Enacting understanding of inclusion in complex contexts: classroom practices of South African teachers

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While the practice of inclusive education has recently been widely embraced as an ideal model for education, the acceptance of inclusive education practices has not translated into reality in most mainstream classrooms. Despite the fact that education policies in South Africa stipulate that all learners should be provided with the opportunities to participate as far as possible in all classroom activities, the implementation of inclusive education is still hampered by a combination of a lack of resources and the attitudes and actions of the teachers in the classroom. The main purpose of this paper was to develop a deeper understanding of a group of South African teachers' personal understanding about barriers to learning and how their understanding relates to their consequent actions to implement inclusive education in their classrooms. A qualitative research approach placed within a cultural-historical and bio-ecological theoretical framework was used. The findings, in this paper, indicate that the way in which teachers understand a diversity of learning needs is based on the training that they initially received as teachers, which focused on a deficit, individualised approach to barriers to learning and development, as well as contextual challenges, and that both have direct and substantial effects on teachers' classroom practices. As a result, they engage in practices in their classrooms that are less inclusive, by creating dual learning opportunities that are not sufficiently made available for everyone, with the result that every learner is not able to participate fully as an accepted member of their peer group in all classroom activities.

Keywords: barriers to learning; deficit approach to learning and development; diverse educational needs; inclusive classrooms; inclusive education; mainstream schools; teacher education for inclusion

Introduction

Over the past decade wide agreement globally has encouraged the development of inclusive education by advocating the inclusion of learners with diverse educational needs in the same classrooms. Increasingly inclusive education is regarded internationally as the right of every learner to be part of mainstream classrooms and although developments at policy level are important, ultimately inclusive education comes down to changing education in schools and mainstream classrooms (Srivastava, De Boer & Pijl, 2013). These changes in education have placed new demands on the teaching profession, since in many contexts, classrooms now contain a more heterogeneous mix of learners from different backgrounds and with different levels of ability and disability. In essence, inclusive education is not only about access to education, but also about acceptance and participation in the implementation of inclusive education and the resultant promise of quality education for all (Terzi, 2008). Inclusive schools are therefore about belonging, nurturing and educating all students, regardless of their differences in ability, culture, gender, language, class and ethnicity. An inclusive classroom is thus viewed as a place that both embodies and supports learning for a diverse range of learners, where deficit views of difference and deterministic views about ability are rejected, and participation shapes the experiences and identities of all individuals party to classroom activities (Berry, 2006; Florian, 2009; Kershner, 2009; Kozleski, Artiles & Waitoller, 2014).

An issue that has received a great deal of attention internationally has been teacher effectiveness and teaching quality in inclusion, since interactions between learners and teachers are important social processes that contribute to every learner's academic, social and emotional development (Luckner & Pianta, 2011). Whilst the restructuring and reorganisation of educational policy in response to national and global imperatives for the development of inclusive education might shape broader social and institutional contexts in which teachers operate, it is their personal interpretations and understandings, as well as their day-to-day enactment of inclusion, which determines the way in which policy is reformulated in practice (Sikes, Lawson & Parker, 2007). Consequently, their attitudes towards inclusive education and understanding about its meaning and implementation are crucial elements in the success of inclusive education. The way in which they implement inclusive educational practices in their classrooms are therefore not only likely to be influenced by systemic contextual factors, including for example, the ethos within their own schools as well as the wider educational system's approach to inclusive education, but importantly, also by their understanding of inclusive education.

The study reported in this paper was designed to explore what a group of South African teachers do in their classrooms to make meaning of inclusive education, against the background of the development and implementation of inclusive education in South Africa.

The Implementation of Inclusive Education in South Africa

In response to international developments regarding inclusive education the South Africa White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training system (Department of Education (DoE), 2001) outlined a national strategy to achieve an inclusive education system that focuses on addressing and accommodating learners who experience various barriers to learning as far as possible in mainstream classrooms. It stressed that inequalities in all schools, including the special schools sector, ought to be eradicated. The policy broke with the concept of 'special needs education' and introduced the notion of 'barriers to learning' within an inclusive education framework (DoE, 2001). A central standpoint of White Paper 6 is that inclusive education amounts to recognising and respecting learner diversity; acknowledging that all learners can learn and need support; and capacitating teachers to enable them to address a wide range of learning needs by focusing on teaching and learning actions that will benefit all students who experience barriers to learning (Oswald, 2007). Furthermore, White Paper 6 asserted that the education system must transform to accommodate the full range of barriers to learning and development, including needs caused by intrinsic organic/medical causes (e.g. disabilities, chronic illness), as well as barriers caused by extrinsic systemic barriers, including socio-economic factors, an inflexible curriculum, problems with language and communication, and poorly-trained teachers. However, despite a strongly stated position on the socially-constructed nature of difference and resultant extrinsic contextual barriers, White Paper 6 still depended on a medical approach when support for diverse barriers to learning was proposed. It recommended a continuum of support for learners who experience barriers to learning that distinguished between learners with low-intensive support, who receive support in mainstream schools, learners with moderate support requirements, who are to be accommodated in full-service schools, and learners who require high-intensive educational support, who continue to be accommodated in special schools that will also play a role as resource centres for neighbouring mainstream schools (DoE, 2001; Engelbrecht & Van Deventer, 2013).

As a result, initial and continuing professional development of classroom teachers were considered a priority by the DoE (2001), as teachers were recognised as being the primary resource for achieving the goal of an inclusive education system. It has, however, become increasingly clear in research studies that the focus on inclusive education in South African teacher education programmes tend to be fragmented and short-term, lacking in-depth content knowledge (Engelbrecht, 2013; Oswald, 2007). They continue to focus on a more deficit-oriented approach to intrinsic barriers to learning, based on the continuum of support recommended in White Paper 6. Preparation tends not to take into consideration the unique extrinsic contextual influences that impact on the way in which schools function or the effect of the traditional medical approach to learners with diverse education needs on the quality of teacher-learner interactions in mainstream classrooms. Furthermore, in most instances, teacher education students complete their training without any sustained interaction with students who experience barriers to learning and development especially those with disabilities so that their ability to translate and enact what they have learned in mainstream classrooms remain questionable (Engelbrecht & Van Deventer, 2013; Kozleski & Siuty, 2014; Nel, Engelbrecht, Nel & Tlale, 2014; Oswald, 2007). Teacher education programmes therefore tend not to focus in depth on what Loreman (2010) calls the essential outcomes for inclusive education-related teacher education programmes. These outcomes include, for example, a deeper understanding of inclusive education and diversity; the knowledge and range of skills to collaborate widely with all stakeholders; engaging in inclusive instructional planning by being reasonably prepared to anticipate and be responsive to high-priority needs within regular classrooms; and effectively support learners with diverse learning needs to participate fully in all classroom activities, rather than being supported in separate special classrooms or resource centres (Watkins, 2012). Some of the strategies to provide support in regular classrooms include for instance creating participatory classroom activities using peer collaboration strategies and small group work that are not based solely on ability where individual learning, where interdependence and interpersonal skills are promoted within heterogeneous groups, and where teachers promote classroom dialogue for learning by using responsive instruction strategies (Berry, 2006).

As in other countries, research studies on the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa have pointed out that additional complex contextual issues including funding constraints that affect the availability of resources, resultant over-crowded classrooms and school cultures that influence attitudes towards difference and disability, have complicated the implementation of the recommendations of White Paper 6 (Walton, 2011;

Walton & Lloyd, 2011). Although South African teachers seem to favour inclusion in principle, they believe that the South African educational system does not have the resources needed to enable them to implement inclusive education. Teachers' ambivalence regarding the implementation of inclusive education increases as they become more concerned with teaching subject matter and completing curriculum requirements, rather than diversifying instruction to meet a range of learner needs (e.g. Jordan, Glenn & McGhie-Richmond, 2010; Nel et al., 2014; Nel, Müller, Hugo, Helldin, Bäckmann, Dwyer & Skarlind, 2011; Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel & Malinen, 2012).

Although recent curriculum transformation has integrated the principle of inclusive education, which by implication means that curriculum implementation should be flexible with regard to teaching methods, assessment, pace of teaching and the development of learning material (DoE, 2001), the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) do not support the requirements of a flexible curriculum as stated in Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001; Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013). During annual national assessments (ANA) in 2012 and 2013 by the Department of Basic Education (DoBE) on literacy and numeracy skills in Grades One-Six and Nine, it was established that South African learners experience serious challenges in these areas (DoBE, Republic of South Africa, 2013). As a result, intervention programmes were put in place by the DoBE in primary schools. For example, in Gauteng Province, where most of the schools in this study are located, the Gauteng Programme for Language and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) was initiated to support the implementation of the CAPS. The focus of the GPLMS is on providing clear time allocations to complete the curriculum, weekly routines, revision weeks and marking guidance (Gauteng Province Department of Education, 2012). The findings of this study indicate that this prescriptive approach to policy requirements restricts teachers in being flexible to address their own learners' context and needs (Msibi & Mchunu, 2013:19-23).

Against this background, South African teachers continuously need to develop strategies on a daily basis to provide quality educational opportunities for every learner in their classrooms as their classroom contexts in mainstream schools are increasingly characterised by a complex constellation of barriers to learning and development – primarily those of social class, ethnicity, home language and ability/disability.

Motivation and Theoretical Framework for this Study

The study discussed in this paper forms part of a larger project that had its origin in discussions amongst colleagues in a number of universities in various countries about the effectiveness of pre- and in-service teacher education programmes for the implementation of inclusive education. These discussions led to a more in-depth debate regarding the extent to which teachers are becoming inclusive in their classroom practices and how their own sense of self-efficacy in the implementation of inclusive education and attitudes towards diversity plays a role in this regard. In an effort, therefore, to produce a knowledge base that sheds light on how the development of inclusive education and the implementation thereof in their own classrooms might manifest, a comparative international research project was embarked upon to include a teacher's perspective in different countries, with as overall aim the development of more effective initial and continuing teacher education programmes. Research partners include researchers in Finland, South Africa, Slovenia, Lithuania, China and England.

In order to develop an understanding of teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in general, and to explore questions about the knowledge and skills they need to be inclusive in their own classrooms, the international study has a sequential mixed-method design (Creswell, 2003) that includes both quantitative and qualitative features in the data collection and analysis (Mertens, 2005). By increasing and combining the number of research strategies within this project, we are aiming to broaden the dimension and scope of the project and increase our understanding of teachers' roles in the implementation of inclusive education. Qualitative and quantitative data collection strategies occur in sequential form (in two phases). It was intended that the quantitative data collected and analysed in Phase 1 should provide the basis for the collection of qualitative data in Phase 2, which will focus on teachers' teaching practices in their own classrooms (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 2005).

The overall research project, as well as the study reported on in this study, was placed within a cultural-historical and bio-ecological theoretical framework. Using a cultural-historical framework as proposed by Artiles and Dyson (2005) enabled us to explore how cultural practices, history and context mediate the ways in which inclusive education is realised in local contexts (Kozleski, Artiles, Fletcher & Engelbrecht, 2007). It sheds light on the issues and tensions in the implementation of inclusive education, and how teachers mediate and negotiate their views of inclusive education in institutional and wider ideological contexts. For example, the articulations between forces outside of schools in diverse international contexts such as education policies; the way in which they are either reinforced or opposed within specific local school contexts and how the actions and social interactions of individuals in these school contexts, namely classrooms, are

influenced by these forces (Kozleski et al., 2014; Swart & Pettipher, 2011). The cultural-historical framework resonates with Bronfenbrenner's initial ecological model (1979), and the later development of the bio-ecological model, that is, to understand how learners develop in a complex system of relationships, which are informed by a variety of environmental structures (Berk, 2012; Swart & Pettipher, 2011). These contextual influences comprise micro-, meso- and macro levels, which interact dynamically with one another. Identifying the interconnectedness within and between these systems facilitates a better understanding of the implementation of inclusive education in specific cultural-historical contexts (Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013; Kozleski et al., 2014).

Quantitative data was collected initially in Finland and South Africa using a convenience sampling approach and 319 South-African and 822 Finnish primary and secondary education teachers completed a questionnaire containing a scale measuring Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns on Inclusive Education as well as a scale measuring Teachers Self-Efficacy in Implementing Inclusive Practices. Data was analysed with an IBM SPSS statistics programme. The data from each country was analysed separately, as the objective was to compare the degree to which similar or different the results were between countries. As discussed in Savolainen et al. (2012), a factor analysis carried out in both South Africa and Finland established the structural validity and reliability of the scales and confirmed results in earlier studies by Loreman, Earle, Sharma and Forlin (2007). The comparative analysis indicated that, whereas the overall sentiments towards disabilities are positive in both countries, teachers have several concerns regarding the consequences of including children with disabilities in their classrooms. Results indicated that South African teachers perceive inclusive education within a human rights framework, thereby recognising that there is no difference in the general idea of inclusion and the concrete idea of recognising human rights by including learners with disabilities in their own mainstream classrooms, but that their sense of self-efficacy in doing so is inadequate. Their Finnish counterparts, on the other hand, perceive inclusive education as a pragmatic implementation issue, and would prefer learners with, for example disabilities, to be supported by other professionals within their mainstream schools (Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel & Malinen, 2013).

We therefore realised that in order to develop a deeper understanding of South African teachers' personal interpretations and understandings about barriers to learning within inclusive education, and how their understanding relate to their consequent actions in their classrooms a more in-depth ex-

ploration is needed. As a result, the main research question guiding this study was as follows:

> *What is teachers' understanding of the concept of inclusive education, and as a result, how do they enact inclusive education in classrooms?*

The following sub-questions were formulated to further explore the various aspects of the inclusion of diverse learners in classrooms:

- How do teachers deal with learners and their needs in their classrooms?
- What support do teachers offer learners who experience barriers to learning?

Methodology
As mentioned earlier, a qualitative design was decided upon for Phase 2 of the project, and in the case of the South African study reported here the focus was on developing an understanding of teachers' classroom practices with the four researchers in South Africa as the primary instruments of data collection (Merriam, 2009). The following data sources were used: (1) the results of the quantitative data collected during Phase 1 of the overall project in South Africa as a secondary background data source; (2) semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with teachers who took part in Phase 1; (3) field notes of the researchers based on first exploratory discussions with the teachers and the more formal interview process.

Following the example set by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) and Jordan, Schwartz and McGhie-Richmond (2009), the primary purpose of this study was to encourage teachers through interviews to articulate their views of what is happening in their own classrooms regarding inclusive education practices and by reconstructing their recalled experiences to reflect their understanding about their roles and responsibilities.

Sample Selection and Context
The participants were purposefully chosen from the same sample that completed the questionnaire in Phase 1, and semi-structured individual as well as focus group interviews were conducted. The numbers of teachers interviewed in focus groups differed in the schools (four to seven teachers per school) and three teachers were interviewed individually at two urban schools. In total, 49 teachers were interviewed.

The sample was drawn from the Vaal Triangle area and the Pretoria area in South Africa. The Vaal Triangle area consists of parts of the Gauteng Province as well as the Free State Province and is an industrial area to which people migrate from all over the country to work. This resulted in quite a diverse population of ethnic groups and home languages in the participant schools in the Vaal Triangle area. The participant schools in the Pretoria area also included learners with a diverse

mixture of ethnic groups, home languages and cultures mainly from lower socio-economic areas (Badat & Sayed, 2014). The teachers who participated in the study were also from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with the majority being female. Their levels of professional qualification were a Bachelor's degree or equivalent level.

The two Provincial Departments of Education approved the study and ethical approval was also acquired from the relevant universities. The schools' principals were contacted and meetings were arranged, where the purpose of this phase of the research was explained. All the principals confirmed their co-operation. Thereafter, appointments were made with the teachers. The intent of this phase of the research study was discussed with them. They were reminded that the informed consent that they signed at the beginning of Phase 1 still applies, but they still have an opportunity to withdraw. All the teachers endorsed their cooperation. Interviews took place during break time or after school, and were about an hour in duration. These interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim.

The following semi-structured interview schedule was used:

- If you look/think of your own classroom, how do you deal with all the children and their needs in your classroom?
- If you talk of support for learners in your classroom what do you mean?

Data Analysis

The interview data was analysed using ATLAS.ti in accordance with the data analysis method decided upon for the international comparative research project. ATLAS.ti is a specialised software package, which allows a researcher to extract, categorise and interlink data segments from a large variety and volume of source documents (Friese, 2013). While keeping the overall as well as the sub-research questions in mind, all statements relevant to the topic were identified. Keywords and descriptive phrases were used to make notes about meaningful segments in the transcripts of the South African data. In this process, structural coding was used in order to answer the research questions posed. According to MacQueen, McLellan-Lemal, Bartholow and Milstein (2008, cited in Saldaña, 2013:84) structural coding "applies to a content based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data related to a specific research question, used to frame the interview". Recurring statements were then grouped into categories (families) and thereafter organised into themes that could in future be compared between the different countries. An inductive process of data analysis was therefore employed (Merriam, 2009). The field notes of the researchers were analysed by using content analysis.

Finally, all the data was consolidated using the evidence from the three data sources. In order to verify the trustworthiness of the data analysis, triangulation of the data was undertaken, including the comparison of the different data sources, to verify themes across all sources (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005).

Findings

Findings indicate that two sub-themes within the overall theme of teachers' understanding of inclusive education play a role in teachers' practices in their own classrooms. The sub-themes are framed within the theoretical framework of the overall international research study and are not mutually exclusive, but should be regarded as in dynamic interaction with one another: contextual dilemmas; and a medical deficit approach to teaching and learning support strategies that views barriers to learning as internal to the learner. These findings are now discussed with specific reference to contextual challenges and a medical deficit approach to classroom practices. Evidence of findings is provided in the verbatim quotations from the interviews cited.

Contextual challenges on several system levels have been identified to have a direct and substantial effect on the way in which teachers describe their teaching activities. These system levels address issues at the local-, meso- and macro-system levels and include a lack of physical, financial and human resources on school and district levels, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate initial and continuing teacher education programmes and curriculum constraints that continue to play a role in classrooms in mainstream schools in South Africa (e.g. '…*the classes are too big…*'; '...*the big sizes in our classes* [*sic*] *cause a great difficulty…*'; '...*We need more funding…*'; '*in fact we need training*'; '*And we are having a problem presently, because we are doing this GPLMS and the CAPS*' [*sic*]).

However our overall findings indicate that (as stated in Sikes et al., 2007) whilst contextual issues including policy, structure and school culture might shape the broader school context within which inclusive education is implemented and the participants in this study teach, it is teachers' continuing personal interpretations in dynamic interaction with contextual issues that determine the way in which inclusion is enacted in their classrooms, as well as how they teach and support learners. Although the teachers in this study regard the inclusion of learners with diverse barriers to learning and development in their mainstream classrooms as their right ('*I do not discriminate against anybody...*'; '*they belong in mainstream classrooms...*'), thereby confirming the results of Phase 1 of the overall international project (Savolainen et al., 2012), their classroom teaching and learning

support practices tend to be related not only to a lack of fundamental resources. It is also related to their specific understanding of barriers to learning, based on their initial teacher training regarding special educational needs that focus on a medical deficit approach, and therefore, internal to the learner. They tend to attribute to the learners in their classroom internal and fixed characteristics that, in most cases, are beyond their own expertise and therefore believing it is beyond their ability to support learners experiencing barriers to learning. Consequently these beliefs are reflected in their behaviour in the classroom and in their interactions with learners: '...*there are really weak learners in my classroom who need separate assistance all the time...*'; '...*these weak learners should attend separate remedial classes...*'; '...*you look at their performance and try to do the best you can and of you realise the learner is not doing as expected you just classify that this learner is a slow learner, you just label* [*sic*] *without trying to go deeper into the problem...*'. They therefore prefer to refer these learners for identification and learning support outside their classrooms, because as they say '...*we have not received the necessary special training...*'; '...*so when you find a learner with any disability you can just do the best that you can...but you reach a barrier also, where you can't go over* [*sic*] *that barrier...*'; '..*I want more training... .*'

Furthermore, teachers frequently mentioned their perceived lack of specialised knowledge regarding the professional identification and support of 'special needs' such as learning and sensory disabilities, behavioural, as well as social problems: '...*it also depends on teacher identification of learners who are having barriers because of the lack of knowledge, what type of a barrier these children, this child is experiencing.*' As a result, learners identified with barriers to learning including language difficulties and disabilities remain on the periphery of classroom activities. The group teaching and learning activities referred to by the teachers are based on specific separate ability groups that as a result continue to marginalise and prevent these learners from progressively moving as full participants towards the centre of learning activities in the classroom: '...*I place those who are slow learners in their own group...*'; '...*I try and support weak learners in my class separately... .*'

Discussion
The dynamic interaction between contextual challenges and teachers' understanding of inclusive education in providing inclusive practices for learners who are experiencing diverse barriers to learning in their classrooms clearly influences the development of inclusive education and its envisaged outcomes.

The implementation of inclusive education, 14 years after the introduction of White Paper 6, continues to experience serious challenges as a result of the historical legacy of fundamental economic inequalities during the Apartheid era, and the resultant inadequate physical and human resources (Badat & Sayed, 2014). Overcrowded classrooms of 40+, even up to 70 learners per classroom for example pose challenges with regard to discipline problems. Individual attention to learners' needs is an added stressor for teachers dealing with a variety of contextual challenges in a classroom with a diversity of needs (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart & Eloff, 2003). A shortage of teaching aids and equipment, as well as a lack of administrative and financial support from District offices, are regarded as additional and significant obstacles in enabling teachers to enact inclusive classroom practices. Geldenhuys and Wevers (2013) point out that schools as well as District offices ought to make concerted efforts to acquire the necessary resources to ensure that learners experiencing barriers to learning and their teachers have access to adequate resources. Furthermore, curriculum constraints, such as prescriptive requirements for completion of the curriculum and limited flexibility, are additional challenges in addressing learners' needs. In ensuring that inclusive classroom practices are effective, a curriculum needs to be flexible in order to effect modifications to suit learners' particular contexts and situations and not be restrictive (e.g. Kozleski & Siuty, 2014; Loreman, 2010). The acknowledgement of the continuous dynamic and complex influences and interactions between all contextual aspects of the implementation of inclusive education as well as its influence on the teacher as an individual is therefore important to all concerned.

Findings related to their understanding of barriers to learning and their resultant teaching and learning support strategies indicate that the way in which teachers respect and respond to a diversity of learning needs are based on the training that they initially received as teachers that was based on a deficit approach to barriers to learning and development. They personally engage in practices in their classrooms that are less inclusive, by creating dual learning opportunities that are not sufficiently made available for everyone; every learner is therefore not able to participate fully as part of the whole group in all classroom activities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). What the teachers in this study do in their classrooms to attach meaning to inclusive education practices is to create additional and different spaces and practices for those who experience barriers to learning, by trying to provide something which is different from that which is ordinarily available for most learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). As a result, the teaching

and support strategies they use and the way in which they verbalise challenges and dilemmas are clearly based on their initial teacher education training that was placed within a deficit, individualised approach to special educational needs. Their line of thought is therefore centred on the notion that there is a specific specialist pedagogical approach for all learners with "special educational needs" teachers need to know about, in order to successfully include these learners in mainstream classrooms without an acknowledgement of barriers to learning caused by extrinsic factors. In a situation, as is the case in all the schools in this study, where educational resources are limited and educational aims and values regarding inclusive education still tend to focus on a deficit perspective, the development of a more consistent inclusive education system with diverse learners learning together in a mainstream classroom becomes a matter of balancing certain opposing demands and goals (Kershner, 2009). These include, for example, a continuous effort by teachers to align their general belief in the ideals of the South African Constitution, and its promise of the undoing of previous social injustices that includes the provision of mainstream education for most if not all learners and the realities of the existing conditions in their classrooms. This increases their fear that they do not have the specialised skills they believe that they should have to effectively teach those learners whose learning needs they believe can only be supported by specialised interventions (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Howell, 2007; Kershner, 2009).

These teaching and support activities are rooted in the deficit view, based on the assumption that learners with various types of learning difficulties and disabilities are qualitatively different, and therefore in need of educational responses that are uniquely tailored to their needs. It is therefore not surprising that teachers in this study, with their strong belief in a deficit view entrenched by their initial teacher education experiences, believe that specialist interventions and training are needed to support learners with diverse educational needs. This contributes to their belief that they are not able to implement inclusive education on a concrete and pragmatic level, with the result that their sense of self-efficacy, despite their more positive attitudes to inclusive education, is diminished (Savolainen et al., 2012).

Our results clearly indicate that current initial, as well as continuing teacher education programmes ought to encourage a model of teaching and learning that acknowledges and responds to a wide range of possible barriers to learning, which include both contextual barriers and barriers that are intrinsic to learners, without labelling some learners as 'different', as tends to be the case at present in South Africa. As mentioned earlier, the common international denominator in inclusive education is the recognition and valuing of human diversity within international education systems, and the promise of quality education for all. This implies that teacher education for inclusion should be more than a set of strategies to merely place students in mainstream classrooms and provide a continuum of support levels based on levels of identified disabilities. The conceptual and philosophical challenges in developing teacher education for inclusion programmes and their competencies in this regard are therefore clearly a concern within South Africa. It is widely recommended that initial and continuing teacher preparation programmes need to be restructured in an effort to prepare teachers for complex and diverse classroom contexts. Research indicates that students in initial teacher education programmes benefit when they are instructed on specific collaboration behaviours, especially when they have opportunities to collaborate with special and ordinary teachers during their training. Where training programmes focus on social and educational inclusion and integrate these perspectives in all modules from the outset, not just as an elective or one or two compulsory courses as is the case in the prevailing general teacher education model in South Africa, newly qualified teachers are more successful in providing effective teaching and learning support for learners with diverse education needs despite a lack of general resources to do so (Engelbrecht, 2013; Rouse & Florian, 2012).

Research also indicates that the attempts by the National Department of Education to increase in-service teachers' knowledge and skills through professional development workshops and the encouragement to increasingly enrol in advance studies on inclusive education, such as the previous Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), at various universities, are failing (Eloff & Kgwete, 2007; Nel et al., 2014; Oswald, 2007). The failure of these workshops, as well as advance study opportunities, could be attributed to their short duration and the fact that it is challenging to transform teachers' beliefs about who should have the primary responsibility for learners with complex learning needs within the continuum of support approach recommended in White Paper 6. Jordan et al. (2009:549) state that belief in the locus of responsibility as belonging to the classroom teacher may be a pre-requisite to teachers' development of effective inclusive classroom practices. Challenging teachers' understanding of barriers to learning and development and their resultant beliefs about effective teaching and learning practices for learners who are experiencing barriers to learning should form an integral part of all initial and continuing professional development opportunities.

Conclusion

It has been pointed out repeatedly that inclusive school communities have the responsibility to promote effective learning by creating conducive and supportive learning environments within which learners feel appreciated, curriculum and teaching strategies support learning and teachers understand the uniqueness of every learner in their classrooms (Bojuwoye, Moletsane, Stofile, Moolla & Sylvester, 2014; Swart & Pettipher, 2011). Schools and teachers need to commit to the transformation of their school communities for the implementation of inclusive education to be successful in order to engender attitudes of acceptance and willingness to facilitate the necessary mind shifts in terms of what teachers do in their classrooms, as well as why and how they do it. The importance of a supportive general education context as well as well-skilled professional teachers who have a clear understanding of a variety of barriers to learning, and what their own responsibilities are in addressing these barriers in their own classrooms, are therefore of the utmost importance in the implementation of inclusive education.

The fragility of the changes taking place in South African classrooms is clear in our research results. Teachers, despite their clear understanding of the rights of all learners to be included in mainstream schools, are struggling to meet the increasing influx of learners that are experiencing diverse barriers to learning and development, as they do not have the necessary skills to provide support and to adapt classroom teaching, due to their understanding of barriers to learning as fixed and internal to learners. Furthermore they also have inadequate access to appropriate learning support material and other resources. In order for teachers to enact sustainable inclusive teaching practices effectively in their classrooms the importance of the dynamic interaction between teacher education systems and the education context in terms of education policies, external funding and supportive technical assistance cannot be overemphasised. Transforming teacher education for inclusion alone is for example insufficient to change the present situation in South African classrooms, and it is clear that the sustainable development of inclusive education within the South African educational context needs both collaborative investment in teacher education programmes, as well as focused provincial and national support.

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