

Estelle Swart, Petra Engelbrecht, Irma Eloff & Raine Pettipher

Implementing inclusive education in South Africa: teachers' attitudes and experiences

Summary

The central argument is that the creation of inclusive schools will require more than merely the implementation of new policies. Practising teachers are the key to the successful implementation of an inclusive system and they will need time, ongoing support and in-service training. Real change therefore requires a long-term commitment to professional development. This article presents a comparative analysis of the findings of three independent studies aimed at identifying and describing teachers' attitudes to and experiences in implementing inclusive education in South Africa. The main themes identified in all three studies include inadequate knowledge, skills and training for the implementation of inclusive education; lack of educational and teacher support; insufficient facilities and resources, and the potential effects of inclusive education on learners.

Die implementering van insluitende onderwys in Suid-Afrika: onderwysers se houdings daarteenoor en ervaring daarvan

Die sentrale argument is dat die ontwikkeling van insluitende skole omvattende verandering vereis wat meer behels as die blote implementering van die nuwe onderwysbeleid. Onderwysers speel 'n beslissende rol in die suksesvolle implementering van 'n insluitende onderwysstelsel, mits voldoende tyd, ondersteuning en indiensopleiding aan hulle beskikbaar is. Daadwerklike verandering vereis dus langtermyn professionele ontwikkeling van onderwysers. Hierdie artikel vergelyk die bevindinge van drie onafhanklike voorstudies wat fokus op die identifisering en beskrywing van onderwysers se houdings teenoor die nuwe stelsel en hulle ervarings van die implementering van insluitende onderwys in Suid-Afrika. Die hoofemas van hierdie studies sluit in: ontoereikende kennis aangaande die nuwe stelsel; vaardighede en opleiding benodig om insluiting te implementeer; ontoereikende steun aan onderwysers in hierdie verband; onvoldoende fasiliteite en bronne om die nuwe stelsel te implementeer; en die potensiële invloed van insluiting op die leerders.

Prof R E Swart & Mrs O R Pettipher, Dept of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Education and Nursing, Rand Afrikaans University, P O Box 525, Johannesburg 2006; E-mail: res@edcur.rau.ac.za & rpe@edcur.rau.ac.za; Prof P Engelbrecht, Dept of Educational Psychology and Specialised Education, Faculty of Education, University of Stellenbosch, Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602; E-mail: peng@akad.sun.ac.za & Dr I Eloff, Dept of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002; E-mail: ieloff@bakuma.up.ac.za

The South African Ministry of Education released *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education — building an inclusive education and training system* in July 2001. The development of this policy started as long ago as October 1996 when the Ministry of Education appointed the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) and the National Committee on Education Support Services (NCESS) to examine and make recommendations on all aspects of special needs and support services in education and training in South Africa (Department of National Education 1997). A joint report on the findings was presented to the Minister of Education in November 1997. This extensive report included the findings of the national investigation as well as a “vision”, guiding principles and strategies for developing an inclusive system of education and training. Based on this report’s findings and recommendations, *Consultative Paper 1 on Special Education: building an inclusive education and training system* was released by the Ministry of Education in August 1999 (Department of National Education 1999). All these documents informed the development of Education White Paper 6, which argues for the development of an inclusive education and training system in South Africa.

The concept “inclusion” is not monolithic. Although various countries share a commitment towards inclusion, it is becoming increasingly more accepted that inclusion has different meanings in different contexts. Alan Dyson (2001) suggests that varieties of inclusion are beginning to emerge, each offering different solutions. However, within each of these varieties there are also clear commonalities, such as the principles of social justice, equitable education systems, and the responsiveness of schools towards diversity. It is imperative that these principles be interpreted in context. A South African author, Engelbrecht (1999), integrated these three principles and conceptualised inclusion as the shared value of accommodating all learners in a unified system of education, empowering them to become caring, competent and contributing citizens in an inclusive, changing and diverse society. This all-encompassing definition is also reflected in Education White Paper 6 (Department of National Education 2001).

To recognise and respond to the diverse needs of all learners, the existing education system must be transformed from a system of separate education (isolating special education from regular education) to a single integrated system (Idol 1997). As a result, the focus of education in South Africa has recently shifted from “changing the person” to a systems-change approach (Department of National Education 1997: 54). The focus is no longer on the individual learner who needs to fit in, but on the potential (and responsibility) of the system to transform so that individual differences among learners can be accommodated (Ainscow 1997). Inclusion therefore implies both societal and educational change. Such change has direct implications for schools and teachers. We argue that this change cannot proceed by way of legislation and policy alone, but needs to be carefully managed and understood in the everyday running of schools. Unless teachers are prepared and given the support necessary for inclusive education, quality education for all will not be achieved.

There is overwhelming evidence that teachers are the key force in determining the quality of inclusion (Fullan 1991). They can play a crucial role in transforming schools, or bring about no change at all. Petty & Saddler (1996: 15) refer to numerous studies indicating the importance of teachers’ attitudes for successful inclusion. They maintain that a school’s philosophy and the attitude of the staff are crucial. Thus, an understanding of teachers’ perspectives and their attitudes towards inclusion and the changes it requires is essential to the management and accomplishment of meaningful transformation in South African education.

Attitudes play various roles in an individual’s life. Baron & Byrne (1991: 138) describe attitudes as

[...] internal representations of various aspects of the social or physical world — representation containing affective reactions to the attitude object and a wide range of cognitions about it (eg thoughts, beliefs, judgements). Attitudes reflect past experience, shape ongoing behaviour, and serve essential functions for those who hold them.

Various researchers have found that teachers’ beliefs and attitudes can often be linked to the more generalised belief systems of their society (Schechtman & Or 1996: 137). This may be directly related to the influences and learning experiences provided by the environment

which shapes one's attitudes. It would therefore seem as though attitudes have a cognitive (learned) component, an emotional component and a component of observable behaviour. For the purposes of this research it is argued that a teacher not only needs knowledge and skills to cope with learners with special needs (LSEN) (the cognitive component), but ideally also positive emotional components. A relationship between attitudes and behaviour is therefore assumed as an essential link. In other words, in order to ensure positive behaviour, or teaching outcomes, teachers have to develop positive attitudes. However, all too often, according to Schechtman & Or (1996: 137), the emotional aspects that underlie teachers' beliefs about inclusion are ignored by the policy-makers, who tend to focus on knowledge, skills and practical support without giving much recognition to implicit needs and emotional inhibitions.

As mainstreaming and integration, and more recently inclusion, have become a universal agenda for school reform, most of the research on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion reflects international tendencies. In general, mainstream teachers are of the opinion that they do not possess adequate training, skills, time or support networks to ensure quality education for all. This has also been the conclusion of studies conducted among teachers in South African primary schools which have adopted the philosophy of inclusion since the promulgation of the new constitution of 1996 (Bothma 1997: 59, Harris 1998: 33, Wessels 1997: 110).

The following section of this article will compare the findings of three independent studies. The three studies were conducted at the beginning of 1999 by three separate institutions in different parts of the country. Study 1 was conducted by researchers at the Rand Afrikaans University (Swart & Pettipher 2000), while the researchers for Study 2 were from the University of Stellenbosch (Oswald *et al* 2000) and the researchers for Study 3 from the University of Pretoria (Prozesky 1999). The purpose of all three studies was to identify and describe the attitudes and experiences of teachers in implementing inclusive education. During this period there existed only limited research on inclusive education in South Africa. In response to the Constitution and the 1997 joint report of the NCSNET and the NCESS, individual provinces developed and implemented provincial policies

in regard to developing inclusive schools. Together with the implementation of other new educational policies, teachers were thus confronted with extensive changes. Hence, teachers needed to undergo appropriate training in order to respond effectively to these changes. In reaction to the new demands placed on teachers, each institution independently initiated this research with the ultimate aim of informing teacher preparation for the implementation of inclusive education. Although the studies were conducted in different contexts, the similarities between the findings were striking and the need for consolidation was evident. The purpose of this comparative analysis is to contribute towards the body of knowledge on teachers' attitudes and experiences in implementing inclusive education in the South African context.

1. Comparative analysis of the three studies

The authors compared the three research reports. The constant comparative method of analysis was employed (Maykut & Morehouse 1994) on a meta-level to analyse the designs and the findings of the research reports. The constant comparative method involves a simultaneous process of inductive category coding and a comparison of all units of meaning. The analysis of the designs focused on the purpose of the studies, the selection of the participants, and the procedures of data collection and analysis. The discussions of the findings of the three studies (not the findings alone) were studied to identify the units of meaning. The focus was on teachers' attitudes and experiences in implementing inclusive education. Units of meaning were compared and categorised, with new categories being formed as new units of meaning emerged.

1.1 Comparative analysis of the design type and logic

All three studies were conducted within the interpretative paradigm and were generic qualitative studies seeking to understand in-service teachers' attitudes to and perspectives on inclusive education. The participants in all three studies were purposefully selected, as "information-rich cases" who could contribute significantly towards the study (Patton 1990: 169). As the concept of inclusion is relative-

ly new to teachers in South Africa, the interest was in understanding and gaining insight into the views of teachers. The participants in all three studies were experienced teachers in regular education who had had some exposure to inclusive education and the accommodation of learners with impediments to learning and development. They taught mainly at primary schools. They were representative of various racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, a diversity which enhanced the richness of the data.

The primary focus of data collection and analysis in all three studies was on the attitudes and experiences of teachers in implementing inclusive education. Various data collection methods were used across all three studies, including focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, written responses and an open-ended questionnaire. Data analysis involved the consolidation, reduction and interpretation of the raw data. The researchers in all three studies systematically classified data to construct categories that described and interpreted it. The findings of the three studies are tabulated in Table 1.

1.2 Comparative analysis of the findings

The following patterns were identified in all three studies:

- Inadequate knowledge, skills and training of teachers for effective implementation of inclusive education.
- Lack of educational and teacher support.
- Insufficient facilities, infrastructure and assistive devices.
- Potential effects of inclusive education on learners with special educational needs and on other learners in the mainstream.

2. Discussion of findings

South Africa is in a favourable position in that it is only now implementing a policy that has been tried and tested in numerous other countries for many years. Furthermore, extensive research has been done on the problems and the successes experienced in implementing inclusive education, as well as on the factors that have contributed to the development of positive or negative attitudes towards such edu-

Study 1 (Swart & Pettipher 2000)	Study 2 (Oswald <i>et al</i> 2000)	Study 3 (Prozesky 1999)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Socio-economic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of insecurity as a result of political and economic change • Lack of basic services and resources • High teacher/learner ratio • Unsafe and inaccessible built environment 2. Teaching in a diverse setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing diversity • Labelling 3. Professional development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge and skills • Teacher support • Ineffective in-service training • Misunderstandings of concept of inclusion • Relevant knowledge and skills not acknowledged • Unsure of the relationship between OBE and inclusion 4. Attitudes towards inclusion, diversity and disabilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative and harmful attitudes towards diversity • Labelling on all levels of the system • Misperceptions and assumptions 	<p>Negative attitudes toward inclusive education</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Education policy and management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High teacher/learner ratio • Maintain existing structure of provision of special education • Inadequate facilities and infrastructure • Inadequate educational support services • Inadequate resources and learning apparatus • High tempo of educational change in South Africa 2. The teacher <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate knowledge and training • Increased stress and frustration • Implementing Curriculum 2005 3. The learner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate individual attention to learners with special educational needs • Potential development of emotional difficulties among LSEN • Potential development of academic difficulties among LSEN 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inadequate knowledge and skills in inclusive education 2. Inadequate knowledge of LSEN 3. Inadequate training of teachers to teach LSEN 4. LSEN is regarded as part of the community 5. Attitudes towards specific disabilities 6. Positive attitudes towards working with a multidisciplinary team 7. Previous teaching experience 8. Benefits and problems of including LSEN

Study 1 (Swart & Pettipher 2000)	Study 2 (Oswald <i>et al</i> 2000)	Study 3 (Prozesky 1999)
<p>about disabilities and inclusion</p> <p>5. Inadequate leadership and management</p> <p>6. Resistance to change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential disruptive behaviour of LSEN • Potential neglect of other learners <p>Factors, identified by teachers with a positive attitude, that might foster inclusive education</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Education management and policy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing Curriculum 2005 • Availability of adequate educational support • Lower teacher/learner ratio • Type and extent of disability • Adequate facilities and infrastructure • Early intervention 2. The teacher <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate knowledge and training • Positive attitude towards LSEN • Dedication 	

cation. This provides a framework for the interpretation and discussion of the findings.

2.1 Inadequate knowledge, skills and training of teachers for effective implementation of inclusive education

Participants in all three studies were of the opinion that they do not possess adequate knowledge or skills to address diversity or to teach learners with special educational needs. There is thus a perceived inability to manage diversity, often resulting in feelings of fear and hopelessness and in learners being referred for assessment by a specialist, diagnosis and placement in special programmes. Furthermore, misunderstandings and misperceptions of the concept of inclusion also appear to frustrate its implementation. In these studies, participants conceptualised inclusion as merely the placement of learners with disabilities in a mainstream classroom. Thus inadequate dissemination of information, or even downright misinformation, is prevalent, leading to resistance and disillusionment. Study 3 focused specifically on participants' awareness of the policy of inclusive education, and found that they stated that they possessed no knowledge of official policy documents. However, limited knowledge of inclusive education had been obtained from newspapers, pamphlets, educational programmes and informal discussions.

In light of the above the need for further training and ongoing learning is clear. However, it appears that the current in-service training does not always meet teachers' needs. The teachers in the three studies were of the opinion that their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them for educating learners with special educational needs. Furthermore, there appears to be a negative attitude towards in-service training, which does not always bring about the desired change.

In the context of the numerous changes presently taking place within the education system, participants expressed concerns about the relation between outcomes-based education and inclusion as well as the need to adapt the curriculum to suit learners with special educational needs. A further area of concern was the management of large classes with high teacher/learner ratios. For the teachers in Stu-

dy 2, large classes were perceived as the most difficult obstacle to the successful implementation of inclusion.

2.2 Lack of educational and teacher support

A theme strongly associated with inadequate training is the perceived lack of educational and teacher support. Teachers expressed a need for teacher support teams and support services to assist them with the learners. This relates to their acknowledgement of the importance of collaborative partnerships in implementing inclusive education. For this to be a reality, teachers require skills in collaboration, which they presently do not perceive themselves to possess or use. A significant observation among teachers who expressed a negative attitude towards inclusive education was that they favoured the present educational system, with the continuum of special education services. Teachers with a more positive attitude towards inclusive education and collaborative partnerships identified educational and teacher support services as a prerequisite for the effective implementation of inclusive education. However, the support offered to these teachers remains limited to expert opinion and does not necessarily include collaboration.

2.3 Insufficient facilities, infrastructure and assistive devices

According to the participants, the successful accommodation of learners with special educational needs requires facilities, infrastructure and assistive devices, which are in their opinion presently lacking. The facilities and assistive devices referred to by the participants include more accessible buildings, appropriate instructional material and equipment. Participants in Studies 1 and 3 also identified a lack of basic services and resources, such as water, electricity and toilet facilities. An unsafe and dilapidated built environment was also highlighted. These factors appear to be directly related to poverty and unemployment.

2.4 Potential effects of inclusive education on learners

Negative attitudes and labelling arise from misconceptions and assumptions about disabilities. Participants in all three studies expressed concern about the quality of attention paid to learners with special educational needs, the potential emotional and academic effects of inclusive education on such learners, the potential for disruptive behaviour, and the educational neglect of learners without special educational needs. However, participants also believed that inclusion can benefit learners with and without special needs in terms of facilitating acceptance and understanding of each other. In Study 2, early intervention was emphasised as a precondition for the effective accommodation of all learners, resulting in higher levels of acceptance and understanding.

3. Interpretation and conclusion

In trying to understand the data analysed from the three studies, the authors realised that the broader social context had to be borne in mind. The recent reforms in South African education, many of them based upon the politics and philosophies of the marketplace, have implications for teachers implementing inclusive education. Such reforms and contextual changes include the implementation of a new curriculum; the management of increasing levels of diversity; the changing patterns of family and community life; increased economic uncertainty, with consequent unemployment or redeployment, and more general use of new technologies. In combination, these changes have caused much of the chaos and complexity that teachers encounter in their work. As pointed out by Michael Fullan (Hargreaves 1998: 286), schools today have to manage, co-ordinate and integrate numerous changes in the context of multiple innovations. These multifaceted societal changes have implications for the implementation of inclusive education, including making educational change, faster and more complex change, intensifying teachers' work and increasing the pressures on them to bring about fundamental changes in learning and teaching in order to accommodate diversity and provide a quality education for all.

Inclusion implies a paradigm shift for both education and society in general. Paradigm change in education has been explained by Fullan (1991: 117) in terms of objective and subjective realities. Objective realities include changes in teaching style, resources and skills. Subjective realities include personal attitudes and the will to change. Educational change has to be considered from the teacher's perspective. Fullan (1991: 117) therefore postulates that "educational change depends on what teachers do and think — it's as simple and complex as that". Furthermore, real change (whether imposed or voluntary) always involves elements of loss, anxiety and struggle. All this needs to be taken into account by curriculum developers and teacher educators attempting to transform the system into an inclusive one, if they want to achieve any degree of success.

The findings of this comparative study are closely related to numerous variables which have been shown by a number of researchers to influence teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and their teaching practice. Similarly, these variables are closely connected to the objective and subjective realities described by Fullan (1991: 117), and are essential considerations for paradigm change. The fact that teachers often feel that they have been compelled to make changes when they have not had any substantive participation in policy decisions frequently gives rise to negative attitudes and resistance. Teachers' belief and confidence in their own ability to teach learners with special educational needs is a further factor, as is their concern for the needs of "regular" learners in their classes. An additional subjective reality is teachers' resistance to change — they find it threatening to have to change their proven teaching methods to accommodate learners with special educational needs.

Objective realities have also been shown to play a significant role in influencing teachers' attitudes. Good in-service programmes and skills training in managing learners with special educational needs may lead to more positive attitudes. The provision of sufficient high-quality support services and resources, including special education personnel and back-up from school administration, is a further important factor. In this regard all stakeholders should learn to cooperate and collaborate as equal partners who respect each other's knowledge. Teachers' past experience of teaching learners with spe-

cial educational needs, as well as their knowledge and conception of disabilities and learning difficulties should also be considered.

The challenge of training teachers for inclusive education now lies in changing the conception of what in-service training is all about. It is well documented in the literature that “one-shot workshops” and a “one-size-fits-all” model are frequently but ineffectively employed in education (Ainscow 1993: 245; Brady *et al* 1997: 245). The current practice tends to underestimate the long-term commitment to professional development that is required for real change to occur. The recognition of professional development as a lifelong process, a way of life, is essential. Both teachers and the facilitators in education, training and development responsible for preparing and supporting teachers for inclusive education need to take cognisance of the contextual, complex and time-consuming nature of change. Practising inclusive education requires more than merely the implementation of a new policy. Teachers do not only require ongoing, supportive in-service training or access to information and new policies; they also need to be emotionally facilitated in order for the necessary paradigm shift to occur. To conclude:

Change is difficult, but inevitable. It is guided first by vision, then by planning, then by action. No matter how much we want to hurry, change is methodical and slower than we might wish. But it does occur (Lilly 1989: 155).

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