A Psycho-pedagogic Approach for Inclusive Classes in Disadvantaged Rural Primary Schools in South Africa: Advancing Teaching Practices

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ABSTRACT This paper focuses on pedagogic processes and dilemmas faced by teachers in inclusive classes with diverse learning barriers in South Africa. It also aimed at strengthening teaching practices and learning-support strategies (TPLSSs) which teachers use in inclusive classes (ICs) in disadvantaged, rural primary schools. There were 19 teachers, including inclusive classroom caregivers (ICCs) in 13 schools (n = 19, mean age = 45, males = 2, females = 17) who participated. A qualitative mode of inquiry was used together with a case-study approach as the research design. Data were thematically analyzed and revealed that learners experiencing barriers to learning (LEBTLs) were still marginalized and minimally-supported in the classroom context while teachers used unsuitable pedagogic approaches which were an indication of inadequate lesson planning. A pedagogic-inclusive approach was developed from the project and called the Triad Pedagogic Perspective (TPP) model.

INTRODUCTION

Research in South Africa indicates that the education system is in crisis with several factors such as school violence, teacher burn-out, HIV/AIDS, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy escalating in public schools (Buka and Molepo 2015). One other issue of concern is the indication of racial and cultural prejudice reported in schools and universities (Janssen and Molly 2014). In the light of the above circumstances in schools, where teachers and learners are exposed to unhealthy environments regarding safety and security, the question should be asked: How can teachers effectively teach and support learners who are psychologically in need of support (LePINS), especially in inclusive classes in poverty-stricken schools?

While grappling with a teacher-unfriendly and an ever-changing curriculum, South African teachers in most public schools face overcrowding and poor infrastructure with minimum support for improving their skills in handling inclusive classes (Donohue and Bornman 2014; Buka and Molepo 2015). Despite their willingness to develop skills in dealing with inclusive educa-tion (IE) approaches, teachers are faced with negatively-perceived programs to support them in order to improve their conditions in inclusive classes. Furthermore, research indicates that there is a need for new dimensions with regard to the IE as a discipline, in general, and IE pedagogy for the educational needs of LEBTLs/LePINS in inclusive classes in particular (MacLeskey et al. 2014; Nind 2005).

Research also shows that experts in IE teaching practices and learning support strategies agree that both LEBTLs and ordinary learners benefit in inclusive classes, if teachers have positive attitudes and confidence in their skills in the ICs (Sharma et al. 2013). To support the above, Turkish researchers in inclusive education state that teacher support in ICs results in increased individual attention and greater participation (Rakap and Kaczmarek 2010). However, IE researchers in the United Kingdom note that the role of teaching assistants (herein referred to as inclusive classroom caregivers [ICCs]) is not clear, despite their increased deployment to the ICs (Blatchford et al. 2009).

Teaching Practices and Strategies in Inclusive Classes

According to Bui et al. (2010:1), research "consistently demonstrates that the inclusion of students in general education classrooms" yields positive results. Studies carried out across Europe and Australia in the last 20 years show

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there are several teaching and learning strategies that were used in inclusive classes that illustrated positive results in terms of learner academic performance. It can be argued though those strategies utilize and consume more time than is generally allocated in educational policies of education departments (Cologon 2013). In an attempt therefore to simplify very complex phenomena of teaching in the context of IE, in this paper, the authors affirm Nind's (2005) view when she suggests a three-way perspective regarding pedagogical models. She maintains that curriculum and pedagogy need to be planned and implemented according to mainstream schools, special needs schools and inclusive curriculum perspectives.

Inclusive Education Contexts in South Africa

Since 1994 the South African education system has been unstable, has experienced drastic non-stop changes and has been vulnerable to draw-backs and doubt by stakeholders (Janssen and Molly 2014). The South African Department of Basic Education acknowledges that teachers are incompetent in terms of supporting LEBTLs in ICs (Department of Education 2008). Various factors have contributed to the above. Before 1994, for years, the education system was operated through discrimination, racism and economic disparity led by the white apartheid government (Donohue and Bornman 2014; Buka and Molepo 2015). While Black communities and their schools were overlooked and had poorly- trained teachers, white communities and their schools enjoyed the best facilities with highly-trained teachers. Special schools (special-needs education for white children) were provided with state-of-the-art facilities, experts and highly-skilled teachers while such schools for black children were few in proportion to their numbers with inferior equipment and poorly-skilled teachers (Department of Education [DOE] 2001). The above situation reflected macro exclusion where segregation, stigmatization were experienced by black or non-white children.

In an attempt to shift from macro exclusion, the new government that took over in 1994 focused on repealing legislative frameworks which had enslaved black communities in poverty and that dated far back to colonial times. As Sharma et al. (2013) point out, educational reforms and policies emphasized on the movement of learn-

ers from one school (Black) to another school (White). With the view to accelerate IE approaches, governments worldwide, including the South African government, established educational policies that supported IE advocacy (Buka and Molepo 2015; Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013).

Research indicates that less has been done in developing specific teaching approaches to deal with inclusive classes and consequently teachers are in a dilemma regarding learning-support strategies (MacLeskey et al. 2014; Donohue and Bornman 2014). After the introduction of an inclusive education legislative framework in 2001, which allowed learners from the then special schools to be admitted into mainstream schools (MSSs), teachers in MSSs found themselves lacking in skills required to support such learners, especially in disadvantaged, rural schools. The South African Ministry of Education simply failed to come up with appropriate and effective in-service teachers' training programs (Buka and Molepo 2015).

Over and above these constraints, environmental conditions under which teachers work are not helpful in terms of the acceleration of positive IE practices in schools. Recent research studies indicate that in disadvantaged rural schools, especially in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa (one of the poorest provinces), conditions are dire. Many schools are housed in inadequate buildings or structures and teachers are faced with overcrowded classes and no libraries while learners have minimal support from illiterate parents and demotivated teachers many of whom suffer from burn-out (Donohue and Bornman 2014).

Anti-social Teaching Practices

This research paper revealed that anti-social teaching practices such as micro exclusion and ableism (perceptional discrimination) were common. While LEBTLs/LePINS were there in an inclusive class in a mainstream school, they were classified and clustered in a corner together (Buka and Molepo 2015). This means they were experiencing segregation and stigmatization right inside a class meant for inclusion. Micro exclusion is therefore one of challenges facing inclusive education practitioners today and it cannot be condoned since it is against inclusive education practices (MacLeskey et al. 2014; Cologon 2013). The authors assume the same

stance against macro exclusion and ableism because inclusive education also relates to a human-rights and social-relations approach.

As LePINS were confined in a corner unattended (there were no ICCs) the teacher focused on the other members of the class while the LePNS were given books which were irrelevant to the lesson being conducted. These learners facing learning barriers were expected to adapt to the norms of the class unless removed to a specialized school environment or to hospitals to cure their conditions. According to Cologon (2013: 17), most teachers and the public still reflect this anti-social perception, ableism, and this call for help to promote social model of coping with LePINS.

It is with the above in mind that this article has been written. The researchers seek to introduce a psycho-pedagogic teaching model, which does not only promote a social approach but can also assist teachers in improving their teaching practices together with learner support strategies within the context of inclusive classes.

Objectives of the Study

This study investigated pedagogic processes and dilemmas faced by teachers in inclusive classes with diverse learning barriers with the aim of strengthening teaching practices and learning-support strategies for teachers (TPLSSs) in inclusive classes (ICs) in rural-disadvantaged primary schools. Five subsidiary questions led to five significant issues which informed the objectives of the study as follows: identifying learners' educational needs, identifying pedagogic models for ICs, investigating learning support strategies, exploring teachers' reflective practices and in *loco* support teachers get in ICs; however, this article focuses on TPLSSs engaged by teachers in ICs, especially in rural primary schools. Against the assumption that "higher teacher-child ratios" together with highly-trained teachers for special education in special classes yields better academic results, research shows that LEBTLs in mainstream schools "demonstrate better academic and vocational outcomes" than those in specialized environment (Cologon 2013: 24).

METHODS

A qualitative mode of inquiry was used and a case-study (multiple-case study which fenced 13 schools) approach as a research design was selected. Participants were purposively selected, interviewed and observed in two education districts. There was a sample of 19 teachers including inclusive classroom caregivers (ICCs) in 13 schools (n = 19, mean age = 45, males = 2, females = 17) in 1 province of South Africa, in disadvantaged, rural primary schools. A qualitative research approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Maree 2010).

Instruments

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews and classroom observations. About 26 classrooms were observed with 6 (2 resource schools and 4 mainstream schools) classrooms intensively studied 3 times each for 1-hour teaching period over a year. Video-tapes and voice recorders were also used during data collection. Semi-structured and open-ended questions on teaching experiences and attitudes or beliefs were posed to participants. Field notes strengthened and supplemented data at each site. For trustworthiness, data were verified with participants during and after the data-collection process (Maree 2010).

Data were thematically analyzed according to segmentation in which coding of information, categories and patterns led to the themes. As merging themes emanated from analyzed data, findings were developed from these (Maree 2010).

FINDINGS

Several themes emerged from data analyzed and were crystallized to findings which are presented as follows:

Teaching Practices and Learning-Support Strategies in ICs

This study found that teachers were left on their own; finding themselves confused and fumbling, they resorted to old-fashioned and inadequate teaching methods as they had minimal support from school-based support teams and district-based support teams. One participant complained, *"So many changes with this curriculum. You don't know what and how to teach. No good workshops. You are just confused in the classroom."* As far as teaching methods were

concerned, teachers used task-oriented peda-gogic (TOP) approaches which were neither ef-fective nor responsive to learners' needs. A teacher from a resource school (RS) remarked, *"I come from ordinary school, I was never trained to teach here but I use my common sense. Those inclusive education advisers can't help you."*

Lack of Teacher-support and Learner Marginalization

Most teachers had neither skills nor exper-tise required for learning-support strategies. This was coupled by absence of teacher-support staff (herein referred to as ICCs) engaged in ICs. In RSs each class had one ICC and, as one teacher pointed out, *"In Britain, a learner has about 6 hands to support including the teacher. I was there. Here you only have one assistant and expected to support all learners in the class-room in a period."* Teachers stumbled along and most of the time deviated from the main topic as they grappled with content and learners. Most learners were left out as teachers focused on a few. A teacher from a mainstream school (MS) said, when asked about learners in a corner who were neglected during tuition, *"Oh shame. They don't know why they are here. I don't want to bother them."*

Cellphones: A Classroom Disturbance

The teaching and learning process was of-ten interrupted by a teacher's cellphone ringing. The teacher would suddenly stop teaching and attend to a cellphone call. Some teachers left the class and went outside to have uninterrupted personal conversations on cellphones. When asked whether cellphones were not a distur-bance, one teacher in the RS remarked, *"One will always take a chance for a privilege as long as authorities were silent."*

DISCUSSION

As far as teaching models and learning-sup-port strategies are concerned, the study revealed that there were gaps that were identified both locally and internationally in the arena of inclu-sive education implementation, especially in the diverse classroom environment in most schools (Ahsan 2014). Micro exclusion and ableism in inclusive classes remain an existing challenge worldwide where LePINS are allowed in class-rooms but given less attention during tuition (MacLeskey et al. 2014; Cologon 2013). Fur-thermore, the research study revealed gaps in teaching practices, teacher support, skills and expertise on the part of teachers, in diverse or inclusive classes. There were also indications of inappropriate lesson planning. Such inade-quate approaches did not assist learners to suf-ficiently benefit from the processes of teaching and learning.

The findings confirm the views held by Geldenhuys and Wevers (2013) who point out that most teachers in the system were initially trained for mainstream or special education and not for an inclusive classroom environment. Buka and Molepo (2015) observed that in rural schools, teachers received minimal support from district-based support teams providing inappro-priate programs which were negatively perceived by teachers.

Findings also indicate niches for interven-tion programs in order to ameliorate the situa-tion. The issues of discrimination against, and exclusion and marginalization of LEBTLs in the ICs, may lead to the permanent loss of educa-tion opportunities for such learners and prolong their dependence on state grants. Socio-eco-nomic and socio-psychological aspects that surround learners (and schools) require intensi-fying the co-operation and incorporation of var-ious education stakeholders, including parents, into school programs to strengthen active part-nership (Cologon 2013; Cox-Petersen 2011).

The zeal or sense of commitment from teach-ers in their jobs or profession indicates areas of strengths which may be consolidated for pro-fessional development and proper skill acquisi-tion (MacLeskey et al. 2014; Donohue and Born-man 2014). However, school policy and moni-toring should discourage the use of cellphones during tuition unless it is used for learning and teaching purposes as an integral part of a les-son. The consequences of this mal-teaching practice impede actualization of basic learning outcomes (ABLOs). Such practices inhibit and compromise the process of learning or quality education. The study also revealed that LEBT-Ls were still marginalized and minimally support-ed in the classroom context even after 15 years of the adoption of the EWP6 policy document which is the inclusive education legislative frame-

work (Buka and Molepo 2015). In an attempt to change the status quo in inclusive classes and support teachers to advance their practices a new approached is advocated in the next section.

**Psycho-pedagogic Approach for Inclusive Education**

To address the confusion of teachers in ICs and to help fill some of the gaps identified, especially, mal-teaching practices in inclusive classes, this paper proposes a psycho-pedagogic approach, which is more classrooms oriented and focuses on the promotion of socio-psychological learning strategies. As their contribution to the existing body of knowledge the authors advocate for the psycho-pedagogic approach which is based on Nind's three-way perspective. Herein the model is also a three-dimensional teaching approach and is called a Triad Psycho-pedagogic Perspective (TPP) Model.

The TPP Model can be considered as new approach towards developing psycho-pedagogic practices in diverse classroom environments. As it focuses on strengthening both teaching practices and learning strategies, it directly addresses curriculum deficiencies through class-

room dynamics. This TPP model is another perspective to consider for enhancing IC teaching practices in order to promote IE pedagogy that focuses on learners' educational needs in an inclusive class environment.

As the TTP inherits its flexibility from inclusive-education-based curriculum and pedagogy (IECP), on which it is based, teachers are able to innovate and incorporate other relevant teaching methods to advance teaching and learning (T & L) processes. Teachers' confidence can therefore be enhanced as the TTP Model accommodates teachers' innovations or re-creation. In the TPP Model, the IECP lends itself as a new coming, flexible, pedagogical model which has not evolved from the two pre-existing models, namely, mainstream-curriculum pedagogy (MCP) and special-needs-curriculum pedagogy (SNCP) but exists as a result of paradigmatic shifts; for example, from general education to inclusion (Fig. 1).

This inclusively-inclined approach will only use those elements that are deemed to be appropriate in particular circumstances for specific lessons in order to positively impact on, and respond to learners' educational needs from both MCP and SNCP approaches. The three pillars of
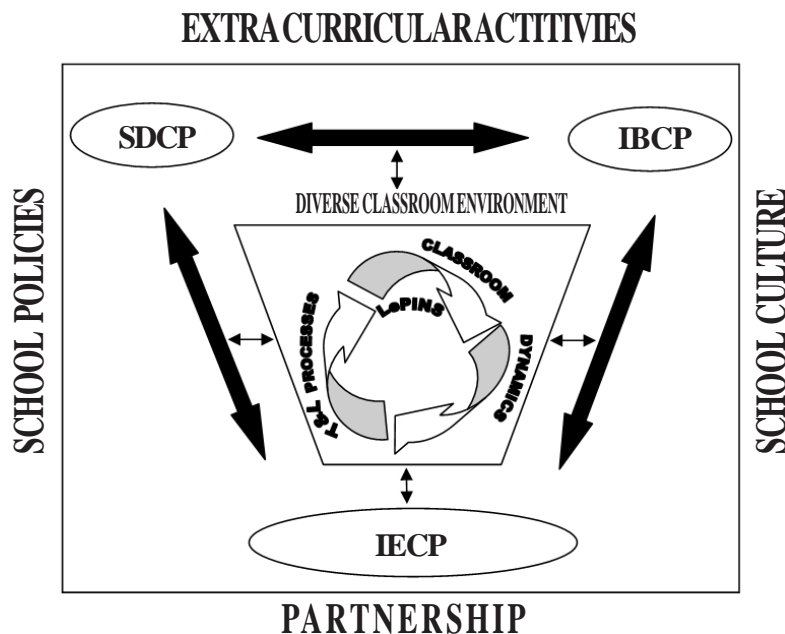
Fig.1. The Triad Psycho-pedagogic perspective model
Source: Buka and Molepo

the TPP Model do not intertwine but relate and seek the harmonious cooperation of each other. The first cooperative is socio-dynamic-based curriculum and pedagogy (SDCP) which promotes class communities and social cohesion. The second is individual-based curriculum and pedagogy (IBCP) that acknowledges individuality in terms of lesson grasping or learning-barrier disparity within community members. The third pillar is the IECP, which can be seen as the base and hearth of all processes in an inclusive class environment. The IECP seeks to generate power to advance strides towards inclusive education approaches in the classroom. All these curricular and pedagogical approaches constantly interchange and borrow common aspects from each other but strive to ultimately meet IE principles for equal and quality education in a classroom setting. IECP can synthesize such qualities from other models and adapt them to meet learners' educational needs. In this paper, we propose IECP to be seen as a theoretical framework that underpins all teaching approaches and that can be used in diverse classroom environments (DCEs). Teaching practices in DCEs should focus on socio-psychological and psycho-pedagogic approaches in mainstream schools with an adapted curriculum for learners in a class so as to meet all learners' educational needs.

Advantage of TPP Model

This TPP model can assist in addressing the existing inadequate teaching practices among teachers in an inclusive/diverse class environment and help to improve their teaching methods. When using the TPP the educational needs of LEBTLs can be addressed while at the same time ordinary learners can also be catered for. One of the advantages of the TPP model is that it embraces curriculum adaptation that focuses on addressing specific learning barriers in a diverse class.

The TTP model owes its uniqueness and difference (from other existing pedagogic models) to its inclusive class-based inclination. It also derives its strength from incorporating major inclusive models such as transformative, socially-interactive and differentiation pedagogic models. One other advancement incorporated is the consideration of individual education programs (IEP). This pedagogic model will require the teach-

er to include in his/her planning, in advance, all three components (pillars) of the model.

The TTP model differs from Nind's Model in that it seeks to address curriculum-pedagogic challenges experienced in inclusive classes with all its three components while Nind's three-way approach is broader and extends to mainstream and special schools separately. The major difference between these two models can therefore be captured or simplified in this way: The TPP model is a class-based pedagogic approach while Nind's can be said to be a strategically-based approach (referring to mainstream and special schools as independent entities). The TTP approach will particularly attempt to address daily challenges teachers face in the classroom as they interact with diverse learners.

TPP Model Operational Approach

When one considers teaching models for IE, especially in an inclusive-class or diverse-class environment, one has to think of the TPP Model. The first approach is the socio-dynamic-based curriculum and pedagogy (SDCP) for diverse class environment. The SDCP perspective combines three approaches in one, namely, differentiation and a transformative and social approach. The second is individual-based curriculum and pedagogy (IBCP) for individuals in inclusive classes that may need the individual education programs (IEP). The third approach is the inclusive-education-based curriculum and pedagogy (IECP); the latter seeks to combine qualities from the other approaches, especially with regard to mainstream and special-needs approaches. The extent of the veracity and effectiveness, or success of IECP will depend on teachers' innovations, confirmation of IE theories, teachers' vision, and the support they get from other inclusive education stakeholders.

One of the most significant advantages of the TPP Model is its ability to address and encourage inclusion in the classroom setting. The principles and philosophy of social-constructivism are embraced in this model as learners interact in communities. Cooperation, sympathy, comradeship, interpersonal skills, empathy, compromise, self-esteem, social skills and team spirit are all simultaneously-cultivated values. The disadvantage of a TPP approach is that it relies on the innovative skills of the teacher who needs to select relevant learning cooperatives that in-

volve maximum learner participation. Figure 1 illustrates the TTP approach system as discussed above.

CONCLUSION

The processes, methods, strategies of teaching and learning support to better meet diverse educational needs of various learners in different types of classes will remain both demanding and a challenge. Both teachers and learners need to be empowered and supported in classrooms. There might be many barriers and challenges regarding IE but it is also imperative to take a step forward in an attempt to limit them. A classroom seems to be an appropriate place to start through innovative teaching methods such as TTP.

Although the TTP model is flexible and teacher friendly, workshops are needed to orientate or obtain the buy-in of teachers. This may help to change the mindset of teachers who have negative attitude towards IE and its programs. The use of TPP not only provides teachers with a hands-on teaching approach that replaces outdated models teachers use, but learners too might engage in maximum participation that ensures their expectations or educational needs are met.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Specific programs that focus on the professional development of teachers regarding theory and philosophy of IE should be simplified for effectively implemented to empower teachers' conceptual knowledge on IE approaches. Schools need to establish and monitor policies that control class disturbances such as the use of cellphones in ICs and other classrooms. The Ministries of Education, universities, district offices and schools need to forge or establish meaningful partnerships that work for schools with various stakeholders. For example, some partners may offer to and/or pay for teachers' training costs to acquire certain skills on inclusive education. Programs to enhance research innovations on IE need to be intensified so as to encourage universities, business, schools, government and others to participate jointly. Training at tertiary level needs to include the enhanc-

ing of skills with regard to IE so that teachers entering the profession are well prepared for ICs. The TPP Model should be used as an example of innovative teaching in diverse or inclusive classes and workshops.

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