Implementing inclusive educational practices through partnerships

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ABSTRACT
This study reports on work in progress of a partnership between the University of Stellenbosch and three rural schools in a disadvantaged community, focused on the development of inclusive educational practices such as teaching, assessment and support in inclusive education. Recognizing the changing needs of the teaching profession and consequently the changing needs of pre-service educators, this project was conceived as providing a structured arrangement to facilitate learning in a field-based setting. Keeping within the University’s mission of teaching, research and service learning, this partnership of critical engagement has been seen as an opportunity for students to engage in service learning that enhances student learning, advances community development and responds to social issues and concerns. The study reveals the need to acknowledge barriers which have implications for the planning, expectations and effectiveness of implementing inclusive education in this specific context.

INTRODUCTION
Universities all over the world are faced with increasing pressure to adjust to new social, economic, and political environments and to provide improved access to communities (Reddy 2000). Part of becoming more accountable is to embrace an educational approach of complementing theory with application. In an effort to synthesize theory and practice in education, we have to assure that learning through experience, especially in a non-classroom setting, encourages students to become active participants in their own education. Students apply theories learned in courses to real-life situations at a school. Using the students as researchers within the project opened up the possibility that student researchers could get access to some insights while working along the educator in the school as partners.

This partnership which encourages critical engagement of all, helps students to learn and to develop through a thoughtfully organized involvement that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community. The project is integrated into and enhances the academic programme of the students enrolled and provides opportunities to develop a process of preparation, reflection, and review. Lessons learned in a school situation that may not be obvious to the participant become evident through skilled tutoring and effective mentoring. The project explores new ways to exploit the interactive energies of teaching and learning through expanded opportunities for teaching outside the classroom, self-directed student learning, and student engagement.

The notion of engagement is well documented in student learning literature. It is characterised, for example, by Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) as being related to task persistence, cognitive effort, excitement and interest in encountering new ideas. Students who are engaged with their learning are said to exhibit enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity and interest. They are willing to exert intense effort and concentration and will select tasks that challenge and intrigue them. Knowledge has become less easily compartmentalized and since the complex problems of our time seem to call for interdisciplinary approaches, students must be prepared to use the tools of various disciplines. Multidisciplinary approaches require collaboration, and therefore collaboration in course development and teaching ought to be rewarded.

Besides making students aware of their social responsibilities we aimed to incorporate greater appreciation for diversity, commitment to service-learning, and awareness of a shared vision that helps to build a sense of community. Guided by ecological principles the overarching philosophy is one of partnerships and collaboration.

THE PROCESS OF PARTNERSHIP BUILDING
Underpinning the philosophy of partnerships are various aspects that need to be discussed briefly. Establishing trust is of critical importance in establishing relationships. Significant time was taken to
AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO EDUCATION

Inclusion is a principle that refers to the right of all learners to feel welcome in a supportive educational context. The recent movement towards inclusive education promotes a single system of education dedicated to ensuring that all learners are empowered to become caring and competent citizens in an inclusive, changing and diverse society. It is increasingly recognised that inclusion is by no means only about the full integration of learners identified as either physically or cognitively disabled. It is about responding to the diverse needs of ALL learners in the classroom in order to avoid learning breakdown or exclusion and in this way promoting effective teaching and learning. Barriers to learning, development and participation can also include socio-economic aspects, attitudes, curricula, language and communication, contexts, support services, legislation and policy, parental involvement as well as human resources (DNE 2001:7).

In the South African context, the provision of a well-developed educational system for white learners experiencing barriers to learning, development and participation, is set against the shortage of educational provision for other population groups during the apartheid era. Ethnic separation and discrimination on grounds of race and colour, resulted in unequal educational services, financial support, aids and/or specially trained personnel. Thousands of learners who experienced barriers to learning, development or participation, could thus not make any progress in mainstream education and were forced to leave school early.

Inclusive education involves a different approach to identifying and attempting to resolve difficulties that may arise in schools. With an inclusive approach, the possible handicaps and deficits of learners are no longer emphasised as it has limiting ways to address difficulties and confers labels that could lead to lowered expectations. Focusing only on student deficits may obscure other barriers to learning, development and participation in schools and educational systems. The focus rather shifts to the development of educational practices, cultures and climate as well as policies that will minimise educational difficulties for all learners (Booth, Ainscow, Black Hawkins, Vaugh an & Shaw 2000).

Inclusive policies

An inclusive policy forms the framework for the implementation and development of quality education for all. It is about securing inclusion at the heart of school development, permeating all policies, so that they increase the learning and participation of all learners, as well as to increase the capacity of the school to respond to learner diversity. Capacity building and support is viewed from the perspective of the learners and their development rather than school or local education authority or administrative structures (Hall 1998).

Inclusive cultures

An inclusive culture relates to a secure, accepting, collaborating, and stimulating community in which everyone is valued, as the foundation for the highest achievement of all learners. Inclusive values, shared among learners, parents/carers and educators, are embedded in the educational practices and policies and conveyed by all to new members of the school (Dyson 2001).

This approach to inclusion emphasises that inclusive education does not imply a specific set of educational
techniques, but that it is an ongoing process of fundamental self review to ensure that the institution’s educational practices embody inclusive values and that the individuals share those values. Inclusive cultures can be created by building a sense of community where everybody is made to feel welcome and treated with respect (Hall & Engelbrecht 1999) as well as establishing inclusive values, by frequently questioning and challenging each individual’s own discriminatory practices and attitudes.

Inclusive educational practices

The focus of inclusive educational practices should be on the full participation of all learners in all activities and settings to draw on their different knowledge and experiences. Teaching and support are integrated to enhance active learning and overcoming any barriers by mobilising resources (Ainscow 1999).

The provision of services to all learners assumes that learners experiencing barriers to learning, development and participation will be taught on a supportive basis together with a heterogeneous, appropriate age group within a learner centered classroom, school and community context.

Against this background, this article explores the educators’ understanding, beliefs and expectations toward the barriers in their specific context of three rural schools as they engaged in the transformation to inclusive education in a partnership with the University of Stellenbosch. It seems that the most important factor in any process of transformation is the needs and expectations of the people that will be affected by the change (Hall & Engelbrecht 2000).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The type of research that we employed falls within the critical/interpretive paradigm, using participatory action research.

This methodology of research combines this researcher’s different areas of interest; as participatory action research is concerned with power relations between researcher and researched, and the rights of the individual. Current practice in action research views the researcher and participant as equal in status and emphasises the participants’ right to speak and have their views seen as central to the research enterprise. Communication between participants is actively encouraged. The research process should be seen as dialectic, whereby feedback is received and changes made in accordance with suggestions made by the participants. The focus of this research is on exploring interactions through social and critical reflective processes. In participatory research, before action can take place to change a social situation, the situation must be well understood by the people involved. They must know what their concerns about it are, and in which direction they want to change (Collins 1999).

The Participatory action research paradigm holds that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation, and is interested in understanding the social phenomenon from the participants’ perspective through engagement in the life of those participants. Therefore, this type of research focuses on using interpretative techniques in order to understand the subjective meaning of the situations.

Participants

Twenty one educators at three different rural schools in the Stellenbosch area participated in this research. Nineteen postgraduate students enrolled in a fulltime course for the support of learners with special needs, participated as co researchers.

Data construction

Various techniques were used to construct data that reflects aspects related to educators’ beliefs, understanding and expectations of inclusive education. Data were constructed by means of a literature survey, observational field notes, interviews, and the Index for Inclusion produced by the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (Booth et al 2000). Aspects dealt with in the Index referred to the educator’s own experiences, observations and perceptions.

THE FINDINGS

Focusing on aspects of inclusive education that are related to the policy, educational practices and culture of an inclusive educational system various themes or patterns could be clearly distinguished in this research. These themes or patterns referred to barriers pertaining to the learners, the parents, the community, educators and schools, and the broader socio economic context that influence educators’ understanding, belief and expectations of inclusive education. These aspects will be discussed briefly.

Socio-economic barriers

The socio economic conditions in a community have an effect on educational provision. Lack of access to basic services affects the learning process and leads to learning breakdown or exclusion (Thejane & Muthukrishna 2000).
In winter some learners are very late because they have to walk to school in the cold and the dark. (Educator's response)

The most obvious result of poverty is the inability of families to meet basic needs such as nutrition and shelter.

The community sits with a shortage of houses. If you can see the houses around the schools ... This is how the children live, wet and cold in the winter, we cannot even call it houses. It is just a squatter camp. (Educator's response)

The children don't get enough sleep or food or warm blankets. How can they work at school if they are tired and hungry and cold? (Educator's response)

Learners living in such conditions are often subjected to increased emotional stress that adversely affects learning and development.

You don’t know how many people live in that house. It is Grandma, Grandpa, Aunts and Uncles, too many to name. (Educator's response)

Some children stay at family over weekends in order to avoid abuse at home. Subsequently they often miss school on Mondays. (Educator's response)

Barriers in the community

Most of the parents in this community felt inadequate in offering support as they had limited formal schooling experience. Others parents who are employed do not have time to become involved in their children's education.

Most parents work from early morning to very late. They have little time for anything! (Educator's response)

The parents can't read. (Educator's response)

We struggle with discipline and a lack of respect is a major problem. We can not blame the children as they are used to the way things are done at home ... a lot of scolding and whipping at some houses. (Educator's response)

The legacy of apartheid is still felt in this poor community. Support and especially financial support is often given without the proper training and guidance.

Apartheid left our people in poverty. (Parent’s response)

Our people lag behind but we cannot still blame Apartheid for everything today! It has been six years. (Educator’s response)

It is the contrasts in this country that are killing me. There is the farmer with his lovely house and here are the children with nothing! (Educator’s response)

One farm in particular is trying to involve the community in the school. The farm sponsored building material and tried to involve members of the unemployed community in building their new school. Unfortunately they did not train the workers and many walls had to be broken down again due to unskilled labour. (Educator’s response)

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Barriers to effective educational provision

This poverty stricken community is characterised by limited educational facilities, large classes, inadequately trained staff and insufficient teaching and learning materials.

51 Learners in a class where only 25 can fit is too much! (Educator’s response)

The children never had any real books to read or take home with them. (Educator’s response)

There are no carpets, heaters, or projectors. (Observational field notes)

The educator was shouting all the time. (Observational field notes)

Many educators still use the traditional way of teaching where they talk and the children listen. (Observational field notes)

The educator believes she is doing OBE but she is working through an OBE book using the activities as prescribed but not very creatively. (Observational field notes)

Educators have limited experience of the concept learners with special needs and hardly any exposure to inclusive education.

I have never heard about Inclusive education Learners with Fragile X syndrome as well as learners with Foetal alcohol syndrome are included in the school. However, educators are not aware how to accommodate them. (Observational field notes)

The school does not have a choice to be a school for all, it simply has to be as learners have nowhere else to go. (Educator’s response)

Negative attitudes toward learners manifest themselves in the labelling of learners.

The learners are negative and lazy! (Educator’s response)
The ‘slower’ learners fall behind as they are not able to keep up with the ‘stronger’ learners. (Educator’s response)

Some educators use teaching styles that may not meet the need of learners that is indicative of an inflexible curriculum.

Educators focus on their traditional methods in order to complete the work and assignments learning does not seem to be part of the process. (Observational field notes)

There was nothing on the walls, no pictures, no posters, and no charts. Not even the work of any of the learners was pinned on the walls. (Observational field notes)

The learners with learning problems were left to their own devices. If he or she can’t read and the backlog seems too big or the effort too much, then the learner is left to pass on to the next grade. It simply becomes the problem of the next educator. (Observational field notes)

Language and communication posed a problem as the medium of teaching and learning was often not the language in which learners received their upbringing or their home language.

Some learners receive their education in their third language and not in their mother tongue. (Educator’s response)

It is difficult to get learners to participate in discussions and voice their opinions. (Educator’s response)

Positive responses

There were also very contradicting comments regarding the barriers discussed above. These positive remarks referred to various aspects of the learners, the educators, schools, parents and community. Compare the following regarding learners:

The learners help one another spontaneously. Once you try to structure group work, they become shy and don’t know what to do. (Educator’s response)

Mistakes are allowed and seen as a learning experience (Observational field notes)

School attendance is very good (Educator’s response)

The schools have a feeding scheme where learners are provided with food.

The school supplies flavoured milk and peanut butter sandwiches. (Educator’s response)

In wintertime we get soup and bread at school. (Learner’s response)

Some parents are more involved at the school.

We received a donation of blue paint for the school’s roof. All us parents spend Saturdays painting it. Unfortunately we ran out of paint now, but we will soon have some more. (Parent’s response)

The educator collects old papers, newspaper and waste from the parents to recycle and use funds for her classes. (Observational field notes)

A few educators seemed to have a positive attitude toward the learners.

The educator is friendly and caring although at times she has to be strict with the learners and threaten them. She is also very open to new ideas and very keen to learn. (Observational field notes)

Inclusion is practiced without staff realising it but they don’t really know what it is. (Observational field notes)

The Foundation Phase educators are very resourceful and make their classrooms bright and colourful. (Observational field notes)

The staff is very supportive of each other. (Observational field notes)

We are willing to try but we don’t have the skills or the resources! (Educator’s response)

The community becomes more involved and support is negotiated in cooperation with the school.

The farmers supply some financial support and pay for an additional educator. (Educator’s response)

DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The reality of the socio economic hardships of this historically disadvantaged rural community seems prominent to the process of transformation and most of the households in this community experience outright poverty. Furthermore, there is a huge disparity in terms of distribution of income and wealth in this community, and many households have limited access to education, healthcare, proper housing and clean water. The socio economic conditions in a community have an effect on educational provision. Lack of access to basic services affects the learning process and leads to learning breakdown or exclusion (Thejane & Muthukrishna 2000).

Educators, particularly those in schools serving low socio economic communities, are confronted every day with the effects of poverty and family disruptions. Schools do not have the resources and educators do not have the training to deal with the complex social
and health problems that learners bring to school. In
school barriers such as the traditional mainstream
educational provision with its academic curriculum,
its system of competitive assessment and the way
schools stream, select and narrow their services
compound to produce social inequalities.

It appears that the educator in the mainstream is not
regarded as being adequately trained, informed,
equipped or prepared to deal with the learner with
special educational needs. A lack of relevant tertiary
training and in service training as well as the lack of
available opportunity to improve the situation is
argued here. From this research it appears that there
is a need for information regarding the movement to
inclusion as well as for information regarding the
practical implementation and teaching methods of
inclusive education. Both positive and negative
responses have to be interpreted in terms of implica-
tions for inclusive policies, cultures, and educational
practices.

Implications for inclusive policies

The vast majority of educators have mixed feelings
about the policy of inclusive education. While some
display a positive attitude towards the philosophy and
underlying principles of inclusion, there is an over
whelming feeling of uncertainty regarding the prac-
tical implications of inclusive education. Factors such
as the number of learners in a class, academic
pressure, and the standards of the school determine
the amount of time and attention that an educator can
devote to a learner with special educational needs in
the mainstream. While educators expect to satisfy the
needs of all learners in an inclusive educational
situation, they are worried about the lack of clear
criteria and methods for achieving this.

Implications for inclusive cultures

An inclusive educational approach does not presume
that every educator will have available all the abilities
to train all learners experiencing barriers to learning,
development and participation, but individual educa-
tors ought to have available a support system that
makes cooperation and problem solving possible
(Lipsky & Gartner 1997:101). Educators indicated
that co-operation between educators can bring about
a wider utilisation of services, experience and knowl-
dge. An approach in which mutual respect applies
can contribute to support networks with different
persons and institutions provided that the structure
and planning is put in place.

Appropriate collegial relationships for practical and
emotional support where sharing and collaboration
are the norm, provide the opportunities for educators
to share, to relax and to support one another.

Educators want their colleagues to respond with
empathy and to be sensitive to their needs (Nias

Implications for inclusive educational
practices

Teaching cannot be reduced to technical competence
but it involves significant emotional commitments of
educators influencing how educators teach, how they
plan, and the structures in which they prefer to teach
(Hargreaves 1998:573). The emotional dimension of
teaching and learning impact on the way in which
educators interpreted educational changes. Genuine
change, whether voluntary or compelled, is usually
accompanied by a measure of loss, anxiety and
remorse (Fullan 1993:31).

The educators’ need for information is directed at the
practical knowledge, appropriate skills and suitable
strategies for understanding, processing and imple-
menting the process of transformation so that the
current gaps can be filled with insight and under-
standing. Knowledge pertaining to the diverse educa-
tional needs of all learners can be shared in a
relationship of cooperation among all members of
the personnel (Bradley, King Sears & Tessier Switllick
1997).

Implications for this partnership

The findings of this study show the importance of
being sensitive to the people in the context, to their
perceptions of their experiences and their schools. It
confirmed that there could be no “blueprint” for the
implementation of inclusive education as no schools
are the same. The specific qualities of each school
should be recognised and how various aspects
interact to produce understanding, belief and expec-
tations. This dynamic interaction has specific implica-
tions for developing appropriate strategies for
redressing the specific needs of a disadvantaged
school.

CONCLUSION

The present political climate in South Africa values
community engagement and welcomes initiatives that
strive to address the socio political needs of society.
A partnership with the three schools in the commu-
nity implies involvement with the people of the
community. The multidimensional nature of poverty
concerns satisfaction of basic human needs linked to
nutrition, health, housing, water and sanitation,
education and participation in cultural and social life.
Education can be a tool for empowerment. This
implies a shift to direct the system to capacity building
that enables schools and educators to be responsible
for learning and to be responsive to diverse and changing learner and community needs, interests, and concerns (Darling Hammond 1998).

The partnership thus ought to be approached in a multi disciplinary people centred way and linked with other efforts of uplifting the overall community in an attempt to support the implementation of inclusive educational practices at the three rural schools. The foundation of this partnership is a common goal to work towards a community that welcomes multiple perspectives and celebrates difference while meeting the needs of all members with tolerance, understanding, and compassion.

This partnership aims at strengthening the educator’s understanding, belief and expectations of inclusive education practices and developing a framework for effective transformation of the nature of education, the curriculum, teaching methods and institutional structures through strategies such as sharing a belief in inclusive education that relates to the culture embedded in a secure, accepting, collaborating, stimulating community in which everyone is valued. The change to inclusive education should emerge, rather than be imposed, from the workplace while it has to focus on those issues and concerns most relevant to educators in a supportive, collaborative partnership.

REFERENCES


