Inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments: Teachers' views on their language, social and academic development

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Inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments in mainstream classes contributes to their language, social and academic development. These learners require adequate support from the teachers to succeed in the classroom. However, such an endeavour requires that teachers are appropriately prepared and supported. With this study we investigated teachers' strategies for inclusion that enhance the language, social and academic development of learners with hearing impairments in mainstream classes. This was a qualitative case study. Data were collected from 2 purposefully selected female teachers at a mainstream school that admits learners with mild hearing impairments. The school is in Soweto, South Africa. Data were collected primarily through individual interviews and analysed thematically for content. Teachers held positive views about the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments in mainstream schools. They highlighted the use of 2 inclusive strategies, namely, repeated reading, and peer-assisted reading as strategies for facilitating inclusion. Such strategies enhance learners' language and social development, and ultimately contribute to academic success. Furthermore, they mentioned that a shortage of facilities, a lack of support through teacher-parent collaboration and a lack of training in inclusion were hindrances to inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments. The conclusion is that inclusive teaching strategies should be learner-centred and allow full participation for all learners. Thus, regarding the teaching of semantics, it is recommended that more emphasis is placed on listening, speaking and constant reading.

Keywords: case study; curriculum; inclusive education; learners; mainstream classrooms; mild hearing impairment; teacher views

Introduction
As espoused by the United Nations (UN), education is an important feature of human rights. These rights must guarantee an inclusive environment for all learners, including those with disabilities, to have equal educational opportunities. White Paper 6 on the inclusion of learners with special needs (Department of Education [DoE], 2001) provides a framework for establishing inclusive education systems and equitable educational opportunities for learners with impairments. This legislative enactment is anchored in respecting learner differences, not limited to disability, but also to differences in ethnicity, language, race, sexuality, location, and gender. Furthermore, it explains inclusive education as a continuous process that requires the involvement of a variety of stakeholders, as well as teachers and learners (DoE, 2001). However, the implementation of inclusive practices requires more than policy changes; practising teachers are key to the successful execution of inclusive education (Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff & Pettipher, 2002). They are important in determining the success of inclusive pedagogies because as agents of change they play a fundamental role in transforming schools (Fullan, 1993). Unfortunately, there appears to be a knowledge gap regarding teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments as literature tends to focus on teachers' perceptions of inclusive education broadly or on other disabilities, including deafness.

Hearing impairment is a significant risk for language disorders to develop (Trezek & Mayer, 2019). Individuals with hearing impairments can negotiate meaning using signs or gestures (Rastgoo, Kiani, Escalera & Sabokrou, 2021). However, their insufficient exposure to phonological coding may disadvantage them as potential readers (Alasim, 2020). Often, they suffer incomplete phonological representations because of being less able to access such representations (Perfetti, 2017). They are likely to experience speech that is distorted, frequency being quieter with essential acoustic cues below the threshold (Moore, 2007). In addition to delayed spoken language development, these learners face challenges in interacting with peers, which is essential for the development of their social skills. When listening, they may have difficulties in processing verbal communication because of their inability to hear certain sounds. As a result, their poor expressive skills caused by delayed language development negatively impact their social development and confidence to relate with others (Girgin, 2013). One key area that may also be impacted by hearing impairment is academic development. The learners hardly bring a wealth of language to the classroom, and this could negatively impact their academic success. These challenges may lower the confidence to participate in classroom activities thus delaying their academic progress. Sanir and Özmen (2022) argue that these learners often face difficulties expressing themselves in writing and orally in the classroom. As a result, they often experience difficulties coping in the classroom as language proficiency is pivotal to their academic success.

Conceptually, hearing impairment and deafness tend to be grouped together under the hard of hearing group (Luckner & Handley, 2008). This is the case even though people with hearing impairments or who are hard of hearing can function audiologically if provided with suitable amplification and an acoustic environment,

while those who are deaf have no hearing at all. As such, hearing impairment is categorised as mild hearing impairment (21 to 40 decibels [dB] – faint or distant speech may be difficult, lip-reading can be helpful); moderate hearing impairment (41 to 55 dB – conversational speech can be understood at 1 metre to 1.5 metres, but as much as 50% of discussions may be missed if the voices are faint or not in line of vision); moderate to severe hearing impairment (56 to 70 dB – speech must be loud in order to be understood and group discussions will be difficult to follow); severe hearing impairment (71 to 90 dB – voices may be heard from a distance of about 30 cm from the ear); and profound hearing impairment/deaf (91 dB plus – may hear louder sounds above 91dB, vision rather than hearing is the primary avenue for communication) (Szymanski, Lutz, Shahan & Gala, 2013). It is worth noting that classroom strategies adopted to provide inclusive education for the above-mentioned categories differ. For example, learners who are deaf are usually taught in special education units as opposed to their peers with mild hearing impairments. For the latter, inclusive strategies involve integrating them in mainstream classrooms so that they can hear and acquire more language. The assumption is that as they get more exposure and hear spoken language, they will develop to be competent language users.

The focus in this study was on mild hearing impairment. The term is defined as being unable to hear sounds that are quieter than about 25 dB for adults and 15 dB for children (Brown, 2020). This includes sounds like whispered conversations. In addition, individuals with mild hearing impairment may struggle with hearing both low-pitched and high-pitched sounds (known as frequency) in that sound range (Kiely & Anstey, 2021). Their hearing challenges may pose a barrier to curriculum access, but they are able to cope in an ordinary classroom if provided with appropriate support (Calhoon & Fuchs, 2003; Inclusive Education South Africa, 2019).

Inclusion of Learners with a Mild Hearing Impairment

Internationally, literature is limited to deaf learners rather than those with mild hearing impairments. Most of the literature reports on the findings of the investigation about deaf learners rather than the teachers' views on the inclusion of these learners. Available studies, for example by Woolfolk Hoy, Davis and Anderman (2013) indicate that teachers believe that the use of scaffolds, such as providing relevant examples for learners to discuss in inclusive settings, encourage dialogue among the learners. In the teachers' view, the dialogue allows learners to grow independently in spoken language development when they engage in dialogic interaction with their hearing peers. They indicate

that dialogic education, as espoused by Freire's (1990) dialogic pedagogy, creates an inclusive and democratic classroom environment that promotes equal communication and respect for others.

Essentially, teachers' beliefs and knowledge of inclusive education may differ significantly (Levin, 2014). In addition, teachers' understanding of inclusive education and self-evaluations to integrate inclusive practices potentially influences their opinions of and beliefs towards the practice (Liu, Yao, Wang & Du, 2020). Some inclusive practices for learners with mild hearing impairments as underscored by Pelin Karasu (2020) include shared and repeated reading. Pelin Karasu (2020) contends that in shared reading all learners participate and it thus fosters the social qualities of learners in mainstream education and increases their literacy skills. As another key strategy to inclusive education, repeated reading provides learners with opportunities to learn to listen to one another with respect as they read text for and to each other (Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge & Warren, 2018). However, Hamilton-Jones and Vail (2014) found that mainstream classroom teachers feel unprepared to plan and design instruction that accommodates learners with mild hearing impairments in their classrooms.

South African Literature

Within the South African context, research on the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments is noticeably limited. There tends to be an overwhelming focus on disability in a broad sense. For example, Donohue and Bornman (2014) and Naicker (2018) examined the emerging pedagogies in inclusive settings and the challenges of realising inclusive education in South African schools. Although Naicker (2018) does not report on how teachers perceive the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream classes, she points out that bureaucrats have not provided training for teachers. Teachers were oriented towards inclusive education without conceptual tools to guide them in inclusive pedagogy. However, Donohue and Bornman (2014) found that, although teachers often report that they support the notion of inclusive education, they believe that such learners can best be served in separate classrooms. As such, teachers also attribute negative societal attitudes towards disability for the marginalisation of learners with disabilities in general education schools. They considered this a justification for maintaining separate schools.

Literature on learners with hearing impairments does not cover teacher perceptions, but focuses on how these learners are taught in special schools. For example, Storbeck (1999) reveals the importance of using visual materials such as pictures and videos to support these learners to effectively understand the content.

Similarly, Madisha's (2023) quantitative study suggests that the inclusion of learners with hearing impairments requires teachers to face learners during instruction for them to speech read and thereby facilitate comprehension. The study recommends that the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments needs to involve the assistance of their hearing peers where, for example, they read together.

A study by Nel, Tlale, Engelbrecht and Nel (2016) at three schools in the Tshwane South district of the Gauteng province, South Africa, captured such teachers' perceptions. The findings revealed teachers' beliefs in information sharing among educators as a tool to successfully meet the educational needs of learners with disabilities in general education classrooms. For them, inclusive classroom practices require learning from one another by hearing others' experiences. Teachers also pointed out that inclusive education could be effective for all learners. This could be achieved particularly during cooperative learning when learners engage with one another to develop their language, social and academic skills.

Limited research in South Africa has explored teachers' views on inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments in mainstream classrooms. The limited research has seemingly resulted in teachers having a relatively low expectation for these learners to succeed. As a result, the teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of these learners in ordinary classroom remains unknown (Bell, Carl & Swart, 2016).

The aim with the study was to examine teachers' views regarding the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments in mainstream classrooms to enhance their language, social and academic development. Thus, we report on teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards inclusion of these learners in a South African mainstream classroom. The hope was to gain insight into their readiness to include and teach these learners in mainstream classrooms. The intention was to provide insight from which endeavours to transform the curriculum aimed at offering equalising access to education for learners with mild hearing impairments could be drawn. Regarding the importance of this study to an international audience, it provides insight that is likely to raise teachers' and other practitioners' awareness of what is essential when employing teaching strategies that are inclusive in classrooms that have learners with mild hearing impairments. Three questions are central to this study:

1) How do teachers view the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments in a mainstream classroom?
2) What strategies do the teachers employ to include learners with mild hearing impairments?
3) How do those strategies enhance the language, social and academic development of learners with hearing impairments?

Conceptual Framework
In short, an inclusive education development process should be seen as thoughtfully allowing curriculum access, learner participation and success in classroom activities (Phasha, 2010; Phasha & Condy, 2016). Values integral to the notion of inclusivity comprise respect, embrace difference and recognise equality (Parker, 2003). In alignment with this thinking, we adopted the concept of communicative democracy as its theoretical framework (Young, 1996). The concept emphasises the significance of equalising forms of communicative interactions. According to Young (1996), communicative democracy provides opportunities to communicate with one another as opposed to merely conducting deliberations. Applied to this study, the concept requires full and respectful participation of hearing learners and learners with mild hearing impairments in lessons to develop the confidence to interact, discuss and learn from one another to augment their language, social and academic development. Teachers' strategies for teaching inclusively and respectfully to facilitate the language, social development and academic success of all learners involved in lessons were of particular interest for the study.

Research Methods
Methodology
We employed a qualitative case study design in this study, which allows for in-depth exploration and understanding of complex issues and for the examination of data within the context where the activity takes place (Yin, 1989; Zainal, 2017). It permits systematic ways of observing events, collecting, and analysing data over extended periods of time in the natural context (Merriam, 2002). It enables researchers to immerse into the context where data are collected, and to analyse and generate more data at the same time. A case study design enables participants to tell their stories (Flick, 2002) or take for granted positions regarding a phenomenon (Klingner & Boardman, 2011). These attributes made it a suitable design through which to explore teachers' views on inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments in mainstream classrooms.

The Research Location
The research site was in Soweto, the largest township in the Gauteng province, South Africa. Soweto is an acronym for South-west Townships. Thus, it is a conglomerate of predominantly African townships situated south-west of Johannesburg, which were later bracketed together

under the acronym, Soweto in 1963 (Phillips, 2014).

The research site was a public school within the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. At the time of the study, the school had enrolled 103 learners with mild hearing impairments. This made it a unique context for capturing teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments (Yin, 1989).

Sampling of the Schools

With the assistance of the district office of the DoE, four schools were purposively selected and visited to explain the purpose of the study. These were the schools known by the district office of the DoE to have learners with some form of hearing impairment. The schools admitted learners in the age range of 14 to 16 years. These were learners in Grades 7 to 9. However, the first school was excluded because it did not have learners with hearing impairment. The second and the third schools were also excluded because they had fewer than five learners with hearing impairments in the Senior Phase. The fourth school had a significant number of learners with hearing impairments in the Senior Phase (Grades 7–9). Also, they had teachers with experience of teaching learners with hearing impairments. Therefore, the fourth school with 103 learners with hearing impairments was selected as a suitable site for the study.

Sampling of Teachers

Following permission to conduct the study, the Head of Department was assigned to assist with the identification of suitable participants. The key criterion for selecting the participants was their experience in teaching learners with a hearing impairment in inclusive settings for at least 5 years in senior phase classes. Two of the six participants identified for the study met the criteria and the other four had either 2 years or less experience of teaching learners with a hearing impairment in inclusive settings. It is worth noting that those who believe that at least five participants are required could criticise such a sample size for being too small. However, for this study, we ended up with two participants because they had experience that could best inform the research question and enrich the understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Two of the six teachers who indicated experience in teaching learners with a hearing impairment accepted the request to participate in the study following a thorough explanation of the research ethics, methods, and purpose. Both teachers were female and had university bachelor degrees with English as a major. Their teaching experience ranged between 5 and 22 years of teaching senior phase classes (grades 7–9). Their

experience made them suitable informants and information-rich with a sound practical and theoretical knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Marshall, 1996; Tongco, 2007).

Data Collection Methods
Interviews
Interviews were used to collect data. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) argue that interviews are used to get to know the interviewee better; hence they are based on the meanings that life experiences hold for the respondents. In addition, they permit flexibility in how the questions are asked and answered. The interviews were semi-structured, and questions were posed in an open-ended way to permit the collection of deep data. They were conducted with each teacher individually in a face-to-face manner on two occasions for a duration of 45 minutes. The following questions guided the interview process:

a) Please share your views about inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments.
b) Take me through the strategies you follow to include learners with mild hearing impairments in the curriculum.
c) Also, share how those strategies enhance the language, social and academic development of learners with hearing impairments.
d) Feel free to share any challenges or positives related to inclusion of learners with hearing impairments.

The questions included probes and prompts, especially when some responses were vague and brief.

The interview process started with an explanation of the study objectives and how the ethics of research would be adhered to. These included assurance about confidentiality and anonymity, participants' rights to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences, the principle of participation with no payment; how data would be stored and published in peer reviewed journals, books and presented at conferences. Teachers were also given the opportunity to ask questions or request clarity before the start of the interview and throughout the process. This encouraged them to feel comfortable about the interview. Recording the teachers' responses was crucial to ensure accurate capturing of their views and their permission was sought to do so. The interviews were conducted before and at the end of the school day in quiet rooms identified by the two teachers.

Data Management and Analysis
We followed the thematic content analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006) in this study. The approach is usually applied to a set of texts such as interviews. Thus, the researcher closely examines the data to identify common patterns and themes. One of the key elements of thematic analysis is flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data

gathered through qualitative methods are generally unstructured and disorganised consist of transcriptions from interviews. Thus, the researcher needs to structure the data and provide coherence (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002) to facilitate its analysis through transcribing, coding, and forming themes. The approach was helpful in the study as it provided insight and was used to analyse data and develop themes. According to Bryman and Burgess (2002), coding denotes identifying similarities and differences that are revealed through the informants' accounts and unravelled by the researcher. From the data collected through the interviews, codes, categories, and themes were developed to organise its presentation and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding of data was preceded by transcribing what the teachers had said in the interviews into a written form to facilitate the identification of codes across the transcripts. Following Patton's (2005) assertion that managing interviews and observation transcriptions requires immersion into the data, we conducted verbatim transcription of the data ourselves. We read and re-read the transcripts to gain deep insight into how teachers explained their pedagogical practices for learners with mild hearing impairments. We then coded the data, categorised them, and then developed themes. This was followed by naming the themes and defining them clearly.

The themes that emerged were used to structure the analysis. Once the themes emerged, they were categorised and coded to unmask the trends (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013). Through such a descriptive coding approach, we were able to develop an understanding and interpretation of what the teachers perceived as crucial to teaching English language to learners with hearing impairments in inclusive settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant authorities within the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Gauteng DoE, and education district office and the identified school/s. Participants consented to participate in the study following a thorough explanation of the study, methods, research ethics and their rights. We clarified that the research was for study purposes and that parts of the findings would be published without mentioning the participants' names. We explained to all involved the nature of the research, the aims, duration, risks involved and how data would be collected and presented: our role in the study and that the data collected would be used solely for our study and academic publication. Voluntary participation was emphasised, and we encouraged the participants to raise any concerns they had before we started with data collection.

Issues of anonymity and confidentiality could present challenges during the research process. Therefore, we assured the participants that their privacy and confidentiality would be respected.

Opinions about Inclusion of Learners with Mild Hearing Impairments

Generally, the teachers regarded the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments as significant to enable curriculum access for them and foster classroom interaction with their hearing counterparts. In the teachers' views, learners working with hearing peers could potentially facilitate their understanding of curriculum content. Furthermore, they pointed out that such interactions offered opportunities for learners' language development in addition to enhancing their comprehension of the curriculum content, how they work together as peers, and their social interaction as a learner community. Teacher A remarked: "*Discussions encouraged the learners to read and think together. Participation gave them opportunities to discuss, ask questions and respond to questions as they became confident during classroom interactions.*"

Teacher B commented: "*I have realised that some learners, because they are given opportunities to talk, have gained confidence to participate. Dialogue allows learners to assist each other during activities.*"

Teaching Strategies for Inclusion

The teachers highlighted the adoption of particular strategies, for example assisted and repeated reading to aid the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments and to improve their language competence. These strategies are consistent with the recommendations outlined in the *Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning* (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2010).

Repeated reading

Teachers A and B revealed during the interviews that they intentionally planned reading tasks that provided opportunities for learners to correctly read a given number of words several times. The technique assisted the learners to recognise the words and enhanced their capability to remember them and use them in written assessments and examinations. In response to why they used repeated reading, they highlighted that the strategy had positive effects on language development and the reading abilities of different learners. Repeated reading, in their view, improved fluency in oral reading. Similar findings were reported by Duke and Pearson (2009). They found that rich, high-quality discussions during repeated reading, involving both the teacher and the learner, facilitated understanding of the text, and

contributed to language development. According to Kaderavek and Pakulski (2007) repeated reading enhances the comprehension of words when learners examine and discuss the meaning of such words. The teacher guides the learners by explaining the meaning of some words that the learners encounter. As such, repeated reading also actively engages the learners with the text for prolonged times. The engagement presents opportunities to be able to identify the words, and read them fluently (Shanahan, 2020). In Teacher B's view, there was a strong link between repeated reading, success in identifying words, reading rate, word comprehension and overall academic success. Teacher B reinforced her explanation as follows: "*This approach* (repeated reading) *is helpful in improving oral reading rate and comprehension. Many learners have demonstrated increased reading rate and comprehension because of repeated reading.*"

Teacher A also argued that when learners engaged in reading and repeatedly read the same text it facilitated their recognition and correct pronunciation of words. Subsequently, this promoted their ability to read accurately and quickly. She expressed her view as follows: "*This strategy facilitates competence in word identification, reading fluency, word attack and fosters decoding skills.*"

Peer-assisted reading

The teachers emphasised the importance of learners engaging respectfully with both the text and one another when reading. Interacting respectfully with one another draws from the concept of communicative democracy (Young, 1996), which encourages equality and respect during interactions. For teachers, peer-assisted reading encouraged reading as learners helped each other. It also promoted social interaction among them. According to Woolfolk Hoy et al. (2013), peer-assisted reading activities promote independent growth among the learners for them to be proficient readers. As the learners interact with each other during reading activities, they move to the next level of being confident readers. Also, the DBE (2010) in South Africa encourages peer-assisted reading for learners requiring support. They argue that instruction augmented by means of a "buddy" system, provides learners with opportunities to develop their reading skills. In individual interviews, they expressed that peer-assisted learning/or tutoring could have positive outcomes for the inclusive practices and reading ability of various learners, including learners with mild hearing impairments. According to the teachers, this approach is potentially effective in assisting learners to improve their academic work. This point aligns with the findings by Joseph, Alber-Morgan, Cullen and Rouse (2016) who report that peer-

assisted reading teaches learners self-questioning skills, which then lead to deeper text engagement and enhanced language comprehension. Teacher A explained that when teaching, she usually encouraged learners who read well to read to peers who had not developed similar reading skills. She made the following remark: "*Allowing the fast learners to read for others is helpful, they tend to develop reading skills when they interact with one another.*"

Teacher B explained that she promoted peer-assisted reading with the help of a lesson plan, which she shared during the interview. Her plan involved teaching collaborative reading, story retelling and prediction. She ensured that the learners understood the meaning of the word "radiant." Those who grasped the word were then tasked to lead the ensuing discussion. She shared a worksheet of the task she used to explain the meaning of this word.

For example, she requested the learners to say the word "radiant" and asked whether any of the following would make someone look radiant:
- Passing the examination
- Feeling sick
- Earning your first salary

The teacher pointed out that although some learners struggled to associate the word "radiant" with the above phrases, most of them managed to successfully associate the word with the phrases. For those who struggled, the teacher requested others to assist in recognition of the notion of peer assistance. She made the following comment:

> Rather than me all the time providing assistance, I ask other learners to explain to those who struggle, in this way, I try to build teamwork among the learners. The more they work together the more all of them develop confidence to ask questions and learn new content.

The teachers' views support the findings of Woolfolk Hoy et al. (2013) that peer-assisted reading allows learners to grow independently in language development. As the learners interact, treating each learner's contribution with respect and in recognition of Young's (1996) concept of communication democracy, they move to the next level of understanding English, the language that is used for learning and teaching.

Challenges of Inclusion Experienced by the Teachers

Generally, teachers raised concerns about the shortage of facilities that are important for inclusive education to take place. The availability of technology such as computers, tablets, or iPads to effectively implement inclusive pedagogical practices was specifically mentioned. In addition, collaborative partnerships between teachers and parents were also highlighted as critical for the success of inclusive education. Furthermore, teachers were of the view that they were not

adequately trained and knowledgeable to tackle diversity. This perceived inadequate training may hinder progress and, in some cases, bring about resistance among teachers. Thus, inadequate training may result in feelings of despondence and disillusionment.

The findings reveal that some challenges stem from the way in which teachers treated learners with hearing impairments compared to their hearing peers. It can be argued that when teachers do not treat all learners equally, whether wittingly or not, they fail to fully embrace the concept of communicative democracy (Young, 1996). The concept, which guided the study, advocates for fairness, equality, and recognition of diversity. In some instances, teachers tended to focus more on one group to the disadvantage of the other. Teacher A made the following comment: "*We support inclusive education as a vehicle to address diversity in our classrooms. However, the lack of adequate training and resources will always remain a hindrance to successfully use inclusive pedagogical practices in our schools.*"

Teacher B concurred and explained as follows:

> *Inclusive education is a noble idea that can be used to address the educational needs of all learners, however, if adequate resources and ongoing training can be made available to us, we would have no reason to fail in our efforts to include all the learners when teaching.*

These sentiments highlight the significance of providing continuous teacher training. Teachers believe that with proper training and access to appropriate resources, they can acquire some competence to include learners with mild hearing impairments in their classrooms. Similarly, they highlighted the importance of collaborative partnerships between teachers and parents. They argued that robust collaborative partnerships could potentially ease the successful implementation of inclusive education. These robust partnerships entail ongoing engagement with parents regarding the academic progress of the learners. When parents communicate with the teachers, the two parties can develop a strong relationship and create an optimal learning environment, both at home and at school. However, they noted that the partnerships were not robust. This view is consistent with that of Engelbrecht, Oswald and Forlin (2006) who express the importance of strong partnerships for the successful implementation of inclusive pedagogical approaches for learners with mild hearing impairments in mainstream classes. Teacher B commented:

> *Collaborating with the parents regularly is very helpful. Discussing learner progress and how they do their tasks and homework can give us an indication of how to assist the learners. However, parents seem to show little interest to communicate with us.*

Teacher A remarked: "*Even when we try to invite them to school for the meetings to discuss learners' progress, they simply do not respond.*"

Based on the above remarks, the South African policy on inclusive education should aim to strike a balance between the pedagogical practices employed by teachers and individual-focused approaches. The goal is to ensure that, with adequate support, these strategies can be harnessed to leverage each learner's strengths to attain curriculum access and academic success (Molapisi, 2022).

Among other concerns, the two teachers agreed on the issue of inadequate support from both the school management and, to some extent, the district education office. They asserted that while they fully supported inclusive education, efforts to implement it under the current circumstances and inadequate support, often presented challenges. They highlighted the need for the inclusion of support services such as teacher assistants to help with the learners. In their view, the successful inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments in mainstream classrooms requires support from the DoE, the district education office, and the school management at all levels. Teacher B commented as follows: "*Support from the department and in particular school management can be helpful if we are to successfully implement inclusive education, we need resources, both human and material in our schools. Opinions from university experts alone are not enough.*"

Discussion

The inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments in South African mainstream schools represents a paradigm shift that calls for acceptance of diversity and fulfilment of learners' educational needs (Engelbrecht et al., 2006). This shift is supported by Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan and Hopkins (2014) who advocate for adjustments to the curriculum that would include appropriate pedagogical practices important for an inclusive setting. Furthermore, the successful implementation of inclusive education could be driven by teacher attitude and the willingness to welcome change. Thus, it can be argued that teachers' actions and beliefs as agents of change play a crucial role in shaping the desired educational system that accommodates all learners, irrespective of their differences. For this reason, Hargreaves et al. (2014) hold the view that teacher education institutions and curriculum designers need to consider all the factors mentioned above to transform the education system into an inclusive one. This study is relevant to scholars worldwide. It offers knowledge that draws from contextual empirical evidence. It can prove beneficial to practitioners or policymakers involved in multidimensional process of economic

development. This includes designing curricula that strive to create economic opportunities for all.

With their teaching strategies, the teachers were deliberate in their attempts to create an environment that facilitated equalising forms of communication and learning. Young (1996) argues that communication that is inclusive and characterised by parity and fairness recognises and embraces diversity, respect, and equality. Therefore, encouraging learners to actively participate in classroom discussions; treating learner contributions with respect and urging them to attentively listen to the others during deliberations, could be seen as having promoted inclusivity and equal recognition of contributions of others.

The teachers' views presented in the study generally indicated their willingness to embrace inclusive education as a means of accommodating learner diversity, in particular, learners with mild hearing impairments in mainstream classrooms. They highlighted the importance of acknowledging and respecting learner diversity and equity and thus employing the use of teaching strategies that cater for all learners. These views resonate with Sayed, Soudien and Carrim's (2003) argument that an inclusive curriculum is underpinned by principles of equity and access. The objective of such a curriculum is to provide education to all learners (Molapisi, 2022). Therefore, teachers' strategies such as repeated reading were suitable to facilitate the inclusion of learners with mild impairment in the curriculum.

Teachers' emphasis on improving their own skills to manage learners with mild hearing impairment was noted, and it underscored their attitude towards inclusivity. In their view, skills acquisition is critical for developing positive attitudes towards implementing inclusion. Therefore, skills development needs to be considered as a collaborative effort by stakeholders sharing knowledge on how to include these learners. Short courses are regularly provided but ineffectively used (Ainscow, 2020). Therefore, the current practice needs to be reconsidered to enable stakeholders to address "long-term commitment to professional development" (Engelbrecht et al., 2006).

Regarding their pedagogical strategies, the teachers indicated that shared reading, reading newspaper articles and storytelling facilitated reading comprehension as well. Even though they acknowledged that, for example, storybooks alone would not enable their learners to read and understand texts without an environment rich in vocabulary, they argued that concept development, experience and a discussion of words and their meanings in addition to an interest to read storybooks significantly affected text comprehension and proficiency. In addition, they

argued that repeated exposure to texts fosters the understanding of words, particularly when learners discuss the meaning of words among themselves. This is in line with the findings of Woolfolk Hoy et al. (2013), which suggest that providing relevant examples of word meaning and phrases in activities enables learners to grow independently in learning a language. In essence, engaging in repeated reading tasks helps learners to become familiar with the words they come across from different texts. The findings reveal that peer-assisted reading played a motivating role, encouraging learners to support each other in word recognition and pronunciation and develop confidence to freely express themselves in group discussions. This, in turn, improved their spoken language.

Despite the challenges that teachers face, the findings highlight their appreciation of the importance of inclusive classrooms. The different teaching strategies that they promoted and implemented served as effective means to promote recognition and respect of learners' unique attributes and facilitated active involvement of learners with hearing impairments in learning. Recognition of respect is in line with Young's (1996) concept of communicative democracy, which espouses treating others equally and with respect. By engaging in dialogue and assisting each other, learners are afforded opportunities for discussion, which in turn improve their confidence to speak, discuss and argue. These discussions enhance their language skills. As pointed out by Samuelsson (2016), in a classroom that promotes communicative democracy, the teacher operates on an assumption that all learners can achieve their learning goals primarily by taking part in classroom deliberative situations to explore how what is taught should be understood and used to develop their language and knowledge.

Concluding Remarks
The teacher participants in this study were information-rich participants regarding classroom practice. They offered insight into essential aspects of employing inclusive strategies. Specifically, the strategies they highlighted were aimed to ensure the inclusion of learners with mild hearing impairments in line with educational policy requirements. However, it is important to emphasise that policy alone is inadequate for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Over and above administrative support, teachers also need emotional support to facilitate the paradigm shift necessary to realise inclusive education.

To promote teacher efficacy in classes with learners with mild hearing impairments, it is imperative to empower teachers with skills to support these learners and facilitate the understanding of content. Although teachers may

face challenges related to curriculum differentiation and accommodation in developing countries such as South Africa, they also have the responsibility to motivate these learners by adopting appropriate teaching strategies. To implement inclusive pedagogical practices, it is crucial to provide adequate training for teachers to adapt content and allow these learners to sufficiently access the curriculum.

Institutions of higher learning, for example, the University of Witwatersrand, offer qualifications tailored to train teachers to teach learners with hearing impairments. We recommend that such efforts be maintained and programmes improved, and that more teacher education institutions become involved.

Limitations

The results of the study cannot be generalised because of the small number of participants. Only two teachers participated in the study. However, they provided data that made it possible to answer the questions posed for this study. However, the teachers' experiences and classroom pedagogical practices may not reflect the wider South African context.

Authors' Contributions

GM collected data by conducting teacher interviews. GM and NP analysed the data. GM wrote the manuscript. NP reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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