

# **A MISMATCH BETWEEN EDUCATION POLICY PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION: A CRITIQUE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY**

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*Abstract: Since 1994 a lot of changes have taken place in the South African education settings ostensibly to address the imbalances of the past. One such change is the inclusive education policy which is contained in the National Department of Education's report entitled Quality Education for All (1997). The thinking behind the policy is that since people with disability end up working with able-bodied people they should school together. In that way, they get to understand and appreciate each other better.*

*This paper draws extensively on literature review on inclusive education issues in South Africa and elsewhere. Particular attention is paid to studies carried out in some of the provinces in South Africa to establish how the policy is being implanted. Based on our observations as former school educators and also on our current involvement in higher education institutions we are of the opinion that there is a mismatch between education policy planning and implementation. The irony is that most of the policy planners are not necessarily trained educators as such they are not in tune with both practical and logistical realities in the school system. We therefore contend that with the current teacher training programmes in place, teachers are not adequately equipped to cope with the requirements of inclusive education. Besides, the available infrastructure is not user-friendly for disabled people. The policy therefore has to be implemented gradually and not as hastily as it is being done.*

## **Introduction**

The education landscape of South Africa has changed drastically since the 1994 democratic elections which ushered in a majority rule. The transformation in education has focused very much on redressing the past injustices, inequalities and imbalances which had made better education exclusive for only a few privileged citizens at the expense of the majority. Education, under the new Constitution of South Africa (1996: section 29) is a right for all citizens of the country. The new government which emerged in 1994, through various legislation, has leveled the playing field by abolishing all discriminatory laws that preserved well resourced schools for the white minority. One such policy is inclusive education (National Department of Education, 1997). The policy states that all learners – no matter their physical conditions or background should enroll and learn in same schools. This means both the 'able-bodied' and the disabled must attend the same schools and learn together. The thinking behind this is that since people with disabilities end up working together with able-bodied people they should school together. In that way, they may get to understand and appreciate each other better.

This paper critically examines the practical implementation of the inclusive education policy of South Africa by pointing out some of the major challenges and pitfalls that may hinder its success. As former school teachers and currently involved in higher education we have observed some of the difficulties and impracticalities associated with the implementation of the inclusive education policy. The irony is that the policy planners are not necessarily trained educators who have the experience of the realities on the ground. For instance, the current pre-service teacher training programmes in the country do not prepare educators to teach in integrated schools. There is also paucity of resources to boot. We therefore contend that although the policy is nice on paper there seems to be some mismatch between it's planning and implementation and that the policy as it is now needs a drastic review.

The word inclusive simply refers to something that involves a wide range of people or stakeholders. Inclusive education is therefore a type of education which involves a broader spectrum of learners from all communities and backgrounds no matter their physical conditions. In the South African context, inclusive education refers to the integration of the physically challenged (i.e. the able bodied and disabled), the visually and the auditory impaired and the mentally retarded into the mainstream education. Inclusion may however have a variety of meanings to different people and in different contexts. However, as Swart *et al* (2002:175) aptly remark; within each of these varieties there are also clear commonalities, such as the principles of social justice, equitable education systems and the responsiveness of schools towards diversity. It is imperative that these principles be interpreted in context. Under the previous political dispensation learners with physical disabilities were excluded from the mainstream education. They were not allowed to attend the same school as the so-called 'normal' children. Thus each disability group had their own school hence there were 'school for the blind', 'school for the deaf' and 'school for the mentally retarded'. These separate schools for different groups of children were seen by many as discriminatory.

After 1994, a debate emerged as to whether this segregation and discrimination should be allowed to continue in the light of the fact that the new democratic constitution disallows all forms of discrimination. Many were of the view that all children – no matter their physical conditions and background – must attend schools together under the same roof. This argument had both political and socio-economic dimensions. In terms of constitutional provisions the separate schools for the physically handicapped affirm apartheid - discrimination – something which does not exist in South Africa any more. Those who look at it from a socio-economic perspective might argue that all learners must learn together in the same classrooms no matter their physical conditions. After all, when they finish their studies all of them would live and work in the same work environment.

Most probably in view of the thinking illustrated above, the South African National Department of Education appointed the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) and the National Committee on Education Support Services (NCESS) to examine and make recommendations on all aspects of special needs and support services in education and training in South Africa (see National Department of Education, 1997). The two commissions recommended some guidelines, principles and strategies for developing an inclusive system of education for the country. Based on the recommendations of the commissions the government issued a white paper which argued for the development of an inclusive education and training system for South Africa (National Department of Education; White Paper No 6; 2000).

### **The State of Readiness of South African Teachers for Inclusive Education**

According to Fullan (1993:127) teachers are no doubt key role-players in determining the quality of implementation of any new education policy. In a situation where teachers are ignored or not properly consulted in the process of planning a new policy

related to their work but are only required to play a major role in its implementation they are likely to be indifferent. The reality is that without the commitment and involvement of teachers no educational policy related to curriculum (e.g. teaching, learning and assessment) can be effectively implemented. This fact is supported by Wearmouth *et al* (2000: 36) who maintain that too often change in education has failed because insufficient attention had been taken of current practices and needs of those who are expected to put it into effect. Based on our observations, interactions with colleagues and the available literature we are of the opinion that South African teachers have been largely ignored in so far as issues on the inclusive education policy is concerned. This view is in consonance with Hay *et al* (2001) who point out that if the implementation of changed policies fail in the developed world where teachers are generally adequately trained then great care must be taken by policy markers in South Africa where teachers are insufficiently trained. That South African teachers are not adequately trained is well documented in the literature (see Roloti, 1999, Seligman, 1998).

Some of the knowledge and skills both general education and special education teachers need to be competent inclusive education teachers include:

- ❖ Ability to accommodate, accept, support and teach all categories of learners (e.g. blind, sighted, deaf, etc) in the same teaching- learning environment.
- ❖ Ability to solve learning problems of all kinds of learners, to be able to informally and formally assess the skills of each learner's needs (rather than relying solely on standardized curriculum).
- ❖ Ability to devise, adapt or adopt teaching and learning strategies that may promote maximum learning among all categories of learners in the classroom (e.g. the use of sign language to explain issues to the deaf).
- ❖ Ability to take advantage of children's individual interests and use their internal motivation for developing needed skills.
- ❖ Ability to set high but alternative expectations that are suitable for the students; this means developing alternative assessments.
- ❖ Ability to make appropriate expectations for EACH student, regardless of the student's capabilities. If teachers can do this, it allows all students to be included in a class and school.
- ❖ Ability to determine how to modify assignments for students; how to design classroom activities with so many levels that all students have a part. This teaching skill can apply not just at the elementary or secondary level, but at college level as well. It will mean more activity-based teaching rather than seat-based teaching.
- ❖ Ability to learn how to value all kinds of skills that students bring to a class, not just the academic skills. In doing this, teachers will make it explicit that in their classrooms they value all skills, even if that is not a clear value of the whole school.
- ❖ Ability to provide daily success for all students. Teachers have to work to counteract the message all students get when certain students are continually taken out of class for special work.

Other competencies that will help general education teachers in an inclusive environment include:

- ❖ A realization that every child in the class is their responsibility. Teachers need to find out how to work with each child rather than assuming someone else will tell them how to educate a child.
- ❖ Knowing a variety of instructional strategies and how to use them effectively: This includes the ability to adapt materials and rewrite objectives for a child's needs.
- ❖ Working as a team with parents and special education teachers to learn what skills a child needs and to provide the best teaching approach.
- ❖ Viewing each child in the class as an opportunity to become a better teacher rather than a problem to be coped with or have someone else fix.
- ❖ Flexibility and a high tolerance for ambiguity.

These teacher competencies are quite broad but the reality is that South African teachers are just not trained or equipped to cope with the demands of inclusive education. For instance, Hay *et al* (2001) carried out a study in the Free State to find about the state of readiness of teachers for inclusive education and concluded that a huge effort will have to be made by policy makers and provincial education departments to effect a paradigm shift towards inclusion. Our own experiences as school teachers for over 16 years and interaction with colleagues in provinces such as, Limpopo, North-West, Northern Cape, the Free State and Guateng reveal a similar trend. Hence our submission that South African teachers are just not prepared for inclusive education.

Other studies in South Africa have however focused on the attitude of teacher's towards inclusion (see Bothma 1997, Harris 1998, Bothma, Gravett, & Swart 2000). For instance, Swart, *et al* (2000) carried out comparative studies in Guateng and the Western Cape Provinces to determine teacher attitude towards inclusion and came out with the following findings:

- ❖ Inadequate knowledge, skills and training of teachers to implement inclusive education effectively;
- ❖ Lack of educational and teachers support;
- ❖ Inadequate provision of facilities, infrastructure and assistive devices; and
- ❖ Potential effects of inclusive education on learners with special educational needs as well as other learners in the mainstream.

The deduction can thus be made that most teachers have not made the paradigm shift towards inclusion.

From the discussion thus far, two issues stand out:

- a) South African teachers have not been properly consulted or briefed on the inclusive education policy.
- b) Teachers are not adequately trained to cope with the added burden of teaching and caring for learners with disability.

We would however like to introduce another element into the discussion and that is insufficient facilities, infrastructure and assistive devices.

As stated elsewhere in this paper, prior the implementation of an inclusive education policy in South Africa, the education of disabled and physically impaired learners was the prerogative of a few selected designated schools. With the inclusive policy now in place, all learners are to attend the same school. The reality is that existing structures were created or built without due consideration to people with disability so its not user-friendly for such people. To accommodate people with disabilities, there is a need for more accessible buildings and appropriate instructional materials and equipment have to be supplied by the relevant education authorities. In some of the former homelands basic services and resources such as water, electricity and ablution facilities are still lacking. In fact, classes are still held under trees in some of these areas so the ad hoc implementation of the inclusive education policy with a proper needs analysis audit is a recipe for disaster.

## Conclusion

The central argument of this paper is that, the creation of inclusive schools will require more than merely the implementation of new policies. Practising teachers are the key to the successful implementation of an inclusive system and they will need time, ongoing support and in-service training. Real change requires a long term commitment to professional development (Swart *et al*, 2002). Clearly the task is enormous and Fullan (1985) has these words for all concerned:

*Change will occur when certain elements are in combination: attention to the development of clear and validated materials; active administrative support and leadership at district and especially the school level; focussed, on-going in-service or staff development activities; the development of collegiality and other interaction-based conditions at the school level; the selective use of external resources, both people and materials (p. )*

We therefore conclude by indicating that the South African inclusive education system as portrayed in the 'Quality Education for All' report (National Department of Education, 1997), has come into effect and although this is a major step forward in transforming the South African education system great care need to taken in order to avoid some of the practical problems encountered in the implementation of the Curriculum 2005. For instance, the Curriculum 2005 was implemented too hastily without proper teacher preparation, orientation and provision of resources.

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