

Inclusive Classrooms: An Ecosystemic Perspective

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ABSTRACT This paper explores various aspects of learning in inclusive classrooms from an ecosystemic perspective. One purpose of including learners with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, as opposed to segregating them in special educational classrooms, is to help all learners (learners with and without disabilities) learn to live, work and play together, so that eventually they can successfully live, work and be together in the community as adults. Inclusion is a shift away from separate education that encouraged separate relations between people with and without disabilities. People with disabilities were viewed with contempt, but inclusive education encourages us to look beyond the disability and concentrate on who that person is and what they can do. Therefore, we argue that over and above the fact that inclusive education is about social justice where every individual is seen as an equal member and partner, individuals occupy spaces deserving of mutual and reciprocal co-existence in the creation and perpetuation of sustainable learning. Affording equal opportunities for everyone in society is seen as a moral right. Each person's potential has to be tapped into and developed, regardless of their disabilities or abilities. Differentiation in society should not be encouraged, but diversity has to be celebrated and accommodated. In this paper, we argue that learning in inclusive classrooms suggests the need for effective, collaborative, collegial, cohesive and well-coordinated partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive Education (IE) is understood as a philosophy supporting and celebrating diversity in its broadest sense (Kugelmass 2004). DNE (1997a) further reiterates that, inclusive education entails a learning environment that promotes the full, personal, academic and professional development of all learners irrespective of race, class, gender, disability, religion, culture, sexual preference, learning styles and language. Beckett (2008) and Forlin (2010), on the other hand states that inclusive education should be viewed as being founded upon a moral position, which values and respects every individual and which welcomes diversity as a rich learning resource. IE is a system of education that functions from the human rights perspective, where every individual has an equal right to education and educational support where and when needed. The broad philosophy of education has an implication for

schools or the way schools are run. Schools have to become inclusive so that all learners can have access to education. IE appeals to the morals of individuals to treat each person equally and respectfully. Learning in an inclusive education system will encourage acceptance and help build more meaningful relations among learners of differing abilities. Classrooms are more compact and as a result, relations are easily forged due to the close interaction of learners and their teachers (Estell et al. 2008).

According to Farrel (2000), there are two arguments for inclusive education. One argument is socio-political, which states that inclusion is a matter of human rights. The second one is empirical, which is based on the evidence gathered on the practice of inclusion. The empirical argument is based on the facts collected about the effects of inclusion on children with and without disabilities. These views suggest that it is a human right to allow children full participation in social life through school. Practice will, however, inform us of the benefits accrued both to learners with and without disabilities, teachers and other stakeholders. Conclusions about the benefits or lack thereof, of the implementation of IE, cannot be drawn unless research has been undertaken to study its impact. On the contrary, Beckett (2008) states that there is wealth of evidence suggesting

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that, in reality, education sometimes plays a somewhat disturbing role: actually perpetuating the inequalities that exist within society, be they inequalities associated with gender, ethnicity, class or disability (Deem 1981; Crozier 2005; Wheelahan 2007; Gerwitz 1996; Norwich 2002, cited in Beckett 2008). IE aims at removing these inequalities which are usually deep-seated in societies. It will take much more than placement of learners with disabilities/special needs in mainstream schools to bridge the gap of existing inequalities in our societies.

It is, however, true that education plays a major role in educating our children and hence, the whole society (ecosystem). What remains is whether teaching learners with different abilities in one education system is feasible. Implementation that is not well carried out will result in perpetuation of the inequalities that exist in society. If teachers are not properly trained they may not be able to accommodate diversity; then many learners who need support in education will be shorthanded. On the other hand, there will be a lot of learners in classes, which means teachers are not going to be able to reach everyone and most of the learners may drop out of school. This will not be because they failed, but because the system failed them. Cigman (2007) sums up the issue of inefficiency and ill-preparedness of the education system by stating that the prospect of the general education system being geared up in terms of staff, expertise and facilities to cater for every kind of disability as an integral part of its provision is something of a utopian ideal. Lack of facilities and expertise is a reality for developing countries in particular, which do not have a lot of experts and facilities that would help make the implementation of IE a success (Johnstone and Chapman 2009; Pillay and Terlizzi 2009).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Inclusive schools are designed to secure children's basic human right to an individually, culturally and developmentally appropriate education and to eliminate social exclusion (Kugelmass 2004). These schools should also be welcoming institutions that are concerned about the well-being of all learners (Alur 2008; Nind et al. 2003). Therefore, inclusive schools are geared towards the recognition and response to the diverse needs of the learner population. Stainback and Stainback (1996) state that an inclusive school

is one that educates learners in the mainstream... providing them with appropriate educational programs that are challenging yet geared to their capabilities and the needs as well as any support and assistance they and/or their teachers may need to be successful in the mainstream. Sands et al. (2000) have a slightly different point of view by stating that 'inclusive school communities are ecosystems in which macro-features like building-level supports influence how classroom supports are organised. Classroom supports, in turn, affect the kinds of individual support strategies that are selected'. Several changes take place in order for schools to become inclusive in every sense. These changes within the school will encourage the changes in the classrooms, outside the classrooms as well as at home and in the wider society (appealing to different levels of the human ecosystem).

It is, therefore, clear from the above postulations that an inclusive school is one that takes into account the basic right of every individual to access education in an accepting and non-discriminatory environment. The basic founding principle of inclusive schools is the eradication of social exclusion that begins at the school level and is expected to overflow into the wider society. Engaging learners with and without obvious disabilities in a single education system is in line with the ecosystemic framework where learners as a community value one another and they become valued members of their families and communities. The ecosystemic framework is defined as a blend of ecological and systems theory views of human interaction between individuals and between different levels of the social context (Donald et al. 2010; Hay 2002:2; Kalenga and Fourie 2011). It is a framework which explains the links between the individual and his or her social context. It also helps us to understand the person-environment relationship and the theoretical perspectives that support it. The perspective shows how individuals and groups at different levels of the social context are linked in interdependent and interacting relationships. Engelbrecht et al. (1999:4-5) argue that values, perceptions and actions of individual people, including teachers, parent, learners and others are difficult to understand if they divorced from the social context in which they occur. The authors also point out those different levels of systems in the whole social context influence one another in a continuous process of dynamic balance,

tension and interplay and that systems and subsystems also interact with other systems, shaping and limiting each other.

An inclusive school also provides a platform for support to the learner population as well as teachers. An inclusive school supports and views diversity as important and necessary to building an inclusive society. Thomas and Loxley (2007) succinctly state that “if schools... are to be accorded the role of ‘primary change agents’ in bringing about inclusion, then clearly attention needs to be paid to the processes involved in introducing new policy arrangements. Defining policy is difficult. On one level, it can be viewed in simple terms as representing normative guidelines for action; that is, it sets out how things should be done. On another level, policy can be part of an institution’s ‘oral’ tradition-tacitly understood, but having no textual equivalent”.

PARTNERSHIPS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

All stakeholders have to be properly informed of the changes in order to make inclusion a success. Traditionally, discussions of important school outcomes have been conducted in private by school administrators, curriculum specialists and other ‘experts’. In contrast, in inclusive school communities, children, youths and their families, community members all participate in these important decisions along with school professionals and support personnel (Sands et al. 2000). The needs and interests of the learners inform policy. Professionals, like psychologists and social workers, have different roles, because they now have to listen to the views of other people and they do not have the last say. This partnership also ensures that inclusion spills from individuals to classrooms, from classrooms to the playground, from the playground to the entire school and then from the school to families and the entire community.

Parents

Parents are also given a major role to play. Instead of sitting on the sidelines and being called to school to be informed of changes, they actually participate in decision-making that concerns making changes. Parents are to be involved in aspects of school, such as the assessment of

their own children. They are normally very observant of their children’s performance and schools often tell rather than ask parents about their children’s performance (Engelbrecht et al. 2004). Parents also have a right to be notified about anything that might concern the identification, evaluation or placement for educational purposes of their children. They can also request an independent evaluation to be done for their children. Parents can also provide essential information to the multidisciplinary team that assists in the development of an appropriate and a high-quality educational programme (Vaughn et al. 2007).

Parents play an important role as mediators towards the school, by giving information and resolving problems when teachers/learners do not understand their child’s needs (Lightfoot et al. 1999). Some of the problem behaviours that manifest in the school environment emanate from the home and it is only the parent who can inform the schools about the nature of the problem. Parents should not just be called when there are problems but, should take an active role in preventing problems in the school. Some might argue that this is not feasible. Teachers are very much used to their own space in teaching and having to accommodate the views of others may seem an insurmountable task. One may also inquire when time would be found for this co-operation; what with working parents and their busy lifestyles. Many schools claim to involve parents but they mostly just pay lip service (Engelbrecht et al. 2004). Vaughn et al. (2007) and Downing (2008) are also of the view that parent-teacher collaborative practices are not as comprehensive as they could be.

Other professionals, like psychologists and other therapists are used to their own offices and being consulted when there are problems. In inclusive education, the expectation is that all professionals will work together in a collaborative partnership where there are no hierarchies. Co-operation, then means that there has to be compromise from all partners so that they can work towards a common goal. Co-operation may, however, appear impossible, since others may feel superior to others and this collaboration will be about whose last word it will be. It will take some time getting used to working with one another. In schools, parents fear approaching their children’s teachers and psychologists and therapists may be most feared both by parents

and teachers alike, as they are considered to be far too well-educated than ordinary folk. This fear makes for an uneasy working relationship which might not benefit learners. Careful planning will therefore be required to ensure that all partners work together in a collaborative partnership.

Support Services

For a school to be inclusive, learners who need support for effective learning should be given such support. Support can be in the form of personnel (counsellors, psychologists and occupational therapists), accommodations to the learning environment (extra time for class work or tests, seating arrangements). DeJong (2000), Engelbrecht (2004) as well as Lazarus and Lomofsky (2001) attest that in order to succeed, an inclusive education system which accommodates all learners and identifies and addresses the barriers to learning, development and participation needs a strong and efficient education support service to be developed on a country wide and equitable basis. Availability of support will ensure that all learners are afforded the best possible means to quality education in a supportive school environment. Supporting learners will ensure that they are better adjusted individuals in relation to their peers at school and at home, their teachers and other community members.

Teachers also need continuing support from other professionals so that they are able to deal with the learner diversity. Teachers need support in dealing with emotionally and physically challenged learners. They also need to have a balanced control of the typically developing learners and those with special needs in the classroom to ensure that they interact well and do not discriminate against one another. Teachers also need support, because most of them feel that they had inadequate training, skills, or resources to accommodate the diversity of the learner population (Engelbrecht et al. 2004; Hines 2008; Kourkoutas et al. 2010). The roles of teachers in inclusive schools have become increasingly demanding and frustrating and it has become imperative that they seek support even from parents and other community members. In the authors' own view, it seems that providing support may sometimes involve pulling out some learners to receive assistance from the concerned professionals. This, therefore, means that the particular

learner or learners will miss out on the content of the day or days that they were not present in class to receive help. The teacher may also decide to slow down in order to wait for a learner who did not choose to need help on that day. Slowing down the pace will prove detrimental to the learning of the other learners too. It is therefore imperative to have some sort of classroom support in the form of paraprofessionals.

Paraeducators/Paraprofessionals

Many schools have increased their use of paraprofessionals as a primary mechanism to include more learners with various disabilities in general education classes. A paraprofessional or paraeducator is someone who is designated to ensure appropriate programming for a given learner. These individuals are typically trained to meet the unique instructional needs of learners with severe and multiple disabilities (Downing 2008). Paraeducators do not necessarily take over from class teachers, but assist class teachers in developing programmes for learners. Giangreco et al. (2006) state that often the assignment of a paraprofessional is designed to meet the multiple goals of assisting learners with disabilities, supporting the work of their classroom teachers and special educators and being responsive to requests from parents. So, not only do they assist learners and educators, but they liaise between the school and the community. One of the more common service delivery models establishes the special educator as the lead professional accountable for the education of learners with disabilities in a general education classroom, serving as an itinerant consultant to several classroom teachers and as a manager of teacher assistants dispersed across grades or classes (Florian 2007). If paraprofessionals are, however, seen by teachers as the primary educators of disabled children, then teachers may disconnect themselves from such learners. Those learners will be seen as the responsibility of the paraeducators and teachers will not learn anything by the presence of disabled learners.

There are detrimental effects related to paraeducators becoming the primary instructors of learners with disabilities. Some of these problems include separation from classmates, interference with peer interactions, dependence on adults, loss of personal control, and limited access to quality instruction (Giangreco et al.

2001). Paraeducators in their roles as assistants or partners, have to work with teachers so that learners are not pulled out of their classes in order to learn with peers. The mainstay of inclusion is that all children receive as normal as possible an education as can be afforded to them. Overreliance on support personnel should not be practiced so that all children are able to interact optimally. Apart from paraeducators/paraprofessionals, there are other professionals that will be working in the educational environment to assist teachers and learners.

Other Professionals

When schools become inclusive, then it means that there is an increasing diversity in learner needs. The increasing diversity means that there is a great need for more professionals who have never worked in regular schools. These professionals are going to be working together with teachers and parents and that calls for changes in their roles. These professionals are going to use their expertise to help learners with their various needs and also help teachers. Professionals trained in specific areas of need, like vision teachers, teachers for deaf learners, communication specialists, interpreters, occupational therapists, physical therapists, orientation and mobility instructors, adaptive physical education specialists and behaviour specialists, are a valuable resource for additional support in inclusive classrooms. Although these individuals (owing to large caseloads) may serve primarily in a collaborative and consultative manner, the direct time they spend with learners in classrooms can provide needed support to the teacher at critical times of the day (Downing 2008). The huge caseloads that these specialists have to attend to may mean that they do not attend to all learners. They might have to come to a school only once in two years and some learners will miss school so that they can see a specific specialist. If an agreement has, however, been reached between schools and professionals to come to schools on certain days, then it means learners might not miss out on much. Even then, the pace of content presentation still has to be slowed down to accommodate learners who are off on certain days. They will, however, miss out on school work if they need help on days that professionals are not at their school and they have to go to them.

Learners Taught in Neighbourhood Schools

Learners generally benefit from attending the same school in their neighbourhood over a period of years, which helps them develop the long-lasting social relationships that are an important component of education. Each school in the district should accept ownership of its neighbourhood learners and operate from the premise that all learners belong everywhere in the school community (Schwarz 2007). No longer will learners attend schools far from their homes, because they have a certain disability, they will attend their neighbourhood schools because support will be provided for them. Children will be taught with their peers, which will strengthen their social relations and further entrench their socialisation. Special schools are normally far from the homes of many learners and as a result, they have to attend boarding schools that are far from their homes. Attending schools far from home means that learners are removed from their social environments to unfamiliar territories that they have to navigate on their own. This removal might have an adverse effect on their social contacts in their own neighbourhoods (Ruijs and Peetsma 2009). If learners with disabilities are moved to special schools far from their homes, then they lose friendships with peers and families. The removal from learners' neighbourhood is set to change with the advent of IE. Changes will take place in local schools that will enable the accommodation of diverse learner needs. Some of the changes would include modifications to the built environment and provision of support personnel where needed. The teaching methods will also have to change in order to align themselves with the changes in who has to be taught. When learners are taught in their neighbourhood, this has an effect of building an inclusive society where tolerance and acceptance will be encouraged at school level and spilling over to the entire community. The most important aspect of encouraging inclusion is by first training teachers so that they are well aware of the demands of the new education system.

Learner Preparation

Learners, both with and without disabilities, have to be sensitised about the process of inclusion. IE means that there is no longer separate education, there will be one education system;

this having the effect of causing confusion among the learner population. A single education system therefore means that both learners with and without disabilities have to be properly informed about the process and its vision for an inclusive society. Proper education, prior to the implementation of inclusive education, that will elicit responses from all learners will have to be carried out to get their views. These views can inform policy and improve practice. The major reason for learner preparation is that, unlike when learners were only responsible for their own learning, in inclusive schools, learners assume greater responsibility for their own learning and for that of their peers (Sands et al. 2000). Responsibility for others' education is mainly true for learners without obvious disabilities as they normally become peer educators and modellers to their disabled peers. There is competition and independence encouraged in general education classrooms, but learners are expected to work cooperatively with others in inclusive classrooms.

INCULSIVE CLASSROOMS

Inclusive classrooms are places where all learners are integral members of classrooms, feel a connection to their peers, have access to rigorous and meaningful general education curricula and receive the collaborative support to succeed (Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis 2009). These classrooms are made up of disabled and non-disabled learners. An atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance is instilled so that everyone feels like a valued member.

Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms

The most fundamental characteristics of classroom teaching are that a teacher is located in one enclosed room with a group – a class - of learners for whose teaching he or she is directly responsible (Nind et al. 2003). The teacher being in charge of the learning and teaching is the traditional and very popular way teaching and learning still occurs. The teacher stands in the front and learners are seated in rows listening to the teacher lecture. The teacher knows the content and learners rely on him or her to impart knowledge to them. Teachers in inclusive classrooms are, however, given an ever-widening range of responsibilities, for example identifying learners' special needs or possible symptoms of child

abuse, or checking immediately or unexplained absences. These wide-ranging responsibilities, coupled with 'covering' a set curriculum, preparing learners for external assessments, trying to teach for understanding or the development of autonomy, complicate teachers' work (Nind et al. 2003). The fact that they have to 'cover' a set curriculum is pressure enough on the teachers' time. Some teachers have not been trained in special educational needs and for them to be expected to carry out all those tasks will increase their workload. Teachers have to be aware at all times of what is happening with each learner. They also have to monitor and report on the progress of each learner.

They are also responsible for the interaction of all learners, particularly learners with and without disabilities. Teachers have to thoughtfully intervene and actively facilitate the acceptance of learners with disabilities in the general education classroom (Eriksson et al. 2007). Learners with disabilities or special needs need a greater amount of time to perform some school activities and they are mostly less popular among their peers without disabilities. So, regular teachers are faced with extra work of having to accommodate a diversity of learner needs. That is why teachers in inclusive classrooms need to do collaborative work with other professionals to ease the burden of their work, like special education teachers. In this way, regular teachers will accept the perspectives of others and not only listen to them, but also embrace other ideas and viewpoints (Tannock 2009). This will also improve the practice of education for all learners.

Teachers in Collaborative Work

Collaboration is a style of direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties, voluntarily engaged in shared problem solving, shared decision-making and shared resources as they work toward a common goal. They each bring unique perspectives, experiences, knowledge bases, and personal belief systems that hold equal weight and value as they work together (Sands et al. 2000:121). People working in collaborative teams can accomplish much more than individuals on their own. A positive attitude towards professional collaboration and team problem solving will increase the likelihood of successful IE for all learners (Engelbrecht et al. 2004:158; Hines 2008).

Sands et al. (2000), also state that the collaborative work of the team fosters strong alliances and a high level of affiliation among its members and also contributes to the ability of all learners to develop alliances and a sense of affiliation with one another. The opportunity for educators to plan together is critical in pooling talent and responsibilities. Mutual planning time is also vital as educators seek to discuss the progress of individual children, share goals and plan lessons for the classroom (Friend and Cook 2007; Tannock 2009). Professional and personal growth for teachers takes place when they collaborate and learners are also helped in the process. Not only is collaboration important for teachers, it also benefits learners as well. When teachers work together towards the common goal of assisting learners then learners will benefit more from education. The strong alliance among teachers will also encourage learners to also work together and help each other where necessary. The reality of the teaching situation is that there are many different subjects in high schools, there are internal as well as external examinations and many learners to teach. Teachers do not always work together even when they teach the same subject, due to time constraints of the many responsibilities they carry other than teaching. One of the many responsibilities of teachers is to enforce co-operation among the learner population.

Teachers as Agents of Socialisation

Teachers in inclusive classrooms have to ensure that every learner participates and feels like a valued member of the class. This includes encouraging learners with and without disabilities to work together. The reason behind active encouragement is because the proximity and presence of learners with disabilities in the general classroom does not automatically bring about positive attitudes (Wong 2006). An emphasis on the teacher's role is intervention which will result in higher levels of acceptance and understanding (Swart et al. 2002). Teachers play an important role in helping learners adjust in classrooms and gain confidence as members of the school and their own communities.

Engelbrecht et al. (2004) and Nind et al. (2003) concur that a teacher can talk to a class about what the child can or cannot do, what they like and what they do not. This prior intervention can assist in reducing awkwardness among learners

without disabilities and those with disabilities. To enforce socialisation between learners with and without disabilities, it is important to pair the disabled learners with their non-disabled peers in class activities (Vaughn et al. 2007). In this way learners without obvious disabilities will begin to see the other learners' disability not as a deficiency, but recognise the social nature of disability. Both learners with and without disabilities can and will learn to tolerate one another. Social skills are an important aspect of education for all young children with or without disabilities. It appears that inclusive settings are ideal situations in which to teach social skills and social interaction strategies as these settings provide a forum through which children with disabilities can learn from their typically developing peers (Terpstra and Tamura 2007). Learners, both with and without disabilities play an important role in the success of inclusive education.

Assessment

Assessment is the process of identifying, gathering and interpreting information about learners' learning. The central purpose of assessment is to provide information on the learners' achievement and progress and set the direction for ongoing teaching and learning, being continuous and cyclical (Department of Education 1998). To be broadly inclusive, assessment has to be continuous with teaching and learning. Teachers need to develop a conscious habit of reflecting on and interpreting everything that facilitates or obstructs learning for each of the learners in the classroom. These reflective questions usually result in the emergence of new insights and for adjusting and improving future learning experiences (Engelbrecht et al. 2004). Reflection also means that teachers have to adjust the means they used to assess all learners. Assessment accommodations have to be put in place so that all learners have a fair chance of being appropriately assessed for maximum learning. Assessment accommodations can be defined as changes in ways that tasks are administered and presented or changes to how learners respond to assessment tasks (Alant and Casey 2005). Since one of the barriers experienced by learners with impairment, which in the past has led to drop out (or more insidiously to 'push out'), has been that of assessment (DoE 2001); some assessment concessions have to be put in

place to accommodate learners who have special needs. Some of the assessment concessions given to learners include providing learners with more time to complete assessments, to have task instructions read to learners, to introduce a practical component to allow the learner to demonstrate competence 'without having to use language' and to develop a task to substitute the task being done by the rest of the class. Providing concessions is a new approach to assessment which differs from the traditional one of assessing for differentiating among the learner population. In schools the purpose of assessment was classificatory and used mainly for promotion or alternative placement, for a ranking order of academic success in the classrooms and judged on matriculation results, of schools showing 'good' or 'poor' results (Engelbrecht et al. 2004:106). In a similar vein, Jones and Tanner (2006:2) posit that assessment in regular schools does not always lend itself well to planning for teaching and learning. Its main uses are often to create ability sets or bands, to provide information to parents on annual reports, to set long-term targets for teachers and learners and to track progress towards external examinations. Forlin (2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2010) cautions about the existence of considerable pedagogical dissonance within the education system that promotes varied modes of achieving educational outcomes for diverse learners, while still retaining an examination oriented approach that requires all learners to meet the same criteria. The implication is that there needs to be continuous reflection in respect of diverse IE contexts.

Learners with Obvious Disabilities

Disability in children affects the physical and functional status of the child, and has compelling implications for his/her social and emotional development (Vosloo 2009). Children are born with disabilities, develop disabilities or are involved in accidents that leave them with a disability. As they grow older, children begin to realise that they are different from their peers, especially at adolescence. Children with disabilities integrated into regular classrooms have a more negative picture of school, fewer social contacts, perceive more environmental barriers and are more dependent on adults than their typically developing peers (Eriksson et al. 2007). This negative picture arises because these

learners sometimes cannot do what their peers can do and therefore are not included in many activities. The inability to do as their peers can have an effect on their emotional well-being and how they interact socially with their peers without disabilities or special needs. This apprehension results because they will compare themselves to their non-disabled peers and feel inadequate.

Children with disabilities often need specific instruction in addition to being included in programs with the children without disabilities (Terpstra and Tamura 2007). Unlike their typically developing peers, learners with disabilities may also need extended instruction or assistance on specific tasks. For young people in adolescence, they may be embarrassed and they may feel self-conscious in front of their peers. Children with disabilities often demonstrate lower levels of social interaction, including social initiation, social response and the use of appropriate social skills (Terpstra and Tamura 2009). The learners already know that they are different from their peers, and sometimes due to their disability, are not included in many activities. Their disability means that they lag behind their peers in social relations. There is need for them to become a part of the school community and valued members of their classrooms. In inclusive settings, they have to interact with their peers without disabilities and this will call for necessary accommodations. An important focus of this study, however, is the learners without obvious disabilities, because inclusion happens to them. It is also important that their experiences and perceptions are taken into consideration when undertaking IE. Their views about other children with disabilities or special needs in inclusive classrooms, their views about learning and teachers in inclusive classrooms as well as their experiences of inclusive education are important to explore.

Learners without Obvious Disabilities

There are many definitions of disability from the perspectives of different individuals. One of the definitions of disability starts from the functional limitations of individuals, such as blindness, deafness or other changes in bodily structures. The second definition is legal or administrative and originates from the distribution of welfare benefits to disabled people. The final definition is subjective, which means a person

conceives of her/himself as disabled (Gronvik 2009). Learners without obvious disabilities are therefore those learners who have not been identified as having any disabilities or who do not outwardly show any signs of a disability. These learners have not been professionally identified as having a special need or a disability, thus they do not have an obvious disability or a special need. Learners without obvious disabilities may form negative or positive perceptions of inclusion depending on what they know or what they do not know of the process. The fact that IE was only introduced in primary schools and not followed up in high schools in Lesotho poses a problem. Learners with special educational needs are accepted into high schools, but with little continuing support, except in those schools that already accept learners with certain disabilities. Not much is known about the transition of learners from primary schools to high schools, because there is a scarcity of research on inclusive secondary classrooms compared to inclusive elementary classrooms (Mastropieri and Scruggs 2001). Internal and external examinations measure the success of schools (Engelbrecht and Green 2007). Reliance on internal as well as external examinations means that gaps in learner skills are more pronounced in secondary schools which often employ 'teacher-centred' strategies for learning. There are wide-ranging demands on time, particularly for learners with disabilities given the need for learning various important skills (Kozik et al. 2009). Mastropieri and Scruggs (2001) also attest that in secondary schools, there is pressure on high-stakes testing, content knowledge and an increasing expectation of independent study skills. Another complication is that of the pace of content presentation that is required in order to cover the required content within an academic year. The fact that content presentation has to be paced according to the demands of the curriculum, learners with special needs may be left out or those without obvious disabilities might be short-handed in an effort to accommodate diversity. Learners with special needs/disabilities often require a relaxed pace, which means that teachers have to relax their pace of content presentation. This fact of having to accommodate learner diversity may be perceived in different ways by learners without obvious disabilities.

LEARNING IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Learners without obvious disabilities are expected to be peer modellers to those learners with disabilities. They have to help those with disabilities with their school work by becoming peer tutors or buddy readers (Hines 2008). In a study carried out about perceptions of learners about inclusive instruction, it was found that some learners accepted teachers' use of curricular adaptations for classmates exhibiting learning deficits, but other learners opposed accommodations citing fairness, grading, need for uniformity of curriculum (Fulk and Smith 1995). Since quality education is measured by the school results at the end of the year, learning in inclusive classrooms for some learners may appear time-wasting and therefore of no benefit at the end of the year. By the same token, some learners without obvious disabilities may find it helpful that the teacher assigns more work or more time to finish tasks. This may be to the advantage of all learners and not only those with disabilities / special needs.

Social Interaction

Schools are social spaces and one of the greatest assets of this social space that can enhance learning is having lasting and meaningful relationships with peers. Friendships have major implications for positive emotional and academic development and protect against the negative impact of general peer rejection. Friends also promote engagement in school. The social skills defects evident in many children with learning disabilities may, however, lead typically achieving learners to avoid forming friendships with them or exclude them in certain educational and social activities (Estell et al. 2009). In inclusive settings, learners with special needs have an opportunity to have appropriate peer modelling and what it takes to be part of a team with people without disabilities. On the other hand learners without identified special needs/disabilities learn to deal more effectively with people who may have different abilities, backgrounds, interests or experiences (Hoskins 1996). An inclusive school and especially, classroom, is supposed to benefit all children by fostering acceptance and friendship. Acceptance and friendships formed in the classrooms can help build an inclusive society when learners also interact positively outside the school.

For young adults in high schools, having a friend is one of the most important aspects of schooling. The importance of having friends is reinforced by (Nind et al. 2004) that having friends and being part of a group for most learners, is the most significant aspect of school. Soodak (2003) also states that inclusive school communities focus on social as well as academic outcomes for children. Friendships matter to children, their parents and their teachers, because they provide children with the opportunity to develop important skills and attitudes, and perhaps most important, they enhance quality of life for children and their families. Friendships serve a wide array of purposes that include social and academic enhancement and they improve lives in families and thus, the wider community. Friendships between learners with and without disabilities are sometimes fraught with difficulties. Wong (2006) clearly points out that learners without obvious disabilities have revealed a willingness to help their disabled classmates, but they were not given opportunities or provided with the appropriate structures that would allow them to relate to the learners with disabilities. Lack of adult facilitation may result in peer rejection.

Peer Rejection

Learners without obvious disabilities are sometimes willing to form friendships with learners with disabilities, but the other end of the spectrum is that learners with disabilities are rejected by peers. In a study by (Rosenbaum 1986, cited in Estell et al. 2009), it was shown and found out that children actively reject others who are too dissimilar from themselves. Although learners with severe and multiple disabilities share many similarities with other children their age in terms of interests and desires, the lack of typical communication skills and the need for certain adaptations may pose initial barriers to the development of friendships. Learners may need to understand about their classmates' specific strengths and needs in order to feel more comfortable in their interactions (Downing 2008). Peers with disabilities are actively rejected by those without obvious disabilities, because they are different, but the underlying reason is that they do not know about their peers' particular disability. According to Wong (2006), qualitative data indicated that children felt uncomfortable in

relation to peers with disabilities if they were not given adequate information about the nature of the disabilities. When learners do not know about a disability or disabilities, they do not know how to react around an individual, because they do not know the needs of that person. They do not know whether a peer would need assistance and they do not know how to go about talking about the peer's disability without appearing insensitive. This can cause rejection.

Some learners with disabilities are rejected by peers if an interaction with them is seen as threatening the social status and self image of their non-disabled peers. Then there would be a high incidence of non-acceptance (Wong 2006). Self image and peer acceptance are very important at adolescence, and if someone is perceived as interacting with the wrong crowd, then they will be ostracised by the peer group. This can be detrimental to the social development of a learner. Some learners with a limited knowledge of disability may highly disapprove of their friends associating with other learners with disabilities. Some learners with disabilities lose reciprocal friendships and have higher social rejection despite being in an inclusive setting. They are rejected both for play and scholastic activities (Frederickson and Furnham 2004). This normally happens when typically achieving learners hold and maintain negative self-fulfilling prophecies of learners with special needs (Estell et al. 2008). These prophecies could be that disabilities are contagious or that disabled people are useless and are always in need of help. These are ideas that are harmful to forming relationships with learners with special needs. Many parents with children with disabilities / special educational needs feel that being in inclusive classrooms will give their children an opportunity for contacts and interactions with typical peers (Koster et al. 2009). Studies report that learners with disabilities experience higher levels of loneliness than their peers (Lackaye and Margalit 2008), are less accepted and generally have a social status lower than that of their classmates (Koster et al. 2009). Learners with obvious disabilities are also less popular, have fewer reciprocal friends and they are less often part of a subgroup of peers (Ruijs and Peetsma 2009). The improvement of self-image is important, but the rejection of peers can be harmful in this respect, regarding development of self-image.

Peer Acceptance

Learners without obvious disabilities are mostly seen as willing to form friendships with learners with disabilities. Some of the reasons they gave for being friends with disabled learners with disabilities were altruistic (Wong 2006). These learners feel that it is their responsibility to form friendships. The feeling of letting those learners with disabilities down, weighs heavily on the learners without obvious disabilities and they feel the need to approach and form friendships. These friendships are based not on the willingness to be friends, but to be of assistance. If support is, however, the only reason why friendships are formed, then they might not flourish. When relations are dominated by the assumption of need and care, the peers behave not as equals, but more as guides and helpers (De Schauwer et al. 2008). The formation of friendships based on the need for care and support, contributes to learners without disabilities viewing those with disabilities as weak. The formation of friendships is supposed to contribute to mutual benefits and not one sided benefits to learners with disabilities. Learners without obvious disabilities need to see themselves as equals and not helpers. In order to view themselves as equals, they need to act as equals. Learning about disabilities will help them realise that learners with disabilities are in need of friendships and not guardianship.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the authors argued for effective and constant reflection in order to ensure effective, collaborative, collegial, cohesive and well-coordinated partnerships for successful learning in inclusive classrooms. Social relations play an important part in the development of self-concept for adolescents. It is through being with others that one can find their place in the universe. Poor social relations in the school can lead to adolescents having a bad experience of school. Social relations have an impact on the academic performance of the learners. Learners without obvious disabilities who do not interact with those with disabilities may lose out on an opportunity to gain knowledge. Those who engage with learners with disabilities may spend a lot of time trying to be of help, to the detriment of their own learning. Helping learners with disabilities may also detract from learning of learners without

obvious disabilities or enhance their learning. It is, however, important that all learners benefit from learning in inclusive settings and that means ensuring a balance in the way learners with and without obvious disabilities are handled. Teachers have to work with special educators, learners, school administrators, parents and other professionals to enhance teaching and learning (participants in an ecosystem). The involvement of all stakeholders will ensure efficiency in education.

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