

Restoring Inclusive Education: Paradigm Shift from a Medical to a Social Model among Learners with Disability

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ABSTRACT This paper outlines a critical analysis of the paradigm shift from a medical to a social model, using the key concepts impacting on learners with disabilities in a schooling system. The social constructionist perspective and the social model provide a conceptual frame for examining disability and inclusive education. Inclusive education is significant for its multidimensional nature and lack of universal definition. The two main issues concerning scholars and interest groups are the lack of access to learning by learners with disability and the confining nature of disability. Despite the acceptance of inclusive education globally, the evidence in the literature suggests many limitations in broadening access to education for all. The paper found that there is an interplay of various aspects relating to inclusive education, namely the historical context and the education system, the capacity for the implementation of inclusive education, a policy framework, infrastructure and resources coordination, and a culture of inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

For the longest time, the injustices of a lack of reasonable access for learners with disability to education and the confines of disability for individuals are two main concerns with which various scholars and interest groups have grappled. The key issue in this paper is the conceptualisation of the challenges faced by learners with disabilities. The paper uses a social constructionist perspective and the social model to examine disability and inclusive education. Although inclusive education is a contested concept devoid of universal definition, it suffices to embrace its primary role in reducing the exclusion of all learners from and within schools, and to secure their participation and learning success.

From the inclusive education discourse, it is paramount to look beyond the adoption of inclusive education within the context of the social model, and to focus on the narratives around its implementation. Thomas et al. (2014) and Caniglia et al. (2021) assert that the social context is at the centre of knowing and that knowledge is created through shared production. Karlberg (2005: 1) claims that “the ways we think and talk about a subject influence and reflect the ways we act in relation to that subject”.

Inclusive education has been one of the measures depicting transformation in the South African

education system. For a country like South Africa, the segregation of learners with disabilities on the basis of disability is cause for concern, considering the country’s long history of discrimination and the injustices of the past (McKenzie and Dalton 2020). South African schools have been segregated in terms of disability (Cigman 2010; Donohue and Bormman 2014).

According to Mutloatse (1997: 17), “For inclusion to be successful as a process, it needs to take into account issues of participation, involvement, power and equity”. Similarly, Cigman (2010) describes inclusive education as a social response to the medicalization of disability. This is different from the medical model, which describes the difficulties of disabled individuals as emanating from their individual impairments, lack or loss of functioning (Cigman 2010; Bunbury 2020). Inclusive education as aligned with the social model, tend to advance the notion that the challenges faced by disabled children is not to be attributed to an individual but to the interplay of other factors, like the educational system, and social, political, and cultural factors. The desirable implications of paradigm shift from the medical model to the social model may result with understanding the phenomenon from a more collective manner as opposed to attributing a challenge to individual limitations.

Social Model among Learners with Disability

Relevance of Social Constructionism in Learners with Disability

Social constructionism is crucial in understanding and explaining disability and inclusive education within the social model. The literature reflects that the experiences and ways of being for people with disabilities are not separate from social-political-cultural constructions (Goodley 2001; Yoshizaki-Gibbons 2021). Essentially, the social constructionism is based on understanding knowledge as a socially-constructed phenomenon. The same applies to knowledge about inclusive education and disability.

Wendell (1996) describes disability as a socially constructed discourse relevant as “ways ranging from social conditions that straight forwardly create illnesses, injuries, and poor physical functioning, to subtle cultural factors that determine standards of normality and exclude those who do not meet them from full participation in their societies”. Furthermore, Wendell (1996) views social arrangements and expectations as responsible for contributing to impairment and disability. This shows that, although disability is described as having a biomedical origin, it cannot be only defined in biological terms. Viewing disability from a social constructionist perspective shows that the social model provides a “challenge to over-medicalised and individualist accounts of disability, which led to its de-medicalising and de-individualising” (Shakespeare 2010: 266).

The social model is not without critique as it is mainly perceived as failing to fully consider the lived experiences of the differently abled individuals. In this regard, it is described as failing to address the impairment experienced by individuals in terms of physical and medical reality. Based on this critique, Palmer and Harley (2012) call for an inclusive social theory, which embraces “the relational element between the individual and society”. Moreover, the authors highlight the social-relational model of disability as a reviewed version of the social model (Palmer and Harley 2012). This social relational model acknowledges the existence of the social and the individual impact on disability, with the *societal* attitudes about disability or impairment viewed as major disabling factors. As indicated, conceptualising disability from a social

model tend to consider both individual impairment and the social constructed attitudes and ideas.

Literature Review

Historical Context of the Education System

The Right to Education for Children with Disabilities Campaign and Human Rights Watch (2015) describes South Africa’s inclusive education system as a system in a state of crisis. This country has resulted in the most of its citizens, mainly in rural areas, being disadvantaged and marginalised. Those socio-economic disadvantages resulted in mostly females and children from such communities being excluded in the efforts to develop the disadvantaged communities. Considering the current situation of children with disabilities, more especially those from rural and disadvantaged communities, the aftermath of the country’s divided history is quite clear. Hodgson et al. (2018) and Banks et al. (2019) indicate that mostly poor black children with disabilities are penalized under the country’s highly exclusionary education system, as a direct result of the country’s past. This indicates that children accessing education in South Africa has always been a cause for concern, even before the advent of democracy in 1994.

South Africa’s education system now is designed and aimed at promoting and implementing appropriate, effective, and non-discriminatory full access to education for all children, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, abilities and disabilities (Hodgson et al. 2018). This is because the country is governed by the supreme law of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The Constitution declares access to education as a human right and not a privilege and advocates for non-discrimination for all citizens. Section 29 of the Constitution grants all citizens the right to education and such right is not subject to resource availability (Murungi 2015). This means that the right ought to be directly and immediately implemented, as opposed to others that can be progressively implemented. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (2015) which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly was developed to safeguard the rights of all people in all countries. The declaration was the first of its kind in terms of international laws recognising and acknowledging that all people have inherent fundamental rights that needed to be

upheld to ensure their quality of life. The UDHR was a key instrument that paved the way for laws and legislations aimed at safeguarding human rights and freedoms, most especially for children, as vulnerable and marginalised members of society. The right to education was declared as a fundamental right for children and this declaration led to increased recognition and access to education for children from all levels of society.

It is essential for education to be based on the principles of equity and inclusion (OECD 2017; UNESCO 2017). This simply means that schools or environments for learning need to ensure that education is inclusive, irrespective of individuals' varying abilities. An Education White Paper 6 was developed with sole aim of ensuring that the majority of South African children suffering from various disabilities would be included in the education system (Department of Education 2001). A small number of children with disabilities were in special schools and this fraction mainly comprised of children from middle and upper classes, whose parents, caregivers, and families were knowledgeable and could manage to pay the costs often associated with such arrangements.

Disability as a Contested Concept

Before providing a discussion on inclusive education, it is essential to briefly reflect on disability in general. The definition of disability is varied and contested across different disciplines and contexts, as applicable from medicine to sociology. Despite a plethora of definitions, it is essential to note that there are several factors influencing the manner which disability is perceived (Smith and Sparkes 2008). Although there is lack of consensus on what the concept "disability" constitutes, in social sciences in particular, the word often evokes thoughts of impairment and an inability to do something (Mitra 2006). The cultural attitudes of parents, families, and wider community members, are regarded as having an adverse effect on the meaningful participation of children and adults with disabilities in the community, and more especially at schools (De Winnaar 2013).

The importance of education for children with disabilities is often overlooked and very much dependant on the cultural attitudes and perceptions of their parents, families, and the community, which may dictate whether to send the child to school or not (Department of Education 2001). The World

Health Organisation (WHO 2013) describes disability as an comprehensive concept, which covers the impairments, the activity limitations, and the restricted participation. Furthermore, the impairment is regarded as a challenge in the functioning and the structure of body (WHO 2001, 2013; De Winnaar 2013). In relation to this assertion, despite a distinction between the physical and the intellectual disability, the two phenomena do not occur in a mutually exclusive manner. Schalock (2011) describes intellectual disability in terms of the limitations in the area of intellectual functioning and adaptive behavioural patterns, and that it manifests at the developmental level.

Essentially, there is no single definition that is higher important or less significance than other definitions, but that each of them simply informed by different perspectives. It is vital to acknowledge its physical manifestation thereof and that this cannot be simply ignored in its definition (Raymond and Lopez 2019; Tsatsou 2020; Muyinda 2020). The essential nature of the measurement of the level of dependence and support for the person with disability cannot be ignored. This measurement relates with the medical model of disability, where medical approach about differently abled individuals "predominates schools where special educational needs are thought of as emanating from the individual who is seen as different, faulty and needing to be assessed and made as normal as possible" (Rieser 2012).

Inclusive Education and Constructivism

Inclusion remains an issue of concern because equality and non-discrimination are fundamental principles upon which democratic societies are based. In addition to the traditional lenses through which education is viewed, namely general education and special needs education, education is mainly understood within the context of medical and social models (Connor and Ferri 2005). The phenomenon of traditional mainstream education never resolved the situation, considering that it attempted to adapt disabled learners to its system, and not providing suitable accommodation for those learners.

Hornby (2014) is of the view that most proponents of inclusive education discourage the use of labelling children as 'special needs', as the term can result in the stigmatisation of children.

Inclusive Education as a Human Rights Issue

From a legal perspective, this describes the right to education in referencing school, at a practical level. There is evidence that, as early as 2001, South Africa initiated the implementation of inclusive education, which anticipated the commitment to education for all learners by 2015. Consequently, schooling had to be made compulsory and accessible (Saloviita 2020; Pillay et al. 2021).

McCowan (2011) argues that “the legal expression of the universal right to education, while containing valuable guarantees, is deficient in terms of its detail”. This perspective pay little attention to other methods of learning but perceives formal education as the essential mode of accomplishing the right to education.

The view of education as a right, and an entitlement of some sort, contrast with the view of education (Mahomed 2020). While the process of including the differently-abled learners in mainstream schools may serve the fulfilment of the right to education, the access and quality of the education is essential in adding value to their lives. It is crucial to highlight their strengths and skills, instead of their weaknesses, or their mere reference to the inclusion.

Some researchers emphasize that the right to education does not exist in an exclusive manner. Furthermore, McCowan (2011) describes the interdependent nature of rights to be evident in different ways, namely through “the right to education”, “rights in education” and “rights through education”. Firstly, an inclusion is described as an equal opportunity to education as applicable in school institutions. Secondly, an inclusion refers to the way in which learners with disabilities are protected. Lastly, the rights through education outlines how the capabilities for exercising human rights develop.

METHODOLOGY

Jaakkola (2020) asserts that both empirical and conceptual papers share the common goal of creating new knowledge, which occurs through the careful selection of sources of information following a particular process. However, in contrast to empirical papers, the arguments of conceptual papers “are not derived from data in the traditional sense but involve the assimilation

and combination of evidence in the form of previously developed concepts and theories” (Jaakkola 2020: 19).

This paper offers a conceptual contribution, framed as an analysis of the social model and the related concepts, as applicable among learners with disabilities in a schooling system, with reference to South African context. In the main, it serves to provide insight and explicate the paradigm shift from the medical model to the social model. Furthermore, it relies on detailed literature involving the historical and background development of special needs education, disability, an overview of inclusive education and the cultural level barriers to education support services in South Africa. Based on the notion that the social model, and the related concepts are developed and tested through empirical research, this paper is not without empirical evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Models of Disability

Models of disabilities are structurally meant to clarify or deeply explain exact experiences, in terms of certain mechanisms and systems. In using them, it helps to provide a unique structure which can make it possible to bring or show the representation of information. This information shows an understanding of experiences and provides more explanation (Llewellyn and Hogan 2000). Some of the models ensure the definition of disability. These models can include medical and social models. Other researchers define disability as a human existence, so that the world itself can view it as a change.

Medical Model of Disability

The medical model, with its emphasis on the deficit of the person, is describe as having dominated South Africa’s education system (Engelbrecht 2006). This model also emphasizes the human adaptation in the world, while a person with disability is presented as a condition (Rieser 2012). In this regard, people with disabilities are viewed as people who need specialized programmes or medical treatments (Naicker 2005; Lim 2020). It is also emphasized that people with disabilities are expected to adapt positively and show healthy well-being in the environment where they can be found (Teater 2010).

Social Model of Disability

The social model is significant for its recognition of the social origin of disability. This model aligns with the inclusive education view that locates barriers to learning and development in the system, as opposed to only focusing on individuals (Department of Education 2001). The education system and the broader social, economic, and political circumstances are therefore crucial in this model. The right to education for learners with disabilities, an environment with no discrimination and avoidance of prejudice are also included in this model (Pillay and Di Terlizzi 2009).

Paradigm Shift from Medical to Social Model

During apartheid, learners with disabilities in South African Schools were viewed more from a medical model, and even education policies were used as part of the way in which learners were labelled according to their race, culture and disability itself. In later years, a shift took place on how learners with disabilities should be viewed (Barnes 2011). The South African education system accommodates the learners' needs accordingly. Disability is viewed as a social construct, which is totally different from the medical model. The introduction of the social model is not new, since learners with disabilities started to be viewed in such a manner since the 1980s (UNESCO 2013).

Implications of Inclusive Education in the South African Context

It is rare to talk about the South African context without reference to the legislation, policies, infrastructure, and resources, as critical support measures in the process. Polat (2011) emphasises that improved legislation, infrastructure and investing more resources is crucial in ensuring that the vision of inclusive education for children with disabilities is realised. Polat (2011), however, indicates that such improvements and efforts on their own are not sufficient for inclusion, as attitudinal barriers among community members and school professionals are essential for facilitating and fast-tracking the inclusion of children with disabilities, more especially in rural and low-income communities. Key in this regard is not the existence of these measures for their own sake, but their

existence as “measures necessary to facilitate the effective education of children with disabilities” (Murungi 2015: 3183).

Capacity for Implementation of Inclusive Education

Children from rural areas have always been at a risk of not having access to formal education. This is even more true of children with disabilities, who are almost completely marginalised (Cantero-Garrito et al. 2020). Their disability has disallowed them from receiving education in mainstream schools and, with the lack of specialised schools and costs associated with such, children with disability have long been denied their constitutional right to education, as entrenched in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Philpott and Muthukrishna 2019).

Donohue and Bornman (2014) set out the statistics for children with disabilities in South Africa: more than 70 percent of children suffering from disabilities have no access to education (Donohue and Bornman 2014). They also indicate that, of the small percentage that is “schooling”, the majority of them are still accommodated in separate schools for children with special needs. The authors express their concern about inclusive education with the current prevailing situation where children with disabilities are still excluded from mainstream education. This is irrespective of international instruments and protocols calling for children with disabilities to co-exist side by side with their peers in a schooling environment. South Africa, like most African countries, still experiences difficulties in integrating special needs children and realising the rights of children with disabilities, as recognised by international treaties (Engelbrecht et al. 2016).

Although teachers in South African schools are fully supportive of the idea of inclusive education, they are still untrained or lack the capacity to implement inclusive education in the classroom. This results from the fact that the majority of teachers are still of the notion that children with disabilities are more likely to benefit better in the special classroom that caters for their specific needs. Furthermore, teachers in South African schools possess attitudes and beliefs that children with disabilities cannot cope or benefit from mainstream education due to their special needs (Bornman and Rose 2010; Nel et al. 2016).

Oswald and Swart (2011) share the same sentiments with authors such as Polat (2011), as the readiness and capacity of South African teachers. The authors are of the view that current legislations and policies advocating for inclusive education demand changes of attitudes as far as teachers in classrooms are concerned. This speaks to the fact that teachers should not only support inclusive education policies but also be willing to put it in practice through the promotion of best practices that support inclusive education for children with disabilities. The authors indicate that this is achieved only if teachers and other stakeholders are educated, capacitated, and supported to implement best practices. This means that the South African Department of Basic Education should proactively train teachers to implement inclusive education so that South African classrooms are also friendly to children with disabilities.

Nel et al. (2011) write at great length about the appropriate resources that teachers in classrooms need for their learners with disabilities. The authors emphasize that support is an important component for realising inclusive education. This acknowledges the fact that without the necessary support of learners with disabilities, teachers in South African classrooms are limited in their abilities. The authors indicate that the attitude and beliefs of teachers are often perpetuated by the lack of support services, including equipment, special treatments, and the educational provisions of accommodation of learners with disability (Paseka and Schwab 2020).

Policy Development and Implementation

There is sufficient literature indicating the significance of policy development and implementation as far as inclusive education is concerned. Hay et al. (2001) express concern about policy development and implementation of inclusive education in South Africa, as key factors in implementing international treaties and protocols. Hogson et al. (2018) indicate that policy reform and effective implementation is the only solution towards facilitating inclusive education. Policy implementation is as important as policy development, meaning that good policies may yield negative results due to ineffective implementation, which has been the case with policies on inclusive education.

Irrespective of the guiding principles and strategies contained in the Education White Paper 6,

schools and other educational institutions appear to experience challenges in interpreting and customising strategies to their respective schools so as to facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive education. In the absence of strategies and mechanisms for effective implementation, little will be achieved to realise the rights of people with disabilities, more especially children accessing inclusive education.

Bornman and Rose (2010) identify, that challenges such as lack of resources and support, as well as the still existing negative and discrimination attitudes towards people with disabilities, are the causative factors in South African schools' challenges in implementing inclusive education. In the absence of resources, strategies and other supportive actions, the implementation of policies and legislation will not be effective. Considering the international treaties, laws, and legislations, as well as South African policies as far as inclusive education is concerned, there are sufficient policies that have the potential to address the issue of access to quality education for children with disabilities. However, the lack of effective mechanisms and resources have rendered such policies ineffective.

The implementation of legislation for transforming inclusive education requires transformational leadership and management as these play a critical role in ensuring that school environments are restructured to promote and encourage diversity and therefore accommodate for children with disabilities. As it stands, South African schools are experiencing challenges in addressing the four core elements that are key in facilitating inclusive educations, namely the creation of an inclusive culture, support structures, operational procedures, and partnerships with parents (Engelbrecht 2020).

Infrastructure and Resources Coordination

The issue of infrastructure and resources is the most crucial in ensuring effective implementation of inclusive education (Mfuthwana and Dreyer 2018). The Department of Education's sole mandate is to ensure access to education and it needs to invest considerable amount of funds and resources in restructuring the education system. This is a challenge, considering that South Africa has limited resources even when it comes to special schools, as facilities designated for children with

special needs. Moreover, the very existence of such special schools for children with disabilities goes against the principle of universal inclusion for children with disabilities (Ngobeni et al. 2020). The restructuring of the education system calls for a remodelling of infrastructure to ensure that children with disabilities are catered for or met in the mainstream education system. The current infrastructure and available resources within the school system is nowhere near sufficient to ensure the realisation of inclusive education (Lipsky and Gartner 1999).

Inclusive culture support structures and operational procedures require an adoption of a multi-disciplinary team strategy, all aimed at advancing the interests of children with disabilities (Masango 2013). Advancing an inclusive culture in South African schools requires leadership that believes in and embraces an inclusive culture. Visionary leadership has the potential to facilitate inclusiveness through influencing existing attitudes. Policy makers are not policy implementers and, therefore, the effectiveness of policies are solely dependent on practitioners on the ground and their ability to sell the idea and instil a culture of positive and welcoming attitudes as far as children with disabilities are concerned.

Sebele (2013) expresses the concern that un-coordinated support structures and operational procedures has often resulted in poor implementation of policies rendering them ineffective. It is of utmost importance that coordinated structures are in place and that uniform operational procedures are developed to facilitate correct interpretation and implementation of policies regarding children with disabilities. Coordinated efforts and uniform laws and rules are required to ensure that all schools in South Africa rally behind the implementation of inclusive education (Pather 2019).

Teachers' attitudes, beliefs, views, and perception are a critical element in transforming the education system and therefore their influence in the effective implementation of inclusive education should not be overlooked. Changing the mind-set of the very people that are tasked with implementing the required changes is of utmost importance (Prinsloo 2001: 346). It is, therefore, very important for the South African government to empower teachers with knowledge and skills to facilitate transformation in South African schools and promote inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

The central focus in this paper was to explore issues of inclusive education relating to disability. Firstly, it conceptualised the key issues faced by learners with disabilities and secondly applied the social model in examining disability and inclusive education, with the view of examining the access to learning by learners with disabilities.

A fundamental issue about inclusive education is that, despite it being a widely used term, it remains contested and devoid of universal definition, even among social scientists. There is sufficient literature on inclusive education suggesting that the education system is still characterised by segregation on the basis of disability. Despite the remarkable achievements in the transformation of the education system, as manifested through the development of inclusive education, the plight of learners with disabilities remains a concern, particularly in the implementation of inclusive education.

This paper has provided insight into the traditional conception of inclusive education, particularly its sole focus on the limitations of the individual with particular focus on what the individual is unable to do, as opposed to what he or she is capable of doing. Through the social constructionist perspective and the social model, the background was laid for understanding of the plight of learners with disabilities, as applicable to inclusive education. Lastly, the historical context and the education system, capacity for implementation of inclusive education, policy development and implementation, infrastructure and resources coordination and inclusive education and culture were found to be the interactive factors towards realisation of inclusive education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is apparent that the effective implementation of inclusive education requires a comprehensive and collaborative process involving various role players. There is a need for a collaborative policy and implementation strategy, which will provide an outline of the roles and responsibilities of the respective role players. There is also a need to advocate for the resourcing of schools as primary contexts for implementation of inclusive education. Those resources may come in the form of infrastructure development, equipping educators with knowledge and skills to

better implement inclusive education. The government has to develop intensive or continuous training programs for educators in inclusive education and related cultural issues. These programs can provide insight in offering critique on the traditional conception of inclusive education.

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