

Stakeholders' Perception and Experience of Inclusive Education: A Case of a Further Education and Training College in South Africa

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KEYWORDS Experience. Inclusive Education. Perception. Stakeholders

ABSTRACT Inclusive education is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through increasing participation by all categories of learners in the learning environment. A qualitative approach using a phenomenological case study was adopted for this study. The study explored and described the experiences of learners (including a learner with disabilities), staff, and the institutional management team with respect to inclusive practices in Sekhukhume Further Education and Training (FET) College in South Africa. The study found that the institution in question lacked the necessary resources and managerial capacity to implement fully inclusive educational programmes that will meet the special needs of all learners in the institution in question. The provision of resources, professional development of lecturers, capacitating the institutional management and putting monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place can go a long way in ensuring that inclusive needs of learners with disabilities are met.

INTRODUCTION

The world today has over half a billion people with mental, physical or sensory impairments which exclude them from actively participating in many spheres of life including education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2005). At the World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain in June 1994, it was noted with concern that very few children with disabilities have access to education, and also millions of adults with disabilities lack even the rudiments of basic education (UNESCO 1994). Social transformation could take place through inclusive education which requires well equipped, knowledgeable and competent teachers who are able to foster the required values, confidence and support in disabled students, thus preparing them to become capable citizens (Marimuthu 2015).

According to UNESCO (2005), inclusive education is a process of addressing and respond-

ing to the diversity of needs of learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion. Early efforts at providing education or training for learners with disabilities were through separate special schools (special schools), usually targeting specific impairments, such as the school for the blind or deaf. According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2011), the special schools failed to meet the demands and needs of all learners with various forms of disabilities. This situation began to change only when legislations started to require learners with disabilities to receive education in an inclusive environment (WHO 2011).

In South Africa, the integration of people living with disabilities has been an on-going process since the dawn of democracy. Before April 1994, the provision of education for learners with disabilities has been shaped by the realities of the past socio-economic policies of the then apartheid regime which denied access to educational opportunities to marginalised groups

including people with disabilities (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) 2012; Dube 2005).

As part of its transformation agenda, the South African government pursues strategies for integration of learners and staff with disabilities in all aspects of university or college life. In addition, it has made provision in the constitution that outlaws all forms of discrimination, and requires all organs of state to ensure that people with disabilities have equal access to opportunities (DHET 2013). To this end, the "inclusive education" concept found expression in the South African Schools (SASA) Act No 84 of 1996 which was aimed at transforming the public education system and making educational institutions open to all learners with or without disabilities (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996). At the higher education phase, the White Paper No. 6 on Special Needs Education and Building an Inclusive Education and Training System clearly defines and contextualizes inclusive education with a view of leveling the learning environment for all categories of learners to participate (Department of Education (DoE) 2001).

The underpinning principles in the above act and policy laid down the frameworks that seek to address the educational needs of all learners and at all levels including the FET phase. In South Africa, there are fifty registered and accredited public FET Colleges which operate close on 300 campuses spread across the rural and urban areas of the country. Public FET Colleges are established and operated under the authority of the Further Education and Training Colleges Act 16 of 2006 and resort under the Department of Higher Education and Training. This sector accounts for more than 300 000 students in public FET Colleges (DHET 2014).

Despite the fact that legislations and policies have contributed to the increasing enrolment of learners with disabilities in post-school institutions, many challenges and barriers still exist in the educational environments (Biewera et al. 2015; Paul 2000; Fuller et al. 2004; Lawson et al. 2008). Education is the cornerstone both for personal and national developments (Lamichhanea and Kawakatsub 2015); but the management of disability in post-school education remains fragmented and lacking effective transformation to the extent that Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges in partic-

ular lack the capacity, or even the policies, to cater for the learners and staff with disabilities (DHET 2013). Hay et al. (2001) also point out that the lecturers' lack of knowledge on issues of inclusive education coupled with unpreparedness and under-resourced learning and teaching environments adversely impact on inclusion. In the light of the above, the study sought to explore the experiences of the role-players within a Further Education and Training College.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach using a phenomenological case study was adopted for this study. Since the study aimed at exploring lived experiences of the study subjects, this approach was deemed appropriate. Furthermore, employing a case study design allowed a systematic in-depth inquiry into the phenomenon of interest in a particular setting (Bromley 1991). Case study research is suitable in that the researcher intends to achieve a holistic understanding of how participants relate and interact with each other in a specific situation and how they make meaning of a phenomenon which is being studied.

The study targeted all role players in the learning environment at the Sekhukhume FET college. Non-probability purposive sampling was applied because the method allowed participants of interest to the researchers to be selected. A total of 11 participants comprising six lecturers, two members of the college management team, three learners including one with disabilities were recruited.

Data were collected from participants using unstructured interview with the aid of an audiotape. The main theme in the interview schedule revolves around "*educational inclusion and how it is lived and experienced*" by the different key players in the institution in question. Participation in this study was voluntary and all participants were requested to give informed consent before the study was conducted. Finally, all participants were assured of confidentiality of their responses and anonymity of their identities. Access to the study site was negotiated with the Campus Manager. The interview guide was piloted among some selected representative groups having similar characteristics as the target population. Secondly, the researchers took every step to ensure the trustworthiness as well. Data were analysed using themat-

ic content analysis (TCA) which is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data (Anderson 2007). This involved coding and categorizing in order to identify primary patterns and themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eleven participants were interviewed. Among them were three learners including one with disabilities, two members of the college management team and six lecturers.

Responses given by all the participants enabled the researchers to establish the following emerging theme/sub-themes relevant to research objectives (Table 1). These themes were a clear reflection of experiences and expression of sentiments of the participants pertaining to the phenomenon under study. The table gave a summary of the extent to which participants felt under each sub-theme.

Main Theme: Issues Related to Access and Equity

Disabled persons need training to merge them into an inclusive society (Marimuthu 2015). Access and equity are the main pillars of inclusive education. Access is a broad multi-dimensional term that requires an assessment of physical, financial, socio-psychological areas (WHO 2008). For a system to function inclusively, especially to meet the special needs of learners

with disabilities, provisions have to be made to cater for all on equal footing. According to Government Accountability Office (2009), institutions are required to provide equal access to education through academic adjustments and auxiliary aids and services. Issues raised by the participants pertaining to inclusive education in the study setting are presented and discussed under the four sub-themes below:

Sub-theme 1: Lack of Resources

In South Africa, the Education White Paper 6 of 2001 on *Special Needs Education and Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* emphasizes that learners with disabilities require special educational assistance in many areas in order to justify their total inclusion in any educational programmes (DoE 2001). The issue of educational inclusion revolves around the learner especially those requiring special needs to accomplish the educational outcomes. In the current study all the participants (learners, lecturers and members of the management) raised issues pertaining to poor resources by stating that they were adversely affected. Also, members of the management admitted that the institution lacked the resource capacity which negatively impacts on all learners, especially those with disabilities.

Undoubtedly, poor resources undermine effective implementation of inclusive education.

Table 1: Main theme and sub-themes emerging out of the interviews

Main theme participants	Issues related to access and equity			
	Sub-themes			
	1. Lack of resources	2. Inflexible curriculum	3. Lack of support	4. Stereotyping of disability
1. Participant 1(Learner with disabilities)	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”
2. Participant 2(Learner without disabilities)	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”
3. Participant 3(Learner without disabilities)	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”
4. Participant 4(Senior management)	“affected”			
5. Participant 5(Senior management)	“affected”			
6. Participant 6(Lecturer)	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”	
7. Participant 7(Lecturer)	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”	
8. Participant 8(Lecturer)	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”	
9. Participant 9(Lecturer)	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”	
10. Participant 10(Lecturer)	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”	
11. Participant 11(Lecturer)	“affected”	“affected”	“affected”	

For all learners to participate fully in all spheres of educational programmes in an institution requires adapting physical environments, infrastructure and providing assistive devices for special needs learners. To this end, Biewera et al. (2015) called for individualized support that can serve respective disability needs to bolster easy access and unhampered progression. For example, provision of railings in some of the pathways, ramps and lifts will facilitate easy access to places like the lecture venues, libraries, laboratories where all will be equally serviced. Though Brunton and Gibson (2009) argue that it is impossible to remove all imaginable barriers to study for all learners with disabilities, disability-user-friendly buildings, facilities, physical environment will make the learning environment least restrictive for all role players in the setting.

Sub-theme 2: Inflexible Curriculum

Flexible curriculum lies at the heart of inclusive education. According to DoE (2001), the need for inclusive education system arose after acknowledging that the curriculum and education system as a whole have generally failed to respond to the diverse needs of the learner population, resulting in massive numbers of drop-outs, push-outs, and failures. It also asserts that barriers to learning arise from within the various interlocking parts of the curriculum, such as:

- ♦ content of learning programmes,
- ♦ language and medium of learning and teaching,
- ♦ management and organisation of classrooms,
- ♦ teaching style and pace, time frames for completion of curricula,
- ♦ materials and equipment that are available, and assessment methods and techniques (DoE 2001:32).

Consistent with DoE (2001) assertion, both learners and lecturers in this study raised critical issues affecting them with regard to the curriculum. Some of the claims were: ... *“computer related subjects were a challenge”, “the curriculum not suitable for the blind students”, “disabled students were given equal amount of time-frame as the other students which becomes a challenge because the blind student has to request services of another student to assist in reading and writing”*. In a study involving nurse academics responsible for the management and/

or delivery of mental health nursing curriculum at 27 universities in 2013, Happella et al. (2015) found that most of the participants supported the innovative educational practice that requires a transformation in thinking and the concept of service user academics in the tertiary setting. This initiative can also be applauded in the current study setting.

In response to the question: *“why would you find it difficult teaching learners with disabilities?”*, lecturers (participants) indicated that they were not trained to teach learners with disabilities and had never received an in-service training that would assist them in teaching learners with special needs. On issues of institutional policies regarding inclusive educational practices, all the lecturers except one indicated that they do not know the institution's policies while the remaining lecturer was not sure.

Different views were expressed by lecturers on full integration of learners with disabilities; whilst some supported integration, others were either not sure or felt it was impossible. Such views need to be taken in the light of the huge responsibilities placed on lecturers who lack the necessary professional training to manage issues affecting different types of learners with individual educational needs. It can be inferred that whilst lecturers fail to manage diversity in their classes due to lack of training, the members of the management also indicated that they lack the knowledge regarding the type of assistive devices and adapted facilities that must be provided for needy learners. Addressing these issues pertaining to the curriculum, Save the Children (2002) cited in Samkange (2013) identified the following factors that can enhance curricular access and equity in an inclusive environment:

- ♦ learner-centred curriculum,
- ♦ flexible methods of teaching
- ♦ alternative methods of training and
- ♦ teachers' attitude

Sub-theme 3: Lack of Support

The findings from the study indicated that both learner and lecturer participants did not receive adequate support in order to participate fully in the setting. Other learner participants (non-disabled learners) expressed the view that learners with disabilities were not receiving enough support from the management of the

institution. The realization of inclusive education system greatly depends on a wide range of support for learners, staff and management in the learning environment. In line with this notion, Marimuthu (2015) and the DoE(2001) acknowledge that inclusive education needs support for all role player including learners, staffs, parents and communities. Alluding to this generally, WHO/World Bank (2011) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2011) posit that, for persons with disabilities, assistance and support, including special services or care givers are prerequisites for their full participation in society.

One of the claims made by the learner participants is that lecturers were not able to utilize any other teaching method to accommodate everyone in class. When needs are not adequately met and support is lacking, all role players whether with or without disabilities will be put under undue pressure. Support, whether physical in terms of adapting facilities and provision of learning/teaching materials or psychosocial in terms of requiring special professionals (psychologist, language interpreters, social workers etc.) can be costly. It therefore, requires the full involvement of the government and its departments if the inclusive system is to succeed.

Sub-theme 4: Stereo-typing of Disability in the Setting

From time immemorial, disability has been a phenomenon that incurred stigmatization, discrimination and negative stereotyping (United Kingdom Disabled Peoples' Council (UKDPC) 2011 cited in Tugli et al. 2013; Kenya Projects Organization (KENPRO) 2010). Though learners with disabilities in this study were viewed by non-disabled counterparts as being humble, respectful and doing all they can to achieve their dreams, a completely different picture was painted by the others. According to them, learners with disabilities were mocked and teased by some able-bodied students. In a similar study to explore the views of learners regarding the social and learning environment of learners with disabilities, Ramakuela and Maluleke (2011) found that the majority (80%) of learners with disabilities feel rejected by their fellow non-disabled learners, staff and the institution at large.

Though Biewera et al. (2015) in their investigation found that tertiary education is highly

socially selective for persons with disabilities in all the European countries, this does not need to be the case when social inclusion has now become a human rights issue. Therefore, inclusive education seeks to foster acceptance of all learners in a manner that learning needs are equally and equitably provided for the full participation of vulnerable people as well (DoE 2001). Office of Disability Employment Policy (2013 cited in Tugli et al. 2013) argues that the most pervasive negative attitude is focusing on a person's disability rather than on an individual's abilities that give rise to attitudinal barriers such as feeling of inferiority, pity, ignorance, stereotyping, denial and prejudice against people with disabilities. Instead of giving everyone a sense of belonging, mocking and teasing in the learning environment is a drawback to implementing inclusive education. In addition, such tendencies have the propensity of adversely the self-esteem and self-confidence of those learners with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

The study found that the institution in question lacked the resources and managerial capacity to implement inclusive educational programmes that will meet the needs of all shades of diverse groups of students in the institution in question. Equally critical issues that affect optimal operation in the institution also did surface among the findings. This includes poor managerial skills among the management team and lack of induction for the teaching staff, which can play key roles in the realization of inclusive education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusive education is a product of enabling environment for all categories of students as well as staffs and management. Against this background, this paper recommends that:

- ♦ adequate resources must be provided the adaptation of the physical environment including teaching and learning strategies.
- ♦ professional development of lecturers, capacitating the institutional management and putting monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be put in place to enhance and promote full integration and co-existence of everyone without prejudice or discrimination.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was qualitative in nature with its main focus on only one FET institution. Hence, the findings emanating from this study may not be generalized.

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