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The progress of inclusive education in South Africa: Teachers' experiences in a selected district, KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

Education policies tend to evoke mixed feelings: excitement amongst advocates of change or uncertainty and stress among teachers expected to implement them. Reactions to the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System have been no different. Emanating from a PhD study, this article documents how inclusive education is progressing in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Informed by social constructivism and the systems theory, the study investigated teachers' experiences and understandings of this policy statement in three primary schools in two districts. Data collected showed that teachers had limited experiences of inclusive education and limited understandings of what it entails in South Africa. As a result, most teachers felt inadequately prepared to implement it. The article concludes that the limited experiences and understandings result from, among other things, the inadequate and inappropriate professional development strategy used to disseminate information within the Department of Education.

Keywords: barriers to learning and development, paradigm shift, professional development

Introduction

The post-apartheid South African Department of Education (hereafter, DoE) inherited a legacy of inequalities. In response, it has churned out numerous policies in the drive to redress these imbalances and provide quality education for all. Unfortunately, the reality is that new policies tend to evoke mixed feelings: excitement amongst advocates for change and uncertainty and even stress among those who are expected to implement them. Reactions to Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001) have been no different. This article focuses on teachers' experiences of this policy statement in three primary schools (two districts) in KwaZulu-Natal (hereafter, KZN). It emanates from a larger study which explored the complexities of policy dissemination within the DoE, particularly in KZN. The larger study was premised on the assumption that teachers' knowledge and understandings of inclusive education would be greatly influenced by, among other

things, the quality and quantity of professional development opportunities available to them in terms of what it is, why it is being adopted, and how it can be implemented. The study was conducted between 2004 and 2006.

Inclusive education and its rationale in South Africa

In Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education – Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (hereafter EWP6) inclusive education is defined as a system that recognizes that all children and youth can learn, and that they require support to do so. It is a system that celebrates learner diversity and recognizes that learning takes place in different social contexts, including schools. It seeks to create education structures/systems and methodologies that make it possible for schools to meet the needs of all, and to increase the participation of all learners in the culture and curricula of centres of learning. In addition, it challenges attitudes, behaviours, teaching methodologies, teaching environments, and curricula to meet the needs of all learners, and to develop learners' strengths such that they are able to participate critically in the learning process (DoE, 2001).

Such a system of education presents a paradigm shift in how education is understood, organized and run. I have already indicated that there were structural imbalances in the education system. For example, apart from language, racial and socio-economic divisions and inequalities, education had been organized in accordance with the medical model which is preoccupied with deficits within learners (Fulcher, 1989) at the exclusion of contextual factors within the learning context (UNESCO, 1993). One of the purposes of inclusive education is to change our focus from what is wrong with the learner to contextual factors that interfere with learning. It is also geared towards the development of learning environments such that all learners are supported in their learning through the identification and removal of barriers to learning and development (DoE, 2001).

What is the significance of professional development in inclusive education and other reform agendas?

Inclusive education has been embraced as a means towards the creation of a caring, inclusive society (Carrim, 2007; DoE, 2001) and teachers have a critical role to play as change agents in the creation of such a society. Several international studies have concluded that teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education determine their commitment to inclusive practices and influence the outcomes of their practice (Baguwemu and Nabirye, 2002; Burstein et al., 2004; Rose, 2001; UNESCO, 1999). Since inclusive education is concerned with the identification and minimization of barriers to learning, then these studies highlight the critical role of teachers' professional development in influencing teachers' understandings of, and commitment to, this or any other innovation. Thus, Burstein et al. (2004) recommend a systematic and intensive training programme to develop teachers' confidence and competence as change occurs through ongoing and participatory staff development programmes. According to these authors, it takes a long time to train as a teacher, and after several years' experience in the classroom, teachers get set in their ways of thinking about teaching and learning. Research

also suggests that most teachers tend to teach in the same way they were taught in their own schools (Lortie, 1975, cited in Hyde, 1992; Schwille et al., 2007). It is, therefore, important that re-training takes place over time, and that it is both theoretical and practical (Burstein et al., 2004).

We should also remember that – by and large – school reform is challenging (Fullan, 1992), and that, inclusion is more complex than other educational reforms (Burstein et al., 2004). The complexity of inclusion emanates from the fact that it is not merely a superficial shift from one form of service provision to another, but rather that it involves a much deeper transformation in areas such as beliefs and values (Doyle, 2002; Swart et al., 2004). In describing the shift, Doyle (2002) asserts that inclusion is different from mainstreaming in that it is a change in thinking, a paradigm shift. Citing Zepeda and Langenbach (1999), Doyle (2002: 41) states that:

Inclusion is a 'mindset' about educating students and not just a place or a method of delivering instruction. It is a philosophy [and] is part of the very culture of school.

This means that careful planning and preparation need to take place to ensure that such a system is implemented appropriately, including the development of new strategies for educator and school development. Generally, the adoption of a new policy by the Ministry does not necessarily mean that teachers will immediately abandon their old ways of practice. Instead, there may be reluctance to try out something new under the pretext of 'why change what works?' Mathibe (2007) observes that teachers' professional development needs to focus on giving them appropriate attitudes, knowledge, skills and values to perform their tasks well and resourcefully. This is even more critical in inclusive education where teachers need to know and understand what barriers to learning are, how to address them, as well as get hands-on training in classroom strategies that promote inclusion (Walton et al., 2009). This cannot be achieved using one-off training sessions as these have already been shown to be ineffective (Lessing and de Wit, 2007).

In response to this criticism, Schwille (2007) suggests an alternative approach to teacher development, an approach characterized by the following:

- Teachers provided with opportunities to apply newly gained knowledge in their classrooms with support as needed
- Opportunities to observe peers and to receive feedback
- Opportunities to collaborate and collectively decide about their professional development needs within schools
- A balance between pedagogy and subject matter
- Opportunities to conduct action research and share results. (Schwille, 2007: 3)

Adopting such an approach demands that the South African Department of Education (DoE) makes drastic changes in their organization of teacher development to ensure that teachers acquire relevant skills to support all learners in their learning. This should not be too difficult since the DoE has already acknowledged that in the old system, personnel development was fragmented and unsustainable, leading to low morale and lack of creativity with reference to the delivery of the curriculum (DoE, 1997). It is in the same

vein that Bray (2007) argues that continuing professional development of teachers needs to be a life-long exercise that enables them to keep on changing and improving their abilities and classroom practices in accordance with contextual and economic changes and requirements. Similarly, Schwille et al. (2007) suggest that policy formulation and program designs should consider what learning opportunities are available to teachers, covering their own schooling all the way through their teaching careers. This highlights the importance of formal and informal opportunities to learn that teachers have as all have an impact on their practice.

This study highlights the critical value of staff development when innovations are introduced as it provides teachers with opportunities to engage in debates and dialogue, and it also creates opportunities for demonstrations and try outs of, and feed back on, the new desired behaviour. It argues that policy formulation and related teacher development programs take into account what learning opportunities are available to teachers (Schwille et al., 2007) as in the absence of such opportunities, teachers' understandings of the reforms will be limited and they are likely to reject them. It is in this vein that the professional development of teachers is deemed to be an essential condition in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Methodological considerations

This article emerges out of a larger project which utilized a qualitative, multiple case study approach. The sample consisted of three primary schools located in two District Offices and three different geographical contexts (Mangelengele: rural, Island View: urban, and Zungeza: semi-urban). Two theoretical frameworks informed data collection and analysis, namely, social constructivism and the systems perspectives (Donald et al., 2002). These were found to be best suited to understanding teachers and their learning within schools as sub-systems of a bigger system.

This study sought to answer three critical research questions:

- How are teachers experiencing the new policy of inclusion?
- What emerges as their understanding of this innovation?
- To what extent, and in what ways, have their experiences made these teachers ready to implement EWP6?

The analysis presented herein is based on information obtained from document analysis, self-completion questionnaires (teachers, $N = 42$, 60%), individual interviews with principals ($N = 3$) and focus group interviews with teachers ($N = 23$). Summaries of findings per school were submitted to individual schools for scrutiny and corroboration. This process of member checking (Robson, 2002) enabled participants to assess and modify the findings in view of their experiences. Pseudonyms are used for schools and teachers.

Findings

The research findings are organized in terms of the three research questions, teachers' experiences of EWP6, their understandings of this innovation and the extent of their readiness to implement it.

1. Experiences of inclusive education

Findings suggested that teachers in the three schools (and by implication, in the districts where these schools were managed) had had very limited experiences of the policy statement in terms of information, training and/or support in preparation for the development of an inclusive system of education, as reflected in these statements:

. . . we went . . . for our OBE course . . . at that time we were told we will be planning how to implement the inclusive policy and then it was just an empty vein and then I started to forget 'bout it ... (Ms Vee, Island View)

Another teacher from another school confirmed that they had attended some training:

All of us have heard about it. Any person who attended curriculum 2005 they have heard about it. There was a slot in the workshop for inclusive education. You've heard about it if you were at the workshop. All of us attended curriculum 2005 workshop. (Mrs Bee, Zungeza)

Yes. I have (heard of the policy) . . . we went to the course of special needs last year and they discussed the policy. (Ms Doremi, Island View)

. . . it hasn't been discussed in detail but we have discussed inclusive education in the past. We haven't discussed the 'white paper' or gone through it. We have discussed the idea of inclusive and what it's all about . . . (Mrs Latido, Island View)

Unlike the other two schools, Island View had – to a limited extent – engaged with the policy beyond the workshops. However, it was noted that in all these schools, none of the teachers mentioned attending specific workshops on inclusive education. Instead, it seemed to be piggybacking on other programs. Although all teachers indicated that they had participated in staff development programmes of some kind, in the past year or two, it was clear that there was no deliberate and intense focus on EWP6.

Joyce et al. (1999) argue that to gain competence in a new model of teaching necessitates numerous practice sessions, something that these teachers were not afforded. Due to this lack of support, teachers wished for what they saw as alternative educational provisions:

And if things were right, even us we will be having special classes [*sic*], but at the moment, we have to teach them together. (Ms Bee, Mangelengele)

This sentiment was echoed at Zungeza, even though this school was upbeat about inclusive education and had reported that it had already started including all learners:

Another thing we had thought of . . . if the department can provide this school with a different classroom where such learners can learn practical subjects, maybe woodwork or something, so as to help them when they go out. (Ms X, Zungeza)

Such comments suggest that teachers were feeling overwhelmed by the demands some of the 'untypical' learners made on them and felt that separate provision would provide some relief. The (unstated) assumption was that in such classes, someone else – probably a specially trained teacher – would take responsibility for these learners' learning. It is normal to want to shift responsibility when people feel overwhelmed by the demands placed on them. However, one wonders if these teachers would have

felt differently had they been offered a proper introduction to inclusive education, including skills and support to identify and address barriers to learning.

School records were also silent on inclusive education. At Zungu and Mangelengele there was one circular inviting one teacher (per school) to attend a two-hour workshop on inclusive education. Island View had reportedly received this invitation 'a while back' so it was no longer in the file. Although it was not stated on the invitation, the principals indicated that they understood that whoever attended had to come back and share the contents of the workshop with the rest of the teaching staff (cascade model of training). Mangelengele did not have a copy of EWP6 for the best part of the study. Zungu and Island View had copies but these were filed and were not used in any way by the school communities.

2. Knowledge and/or understanding of the policy

As a result of the teachers' limited experiences of EWP6, they had limited knowledge and/or understandings of this policy statement. This was clearly evident in that the medical discourse that has greatly influenced education in South Africa was still dominant and tended to cloud their perceptions of teaching and learning. This, in turn, influenced their understandings of inclusive education. For example, findings from the questionnaire showed that 28 out of 42 (67%) teachers equated inclusive education with teaching disabled learners in mainstream schools, whilst the remainder pleaded ignorance or did not answer.

Such misconceptions were not surprising given the fact that the majority of teachers were not invited to take part in the awareness raising workshops that their districts ran, let alone that these workshops were one off and lasted for two hours at most. Instead, one teacher per school attended and was expected to cascade the information to colleagues. At Mangelengele, the very teacher who had attended the briefing session a week before the questionnaire was completed gave the following definition of inclusive education:

It is about all schools catering for normal learners and learners with different disability. (Questionnaire 37, hereafter Q and a number will be used)

This teacher had already cascaded the information, and, as a result of her misunderstanding of what inclusive education is and how it is conceptualized in the policy statement, a similarly limited understanding thereof had developed among other staff members. For example, one teacher defined inclusive education as when 'normal learners and disabilities learners learn together' (Q38), while another responded that EWP6 is meant to address the fact that:

Disabled learners actually need special attention and not to be neglected. They must be given a chance to play with others, e.g. soccer or netball. (Q39)

It was clear that limited exposure to the policy of inclusive education and what it proposes prevented a paradigm shift in the teachers' understanding of the nature and purpose of teaching and learning. As a result, the values and beliefs that underpin teaching and learning in the schools studied continued to reflect the medical discourse. Another response substantiated this lack of transformation in the teachers' thinking:

The government encourages this inclusive education to take part in our schools but the majority of educators were not trained nor educated about how to deal with disabled learners . . . I think the government should provide the cheapest institution which . . . will provide things that disabled children need . . . (Q16)

During focus group interviews, some of the teachers were more concerned with the practicalities of inclusive education at classroom level:

The children are at their primary years, so you can include them at this stage, but as they grow up, their levels vary so much or their performance. So you not just looking at age . . . you look at their different levels. Sometimes we can work with one level but what is the department gonna use as a cut off for them to move up? When are you going to move them up so that they could progress? When are we gonna move from one grade to another grade? When they are 10 years old and they are still at level . . . one, do they move to the next grade? . . . you sit in the classroom and you wonder: Is it to their benefit to be included at the end of the day? Where then do you draw the line for them to move on? If they are 9 years old and they are still functioning as five year olds . . . (Mrs Pooh, Island View)

. . . So I'm just thinking like if it's gonna be more work . . . It's gonna give us more work when there are learners who need special attention and there are special problems as well. (Ms Dee, Mangelengele)

3. *Readiness to implement*

It was also clear that as a result of the limited experiences with, and the resultant limited knowledge/understandings of EWP6, teachers in the selected schools were not ready to implement inclusive education. A chance meeting with an official from one of the districts confirmed that the cascade model which they used to develop teachers in that district was problematic and ineffective, but because they lacked human resources and had no alternative strategy, they continued using it. Whilst the districts and the province continued to ignore evidence that the cascade model was not serving any purpose, teachers remained ill prepared to create inclusive classrooms. The teachers acknowledged this and highlighted the need for targeted professional development in preparation for the implementation of EWP6:

oh we do not have the skills to work with them (children experiencing barriers to learning and development). Definitely schools do not know how, but we should be trained to work with these children and to accommodate them as far as possible, I do think that it can work if there was another person in class . . . (Mrs Jay, Island View)

I think we cannot . . . because it will be difficult . . . These children need much more time and attention and I think of our situation now, it will be extremely difficult. (Ms Zhee, Island View)

At another school, one teacher said:

I can say it's a mixture of feelings because as we are trying to deal with what we call normal kids. So when we are faced with those learners that need special attention you know there is that fear; how will you be teaching them; will you be able to meet their needs . . . (Mr Gee, Mangelengele)

Another added:

. . . you usually know that there is a problem but you don't know exactly how to deal with that problem because you're not equipped to deal with it. (Ms Moo, Mangelengele)

Zungeza held a different perspective to that of the other schools regarding the implementation of EWP6. They were more receptive to the idea, albeit misunderstood (see Mrs X's comments), and the only possible explanation was that the principal had registered for a course wherein inclusive education was discussed at university. At this school, the principal's and teachers' assessment of their school's ability to implement this policy were promising. For example, the principal was so confident of her staff's ability to handle the challenges of creating an inclusive school environment that she was keen to see the implementation of this policy as soon as possible:

In fact, I would like to start tomorrow; I would like to experience new things. I want to see how it [inclusion] is going to take place because we have had such children before who have problems, who have different needs. Really we have not had problems because you know we work as a team. (Mrs Kay, Zungeza)

The same sentiment was echoed by the Head of Department during the focus group interview:

Yes, it will be successfully implemented because we have already attempted it. (Mr Li, Zungeza)

However, not all of them felt confident about this, as one indicated that they would welcome the creation of a special class where learners experiencing barriers to learning and development would learn practical subjects.

Discussion

What emerges from the data is the dominance of the medical model used in the initial training of teachers, a model that emphasizes learner deficits over the role of the context in learning. As such, the values, beliefs, and practices of this model have become entrenched in teachers' ways of thinking about teaching and learning as reflected in their responses. The fact that they still viewed separate provision for learners who experience barriers to learning and development as a better option (including those with disabilities) indicated an absence of a shift in their understanding of teaching and learning. This lack of shift in thinking was understandable in the light of the ineffective professional development model used to disseminate information about EWP6.

Changing allegiance to a discourse and its related philosophy and assumptions requires the provision of continuous professional development and support. Unfortunately, as the findings of this study suggest, this has not been forthcoming. Instead, the workshops where this policy was on the agenda focused on other policies (OBE and C2005) or were one-off orientation sessions lasting for two hours, attended by one teacher per school who was then entrusted with the responsibility to cascade the new knowledge gained. There were no follow-up sessions planned. Had there been follow-ups, someone would have recognized that what gets cascaded is incorrect and corrective measures would have been taken.

Research has shown that unless teacher development programs are designed such that teachers have ample opportunities to learn in their own work context and in collaboration with others, they are not going to be effective (Schwille et al., 2007). This has implications for where staff development takes place, as Joyce et al. (1999: 117)

observe that teachers require conditions that are different from settings usually used for staff development in order to ‘improve their skills and learn new approaches to teaching’.

The findings of this study suggest that EWP6 and other policies preceding it have had no effect on how the three schools and those who work in them think about, and respond to, the diversity of learning needs in their contexts. As a result, the status quo has remained unchallenged. They also highlight that communication lines between the different levels of the education system are clogged. For example, the evident failure of Provincial and District officials to diffuse accurate information about EWP6 coupled with the persistent use of the cascade model in teacher development when it was clearly not effective suggests that the different levels of the system are not communicating effectively. As a result, most teachers see the untypical learner as an outsider who deserves to be taught separately from the rest of the learner population without looking at how their teaching and classroom organization could be causing barriers to learning.

Conclusion

Throughout the focus group interviews, it was clear that across the three schools, teachers’ experiences of EWP6 were very limited and that as a result, their understandings thereof were also similar, ranging from non-existent to very limited and/or distorted. This rendered the three schools under study not ready to implement the new policy although Zungeza thought differently. The minimal interaction with the policy and the consequential poor understanding thereof among the participating teachers could be linked to the inadequacy of the professional development strategy employed to prepare them and their schools for implementing EWP6.

This study was premised on the assumption that the more teachers experience or are exposed to EWP6, the better they will understand what it is about. This exposure would enable schools and teachers to create welcoming classrooms where all learners feel they belong, and are encouraged to participate in the learning process. Specifically, the study purported that how teachers understand EWP6 will be influenced by the quantity and quality of their experiences of this policy statement. These findings suggest that teachers’ experiences and understandings of any policy, inclusive education included, are determined by the nature of the professional development they are exposed to. Teachers’ professional development is the most important innovation diffusion strategy at the disposal of the DoE. Therefore, this article concludes that it is difficult to change teachers’ thinking about their work if they do not have adequate opportunities to engage with the proposed innovation – individually and collaboratively – so as to question, debate, and learn new ways of thinking and doing the education business. This has implications for how the DoE and institutions of higher learning plan programs for the professional development of teachers.

There is no doubt that the South African education system, in its present form, needs to change if we are serious about providing quality education to all learners. There are numerous initiatives aimed at making this a reality, EWP6 being one of them. However, without proper professional development of those at the chalk face and those who support them, the changes that such reforms aim to entrench will remain superficial. Evidently, developing an inclusive education and training system is a time-consuming and expensive process. Changing the existing culture of exclusion, individualism, and marginalization in schools to an inclusive one will take substantial amounts of time to achieve, far more

than is currently allocated. To unlearn all the teachings of the deficit paradigm and learn a new one will take years of re-training, dialogue, debates, demonstrations, practice and information sharing at school and district levels. Unfortunately, there are no short cuts.

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