in affluent suburbs and were adequate to serve the white population. Specialist services were only available to learners who were enrolled in these special schools. Remedial teaching (defined as professional support offered to learners with a learning difficulty, either on an individual basis or in a small group) was a key component of these specialist services. Remedial teaching was typically implemented with a "pull-out" model, where learners are withdrawn from their regular class periodically for one-on-one or small-group specialist support. The pull-out remedial model has been criticised as stigmatising and disruptive but is still used in some countries (Rose, 2020). The focus of remedial teaching was to remedy the *individual child's* learning problem.

Under the inclusive education approach, support needs are seen to exist on a continuum: from low-level through to high-level. Different parts of the schooling system were to be equipped to respond to these different levels of need. White Paper 6 (2001) provided a framework for an inclusive education system where special schools would be reserved for learners with high-level support needs for whom attempts at reasonable accommodation in ordinary schools had failed, rather than being the first port of call for learners experiencing learning difficulty. The White Paper laid out a broad approach to reorganising available support services to make them available in all schools (National Department of Education, 2001). The inclusive approach was further developed in specific policies as shown in Figure 1. For learners with low-level additional support needs, the Screening, Identification, Assessment & Support Policy is the most relevant. This policy was first launched as a strategy in 2008 and modified and rewritten as an education policy in 2014. Training on this policy has been rolled out.

The new policies and guidelines reflected in Figure 1 emphasise how, in ordinary schools, the class teacher (rather than a remedial teacher) should become the main provider of support for learners with learning difficulties. It is envisaged that class teachers would receive support from various sources to fulfil this expanded role. Where needed, a school-based support team (SBST) should assist the class teacher with assessing current teaching and learning strategies, designing new ones and delivering interventions. By 2017, two thirds (67%) of South African schools reported having SBSTs in place (Deghaye, 2021). SBSTs should be made up of existing staff and headed by a SBST coordinator (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Many high-income countries, several middle-income countries (Botswana, Namibia) and some low-income countries (Zanzibar, Kiribati) have created similar positions for coordinators in schools (Republic of Namibia Ministry of Education, 2014; Rose, 2020; UNESCO, 2020b).

Figure 1: Key policy changes impacting learners with low-level additional support needs, 2001 to 2024



Where needed, the SBST may call on the district-based support team (DBST) or itinerant specialist support staff (based at the district and circuit) who would assist with planning, guiding, and monitoring the support provided to learners (Department of Basic Education, 2014). In total, 65% of SBSTs reported receiving assistance from DBSTs in 2017 (Deghaye, 2023).

There are four programmes of learning support within the SIAS Policy: 1) provision of specialist services by specialised staff; 2) curriculum differentiation; 3) provision of specialised Learning and Teaching Support Material and assistive technology and 4) training of teachers, school management teams and staff (Department of Basic Education, 2014). The aim of these support programmes is to remove barriers to learning in all schools. All four of these programmes should be present in all ordinary schools, on a low-intensity, low-frequency basis. That is, ordinary schools should be able to provide curriculum differentiation for learners with low-level additional support needs and should have low-frequency access to assistive technology and specialised LTSM from resource centres, low-frequency access to specialist personnel support (such as learning support teachers) and once-off or annual training for teachers (Department of Basic Education, 2014, 2018a; National Department of Education, 2001).

Very often, learning support involves collaboration between regular classroom teachers and teachers with specialised training (Lehtomaki et al., 2020). Specialist teachers will advise class teachers on curriculum differentiation strategies and instruct class teachers on different teaching methods which are more effective for particular learners. In-class support from a specialist teacher is preferred to the older model of pull-out remediation.

Prior to the release of the 2014 SIAS Policy, inclusive education policies in South Africa were criticised as incoherent (Du Plessis, 2013). Implementation of White Paper 6 has been slow (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Watermeyer et al., 2016) and uneven between provinces. At times, sets of guidelines are vague. For example, the guidelines on curriculum differentiation within the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education, 2011) are very short and provide very few practical examples of how to implement differentiation. A funding strategy has not yet been developed to support full implementation of White Paper 6 or the SIAS Policy (Deghaye, 2023; Equal Education Law Centre, 2022).

3 THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The review and analysis in this study is guided by the conceptualisation of learner support in the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) Policy of 2014. The SIAS policy is preferred over the White Paper 6 (which is currently being reviewed) as the SIAS is more up-to-date and detailed. In this study, the SIAS policy document, together with the proposed (draft) National Guidelines for Resourcing an Inclusive Education System (2018), will be used as the framework for evaluating available support for class teachers.

Specifically, this study focuses on the provision of two of the four programmes of support in ordinary schools in relation to learners with low-level additional support needs, as outlined above from the 2014 SIAS policy. The two programmes include the provision of specialist services by specialised staff (on a low-frequency basis) and curriculum differentiation.

4 METHODOLOGY

This study consists of three interrelated parts. First, we review existing evidence to determine the extent to which curriculum differentiation is used within schools, and the extent to which teachers are prepared or trained in curriculum differentiation. Then a policy review traces intentions and envisaged support for schools in the provision of specialist support services. Finally, a retrospective quantitative analysis of two secondary datasets is used to compare policy intentions against the current realities of resourcing for learner (and teacher) support in schools.

4.1 Policy review

Two policy documents were analysed to determine the proposed allocation of specialist learning support staff: the SIAS Policy (2014), and the (draft) National Guidelines for Resourcing an Inclusive Education System (known from now on as the 2018 funding guidelines). A further two documents were analysed to determine the actual allocation of specialist learning support staff within education department regulations: the District

Staffing Norms (2018) and the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) (2022). The PAM are the regulations that set out the terms of employment for all public-sector school- and district-based educators in South Africa.

4.2 Data analysis

Once roles are allocated in the PAM and in sets of norms and standards, posts still need to be created, advertised and filled. To determine to what extent this process has been fully completed, a descriptive quantitative analysis of education department payroll data was conducted to identify the actual number of learning support and remedial teachers, educational psychologists and psychometrists, learning support agents and monitors employed in the provincial and national departments of education. In this way, we compared the proposed specialist roles in SIAS and the draft funding guidelines with the actual number of employees working in these roles to determine how many of the promised support resources for class teachers are currently available. As a case study, we compared the total number of educational psychologists currently employed at district office level with the total number needed to fulfil policy intentions (as expressed in SIAS and in the draft funding guidelines) to estimate the total unmet need for educational psychologists.

We also searched the payroll data (at district office level) for specific roles that are mentioned in the district norms. In this way we estimated how many of the roles in district norms had been filled in 2019 and which roles have just not been created at all. As a detailed case study, we compared the total number of educational psychologists currently employed at district-office level with the total number needed to meet interim district norms.

This analysis was conducted on an anonymised provincial payroll dataset created by DBE from annual downloads from the Personal and Salary System (PERSAL) in November each year from 2012 to 2021.¹ The focus of the analysis was on 2019 payroll data as the 2020 and 2021 data was influenced by the COVID-19 disruption and may not be typical of the period.

Finally, findings from the School Monitoring Survey 2017/18 on the support provided to schools from specialists in district offices are discussed. The survey is a comprehensive, nationally representative school survey with a planned sample of 1000 primary and 1000 secondary schools. The sample, structure, content and full results of the School Monitoring Survey 2017/18 are described elsewhere (Deghaye, 2021) and will not be discussed in detail here.

Permission was obtained from the Department of Basic Education to analyse the School Monitoring Survey 2017/18 and public sector payroll data. Permission to use public sector payroll data for the education sector was obtained from the Department of Basic

¹ The employment data table was merged with other data tables following technical guidelines provided by the Department of Basic Education (Gustafsson, 2022).

Education (DBE) for work on the Teacher Demographic Dividend Project (SU study ECO-2022-25126). Approval to conduct analysis of the school survey data was provided by Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee: Humanities (study number 1533). All data was anonymised so that neither individuals nor schools are identifiable in the data. Anonymisation of the payroll data is described fully by Gustafsson (2022).

5 LITERATURE REVIEW: USE OF AND EXPERTISE IN CURRICULUM DIFFERENTIATION WITHIN SCHOOLS

To what extent are class teachers ready (and trained) to implement curriculum differentiation in South African public schools? By extension, how reliant are they on external specialist support to implement curriculum differentiation strategies in their classrooms? Drawing on existing evidence, we aim to answer these two questions in this section.

The importance of support for class teachers from special needs and learning support educators is recognised in several low- and middle-income contexts (Rose, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a). Many countries² have developed (or proposed) itinerant models where remedial or learning support teachers support learners in more than one school (UNESCO, 2020c). South Africa's proposed model of itinerant learning support, which will be outlined in more detail later, is aligned with these other systems.

5.1 Gaps in expertise for curriculum differentiation within schools

Available evidence, from the nationally representative School Monitoring Survey 2017/18, indicates significant gaps in expertise for curriculum differentiation and learner support in schools (Deghaye, 2021). Almost 4 of every 10 public primary schools and more than 5 of every 10 secondary schools do not have a teacher trained in curriculum differentiation.³ This level of training coverage is insufficient for the implementation of curriculum differentiation in all schools, let alone every classroom.

Although school-based support team (SBST) coordinators are more likely to have some training in curriculum differentiation than other teachers, the availability of this expertise is by no means universal across the public school system. Of SBST coordinators in the combined primary and secondary School Monitoring Survey sample, only 64% had received some training in curriculum differentiation and 60% had a qualification in

² For example, in Kenya, Tanzania, and Mexico, itinerant specialist teachers work in more than one school, providing advice on classroom practice and assisting class teachers to create individual education plans for specific learners (Rose, 2020).

³ The survey shows that 61% of primary schools and 46% of secondary schools had at least one teacher with some training in curriculum differentiation (Deghaye, 2021).

remedial or special education in 2017. As shown in Table 1, 25% of all SBST Coordinators had attended *only* an accredited short course in remedial or special education. A short course is unlikely to be sufficient to equip a coordinator to drive the implementation of remediation and curriculum differentiation in a school without substantial external support.

Table 1: Formal qualifications among school-based support team coordinators in 2017

Type of training in remedial or special education	% of SBST Coordinators
Degree/diploma/post-graduate diploma	37
Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE)	23
Accredited short course	32
Short course only	25
Short course & degree/diploma	15
Short course & ACE	12
No formal qualification in remedial/special education	40

Source: Monitoring Survey 2017/18. School weighted data (all schools). Authors' own calculations.

5.2 Limited curriculum differentiation in foundation phase classrooms

Classroom observation studies reveal that typically there is little differentiation in foundation phase classrooms and whole-class teaching is the norm (Hoadley & Boyd, 2022). This is attributed to a combination of inadequate training or teacher preparation and school conditions that are not conducive to differentiated instruction.

In 2013, a large study of 113 multigrade rural classrooms found evidence of effective differentiation in only 11% of those classrooms. Most teachers made no attempt to provide different learning materials for learners at different grade levels (Taylor, 2014). In classroom observations in 60 schools in Mpumalanga that had participated in the Early Grade Reading Study II, Grade 3 teachers were not observed paying additional or individual attention to learners who were struggling or who needed extension (Thulare, 2019).

Small group instruction is often proposed as one method of providing additional learning support to learners who are struggling. For example, a pre-pandemic guide on the implementation of inclusive education in sub-Saharan Africa suggested that learners who are not keeping up with the core curriculum should receive small group instruction two to three times per week. This should be provided by the class teacher (supported by a specialist teacher where possible) and should focus on key areas where the learner is struggling (Bulat et al., 2017). This recommendation makes two key assumptions: 1) the teacher can identify learners who are struggling to keep up with the core curriculum, and 2) teachers can identify the key areas of learning difficulty. However, studies suggest that many foundation phase teachers in South Africa struggle in these two areas (Ardington and Henry, 2021; Hoadley and Boyd, 2022; Lobelo *et al.*, 2023).

Group guided reading is an example of a small-group, differentiated instruction method that should frequently be used in the foundation phase, although in reality it often is not. Since 2012, the CAPS has mandated the daily use of group guided reading in all foundation phase classes (Hoadley & Boyd, 2022). The first step in group guided reading involves grouping learners into ability-graded reading-proficiency groups, but several studies suggest that foundation phase teachers find this difficult. Teachers in no-fee schools struggle to effectively distinguish foundation phase learners based on reading skill, even when trained in Early Grade Reading Assessment (Lobelo et al., 2023). When distinguishing readers into five reading-proficiency groups (from non-readers to fluent readers, based on number of words correctly read per minute), the average teacher overestimated reading levels by the equivalent of one reading level. Teachers had particular difficulty identifying the weakest readers in a class (Lobelo et al., 2023). This echoes the findings of earlier literature reviews which concluded that South African foundation phase teachers have difficulty constructing and managing ability groups (Hoadley, 2016), matching the level of the text with the learners' ability level and determining an individual learner's reading ability (Hoadley and Boyd, 2022). Foundation phase teachers appear to be ill-equipped to implement group guided reading, which is a fairly simple form of curriculum differentiation. Foundation phase teachers in no-fee schools in Limpopo reported group guided reading to be a difficult activity (Ardington and Henry, 2021).⁴

5.3 Supporting differentiation in large class size settings

Large class sizes are often reported to be an obstacle to small group instruction (Hako et al., 2023) and the introduction of new pedagogies, in general (Spaull and Pretorius, 2022). Grade 3 classes had an average of 41 children nationally in 2017/18 (Wills, 2023b). However, encouraging evidence from evaluations of structured pedagogy interventions⁵ suggests that teacher assistants can be used to effectively support differentiated instruction in large class size contexts (Makaluza & Mpeta, 2022). In Limpopo, teachers who had an assistant were more likely to report grouping their learners according to reading ability and reported more frequent group-guided reading activities⁶ (Ardington & Henry, 2021).

Overall, the literature is clear that curriculum differentiation is not widely used in classrooms in South Africa, despite the emphasis in recent policy documents. A large proportion of South African teachers need extra support from specialists or coaches to

⁴ Where group guided reading was observed (in 2 out of 13 large classroom observation studies in multiple classrooms), the same book was often used across ability groups, chorused reading was often used in small groups, and no individual feedback was given (Hoadley and Boyd, 2022). Teachers find management of group guided reading difficult and it is often not effectively used to individualise reading (Hoadley, 2016).

⁵ These evaluations provide a trained teachers' assistant, teacher training in 'Teaching at the Right Level' and a set of structured learning materials.

⁶ Seventy percent of teachers mentioned that teaching assistants were used for small group work, while small-group work was done by the teaching assistant in 66% of observed literacy lessons (Makaluza & Mpeta, 2022).

implement curriculum differentiation in their classrooms, especially given that large proportions have not been trained accordingly. In the next section we will turn to the question of how much specialist learning support is available from circuits and districts.

6 FINDINGS FROM A POLICY REVIEW: INTENTIONS FOR LEARNING SUPPORT TO SCHOOLS

Incongruence can occur between stated intentions in policy and how it is outworked in practice. This is the case in inclusive education in South Africa. In the first section we trace out policy intentions: the specialist learning support roles that have been proposed for circuit and district offices that would support the implementation of curriculum differentiation in schools. Then the second section outlines which of these roles government has allocated (or committed to providing). Moving from policy intentions and commitments to implementation, we then consider which roles have been filled in reality. We describe the actual number of learning support specialists employed in provincial education departments. We compare these numbers against the intentions in proposals and the allocations (commitments) made in regulations.

6.1 Proposed specialist learning support roles (policy intentions)

6.1.1 Circuit-level

The Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy suggests that learners with low-level additional support needs who require the assistance of Learning Support Teachers or Education Counsellors should receive this assistance at least once or twice per term. This learning support should be provided by itinerant **circuit-level** teams (Department of Basic Education, 2018a). The proposed structure of these **circuit-level** teams is provided in the 2018 funding guidelines and is summarised in Table 2. While all five members of this multidisciplinary team would provide different aspects of learning support, the guidelines propose that the Learning Support Coordinator would be responsible for curriculum differentiation, remedial and special education in that circuit (Department of Basic Education, 2018a). The funding guidelines do not clearly define the proposed roles and scope of work for all the proposed members of the circuit-level itinerant teams.

Table 2: Proposed staffing structure of itinerant circuit-level teams in South Africa

	Description of role
Educational Psychologist	Assess & diagnose psychological disorders & learning barriers affecting children in schools and design interventions.
Social Worker	Not defined
Chief Education Therapist: occupational therapy	Not defined
Chief Education Therapist: Speech & language therapy	Not defined
Senior Education Specialist: Learning support Coordinator	Responsible for curriculum differentiation, remedial and special education in that circuit

Source: National Guidelines for Resourcing an Inclusive Education System (Draft), 2018, Health Professions Council of South Africa (2019)

6.1.2 District-level

The 2018 funding guidelines also include a proposed staffing structure for the **district-based support teams**, as shown in the first column of Table 3. These include one Learning Support Supervisor per district who would focus on Curriculum Differentiation, Remedial and Special Education. There is no proposed allocation of remedial or learning support teachers to ordinary schools in the 2018 funding guidelines. Instead, interventions to support learners with low-level support needs should be provided by the existing teachers (Department of Basic Education, 2014, 2018a).

6.2 Specialist learner support roles allocated in regulations (policy commitments)

6.2.1 District-level

Actual commitments to resourcing government plans may stray from initial policy intentions. This occurred in the context of inclusive education. The funding guidelines state that "the proposal ...will be considered as part of the revision of the District Norms (Department of Basic Education, 2018a)." Indeed, later in 2018, a new set of staffing norms for district offices were released (Department of Basic Education, 2018b). In the second column of Table 3, we indicate whether there was a commitment included in the district norms to each role proposed in the funding guidelines.

The **district norms** stated how many people should be employed in each role, initially (shown in column 2) and at an unnamed future date (which is labelled as eventual allocation in column 3 of Table 3). Five of the nine roles proposed in the funding guidelines were included in the district norms. Roles proposed in the 2018 funding guidelines that are not included in the district staffing norms include: The *Deputy Chief Educational Specialist (DCES): Learning Support Supervisor*; *Senior Speech Therapist* and *DCES: Institutional Support Coordinator*. Rather, the norms include two *DCES roles* - one in educational psychology and one in education counselling. While these individuals may

have strong skills in curriculum differentiation, they are not directly tasked with driving curriculum differentiation in the district. Thus, the 2018 district norms never formally allocated the initially proposed specialist resources to curriculum differentiation and learning support to district offices.

As a next step, we reviewed the PAM 2022 to determine whether the roles in either the district norms or proposed funding guidelines were listed. The PAM is an important document for stating policy commitments for personnel resourcing in the public schooling system. As shown in column 2 of Table 3, the *Chief Education Specialist (CES)* responsible for inclusive education and learning support in the district has a slightly different title in the PAM 2022 and is responsible for managing a much broader range of services than in the district norms, including the implementation of library services and co-curricular services in the district. Relative to initial policy intentions in SIAS, policy commitments as reflected in PAMs diluted the role of the *CES* and its focus on learning support. Furthermore, the specific (additional) duties of the *DCES: Inclusive Education, Therapeutic and Learning Support* as listed in the PAM (2022) are also indicative of dilution of this role's focus, which is much broader in PAMs than the initially proposed role in the funding guidelines.

Table 3: Proposed and actual staffing of district-based support teams (DBST) in South Africa

Intentions →	Commitments →		Practice (reality)	
Proposed staffing of DBST (Funding Guidelines, 2018)	District staffing norms (2018)		Roles specified in PAM 2022	No. employed in each role nationally (2019) ‡
Role	Initial allocation (no. per district)	Eventual allocation (no. per district)		
CES: Inclusive Education, Specialised Curriculum, Psychosocial, Health & Learning Support	1	1	CES: District Learner Support / Inclusive Education Services	Individual CES roles not shown in payroll data.
Senior Educational Psychologist	1	1: 40 000 learners.	Senior Educational Psychologist	6 (nationally)
Senior Education Counsellor	1	1: 40 000 learners	Senior Education Counsellor Specialist	0
Social Work Supervisor	1	1: 40 000 learners	-	47
Senior Educational Therapist: Occupational therapy	1	1: 40 000 learners	Senior Educational Therapist Specialist	3
Senior Educational Therapist: speech, language	0	0	-	0
DCES: Learning Support Supervisor: Curriculum Differentiation/ Remedial/Special Education	0	0	DCES: Inclusive Education, Therapeutic and Learning Support	Individual DCES roles not shown in payroll data.
DCES: Institutional Support Coordinator †	0	0	-	
DCES: HIV/AIDS, TB and ISHP Coordinator	0	0	-	
.	DCES: Educational psychologist	1	-	
.	DCES: Educational counsellor	1	-	0

Source: Column 1 (Department of Basic Education, 2018a). Column 2 (Department of Basic Education, 2018b). CES – Chief educational specialist, DCES – deputy chief educational specialist, SES – Senior Educational specialist, PAM – Personnel Administrative Measures. †to support special schools, resource centres, full-service schools ‡only roles based at the district-level (or where component was marked as missing) were included.

6.2.2 Circuit-level

Neither **circuit-level** *Learning Support Coordinators* nor *Learning Support Teachers* are listed as a distinct role in the PAM (2022).

6.3 Number of specialist learning support staff currently employed (reality)

Next, we analysed the payroll data to determine which of the proposed and allocated roles had been filled.

6.3.1 District-level

We searched the payroll data for specific roles included in the district norms. Nationally, only six *Senior Educational Psychologists*, 47 *Social Work Supervisors* and three *Senior Educational Therapists* were employed in 2019 in district offices, according to national public sector payroll data (see Table 3, column 5). *Social Work Supervisors* were employed only in the Western and Northern Cape, Gauteng and Limpopo. Given that there are 86 education districts in the country, this suggests there are wide gaps between the district norms and current levels of employment of *senior* psychologists, education counsellors, social workers and education therapists in districts.

A larger number of (more junior) *Educational Psychologists*, *Education Counsellors* and *Educational Therapists* were employed in district offices, but there were no DoE-employed *Social Workers*⁷ other than in district offices in Limpopo. Our analysis of the payroll data shows there were 210 office-based educational psychologists⁸ and psychometrists⁹ employed in 2019. More than half of these were working at above-district level, leaving only 82 educational psychologists¹⁰ employed in district offices (as shown in column 2 of Table 4). No psychologists were employed in Limpopo from 2018 to 2021.

Nationally, between 50 and 55 *Education Counsellors* were employed each year from 2017 to 2020. Most of these were school-based counsellors employed in the Western Cape. Gauteng employed one *Education Counsellor* at district level in 2019, and one or two *Education Counsellors* were employed in the Northern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal in the

⁷ This does not include social work supervisors (which are a separate role) or social workers who may be working in other roles.

⁸ Educational psychologists have degrees in psychology and education and can assess, diagnose psychological disorders and learning barriers affecting children in schools and design interventions.

⁹ Psychometrists are responsible for administering and scoring psychometric assessments and can provide basic counselling (Health Professions Council of South Africa, 2019). They must have a bachelor's degree in psychology, and generally work under the supervision of a psychologist.

¹⁰ From this point onwards we have combined *Educational Psychologists* and *Psychometrists* and will refer to them collectively as psychologists, for the sake of brevity and clarity

Table 4: Number of office-based educational psychologists (including psychometrists) employed in 2019 and number needed to reach district norms and funding guidelines (2018)

	Current no. employed at district-level (or below)	No. needed to meet 2018 district norms [†]	No. needed in itinerant circuit teams [‡]	No. needed (in circuits and districts)	Total unmet need (no. of psychologists) [§]
Western Cape	28	8	51	59	31
Eastern Cape	32	23	175	198	166
Northern Cape	7	5	19	24	17
Free State	0	5	37	42	42
KwaZulu-Natal	7	12	196	208	201
North West	0	4	49	53	53
Gauteng	8	15	74	89	81
Mpumalanga	0	4	57	61	61
Limpopo	0	10	127	137	137
South Africa	82	86	785	871	789

Source: Anonymised public sector payroll 2018; Master List 2019 of ordinary schools, South Africa education district shape files (2018), 2018 district norms (Department of Basic Education, 2018b) [†]one per district, this is equivalent to the number of districts per province [‡] assuming 1 educational psychologist per circuit as per funding guidelines and 30 schools per circuit, number of schools as per 2019 Master list. [§]calculated as number needed to meet 2018 district norms + number needed for one per itinerant circuit team – number currently employed at district-level or below.

period 2018 to 2020. Thus, the Western Cape has enough education counsellors to meet the district norms, if staff were to be moved from school-based to district-based roles and were ready to be promoted to *Senior Education Counsellors*. Outside of the Western Cape there are almost no *Education Counsellors* who could be promoted into senior roles or relocated to fulfil district norms.

We conducted a more detailed case study of capacity in educational psychology. Given that so few senior staff are currently employed in district offices, we broadened our analysis to include all psychologists working at district-level. In Table 4, we compare the current number of district-based psychologists with the interim district staffing norm (one psychologist per education district, as shown in column 3 of Table 4).

At a national level, there are almost enough currently-employed psychologists to meet the interim district norms. But this is due to the relatively high number of psychologists at district and circuit offices in the Western Cape. If we compare the number needed in districts (column 3) with the current capacity at district level (column 2) on a province-by-province basis, only three provinces currently have the capacity to meet district norms (the Western, Eastern and Northern Cape, shaded in green). The interim district norms were certainly not being met in six provinces in 2019. Other than in Mpumalanga (where there were 11 school-based psychologists in 2019), there is little scope for moving psychologists from schools to district offices to meet this demand.

Psychologists will also be needed in itinerant circuit teams, as proposed in SIAS and the 2018 draft funding guidelines. As a next step, we estimated the number of psychologists needed to provide one per circuit (shown in column 4, Table 4). We combined the number of psychologists needed to meet the proposals for circuits and the district norms (shown in column 5). Finally, unmet need was calculated by subtracting the current number of office-based psychologists (at district level or below) with the total number needed to fulfil policy intentions. This is labelled as total unmet need and is shown in the final column of Table 4. There is unmet need in every province and in total we calculated that 789 additional educational psychologists (or psychometrists) are needed to fulfil policy intentions. This is almost ten times the number that are currently employed in district offices.

A similar analysis showed that, in order to reach the 2018 district norms, an additional 63 *Education Counsellors* would need to be employed in South Africa. This is a conservative estimate which assumes that substantial redeployment from schools is possible in the Western Cape. Overall, our analysis of the payroll data shows that, from 2018 to 2020, the district norms on employment of *Education Counsellors* and *psychologists* were not being met.

The payroll data indicates that *Learning support agents* and *Learning support monitors* are employed in the North West and Free State respectively. *Learner support agents* are responsible for putting systems of psychosocial support in place in schools, within the care and support for teaching and learning framework. Their responsibilities include setting up peer education clubs, establishing a network with local NGOs and working with

these NGOs to put after-school prevention programmes in place (for example for substance abuse and gangsterism). These agents work together with the SBST to identify vulnerable learners. They can provide group counselling, if they are suitably qualified (Department of Basic Education, 2019). In the North West, between 67 and 231 *Learning support agents* were appointed each year from 2019 onwards. In the Free State, between 31 and 54 people were employed each year as *Learning support monitors* (at division level). The role is classified as an administrative line function, but according to the DBE, *Learning support agents* are known by different job titles in different provinces. Individuals working in these posts may in fact be working in very similar roles to *Learning support agents*.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine whether the specific *CES* or *DCES* posts related to inclusive education (shown in column 1 and 4 of Table 3) have been filled as the payroll data does not specify the precise job title for individual CES and DCES roles. As a result, we cannot determine the availability of these resources in the system, and we may be underestimating the available specialist skills in the district offices.

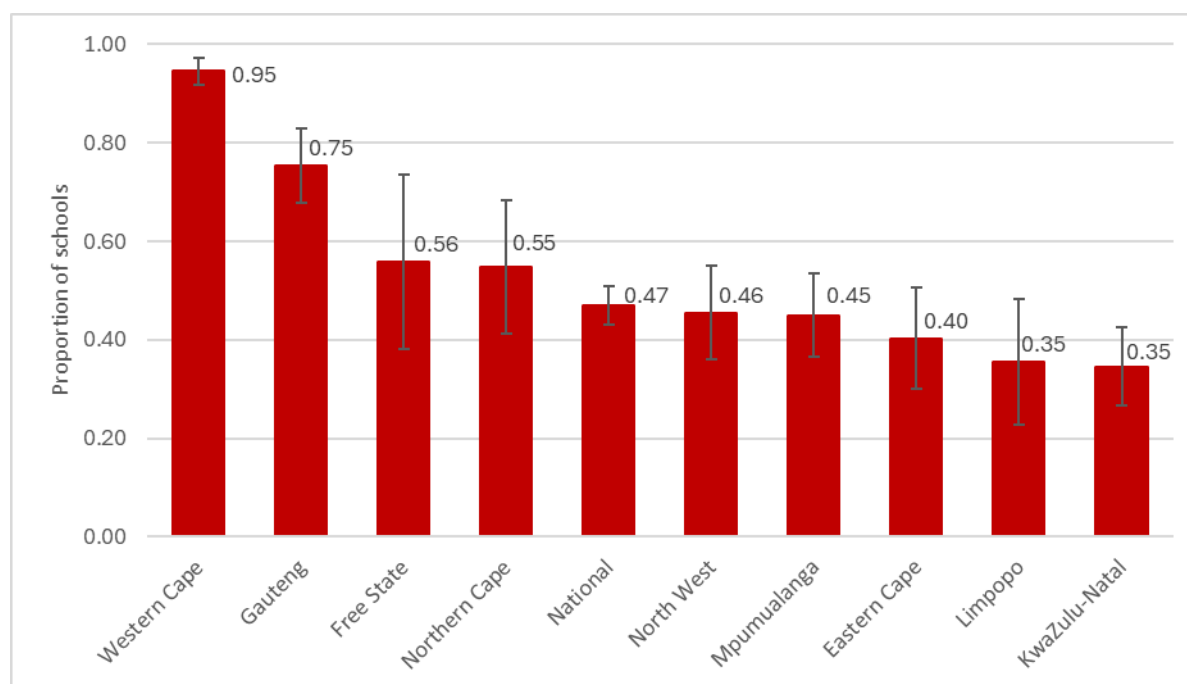
6.3.2 Circuit level

No *Learning Support Teachers* or circuit level *Learning Support Coordinators* could be identified in the public sector payroll data (2012 to 2021). This strongly suggests that these posts have not yet been created.

6.4 Finding from data analysis: availability of specialist services to schools

The impact of the inadequate and geographically uneven pattern of employment of learning support specialists is shown in the results of the School Monitoring Survey 2017/18. Only 47% of principals reported that their school had received a visit from a psychologist, therapist, member of the district-based support team, learning support official or health official in 2017. Coverage was much higher in the Western Cape than the other eight South African provinces (see Figure 2). There was no significant improvement in the provision of these services between 2011 and 2017 (Deghaye, 2021). This suggests that specialist support is not reaching many learners with learning difficulties and is not improving over time.

Figure 2: Proportion of schools visited by psychologists, therapists, members of the district-based support team, learning support officials or health officials in 2017, by province.



Source: Figure reproduced from Deghaye (2023) using the School Monitoring Survey 2017/18. School weighted data (all schools). Black lines reflect 95% confidence intervals.

7 DISCUSSION

Curriculum differentiation is not a common practice in foundation phase classrooms. A review of existing literature indicates that foundation phase teachers in South Africa appear to lack the required skills to implement curriculum differentiation and differentiated, small group instruction. In many schools, teachers have not received any training in curriculum differentiation and large class size contexts constrains the possibilities for implementation. In these circumstances, most class teachers need extra support, coaching and additional training to implement curriculum differentiation in their classrooms, as envisaged in policy.

However, the policy review presented in this paper, juxtaposed against an analysis of specialist roles in public payroll data, is indicative of the incongruence between intentions for specialist support for teachers (and learners), particularly in areas of remediation and curriculum differentiation and actual provisioning. New evidence presented in this paper suggests that various itinerant learning support teacher posts have not been created or filled in circuits. No *Learning support teachers* or *Learning Support Coordinators* could be identified in the payroll system. A handful of mid-level learning support staff (agents and monitors) have been employed in the North West and Free State. Where we were able to identify roles in the payroll data (educational psychologists, educational counsellors,

social work supervisors and educational therapists), current resourcing of these roles in district offices is far below the level needed to meet the district norms. Substantial recruitment will be needed to reach a situation where all circuits have itinerant teams of learning support professionals that actively engage with class teachers and SBST coordinators to support learners who have additional needs.

The geographic inequalities in the availability of specialists are stark. Learners in the Western Cape and Gauteng appear to have much better access to educational psychologists and counsellors. Availability of specialists is particularly poor in Limpopo. Yet, Limpopo was among the provinces with the poorest average reading proficiency in Grade 4 and 6 in PIRLS 2021 (Department of Basic Education and Centre for Evaluation and Assessment, 2023). Teachers in Limpopo seem to have the highest unmet need for specialist support to implement curriculum differentiation and reading remediation.

The lack of *Learning support teachers* is unlikely related to an insufficient supply of these specialists coming from the higher education system, as at least six universities have developed programmes in learning support education. The availability of post-graduate courses in learning support and remedial education places South Africa in a better position than many other middle-income countries, where universities are still developing these courses. Instead, delays in finalising inclusive education policies, a human resources plan and a funding strategy for inclusive education are the primary contributors to the current vacuum in learner support. Without an inclusive education funding strategy or human resources plan, many learners are left without adequate learning support.

Given the lack of learning support specialists in districts and circuits, the burden of support must be falling on school-based support teams (SBSTs). SBST coordinators have, however, not all been trained in curriculum differentiation. An appointment as a SBST coordinator does not result in any reduction in teaching load. It seems difficult to imagine how effective SBST coordinators can be, without assistance from itinerant support teachers, without universal training, and while carrying a full teaching load.

These findings add to the evidence that the policy transition to inclusive education has been incomplete (Deghaye, 2021; Du Plessis, 2013; Equal Education Law Centre, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2015; Watermeyer et al., 2016). Partial implementation of inclusive education policies has led to substantial gaps in learning support in South African schools. The inclusive education model de-emphasised remedial teaching but learning support services meant to replace remedial teachers and provide learner support have not yet been funded or put in place. The implications for learners who are having difficulty learning to read are often forgotten.

Class teachers, particularly in the foundation phase, need further practical training on instruction differentiation before effective curriculum differentiation and small group instruction can be achieved. Large class sizes present practical challenges to curriculum differentiation, but existing research suggests that the provision of teachers' assistants combined with a structured pedagogy programme have the potential to enable small group instruction in foundation phase classrooms.

While it has not been discussed here, teachers may also lack structured, graded learning material to use in differentiation. This question deserves more research attention. For example, the DBE workbooks, which are the most widely-used learning materials in the foundation phase (Hoadley & Boyd, 2022) have been shown to be strictly grade-level texts which do not present learners with practice material from related topics in the previous grade (Hoadley & Galant, 2016).

Additional training in curriculum differentiation and group guided reading is urgently needed. Fortunately, the coverage of inclusive education in initial teacher training has been improved in recent years (Deghaye, 2024; Neethling et al., 2023). This offers some hope that new teachers will have better skills in curriculum differentiation and management of ability groupings.

7.1 Data limitations

The data presented here do not provide insights into employment of specialist educators in independent schools or in governing body positions in fee-charging schools.

As mentioned earlier, we could not extend our quantitative analysis to all the posts included in the district norms due to the structure of payroll data, which does not specify the exact role that a Chief Education Specialist or Deputy Chief Education Specialist fulfils. This makes it very difficult to monitor whether these staffing norms are being met. The analysis risks underestimating available specialist support for implementation of curriculum differentiation as a result. The analysis was further complicated by the lack of detailed descriptions for some of the proposed roles. It would be useful if greater detail could be provided in the next version of White Paper 6. Finally, there were also inconsistencies between job titles in PAM and the payroll, which made it difficult to determine whether some roles were filled.

7.2 Recommendations

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that South Africa does not have enough learning support specialists employed in district and circuit offices to support class teachers to implement curriculum differentiation and to provide the necessary training and mentoring. Filling these posts will require significant investment. For example, evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that in order to put itinerant learning support teams in place and meet the district staffing norms in the public basic education system, the number of *educational psychologists* will have to increase ten-fold. About 785 posts for *Learning support teachers* must be created at circuit-level to enable itinerant teams to begin functioning, while additional *Education Counsellor posts* need to be created in districts to meet district staffing norms.

A ten-fold increase in employment of educational psychologists will be difficult to achieve in the medium term. Interim solutions are needed. In particular, different models for the provision of psychometric assessment should be explored. The outsourcing of psychometric assessment to private practitioners at a rate per assessment (in line with private provision models in the proposed National Health Insurance Act) should also be investigated and negotiations should begin soon, so that psychometric learning assessments are included in the basic package of care to be covered by National Health Insurance in the future.

In the current fiscal climate, where real spending per learner is set to decline by nearly 9% in this medium-term budget cycle, it is difficult to argue for posts to be filled or created. However, the longer-term savings from these investments, for example through eventual reductions in grade repetition (as outlined by (van der Berg et al., 2019) should be considered.

Itinerant teams to reach learners with severe to profound intellectual disability have been operational in special care centres and special schools for several years. The experience of these teams should be documented and used to guide the development of operational models for circuit-level itinerant teams. Potential synergies between these two sets of itinerant teams should also be explored. In rural areas, the feasibility of telemedicine approaches, as suggested in the 2014 SIAS policy, should be explored.

The use of mid-level learning support agents and monitors in the Free State and North West should be evaluated to determine what support this provides to teachers and learners. Finally, research is needed to test whether reducing the teaching load of SBST coordinators in primary schools is associated with increased practice of curriculum differentiation and additional support for struggling learners.

Ideally, additional training in curriculum differentiation and small group teaching methods should be combined with the permanent appointment of teacher assistants in every foundation phase school.

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