

An Exploration of the 4th Year Student Readiness in Teaching in Inclusive Schools: A Case Study of Early Childhood Development Curriculum at University of Kwa-Zulu Natal-Edgewood Campus

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KEYWORDS Inclusive Education. Multicultural Education. Early Childhood Development. Readiness

ABSTRACT This paper aims at determining how ready the pre-service exit teachers are and how well the curriculum prepares the students for the classroom implementation and practice of inclusive education. Data was collected using semi structured interviews from a purposive sample and data analysis was informed by social constructivism and eco-systemic theory which helped to understand how individuals actively construct and understand their realities. In doing so, there is need to explore participants' readiness to teach in an inclusive classroom. The paper revealed that Early Childhood Development (ECD) curriculum of the University should be restructured to develop, enhance as well as prepare pre-service exit teachers for inclusive environments. Based on these findings recommendations were made on the need of the ECD teacher training curriculum in fostering competence to student teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

South African education system in 1994 became a new frame of reference although there is still slow progress towards the implementation of inclusive education. Literally, inclusive education system advocates and caters for all excluded children who are not supported to achieve their potentials in schools to have the right to a full range educational opportunities irrespective of their differences. Inclusion in South Africa recognizes that every child can learn and belongs in the mainstream of both school and community life (Yssel et al. 2007). For a successful inclusive practice, teachers are the key role players and their preparation and development towards its implementation and acceptance in schools is highly needed. However in training teachers, how and what knowledge pre-service teachers are equipped with within their teacher training institutions to become an inclusive teacher becomes of interest to stakeholders. This has lead researchers such as Kraska and Boyle (2014), Gokdere (2012) and Unianu (2012), whose interest is on inclusion to examine pre-teachers attitudes, concerns, willingness and even interactions towards inclusive education.

Studies on inclusion and its practices are fast becoming a global phenomenon. Unianu (2012) highlights on how most studies are showing

concerns on inclusive practices in school context. This he further argues that there should be demands on all educational systems which are preparing teachers for tomorrow to make a bigger investment on contents of their curriculum in relation to inclusion rather than integration of all learners. This is to say there is need to promote through the pre-service teachers what inclusion is, know how to make inclusion work and to promote further the principles of inclusion by teaching and equipping these students on its knowledge as well as its application.

Promoting inclusive education practices is about reforming the education system, for example according to Brown et al. (2011) there is need for teachers to accept the responsibility for creating classrooms and schools in which all children can learn and feel that they belong as well as be ensured of quality education. However, if and when every child is included and given an equally opportunity there is a change especially in the happenings around the child for example a lifelong education leading to an escape of the inequalities and prejudices leading to improved way of life and lack of denial of their human rights (Fourie 2014). With the move towards inclusive education and effective teaching and learning teachers if committed are the keys to successful practices. Implying that within the training of pre-service teachers, a look

into their teacher education curriculum to adjust and accommodate specific changes to teaching and learning practices leading to inclusive education is needed.

Literature Review

Although inclusive education and practices aims at the needs of all learners at different levels by welcoming different diversity, addressing barriers to learning and fostering maximum participation there is need for institutions which engages in training pre-service teachers to consider involving inclusive education in their curriculum. According to Unianu (2012) there is need to expose pre-service teachers to inclusive practices and experiences during their training in higher education to help boost their confidence towards their readiness to be inclusive in their practices. This is supported by Al Zyoudi et al. (2011) findings, that pre-service teachers have more positive attitudes towards different learners when they have had additional training and knowledge of inclusion.

These trainings according to Oswald and Swart (2011) will aid a better inclusion and achievement in the classroom. It is important that these trainings, at higher education environment on pre service teachers will provide training to enhance teachers with knowledge of different learning needs, disabilities, skills development, and language proficiency among others.

The above mentioned will develop a wealth of knowledge and show how effective pre service teacher's skills and training will become, which will enable them to combat or face their fears of inclusive practices. These trainings will also be able to provide enough avenues and opportunities for experiencing and practicing the acquired content knowledge in an inclusive classroom before the end of their teaching training programs. However, the pre service teacher's exposures to different learning needs will to an extent determine how well they can work as an inclusive teacher or in schools irrespective of learner's race, religion, gender, socio-economic status, ability, geographic regions and culture. This is because inclusion requires teachers to accept the responsibility for creating schools in which all children can learn and feel like they belong (Rouse 2010; Florian and Rouse 2010).

The shift to an inclusive education system according to Oswald and Swart (2011) implied that teachers have been confronted with new policies which require a new mind set, attitudes and practice, thereby making them the most influential resources for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Teacher education has been restructured in line with policy and structural innovations envisaged for post-apartheid South African education system, these institutions are now required to ensure that pre-service teachers during training are competent to cater for the needs of an increasing range of diverse learners.

In South Africa, educators who were trained pre-1994 were trained in a dual system of teacher education which was separated along the lines of mainstream and special education. There is an urgent desire and need for these educators to update their knowledge to be in line with the aims of education.

Although Engelbrecht (2006) argued that lack of effective preparation of teachers to accommodate individual needs in their classrooms brings about challenges to the implementation of inclusive education, studies have investigated and found that exposing pre-service teachers to inclusion enhances their attitudes within the classroom. What this might mean is that the success of inclusive education hinges on the effective preparedness of teachers. However Bhengu (2006) opined that the level of preparedness of teachers might determine their degree of acceptance and lead to adequate efficiency in the implementation of inclusive education. Further, Bhengu (2006) suggested that some teachers who are exposed to inclusive education during teacher training still felt incompetent due to lack of teaching facilities and resources. Lack of facilities and resources has been hiccups for quality teaching and learning within urban schools in South Africa.

The training of ECD teachers in higher education necessitates a curriculum that will expose these pre-service educators to an adequate orientation, training and development to become effective teachers in the future. The impact of an inclusive led curriculum of ECD teachers reflects on the field experiences of the pre-service teachers who are equipped further with the necessary skills, needed to cope with the learners involved. Due to historical neglect, the ECD sector of the education system is faced with numerous chal-

lenges, therefore an effective training of ECD teachers within inclusive principles and commitment from trained teachers to their learners will benefit every child by contributing to the building of his/her future despite challenges faced in ECD phase of education.

Inclusive Education

Globally, inclusion is an educational practice based on a notion of social justice that advocates access to equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of the presence of a disability. With the global demands of inclusion comes the national demands of Inclusive Education, in South Africa Education White Paper 6 Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, arose out of the need for changes to be made to the provision of education and training so that it is responsive and sensitive to the diverse range of learning needs (EDWP 6 2001). To build an inclusive education system according to Howell and Lazarus (2008) required changes to the way in which people understand, conceptualize, explain and thus respond to different learning needs within the learner population. This can be done according to Al Zyoudi et al. (2011) by constantly aiming to meet the needs of all learners while addressing barriers to learning, welcoming diversity, fostering maximum participation by all in the culture of the school as well as a vehicle for redressing the imbalances created by the previous education system (Daniels 2010).

Inclusive education can broadly be conceptualized as an education system that accommodates all learners' needs, by acknowledging the barriers faced by the learners and meeting these needs as to ensure effective learning for all (Stofile and Green 2007). Addressing barriers in education will take time and effort at different level as there is need for acceptance of differences by different stakeholders. Further, these barriers can first be broken when teachers begin to feel comfortable with it and see it as more of a challenge than a problem. What this might mean is that pre-service teachers' training institutions need to infuse within their curriculum an in-depth knowledge of inclusive education.

Challenges in Teaching Early Childhood Development (ECD) Phase

In South Africa, 'Early Childhood Development is an umbrella term that applies to the pro-

cess in which children, from birth to at least nine years of age, grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially' (Parliamentary Liaison Office 2012; Storbeck and Moodley 2011; UNICEF 2014). Several studies for example Preston et al. (2012) and Kartal (2007) opined that ECD education services are interventions that aim to support the cognitive, emotional, physical and social development of children before the age of formal schooling.

Studies have reported that there is a huge gap in ECD expectations, provision and delivery. This is as a result of issues faced by facilities for example lack of professionalism, lack of qualification, inadequate support needed by the teachers, lack of resources, lack of parental involvement, language disparity, social-economic factors, racial differences, negative attitudes of teachers, lack of morale among others (Harwood et al. 2012; Preston et al. 2012; Kartal 2007; Akinbote 2007; Ejieh 2006). Despite these situations teachers are expected to be competent experts to handle different situation in early childhood education of learners. However, quality trained ECD teacher is required to support in provision of quality early childhood care and education.

Further, there is a growing migration of people from countries around South Africa which already have history of multi-racial challenges within schools as well as the learners that are enrolled. Therefore it is important that at teacher training institutions pre-service teachers are trained and exposed to teach children from different racial/ethnic, cultural, language, or socio-economic backgrounds (Oswald and Swart 2011). This led studies by Forlin et al. (2009), Akinbote (2007) and Ejieh (2006) to propose that pre-service teacher education trainings must attend to the changing needs and demands of children as well as the society by being in tune with changes and interactions within all the systems as well as enhancing their readiness.

Theoretical Framework

Eco-systemic theory integrates both ecological and systems theories as one theory (Donald et al. 2010). Ecological theory is based on the interdependence between different organisms and their physical environments, these relationships between the organisms are seen holistically as every part is as important as another. System theory states that in order to understand

the whole, we need to examine the relationship between all the parts of the system. By implication, this theory sees different levels and groups of people as interactive systems where the functioning of the whole is dependent on the interaction between all parts. The eco-systemic perspective, according to Kalenga (2010), is a situation where every individual and or groups are linked in dynamic, interdependence and in any form of relationship which might occur at any level. The levels the individual finds himself or herself includes the school, community, family and the society at large. This theory emphasis the need of the interaction and effects of the different systems an individual finds himself which determines or influences their survival.

Objectives

The training of pre-service teachers in higher education is important as their exposure and pre-experiences to inclusive practice will aid to enhance their readiness to work as inclusive teachers in inclusive schools. The paper aims to ascertain how ready these pre-service teachers are to work as an inclusive teacher. Although their readiness to practice inclusive education might be determinant on the content of their teacher education curriculum with regards to inclusion, this paper is also set to explore; how well the ECD curriculum of the institution prepare the pre-exit teachers for the challenges within the ECD classroom and what the ECD curriculum contain about inclusive education? These questions and answers could have an important impact on how the teacher education training curriculum of this institution can be structured to promote the application of inclusive principles and practices within the pre-service teachers.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative method of data collection. Supporting this design, Creswell (2012), indicated that qualitative design is more descriptive, holistic, explorative and contextual in its nature and aims to produce rich description of investigated phenomena. It is this manner that the researchers acquires knowledge about the paper based on multiple meanings the participants attach on the subject. The context in which this study was conducted, was within the ECD pre-exit teachers (4th year). Six students

who were registered students of the University were selected using purposive sampling. The data collection method used was semi-structured interview. This method was employed to access the student teachers understanding of inclusive education, whether they are aware on its principals and its application as well as how these knowledge enhances their readiness within school and classroom situation as an inclusive teacher. Data analysis in a qualitative research is certainly interpretive, hence the analysis is less a completely accurate representation but more of a reflexive reactive interaction between the researcher and the de-contextualized data are already interpretation of a social encounter (Cohen et al. 2011). Data generated from this paper was analyzed thematically in order to make sense of the knowledge generated from this paper.

Eco-systemic and social constructive theory were used as a lens to understand pre-service teachers readiness to inclusive practices. Social constructivism as a theory of learning spearheaded by Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (McMahon 2007). Kukla (2000) argued that social constructivism believes that reality is constructed through human activity as knowledge is a human product which is socially and culturally constructed whereby an individual creates meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in. Furthermore, McMahon (2007) highlighted the importance of learning to be viewed as a social process as it does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviors that are shaped by external forces. This implies that meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities.

RESULTS

Most studies on inclusive education, its principles and practices advocates for an adoption of a positive attitude from all stakeholders involved. On analyzing interview transcripts the following broad themes emerged.

Expectations of their Training

There is an expectation of a well-structured curriculum content that will speak to inclusive

practices, not being exposed to these knowledge brought about disappointments. These they believed would have contributed to their training especially in terms of communication and exposure to what they were supposed to know and do in terms of classroom challenges.

All participants indicated that:

"I expected a lot of inclusive education material in our curriculum content, but it is scattered all over in bits and pieces in different modules, and it is not sufficient."

Language of Teaching and Learning

South Africa is a multi-lingual country; language difference is much evident in the heterogeneous population. However, it is a challenge in the classrooms.

Hamid indicated:

"Knowing that we are going to become the educators in the schools whereby the foundation of our learners are somehow dependent on our abilities, I felt it was important the school curriculum would have accommodated different languages in our training having in mind that this is a multi-related nation."

Exposure to Diverse Learners and Special Education in Teacher Training

No knowledge they say is a waste, as that knowledge which do not seem to be useful now can become useful in the future. Being aware and having knowledge of different situations that can be faced in the classroom is better than not having an idea of what one can face in a classroom situation.

Hamid stated:

"But part of our curriculum breakdown should have been dealing with special needs education and even a compulsory teaching practice at a special school."

Angela indicated:

"Having to have had special educational need/learners as a module would have been good. Whereby in a great detail it will inform us on different types of barriers to learning, how to identify them and what to do about it would have made a whole lot of difference."

Intense Exposure to Inclusive and Multicultural Education

In terms of teacher training, they are areas that these pre-service teachers felt the need for

adjustments which would have equipped them better for their training as teachers. In other words curriculum for the teacher training should have accommodated in-depth training and exposure of inclusive and multicultural education.

Angela stated:

"Inclusive education and what it is in terms of culture, religion, social status, abilities and others should stand alone in the teaching syllabus in order to emphasize the importance more."

Afonri said:

"I strongly believe that our degree curriculum is incomplete without us experiencing the basics of differences in South Africa. I mean since South Africa is a multi-nation with regards to language, culture, religion, race among others and the classroom is somehow a place where you can experience this well. So I feel that a lot should be invested on teachers about inclusive and multi-cultural education system."

DISCUSSION

Exposure to practical and hands-on what teaching entails during training of pre-service teachers equipped them with the realities of school context and its challenges. Although most teacher education curriculum equips pre-service teachers with knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to work as a teacher, these pre-service teachers expects to be equipped with specific knowledge to enable them to include all learners irrespective of their differences. This is in line with the findings of Unianu (2012) who argued that there is need for all educational system preparing teachers for tomorrow to make a bigger investment on inclusion focusing on equipping its students with skills and experiences around it. Also Fourie (2014) suggested that when much is invested in teacher education especially within the ECD practitioners a lot more will be invested in the future of the societies. Further these expectations of how and what the pre-service training should contain implied that pre-service teachers have an idea of what could be done differently in their teacher training services and field experiences to improve their teaching methods. For instance the view that if they were exposed to a type of training which accommodates different individuals in terms of culture, beliefs, gender, race among oth-

ers they will be better prepared from their training; having in mind that present day classrooms are more diverse. This is in line with Cambourne (2002) and Male (2011), who reported that the major concern of the participants studied was the dissatisfaction with their pre-service education and they do not poses what they deem to be the essential training competencies to solve the challenges they are confronted with in the classrooms. A project initiated by Inclusive Education South Africa (2014) found that there is need for center based ECD practitioners to be trained in inclusion due to the fact that they lack necessary skills for early identification and intervention for young children experiencing barriers to learning and development. Studies done by Brown et al. (2011), and Spinthourakis (2007) supported this by suggesting that teacher education has the responsibility to prepare pre-service teachers to effectively serve students, regardless of their differences, backgrounds, experiences and areas of diversity. This implies that if teachers will be positive agents of change and good advocates of inclusive education there is need for specific skills and knowledge in respect to cultural diversity and multiculturalism to be implemented at their pre-service training education. Further, there is a general acceptance that teacher's attitudes and expectations impact significantly upon learners educational outcomes (Male 2010).

Multicultural education is important for pre-service teacher readiness because if implemented in pre-service teacher training it will help ensure that these pre-service teachers will be equipped with cultural knowledge of different groups within their context and will address the beliefs and attitudes of pre-service teacher. Further, multicultural education would help in teacher training to expose the students on the existence of many cultures South Africa. Also of note is the language student teachers acquire during their trainings to be in line with the official languages that is been recognized in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

There is need to revamp the ECD curriculum content that will relate to inclusive and multicultural education in order to improve, enhance and aid pre-service teachers readiness to teacher in schools. This paper argued for teacher training institutions in South Africa to consider the need

for university graduates specializing in inclusive and multicultural education at undergraduate's level leading to the new teachers having more confidence when they begin their new jobs. Although South Africa remains divided with language and culture, a move in this direction will increase an embrace to all cultures during teacher training as well as improved understanding and dealings with different learners in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper suggests that higher institutions of learning in South Africa should consider incorporating inclusive and multicultural education as a specialization in their teacher training institutions curriculum.

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Paper received for publication on February 2015
Paper accepted for publication on November 2016