

**COVER PAGE**

**Title: Exploring learners' experiences of inclusive education:  
the voice of the voiceless**

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## Abstract

Since the 1994 election, South Africa has moved from a politics of separatism to social justice and inclusivity. The White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) on inclusive education policy emphasizes inclusion of all learners in the basic education system, regardless of disability, race, learning style, HIV status etc. This has brought change to classroom dynamics, where the tradition of the classroom is based on reading and writing for 'normal' learners, and diverse learning needs related to impairment is 'abnormal'. Theories of Inclusive Education underpin this paper. Using a qualitative approach, this study explores learners' experiences in the classroom to assess implementation of Inclusive Education. The study reveals that in South Africa the problem of inclusive curriculum implementation still persists and needs special attention from all stakeholders in education. It is also evident that teachers have not been properly prepared for the paradigm shift needed for implementation of an inclusive curriculum. The losers in the process are the learners, as they continuously have negative experiences in the classroom. The paper concludes that in-depth training of the teachers in Inclusive Education is required to ensure that the paradigm shift from the apartheid education system to Inclusive Education is achieved.

*Key words: inclusive education, inclusion, diverse learner needs, inclusive curriculum, inclusive classroom*

## **Introduction and background**

Since the 1994 election, South Africa has moved from a politics of separatism to social justice and inclusivity. The White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) on inclusive education policy emphasizes inclusion of all learners in the basic education system, regardless of disability, race, learning style, HIV status etc. This has brought change to classroom dynamics, where the tradition of the

classroom is based on reading and writing for 'normal' learners, and diverse learning needs related to impairment is 'abnormal'.

Learners' experiences within South African inclusive classrooms have changed to some extent with attempts at implementing inclusive education that accommodates diverse learner needs, but the classroom teaching traditions that existed under the apartheid education system still persist. The majority of learners with special needs still find themselves alienated and excluded from full access to the curriculum. This is contrary to the present South African education system which is rooted in the principles of social justice and inclusivity in the classroom which hinders effective implementation of Inclusive curriculum.

The classroom is structured for the able learners; there must be a point where we start accounting for the differences. Structures in our societies favor a particular group of people. The norm in learning is reading and writing not otherwise. Therefore, the school disables them by putting the measure of success on reading and writing and yet there are many ways of learning including indigenous learning. In as much as there is significant research done by Muthukrishna (2010), Ntombela (2010, 2011), Kalenga (2006, 2010), Engelbretch (2008, 2009), Engelbretch et al., (1999, 2007, 2008) in inclusive education none of the research has focused on the experiences of learners within South African inclusive classrooms. Therefore, we intend to fill the gap by finding out how far Inclusive Education has been implemented in a selected school in Pinetown district by exploring learners' experiences in the classroom environment and make a contribution at a national and international level.

Large numbers of learners who experience learning difficulties and physical disability are included and are being accommodated in classrooms, hence, the context in which learning and teaching takes place requires a considerable change to cater for learners' diverse needs in the classroom. Lomofsky, Roberts, and Mvambi, (1999) alluded to the above idea when they stated that teaching has become more demanding and challenging to educators. This refers to a different

way of teaching that includes learners who have been marginalized by the previous education apartheid system.

This paper presents learners' experiences in the classroom. These experiences are viewed according to Lorenz's (2002) assertion that children bring to the classroom knowledge and skills that have been learnt from home and society. Considering this idea learners construct knowledge in the classroom by referring or building on the knowledge and skills learnt from home and their society. The knowledge learners bring to school incorporates values and norms inherent in their society. Hence, the learner must be able to identify himself/herself in the activities taking place in the classroom in such a way that learners' experiences facilitates the optimal development of the learner towards his/her full academic potential.

Bennett and Dunne (2001) advocate the idea that what children learn in the classroom depends to a large extent on what they already know. This echoes Vygotsky's theory (cited in Rowland 2006) that learning progresses from the known to the unknown: the learner begins formal learning at school having some knowledge that was acquired informally at home or in the community. Formal learning at school thus progresses from what the learner already knows towards construction of new knowledge.

A further consideration is that contemporary classroom education is itself an import to Africa and replaced indigenous modes of learning. Modern middle-class parents prepare their children for school. The prepared learners and the unprepared learners, from homes where parents are not educated (or indeed from child-headed families), all find themselves in the same classroom and all are expected to work at the same pace. Hence, the classroom community consists of individuals with different abilities and diverse learning needs. Recognition and accommodation of all ability levels in the classroom is of paramount importance and needs serious attention, since it sets the scene for the type of experiences that occur during the learning process. The learner is presented as an active agent in his or her own learning and development, who interacts and acquires skills and knowledge in the process.

Lorenz (2002) stated that the learner in the inclusive classroom acquires new skills; develops independence in learning and behavior; develops age-appropriate behavior and develops friendly relations with peers in the classroom community. These factors are important for nation building in South Africa, since the primary aim of education is to prepare learners to become fully functional, tolerant and peace-loving citizens.

On the contrary a study done by Selvam (2004) in a South African school revealed that the majority of learners who experience learning difficulties or are physically disabled have negative experiences in the classroom. Learners are being laughed at by their peers and are labeled and excluded in peer group tasks and activities assigned in the classroom. These issues raise the questions of why the learners encounter such challenges; what the root causes of this situation are and the impact on the implementation of Inclusive Education in the South African context.

### **Critical questions**

1. What are the learners' experiences in the inclusive classrooms?
2. What strategies should be put in place in order to accommodate all learners in the classroom?

### **Research aims**

The aim of this study is to explore the learners' experiences in inclusive classroom and make suggestions of strategies for accommodating all learners in the classroom.

### **Theories of Inclusive Education**

Research shows that Inclusive Education helps the development of learners in the following ways: Learners with specific challenges make gains in cognition and social development and physical motor skills. They do well when the general environment is adjusted to meet their needs (Gately and Gately, 2001:41) and Learners with more typical

development challenges gain higher levels of tolerance for the people with differences. They learn to make the most of those they interact with (Hall and McGregor, 2000:114).

In an inclusive classroom, the philosophy of inclusion thus hinges on helping learners and educators to become better members of a community by creating new visions for communities and for schools in particular. Inclusion, in this context, is about membership and belonging to a community. White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) states that Inclusive Education and training includes: acknowledging that all learners and youths can learn and that all learners and youths need support; and accepting and respecting the fact that learners are different in some ways and have different learning needs, which should be valued equally and should become an ordinary part of human beings' experiential living.

This means that education and school structures, systems and learning methodologies must meet all learners' needs at various educational levels and kinds of learning support. Educators must, in this regard, acknowledge and respect the differences in learners, whether due to: age, gender, ethnicity, language, class, disability and/or HIV status (Allen and Schwartz, 2001: 54; Daniels and Vaughn, 1999: 48; Nagata, 2003; Munoz, 2007).

Inclusive Education is presented broader than formal schooling in that:

- it acknowledges that learning also occurs in the home and community, and within formal and informal modes and structures ( Beverly and Thomas, 1999: 179; UNESCO, 2009, 2010);
- educators are expected to change attitudes, behaviours, teaching methodologies, curricula and environments to meet the needs of all learners (De Bettencourt, 1999:27; UNESCO, 2009, 2010);
- participation of learners must be maximized in the culture and the curricula of educational institutions and must uncover and minimize barriers to learning (Rafferty, Leinenbach and Helms, 1999: 51; UNESCO, 2009, 2010);
- learners must be empowered by developing their individual strengths and by enabling them to participate critically in the process of learning; and

- some learners may require more intense and specialized forms of learning support to be able to develop to their full potential (McConnell, 1999: 14; UNESCO, 2009, 2010).

Based on the above list, the vision for Inclusive Education in South Africa can be described as the practice of promoting the participation and competence of every learner, which aims at forming an inclusive society in which differences are respected and valued, and where discrimination and prejudice is actively combated in policies and practices (Lieberman and Houston-Wilson, 1999: 129; Lipsky and Gartner, 1998: 78; UNICEF, 2009).

However, an Inclusive Education system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive. Schools must become better at educating ‘all’ learners in their communities regardless of the challenges that they might be facing. Educating all learners in their communities must be their first priority. The UNESCO Conference (2008a) proclaimed that: ‘...ordinary schools which embark on educating learners with the principles of Inclusive Education have the most effective way of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all learners in their communities.’ These schools can provide effective education to most of these learners and can improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

In South Africa, to a large extent, inclusive education is understood and practiced at the level of eradicating segregation which has resulted in mainstreaming without the necessary resources in the schools. A deeper understanding of inclusive education should be a practice that embraces and allows for a different practice of education.

### **Research design and methodology**

This study is a qualitative case study as it focuses on a small scale study with a small sample, but aim at in-depth study of learner interaction and thereby provide rigor in explaining in a deeper sense (Maree, 2007).

## **Research context**

This study was conducted in one school, situated in the Hammersdale circuit in the Pinetown district. The school is a mainstream school with a population of 1200 learners and 30 qualified educators. The average class size is 60. It is located in a semi-rural area, where most of the schools were disadvantaged by the apartheid education system.

## **Sample**

The sample size of the study was 12 learners from the senior phase (grade 7, 8 and 9) and 3 teachers. The age of the learners is between thirteen and fifteen years. The total number of classes per grade was four. Each session of the focus group interview was 25 minutes in duration.

## **Data collection techniques/methods**

### **Focus group interviews**

Focus groups provide access to group meanings, processes and norms. Using focus group interviews to study learners' experiences in the classroom produced data that contained collective meanings about their classroom experiences. In this way a detailed account by learners reflected the process of how interactions and relationships occur within the classroom environment, and how they experience the curriculum that is being taught. Interviews were semi-structured to allow the researchers to probe and get a deeper insight (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robson, 2001).

### **Data analysis**

Data was tape-recorded during focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews and then transcribed. The transcripts were made available to the participants of the study (learners and teachers) to read and verify that it is a true



reflection of the information they gave. It was then categorized and coded into themes to allow for the interpretation of information (Atkinson and Cofey, 1996, Dey, 1993).

### **Ethical consideration**

Learner participants in the study were given consent letters requesting parental permission for them to participate in the study. Participants were also informed of their right to quit the study at any time they want to, without any fear of marginalization or retribution. An explanation was given beforehand that the participants have the right to refuse to be tape-recorded. A letter requesting access to conduct the study in the school was forwarded to the school principal and the Department of Education district office.

### **Discussions of findings**

#### **Fears of Interactions and relationships amongst learners**

In general, learners live in fear of other learners. This is pointed out in one participant's response that,

*“In the classroom there is a lot of gossip, jealousy and pretending which makes one uncomfortable in this environment. There is also stealing and fighting over small issues”.*

It is evident that the classroom in this case, is the place where the fittest survive. It is not a welcoming and friendly environment to most of the learners. It poses a threat to effective communication between learners, and results in passivity and withdrawal behavior in the learners. Inasmuch as inclusion is desired in the classroom, this situation promotes exclusion and hampers learning.

It is evident from the data that interaction and relationships among learners in the classroom are not good. One participant stated that,

*“Learners treat each other badly, rudely if you cannot cope with the learning task, and will tease you and make fun of you”.*

This means that learners who experience learning difficulties are being alienated and marginalized in the learning process.

The aforementioned idea was also expressed by another participant who stated that,

*“When you have difficulty in understanding a task or maybe you have done something wrong because you did not understand the instructions, other learners call you a stupid and will say something like you do not have to do anything in our group because you are stupid”.*

Such an environment does not encourage active participation in learning tasks and collaboration in the learning process is hindered. This situation excludes learners with special learning needs.

It is evident also that the attitudes of some learners towards special needs learners are very negative, and create a barrier to learning. Selvam's (2004) found that learners who experience learning difficulties in the South African context have negative experiences in the classroom; they are being laughed at by their peers and excluded in peer group tasks and activities. It is confirmed by the participants' responses in this study.

Rix's (2005) argues that it is important to think with others, draw from others and create meanings collaboratively in an inclusive classroom. From personal teaching experiences, ridicule by peers destroys learners' self-esteem and confidence in completing learning tasks, and results in the passivity of learners, stifling their development and creativity.

When some learners are being labeled stupid, they are frustrated and excluded from learning tasks, as one participant mentioned:

*“Some learners create jokes about us that make one feel embarrassed and frustrated within the classroom to such an extent that one feels that he or she does not belong in this class”.*

Hence, the sense of belonging in the classroom community is lacking and learners who are victims in this situation are excluded rather than being accepted as members. In this way, the aim of education to prepare learners to take part in an inclusive and tolerant society, and to develop them to be functional citizens, is hampered.

### **Learners' negative and positive experiences during the learning process**

These accounts are as follows:

*“Some teachers teach lessons in a very boring manner to such an extent that we get sleepy and bored. That is a very bad experience”*

This statement by one of the participants reveals a barrier in teaching and learning. The teaching methods used were not appropriate for different learner abilities. Nind (2005) argues in favor of this notion, by pointing out that inclusion and exclusion occur in the context of the curriculum, and that differences in learning arise because learners fail to meet the requirements of a given curriculum.

In this case, the learner felt bored and sleepy because of the lack of a stimulating pedagogy that motivates the learners' full participation in the learning process. The aforementioned statement confirms Goodlad's (2004) findings that much classroom talk is driven by teacher talk and does not engage students. Learning should be scaffolded, allowing the learners to engage themselves with learning activities by communicating with capable others and teachers, to develop new skills and progress to the next level where they will be skilled to perform tasks independently. The argument above is further confirmed by participants' responses which were repeated a number of times that,

*“Sometimes teachers come to the classroom not prepared for the lesson and teach something that they do not understand themselves”.*

Success in a lesson needs thorough planning and preparation. An inclusive lesson requires a further design to accommodate the diverse needs of learners. Without

the identification and addressing of the barriers to learning, most learners are excluded.

Some respondents spoke of experiencing good teaching and stimulating activities during the learning process in the classroom. Some said that:

*“There are also very good teachers, we all know them and when the time comes for their lesson everybody in the classroom behaves well and concentrate on the lesson, we respect them a lot”.*

Learners are good evaluators of teaching, since they are the recipients of this educational process and have direct classroom experiences of the activities taking place. The attitudes and behavior of learners indicates that they realize that they are a direct part of the learning process. They are taking responsibility for their own learning and are involved in the meaning construction together with the teachers. Hence, the lesson must be stimulant, promote interest and concentration to cultivate interest and responsibility in their learning.

### **Inequality experiences within the classroom**

Inclusion in the classroom implies that all learners are accepted within the classroom environment and that they feel respected and equal to each other, regardless of their language, race, religion, ethnicity or disability (Department of Education, 2001). Green, Forrester, Mvambi, Jan Van Vuuren & du Toit (1999) explained that teachers are central to the success of inclusion and that it requires changes in attitudes and practice. Moreover, the success of inclusion depends on broad factors such as social and educational conditions and attitudes and, equally, on the actions of specific teachers in a particular context.

Participants in this study pointed out that:

*“Teachers do not treat us equally. For example, if one learner who is disliked by the teacher does wrong, the teacher will say who he or she thinks he is. But if the learner who is liked by the teacher does something wrong, the teacher will say 'Do not do it again' without shouting at that learner”.*

This statement points out that favoritism is being practiced by the teachers in the classroom. This condition marginalizes some learners and they lose interest in activities because they do not feel wanted by the teachers.

We are of the opinion that in such situations, the right for equality is violated in the classroom because learners are not given equal opportunities in doing tasks. There are those who are always preferred over others by the teachers. Such a situation results in division and the creation of superior and inferior learning groups within the classroom.

Teachers can be judgmental in the classroom. This causes division amongst learners in the sense that there will be those who possess more power and tend to dominate over other learners. This idea is revealed in the participant's response that:

*“Some teachers do not treat us equally, and judge us. When, for example, a learner raises a hand to respond or contribute to the learning task, the teacher will not allow that learner because he/she has judged that no good answer will come from that learner. Eventually the learner develops hatred for that teacher”.*

Instead of identifying the problems some learners have in the learning process and assisting them, teachers ignore the situation and give no support to enable the learner to achieve the learning objective. Thus,

*“Teachers call us stupid and we feel embarrassed and insulted”.*

This situation destroys the learners' self esteem and confidence in attempting learning activities. Hence, the idea of inclusion of the able and disabled learners benefiting from learning together is lost, that is, the interests, values and skills already acquired that might stimulate and facilitate further development and learning are stifled and hindered.

This fact confirms Selvum's (2004) findings that learners have negative experiences in the classroom. They are being laughed at by other learners and not being accepted fully as members of the group. Such a situation results from the

attitudes of teachers who fear inclusion and respond negatively to learners with learning difficulties. Hence, exclusion of some learners is, in this sense, inevitable.

### **Frustrated learners due to lack of support during the learning process**

Support in education is central to Inclusive Education. The classroom is the context in which the inclusion of learners is implemented. All activities taking place in the classroom need to be supportive to learners in their learning process, especially peer and teacher interaction. Davis (2003) expressed the view that for classrooms to be more inclusive there is a need to develop teaching practices that lead to social inclusion in classroom learning activities. These eventually lead to increased access to the curriculum, development of the child's independence and equal opportunities for all learners.

According to the findings in this study, learners experienced the opposite of the above statement. One participant responded to support in the classroom as follows:

*“Some teachers, if you do not understand instructions in the task and come to them, they will tell you that they are busy, come back later. When you return, they will tell you the same story”.*

Learners are not given support to complete learning tasks which creates barriers to the child's learning and development. This is contrary to what is expected of them since their role is to interpret the curriculum and engage learners in classroom tasks, ensuring that good relationships exist and that interaction that occur in the classroom lead to learning and development. Therefore, successful implementation of Inclusive Education relies to a large extent on the support rendered to learners during the learning process.

It appears evident that there is no support rendered to learners in order to help them maximize their potential. Hence, learners are frustrated by the activities

taking place in the classroom. This idea is also confirmed by some responses of the participants that:

*“Sometimes you will find that the teacher knows that the learners did not understand the task but will do nothing in order to help that learner to carry on”.*

This situation leaves much to be desired of the competencies of the teachers in implementing Inclusive Education. The role of the teacher is to create a supportive learning environment that facilitates learning and inclusion. Support is the heartbeat of Inclusive Education. Support in learning is achieved through the teacher's role as mediator in providing activities that will challenge learners to create meanings around the aspects of their learning and progress.

Lack of support within the classroom creates an environment that alienates and excludes learners with learning difficulties. They will not feel part of the classroom community and will become withdrawn and passive in the learning process. This is not the objective of Inclusive Education. Rather, it aims at the realization of the barriers in education and addressing them by accommodating diverse learner needs. According to the principles of Inclusive Education, all learners need to actively participate in the learning tasks, construct meanings together with capable others and reach the level of self-directed learning and development.

It is also evident that teachers push their roles as mediators onto learners. One participant responded angrily as follows:

*“From my experience, teachers put the blame on us when learners in our group are unable to finish the task, but if such a person does not want to do their work, there is nothing that we can do. We cannot force them to do it, but the blame from the teachers will be on us for not teaching that person to do it properly. I get very angry about that since I am not the one responsible for that person's learning difficulty. But if the person comes to me really serious about their work, I can help them with everything I have”.*

Collaboration in group work is a good thing but learners require intervention by the teacher in the form of mediation to help them think forward and achieve the outcomes of the lesson. Learners are not supposed to take full responsibility for assisting learners with learning difficulties in their group, since this can demotivate and frustrate learners.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Based on the finding of this study, the recommendations are as follows:

Training of learners in classes of inclusive education on how to relate and collaborate with all learners in classroom.

Train paid peer teachers for inclusive classrooms.

In-depth training of pre-service and in-service teachers in Inclusive Education is required to ensure that the paradigm shift from the apartheid education system to Inclusive Education is achieved. The content of the training should seriously focus on issues of inclusive curriculum and its implementation. Teacher support services need to be rendered by district officials, who are specialist in Inclusive Education on regular basis to enable teachers to develop coping strategies and confidence in the classroom.

The department of education should ensure that there are enough personnel to provide professional support services in schools. These services are central to Inclusive Education as teachers are not all trained professionals in all support services, such as psychologist.

The department of education needs to set the standards and requirements for inclusive classrooms and establish monitoring programs to ensure that these standards are met in all schools. These requirements need to be available to all educators, heads of department and principals. Training sessions are needed for



the teachers and other stakeholders to empower them to implement and maintain these standards.

To conclude, Inclusive Education is a working education system in South Africa. Learners are still experiencing activities that exclude them from the curriculum rendered in the classroom. The classroom environment for many learners is not conducive for their optimal development and accommodation of diverse learning needs of learners is not achieved under existing classroom environment in the Pinetown district schools.

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