

TVET Managers' Perspectives on Preparedness for Inclusive Education in the Eastern Cape

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ABSTRACT:

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) managers play a critical role in implementing inclusive education policies. This study explores Eastern Cape TVET managers' perceptions of their preparedness for inclusion. Despite growing attention to inclusive education, limited research focuses on managers' perspectives in this sector, making this study significant. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the research highlights how interactions between policy, institutional structures, and local contexts influence implementation. A qualitative approach was employed, using convenience and purposive sampling to select two public TVET colleges and ten managers. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, observations of facilities and assistive technologies, and document analysis of policies and strategic plans. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Findings reveal that managers generally hold positive attitudes toward inclusive education and recognise its importance for equity and social justice. However, they feel insufficiently prepared to implement it effectively. Challenges include inconsistent understandings of inclusion, lack of training, centralised budgets that do not prioritise accessibility, and limited institutional support for students with disabilities. The study recommends establishing inclusive committees, conducting skills audits, building managerial capacity, strengthening partnerships, clarifying implementation guidelines, and revising budget structures to support inclusive practices in TVET colleges.

Keywords: Perspectives, inclusive education, TVET colleges, implementation, students with disabilities..

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1. Introduction

Managers in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges are primarily responsible for guiding and implementing institutional change. Their perspectives on inclusive education are therefore pivotal: they shape organisational priorities, influence lecturers' attitudes, and determine whether concrete plans are put in place to support students with diverse learning needs. When managers hold positive views about inclusion, they are more likely to invest in developing lecturers' skills to work effectively with students

with special needs and to adopt leadership approaches that are self-motivated, collaborative, and oriented towards comprehensive systems change (Ngwokabuenui, 2013; Schmidt & Venet, 2012; Mentz & Barrett, 2011). Creating inclusive colleges through universal accessibility and appropriate support measures for students with special needs can, in turn, motivate all internal stakeholders to meaningfully include and support these students.

Given that managers are expected to play a critical role in the successful implementation of inclusive practices, it is essential that they have a

sound understanding of policies and legislation related to the rights of people with disabilities and students with special needs. Lampan (2014), drawing on Bailey and du Plessis' (1997) survey of over 200 Australian school principals and Conrad and Brown's (2011) study of principals in Trinidad and Tobago, showed that principals' attitudes towards inclusion tend to cluster around two dimensions: beliefs about the philosophy of inclusion and beliefs about the practice of inclusion. Against this backdrop, it is important to understand how TVET managers in the Eastern Cape in South Africa view the implementation of inclusive practices, particularly given societal perceptions that position colleges as institutions primarily intended to admit "slow learners" (Steukers, 2017).

Regionally and in the South African context, the studies consulted by the researchers in the current study show that the bulk of empirical work on inclusive education has focused either on schools or universities, with greater emphasis on policy texts and the experiences of students with disabilities rather than those of institutional leaders. Research on inclusion in the TVET sector, and specifically on how college managers understand and enact their responsibilities, remains particularly sparse (Delubom et al., 2020). This paper contributes to addressing that gap by foregrounding TVET managers' perspectives on, and perceived preparedness for, inclusive education in the under-researched Eastern Cape province, using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to illuminate how their views are shaped by, and in turn shape, broader institutional and policy environments.

2. Methodology

Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which was appropriate for generating in-depth accounts of participants' personal and subjective experiences of implementing inclusive education (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, & Bezuidenhout, 2015). Qualitative methods are particularly suited to exploring feelings, attitudes,

perceptions, and meanings associated with a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), in this case, TVET managers' perspectives on and preparedness for inclusive education.

A phenomenological research design was used to understand how managers experience and make sense of their role in implementing inclusive education. Phenomenology seeks rich descriptions from participants who have lived, or are currently living, the phenomenon under investigation (Babbie & Mouton, 2018). This design was therefore well-suited to capturing managers' first-hand accounts of inclusive practices in Eastern Cape TVET colleges.

Sampling

Two public TVET colleges in the Eastern Cape, South Africa were selected through convenience sampling, as access to them was readily available. Within these institutions, purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Ten managers were selected: two college principals, four deputy principals (academic services and registration), and four campus managers. The selected participants had rich information regarding the knowledge of the college policies and practices related to inclusion and managing staff working directly with students with disabilities.

Data instruments

Three instruments were used for data collection: in-depth face-to-face interviews, observation, and document analysis to facilitate data triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Patton, 2015).

Interviews

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to generate data from managers' perspectives, eliciting detailed accounts of their perceptions and perceived preparedness regarding inclusive education. The researchers scheduled appointments in advance, and an interview guide was shared with participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Interviews were recorded after participants provided informed consent and later transcribed verbatim

(Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Informed consent for participation was obtained from all identifiable human participants involved in the study.

Observations

The researchers sought permission to observe the institutional physical infrastructure of each campus, i.e., buildings, grounds, and access routes, to assess accessibility and inclusivity, e.g., ramps, signage, toilets, and support facilities, like assistive technology and devices. The researchers also recorded field notes concurrently (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Document analysis

The researchers used a document analysis method to complement and verify interview data. They analysed institutional documents, including meeting minutes, reports, strategic plans, and policies. Documents provide texts and images created independently of the researcher and are thus comparatively free from researcher influence (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Patton, 2015). Access to documents was requested prior to site visits.

Data analysis

The researchers analysed data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore managers' interpretation of their experiences of inclusive education in TVET colleges (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Babbie & Mouton, 2018). IPA examines individual cases in detail and then identifies patterns across cases, offering an "insider's" perspective that can illuminate broader social and institutional issues (Babbie & Mouton, 2018; Larkin et al., 2006).

Emergent themes were identified for each case after reading and re-reading the transcripts and taking notes. The themes were then grouped into higher-order categories across participants. Observational notes and documents were used to refine and corroborate themes. Anonymity and pseudonymous codes were used to preserve participants' identities, e.g., CP-1 (college principal, College 1), DPAS-2 (deputy principal: academic services, College 2), DPR-1 (deputy

principal: registration, College 1), CM-2 (campus manager, College 2).

Data Trustworthiness

To ensure data trustworthiness, the researchers used interviews, observations, and document analysis to triangulate (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). An audit trail was maintained, and member checking of key interpretations with selected participants was done, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for credibility and dependability in qualitative research.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university structures, and institutional as well as individual informed consent was secured in line with standard qualitative research ethics (BERA, 2018). Mertens (1998) contends that ethical guidelines in research are required to guard against possible dilemmas. Permission was sought from the two TVET colleges in the Eastern Cape Province. The study adhered to the ethical principle of protecting participants from physical and psychological harm. Written, voluntary consent to participate and to record the interviews was obtained after the purpose and relevant details of the study had been clearly explained. Consent forms were signed before the commencement of interviews, and confidentiality was ensured through participant codes and password-protected electronic data storage. The study was issued Protocol Number EREC1550-1558-19.

3. Results

The findings are organised around three themes that speak directly to the research questions: (1) conceptualisations of inclusive education, (2) perceived preparedness and capacity, and (3) systemic and structural constraints." The findings indicate that TVET managers in the Eastern Cape hold generally positive views of inclusive education and are willing to implement it more fully, provided key structural challenges are addressed. Managers articulated an understanding of inclusion as a rights-based issue grounded in non-discrimination and access:

DPAS2: *"Inclusive education deals with issues of access to education irrespective of your physical condition. It refers to a system whereby people are not discriminated against based on their conditions."*

CP2: *"I see inclusive education as a human rights issue. To me, it means we cannot deny any students with special needs."*

This positive orientation is undermined by fragmentation and a lack of coherence across the college system. Minutes of Broad Management Team meetings and records of the policy workshop revealed limited institutional alignment around inclusive education, as echoed in interview data by DPRI:

DPR1: *"I view roles as clear for everyone. What is needed is for us to work as a team in unison and not create difficulties for each other; everything will be in order."*

Across the campuses, the interviewees acknowledged the centralisation of budgets at administrative centres as a major barrier. Data from interviews and documentary evidence (budget and strategic plans reports) showed that campuses lacked a flexible fund to prioritise accessibility, as indicated below.

CM1 (annoyed): *"It is disappointing that campuses depend upon the budget which lies at the Administration Centre. For example, if one identifies the need to renovate, one will be told that there is no budget."*

Observation notes supported this, underlining inaccessible historical buildings without ramps or handrails and the absence of assistive infrastructure, even where student enrolment data indicated the presence of learners with disabilities.

The participants' response revealed limited institutional autonomy and weak policy engagement. The researchers found that the policy documents bore only the DHET logo, confirming managers' claims that colleges cannot adapt or develop their own inclusive education policies. Minutes from a policy workshop reflected confusion among internal stakeholders about which policies addressed disability and inclusion, and no record of systematic policy-orientation sessions. Thus, CP1 explains:

CP1: *"The policies are the same in all fifty colleges. Colleges differ from universities; they lack the autonomy to develop their own policies. All the policies have the DHET logo, not the college logo."*

CP2: *"I feel that colleges are obliged to implement policies that come from the Department of Higher Education and Training."*

These findings resonate with Ntombela's (2019) observation that policy issues delay the implementation of inclusive education.

A further concern is the lack of systematic data and structured systems to support students with disabilities. Despite recognising inclusive education as a human right, some managers could not state how many students with disabilities were registered on their campuses, and organisational charts and meeting minutes reflected no dedicated disability or inclusion units:

DPR1: *"There is a problem of structured systems in the college, and that leads us not to accommodate students with disabilities as we are expected to."*

Both interviews and document data analysis suggest that support remains ad hoc and minimal. Access is largely understood as physical entry rather than full participation in teaching, learning, and campus life. Consistent with Mphongoshe et al. (2015), students with disabilities were reported to receive limited institutional support and, in some cases, to be selectively admitted only if their disabilities would not require "reasonable accommodations". This was confirmed through observation of inaccessible facilities and the absence of visible disability-support services.

Managers explicitly acknowledged their capacity and resource constraints:

CM1: *"The capacity to provide support to students with disabilities is not there. The lecturers are overwhelmed and cannot identify these students because they had their functions."*

CM2 (exhausted): *"The problem is funding. Whatever we do not have is because we lack the funds. We were going to provide support to such students if we had funds."*

The data generated from the multiple sources, the interview narratives, documentary records, and

observational data, depict TVET managers as conceptually supportive but practically underprepared. The system of centralised budgeting, limited autonomy, a lack of training, weak internal structures, and the inaccessibility of physical environments constrain managers' ability to fully implement inclusive education in Eastern Cape TVET colleges.

4. Discussion

The study found that managers' generally positive attitude towards implementing inclusive education is undermined by systemic, structural, and procedural limitations. For example, the absence of clear, institutionalised guidelines for reasonable accommodations, limited dedicated disability structures, and inadequate capacity among staff affect access to education and participation for students with disabilities.

The study revealed that reasonable accommodations were provided on a case-by-case basis, but without written procedures to guide decisions. The analysis of the Special Needs policy and related documents revealed no explicit guidelines for identifying, approving, or implementing accommodations. It becomes a challenge considering that the international and national frameworks stress reasonable accommodations as key aspect of the right to inclusive education, and highlight that accommodations must be individualised, transparent, and consistent (UN, 2006; DBE, 2016; DHET, 2018). The CRPD, for example, defines reasonable accommodations as "necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments ... to ensure persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms" (UN, 2006, Art. 2). Contrastingly to the findings, undocumented practices as found in this study, risk arbitrariness, under provision and inequity between campuses and programmes.

The case-by-case approach also means that accommodations depend heavily on individual managers' and lecturers' discretion, rather than on an institutional commitment supported by clear processes and resources. While this

flexibility can sometimes enable creative solutions, it often results in inconsistency and uncertainty for students (Israel, 2019; Mutanga, 2017). The confusion reported by TVET delegates at Eastern Cape Regional Disability Collaboration meetings when universities shared their structured accommodation guidelines (Israel, 2019) highlights this gap: universities have increasingly formalised their reasonable accommodation processes (e.g., disability units, written procedures, multi-stakeholder committees), whereas TVET colleges lag in systematising support (Swart & Pettipher, 2019).

The study highlighted a lack of dedicated disability or inclusion units in most of the participating colleges. Instead, the responsibility for supporting students with disabilities is often added to the portfolios of Career Guidance Officers, who already carry significant workloads. This mirrors findings from other South African and African studies, which show that disability related functions in post-school institutions are frequently fragmented or marginalised, with no clear organisational home, dedicated staff, or ring-fenced budgets (Matshedisho, 2010; Mutanga, 2017; Mphongoshe et al., 2015). Where no dedicated unit or coordinator exists, disability support tends to be reactive, limited to crisis management, or focused solely on admission rather than on ongoing support throughout the student life cycle (Dolmage, 2017).

The study also found that the lack of capacity and professional development in inclusive education is a critical barrier. Lecturers are sometimes the first to notice students' learning difficulties, yet the study shows they "do not have an expertise in what to do" once they have identified potential disabilities. Managers themselves acknowledge that they lack the training and structures needed to respond appropriately. This aligns with broader South African literature indicating that staff in higher and TVET education often feel ill-prepared to work with students with disabilities, due to limited pre-service and in-service training on inclusive pedagogy, differentiation, and support strategies (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024; Hay, 2018). Internationally, researchers

emphasise that inclusive post-school education cannot be achieved without ongoing capacity building for academic and support staff, including training on universal design for learning (UDL), reasonable accommodation processes, and collaborative working with disability services (Ainscow, 2020; Moraña, 2017).

The study also revealed a striking discrepancy between managers' stated preparedness and the objective evidence from documents and observations. In interviews, managers present themselves as willing and "prepared" to implement inclusive education. However, document analysis (e.g., policy minutes, strategic plans reports) and campus observations (e.g., inaccessible infrastructure, lack of assistive devices, absence of disability units) paint a picture of institutions that are still far from realising inclusive practices. This contradiction is not unusual: leaders may express aspirational commitments to inclusion while structural, financial, and historical constraints limit what is practically possible (Ntombela, 2019; Swart & Pettipher, 2019). The ecological systems perspective helps explain this tension: managers operate at the exosystem level, constrained by DHET policy, centralised budgets, and legacy infrastructure (macrosystem), which affects what can occur at the classroom and campus (microsystem) levels.

The finding that colleges must submit all examination concession applications to DHET, with no mandate to grant concessions internally (DBE, 2016), further illustrates the limited autonomy of TVET institutions in responding swiftly to learners' needs. International best practice suggests that institutions should have clearly delegated authority to implement reasonable accommodations, within an agreed regulatory framework, so that students are not disadvantaged by bureaucratic delays (HEA, 2015; European Commission, 2017). The current TVET arrangement may therefore undermine the principle of timely, effective support and contribute to the "policy–practice gap" widely documented in inclusive education (Mutanga & Walker, 2015; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024).

This discussion suggests that while TVET managers in this study endorse inclusive education at the level of discourse and values, they are operating within an environment marked by:

- the absence of formalised reasonable accommodation guidelines,
- fragmented or non-existent disability support structures,
- limited staff capacity and training, and
- centralised policy and budget controls that restrict local responsiveness.

To move from rhetorical commitment to substantive preparedness, TVET colleges would need to: develop and implement written reasonable accommodation procedures; establish or strengthen disability/inclusion units; provide systematic capacity-building for managers, lecturers, and support staff; and negotiate greater institutional autonomy and dedicated funding for accessibility and support. Without such systemic changes, the rights-based vision of inclusive education embodied in the South African Constitution, White Paper 6, and international agreements (DoE, 2001; Elder, 2015; UN, 2006) will remain only partially realised in the Eastern Cape TVET sector.

Limitations

This study has methodological limitations that should be acknowledged. For example, the sample was restricted to two TVET colleges in the Eastern Cape and 10 managers, limiting the transferability of the findings to other provinces and to the wider South African TVET sector. Also, the study relied primarily on self-reported data from managers, which may reflect aspirational or socially desirable accounts rather than actual day-to-day practices, although triangulation with observations and document analysis helped to mitigate this. Furthermore, the specific historical and socio-economic context of the Eastern Cape means that the dynamics identified here may play out differently in better-resourced or differently structured TVET environments.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore TVET managers' perspectives on, and preparedness for, inclusive education in the Eastern Cape. The findings show that managers articulate a largely positive, rights-based understanding of inclusive education and recognise that students with disabilities should not be denied access. However, this attitudinal readiness is not matched by systemic preparedness. Across interviews, document analysis, and observations, TVET colleges were shown to face a range of interlocking challenges that significantly constrain the effective implementation of inclusive education. Key barriers include limited institutional coherence and teamwork around inclusion, insufficient training and capacity building for managers and lecturers, centralised budgeting that leaves campuses with little discretion to prioritise accessibility, and minimal, often ad hoc support for students with disabilities. The absence of clear, written guidelines and procedures for reasonable accommodations is particularly concerning, given national and international commitments to inclusive, rights-based education.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, the paper recommends establishing college-level accessibility or inclusion committees to coordinate policy implementation. It further recommends conducting systematic skills audits and targeted professional development for managers and lecturers. The TVET colleges are encouraged to strengthen partnerships with universities and disability organisations to share expertise and models of good practice. They should develop and institutionalise reasonable accommodation guidelines and disability support protocols, and review budget structures so that campuses have earmarked resources for accessibility and support.

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Future research

Future research should examine the retention, progression, and success of students with disabilities in TVET colleges as a concrete indicator of the effectiveness of support services and institutional arrangements. The study concludes that TVET managers require sustained structural, financial, and developmental support if their positive intentions are to translate into meaningful, system-wide preparedness for inclusive education in the Eastern Cape.

6. Author Declaration

We declare that the study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the institution with the Protocol Number EREC1550-1558-19 on the 22 May 2019. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university structures, and institutional as well as individual informed consent was secured in line with standard qualitative research ethics (BERA, 2018). Mertens (1998) contends that ethical guidelines in research are required to guard against possible dilemmas. Permission was sought from the two TVET colleges in the Eastern Cape Province. The study adhered to the ethical principle of protecting participants from physical and psychological harm. Written, voluntary consent to participate and to record the interviews was obtained after the purpose and relevant details of the study had been clearly explained. Consent forms were signed before the commencement of interviews, and confidentiality was ensured through participant codes and password-protected electronic data storage. Both authors affiliated in the institution in which the ethical clearance was issued.

The authors confirm the originality of the work and that they have no conflict of interest to the data collected.

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