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THE CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN SCHOOLS: THE SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is the term used to describe an education system in which all learners are accepted and fully included, educationally and socially. The process of inclusion proves to have challenges in developing countries such as South Africa which adopted it a bit later than the developed countries. Research has mentioned that amongst other challenges is the lack of resources and overcrowding. Hence, this paper debates and discusses the challenges in the implementation of inclusive education in South African schools. The study was designed as a multiple case study research in which a qualitative research approach was employed. Three schools in the Buffalo City Metro and three participants per school participated in the study. Qualitative data analysis was grounded on an interpretive philosophy. The findings revealed that overcrowding, insufficient training, lack of knowledge and skills of educators were the overarching themes that resulted in educators feeling a sense of inadequacy to teach in an inclusive education classroom. The study will cover the challenges faced in the implementation of inclusive education. Therefore, the study recommends that inclusive education should cater to all learners irrespective of the type of disability.

Keywords: Barrier; curriculum adaptation; diversity; sexual orientation; inclusive education.

1. INTRODUCTION

During apartheid, the South African schooling system had ever-worsening challenges of inequality and social rights. The disabled children from the white communities were accommodated in well-resourced special schools whereas the black schools were extremely under-resourced. The Education for All (EFA) initiative, first put forth in 1990, marked a global movement towards providing quality basic education for all children, youth and adults (UNESCO, 1990). There is a need for additional teacher training, as reported in these studies, therefore Engelbrecht and Muthukrishna justify the need for sound professional training so that teachers can build the self-confidence and



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cognitive flexibility to develop innovative localised approaches (Engelbrecht, Muthukrishna, 2017). The complement to mainstreaming can best be described as the “full-time education of learners with and without disabilities in regular classroom settings” (Engelbrecht, 2012:112). Central to understanding the purposes for mainstreaming and inclusion, the “least restrictive environment” can best be described as the general education classroom (Schwartz, 2013:40).

Most of the experiences that threaten individuals’ need to belong can be conceptualised as social exclusion. Social exclusion has been defined as

the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live, (Galabuzi, 2004).

Social exclusion has been broadly defined as the experience of being kept apart from others physically (e.g., segregation) or emotionally (e.g., being ignored or told one is not wanted) (Riva & Eck, 2016). The literature on social exclusion identified two main instances of exclusion: rejection and ostracism (Wesselmann & Williams, 2017). In recent years, the practice of inclusive education has been widely embraced as an ideal education system. The current state of education in South Africa can be attributed to the legacy of the education policies instituted to combat the apartheid laws. The Salamanca Statement in 1994 accelerated towards the international move towards inclusive education. It is an international policy initiative that envisions that

Mainstream schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all (1994:45).

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Learners with special needs were historically educated in special schools away from their homes and their peers. The historical legacy of separate special schools in higher-income countries was gradually challenged by moral concerns about segregated special education. Questions also arose around the disproportionate representation in separate special education settings of learners from culturally and linguistically non-dominant groups in, for example, the United States, and the marginalisation of girls in formal education in other parts of the world (Kozleski, Artiles & Waitoller, 2013). The inclusive education discourse is one of the most acclaimed yet controversial recent developments on the right to education. According to du Plessis (2013: 78),

inclusive education in the South African context is defined as a learning environment that promotes the full personal, academic and professional development of all learners irrespective of race, class, gender, disability, religion, culture, sexual preference, learning styles and language.

Recently, a more multidisciplinary, critical discourse based on the implementation discourse has emerged, which interrogates how inclusion is enacted in diverse contexts (Walton, 2016). The exclusion of learners in schools is strongly discouraged in the White Paper 6 as the act of ignorance and lack of compassion. The new Curriculum and Assessment Policy (2009) in Lesotho represents the latest education reform and marks a departure from the examination-oriented curriculum to a new approach wherein the curriculum is organised into learning areas (Raselimo & Mahao, 2015).

The challenges to schools at the meso-level relate to two main factors such as the lack of time and the lack of resources. The resources and time issues are school- and classroom-based issues. One challenge faced by individual teachers is class size. Many schools have an average class size of 80 to 100 students (Mkandawire, Maphale, & Tseeke, 2016). Mitchell (2008) states that obtaining adequate resources is one of the many important functions of school leadership since a key barrier to the successful creation of ecology for inclusion is the lack of appropriate resources (Kgothule & Hay, 2013). In South Africa, the average class size has 90 to 100 learners and this is due to the challenges regarding infrastructure (Mpu, 2018). Inclusive education approaches (such as cooperative learning, curriculum differentiation, learning accommodations and flexible response options) become necessary to reach all learners when class sizes are large.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The principal objective of this paper is to highlight the main challenges in the implementation of inclusive education in South African schools. It further produces the strategies on how these challenges can be addressed.

4. THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Participants were asked the following questions:

- How much do educators know about inclusive education?
- What are the educators' views regarding the inclusion of learners with physical disabilities in mainstream classrooms?
- What support do educators require from district-based support teams (DBST) to help them improve their practices?

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework is the theory of social change and more specifically, structural functionalism (Van den Bergh, 2014) which favours a unitary concept of society that emphasises social integration. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory is the theoretical model that guided the study. The first system of this theory is the "micro-system" which constitutes a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations between individuals and the systems in which they actively participate, such as the family, the school or peers (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). The advantages of using this theory for the study is because Bronfenbrenner finalised his theory by developing his thinking about "proximal processes" which are reciprocal in the development of an individual and other significant processes (Rosa & Tuge, 2013). This is line with the different systems and the influences surrounding their development such as parents, peers, teachers, the school policies and the society from which they come. Out of the systems in this theory, Bronfenbrenner added chronosystem last as he took into account the changes over time, not only within an individual but also in the environments in which that individual is found to investigate these changes may affect a person's developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The study is based on the interpretive paradigm. In keeping with Naicker's definition (2007), a paradigm is a framework for identifying, explaining and solving issues. The aim of the interpretive paradigm for this study is to understand the subjective world of human experience. It is relevant for this study as it is aimed at investigating the perceptions of educators on inclusive education regarding learners with physical disabilities.

The interpretive paradigm can also be called the “anti-positivist” paradigm because it is developed as a reaction to positivism (Mack, 2010). The anti-positivist approach argues that the social world can be understood only from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated. It emphasises the ability of the individual to construct meaning; thus, it is sometimes referred to as constructivism. One of the advantages of this approach is the close collaboration between researcher and participant, while enabling participants to tell their stories. The intention of the research, in line with the view of Creswell (2007), is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation. Consequently, the researcher’s intention is to make sense of the meanings others have about the world.

5.1 Design and sample

The study used a case study design. Creswell (2013: 97) describes it as “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information”. As the data were collected from three different sites such as private, mainstream and special schools, this approach is relevant as the cases differed from one another. The participants from each site had different views regarding the challenges of inclusive education and its implementation. The qualitative research approach correlates with an inductive approach as it is a systematic procedure for analysing qualitative data in which the analysis is likely to be guided by specific evaluation objectives (Thomas, 2006:283). The participants were educators from private, special and mainstream schools. The participants were selected using two sampling techniques such as convenience and purposive sampling. According to Evans (2014), a convenience sample is one in which the researcher selects participants who are readily available (e.g. teachers in this case). Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgemental sampling, refers to the selection of participants based on a study’s purpose as well as on the researcher’s knowledge of the population under research (Crossman, 2014).

5.2 Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data analysis for this case study is grounded in an interpretive philosophy. As interviews are the most common data collection method, observations and documents can be used to conduct the research as it was the case with this study. In this research approach, factual accuracy is not of significance as the focus is on the person’s lived experience of what it is like to teach inclusive education in mainstream schools. The researcher generated initial codes that helped in searching for themes. Coding was used to combine themes, sub-themes and patterns that emerged. On the findings, the researcher discovered that there were challenges that were common amongst the participants.

5.3 Ethical consideration

For this study all ethical considerations were fulfilled and an ethical clearance certificate with REC-270710-028 Level 01 is its reference. The study was approved by the Principals of the schools where the study was conducted. Prior to the encounter, the consent forms were signed by participants and the research instruments were piloted before the commencement of the study. Voluntary participation, liberty to withdraw at any time and anonymity were clearly discussed with the participants. Pseudonyms were used in adherence with the ethical issues and the schools of the provincial Department of Education were also informed and

approval was granted. After the completion of the study, the participants were debriefed as was promised in a district workshop organised by the researcher in discussing the findings.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Challenges in the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa

According to Donohue and Bornman (2014), when the Education White Paper 6 was first published in 2001, South Africa appeared to be following the international trend towards inclusion, but subsequent policy implementation has made little progress over the past decade. Researchers found that educators were not provided with sufficient support in implementing the policy (Dreyer, 2017; Du Plessis, 2013). Donohue and Bornman (2014:10) concluded that the implementation of inclusive education is at an apparent standstill because of ambiguity about the means through which inclusive education can be achieved.

Donohue and Bornman (2014) believe the ambiguity of policies is linked to the lack of funding and is intentional. Policies such as these are created to conform to international norms not as a direct result of locally led changes and are hence “symbolic”. The lack of funding attached to such policies is an indication that the policy has little local substance. There is certainly some consistency in the way many of the articles that are critical of policies tend to point to the influence of the international development sector on promoting inclusive education as the only progressive approach for the education of learners with disabilities. In this sense, donors have become very influential in promoting practices that are based on socio-economic contexts that are not the same in low-income countries (Kalyanpur, 2008; 2011; 2014; Le Fanu, 2014).

However, over a decade after the introduction of the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), most learners with barriers to learning who attend school are still in separate “special” schools for learners with disabilities (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). According to the views of educators regarding the implementation is their lack of knowledge and skills in dealing with inclusive education. The discourses that surround educators’ roles in inclusive education largely include the way educators are prepared to carry out their responsibilities wherever they are at the time of their duty. In other words, a success in inclusive education in a country depends largely on the capacity of the educators’ skills and knowledge in inclusive education (Bourke, 2010).

6.2 Formulating an inclusive education policy

As explained by Muthukrishna and Schoeman (2000), policy development in South Africa was a unique process that attempted to model its own recommendations. It was characterised by a participatory, democratic approach that adopted a problem-centred approach that took into account the complex challenges presented by a developing context. In accepting this approach, it is essential to acknowledge that the learners who are most vulnerable to barriers to learning and exclusion in South Africa are those who have historically been termed “learners with special education needs”, i.e. learners with disabilities and impairments. Their increased vulnerability has arisen largely because of the historical nature and extent of the educational support provided (White Paper 6:21).

Despite the development of an inclusive education policy to address this exclusion, one of the issues that hamper progress is the lack of educator skills in adapting the curriculum to meet a range of learning needs (Chataika, McKenzie, Swart & Lyner-Cleophas 2012). Educator training programmes do not appear to be adequately addressing this need, resulting in stress for educators and the lack of progress of learners with disabilities (Chataika *et al.*, 2012; Engelbrecht 2006).

According to the Department of Basic Education Report by the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshega (Department of Basic Education, 2010), the total population of learners between the ages of 5 and 18 was estimated at approximately 14.6 million – of which nearly 1,000,000 were disabled. The motives why disabled learners are not attending school are diverse; however paramount among them is that their needs are not catered for in mainstream schools (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit, & van Deventer, 2016). The intention of adopting the policy was to divert from the precept of exclusion of individuals with disabilities through special schools that were in the area several years after independence to “inclusion” into the mainstream.

The inclusive education policy, as outlined in White Paper 6, recognises that each learner is unique and therefore each has a unique feature of learning needs. The underlying principle of inclusive education is to offer an education that is as equitable as viable for all learners, while adapting it to the needs of each learner (Thomazet, 2009). White Paper 6 accepts that a broad range of learning needs exist among the learner population at any point in time, and that, where these are not met, learners may fail to learn effectively or be excluded from the learning system.

6.3 Policy implementation

To address these past and current challenges, in 2001 South Africa adopted the inclusive education policy, Education White Paper 6. Since its implementation there have been several initiatives to facilitate the effective implementation of an inclusive education system. This policy outlines strategies for the provisions of education support for learners who experience barriers to learning and development. According to this policy, one of the key strategies for improving education support to learners experiencing barriers to learning and development is through the establishment of an inclusive education and training system (Report Guidelines, 2014).

In South Africa, teacher education has been characterised by fragmentation and involves deep disparities in duration and quality (Engelbrecht, Nel & Tlale, 2015). Many educators are seen to be disadvantaged due to the poor quality of their training within the field (Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2015). In the past, in-service training was predominantly provided by universities, educator-training colleges and non-governmental or private organisations (Logan, 2012). These were generally uncoordinated with no clear overall policy guidelines formulated by government education departments (Logan, 2012). The South African Co-operation programme in Education (SCOPE) sector funded various in-service programmes in which a cascade model was used to introduce and support inclusive education in several South African provinces (Amod, 2015; Logan, 2012).

The cascade model was designed for one or two representatives from each school to attend the programmes and then relate the knowledge and skills they learnt to their colleagues (Engelbrecht, 2006). Educators' prior knowledge of inclusive education from pre-service training as well as in-service training was found to have more positive attitudes towards

inclusion than educators who had not gained that knowledge (Logan, 2012; Wylde, 2015). Training that involves administrative issues surrounding inclusive education, exposure to the best inclusive practices, collaboration with colleagues and parents as well as the availability of support structures are viewed as fundamental aspects of educator training in inclusive education (Amod, 2015; Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2015).

6.4 Challenges faced by students in mainstream schools

- *Poor physical infrastructure:* Poor school physical infrastructure as one of the major problems constraining the teaching of and learning for learners with disabilities: The construction of school buildings, even those constructed under the new government, do not consider the needs of learners with physical disabilities and other disabilities. The entrances to most buildings, for example, have long staircases that cannot be accessed by physically disabled learners using wheelchairs.
- *Poor facilities:* Lack of learning materials is another problem constraining their learning. Many schools in South Africa do not have enough chairs and tables for the students; therefore, many learners struggle to get a chair to sit on and this becomes more difficult for a student with any disability who cannot run fast to get a chair. There are also no books for visually impaired learners.
- *Transport problems:* Learners with physical disabilities do not have reliable means of transport from their homes to schools. Because of this, they are always late in attending classes as a considerable amount of time is lost in travelling. Public transport in South Africa is not wheelchair-friendly as there is no place to keep their wheelchairs.
- *Feelings of neglect by and dissatisfaction with educators:* It was observed that the type of education received by learners with disabilities is of very poor quality, in fact, they did not consider themselves as receiving any education! This may be because there are very few education centres that provide training for teachers in special education, so the available teachers are not knowledgeable about teaching learners with physical disabilities.
- *Stigma:* Another problem is stigmatisation and embarrassment perpetrated by other learners, primarily characterised by laughing and name-calling. (Avramidis, 2012)

The participants were very vocal about the above challenges

P1: You can see for yourself the condition our school. We do not have ramps around our school for wheelchair bound learners. How do you think we can manage this problem?

P2: My classroom is on the second floor. We use stairs to access it which could be a challenge for those learners who are using wheelchairs.

P3: I teach computer my learners which is located in the next block. The learners have to get to the computer lab on time. You have to wait long for those who cannot walk and the period will be almost gone by the time they reach. The veranda has huge potholes and their wheelchairs get stuck whilst struggling to get to class if they do not find someone to push them, really the infrastructure does not cater for the disabled.

The issue of the shortage of furniture and learner teacher support material (LTSM) were also a challenge. Participants complained of the lack of assistive devices such as Braille and the books printed in large fonts were another concern.

P1: My view is that the teaching equipment like large font books and other teaching aids must be available in schools and that continuous training must be at the heart of the management teams.

P3: I once visited a school where I saw learners who are Deaf having books written in Braille. If we can for example have signed language interpreters to assist whilst teaching, modified books with bigger prints and maybe computers that are designed for learners who cannot handle the mouse maybe. It is just wishful thinking because to have ICT devices in this province is just a dream.

During the researcher's stay at the sites, she observed that when the learners come from their transport, it was the driver's duty to assist learners out of the transport. There was no support from the parents or caregivers. When getting out of the transport, the driver has to be the one unfolding the wheelchair and wheeling the child to the entrance where he meets with the teacher or a fellow student.

P1 and P3: In this area all learners use the same mode of transport and the transport picks and drop in various schools and when it finally arrives it is late already for the first period.

Another overarching challenge in schools is the issue of stigmatising and name-calling. The respondents had the following to say:

P1&P2: Positive attitude, I can say can help in the refurbishment of the current teaching conditions. This does not only lie with educators but attitudes can be from among learners calling each other names related to disability and stigmatisation.

P3: Due to the lack of knowledge and skills, some teachers still associate disability with witchcraft. They have a negative attitude towards learners with disabilities.

6.5 Strategies in responding to challenges in the implementation of inclusive education

While much public debate and inclusive education research focus on the importance of initial teacher education, the connection between initial teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning is recognised. Educators who experience high-quality initial preparation are more likely to seek ongoing opportunities to improve in their practice and engage in professional development throughout their careers (Scheerens, 2010). As indicated earlier in this report, new educational reforms such as inclusive education demand new skills and abilities from educators. For in-service educators, the effective professional learning opportunities must be provided to enable them to gain these competencies.

Hwang and Evans (2011), Fuchs (2010), Hido and Shehu (2010) as well as Brakenreed (2011) agree that the following factors are integral in the implementation of inclusive education: information sharing workshops, time management for planning, adequate resources, reduced class sizes and training for school administrators help to promote inclusive education. Furthermore, they consented that collaboration roles and a change in educational values and philosophy are the best methods of establishing an inclusive education. In addition, Slavica (2010) reported that commitment and a clear vision are needed for learners with special needs to flourish.

Other strategies that have been successful for working with students in the inclusive classroom:

- Get to know your students' individualised education plan (IEP)
- Implement universal design for learning (UDL)

- Support important life skills
- Engage in collaborative planning and teaching
- Develop a strong behaviour management plan (Ciyer, 2010).

7. DISCUSSION

The interviewed participants shared their perceptions of inclusive education stating the lack of support from district-based support teams (DBSTs). The data analysis indicated that not only the educators in these classroom environments are playing a role; classroom organisation and overcrowding; resources; strategies and teaching methods and the well-trained personnel as well as the other stakeholders outside the school are essential. The policies regarding the implementation of inclusion need to be reviewed regularly and need to be advocated to all stakeholders. The availability of necessary resources is vital and that challenges addressed in the study need to be addressed. It is important that Southern African countries give due consideration to their social, economic, political, cultural and historical singularities in responding to the challenges posed by the implementation of inclusive education. The participants reported a lack of skills in working with learners who are physically challenged. All participants expressed a desperate need for training and follow-up support. A few have at least attended workshops on inclusive education; however, they claim that those workshops were not enough. Their responses are expressed under the theme on the support that the participants get from district-based support teams (DBST). Similarly, the participants were quoted saying:

P1: The District Support Teams must give us intensive training on how to handle the issue of inclusive education.

P2: District Based Support Teams must train the teachers on how to do intervention strategies in our schools.

P3: Training is very limited as it is done once in a while. After the training there is no monitoring done to check progress.

The findings revealed that insufficient training, lack of knowledge and skills of educators were the overarching themes that resulted in educators feeling a sense of inadequacy to teach in an inclusive classroom environment. These findings were consistent with Bigham (2010), who discovered a correlation between attitudes and training.

Such training initiatives could include, but should not be limited to:

- in-depth courses with a focal point for accommodating learners with special needs;
- periodic seminars and workshops for training in teaching diverse learners;
- promotional videos of inclusion in action at the school level;
- training for parents and the school community;
- technology;
- first aid training; and
- annual, professional development training on inclusive education (Bigham, 2010).

These findings are consistent with recent literature that established that while educators were positive about inclusive education, they still preferred to include certain categories of learners (Engel-Yeger, 2010). Additionally, educators were adamant that access to resources and support from administrators for educators and learners would prove beneficial to the implementation of inclusive education at the secondary level as consistent with previous research (Fuchs, 2010; Hwang & Evans, 2011; Kalyva *et al.*, 2007).

7.1 The milestones regarding the implementation of inclusive education

South Africa, similar to all other countries, has since embarked on components such as:

- Inclusive policies that promote Education for All (EFA)
- Flexible and inclusive curriculum
- Formation of school-based support teams (SMTs to work in collaboration with district support teams)
- Equitable distribution of resources
- Strong and supportive school leadership
- Training of teachers in inclusive pedagogy and diversity
- Parental involvement in the schooling system

8. CONCLUSION

The issues of inclusive education and its implementation are indeed South Africa's challenge. Statistically, learners with disabilities do not attend school because of the lack of knowledge and skills by educators. Training needs to support educators and caregivers are crucial. Owing to inadequate infrastructure and the shortage of assistive devices lead to social exclusion. This study highlighted strategies in responding to challenges in the implementation of inclusive education.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study only focused on one district of the Eastern Cape. Future research should focus on qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Future researchers may repeat this study using a larger population covering a greater part of the province.

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