



STORY TIME: Margaux Bergman reads to grades 2 and 3 from the Zonneblom Boys' School.

PICTURE: ARMAND HOUGH/ANA

Learning support teachers play crucial role in classes

Hats off to those who go above and beyond duty to support their pupils

EVERY year on October 5, people across the world celebrate World Teachers' Day to recognise the important role they play in the academic and personal development of learners. This day also draws attention to teachers' rights and responsibilities on a global scale.

In South Africa, it coincides with the Annual National Teachers' Awards which acknowledge their significant contributions in the various categories in the field of education.

The focus of the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 recognises that teachers play a significant role in achieving the goals of the 2030 education agenda (Education 2030 Framework for Action). Qualified and passionate, they are crucial in providing quality education and support for all learners in an inclusive education system. It is therefore important that teachers be supported in their quest to provide the best they can, despite the contextual and systemic challenges they may experience.

Having written a piece for World Teachers' Day before, this year I want to acknowledge and validate the work done by those who provide additional support to pupils. This includes teachers at primary and high schools who support pupils with extra classes, etc in the afternoon.

Sometimes these efforts are voluntary and not part of the whole school planning. In a more official capacity, many primary schools in the Western Cape and very few high schools have a learning support post. These departmental posts are mainly on an itinerant arrangement between two or three schools.

The learning support teachers play a crucial role in collaboration with mainstream teachers to identify and provide additional support to pupils who experience difficulties (barriers). Part of their responsibility is to support teachers to help them to identify and provide support to their pupils.

Class teachers are at the first level of identification and support. Not all schools, particularly high schools, have a learning support teacher. At many of these high schools there are teachers who assume these additional support duties in the absence of an official learning support post. While primary schools in the Western Cape have by now a well-established learning support structure, many high schools still struggle with the concept of formal additional support.

While high schools are familiar with the process of applying for concessions, such as extra time for the Grade 12 exams, they are not yet geared to identifying and supporting these needs earlier in the schooling career. These concessions

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are also only approved for the matric exam if a pupil has a history of receiving assessment support. This is important because although pupils who experience barriers to learning can apply for adaptive/alternative procedures for the Grade 12 exams (Department of Education, 2008), it can only be done if a process of identification was preceded by recommendations of an educational psychologist.

What is meant by a "learning difficulty"? Anybody can experience a learning difficulty. Even the highly intelligent may experience specific learning difficulties such as with organisation, writing, visual processing, reading or auditory processing, etc.

Too often people see pupils who need additional support as those who need to go to a special school (another thorn in the flesh when randomly and ignorantly thrown about).

This year brought about new challenges, particularly for high schools. As from 2018, all schools have to complete the Screening, Identification and Assessment Strategy (Sias) document. As the name implies, it has as its aim the early identification of learning barriers with the prospect of receiving support. This is a cumbersome process and needs collaboration of all role players. It involves the class teacher, school-based support team, the district-based support team and the parents. Many parents who have some knowledge and have the financial means, have taken the first step in initiating support for their child. That means taking the child to a private educational psychologist.

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This is a costly exercise with the consequence that for those who do not have the money, the child would seldom receive the much needed additional support from the school; specifically high schools. In many cases, the financial burden does not stop there. After identification by a professional, parents often have to foot the bill for the additional support. This can range from paying for a reader, a scribe to an in-class assistant.

These support structures are recognised by the Department of Education but not provided or paid for in public schools. This is the case for both primary and high schools. Again those who cannot afford it have to go without the much needed and deserved support. Besides the fact that this can be costly for parents if done privately, many parents are not even aware that they can apply for support.

Many ordinary public primary schools in the Western Cape provide additional support through learning support teachers and other supportive structures. However, these pupils can "fall through the cracks" when they go to high school. Little to no formal support structures in high schools can lead to many of these pupils to drop out of school. Hats-off to those high school teachers who are actually doing everything in their power, with limited resources and often little understanding and support from their colleagues.

Currently, some teachers voluntarily fulfil this function in addition to their core duties. They work closely with district education psychologists who are too few to adequately fulfil the needs of all the schools assigned to them.

Are our high schools ready to accept and support pupils who experience learning difficulties? Are high schools ready for this process of early identification and support? If the policy of inclusive education and the implementation of the Sias process are to be truly successful, the department of education has to come to the party.

It is a fact that all schools need to be supported to provide quality and equal education and support to all. High schools, in particular, too need formal and official learning support posts to co-ordinate support. While we understand that it is costly, the department has to put its money where its mouth is in providing or at least subsidising support structures to pupils who qualify for additional support, like scribes, readers, etc. It makes no sense that this is only done during the matric exam. If not, the poorest of the poor will again be marginalised.

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