

Educators' perceptions of inclusive education for learners with physical disabilities in mainstream classrooms

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ABSTRACT: While the practice of inclusive education has recently been widely embraced as an ideal model for education, the acceptance of inclusive education practices has not translated into reality in most mainstream classrooms. Even though education policies in South Africa stipulate that all learners should be provided with the opportunities to participate as far as possible in all classroom activities, the implementation of inclusive education is still hampered by a combination of a lack of resources and the attitudes and actions of the educators in the classroom. The main purpose of this paper is to develop a deeper understanding of educators' personal understanding of the barriers to learning and how their understanding relates to their consequent actions to implement inclusive education in mainstream classrooms. A qualitative research approach was used to establish their perspectives and to frame questions regarding their perceptions and understanding. The findings, in this paper, indicate that the way in which educators understand the diversity of learning needs is based on the training that they received, which focused on a deficit, individualised approach to the barriers that encounter learning and development.

KEYWORDS: *barriers to learning; inclusive education; mainstream classrooms; inclusion*

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade wide agreement globally has encouraged the development of inclusive education by advocating the inclusion of learners with diverse educational needs in the same classrooms. It was emphasised that learners irrespective of disability should be educated alongside their peers instead of being marginalized into special schools. Inclusive education is regarded internationally as the right of every learner to be part of mainstream classrooms. Although developments in policy and legislative level are important, ultimately inclusive education comes down to changing education in schools and mainstream classrooms (Srivastava, De Boer & Pijl, 2013). These changes in education have placed new demands on the teaching profession, since in many contexts, classrooms now contain a mix of learners from different backgrounds and with different levels of ability and disability. Inclusive education is not only about access to education, but also about acceptance and participation in the implementation of inclusive education and the resultant promise of quality education for all (Terzi, 2008). Inclusive schools are therefore about belonging, celebrating and educating all learners, regardless of their differences in ability, culture, gender, language, class and ethnicity. An inclusive classroom is thus viewed as a place that both embodies and supports learning for a diverse range of learners, where deficit views of difference and deterministic views about ability are rejected, and participation shapes the experiences and identities of all individuals' participation to classroom activities (Berry, 2006; Florian, 2009; Kershner, 2009; Kozleski, Artiles & Waitoller, 2014).

An issue that has received a great deal of attention internationally has been educator preparedness and teaching strategies in inclusive classrooms. According to the researchers; interactions between learners and educators are important social processes that contribute to every learner's academic, social and emotional development (Luckner & Pianta, 2011). Whilst the restructuring and reorganisation of educational policy in response to national and global imperatives for the development of inclusive education might shape broader social and institutional contexts in which educators operate, it is their personal interpretations and understandings, as well as their day-to-day enactment of inclusion, which determines the way in which policy is reformulated in practice (Sikes, Lawson & Parker, 2007). Consequently, their attitudes towards inclusive education and understanding about its meaning and implementation are crucial elements in the success of inclusive education. The way in which they implement inclusive educational practices in their classrooms are therefore not only likely to be influenced by systemic contextual factors, including for example, the ethos within their own schools as well as the wider educational system's approach to inclusive education, but importantly, also by their understanding of inclusive education.

II. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

In response to international developments regarding inclusive education the South Africa White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, building an inclusive education and training system (Department of Education (DoE), 2001) outlined to a national strategy to achieve an inclusive education system that focusses on accommodating learners with diverse needs in mainstream classrooms. The policy broke with the concept of 'special needs education' and introduced the notion of 'barriers to learning' within an inclusive education framework (DoE, 2001). The central focus of White Paper 6 is that inclusive education is embracing, recognising and celebrating learner diversity; acknowledging that all learners can learn and need support; and capacitating educators to enable them to address a wide range of learning needs by focusing on teaching and learning actions that will benefit all students who experience barriers to learning (Oswald, 2007). Furthermore, White Paper 6 asserts that the education system must transform to accommodate the full range of barriers to learning and development, including needs caused by intrinsic medical causes (e.g. disabilities, chronic illness), as well as barriers caused by extrinsic systemic barriers, including socio-economic factors, an inflexible curriculum, problems with language and communication, and poorly-trained educators. However, despite a strongly stated position on the socially-constructed nature of difference and resultant extrinsic contextual barriers, White Paper 6 still depended on a medical model approach when support for diverse barriers to learning is proposed. It recommends a continuum of support for learners who experience barriers to learning that distinguished between learners with low-intensive level support, who receive support in mainstream schools, learners with moderate level support requirements, who are to be accommodated in full-service schools, and learners who require high-intensive educational level support, who continue to be accommodated in special schools that will also play a role as resource centres for neighbouring mainstream schools (DoE, 2001; Engelbrecht & Van Deventer, 2013).

As a result, initial and continuing professional development of classroom educators were considered a priority by the DoE (2001), as educators were recognised as being the primary resource for achieving the goal of an inclusive education system. It has, however, become increasingly clear in research studies that the focus on inclusive education in South African teacher education programmes tend to be fragmented and short-term, lacking in-depth content knowledge (Engelbrecht, 2013; Oswald, 2007). They continue to focus on a more deficit-oriented approach to intrinsic barriers to learning, based on the continuum of support recommended in White Paper 6. Preparation tends not to take into consideration the unique extrinsic contextual influences that impact on the way in which schools function or the effect of the traditional medical approach to learners with diverse education needs on the quality of teacher-learner interactions in mainstream classrooms. Furthermore, in most instances, teacher education students complete their training without any sustained interaction with students who experience barriers to learning and development especially those with disabilities so that their ability to translate and enact what they have learned in mainstream classrooms remain questionable (Engelbrecht & Van Deventer, 2013; Kozleski & Siuty, 2014; Nel, Engelbrecht, Nel & Tlale, 2014; Oswald, 2007). Teacher education programmes therefore tend not to focus in depth on what Loreman (2010) calls the essential outcomes for inclusive education-related teacher education programmes. These outcomes include, for example, a deeper understanding of inclusive education and diversity; the knowledge and range of skills to collaborate widely with all stakeholders; engaging in inclusive instructional planning by being reasonably prepared to anticipate and be responsive to high-priority needs within regular classrooms; and effectively support learners with diverse learning needs to participate fully in all classroom activities, rather than being supported in separate special classrooms or resource centres (Watkins, 2012). Some of the strategies to provide support in regular classrooms include for instance creating participatory classroom activities using peer collaboration strategies and small group work that are not based solely on ability where individual learning, where interdependence and interpersonal skills are promoted within heterogeneous groups, and where educators promote classroom dialogue for learning by using responsive instruction strategies (Berry, 2006).

As in other countries, research studies on the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa have pointed out that additional complex contextual issues including funding constraints that affect the availability of resources, resultant overcrowded classrooms and school cultures that influence attitudes towards difference and disability, have complicated the implementation of the recommendations of White Paper 6 (Walton, 2011; Walton & Lloyd, 2011). Although South African educators seem to favour inclusion in principle, they believe that the South African educational system does not have the resources needed to enable them to implement inclusive education. Educators' ambivalence regarding the implementation of inclusive education increases as they become more concerned with teaching subject matter and completing curriculum requirements, rather than diversifying instruction to meet a range of learner needs (e.g. Jordan, Glenn & McGhie-Richmond, 2010; Nel et al., 2014; Nel, Müller, Hugo, Helldin, Backmann, Dwyer & Skarlind, 2011; Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel & Malinen, 2012).

Although recent curriculum transformation has integrated the principle of inclusive education, which by implication means that curriculum implementation should be flexible with regard to teaching methods, assessment, pace of teaching and the development of learning material (DoE, 2001), the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) does not support the requirements of a flexible curriculum as

stated in Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001; Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013). During annual national assessments (ANA) in 2012 and 2013 by the Department of Basic Education (DoBE) on literacy and numeracy skills in Grades One-Six and Nine, it was established that South African learners experience serious challenges in these areas (DoBE, Republic of South Africa, 2013). As a result, intervention programmes were put in place by the DoBE in primary schools. For example, in Gauteng Province, where most of the schools in this study are located, the Gauteng Programme for Language and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) was initiated to support the implementation of the CAPS. The focus of the GPLMS is on providing clear time allocations to complete the curriculum, weekly routines, revision weeks and marking guidance (Gauteng Province Department of Education, 2012). The findings of this study indicate that this prescriptive approach to policy requirements restricts educators in being flexible to address their own learners' context and needs (Msibi & Mchunu, 2013:19-23).

Against this background, South African educators continuously need to develop strategies daily to provide quality educational opportunities for every learner in their classrooms as their classroom contexts in mainstream schools are increasingly characterised by a complex constellation of barriers to learning and development - primarily those of social class, ethnicity, home language and ability/disability. To develop an understanding of educators' attitudes and self-efficacy in general, and to explore questions about the knowledge and skills they need to be inclusive in their own classrooms, the international study has a sequential mixed-method design (Creswell, 2003) that includes both quantitative and qualitative features in the data collection and analysis (Mertens, 2005). By increasing and combining the number of research strategies within this project, the research is aiming to broaden the dimension and scope of the project and increase the understanding of educators' roles in the implementation of inclusive education. Qualitative data collection strategy occurred to establish the educator perspectives of inclusive education and to design the frame of questions that the researcher had to come up with the necessary findings and recommendations. It was also intended that the data collected will focus on educators' teaching practices in their own classrooms (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner (2001) defined his bio-ecological theory as "an evolving theoretical system for the scientific study of human development over time" (pp. 693-694), enabling to explore how the bio-ecological model mediate the ways in which inclusive education can affect child development in each level of development. It sheds light on the issues and tensions in the implementation of inclusive education, and how educators mediate and negotiate their views of inclusive education in institutional and wider ideological contexts. For example, the articulations between forces outside of schools in diverse international contexts such as education policies; the way in which they are either reinforced or opposed within specific local school contexts and how the actions and social interactions of individuals in these school contexts, namely classrooms, are influenced by these forces (Kozleski et al., 2014; Swart & Pettipher, 2011). Attitudes and Concerns on Inclusive Education as well as a scale measuring Educators Self-Efficacy in Implementing Inclusive Practices were envisaged.

The analysis indicated that, whereas the overall sentiments towards disabilities are positive in some countries, educators have several concerns regarding the consequences of including children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms in South African context. Results indicated that South African educators perceive inclusive education within a human rights framework, thereby recognising that there is no difference in the general idea of inclusion and the concrete idea of recognising human rights by including learners with disabilities in their own mainstream classrooms, but that their sense of self-efficacy in doing so is inadequate. Their counterparts from other countries, on the other hand, perceive inclusive education as a pragmatic implementation issue, and would prefer learners with, for example disabilities, to be supported by other professionals within their mainstream schools (Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel & Malinen, 2013). They mentioned the District Based Support teams and Institutional Learner Teacher Support Teams that are not fully supporting them. The researcher therefore realised that to develop a deeper understanding of South African educators' personal interpretations and understandings about barriers to learning within inclusive education, and how their understanding relates to their consequent actions in their classrooms a more in-depth exploration is needed. As a result, the main research question guiding this study was as follows:

What are the educators' perceptions of inclusive education for learners with physical disabilities in mainstream classrooms?

The following sub-questions were formulated to further explore the various aspects of the inclusion of diverse learners in classrooms:

- How much do educators know about inclusive education?
- What support do educators require from District Based Support Teams (DBST) to help them improve their practices?

III. FINDINGS

Contextual challenges on several system levels have been identified to have a direct and substantial effect on the way in which educators describe their teaching activities. These system levels address issues at the local-, meso- and macro-system levels and include a lack of physical, financial and human resources in school and district levels, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate initial and continuing teacher education programmes and

curriculum constraints that continue to play a role in classrooms in mainstream schools in South Africa (e.g. '*...the classes are too big...*'; '*Not well resourced classrooms and poor infrastructure*' '*...the big sizes in our classes cause a great difficulty...*'; '*...We need more funding...*'; '*in fact we need training*'; '*And we are having a problem presently, because we are faced with continuous curriculum changes.*

However, the overall findings indicate that (as stated in Sikes et al., 2007) whilst contextual issues including policy, architectural infrastructure and school culture might shape the broader school context within which inclusive education is implemented and the participants in this study, it is educators' continuing personal interpretations in dynamic interaction with contextual issues that determine the way in which inclusion is implemented in their classrooms, as well as how they teach and support learners. Although the educators in this study regard the inclusion of learners with physical disabilities in their mainstream classrooms as their right, thereby confirming the results of the overall international project (Savolainen et al., 2012), their classroom teaching and learning support practices tend to be related not only to a lack of fundamental resources but to the lack of proper knowledge and skills. Findings related to their perceptions of inclusive education to how learners with disabilities, how they should be supported and their resultant teaching and learning support strategies indicate that the way in which the educators respect and respond to the diversity of learning needs are based on the training that they initially received as educators that was based on a deficit approach to barriers to learning and development. Their line of thought is therefore centred on the notion that there is a specific specialist pedagogical approach for all learners with "special educational needs" educators need to be introduced to, to successfully include these learners in mainstream classrooms without an acknowledgement of barriers to learning caused by extrinsic factors. The results clearly indicate that current initial, as well as continuing teacher education programmes ought to encourage a model of teaching and learning that acknowledges and responds to a wide range of possible barriers to learning, which include both contextual barriers and barriers that are intrinsic to learners, without labelling some as 'different'. As mentioned earlier, the common international denominator in inclusive education is the recognition and valuing of human diversity within international education systems, and the promise of quality education for all. This implies that teacher education for inclusion should be more than a set of strategies to merely place students in mainstream classrooms and provide a continuum of support levels based on the severity of identified disabilities. It is widely recommended that initial and continuing teacher preparation programmes need to be restructured to prepare educators for complex and diverse classroom contexts. Research indicates that students in initial teacher education programmes benefit when they are instructed on specific collaborative behaviours, especially when they have opportunities to collaborate with special and ordinary educators during their training. Where training programmes focus on social and educational inclusion and integrate these perspectives in all modules from the outset, not just as elective or one or two compulsory courses as is the case in the prevailing general teacher education model in South Africa, newly qualified educators are more successful in providing effective teaching and learning support for learners with diverse needs despite a lack of general resources to do so (Engelbrecht, 2013; Rouse & Florian, 2012).

IV. CONCLUSION

It has been noticed during the study that inclusive school communities have the responsibility to promote effective learning by creating conducive and supportive learning environments within which learners feel accepted and appreciated, curriculum and teaching strategies support learning and educators understand the uniqueness of every learner in their classrooms (Bojuwoye, Moletsane, Stofile, Moolla & Sylvester, 2014; Swart & Pettipher, 2011). Schools and educators need to commit to the transformation of their school communities for the implementation of inclusive education to be successful to engender attitudes of acceptance and willingness to facilitate the necessary mind shifts in terms of what educators do in their classrooms, as well as why and how they do it. The importance of supportive structures as well as well-skilled professional educators who have a clear understanding of a variety of barriers to learning, and what their own responsibilities are in addressing these barriers in their own classrooms, are therefore of the utmost importance in the implementation of inclusive education. Educators, despite their clear understanding of the rights of all learners to be included in mainstream schools, are struggling to meet the increasing number of learners that are experiencing diverse barriers to learning and development, as they do not have the necessary skills to provide support and to adapt classroom teaching, due to their understanding of barriers to learning as fixed and internal to learners. Furthermore, they also have inadequate access to appropriate learning support material and other resources.

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