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Working towards inclusive education in South African classrooms

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“By inclusive learning we mean the greatest degree of match or fit between the individual learners’ requirements and the provision that is made for them.”
CSIE, 2000:2

The predominant objective of any education system is one of providing quality education for all learners in order to enable them to realise their full potential, thereby enabling them to contribute to and participate in society. During the last two decades international policy development has turned the focus on providing quality education for all learners within the mainstream of education, thereby removing the stigma and stereotyping of learners with barriers to learning. South Africa has also accepted educational approaches that facilitate movement towards more inclusive forms of education. Intensive attempts are made to identify the barriers to learning and development and to provide all children and young people with equal access to quality education. The most important problem that has to be overcome in this process, is the training and empowerment of teachers to identify and effectively support learners who experience barriers to learning. This article gives an overview of the problems facing the educational front in South Africa in this regard and discusses three instruments that have been developed during the last eighteen months to empower teachers to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms.

Introduction

The predominant objective of an education system, is one of providing quality education for all learners in order to enable them to realise their full potential and thereby meaningfully contribute to and participate in society. The recognition that education is a fundamental right and therefore needs to be freely available to all learners, underpins the notion that the education system should provide for and sustain such learning for all learners (RSA Constitution, Act 108 of 1996, sec. 29:1). Key components of the new South African Education Policy are: meeting the needs of **all** learners and actualising the full potential of **all** learners (South Africa, 1997:10; South Africa, 2001:6). If these objectives are realised, barriers to learning and development would essentially be removed.

In accordance with the international trend of providing quality education for all learners within the mainstream of education, South Africa has set a firm foot on the road towards realising this goal. It is, however, clear that within the overall international and national movement a number of groups remain vulnerable — not least children with disabilities but also those others who for a variety of reasons experience barriers to learning within existing arrangements.

During the International Special Education Congress 2000 (ISEC 2000) held in Manchester in July 2000, the following groups were identified:

- Those who are already enrolled in education but for a variety of reasons do not achieve adequately;
- Those who are not enrolled in schools but who could participate if more schools were available or were responsive to the diversity of learners in their communities;
- People with more severe impairments who have a need for some form of additional support.

During the ISEC 2000 Congress which was attended by 500

delegates from all over the world, the following realities came to light: A decade of international policy documents, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UNESCO's Salamanca Statement, has seen encouraging developments in many parts of the world: Developed and developing countries have accepted educational approaches that have facilitated movement towards more inclusive forms of education and intensive attempts have been made to identify the barriers to learning and development. The various international policy documents disseminated during the 1990s place considerable emphasis on the rights of all children and young people to have equal access to education. In spite of all the laudable policies, however, the operationalisation of inclusive education is hampered by many problems. Some of the most important problems that were debated and questions which arose, are the following:

- Inclusive policies have not been able to protect individual rights adequately.
- Marginalised and excluded voices are not heard.
- The way in which people with disabilities experience inclusion and exclusion in education have not been satisfactorily determined.
- Parent and community groups are not making adequate and responsible contributions to the process of inclusive education — especially in developing countries.
- The implications of changing professional roles for teacher education have not been determined.
- Ways in which special schools can promote inclusion should be utilised.
- Ways in which specialised teaching techniques can contribute to overcome barriers to learning should be utilised.
- What forms of classroom practice can respond to pupil diversity?
- Which organisational conditions foster the development of inclusive practice?
- How can pressures to exclude be overcome?
- What are the barriers to development?
- Does inclusive education benefit all children in the school?
- How do we evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive education?

The long list of problems is a clear indication of the challenges that face educators, policy makers, parents and communities in the implementation of inclusive education.

Background to the problem in South Africa

For the past six years South Africa has paid diligent attention to the following truth:

The increasing challenge to schools when they want to make a difference and they want to be fit for the future, is to examine what they are offering their learners, how it is offered and whether it meets the needs of the learners and the public (Charlton & David, 1993:3).

The new constitution emphasises respect for the rights of all, with particular emphasis on the recognition of diversity. This implies an inclusive approach to education in the sense that all learners are entitled to appropriate education in an inclusive and supportive learning environment. The new curriculum, with its outcomes-based approach is well-suited to inclusion (South Africa, 1995).

Educators in South Africa fully support the *Seven Points of the Inclusion Charter* (South Africa, 1997:10-11). The Charter was first drawn up in 1989 by the Centre for the Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE) in Britain with the aim of "ending segregation in education for all children and young people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties."

The Charter was signed in Redland Bristol in November 1999 by political parties, local education authorities, trade unions, members of parliament and various organisations in Britain. The Charter's seven points read thus:

1. We fully support an end to all segregated education on the grounds of disability or learning difficulty, as a policy commitment and goal for this country.
2. We see the ending of segregation in education as a human rights issue which belongs within equal opportunities policies.
3. We believe that all children share equal value and status. We therefore believe that the exclusion of children from the mainstream because of disability or learning difficulty is a devaluation and is discriminating.
4. We envisage the gradual transfer of resources, expertise, staff and pupils from segregated special schools to an appropriately supported, diverse and inclusive mainstream.
5. We believe that segregated education is a major cause of society's widespread prejudice against adults with disabilities or difficulties. De-segregating special education is therefore a crucial first step in helping to change discriminatory attitudes, in creating greater understanding and in developing a fairer society.
6. We believe that efforts to increase participation of people with disabilities or difficulties in learning in community life will be seriously jeopardised unless segregated education is reduced and ultimately ended.
7. For these reasons we call on Central and Local Governments to do all in their power to work as quickly as possible towards the goal of a de-segregated education system. (CSIE, 2000)

One of the problems facing South Africa in realising the ideals of inclusive education is the wide meaning of the concept "learners with disabilities" or "learners with special educational needs". It includes not only the barriers of physical and intellectual disability, but also the barriers caused by economic and emotional deprivation in South Africa, as well as social exclusion. According to the Report of the NCSNET & NCESS (South Africa, 1997) learners whose education requires additional planning and modifications in order to assist them to learn, are described as learners who are experiencing *barriers* to learning.

There are various forms of special educational needs. Weeks (2000:17-21) describes the various barriers to successful learning as follows:

- **Permanent shortcomings** in a person's make-up. These shortcomings include sensory disabilities, physical disabilities, intellectual disability and multiple disability.
- **Developmental problems** which could manifest as
 - a total delay in all or most of the developmental areas,
 - a delay in one or more aspects of development such as motor, perceptual, language or intellectual development, or
 - not being school ready at the accepted age for new entrants.
- **Learning problems** which could manifest in all school subjects, only certain school subjects, or in certain aspects of a school subject and which are associated with concepts such as underachievement, learners who do not do well at school and disadvantaged learners. The concept "disadvantaged learners" refers to those whose education has fallen behind as a result of social, economic or political circumstances.
- **Circumstantial problems** which could prevent learners from having a fair chance to make a success of their school career (low socio-economic status, culturally deprived learners, marginalised, underprivileged and low achieving learners).

The NCSNET Document (South Africa 1997:12-19) defines learners who experience barriers to learning more inclusively as the following:

learners who experience socio-economic barriers, e.g. inadequate numbers of centres of learning; learners who experience a lack of access to basic services, e.g. adequate transport, access to clinics; learners who experience poverty and underdevelopment, e.g. unemployment, the inability of families to meet the basic needs of their children; factors that place learners at risk, e.g. the emotional and social well-being of learners due to violence, crime, HIV/AIDS; discriminatory attitudes towards learners who are labelled, e.g. slow learners, drop outs; inflexible and inaccessible curriculum and inadequate training of teachers as well as teaching styles that do not meet the needs of all learners, language and communication where the medium of instruction is not the home language of the learner; inaccessible and unsafe built environment; inadequate and inappropriate provision of support services; lack of enabling and protective legislation and policy; lack of parental recognition and involvement; e.g. the learning environment and the broader society do not provide in the needs of these learners and a lack of human resource development strategies, e.g. the absence of ongoing in-service training programmes leads to insecurities, uncertainties, low self-esteem, lack of innovative practices which in turn impact on the attitudes of teachers.

In a developing country such as South Africa where unemployment and poverty are rife and where government and community structures are inhibited by an unstable economy, it can be expected that the provision of quality education for all learners, including those who experience barriers to learning and development, would be a formidable task. South African schools need to be restructured, in terms of the review of the new curriculum, with the collaboration of various stakeholders. Weeks (2000:23) claims that community-based involvement in this regard is essential, with members of the community becoming involved in actualising the full potential of learners. Special schools, with their skilled and experienced staff, have to offer assistance and support to the teaching staff at mainstream schools. Teachers need to be trained in pre- and in-service programmes to focus on the strengths of learners and to regard the different cultural and ethnic backgrounds of learners as having the potential to stimulate a richer learning environment. They also need to understand the diverse needs of the learners in their classrooms, to identify their problems and to be able to give support to all their learners in order for them to learn and develop optimally.

The necessity of training the teachers to think and work in a new frame of reference, places the focus on perhaps the single greatest problem facing the new education dispensation: A disturbing number of teachers in South Africa are confused and insecure because of a series of radical changes that have transformed their working environment. They are not acquainted with the principles of outcomes based education; they find it difficult to seek and find their own learning material (relevant to each child's culture, interest and level of development); they struggle to involve parents and communities in the learning process; they feel themselves inadequate in person and in training to deal with so much diversity amongst the large number of learners in their classrooms; and they suffer a lack of self-respect and self-assurance because of the labels of laziness and untrustworthiness that are attached to them (Sethosa, 2001:169-192; Weeks, 2000:258-259). In spite of many attempts of the government and education department to train and support them, they experience a sense of powerlessness and a sense of not being in control of their situation. Feelings of inferiority and fears of breaching learners' rights, result in a lack of motivation and enthusiasm to meet the needs of all the children in their classrooms.

To empower them to drive the restructuring process in schools requires the united support of the government, parents and communities.

The United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) recognises this need and states the following:

all countries should have a clearly stated policy on inclusive education that is understood at school and wider community levels.

This policy should allow for a flexible curriculum as well as additions and adaptations and provide quality materials, on-going teacher-training and practical support for teachers.

The need to support teachers in this transformation process is accepted internationally. In South Africa this need is well understood and policy-makers, educationists and curriculum developers at training institutions strive to meet the need of all teachers in service and at training level.

Strategies to train and support teachers

During the last four years much research has been done in South Africa by education departments, teacher training colleges and the education departments of universities in order to develop models and programmes that would empower teachers with knowledge and skills to direct the transformation of schools and establish inclusive education. During the period July 2000 to June 2001, three models were developed at the University of South Africa and the University of Pretoria to motivate and empower teachers with the main focus on teachers in service. These models, can also be incorporated in the curricula of teacher training centres and can offer valuable support to teachers in the attempt to empower them to implement inclusive education effectively and successfully. These models are:

- A model for teachers to assist learners with behaviour problems in the classroom, developed by FH Weeks.
- An At-Risk Disk as instrument to enable teachers to identify the nature and extent of the learning difficulties of learners with intellectual disability and specific learning disability in a step-by-step process, developed under the leadership of AC Bouwer.
- A manual to train teachers to assist mildly intellectually disabled learners in the foundation phase, developed by MF Sethosa.

In the first of these studies Weeks (2000) recognises the growing need of teachers to *understand and assist learners with behaviour problems* that serve as barriers to effective learning.

In the past these learners were accommodated in schools of industry, reform schools and places of safety, which were part of the Specialised Education provided for learners. According to the NCSNET Document (South Africa, 1997) these learners have to be accommodated in the mainstream schools in their communities and they have to be provided with a supportive and effective learning and teaching environment. Teachers find it very difficult to deal with the increasing number of children with behaviour problems in mainstream classrooms. These children are disruptive in the extreme and the learning climate in the classrooms is negatively affected for all the children. The teachers' lack of the necessary knowledge, skills and expertise to understand and assist these learners, causes frustration, demotivation and serious feelings of inadequacy which disrupts effective teaching and successful learning (Walker, Colver & Ramsey, 1995; Silberg & Kluff, 1998; Nissen, 2000; Sethosa, 2001).

Weeks' (2000) point of departure is that behaviour problems are caused by the fact that the emotional needs of children (and teachers) are not met. Weeks (2000:400) agrees with Pringle (1986:16-17) that the environment is responsible for nurturing the essentially human characteristics of people. These human characteristics point to personality factors such as emotional needs that need to be satisfied by significant other role players in the child's environment. If educators do not provide the necessary nurturance, stimulation, encouragement and protection to the child at various stages of development and withhold attention or make very little emotional or physical contact with the child, the child is emotionally neglected. Consequently the self-concept of the learner is negatively influenced. Because children react to their environment in line with how they see themselves, it is imperative that parents and teachers should foster positive self-concept formation.

According to Weeks (2000:493) teachers can contribute to communities by attending to the emotional well-being of learners. Teachers can also be of assistance in establishing effective schools for all learners and in guiding educational planners, communities, principals and policy makers in understanding and assisting the learner with

behaviour problems.

Weeks' proposed model for teachers is based on a problem-solving approach. Significant other role players within the environment of the learners are activated and utilised to satisfy the unmet emotional needs that give rise to problem behaviour. The model accentuates the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic factors relating to the behaviour of learners. The main focus is on addressing the unmet needs of love and security, responsibility, new experiences, praise and recognition. These are the unmet needs that cause behaviour problems. The model offers a step-by-step process for assisting and understanding learners with behaviour problems. The different components of the process consist of the following:

- identification of the learner with behaviour problems,
- analysis of the behaviour of the learner in order to determine which emotional needs are unmet and within which relationships,
- planning of the outcomes of the process of understanding and assistance in short and long term,
- altering the setting/situation in which the behaviour is occurring — classroom and/or whole school,
- altering the triggers activating negative behaviour patterns,
- altering the actions that follow on specific behaviour by changing behaviour patterns,
- altering the results of behaviour by changing behaviour manifestations (from unacceptable to acceptable behaviour), and
- altering the quality of relationships in the learner's life-world (empathy, warmth, a caring attitude, congruence, genuineness, unconditional positive regard and respect are necessary elements in all educator-child relationships).

The aim of the model is to empower teachers, parents and all other significant role players in the child's life-world to assist and understand learners in terms of their unmet emotional needs that cause negative self-concept formation and behaviour problems. The model is embedded within the ecological systems theory with a strong focus on the reciprocal impact of interactions via relationships on the behaviour of learners. Learners are not blamed for behaving as they do, rather the impact of the behaviour patterns of significant others from within the environment and learners' behaviour are analysed in terms of unmet emotional needs. The model also focuses on cognitions, feelings and the cognitive map representing internalised feelings and thoughts which mirror learners' unmet emotional needs. The significance of the senses, as instruments for receiving and sending out internalised messages and answers to these messages, is an important component of the model. Networking, whole-school approach, collaboration among significant other role players as well as community based support, are central themes of this model (Weeks, 2000:492).

Training teachers to implement this model will result in building their skills, knowledge and self-confidence. When teachers realise that they cannot only identify and handle learners with behaviour problems but also assist such children to change their behaviour and become better learners, an important contribution to the implementation of successful inclusive education will have been made.

The At-Risk Disk: Differential identification of intellectual and specific learning disability

The At-Risk Disk is a valuable instrument in the empowerment of teachers to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms. The research to develop this instrument was initiated by the realisation that many teachers in the country lack the skills to understand the nature of their learners' difficulties and to adapt instruction, tasks and material in support of their learning. Bouwer and Du Toit (2000:241-247) pointed out the following facts:

- Poverty, malnutrition, inadequate medical facilities, pre-natal infections and infections during early childhood are some of the risk factors that cause a high incidence of disability among children in developing countries.
- Owing to these high risk factors intellectual disability and specific learning disability are highly prevalent especially in under-resourced schools in South Africa.

- Intellectual disability and specific learning disability are not always easily distinguishable. The result is that teachers handle these problems ineffectively.
- Teachers who teach at the Intermediary Phase often feel helpless when their learners fail to perform adequately. The reason for this may be that they had less exposure to developmental and other learning difficulties during training than their colleagues who teach at the Foundation Phase.
- A need exists for a user-friendly, effective instrument for teachers which would help them to distinguish between intellectual and specific learning disabilities and which would indicate the direction of effective support for learning (Bouwer & Du Toit, 2000: 242).

Bouwer and her team consequently set out to develop a qualitative, differential procedure and instrument for institutional, team-based use which could overcome the feelings of helplessness of intermediary teachers especially in under-resourced schools. The aim was to enable them to identify the nature and extent of the learning difficulties of learners with intellectual disabilities and specific learning disabilities in a step-by-step process.

They identified three main characteristics and behavioural manifestations of intellectual disability and grouped them into seven categories namely: intellectual ability; cognitive functioning; perceptual development; language development; physical development; emotional development and social interaction.

The main characteristics and behavioural manifestations of learning disabilities were grouped under the following eight categories: spoken language (receptive and expressive); written language; spelling; reading; mathematics; handwriting; attention; and social and emotional development.

Clear examples of the behavioural manifestations of both kinds of disabilities are given so that teachers are comprehensively guided when identifying learners who do not achieve satisfactorily. An illustration of the product to be used and the procedure that needs to be followed are provided in such a functional way that teachers are enabled to use the product effectively with little instruction and training. Bouwer and Du Toit (2000:247) claim that the At-Risk Disk could "... by dint of its design and the comprehensiveness and specification of its manual, effectively support non-specialist intermediary teachers, especially in under-resourced schools, without prior training to execute a grounded, team-based procedure to differentially identify intellectual disability and specific learning disability."

The *training manual for school support teams* which was developed by Sethosa (2001) is an important supplement to the At-Risk Disk and is another effective instrument in the empowerment of schools to provide quality education for all learners. The focus of this instrument is learners with mild intellectual disability. These learners are especially disadvantaged because it is difficult to identify them. They pass through the same hierarchy of stages of cognitive development, but at a slower rate than the average individual. Unfortunately they are only identified/diagnosed after learning problems and persistent academic achievement problems become apparent. At this stage they have already fallen behind, failed subjects and repeated grades. Their intellectual limitations that manifest in ineffective learning of academic material and subtle social learning problems are difficult problems to handle and remedy in regular classes. In general teachers have little knowledge and less skills to support children with specific educational needs in large regular classrooms in mainstream schools.

Sethosa (2001:42) agrees with Artiles, Csapo and De Lorenzo (1995:31) that children with mild disabilities comprise the majority of all special education populations. A significant number of individuals in the developing world and specifically in South Africa, suffer from mild intellectual disability. Children in Third World countries are especially vulnerable to biological and environmental stressors that cause disabling conditions such as mild intellectual disability. This issue is compounded by malnutrition, traffic accidents, diseases and socio-political conditions (UNICEF, 1993:50). These findings are in

accordance with the findings and statements of Bouwer and Du Toit (2000:242).

It is therefore of the utmost importance that teachers at a pre-service and in-service level, should be prepared and empowered to assist mildly intellectually disabled (MID) learners to develop their potential optimally. It is important to begin this assistance in the foundation phase and the manual was therefore directed at teachers of this school phase.

In her research project, Sethosa (2001:31-67) describes the physical, emotional, social and cognitive characteristics of these learners. She identifies all the important manifestations of their learning problems as well as the teaching principles best suited to help them achieve optimally. Because of the diversity of their problems and the complexity of the inclusive classroom, Sethosa (2001) sought a solution to the teachers' lack of knowledge and skills through the School Support Teams (SST) which form an integral part of the new education dispensation. A manual was developed according to which the School Support Teams could train teachers to identify, understand and support MID learners in their classrooms.

The main outcome of this project is that at the end of the training, teachers (using the SST manual) should experience a paradigm shift with regard to MID learners: in stead of expecting limited success, their attitude towards these learners should change to the extent that they believe in the ability of these learners to reach their full potential despite their problems. The teachers should be able to demonstrate their ability to support the MID in the regular classroom.

The manual consists of nine phases and is implemented during a training course as follows:

Phase 1: Background to the policy of inclusion

Outcome

At the end of this phase, the teachers should demonstrate their knowledge of the policy of inclusion and how this policy evolved in South Africa. They should also display their knowledge of prominent features in other countries.

Phase 2: Curriculum 2005 and outcomes-based education (OBE)

Outcome

At the end of this phase, teachers should display an understanding of the basic principles of Curriculum 2005, OBE and the seven roles of the educator. They should demonstrate the ability to use these principles in the classroom.

Phase 3: Learning difficulties

Outcome

At the end of this phase, the teachers should be able to identify learning difficulties experienced by learners with mild intellectual disability. The teachers should be able to apply the different teaching and learning principles to assist these learners.

Phase 4: Planning learning activities in the three learning programmes in the Foundation Phase

Outcome

At the end of this phase, teachers should demonstrate usable knowledge and understanding of the general problems experienced by learners with regard to language, listening, speaking, Limited English Proficiency (LEP), reading, writing, spelling, handwriting, mathematics and life skills. Teachers should demonstrate the ability to apply the different approaches to assist these learners.

Phase 5: Emotional and/or behavioural disorders

Outcome

At the end of this phase, teachers should be able to display their knowledge of emotional and behavioural disorders with specific reference to those learners with mild intellectual disability. They should also demonstrate the ability to use their knowledge to assist these learners.

Phase 6: Learning preferences

Outcome

At the end of this phase, teachers should have gained an understanding of the theories of multiple intelligences, learning styles and analytical (left brain) and global (right brain) personalities, and demonstrate the ability to use these theories to structure the learning process so as to accommodate all kinds of learners.

Phase 7: The assessment policy

Outcome

At the end of this phase, teachers should display an understanding of the assessment policy and be able to assess learners according to guidelines set out by the Department of Education. They should demonstrate the ability to assess in such a way that the mildly intellectually disabled learners are not disadvantaged.

Phase 8: Collaboration amongst teachers

Outcome

At the end of this phase, teachers should demonstrate an understanding of the process of collaboration amongst teachers. They should be able to use the different steps in the problem-solving and intervention processes.

Phase 9: The Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Outcome

At the end of this phase, the teachers should demonstrate the ability to draw up an effective and efficient Individual Education Plan (IEP) for every individual learner with mild intellectual disability. They should also be able to use the IEP for intervention purposes.

The specific outcomes of each phase illustrate the scope and aim as well as the value of this course. The duration of each phase and the course as a whole are adapted according to the existing knowledge and experience of each group of teachers. It is imperative that teachers of the foundation phase be trained and skilled in the practical application of outcomes based education in order to accommodate mildly intellectually disabled learners in the inclusive classrooms. The use of this training manual will greatly facilitate the training task of the School Support Teams.

Conclusion

There is much endeavour in South African educational circles to train and re-train teachers to accommodate a wide spectrum of diversity in the inclusive classrooms. The success of the policy of inclusion and of outcomes-based education will depend on the motivation and diligence with which each section of the educational structure makes use of the instruments that are available to empower teachers.

The three instruments discussed in this article are at present being tested and refined in schools and classrooms in Gauteng. It is important that educators and educational planners take cognisance of the value of these instruments and ensure that they are eventually put into use in all schools in the country. This will prevent the tragedy of the following truth:

Inclusive education without support is not inclusion: it is dumping (Centre for the Studies of Inclusive Education, 1989).

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