

# Within and between the old and the new: Teachers becoming inclusive practitioners

ANTOINETTE D'AMANT

University of KwaZulu-Natal

*This paper explores how 20 African teachers in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, construct their identities in the light of inclusive education, and how they negotiate the tensions and contradictions emerging from the process of becoming inclusive practitioners. Central to this discussion is the understanding that teachers' identities are socially constructed and that radical transformation requires teachers to draw on their transformative capacity and develop an alternative sense of themselves, not only as teachers but also as individuals. A qualitative approach using personal narratives is used to better comprehend the context-specific experiences of these teachers and draw on their authentic voices. What emerges from the study is evidence of the simultaneous existence of both the powerful influence of historic roots of exclusion, which discourage teachers from becoming inclusive practitioners, and some fruits of inclusion, where teachers' attitudes and practices are beginning to embrace inclusion. Findings clearly show a lack of homogeneity in participants' responses to inclusion, highlighting instead the diversity which exists within and between individual African teachers in rural contexts.*

**Keywords:** inclusive education, transformative capacity, identity, teachers, rural context, *White Paper 6*, South Africa.

## Introduction

The discourse of apartheid was a calculated and systematically constructed system of social organisation, with the intended outcome of underdeveloping and subordinating Non-Whites, and establishing Whites as the political, economic and social power and authority within South Africa. Educational segregation and inequality was strictly enforced, and the implementation of different curricula, pedagogies, investment and resources for different racial groups formed diverse identities and subjectivities. Historically, rural areas were reserved for unskilled labour and the unemployed. This legacy of inequality lives on as rural areas are still identified as particularly prone to poverty and inequality (Aliber, 2003).

The advent of a democratic South Africa heralded the end of a politics of exclusion and the beginning of a politics of inclusion. For South Africa, the issue of inclusion is essentially one of extending quality education to the *whole* population (Engelbrecht, Green, Naicker & Engelbrecht, 1999). A broad definition of inclusion has been adopted, extending beyond the narrow interpretation of provision for learners with disabilities or special needs. *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (Department of Education of South Africa, 2001) advocates a focus on identifying and minimising barriers to learning, development and participation that impact on *all* learners, including those in mainstream schools. The understanding of inclusion outlined in *White Paper 6* rejects the deficit and medical model of difference (which locates deficits and blame within individuals) in favour of the social model (which identifies and addresses barriers in the social environment).

Despite the international shift to inclusive education, fundamental tensions and contradictions exist in most countries between stated policy and actual practice (Kavale, 2002). The contrast between policy and practice is particularly apparent in South African rural schools. Rural schools suffered serious neglect under apartheid's system of unequal education. The view prevails that better resourced, historically privileged schools are more likely to be able to implement new education policies than historically disadvantaged, mainly African schools, particularly rural schools catering for the poor and marginalised (Mattson & Harley, 2003). The issue of poor teacher quality in rural areas is foregrounded, along with warnings that

continued unequal distribution of resources across the urban-rural divide will result in a two-tier education system, wherein the worst prepared teachers teach the learners in most need (Cochran-Smith, 2001).

Teachers living and working in rural contexts are widely understood within a deficiency framework. They are perceived as trapped in poverty and inequality, without the means to escape these (Carter & May, 2001), and defined as backward, ignorant and passive, with little capacity to change (May, 2000). Despite transformational education policies, rural school practices are expected to remain largely unchanged (Vayrynen, 2003).

A contributing factor to the policy-practice dilemma in rural areas could be the stark contrast between the fundamental principles underpinning inclusive policy and the traditional values held by the majority of rural communities. For teachers living and working in rural contexts, implementing policy does not simply represent a new approach to pedagogy – it is also a profound challenge to individual values and beliefs, and those of their community. Criticism has been levelled against education policy implementation which overlooks the highly personal element of transformation, the context and the actual agents of transformation (Carrim, 2002; Fullan, 1993; Jansen, 2001; Kalabula, 2002; Mattson & Harley, 2003; Soudien, 2006).

The universalising tendency to view all teachers as homogeneous, and the assumption that the knowledge claims inherent in inclusive education (equal rights and participation, empowerment and emancipation) transcend specific contexts and teacher subjectivities, could lead to the perpetuation of the view that African teachers living and working in rural contexts are deficient. I wanted to explore how such teachers construct their identities in the light of inclusive education, and how they negotiate the tensions and contradictions emerging from the process of becoming inclusive practitioners. In doing so, I adopt a more complex lens that takes cognisance of Griffiths' (1998: 181) assumption that individuals are embedded in the community to which they belong, therefore deriving their rationality, morality and sense of justice from their particular community.

## **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework for this study draws on theoretical arguments about the nature of teacher identity and is specifically informed by the understanding that teachers' identities are socially constructed within social settings. Conceptual considerations include how the identities of African teachers living and working in rural contexts were defined for them as products of historical circumstances of subordination and marginalisation, and how they are experiencing and responding to being called agents of transformation (Giroux, 1988); social responsibility, social change and social justice (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Investigating these teachers' identities thus cannot overlook the deep culture (Clough & Corbett, 2000) of social exclusion and non-participation. Inclusion challenges traditional and dominant meanings and subjectivities and introduces the expectation that teachers will take on the mantle of change agents of a new inclusive system of education and social order. Such radical transformation signifies "a fundamental dislocation with the past" (Harley & Parker, 1999:190), especially for African teachers living and working in rural contexts.

Research suggests that many teachers experience the new education policy as marginalising and alienating (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2004; Engelbrecht, 2003; Shisana, Peltzer, Zungu-Dirwayi & Louw, 2005). While most teachers give the idea of inclusion their support, they experience the actual change towards inclusion as a radical disrupting of old and familiar values, attitudes, norms and practices. This is especially true for African teachers living and working in rural contexts, where former traditional structuring principles of identity are thrown into question, resulting in a "crisis of representation" (McLaren, 1995:58). Transformation requires these teachers to draw on their transformative capacity (Giddens, 1984) and begin redefining themselves. This requires that they develop an alternative sense of themselves, not only as teachers but also as individuals. This study reflects the understanding that the process of becoming inclusive practitioners for teachers who are deeply embedded in the historical cultural norms, values, attitudes and practices of segregation and exclusion, brings with it many contradictions and dissociations inherent in a dislocation with the past.

This framework highlights the pivotal role that the processes of ongoing identity construction play in these teachers' transitional journeys. It highlights the need to speak of a plurality of meanings, and the understanding that all meanings are "historically contingent" and emerge "out of social conventions and sometimes in opposition to them" (McLaren, 1995:27). The conceptual framework supports the view that the subject itself becomes a site of struggle (McLaren, 1995). It acknowledges the heterogeneous and often contradictory processes of subject formation and draws attention to the ways that culture and experience intersect to constitute determining aspects of human agency and struggle (McLaren, 1995).

Adopting a politics of difference and individualisation is central to the conceptual framework as it speaks out against homogeneity and emphasises the need to recognise the plurality of teachers' experiences and their individual avenues of transformation. Through recognising the complex and contingent nature of identity and multiple processes of negotiating transformative capacity, it was hoped that this study would serve to shift present negative perceptions and understandings of African teachers living and working in rural contexts.

## The study

The study attempts to gain a better understanding of the experiences of African teachers who live and work in rural contexts, becoming inclusive practitioners, by focusing on their subjective understandings and specific contexts. The research questions for this study are: how do African teachers working in a rural context construct their identities in the light of inclusive education, and how do they negotiate possible contradictions that may emerge in the process of becoming inclusive practitioners?

Purposive sampling was used to identify 20 teachers who presented as information-rich cases (Patton, 1990). These teachers were drawn from the 16 rural schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, which participated in the National Department of Education pilot project (2001-2003). This project aimed to create an awareness of inclusive education policy and practices, and to facilitate the implementation of *White Paper 6*. The sample comprised 15 females and 5 males, whose teaching experience ranged from 8 to 28 years. Three of the participants were principals.

The schools which participated in the project are considered rural schools and the teachers all lived in the surrounding rural townships. Critical concerns in these areas included poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, out-of-school youth, and single parent, predominantly female-headed households. The home language of the area is isiZulu and all teachers were African. While previously White, Coloured and Indian schools in South Africa have shown increasing degrees of desegregation, schools historically set up under the Department of Education and Training (African schools) have remained racially homogeneous. All teachers in the sample are therefore African and Zulu-speaking.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach which commits to studying the world from the perspective of the interacting individual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2009; De Vos, 2002). The use of narratives as the main strategy of inquiry is an attempt to better comprehend the subjective, lived experiences of these teachers becoming inclusive practitioners, and to draw on their authentic voices.

The narratives of participants were developed through a series of creative prompts under the umbrella of visual methodology, and expanded through in-depth, unstructured, conversational interviews. Visual triggers and prompts (in the form of two self-drawing exercises and a photovoice exercise) were each followed by conversational interviews where participants were encouraged to explain their drawings and photographs in an informal group situation. These sessions went beyond mere description, giving participants the opportunity to engage in their own interpretations (Mitchell, De Lange, Moletsane, Stuart & Buthelezi, 2005). These group sessions ranged from one to two hours each and were recorded and transcribed.

Broad ethical principles of confidentiality, autonomy and nonmaleficence (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002) were considered. Consent obtained from participants was voluntary and informed and the rights, anonymity and dignity of participants were prioritised (De Vos, 2002).

Participants themselves engaged in the first layer of interpretation, where they explained their drawings and photographs. Their reflections comprised their narratives, with which I engaged directly in

the second layer of interpretation. Tesch's approach to organising and interpreting the data was utilised (De Vos, 2002). Narrative texts were read through repeatedly, enabling me to become immersed in the data and familiar with it. Whole-text analysis was then applied to these free-flowing narrative texts. Units of meaning and categories were identified. A list of the unique categories that emerged was compiled and reduced into themes. These themes were then analysed in terms of the extent to which they supported or contradicted the existing literature relating to this area of research and the conceptual framework adopted by the study. Interpretation and analysis occurred at each of these levels and sought to identify and weave together concepts, categories and interrelationships which emerged from the data. The authentic voices of participants were constructed using their direct quotes, offering a thick description of the data generated.

Conclusions from this study shed light on the specific challenges which face African teachers working in rural contexts. It therefore contributes to the local and international conversation concerning the implementation of inclusive education in rural contexts and developing countries.

## Discussion and interpretation of findings

### Roots of exclusion

The findings serve as a reminder that African teachers in rural contexts are necessarily products of a society steeped in historic forms of exclusion and segregation. These definitions make up the fabric of how they understand themselves and others. It is clear from participants' narratives that notions of inclusion often directly contradict traditional roots of exclusion and the historic belief in segregation on the basis of difference. The following narrative excerpt illustrates the dislocation with the past that inclusion signifies, regarding the traditional assumptions about intelligence and ability that exist within a deep culture of inequality and social exclusion:

*It was initially very difficult to accept or implement inclusive education with our general lack of tolerance and interest in accepting difference. Before, if you are disabled or if you have a learning barrier, you were useless, there is nothing that you can do; you don't think as others do, you don't have any skills, you can't work. There is nothing that I can do to help you. It was OK that they just sit at home not doing anything because that was just the way they are. If you get a child who is disabled, even the parent of that child says that child is a curse. This stigma from the community is something that goes a long way back.*

The following narrative excerpts reflect how inclusion challenges participants' classroom practices and relations which have been steeped in traditional values and practices, such as labelling, discrimination, authoritarianism, corporal punishment and routine:

*Before, I used to label children. The teachers who taught us were labelling us. When you are in the classroom, you begin to see that this one is clever and this one is 'dom' [an Afrikaans word meaning 'dumb' or 'stupid'] – we used this kind of words. And you forget about those ones that are struggling and concentrate only on those ones that are sharp.*

*Before, we would shout at the child in front of the class. We didn't have the idea that we were not respecting the child's feelings. We were ignorant about the need to give that child individual attention, or maybe even find out what the particular problem is that he or she is having.*

*Before inclusive I was using a stick to discipline the learners. Most of the time they were crying because of the stick. The teachers who taught me were using the stick. It seems as if we inherited this from them. It was just like that in my head - the learner can learn if the teacher is having a stick in her hand.*

Inclusion presents as a new way of making sense of classroom relations, attitudes and practices, which does not always correspond with participants' accepted attitudes, values, norms and practices. The following excerpts illustrate how some teachers all too readily fall back on exclusive practices:

*This is learner X (I have removed the name of the learner for ethical reasons). Since he was born he had no anus. For excretion, he's using a 'bag'. I've got that problem with him because when that 'bag' is full, I send him home because I can't .... I'm afraid even to see that problem. He's excellent academically. The problem's only that 'bag'. He should be at that special school. There are teachers there who are trained and used to helping children in this way. But not here.*

*Because of the home backgrounds our learners come from, many teachers feel that we cannot do without corporal punishment. It worked for us when we were at school, and it works for our learners now. The parents also request that we use corporal punishment. We know it is not allowed but we will continue to use it. It is part of who we are.*

These findings support the theory that individuals are embedded in the community to which they belong (Griffiths, 1998). Many participants continue to derive their rationality, morality and sense of justice from their community, which is steeped in the deep culture of traditionally exclusive values and practices.

The following participants' narrative excerpts reflect how they are required to develop an alternative sense of themselves as inclusive teachers and redefine much of what they understand about teaching. The excerpts illustrate the crisis of representation in which these teachers find themselves, having their traditional boundaries and roles challenged by the expectations of what inclusive teachers should be:

*I'm frustrated as a teacher because there are a lot of things that are changing, so quickly in education and there are a lot of things to do to accommodate the new system in a very short time. It seemed we are always having to adapt ourselves. There is a transformation in such a way that sometimes we feel that we are getting lost somewhere, somehow as teachers.*

*Even the idea of inclusion itself is sometimes challenging. You have to shift focuses from the way we have been thinking before and adapt ourselves to a new system of accepting, thinking and doing things.*

The study highlights the difficulties that many of these African teachers, working in a rural context, experience in reconciling ideological contradictions and tensions between the old and familiar, and the new and unfamiliar. The expectation that they transform into inclusive practitioners inevitably forces them into a difficult space of choosing between two different identities and opposing social forces. Findings reinforce the need to understand the lived experiences of these teachers and consider the tensions and contradictions they encounter.

Some participants chose to avoid the risks of engaging with inclusion on any deep level, and simply adopted the rhetoric of inclusion to appease the expectations of inclusive policy. While some participants may understand many of the policy principles of inclusive education and even describe themselves and their teaching practices as inclusive, a significant number have not yet made the personal shift to inclusion.

### *Fruits of inclusion*

Despite revealing evidence of deep roots of exclusion, findings also reveal evidence of fruits of inclusion emerging among these African teachers working in a rural context. Some teachers' attitudes and practices are beginning to embrace inclusion and they seem genuine in their commitment to the process of extending the right to meaningful education and full and equal participation to all:

*Inclusive education opened my eyes to the fact that learners who do not learn are not always the cause of that, but the teachers, the school curriculum, textbooks being used, methods used and other barriers can be the cause of learners failing to learn – all these factors need to be investigated before labelling a learner a failure. I know now that all learners in our classrooms need varying levels of support, and as teachers we must be able to offer them the support they need.*

*Inclusion influenced me more positively. This inclusion promotes my spirit of caring and teaches me not to discriminate. I also learned to accept learners according to their level and also to prepare the lesson according to their level. It also teaches me to be patient and helpful.*

*When I get into the class, I bear in mind that children have barriers from time to time because of some problems – everybody has these. Inclusion helped me realise that people are born differently, and perceive information differently, at different levels. I am a much better teacher now.*

*When time passes, the people change their mind. After they get more information about how they are going to deal with the demands this new thing places on us. And so with this inclusive education, we learn to adapt what we know and think.*

Despite challenges, some participants remain committed to their individual journeys of transition towards becoming inclusive practitioners. Some teachers are successfully negotiating their transformative capacity and redefining themselves and their teaching practices, supporting the theory that the subjects themselves become sites of struggle (McLaren, 1995). The following excerpts support the notion that participants' professional identities play a major part in defining their sense of self and provide evidence of a parallel process of personal and professional development:

*Teaching is the most important part of who we are.*

*I see inclusion as in here [pointing to her heart] not anymore out there.*

*I didn't used to be caring for those who were not coping. I didn't think about these things before. Now I have learned to care about these learners who have barriers to learning. I've learned to treat every learner, and all people, equally and to give support where it is needed. I feel different as a person now.*

*For me it has become a never-ending journey. There are challenges all the time. The more you see, the more you solve and address things, the new things come up all the time and you wonder if we'll ever achieve this dream of an inclusive society. There are challenges but I think they are good challenges, because they make us think. And you are always monitoring your thoughts, monitoring your actions, having to think before you do. When you find you have done something that is against your social justice principles, you feel very bad about it, but then you tell yourself that next time you are not going to do it this way. You're wanting to contribute to this dream of a just and peaceful society.*

For some participants, the introduction of inclusion is challenging old discourses of difference, and new sense is being made of the way life and education can be.

## **Within and between the old and the new**

While findings provide flickers of hope for the future of inclusion and the dream of inclusive education, the reality is that not all participants engage equally in the struggle towards new forms of identity, which inclusion requires. Only a percentage of participants actually manifest the transformative capacity necessary for effective transformation. Findings highlight the plurality of teachers' experiences of and engagement with transition – a reminder that there are multiple forces, agencies and resources (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008) at work in individual African teachers working in a rural context. Findings also highlight the need to speak of a plurality of meanings and to understand that these emerge “out of social conventions and sometimes in opposition to them” (McLaren, 1995:27). The internal differences within the sample indicate that any blanket generalisations about African teachers working in rural contexts would be misleading. Individual teachers are positioned within and between the old and the new social forces, where evidence of exclusion and inclusion exist alongside each other.

## **Wider implications of the study**

Transformative policy requires that African teachers working in a rural context be inducted into a new way of doing and being (Mudimbe, 1988), with new identities conferred upon them and a new order of activities and values instituted. This is reminiscent of the grand narratives of enlightened progress and development (Kavale, 2002) which served to justify theories of colonial expansion and the discourse

on African primitiveness. This study uncovers evidence that these teachers are being forced to occupy a similar space of colonisation, where they are named by others and their selves are externally defined within a deficiency framework, leading to their continued disempowerment. This leads me to question whether transformative education policy, far from being a liberating and empowering force, may in fact serve to perpetuate unequal urban-rural power relations, and the exclusion and marginalisation of African teachers working in rural contexts. Are these teachers not at the receiving end of a colonialist discourse, thereby making them into subjects once again?

Freire (1993) warns against the ghosts of the past haunting revolutionary transformation. These teachers' contributions to the pedagogy of inclusion and liberation will be impossible if they are not liberated, empowered and inclusive themselves. Further policy implementation needs to consider how the transformation and emancipation of African teachers working in rural contexts can be supported. A politics of involvement should be considered, where methods of implementing policy reflect the consciousness of the teachers themselves and reflect a commitment to working *with* teachers towards transformation.

Developing African teachers working in rural contexts into inclusive practitioners calls for a more inclusive understanding of teachers' engagement with transformation. Rather than imposing a single discourse of inclusive education, an inclusive politics would accommodate different interpretations of inclusion and its implementation (Young, 2000). Such a position would understand that inclusion may only be present intermittently, partially or potentially, thus allowing teachers to vary in the extent, depth and intensity of their commitment to the inclusive process.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the diversity which exists within and between these teachers. What emerges is evidence that, despite numerous tensions, contradictions and constraints, some African teachers working in rural contexts are engaging in the process of redefining their identities. While not all are equally open to the idea of inclusion and many have not yet made the shift to inclusion on any deep level, it is also clear that these teachers cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group, and that adopting a deficiency framework when considering African teachers working in rural contexts is clearly misleading and inappropriate. Some display the transformative capacity to challenge historical roots of exclusion and, in doing so, are developing an alternative sense of self, professionally and personally. Through this process of redefining and transforming their own historical destinies, they are constructing themselves in the role of transformative agents of social responsibility, social change and social justice.

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