

Educators' experiences of teaching learners with hearing loss in inclusive classrooms

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Background: A global move towards inclusivity has made inclusive education (IE) a necessity. The education of the learner with hearing loss (HL) in an IE setting remains challenging and scarcely researched. Despite government's clear position on IE, the extent to which the recommendations in the Education White Paper 6 (2001) (EWP6) are implemented, and the educator's related experiences, remains limited, which inspired this study.

Aim: To explore the educators' experiences of teaching learners with HL and the extent to which their current teaching practices incorporate the inclusive education model (IEM) and the EWP6.

Setting: Public primary schools, practicing IE in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa.

Method: An explorative descriptive, qualitative approach within a phenomenology design was utilised. An interview schedule guided the semi-structured interviews, conducted with six purposively sampled educators. Post thematic analysis, data were organised within four organising themes, adopted from the IEM.

Results: The experienced practical implementation of IE comprised the adaptation of curriculum, teaching practices and assessment procedures to accommodate learners with HL. Educators experienced support from relevant stakeholders and policies. Facilitators included the availability of some resources and the learner's access to an appropriate school. Challenges included insufficient guidance from policies and guidelines.

Conclusion: Educators experience difficulties in practically implementing IE with learners with HL. They incorporate the EWP6 and the IEM to a limited extent.

Contribution: The study contributed to the limited information regarding the experiences of educators in an IE context, with learners with HL, at least within the studied or similar context.

Keywords: inclusive education; inclusivity; audiology; Education White Paper 6 (2001); South Africa.

Introduction

The education of a child is an integral aspect contributing towards the holistic development of the child and society as a whole (Kumar & Ahmad 2008), and as such, this article explores the lived experiences of educators of learners with hearing loss (HL) within an inclusive context, in a mainstream school. To truly understand and implement the complete vision of inclusive education (IE), the idea of inclusion should be explored. Inclusive education was implemented 'to ensure that all learners, with and without disabilities, pursue their learning potential to the fullest' (Department of Education 2001:11).

Therefore, while the current study interest is on the educators' experiences of teaching learners with HL, the inclusive context entails that other learners presenting with varying degrees of loss of functionality may be in the context, in addition to learners with no loss of functionality. Approximately 97 million children in sub-Saharan Africa do not have access to education, some of who have disabilities (UNESCO 2020). Research has shown that disability affects approximately 28.9 million children in Southern and Eastern Africa (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] 2021:15). There are approximately only 715 full-service schools in addition to the 464 special needs schools in South Africa (Charles 2017; Makoelle & Burmistrova 2020). Yet, at least 1 80957 individuals of aged 5–24 years present with some level of functional limitations (Statistic South Africa 2016). There are therefore not enough schools to accommodate all school-aged learners with functional loss in inclusive and special education settings. Thus, educators

Note: The interview schedule is available upon request from the authors.

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face an overabundance of challenges in educating learners with HL within inclusive classrooms in mainstream schools, including limited resources, strained support structures, limited expertise and time to sufficiently accommodate such learners without inconveniencing their classmates (Bamu et al. 2017), Inclusive Education of learners with HL in the context of KwaZulu Natal was of particular interest for this study as it has not been explored from the educators' perspective before.

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes disability as an impairment of bodily function or structure, further divided into activity limitations and restrictions on participation (WHO 2022). Disability, impairment or loss of function can be in a form of sensory, physical and others. Some impairments are not visible, such as hearing loss, visual impairment and other disorders. We adopt the definition by the WHO, which defines a person as hard of hearing (HoH), a hearing threshold worse than 20dB in one or both ears. The person may then be classified as HoH or deaf depending on their thresholds across the testing frequencies (WHO 2021). While other researchers may use terms such as hearing impairment, HoH or hearing disability for the same condition depending on their paradigmatic positionality (Aanondsen et al. 2023; Stevens et al. 2012), we shall henceforth use HL as a more inclusive term describing the same. Such HL present challenges to the educators who are not professionally trained for IE, as they often have to accommodate such learners through curriculum adaptations (Maluleke, Khoza-Shangase & Kanji 2019). Childhood HL may have negative ramifications on all aspects of their development, including academic progression, thus highlighting the need for an educational system that is inclusive, yet provides the learner with adequate support (Storbeck 2012). Furthermore, learners in inclusive schools require a greater amount of support and parental involvement in order to thrive academically and socially (Donohue & Bornman 2014). The adaptation of the curriculum, assessment and teaching strategies is a fundamental pillar in the system of IE as it allows for learners with differing abilities to be educated successfully alongside their peers (Moore, Gilbreath & Maiuri 1998). In addition, other factors such as social acceptance (Lorger, Schmidt, & Vukman 2015:179), support from various stakeholders, including therapists (Van Dijk 2003), and the availability of adequate resources, including classroom space, play a vital role in the successful implementation of IE (DEAFSA 2001). Inclusive education has gained momentum globally, in practice and research, as stakeholders become more interested in curriculum adaptations and other means of optimising learning and integration of learners with disabilities with those who do not present with functional disabilities (Dalton, McKenzie & Kahonde 2012). The government's position is access to education for all, including those with disabilities should be prioritised, as recommended by the South African Constitution (South African Government 1996:13).

This gave way for the Education White Paper 6 (EWP 6) (DoE 2001), a policy mandating IE in South Africa. The implementation of IE led to the reidentification of some schools as full-service schools, to accommodate learners with disabilities who fit the assessment criteria in an inclusive context, with at least one in each district. This was intended to limit the load on the special schools from having to accommodate every learner with special needs. Instead, *ordinary schools* accommodate learners who require minimal to no support, *full-service schools* accommodate learners who require moderate support, while *special schools (resources centres)* accommodate learners who require an intensive level of educational and related support (DoE 2001). Despite the policy laying a foundation for success, the implementation of IE in South Africa is far from perfect.

The general lack of clarity and guidance offered by the EWP6 and accompanying guidelines impacts the success of the implementation of IE (Donohue & Bornman 2014). The guidelines (2005, 2010) require educators to possess a certain skill level for them to effectively implement IE, specific to the context, through adapting their teaching methods and materials accordingly, which many educators experienced a lack thereof, as reported by Mpu and Adu (2021). This could be because of the lack of specialised training (Nel et al. 2016), in addition to a difficulty in implementing the ambitious policies in place (Dube et al. 2021). Thus, learners with HL tend to experience neglect in an inclusive setting among their peers (Xie, Potmėšil & Peters 2014), which compromises the key goal of IE. Financial support for schools, provided by the South African Government according to the quintile ranking system that aimed at readdressing the inequalities created by apartheid, has its own challenges (Van Dyk & White 2019). Although the quintile system seems effective in theory, insufficient funding for IE has been experienced as a challenge for educators in South Africa (Bamu et al. 2017), and this continues to be the case as suggested by the current study amplifying this finding.

Aim

The literature covers the education of learners with disabilities in general and the related educator experiences (Donohue & Bornman 2014; Mpu & Adu 2021; Sharma, Dunay & Dely 2018; Walton & Engelbrecht 2022). Yet, there is a void in contemporary literature covering IE for learners with HL. The extent to which the intended and practical application of IE in South Africa, as recommended in the EWP6 and accompanying guidelines, seems to be receiving minimal attention in literature. In response to the above problem, this study aimed to explore the educators' experiences of teaching learners with HL within an inclusive context and the extent to which their current teaching practices incorporate the inclusive practices suggested in the EWP6, its accompanying guidelines and the comprehensive international model by Mitchell (2015). The following research questions were formulated to guide the response to this study aim:

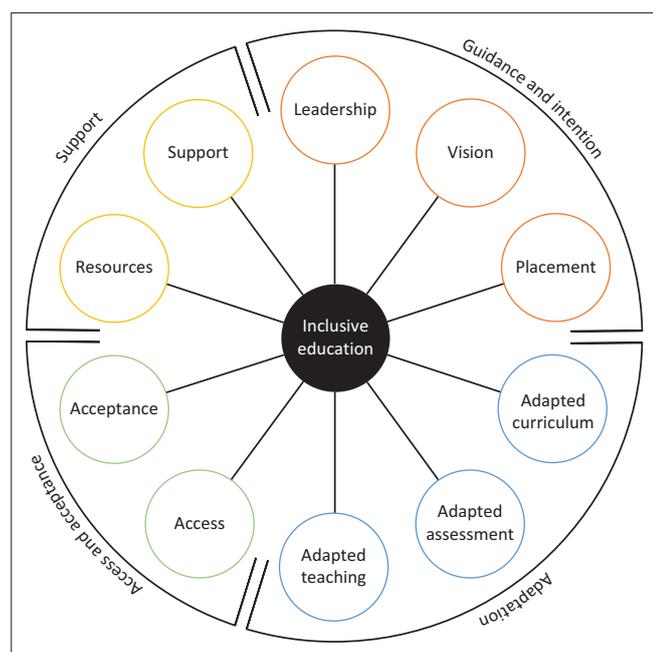
1. What are the teachers' general experiences of teaching learners with HL, within an IE context?
2. How do teachers accommodate learners with HL in an inclusive classroom?
3. What are the challenges and facilitators of practically implementing IE experienced by educators of learners with HL in inclusive schools?
4. To what extent do educators in inclusive schools incorporate the IEM (Figure 1) (Mitchell 2015) and the EWP6 in teaching learners with HL within an inclusive classroom?

Conceptual frame

The conceptual understanding of IE in this study was framed by the IEM (Mitchell 2015), as it covered all key aspects of IE. The IEM (Figure 1) (Mitchell 2015) illustrates the different elements of IE, hence its adoption as a conceptual frame that guided the researchers' perspective of IE. The IEM was adapted by the researchers into four key themes, guided by relevant literature and the EWP6, including guidance and intentions, adaptations, access and acceptance and support.

Although the IEM is a model based on international principles, it encompasses all of the necessary aspects to implement a successful IE programme, thus justifying its use in this study.

Guidance and intentions involve the common, philosophical vision across leading stakeholders towards providing a conducive environment suited for learners with and without special educational needs. *Access and acceptance* involve fostering equitable, physical *access* to education depending on the learner's special needs, while optimising academic and social skills development and mutual *acceptance* among differently abled learners (Lorger et al. 2015). *Support* entails



Source: Mitchell, D.R., 2015, 'Inclusive education is a multi-faceted concept', *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal* 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.151>

FIGURE 1: Adapted from the inclusive education model.

the provision of necessary academic resources and other *support*, with intention to ensure equitable access for learners with differing disabilities. *Adaptations* entails the modifications made to the curriculum (teaching, learning and assessment) to accommodate all learners with differing capabilities (Mitchell 2015). These themes, and the categories within each, were used to organise and analyse the data.

Research methods and design

Design

Within an interpretive paradigm, a phenomenology design was adopted for this study (Irrázaval 2020). Two key phenomenological tenets framed the researcher's perspective on the educators' experiences. Firstly, the world exists as experienced, and secondly, no two individuals can experience the same phenomenon completely in the same way (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio 2019). The current study adopted a qualitative, descriptive, explorative approach to explore and describe the experiences of educator's teaching of learners with HL in an inclusive context (Lambert & Lambert 2012). This design best suited the need to explore the first-hand experiences of the educators that participated in the study as it was not the phenomenon of teaching learners with HL, but the experiences thereof, as lived by the participants, that the researchers were interested in.

Setting and participants

The study was conducted in fulfilment of a postgraduate degree, and the data was collected in public schools that provide IE, within the KZN Province, South Africa. A total of 25 full-service and ordinary schools that catered to the learner with HL were selected and contacted, with the intention of identifying 15 appropriate participants. The number of participants was deemed appropriate as it would most likely allow for the saturation of data (Latham 2020). Out of the 25 schools that were contacted, two schools participated in the study. The KZN Province was selected for the research project as it encompassed the multicultural tapestry of South Africa and allowed the researcher to obtain data from educators of various settings (rural and urban). Thus, the research findings were, arguably, a fair representation of the current inclusive teaching practices for learners with HL.

Data collection was deemed complete after six purposively sampled educators had participated in the study (Table 1), as data saturation was reached, where further data collection did not produce themes that were not already present in the data (Saunders et al. 2017). Each participant had to be currently working in an inclusive school and exposed to learners with HL. All participants had been teaching learners with HL within an inclusive context for at least a minimum of 2 years, with the most experienced in this regard being 10 years. An in-depth interview with each participant indicated that they each had been teaching for many years prior to teaching learners with HL within an inclusive context (see Table 1). Therefore, the cumulative experience of teaching learners

TABLE 1: Participant demographic information.

Demographical information						
Participant	Gender	Years of experience (years)	Years of experience with learners with HL (years)	Classification of school	Quintileranking	Schoolsetting
1	F	10	5	Full service	Q3	Urban
2	F	10	2	Full service	Q3	Urban
3	F	20	5	Ordinary	Q5	Urban
4	F	15	10	Full service	Q3	Urban
5	F	10	5	Full service	Q3	Urban
6	F	4	2	Full service	Q3	Urban

F, female; HL, hearing loss.

with HL, within an inclusive context, was at least 29 years across the participants, which was copious exposure for them to provide in-depth reflections. The participants were exposed to a variety of learners with HL throughout their teaching experience, thus providing them with experience across varying degrees of HL, loss of functionality and amplification needs. However, it must be noted that at the time the study was conducted, none of the educators were teaching learners with HL who had any assistive or amplification devices currently in use.

Participants were all female and mostly homogeneous, in being from Quintile 3 schools within the urban area. The Quintile 3 schools are not considered affluent, yet not poor enough to be prioritised for maximum funding, thus presenting a vulnerable context (Mestry, & Bisschoff, 2009), worthy of the attention in research projects like the current one. Of the participants, three of them only used verbal cues when communicating with their learners; however, one participant supplemented verbal instructions with written cues. However, all participants were exposed to at least one or more learners with a significant HL of moderate level (35 dBHL) or more in at least one ear.

Data collection and analysis

A pilot study was conducted with two participants, following the same recruitment and data collection process as the main study (Leon, Davis & Kraemer 2011). No changes were needed to the data collection process and methods prior to conducting the main study. The participants who took part in the pilot and the data gathered from them were excluded from the main study. For the main study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, guided by the interview schedule (developed by the researcher and guided by the IEM), via an online platform (Zoom). In addition to closely following the interview schedule, the author was able to probe further, with intention to elicit rich reflection from each participant where needed. Thus, despite other participants being less forthcoming with their experiences than others, this process allowed for all interviews to be relatively similar in depth. All audio data were automatically recorded onto a password-protected computer that belonged to the researcher.

The raw data was transcribed twice. Firstly, verbatim transcription was manually conducted by the researcher, transforming audio files into text files (Duranti 2009).

Secondly, the audio files were transcribed using the NVivo 12 software, separately, as a parallel process and a way of double checking the accuracy of the transcription (Zamawe 2015). Where differences existed in the transcription for each interview, the researchers reassessed the audio at specific timestamps to correct the errors. Where necessary, data cleaning included the removal of redundant speech, which did not alter the intention of the speaker, such as 'Uhm' and 'yeah', along with aspects of speech that did not contribute to the topic. The transcripts were then sent to the participants to observe member checking, thus increasing credibility and the richness of the data (Honorene 2017).

Through content analysis, the data was coded and organised into the preexisting subthemes of the IEM, as shown in Figure 1, following a deductive approach (Elo & Kyngäs 2008). Subsequently, emergent themes were formulated by collating the organising subthemes, through thematic analysis following the steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006:87). Each of the two authors generated the emerging themes separately, prior to meeting to compare and agree on the final emerging themes. Therefore, related excerpts within each organising subtheme were placed into themes by the principal researcher. Both researchers cross-checked and agreed on the emergent themes prior to finalising the current article.

Trustworthiness of research

Methodological rigour and transparency about the processes followed in the study enhanced *dependability* (Kyngäs, Kääriäinen & Elo 2020). Data saturation was duly achieved when there were no longer new codes generated from the new data (Urquhart 2013). This was evident between the fifth and sixth interviews, as the sixth did not generate any new codes. This was used to judge the completeness and richness of the generated data, to ensure that the data represented, as closely as possible, the experiences of educators in the study's context, thus enhancing dependability and rigour before terminating data collection (Guest, Namey & Chen 2020). *Transferability* was ensured through a rigorous methodological application, including representative sampling and *bracketing* of the researcher's own experiences ensuring that the findings could be representative of and transferable to similar contexts (Nowell et al. 2017). *Confirmability* was maintained throughout by a rigorous verbatim transcription and retranscription to correct the errors identified from the first transcription. *Bracketing* out the researchers' biases also contributed positively in

confirmability, as this ensures that the conclusions made were founded in the study findings. *Member checking* further contributed in enhancing confirmability of the findings as participants reviewed their transcripts (Johnson, Adkins & Chauvin 2020). The use of direct quotes, over and above sharing the rigorous processes in the study, further enhanced credibility (FitzPatrick 2019).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearances were obtained from the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC/00002351/2021) of the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the KZN Department of Education (Ref: 2/4/8/7042), to ensure that the study is ethically and scientifically sound.

Gatekeeper permission was obtained from the school management of every participating school and all participants were required to provide a written form of consent via an informed consent form. Participants were ensured that their participation was voluntary with autonomy to withdraw if the participants wished to do so. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying factors were removed from the final report.

Results

The emerging themes were organised within the four organising themes and subthemes, derived from the conceptual framework (IEM), as seen in Figure 2.

The key findings suggest that, although the participants had predominately positive experiences of teaching within the IE context, they experienced challenges in the practical implementation of IE. Educators obtained assistance in teaching learners with HL from a variety of sources, including their colleagues, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and relevant professionals. However, the extent of their support was limited. The educators do consider the

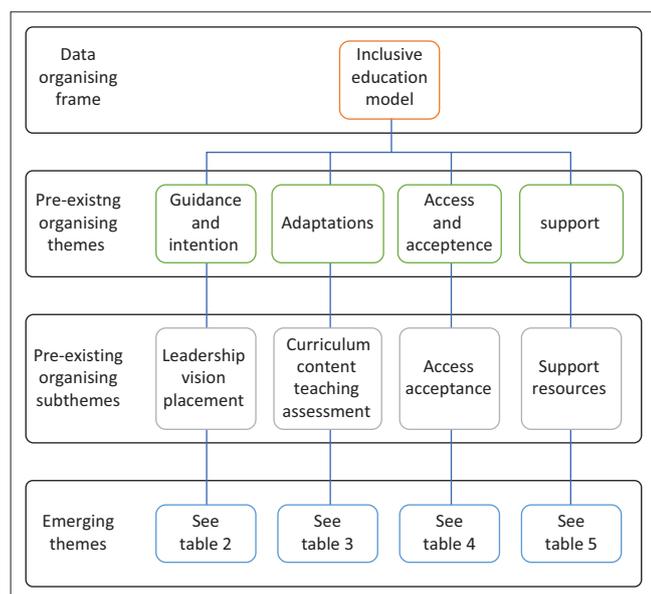


FIGURE 2: Organising frame for data analysis.

recommendations in the EWP6 and its guidelines. Yet, their successful practical implementation of IE may be hindered by the fact that they are only embracing some recommendations of the guidelines, instead of additionally seeking guidance from international and comprehensive models, such as the IEM (Mitchell 2015).

Guidance and intention towards implementing inclusive education

Three preexisting organising subthemes under guidance and intention included leadership, vision and placement. The emerging themes are depicted in Table 2.

The educators' different conceptions of the vision of inclusive education

When the participants were asked to describe what IE meant to them, four of the six participants (Participants 1, 2, 4 and 6) pointed out academic inclusivity. They placed importance on the need to adapt their teaching practices and create an inclusive environment within their classroom. Participant 2 paid little attention to the 'social' inclusion of the learners, which suggests that this was not perceived to be an integral part of IE. Participants 3 and 5 seemed to recognise the social aspect of integration in IE. These participants expressed the need to create a classroom where all learners felt welcomed and equal, with minimal to no segregation of the learner according to their disabilities:

'For me, inclusive education means that we have to balance our teaching for all the kinds of children [*learners*] that we meet.' (Participant 2, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

'Basically, inclusive education Every child has the right to be educated alongside their peers. They should not be segregated in anyway unless it is absolutely necessary and we cannot fulfil the child's basic needs.' (Participant 3, 20 years of experience, ordinary school)

'Inclusive education, to me ... It means that we have the diversity of the learners that have to be equal We are different from each other and they have to accept it.' (Participant 5, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

The difference in conceptions demonstrates that the educators do not share a similar vision of IE. The findings also suggest that the educators may be only addressing either the academic or social needs of their learner(s), therefore not fulfilling their primary role of providing to their learners' holistic needs (DoE 2001:6).

TABLE 2: Findings concerning guidance and intentions.

Organising category	Emerging themes
Vision	1. IE as academic inclusion 2. IE as social inclusion
Leadership	1. Sufficient leadership through meetings with management 2. Sufficient guidance from fellow educators 3. Ambiguous guidance from the EWP6 4. Reliance on own experience 5. Use of school-based policies
Placement	1. Tedious and time-consuming referral process 2. Lack of area-based (catchment area) admission system

IE, inclusive education; EWP6, Education White Paper 6.

Experience of leadership

Leadership from management and related support were generally sufficient. Leadership in this study was defined as the communication and guidance the educators received from their school management and the KZN DBE. The findings indicated that five participants (Participant 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6) had frequent meetings with their school management, some on a daily basis, as a means of management. In addition, four participants (Participants 2, 4, 5 and 6) reported that they are monitored regularly by either their school management or by the KZN DBE:

'Every morning, we normally have a briefing That's where we talk about the challenges or if we see anything new.' (Participant 1, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

'[A] we have Mrs [name] from the district who comes often to check if we are on the right track.' (Participant 2, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

'Every month. Even twice or five times a month.' (Participant 6, 4 years of experience, full-service school)

This indicated that most of the participants were able to communicate with either their school management or directly to their district officials for guidance on IE.

Limited guidance pertaining to the implementation of the Education White Paper 6

Participants reported challenges in the interpretation of the EWP6, thus affecting their ability to implement IE. According to Participant 3, the EWP6 is vague, with nuances of encouraging segregation rather than inclusion. This vagueness leads to participants relying predominantly on their own work experience as the key guide to creating an IE environment for their learners. This also leads to educators relying more on school-specific policies or guidelines, as indicated by Participants 5 and 1:

'If you look at White Paper 6 [2001], it is very ambiguous. They are essentially more catered to people's perceptions that the disabled still need to be segregated.' (Participant 3, 20 years of experience, ordinary school)

'We do use one [a policy] but it's mostly our own [work] experience because we have to prepare something for that learner.' (Participant 5, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

'Yes, there is a school policy that we are using ... because every time you are teaching, you have to follow the level of children ...'. (Participant 1, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

The above findings suggest that while there is guidance for educators, the nature of guidance is typically unique in each school, as opposed to being based on the common EWP6, with some educators relying on personal experience.

The placement of learners with disabilities

Tedious and time-consuming referral process: Another difficulty was experienced in the referral process for learners who do not show progress in their development. Therefore, a learner with a severe HL would need to go through many assessments to generate a referral report, as indicated by Participant 2, who outlines the process:

'[W]e start with the observation sheet, where you observe the child's problem ... then if you see that there is no progress, then use you fill in that first form [SNA 1] . Then you take that form to the SMT and the SBSC. Then they check it and fill in the SNA 2, which helps in the referral. And then if they [the learner] need a psychologist, they take them to the psychologist. If it's an audiologist, they take them to those kinds of specialists. And then they are the ones who are going to write the [assessment] report for the child so that when it goes to the district, it goes with all the information so that the child can be placed properly ...'. (Participant 2, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

The process detailed by Participant 2 shows the many steps educators must take to refer a learner who cannot be accommodated at their school; with the process being completed in 6 months, some learners end up not receiving quality education during that time, which affects their academic progression in comparison to their peers.

Lack of area-based control system: Appropriate placement is further restricted by limited schools that can provide IE. As a result, area-based placement is not always feasible in South Africa. When asked if they used catchment areas in admitting learners, Participant 1 reported that their school did not pay attention to catchment areas, but instead ensured to admit any learner with a disability, in need of education:

'Not exactly, we don't have a catchment area exactly. The parents, or the community, know that [school name] is a full-service school. So, we can help the child, any child who's coming. ... We can't say the child must go back home, we have to help.' (Participant 1, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

Although noble, this practise would place a burden on educators and lead to the overcrowding of classrooms. This would present a challenge for schools that are full service but underresourced.

Adaptations to accommodate learners with hearing loss within inclusive education

The adaptation of the curriculum content, assessment and teaching practices play a critical role in the success of the implementation of IE (Dalton et al. 2012; Mitchell 2015). Practically, curriculum adaptation presented the participants with challenges, which are shared in the emerging themes (Table 3).

Adapting the assessment

The EWP6 specified the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) as a suitable syllabus for all learners. With appropriate guidelines, educators should be confident adapting the curriculum content (Dalton et al. 2012). However, this did not seem to be the case with the current study participants for various reasons. Participant 3 noted that educators may feel that they do not have the knowledge to sufficiently differentiate the curriculum as a means to accommodate all learners:

'... it boils down to a lot of teachers feeling that they do not actually have the capability of differentiating the curriculum.' (Participant 3, 20 years of experience, ordinary school)

TABLE 3: Findings concerning adaptations in inclusive education.

Organising category	Emerging theme
Adapted curriculum	1. Lack of confidence in adapting curriculum content
Adapted assessment	1. Adapting length of assessment time 2. Adapting the presentation (visual and auditory or verbal) of assessment items 3. Challenge: Lack of guidance 4. Challenge: Lack of variation in content
Adapted teaching practices	1. Adapting the classroom arrangement (learner positioning) in class 2. Adapting the mode of instruction (to verbal and visual [sign]) 3. Strategic grouping of learners with different abilities 4. Challenge: Lack of training 5. Challenge: Lack of professional assistance 6. Challenge: Maintaining equal interest on tasks

As some learners may struggle to complete assessment tasks on time, their assessment time was increased. Two participants (Participants 1 and 4) reported use of this practice:

‘And there are those learners who take a long time to finish the paper. So, for a paper for one hour, we make it two hours or one hour and 30 minutes.’ (Participant 4, 15 years of experience, full-service school)

‘We have to apply for the concession forms for them to write their exams. We have to see their problems, then we apply for the concession to help these children [*learners*] achieve.’ (Participant 1, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

A further adaptation is made in the presentation of the assessment tasks as indicated by Participant 3, who would include the auditory presentation to supplement the visually presented paper, by reading out the questions to the learners. Participant 4 noted that they presented the learners with different difficulty levels so as to allow learners with disabilities to answer what they were able to:

‘I do my own reading to my kids [*learners*] when they have a test and that, but there are actually no guidelines on how to implement inclusive education.’ (Participant 3, 20 years of experience, ordinary school)

‘[T]he questions are the same ... The levels; low-order, mid-order and high-order; they only get the low-order questions. Mid-order and high-order, they don’t get [*don’t understand*] because they are too high for them. This is where I see a problem. There has to be a paper for them because we usually plan separately for them.’ (Participant 4, 15 years of experience, full-service school)

Despite the aforementioned adaptations, learners are essentially assessed on the same exams, which leave some participants feeling that this sets the learners up for failure. Another challenge is that the participants are clearly following different, individualistic approaches to adapting their assessment, which leaves room for some level of standardisation in this regard.

Adapting the teaching

Four participants (Participants 1, 2, 4 and 5) optimised the learners’ access to visual and auditory stimuli by positioning

specific learners closer to the front, based on their disability and strategically grouping the learners for the similar purpose, so that peer learning would be optimised between all learners:

‘And with the learner with [*hearing*] impairments, we have to make sure that we are facing them all the time. When you [*the teacher*] are talking, sometimes they read your lips. They want to know your facial expression if you are saying something.’ (Participant 1, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

‘And the seating arrangement, you must put them [*the learners with disabilities*] with learners who doesn’t have a special need. So, they can feel that they are in the classroom, they are participating, even in the classroom.’ (Participant 4, 15 years of experience, full-service school)

‘[B]ut if you see that this child is having some challenges, we have to include that child in a group that will help and mentor him or her. So, they will help him or her ... while [*the teachers*] are dealing with the other children. The child mustn’t be left alone and lost.’ (Participant 1, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

Similarly, to the assessments, the mode of presentation was adapted during teaching. While three of the participants (Participants 1, 2 and 6) only used verbal communication when providing instructions to learners with HL, Participant 2 supplemented the verbal with written instructions:

‘So, when you do give them instructions, do you just use verbal communication?’ (Interviewer)

‘Yes. And written.’ (Participant 2, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

The above excerpt indicates how teachers enforced inclusivity in classroom, in a way that would provide opportunity for a diverse range of interaction. The learners without disability not only assisted those with disabilities, but they are likely to also learn and appreciate opportunities to interact with their peers.

Challenges in adapting teaching

Participants reported that challenges, such as background noise, a lack of resources and assistive devices (see Support and Resources), overcrowding in the classroom and time constraints in lessons, contributed to the difficulties faced in practically implementing IE. In addition, Participant 4 indicated that the educators were not sufficiently trained to teach learners with varying disabilities:

‘I think the problem is that I am not trained on how to deal with and teach a learner with hearing impairment ... I think that is the problem. I think those learners need those special educators. The person who is trained on how to teach them.’ (Participant 4, 15 years of experience, full-service school)

The above excerpt highlights the misconception among educators that only certain educators should teach learners with special needs, despite the EWP6 suggesting that all educators should be confident in their abilities of adapting their teaching strategies to suit the needs of all learners. Participants 6 and 5 expressed the challenge with

maintaining equal interest of learners with different disabilities in one session. While paying attention to the learners with disability, those without or with less severe disability feel underserved:

'And when you're busy with those learners who have special needs, the other learners are bored. You have to accommodate them too. Sometimes, you end up not doing justice to the learners.' (Participant 6, 4 years of experience, full-service school)

'And it does affect the learner's performance. The learner is like, okay to perform; but this hearing problem is pushing her down and she can't perform properly... but the one that can't hear; she just sits there and looks at you.' (Participant 5, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

The above excerpts indicate that achieving consistency in the attention given to the learners with differing abilities is among the key challenges, often leaving educators with a feeling of neglect towards some learners.

Experience with access and acceptance in inclusive education

The findings suggest that physical access to IE for learners with disabilities is open to all. However, because of many factors, not all deserving learners end up accessing it. The related emerging themes are shared in Table 4.

Arbitrary access to inclusive education for learners with disabilities

Arbitrary admission of learners without due selection process

According to Participant 1, inclusive schools remain open to be accessible by all in need. Yet, the challenge remains in the limited information the parents have about the kind and severity of disabilities that can be accommodated in inclusive schools. Thus, some learners, according to Participant 2, are admitted into their school, whereas they should be accessing special schools:

'We take every child [*in*] our community. So, that's the challenge that we're facing every day.' (Participant 1, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

'[S]ome of the parents are not well informed when it comes to special needs. So, ... they just bring them to our school. Without even looking for a special school that will properly accommodate their child.' (Participant 2, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

These findings indicate that learners are being accepted into schools without a comprehensive assessment of the learner's special needs. Although this is a noble deed that ensures no

child is without education, some learners end up admitted into schools that may not be appropriate for their needs, thus placing additional pressure on the educator.

Acceptance of learners

Good social inclusivity and limited acceptance of the learner with hearing loss

As the social development of a child is important to their academic success (Pianta & Hamre 2009), the social inclusivity of the learner with HL is fundamental in IE. Four of the participants (Participants 1, 3, 4 and 5) reported that the learners with HL were accepted among their peers. Participant 1 reported that the learner's disabilities did not dictate their ability to socialise in school or receive academic assistance from their peers. Hence, they seem to be benefiting immensely from IE (Participant 3):

'[T]hey do live a normal life during break or in our lessons. They communicate very well and they understand them [*learners with HL*]. The learners know that the child has a difficulty and sometimes they will help her.' (Participant 1, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

'She's been with me since Grade 4, she's now in Grade 6, she has now improved dramatically with her social skills and that is because she's interacting with other normal children. She's learnt how to play; she's learnt how to interact So that was the biggest improvement.' (Participant 3, 20 years of experience, ordinary school)

The above excerpts indicate that through social inclusion, some learners with HL benefit and experience improvement of social skills. However, social acceptance remains limited in inclusive schools, between the learners (Participant 4) and by themselves, as Participant 2 indicates:

'They all know that this learner has a problem; sometimes they laugh at this particular child. They know that this child can't write, they can't read, this child cannot see. Then this child feels embarrassed. They can't even answer the question in the classroom, because they know that those learners, they always laugh at them. So, IE, sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not.' (Participant 4, 15 years of experience, full-service school)

'So, I was talking to his mom and she was very concerned about his feelings, because they received his first term report and he failed. So, he feels like he doesn't exist. He feels like a failure. He's just angry at himself. So, if IE was to be elaborated, even to the community, I think it would make a better world for us. Because these kids would feel a sense of belonging, they would not be ridiculed and told that they're stupid, and all those kinds of things, because it's not their fault.' (Participant 2, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

While inclusivity is experienced and benefits the learners, such benefits are competing with limited acceptance of the different disabilities among the learners in schools. Bullying is still a serious and common occurrence, which seems to demonstrate that there is much room for learners to accept each other's differences. With such lack of social acceptance, some learners even struggle to accept their disabilities, thus affecting their self-esteem.

TABLE 4: Findings concerning access and acceptance in inclusive education.

Organising category	Emerging theme
Access	1. Arbitrary admission of learners without due selection process
Acceptance	1. Good social inclusivity 2. Limited social acceptance by others 3. LWD's limited self-acceptance of own disability

LWD, learners with disabilities.

TABLE 5: Findings concerning support and resources in inclusive education.

Organising category	Emerging theme
Support	1. Limited access and support from healthcare professionals (non-teaching professionals) 2. Limited parental (social and financial) support
Resources	1. Limited human resources (teacher assistants) 2. Limited equipment resources (teaching aids or devices) 3. Limited knowledge of assistive devices

Support and resources

Support from relevant stakeholders, such as parents, is paramount in the implementation of IE (Kozibroda et al. 2020), as indicated within the emerging themes. The participants experienced limited support in general. The relevant emerging themes concerning support and resources are depicted in Table 5.

Support from non-teaching professionals and learners' parents

Limited support from non-teaching professionals

Support refers to any assistance received from non-teaching staff, such as therapists and healthcare professionals, the KZN DBE and other educators. Three participants (Participants 4, 5 and 6) experienced support from non-teaching staff at their school. However, not all professionals were accessible, such as an audiologist, to some participants (Participants 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6). Instead, they typically experience delays despite following lengthy application processes to access such assistance (Participant 2):

'Usually, our principal used to call the doctors, the special doctors, just to come and view this child and help them.' (Participant 6, 4 years of experience, full-service school)

'No, we've never had [an audiologist]. We have children with a stutter so we've been applying and applying, and we've never received any feedback about it.' (Participant 1, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

'You have to ask them to come and they will take their sweet time, maybe come after two months of you requesting that they come to the school. And maybe, you even have to refer the child to a clinic. And maybe in the clinic, they won't get help because the particular person that you're looking for is not in for the day.' (Participant 2, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

The above excerpts suggest that there is room for coordinated efforts towards ensuring access to non-teaching professionals. The current practices leave the educators and learners with disabilities within IE with little to no support from healthcare professionals. Adding to the above challenge was the limited or lack of parental involvement in inclusive schools (Participant 4). Participant 4 reports that she found herself playing a parent's role when one of her learners needed a parent for a hospital visit:

'I took the learner to the nearest clinic, and then they [the hospital staff] said they want the parents. Then the parents hesitated to come and help the learner. So, we just end up not knowing how to help the learner because the parents said; "I'm busy, I can't come". Or "I can't do this", "I can't sign this, I'm busy". They're neglecting their own children. So, you can't continue helping the

child when the parent is not there.' (Participant 4, 15 years of experience, full-service school)

'The parents that will come to the meeting, are the parents of the learners who don't have any problems. The parents of the learners who have a problem, they don't come at all.' (Participant 4, 15 years of experience, full-service school)

The learner's support system is further impacted by additional forces, such as the financial difficulties that their family might face. Two participants (Participants 2 and 5) reported that their learners faced financial difficulties which could be impeding the support available to the learners. Participant 5 reported that parents are reluctant to send their child to an appropriate school, because of the disability grant they are receiving:

'But sometimes the parents don't want to take the learner to a special school because there's this money that they are getting. They don't want to take care of the learner with that money, they just want that money for themselves. They want to keep that child and they waste the child's time here in our school. Even though we cannot help the learner.' (Participant 5, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

Not only does the act of limiting access to the disability grant for the learner with special needs impact the financial resources available to the learner, but it also limits the learners accessibility to important resources required for their academic progression.

Resources

Limited equipment and human resources for educators in inclusive education

Two key themes emerged, including limited equipment resources and limited human resources. Five participants (1, 2, 4, 5 and 6) reported not having access to visual aids, such as picture cards, needed to adapt and make teaching suitable for learners with disabilities. Participant 5 also reported that they do not have enough teaching assistants and have to share one with other educators:

'... [B]ut the resources, I think we need to improve that. We need more resources ... and the projectors, but not enough so we have to share the projector.' (Participant 5, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

'There is only one teaching assistant and she goes all around. She has to go to the intermediate and the foundation phases.' (Participant 5, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

Some learners with HL need assistive devices, such as hearing aids and FM systems, among various other needs. Three participants (Participants 2, 4 and 5) revealed that their learners with HL did not have hearing aids, and those with FM systems did not seem to be using them correctly:

'Not having a hearing aid is a huge problem, because as much as you come closer, they can try and read your lips; you can try by all means possible but sometimes they cannot understand or do as good as they could have if they had an assistive device. That is one of the biggest challenges for the hearing-impaired kids.' (Participant 2, 10 years of experience, full-service school)

'I have an FM system which I used for the one little girl but she didn't actually really need it because she's not completely deaf, she's hard of hearing. So, she doesn't actually need it,' (Participant 3, 20 years of experience, ordinary school)

Participant 3 indicated that one of her learners had access to an FM system; however, she does not seem to fully understand its purpose as she indicates in the above excerpt. The key purpose of the FM system is to limit the auditory distraction through improving the signal to noise ratio in the sound environment, which helps those with auditory processing challenges, even in the absence of an HL (Purdy et al. 2009). Yet, possibly because of limited understanding of the FM system, the educator does not use it as intended, further impacting the learner. This suggests that availability of some resources alone is insufficient without the needed support from relevant healthcare providers, such as an audiologist.

Discussion

General experiences of teaching learners with hearing loss within inclusive education

This study was conducted within one province of South Africa, where circumstances might have elements of uniqueness from other provinces. Yet, where conditions match those of the study settings, the findings remain applicable, even though the aim was not to generalise the findings to other contexts. The current study has indicated that IE is perceived differently by different educators, with some foregrounding the educational development while others foreground the social aspect. These perspective differences suggested a possibility that the implementation of IE is also different among the educators. This was further supported by the findings that indicated a predominantly institution-based implementation of IE, as opposed to one that follows a standardised approach, despite the availability of a policy and related guidelines for the implementation of the IE (DoBE 2010; DoE 2001).

However, the findings indicated that the study participants did not feel clearly guided by the EWP6 although being the main policy on IE for over 20 years. The same concern was previously noted by Storbeck and Moodley (2011) who noted the poor guidance towards the implementation of IE policies by educators. Likewise, Donohue and Bornman (2014) argued that the guidance at a policy level is simply insufficient for educators. For this and other reasons, the curriculum in IE remains largely suitable for learners without disability, despite some adaptations (Störbeck et al. 2010). Therefore, the room for different interpretations of the EWP6 remains wide enough for IE to be implemented differently at each school, which, we argue, needs to be addressed urgently. A further concern is the lack of specialised training that educators reported, while the current IE system, as it is set out, relies on their expertise in teaching learners with disabilities. The lack of training is a major concern among educators as indicated

in literature (Mpu & Adu 2021; Nel et al. 2014) and supported by the current study.

Challenges and facilitators experienced by educators in the inclusive education context

Among many challenges, the correct placement of learners was mentioned where the administration process was open to all learners with disability, regardless of whether they met inclusive school criteria. Therefore, educators' challenges started with the access and placement process. These were then followed by tedious administration processes once the learners had been admitted, including when they had to access support from other professionals, or needed to be referred to a more suitable school. This potentially contributes to the educators' silent frustrations (Nel et al. 2014), suggesting that the administration that should ideally be carried out by administrators (Flem, Moen & Gudmundsdottir 2004) becomes their responsibility.

The lack of support, or delayed access to other stakeholders including parents, resulted in learners placed with educators who struggled to accommodate them. The findings suggested that the parents have a differing conception and attitude about the importance of their role in their children's learning; the reasons for their lack of involvement in the context studied were not provided. However, a study conducted in Germany found that the parental involvement depended largely on their attitude towards IE, and those with a positive attitude tended to be much more involved in their children's education (Paseka & Schwab 2020).

On the contrary, the participants received the needed support from school management and colleagues through frequent communication, where concerns about teaching would be addressed. This support helped with institutional-based IE implementation, fostering positive experiences in this regard. These findings are similar to the findings reported by Nel et al. (2016) who found that educators had a positive experience with institutional-based support as opposed to the insufficient support they received outside their specific schools towards implementing IE. The support from internal structures alone, mentioned earlier, was clearly insufficient in closing the gap of the needed support from other stakeholders. The educators reporting the lack of stakeholder support as a challenge in IE suggests that such stakeholders, including parents, have a significant role in the effective implementation of IE.

All the above challenges put the educators in a position where they needed resources, including teaching aids and personnel. These were not always available, potentially because of the education funding system that does not seem to prioritise IE as it should, at least as experienced by the educators in this study. Instead, the current funding model (Quintile system) prioritises funding for schools who are classified as Quintile 1, whereas most of the participants in the study teach in Quintile 3 schools. Yet, their needs could be equal to or exceed Quintile 1 schools because of having

learners with different disabilities. These findings are consistent with a study conducted by Makoelle and Burmistrova (2020) in a South African province, which concluded that the current funding system and practices are insufficient to support IE, leading to resource constraints in those schools. Furthermore, Van Dyk and White (2019) revealed the same, especially in low-quintile schools, and further add that there is a need to reconsider the funding approach to a more holistic one, if learners with HL and other disabilities are to be afforded IE experiences.

Adaptations to accommodate the learner with hearing loss in inclusive education

Despite the general challenges in the participants' experiences, they still managed to accommodate the learners with HL and other disabilities through adjusting how they teach and assessed, with the CAPS curriculum keeping the content relatively unchanged. Thus, the participant followed the model of differentiated instruction and assessment, as opposed to a content-based model of accommodating learners with HL and other disabilities.

The teachers typically used their creativity and experience to implement IE, as there are no standardized set of steps they could follow in adjusting the curriculum to suit learners with HL within IE settings. Some participants used ungraded reading books, which was typically easier for the learners to cope with, thus encouraging the learners (Scruggs, Mastropieri & Marshak 2012), while accommodating the different reading skills in the same classroom, as recommended in the EWP6. Other teaching adaptations included the adjustments to the modalities of communication, where some educators supplemented visual information with auditory stimuli. They further adjusted how learners sit in class in order to optimise their exposure to stimuli, depending on their needs. The strategic grouping of learners with different capabilities was also used to facilitate cooperation and peer learning between the learners, as recommended in the Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the classroom through Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (DoBE 2011).

The assessment adaptations were similar to the aforementioned teaching adaptations. Adapting assessments to suit the needs of a learner provides them with opportunities to thrive to the best of their abilities (Gardner 1983). Findings in the current study indicated that the educators adapted the assessments by adjusting the length of examination times, presentation of exam content to their learners and by varying the difficulty of questions throughout the article. Again, there was no standardised method of doing this, which presented a challenge to the educators. The reported lack of guidance in this regard suggests that the educators were either not aware of the Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the classroom through Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (DoBE 2011) or they did not find them to be sufficient in guiding their curriculum adaptation practices. As a result of the lack of guidance, learners with HL may

experience difficulties completing assessments, thus affecting their academic progression.

Limited guidance offered by the inclusive education model and Education White Paper 6

The study findings suggest that the extent to which the IEM and the EWP6 were adopted by educator of learners with HL in IE was very limited, if at all. The curriculum adaptations, staff support, admissions and other practices were typically unique to each school, with each participant having unique methods of implementing IE.

Therefore, it is possible that the lack of awareness of the details of the EWP6 and the IEM, or other suitable models of implementing IE, contributed to the diversity of IE practices among educators. Those who were aware of the EWP6 had different interpretations of its key intentions. This, along with the vague nature of this policy (DoE 2001) and related guidelines (DoBE 2005, 2010, 2011), could have further contributed to the limited extent to which they were adopted by the educators in this study.

Implications and recommendations

- Future research should include a broader study setting, including educators from the private and public sector, across the country of South Africa.
- Perspectives and experiences of other stakeholders such as of school management, district-based support teams, parents, LWDs, teacher assistants and policymakers should be investigated.

The findings suggest a need for a tighter relationship and collaboration between the DBE and Department of Health, or specific professions such as psychologists, occupational therapists, audiologists and many others. A collaborative effort to IE would possibly limit the burden on educators while improving their focus on teaching the learners, thus additionally improving their knowledge on different disabilities and best approaches to accommodate them. Improving the skill-level of educators within IE through detailed training throughout tertiary education and frequent in-service training would have a dramatic effect on the ability of educators to provide efficient IE. The human, financial and other resources have a great impact on application of IE and thus need urgent attention from relevant stakeholders. There appears to be a need for a funding model for IE specifically, different to the Quintile system in order to limit some of the challenges reported by the participants.

Overall, there is a strong policy review implication and a need for regular processes to monitor the application of the existing IE policy and guidelines. There is currently a good government policy, with room to improve, but it does not help if it is not adopted by the educators. Most importantly, standardisation of IE practices must be considered so that the unique institutional practices do not completely dominate IE.

Limitations

While the response to the invitation to participate was low, six participants were sufficient for this in-depth approach followed in the study. Having reached a point of data saturation gave the authors an impression that there was not much data to be generated in the field and the data was satisfactory. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually, which could have limited the richness of the data generated. While purposive sampling ensures a good participant sample, there is room for research to be conducted with participants who teach more learners with HL in IE, for more HL-specific IE experiences. The experiences in the current study are only from educators in public schools, with limited variety in the Quintiles of the schools, thus limiting the findings to being representative to that specific context.

Conclusion

The study sought to explore the educator's experiences of teaching learners with HL and other disabilities within an inclusive context and the extent to which their current teaching practices incorporate the inclusive practices found in the IEM. The findings demonstrated a predominance of challenges, particularly in following standard practice across different schools. Consistently, support and guidance from the Department of Education in general and outside specific schools where the participants worked was limited, with parents of learners with disabilities not being involved in the education of their children. Institution-specific support and leadership was experienced positively with guidance from school leadership. This and other factors led to the implementation of institution-specific teaching practices despite the availability of guidelines and policy on IE. Most concerning was that the educators did not have much training towards teaching learners with disabilities; yet, they were faced with a mammoth task of adjusting the curriculum content, assessment and teaching practices to suit all learners.

Institution-specific implementation of IE indicated that the EWP6 and related guidelines were adopted to a limited extent, if at all. The IEM as a comprehensive guide was not adopted to a meaningful extent as well, even though some elements of the curriculum adjustments talked to it. Overall, the learners with HL and other disabilities ended up being accommodated sub-optimally. The educators had limited knowledge and skills on how to optimize the development of the learners' academic progression and social skills within IE settings. Such challenges are worsened by the lack of access to relevant professionals such as Audiologists; leaving the educators with learners who do not only have a HL, but also a lack of the needed assistive devices to help them cope within IE.

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Authors' contributions

H.M.T.E.M., was the principal investigator who conducted the data generation in partial fulfilment of a master's degree. M.M. was the supervisor of the project. H.M.T.E.M. and M.M. both conceptualised the paper, wrote and proofread the article.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to confidentiality and are available from the corresponding author, H.M.T.E.M., upon reasonable request.

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