

THE EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATORS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL

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The concept of inclusion embraces the democratic values of liberty, equality and human rights and recognises and accommodates diversity thereby respecting the rights of all members of the community (Engelbrecht and Green 2001: 30). According to the previous minister of education, professor Kadar Asmal, the ultimate challenge is to “create the conditions of learning and teaching in all our learning institutions so that all learners can be fully accommodated, can flourish and contribute effectively to the regeneration of our society, our economy and our country” (Department of National Education 1999: 11). The move towards inclusive education shifts the focus from the learners having to adjust to the demands of the system to the systems being capable of accommodating the diverse needs of all learners as inclusively as possible (Department of National Education 1999: 3). The philosophy of inclusion therefore broadens the concept of community, going beyond community of place to also include community of relationships and commitment of mind (Sergiovanni and Starratt 1998: 68-69). Achieving an inclusive learning community depends on establishing an inclusive school climate and culture. While school climate refers to the characteristics that describe the psychological make-up of the school culture reflects the more symbolic nature of school life and can be described as a set of understanding or meanings shared by a group of people. It includes the values and norms of

the school; the interrelated psychological qualities that knit the organisation together (Zoller; Ramanathan and Yu 1999: 159). According to Naicker (1995:153) the schooling system in South Africa requires an urgent rethinking and reworking, a modified system that needs to recognise the cultural and linguistic diversity; the social factors, influencing educability and attitudes towards a range of disabilities. Disabilities stems from the culture of a structured social environment to adjust to the needs and aspirations of citizens with disabilities rather than from the inability of an individual with a disability to adapt to the demands of society (Hann 1986: 128).

The objectives of this study are to explore and describe the experience of educators in a primary school of inclusive education and to describe guidelines to assist educators to facilitate a positive experience of inclusive education. The study is qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual in approach and it therefore becomes necessary to use phenomenological semi-structured interviews with educators involved in inclusive education. Before the interviews, trust was built through written request for permission to the principal of the school concerned to conduct the research study. The participating educators were also informed of what the research is all about before the main interview. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews focusing on the experience of primary school educators of inclusive education. The following question was posed: How is inclusive education for you in this school? Data was analysed utilising Tesch's (Creswell 2004:192) method of open coding. Trustworthiness was ensured by applying Guba's approach including the service of an independent coder. Results were recontextualised within the literature. Most educators view inclusive education as beneficial to the

educators, the parents, the school and the learners as whole; “a tool to make every learner a winner”. There are challenges that make inclusive education difficult to implement and are voiced by educators through a feeling of disempowerment. Support systems presently implemented by educators are met with varying opinions about the efficiency in inclusive education.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

As more learners with disabilities are accommodated in the regular classroom, teaching is likely to become more demanding (Engelbrecht et al 1999:69). Educators in schools are continuously challenged to rethink addressing the demands that accompany this decision.

In the past it was commonly accepted that when an educator was confronted with or when a problem arises in the classroom, removing such learners from the particular programmes and refusing admission managed such problems. This way of addressing problems can also be noticed from the practices followed towards indigenous learners that were removed from the mainstream schools and universities (Goduka and Swadener 1999: 92). According to Stainback and Stainback (2000: 206) it is therefore imperative that it must be recognised that learning content must take into account the dynamic nature of what the learner needs in order to successfully live and work in a community. In spite of the multitudes of challenges resulting from mainstreaming information to be learned, used and remembered must be meaningful and make sense to the learner. The process of learning and teaching needs to be flexible enough to accommodate different learning needs and styles. Flexibility needs to be evident in teaching methods and in assessment (White Paper 6 2001: 32). It must be ensured that learners experience success and

develop self-confidence. This could be done by initially assigning them relatively simple tasks and then gradually increasing the level of difficulty as they progress (Van der Horst 1997: 120). The research questions arising in this investigation are:

- What are the experiences of educators in a primary school of inclusive education?
- What could be done to assist these educators to facilitate a positive experience of inclusive education?

Research design and method

This study followed an explorative, descriptive and contextual design, which was qualitative in nature. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with a number of purposively selected educators (De Vos; Strydom; Fouche and Delpont 2002:271). Interviews were conducted until the data was saturated. Before the actual study commences, a pilot study was done. Part of the data collection was field notes written by the researcher during and after the interviews are conducted (De Vos 1998:252). The service of an independent coder was utilised, and a consensus discussion followed the data analysis by the researcher and the independent coder. A literature control followed the data analysis. Following the write-up of the data analysis, guidelines were deductively derived to assist educators to facilitate a positive experience of inclusive education. Measures to ensure trustworthiness of research procedures were applied throughout the research process. Ethical measures were adhered to during the research project. (Mac Millan and Schumacher 2001:400). The research explored the experience of primary school educators of inclusive education in the first phase of the research. This was done by means of phenomenological interviews conducted with a purposively selected sample

of primary school educators and by means of field notes made at the conclusion of the interview process.

STRATEGIES TO ENSURE TRUSTWORTHINESS

Criterion	Strategy	Application
Credibility. (Truth value)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prolonged engagement. 2. Persistent observation. 3. Triangulation. 4. Referential adequacy. 5. Peer debriefing. 6. Member checks. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stayed in the field until data saturation occurs. 2. Searched for meaning. 3. Interviews, observation and field notes. 4. Using an audiotape to record data. 5. The peer takes the “devil advocate position” questions research methods and assist in decision-making. 6. The aim was to assess the interpretations of participants to correct errors and to provide additional volunteer information.
Transferability (Applicability)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thick description. 2. Purposive sampling. 3. Dense description of research results. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Demographic description of participants. 2. The sampling method was purposive, no prior selection. 3. Obtained literal statement of participants and quotations from documents.
Dependability. (Consistency)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Multi-method strategies. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allowed triangulation in data collection and data analysis.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Step by step replication of the research method. 3. Inquiry audit. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Recorded the decisions made during the emerging design and the rationale including judgments of data validity. 3. An auditor examined documentation of critical incidents and a running account of the process of the inquiry.
<p>Confirmability (Neutrality)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Raw data. 2. Data reduction and analysis products. 3. Data reconstruction and synthesis products. 4. Process notes. 5. Material relating to intentions and dispositions. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recorded audiotapes, written field notes, documents and survey results. 2. Write ups of field notes, summaries and condensed notes. 3. Themes that were developed, findings and conclusions and final report. 4. Methodological notes, trustworthiness notes and audit trail notes. 5. Enquiry proposal, personal notes and expectations.

(Babbie and Mouton 2001:277-278; Krefting 1991: 214-222)

Ethical measures

Ethical measures were adhered to during the research regarding inclusive education.

These include informed consent of the participant, voluntary participation, freedom to

withdraw without discrimination (De Vos 1998:31). Anonymity of participants was ensured by omitting the use of their names and assigning numbers to them (Babbie 1990: 342). The immediate benefit of the study to the participants is that they were able to verbalise their experiences. The long term benefit of the research was that the findings will be used to formulate guidelines to assist educators to facilitate a positive experience of inclusive education. Ethical clearance was sought from the ethics committee of the faculty of health sciences of the University of Johannesburg.

Sample

The sample in this study consisted of primary school educators who have been exposed to inclusive education; educators who have agreed through written consent to participate in the research and educators who had agreed that the interviews can be audio-taped. The sample comprised of eight female educators. Two educators are in their late thirties, four in their early forties and two in their late forties. These educators had teaching experience ranging from three to ten years. The size of the sample was determined by data saturation. According to Morse (1994: 104) saturation is when the themes are repeated and no new information is added with each further interview. The main selection criterion was willingness to participate.

Data collection

Data was collected using phenomenological face to face interviews (De Vos et al 2002: 285; Patton 1990: 290). The interviews created a context where the participant could speak freely and openly by utilizing communication techniques such as clarification, paraphrasing, summarising, probing and minimal verbal as well as non verbal responses

(Okun 1997: 75). During the interviews the interviewer used bracketing (putting preconceived ideas aside) and intuiting (Burns and Grove 1987: 80). Interviews were conducted until data was saturated as demonstrated by repeated themes. These interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed data was analysed using Tech's descriptive method (Creswell 2004: 192). An independent coder analysed the data separately from the researcher. After a consensus discussion between the independent coder and the researcher, the identified theme and categories were presented. A literature control was done to verify the results (Streubert and Carpenter 1995:21).

Results and discussion

Participants identified two categories; challenges experienced by educators presenting as barriers in the process of their implementation of inclusive education; circle of support available and unavailable for educators and learners in order to be empowered to implement inclusive education.

1 Challenges experience by educators presenting as barriers in the process of their implementation of inclusive education

Learners with learning barriers typically experience difficulty in one or more of the basic school subjects. Reading is a major stumbling block in academic achievements, although some fare well in this area, yet have specific disabilities in other subjects such maths and hand writing (Smith 1994: 114). If educators are required to design accessible learning programmes that would meet the diverse needs of learners experiencing barriers to learning, they would require appropriate training to improve their skills, knowledge values and attitudes (Draft guidelines 2002: 241).

Learner barriers experienced by educators

Learner barriers experienced by educators include learning barriers, language barriers, reading barriers and psychological barriers all of which make learning difficult for these learners.

Learning barriers

Learning barrier is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of problems manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. Participants said:

“Yes there’s lots of them in every single class with learning barriers.”

Educators experience learners with learning barriers in their classrooms and are not sure how to handle them.

Language barriers

Language is a problem in an inclusive classroom especially when the medium of instruction is not the learner’s mother tongue. Participants said the following in this regard:

“The general problem that I find is that the Tswana-speaking children they speak very little English because they tend to speak Tswana on the playground, they speak Tswana to one another, the only time they speak English is with the teacher and when they write in their books, write English that is about the only time which is a minimum of English which is very bad actually”.

Any process of teaching/learning which inhibits a fully interactive use of language prevents learners from developing their full potential (Donald et al 1997: 122).

Reading barriers

Reading barriers in an inclusive class occurs because of inadequate oral language skills and insufficient time for practical reading. Participants verbalised the following on reading barriers in an inclusive class:

“...especially reading, children can’t read anymore...”

Reading competency is crucial to all learning areas. Many educators believe that reading problems are the principal cause of failure at school. No one method holds the key to the process of learning to read and so educators need to know and feel competent to use a variety of methods (Westwood 1995:50).

Psychological barriers

Learners with learning barriers have a tendency to be aggressive, demotivated, disruptive and present discipline problems. Primary school educators experience psychological barriers as follows:

“...most of them they need discipline...”

“We have learners who are using drugs...”

Educators are often so discouraged by this loss of control that they lose their enthusiasm and motivation and the entire learning process is hampered (Landsberg et al 2005:455).

Teaching and classroom barriers experienced by educators

Educators are experiencing a problem in teaching learners in an inclusive class because they have never been trained for such an exercise. As such they find it difficult interacting with all the learners in the class. They said:

“If it’s a learning barrier I can try to help but I don’t have that specific training”.

“The teacher must be separate with the learning barrier kids. She must have specific training like remedial education.”

Educators have to deal with complex dilemmas both in and out of the classroom in the process of delivering the curriculum in a way which is relevant to the diverse needs of their learners. This situation often creates stress and can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, isolation and disempowerment. Educators are consequently in need of concrete advice on handling difficult situations to enable them to cope (Engelbrecht et al 1999:157).

Parental barriers experienced by educators

Parental barriers to inclusive education include that some parents are illiterate, not involved, and unable to cooperate. Participants voiced the following in this regard:

“... very often parents are illiterate...”

“Parents who are unable to cooperate. Parents who are not conversant with the methods that we use to help at school.”

Past experiences of parents, who may perceive educators as being evaluative, often lead to parents being hesitant to approach educators to discuss issues of mutual concern.

Socio-economic barriers experienced by educators

In order to implement inclusive education effectively learners’ physiological, social, economic and psychological needs must be met. Therefore proper resources must be made available in order to assist learners in an inclusive school. Educators said the following in this regard:

“Socio – economic is also a problem our children are very poor.”

2 Support system experienced as effective and supportive toward educators in the implementation of inclusive education

Educators need support in their implementation of inclusive education. Participants voiced the following in this regard:

“If we cannot solve it we go to the Department (RST) we phone them they will come to support us.”

“If we see it really don’t help then we prefer the case to the Regional Support Team then they see do this child need Psychology or whatever...”

Many educators feel that they do not have sufficient training and support to meet many of the challenges presented by the learners in their classes and the general problems facing the school as a whole.

Institutional Support Team (IST)

This is the support system established within an institution. This support system is readily available for educators who are experiencing difficulties in their implementation of inclusive education. In this regard the participants said:

“There are four educators in the IST (Institutional Support Team) one educator is from intermediate phase and the educators from the foundation phase and then one of the foundation phase ... then one educator is the secretary, who liaise with District Support Team...”

The primary aims of the institutional support team are to put in place properly coordinated learner and educators support services and identify and address learner,

educator and institutional needs. Where appropriate, these teams can be strengthened by expertise from the local community, regional support teams and higher educational institutions (Draft Guidelines 2002:116).

Regional support team (RST)

This is the support system established outside an institution. This support system assists the institutional support team in its implementation of the inclusive education policies.

Participants said:

“If we cannot solve it we go to the Department (RST) we phone them they will come to support us.”

“The Regional Support Team supports the IST they support the Institutional level Support Team. They help us as the IST so they are conducting workshops...”

The challenge of the regional support team is to ensure that all the education officials at the regional level understand the challenges involved in identifying and addressing barriers to learning and developing an inclusive education system (Draft Guidelines: 2002:112).

Learner peer group support

Learners with barriers can sometimes be assisted by their peers tutoring them. They might open up to their peers and understand the subject matter better when presented by their peers as opposed to that which is presented by the educator. Primary school educators voiced the following in this regard:

“If a child doesn’t understand something I get another child to work with them, very often that works, if I can’t get through to the child then another child will get to this child and explain it them.”

Peer tutoring does not only bring academic benefits but it also promotes social interaction and fosters a climate of kindness (Zabel and Zabel 1996: 145).

Educators individually supporting learners and instruction of learners with barriers

When an educator gives a learner individual support, the learner is able to ask questions without fear of being ridiculed. Therefore individual support not only strengthens the relationship between the learner and the educator but also assist the learner to understand the learning content better. Participants said:

“I will sit with that child I will sit with that child I will sit next to him and say read this thing read the question and then I will show him in with two or three sentences. I will never ever show him the answer and I will say read to me these sentences so he doesn’t have to read the whole comprehension and I will say read the sentence and if he still do not understand I will go back to the question and say read the question again.”

Guidelines and conclusion

Addressing barriers may require different interventions or strategies to prevent them from causing learning breakdown. The key to preventing barriers from occurring is the effective monitoring and meeting of different needs among the learner population and within the system as a whole.

- The classroom needs to provide a safe and supportive atmosphere where all learners are prepared to take risks and learn from their own mistakes without being reprimanded or ridiculed.
- The inclusive classroom fosters acceptance, tolerance and caring in all learners.
- The educator has the responsibility of creating and maintaining a classroom atmosphere which nurtures the personal, cognitive and social development of all learners.
- Educators must take the level of the learners at the beginning of the year and what the assessment standards expect as a minimum at the end of the year into consideration when they plan.
- Educators must therefore “design down” (scaffolding) to ensure progression during the year so that the learners can master assessment standards by the end of the year.
- A range of tasks and activities should be designed or simplified to meet the range of needs within a particular class.
- Challenges should be carefully graded so as not to discourage the learners.
- The curriculum ladder could be extended upward to plan more challenging tasks within the same learning outcome and assessment standards.

The education department must ensure that educators are given support in their implementation of inclusive education. The regional support team must ensure that educators are workshopped, that there are regular visits to schools for support purposes and that the institutional support teams are functional. Educators must give each other support in the implementation of inclusive education. They should build on a

comprehensive support system which includes the institutional support team, parents and the community. They must familiarise themselves with the White Paper Six and the Revised National Curriculum Statement as the basis for inclusive education.

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