

From clinic to classroom: A model of teacher education for inclusion

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One of the challenges associated with the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa is the effective training of teachers to meet diverse learning needs in their classrooms. This article reflects on the pilot years of a postgraduate degree course in inclusive education developed at a South African university, using Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) concept of "inquiry-as-stance". Replacing previous courses which focused on equipping students to provide individual support in clinical settings, the course emphasises inclusive teaching strategies appropriate for whole-class teaching. The course is designed to avoid both individual deficit constructions of learner difference and a rigid theory/practice dichotomy. To ensure context relevance and practical implementation of the pedagogies taught, lecturers visited students in their classrooms and provided support and feedback. Students also kept journals, supported one another by sharing experiences, and were assessed on a critical incident report. Course evaluations attest to student satisfaction with the course content and delivery. The difficulties that both students and lecturers encountered while implementing inclusive pedagogies can be explained as challenges associated with change. The article concludes that teachers need to develop a collaborative and classroom-based knowledge-of-inclusive practice by implementing, reflecting on and theorising inclusive pedagogies.

Keywords: Inclusive education, postgraduate teacher education, inclusive pedagogies, inquiry as stance

Introduction

White Paper Six: Special Needs Education (DoE, 2001) asserts that classroom teachers are the country's primary resource in attaining the goal of inclusive education. Since 2001 there have been various initiatives by the DoE, Non-Government Organisations and universities to train teachers to be able to respond to diverse learning needs in their classrooms. The impact of this training is hard to ascertain, and reports on the implementation of inclusive education are mixed, with some evidence of progress in state and independent schools (Walton, 2011), and a lack of implementation due to inadequate funding and service delivery challenges (Wildeman & Nomdo, 2007). Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in South Africa have been extensively researched, and prevailing negativity is often ascribed to a lack of training and preparation for inclusive classrooms (Stofile & Green, 2007). In 2006, a report from a roundtable discussion organised by The Human Sciences Research Council and Disabled People of South Africa noted that the studies showing teachers' negative attitudes and lack of preparedness for inclusion had been overemphasised and offered little in terms of the way ahead for inclusive education. One of the key practical and implementation-focused research questions which emerged in the report was:

What is the most appropriate Human Resource Development Strategy to ensure integrated and inclusive teaching, learning and management practice in all educational institutions in South Africa? For example such as models of teacher development emerging from international experience and for the South African context and the basic minimum that must be provided to ensure effective implementation of an inclusive education system (Lorenzo & Schneider, 2006:9).

This call for teacher training for the effective implementation of inclusive education is reiterated in the recently published *Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa* (DoE, 2011:10) where inclusive teaching has been prioritised as it has been identified as a “key lever for improving quality across the system”. Because of these policy imperatives, and the practical reality of 200.000 children and young people out of school, often because they cannot access the specialised support they require (RSA, 2010), research needs to focus on models of teacher development that emerge from the international experience and that are appropriate for the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa.

After a brief review of international and local models of teacher education for inclusion, we describe and reflect on the development and implementation of a postgraduate course in inclusive education offered at our university. The course is an option for a Bachelor of Education with Honours (B.Ed Hons) degree – a one-year full-time or a two-year part-time qualification that for some students ‘rounds off’ their undergraduate qualification, and for others, is the first step in an academic career. Our approach adopts “inquiry-as-stance” – Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999:289) term to describe work within an inquiry community, generating local knowledge, envisioning and theorising practice, and interpreting and interrogating others’ theory and research. Inquiry-as-stance is linked in orientation to various approaches in practitioner inquiry, including action research and reflective practice, and is a valuable and documented way of coupling theory and practice in the scholarship of teacher education (Christie & Menter, 2009; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Melville & Bartley, 2010). Central to the idea of inquiry-as-stance is the relationship of the knower(s) (in this instance, we as teacher educators and researchers) and knowledge. Cochran-Smith (2003:21) maintains that “the practitioner/researcher is both user and creator of knowledge, which is always regarded as generative and tentative, to be questioned, challenged, connected, tried out, revised, reshaped, and held problematic”, and it is this conception of knowledge as being inseparable from the knower that resonates with McNiff’s (2008:352) understanding of knowledge as “generated by a knowing subject, from within a social context, and ... best communicated through narrativised accounts that tell the story of one’s learning”. We find this a useful way to position our work, situated as it is in our institutional context and reflecting a collaborative construction of knowledge about teacher education for inclusion. We identify ourselves in this article as ‘knowing subjects’, not devising theories or reporting findings, but rather, through a critical perspective on the research and theory of others (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), and by observing, questioning and transforming the way in which we enable teachers to teach more inclusively, we are narrativising our learning. Because South Africa comes relatively late to inclusive education, we can learn a great deal from the international experience of teacher education for diversity. However, inclusive education is not a universally agreed upon concept, with nuances of meanings across and within countries. Despite different policy frameworks and contextual realities, there are models, courses and topics that could inform local practice.

Models of teacher education for inclusion

International models

In the case of pre-service teachers, two broad approaches are evident. The first approach, which is less prominent, is that of an infused approach, where inclusive education is not taught as a separate course or curriculum, congruent with the idea that “inclusion cannot be taught in isolation” (Forlin, 2010:8). This is exemplified by Loreman (2010) who describes how the knowledge, skills and attitudes that would usually be taught in a single unit on inclusive or special education are spread across a number of courses or an entire programme. This is considered a promising model for teacher preparation, but one which requires further research. The second approach, which is not necessarily more effective (Sharma, Forlin & Loreman, 2008), involves single unit courses that engage students with various aspects of the philosophy and practice of inclusion. Examples of topics offered as part of pre-service teacher education for inclusion internationally are preparation to work with the families of children with ‘special education needs’ (Hornby, 2010; Scorgie, 2010); engaging in collaborative collegial relationships, such as co-teaching

(Wang & Fitch, 2010); interacting positively with people with disabilities (Chambers & Forlin, 2010; Sharma *et al.*, 2008), and apprenticeship in inclusive schools (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2010).

While courses in inclusive education must be regarded as vital for pre-service teachers who may not proceed to further studies, our interest is in in-service teacher education, specifically at postgraduate level. There is, however, a paucity of literature about in-service professional development for inclusion in comparison to that of initial teacher preparation programmes. Features and emphases of postgraduate courses that seem prominent internationally include collaborative inquiry (Armstrong, Moore, Russell & Schimanski, 2009; Deppler, 2010) and site-based supported learning (Ashman, 2010; O’Gorman, 2010).

Local initiatives

Published research on teacher education and inclusion in South Africa still tends to focus on issues of attitude (Nel, Muller, Hugo, Helldin *et al.*, 2011), challenges that teachers face, and the skills and support that teachers perceive they need (Eloff & Kgwete, 2007; Magare, Kitching & Roos, 2010), with relatively little attention being paid to models of teacher education that would enable teachers to address the challenges and gain skills. Lessing and De Witt (2007) report positive outcomes of a professional development workshop designed to empower teachers to work with learners who experience learning difficulties, and Swart and Oswald (2008) suggest that, among other things, teachers use workshops and courses to navigate their learning about inclusive education. Williams, Olivier and Pienaar (2009) describe a model to develop teacher competence in inclusive education that involves a consultant working with a group of teachers. In the context of university studies, Amin and Ramathan (2009) describe the benefits of first-year students doing practicum teaching in a context very different from their own experience and Pienaar and Lombard (2010) reflect on a teacher educator living the values of inclusivity as he teaches a module on inclusive education to undergraduate students.

It appears that a particular gap in the literature on teacher education for inclusion in South Africa is that of how a postgraduate qualification in inclusive education could be structured and presented in a way that draws on international best practice while reflecting local realities. To this end, we report and reflect on the pilot years (2009-2010) of our institution’s postgraduate teacher education course in inclusive education. Each year 10-12 students were enrolled in this elective, having completed their core courses in the honours programme. They represented diverse races, and taught in a variety of urban schools, from well-resourced independent schools, to inner-city schools and special schools. Among the group were preschool, primary and high-school teachers. Their years of teaching experience varied, but none had had any previous formal learning about inclusive teaching.

A rationale for the features of the course

How a course is constructed, what it contains, and how it is taught reveals a great deal about the underlying ideologies and assumptions of the course designers, and prevailing institutional and contextual pressures. As we describe the features of the course and the rationale for the various components, we acknowledge that our biases and perspectives both determine and leach into the course content and how it is presented to students.

Epistemological considerations

Teachers come to a professional learning course with existing knowledge, experiences and theories about teaching and learning (Deppeler, 2010). As far as South African teachers are concerned, Naicker (2005:250) specifically mentions the challenge of teacher education for inclusion, given the legacy of conservative teacher training in the years of apartheid. In particular, he is concerned that conservative thinking and practices, which buttressed segregated education and which make special education practices seem like common sense, need to be replaced at a “pedagogical level”. Bearing this in mind, we approached the design of the course anxious to avoid, if not disrupt three epistemological orientations. The first is that teaching inclusively is a matter of identifying ‘barriers to learning’ that individual learners may experience

and then designing interventions or supports to address these barriers. We were concerned, rather, to present teaching and learning strategies that would be effective for *all* learners in a classroom. The second is related to this. We wanted to reject individual deficit constructions of difference or disability which are based on normalising discourses and which have in the past, and continue to perpetuate marginalisation and exclusion. Instead, we wanted to focus critical attention to how prevailing curricula, cultures and practices in schools work together to marginalise certain learners, even those who are now ‘included’ (Slee, 2011), and enable teachers to effect transformation in their schools and classrooms (Dunbar-Krige & Van der Merwe, 2010). The third is our unease with a traditional theory/practice dichotomy. In this regard, we find Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999:250) distinction between “knowledge-for-practice” and “knowledge-of-practice” useful. “Knowledge-for-practice”, they maintain, is the formal knowledge and theory that teachers are taught to use to inform their practice, whereas “knowledge-of-practice” is “constructed in the context of use, intimately connected to the knower, and ... also inevitably a process of theorizing” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999:273). We were thus concerned to generate and co-construct, with our students, knowledge-of-inclusive practice that blurred the boundaries between lecture theatre and classroom. In doing so, our approach emphasised teachers’ voice and lived classroom experiences, rather than imposing techniques and strategies on teachers based on our (or other researchers’) appraisal of what teachers need (Armstrong, Moore, Russell & Schimanski, 2009; Deppeler, 2010). A university course needs a curriculum, however, and as content and pedagogy are vital considerations (Sharma *et al.*, 2008), we mapped a course that would introduce students to inclusive classroom practices through contact sessions, readings and a day spent at an inclusive school, support them as they implemented these in their classrooms by site visits and creating a collaborative peer culture, and assess them authentically in ways that acknowledged their diverse characteristics and contexts.

Introduction to inclusive classroom practices

The contact sessions with students were designed to explore and engage with various classroom strategies that are regarded in the international and local literature as supportive of learner diversity. Whereas previous courses in this programme focused on individual interventions designed to be implemented in a clinical setting, we emphasised classroom practices which students could realistically and immediately implement in their classrooms. These included universal design and curriculum differentiation (endorsed by Ferguson (2008) and Loreman, Deppeler and Harvey (2010)); co-operative learning (recommended by Sapon-Shevin (2007) and Loreman *et al.*, (2010)); positive discipline and resilience (described by Conway (2010) and Roffey (2010)); using the Concentrated Language Encounter (described in the South African context by Donald and Condy (2005)), and Dialogic teaching (recommended by Lyle (2008)). We also addressed generic topics that arose from teachers’ experiences, including teaching literacy and numeracy, and assessment, and responded to specific concerns raised about learners who experienced various difficulties.

Classroom implementation with supportive feedback

Advocating for school-based approaches to prepare teachers for inclusive practice, Ainscow, Howes, Farrell and Frankham (2003) argue that professional learning needs to be context-specific and directly related to teachers’ work in schools. In support of this, Deppeler (2010) mentions that a connection must be made between knowledge of instructional practices and the school environment. Ashman (2010:146) maintains that a key issue in postgraduate professional learning is the “practical application of new knowledge ... that will change their classroom practices”. We thus asked that as teachers learnt about inclusive classroom strategies, they begin intentionally to implement these in their practice. Recognising that students may experience what Fullan (2007:171) calls an “implementation dip” which is a “dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings”, we realised that it was very important that lecturers respond to students’ efforts with feedback and reassurance. While classroom visits are not usually associated with postgraduate learning in South African universities, lecturers visited the students in their classrooms in order to provide a safety net of support and on-site

guidance as they implemented the inclusive strategies. We were aware that a supportive environment is necessary for change to happen (Zimmerman, 2006), and that more positive attitudes to inclusive education are associated with the availability of support (Chhabra, Srivastava & Srivastava, 2010:221).

Collaboration and participation

Collaboration and participatory teamwork among teachers is necessary for the effective implementation of inclusion in schools (Ferguson, 2008; Loreman *et al.*, 2010) and promotes effective professional learning (O’Gorman, 2010). While the lecture theatre cannot approximate the school staffroom, we did want to promote participation and collaboration and provide opportunities for students to give and receive support to one another, acknowledging that positive relationships and supportive interactions enable the creation of inclusive learning environments (Magare *et al.*, 2010). Students were encouraged to share their experiences, advise one another, and pool their knowledge. In this regard, Jita and Ndjalane (2009) maintain that collaboration and sharing of knowledge among peers helps teachers to reflect on their practices as equals through meaningful social interaction. In addition, the students were consulted throughout the experience as to what they found to be helpful and otherwise, enabling them to participate in decision-making about their own learning and the course trajectory.

Reflective journal

Keeping a journal is a well-documented means whereby teachers can reflect on their practice (Collier, 1999; Ezati, Ocheng, Ssentamu & Sikoyo, 2010; Larrivee, 2000). During this course, students were required to complete at least one journal entry each week that required reflection on their experience and how they had integrated concepts and strategies from their course into their practice. This process of self-reflection necessitates an examination of conceptual frameworks: identifying what it is that structures how we think and act (Blignaut, 2007). As a course requirement, the journal was assessed according to criteria given to the students at the outset of the course. Their reflections were evaluated according to three levels of reflection, namely a tacit level, an aware level, and a strategic level (Perkins, 1992 cited in Dison, 2009). In essence, we were concerned with the extent to which students explained and elaborated on the implementation process, showing their capacity to evaluate their own teaching practices in the light of the theories of others, and by referring to the lecturers’ comments. In other words, we were asking them to generate knowledge-of-inclusive practice as they reflected on their work.

Observing inclusive teaching in practice

Waldron suggests that school teams visit other schools to observe inclusive teaching strategies, with the belief that teachers will find ideas more credible if they observe them being worked out in practice (cited in Walther-Thomas & Brownell, 2001:177). O’Gorman (2010:194) recommends that teachers “witness others’ practice” as this may offer insights into pedagogies for diverse learners. Arrangements were made first for students to visit a local school where inclusive education is practised, with the opportunity to observe classes and engage the teachers in questions and discussion (Walton, 2011). Subsequently, when overlapping school terms made this difficult, video recordings of lessons from this local school were made, and the students watched these together, discussing and critiquing what they saw.

Critical incident report

Rather than set a standard examination at the end of the course which would deny the diversity of students’ characteristics and contexts, we set an examination equivalent in which students had to submit an action research report describing their learning through the year. We decided to use the vehicle of a ‘critical incident’ taken from a literacy- and a numeracy-related lesson (or series of lessons) which had been described in the journal. We described critical moments/incidents in teaching practice as ‘defining moments’ or ‘turning points’, using Haynes and Murriss’s (2011) suggestion that incidents in practice become significant when they dramatically contrast with previous experience. These events stand out

and can become turning points in professional life. These authors maintain that the moment of surprise, awareness or noting the distinctive character of such events is a first step, but for the episode to become critical it has to be interpreted and interrogated. The students were asked to choose incidents that disturbed or excited them about their developing inclusive practice. The requirements of the report included a literature review, a reflection on relevant theories, and an explanation of how the critical incident had occurred within the context of the lesson.

Reflections on change

The presentation of the course and the students' implementation of inclusive practices foregrounded the challenges and complexities of change. Not only did students have to grapple with making changes to their classroom practices by introducing different ways of teaching and learning, but we were also challenged by new ways of being 'lecturers' and of presenting and assessing a course. While the theory and literature on educational change is beyond the scope of this article, we find that many of the challenges encountered in the presentation and implementation of the course are issues of change, rather than issues of inclusive education. For example, while change is "a highly personal experience" (Fullan, 1991:127), it is ideally worked out in collaboration with others (Fullan, 1991; Swart & Pettipher, 2007). Although students enjoyed collaborative relationships with each other and with lecturers in support of their changing classroom practices, many met with scepticism, rebuttal and hostility from their colleagues in schools. Reasons for resistance to change among teachers are well documented (for example, by Zimmerman (2006)) and include entrenched habits; threats to their expertise and identity; lack of understanding of reasons for change, and the fear of the unknown. Individual students often found it difficult to sustain their innovations in institutional contexts that were indifferent to their efforts, or where colleagues undermined their work. McIntyre (2009:607) gives credence to this, noting that "... the concept of inclusive pedagogy itself is disruptive to the status quo in many schools, and will, no doubt, be an uncomfortable idea for many school staff".

Change is multidimensional, and in this course lecturers and students worked in the three dimensions of change described by Fullan (2001:26): the use of new materials; the use of new teaching approaches, and the alteration of beliefs. This multidimensionality accounts for the "complexity, difficulty, uncertainty and ambivalence" that Blignaut (2007:50) associates with change. We were challenged (as were the participants in Gravett's (2004) study on transformative learning) by the sense of losing control of the learning process, as it moved from the familiar terrain of our lecture theatres to the unpredictability of students' classrooms. We could not teach about inclusive pedagogy without using these teaching approaches ourselves, and we were thus challenged with how to teach dialogically, how to differentiate curriculum, instruction and assessment, and how to promote cooperative learning in a postgraduate learning context.

Evaluation

Weekly feedback helped us to pace the course to meet students' needs, and to know when to pause for emphasis and when to move on. As this course represented a new way of teaching an Honours module, we were concerned to access students' formal evaluations of the course. To this end, they filled in a standard university course evaluation form and we drew on their journal entries to understand more about what helped or hindered their learning. We have limited our use of extracts of students' responses for the purpose of illustration in this article, being aware of the danger of using others' voices manipulatively (Armstrong *et al.*, 2009), in particular when disembedding statements from their original textual context. It emerged that the aspects of the course that students highlighted as being particularly beneficial were the on-site supervision visits which, in turn, led to positive and supportive relationships with lecturers. It appears that this gave students both the impetus and the encouragement needed to try new methodologies. In particular, students seem to have appreciated the mediation of the feelings of panic, frustration, anxiety, and inadequacy they experienced as they began to implement changes to their teaching. Reabetswe, in an inner-city primary school, described feeling "frightened" and anxious about whether her classroom strategies were going to work. Janet (a foundation phase teacher in a well-resourced suburban school)

mentioned: “The help and support from the lecturers was very good. They didn’t always give the impression that implementation worked the first time around. They described all angles of the situation. This helped when I thought I’d failed as I knew it wasn’t a major problem and that I could try again.”

Student responses to the course have generally been encouraging. Helen, a preschool teacher stated: “This course has made me a better educator. I am able to adapt content and context to meet the needs of learners in my class and, as a result, they are benefitting”. However, while this remains a popular Honours option, we have to contend with various threats to the sustainability of the course as it is currently presented. Because the course is structured around classroom application of inclusive pedagogies, it effectively excludes teachers who are not currently teaching, either because they are studying full-time, or because they have been unable to secure a teaching post, or because they are employed in another sector and they are retraining with a view to returning to teaching. Some arrangements have been made for such students to spend time in a local school, but this has been far from satisfactory. Compounding this are the institutional and higher education debates about ‘professional’ versus ‘academic’ postgraduate qualifications in education, and how a course such as this could or should be positioned in the academy. Instead of rendering our research and reflection on the pilot years of the course irrelevant, such challenges point to the pressing need for a scholarship of teacher education that will result in the effective implementation of inclusive education in South Africa.

Conclusion

We have deliberately avoided writing this article as research ‘findings’, resisting the closure that the words ‘finding’ or ‘found’ imply. Instead, we have documented our ‘searchings’ as we seek a model for teacher education for inclusion that is simultaneously theoretically rigorous and practically applicable. Our experience suggests that knowledge-for-inclusive education that is transmitted in the lecture theatre and that only requires that teachers understand and articulate inclusive strategies may not be sufficient. Enabling teachers to facilitate access and participation in the curriculum for all learners requires that teachers develop a collaborative and classroom-based knowledge-of-inclusive practice by implementing, reflecting on and theorising inclusive pedagogies.

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