Inclusive education: Developments and challenges in South Africa

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Abstract   The implementation of inclusive education in South Africa must be seen in the context of the country's broader political, social, and cultural developments since 1994, particularly the systematic and progressive transformation of education in congruence with Constitutional values and ideals. As a result, the move towards inclusive education has been primarily justified on educational and social grounds. Using a three-step linear process, this paper systematically reviews relevant peer-reviewed research studies and research reports on inclusive education policy enactment in South Africa, to identify both challenges and successes in implementing inclusive education in South Africa. The research findings indicate that although South African teachers in principle support the justification of inclusive education on social grounds, the lack of adequate human, technical, and infrastructural resources to facilitate implementation is a major contributing factor to the negative perceptions (within some school communities) of its educational and economic viability. Despite these challenges, encouraging positive developments include continued support of an inclusive education agenda at the national level, the gradual transformation of teacher education for inclusion, and the identification of successful locally situated inclusive education approaches. It is therefore important to acknowledge that implementation of inclusive education in South Africa is a continuously evolving process, which needs to be contextually relevant and responsive to the social and economic realities within unique school contexts.

Keywords   Inclusive education · South Africa · Human rights · Social justice

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The Salamanca Statement in 1994 accelerated the international move towards inclusive education. By expanding the initial focus on learners with disabilities to a broader emphasis on learners from all backgrounds, it stressed that all children must be given the opportunity to access mainstream/regular schools and to fully participate in all their activities, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, characteristics, and learning needs (UNESCO 2018). Formal definitions of inclusive education by UNICEF, UNESCO, and the United Nations all stress the right to education for all learners, which shows that inclusive education is strongly value-driven (Haug 2017). Given inclusive education's broad equity agenda, alongside the establishment of a democratic society in South Africa in 1994, it unsurprisingly played a role in transforming South African education (Engelbrecht 2006). The focus of inclusive education on increasing equitable rights and access to education resonated with the great anticipation in South Africa that a transformed education system would play a fundamental role in changing the discriminatory social and economic structures inherited from apartheid, contributing to the establishment of a democratic society (Andrews, Walton, and Osman 2019; Badat and Sayed 2014; Donohue and Bornman 2014; Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit, and Van Deventer 2016; Spreen and Vally 2006; UNESCO 1994). As a result, the move towards inclusive education has been justified since 1994 within the complex South African context, especially on educational and social grounds. These justifications for inclusive education are inextricably interlinked and interact dynamically with one another, both in the challenges as well as the successes of implementing inclusive education in this country.

In this article, I draw on my own reflective engagement in inclusive education over the last 20 years, as well as on other scholars' work on the development of South Africa's inclusive education policy formulation and implementation. As a first step, I give a historical overview of inclusive education, its role in South Africa's democratic society, its justification on educational, social, and economic grounds, and the concomitant expectation that inclusive education will be successfully implemented. A research-based account is then given to identify the challenges and opportunities in inclusive education policy implementation, including the role of teachers. In my analysis of the research and the way forward, I argue for wider recognition of successful locally situated inclusive developments, despite complex challenges in implementation.

Research methodology

The overall method used in this article involved a three-step linear approach to a systematic review, against the background of current international debates on inclusive education as a strategy to eliminate exclusion and promote education as a basic human right in inclusive school communities (Ryan 2010; Seedat 2018). First, I reviewed relevant current international literature, by using online databases (e.g., EBSCOhost, Google, and ERIC) to locate reports by international organisations, including United Nations agencies, peer-reviewed journal publications, and research reports. Descriptive keywords and terms included "inclusive education", "justification of inclusive education", "exclusion in education", "equity in education", "disability and education", "inclusive school communities" and "definitions of inclusive education". This more general review was followed by a refined review, focusing specifically on the development of inclusive education policy in shaping education in South Africa after 1994.

In step 3, relevant peer-reviewed research studies and research reports on inclusive education policy enactment in South Africa were reviewed, to identify both challenges and successes. Criteria for the selection of these studies and reports included relevant, appropriately identified areas of research, appropriate research designs and sound methodologies, and relevant findings—all well-substantiated by the data collected (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson 2005; Engelbrecht and Ekins 2017). Finally, evidence for successful implementation was interrogated through a cultural-historical lens, with specific reference to the mediating force of history and culture on implementation of inclusive education in this country (Engelbrecht and Savolainen 2018; Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel, and Malinen 2013; Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller 2011).

A historical overview of the development of inclusive education in South Africa

Inclusive education has clearly evolved as a human rights and social issue. It is internationally regarded as being essentially about access to and full participation in education, thereby embracing the principle of human rights for all learners—and challenging worldwide exclusionary policies and practices for learners deemed "different" (Engelbrecht and Muthukrishna 2019; Singal and Muthukrishna 2014; UNESCO 2018; Walton 2011). Education under the previous government in South Africa was not only racially divided; it also divided learners according to (dis)ability, with a well-resourced special education system of separate special schools in place specifically for white learners with disabilities (Walton and Rusznyak 2014). Post-1994 educational goals were therefore framed in relation to this legacy, and the 1996 South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996a) emphasised the government's commitment to restoring the human rights of all marginalised groups within education, a fundamental right for all citizens (Badat and Sayed 2014). Key education policy documents, such as the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa 1996b), all stressed the principle of human rights as enshrined in the Constitution (Engelbrecht 2006).

A National Committee on Education Support Services and a National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training were commissioned in 1996 to collaboratively investigate the education and support of learners who experienced challenges, including disabilities, in school (Department of Education 1997). The findings and recommendations in their final report pointed to some significant directions for transformation and change, by advocating a move away from a medical deficit model of difference ("special needs", with a focus on disabilities) to a social model of diverse educational needs, thereby becoming more responsive to diverse educational needs within the South African context (Muthukrishna 2001). The recommendations in the report led to a policy framework, *Education White Paper 6–Special Needs Education: Building an inclusive education and training system*, published in 2001 (Department of Education 2001).

To address the inequalities in education entrenched during the apartheid era, *Education White Paper 6* proposed that the entire education system be transformed progressively to an inclusive education and training system, so that all learners could access education, no matter what individual support needs they might have. The paper was placed within an ecosystemic theoretical framework, addressing both barriers to learning and recommendations at the macro-, meso- and microsystem levels, in order to develop an inclusive education system (Swart and Pettipher 2016). The arguments for the development of inclusive

education in the report (Department of Education 1997), as well as in *Education White Paper 6* (Department of Education 2001), were persuasive on social, educational, and economic grounds, and according to Wildeman and Nomdo (2007, p. 29), they "presented a meta-theory discourse that embodies the anti-discriminatory practices and philosophy of the post-apartheid regime".

There was thus a shift from education policies and thinking associated with racial segregation to an inclusive education system, linked to the principles of human rights and dignity, and valuing equal rights to quality education without discrimination (Andrews 2020; Stofile, Green, and Soudien 2018). With specific reference to the economic justification for inclusive education, *White Paper 6* (Department of Education 2001) stated that the specific inherited system for learners with disabilities (only about 20% of learners with disabilities were accommodated in special educational settings in 1994) was both inefficient and cost-ineffective. Expanding educational provision for learners with diverse educational needs—including environmental and systemic barriers to learning—into a more equitable mainstream educational system could be cost-effective and could expand access to education for learners who have been marginalised in the past (Department of Education 2001).

Strategies at the system level to ensure the gradual implementation of inclusive education have included a focus on developing sufficiently trained teachers as the primary resource to accommodate learner diversity in meaningful ways in mainstream classrooms, ensuring the availability of physical and material resources in schools, and establishing both school-based and district-based support teams (Department of Education 2001). A continuum of support for learners with diverse educational support needs was proposed, and despite the strongly stated position in the policy on the socially constructed nature of a diversity of learning needs, it was based more on a deficit approach to support (Engelbrecht 2018). Learners with non-intensive support needs would receive support in mainstream schools, learners with moderate support needs would be accommodated in yet-to-be-developed full-service schools, and learners with high-level support requirements would be accommodated in special schools. Full-service schools were defined as mainstream schools which would be provided in the future with the necessary physical infrastructure, learning materials, and human resources to accommodate a wide range of diverse learning needs (Department of Education 2001). The publication of *Education White Paper 6* was followed by a number of specific implementation guidelines (e.g., Department of Education 2005a, 2005b, 2008; Department of Basic Education 2010, 2011).

The enactment of inclusive education in South African schools: A research perspective

Background

The importance that (mainly South African) researchers attach to the implementation of inclusive education is best illustrated by the fact that SCOPUS ranks South Africa as one of the top ten countries producing work on inclusive education. Most of the reviewed research studies, for the purposes of this paper, can be placed within the context of the implementation of inclusive education, and they focus broadly on two overall themes: (1) implementation of inclusive education based on the directives of *Education White Paper 6*, and (2) the development of inclusive school communities, with an emphasis on the role of teachers (Andrews 2020; Seedat 2018).

Until recently, there was a strong tendency in the research to focus on evidence of the constraints in implementing the directives of *Education White Paper 6*, especially on the negative experiences of teachers and their lack of knowledge about supporting diverse learning needs in mainstream classrooms (Andrews 2020; Donohue and Bornman 2014; Eloff, Swart, and Engelbrecht 2002; Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013; Materechera 2020; Swart and Pettipher 2016). Furthermore, early research studies emphasised the difficulties in defining inclusive education by using a multitude of idealistic connotations that drew mainly on seminal research conducted in countries of the Global North, thereby constructing inclusive education as a challenging concept within the unique and complex South African context (e.g., Singal and Muthukrishna 2014; Walton 2016). As Walton (2016, pp. 91, 95) rightly pointed out, "in naming inclusive education as the problem, we potentially lose focus on the problem of pervasive and endemic educational exclusion", "losing sight of the economic, social, and political power structures that led to exclusion in the first place" in South Africa.

However, more recent publications have showed increasing awareness of how the justification of inclusive education (on social, educational, and economic grounds) interacts with South Africa's complex socio-economic legacies and cultural-historical factors that reflect the overwhelming legacy of continued inequality (Engelbrecht 2018, 2019; Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018; Phasha, Mahlo, and Dei 2017; Walton 2016, 2018). Emerging themes include calls to acknowledge the significance of culturally shaped values and beliefs in the development of inclusive schools, in interaction with the legacies of colonisation as well as apartheid (Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018; Phasha et al. 2017; Walton 2018). With specific reference to the theoretical frameworks within which research has been placed, it is important to note that the strong reliance on Bronfenbrenner's (bio)ecosystemic theoretical framework in research studies has also been criticised, as it does not always allow scholars to address critical questions of power, culture, identity, and equity in local contexts (e.g., Phasha et al. 2017). The reliance on a (bio)ecosystemic framework, as well as the traditional initial reliance on definitions and implementation strategies developed in high-income countries, gradually gave way to a stronger focus on wider cultural-historical approaches, as well as complexity theory perspectives, to facilitate the description and interpretation of, for example, cultural-historical change processes in education, and in this way to influence implementation strategies (Andrews 2020; Engelbrecht et al. 2013; Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018).

In the following sections, I identify several challenges, especially in initial research findings after 2001, in the implementation of inclusive education. I also analyse more recent accounts showing an increased emphasis on cultural-historical approaches, to identify the strengths and capabilities of local communities in innovatively developing equitable inclusive education practices.

Challenges in the implementation of inclusive education

Even though South African education has made good progress quantitatively, particularly by increasing primary school access for all learners (Department of Basic Education 2015; Wolhuter 2014), effective implementation of policy guidelines has remained questionable, despite the creation of a framework of rights to access and participate fully in education, and the resultant improvement in the number of learners who have access to education in general. As pointed out by Spreen and Vally (2006, p. 353), educational rights should extend beyond "rights to education" to "rights in education", which include education

quality in terms of effective and supportive opportunities to participate in classroom learning activities. The following challenges have played a major role in this regard.

Weaknesses in the policy documents and the guidelines for implementation, including both an incoherent conception and understanding of their strategic intent and practical approach, as articulated in *Education White Paper 6*, have impeded the quality and the relevance of the education each learner receives. As a result, research indicates continued tension between a national agenda of educational transformation that encompasses equity and social justice and the contextual realities in school communities (Andrews et al. 2019; Engelbrecht et al. 2013; Schäfer and Wilmot 2012; Spreen and Vally 2006). Some of the unintended results of these weaknesses in policy and implementation guidelines include inconsistent and often contradictory implementation of policy, and in some cases continued reliance on traditional, more deficit-based linear-causal implementation strategies, developed in the pre-1994 era (Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013; Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018; Ngcobo and Muthukrishna 2011; Walton 2018).

The strong dependence on the medical deficit model in the recommended continuum of support, for example, has led to both conflict and ambiguity in the understanding of a broader definition of inclusive education, as defined in the policy document. Research findings indicate that many primary schools, including full-service schools, still prefer to place learners with learning difficulties in separate "special education" classrooms rather than in mainstream classrooms (Andrews et al. 2019; Donohue and Bornman 2014; Engelbrecht et al. 2016). By doing so, they are still embracing a narrow, simplistic, medicalised view of inclusive education focusing on (dis)ability, which reinforces the idea in some school communities that inclusive education is special education renamed, and that it simply entails rearranging the system and not changing it (Engelbrecht 2019; Walton 2016; Walton and McKenzie 2020). Against the background of these research findings, it is not surprising that the Department of Basic Education acknowledged in 2015 that both conceptual and practical challenges at all levels of the education system continue to hinder progress towards a truly inclusive education system (Department of Basic Education 2015).

Furthermore, policymakers have underestimated the short-term as well as the long-term socio-economic realities of implementation in a middle- to lower-income country, as ensuring equity and quality education for all based on policy recommendations has largely been subverted by budgetary constraints (Department of Basic Education 2015; Engelbrecht 2018; Ngcobo and Muthukrishna 2011; Spreen and Valley 2006; Swart and Oswald 2008; Wildeman and Nomdo 2007; Wolhuter 2014). As pointed out recently by Andrews, Walton, and Osman (2019), funding constraints are, almost 20 years after the publication of *White Paper 6*, still influencing the availability of resources needed to develop effective inclusive school communities. The lack of provision of adequate human, technical, and infrastructural resources to facilitate more inclusive curriculum and learning support structures, especially in rural areas, continues to indicate the clear gap between the ideals of policy documents and the realities within schools, and to create negative perceptions within some school communities of the educational and economic viability of implementing inclusive education (Andrews et al. 2019; Engelbrecht et al. 2016; Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013; Oswald 2014).

Prominent in the literature on implementing inclusive education in South Africa is an emphasis on the role of teachers, as influential role players and agents of change in the development of inclusive schools (e.g., Geldenhuys and Wevers 2013; Makoelle 2012; Oswald 2014; Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel, and Malinen 2012; Swart and Oswald 2008). Whilst the restructuring and reorganisation of education policy in response to the national and international imperatives for inclusive education is important in shaping

the broader social and educational contexts in which teachers work, researchers stress that teachers' personal attitudes and understandings determine the way inclusion is enacted in their classrooms (Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel, and Tlale 2015; Oswald 2014; Swart and Oswald 2008; Walton 2011).

Initial research after 2001 tended to focus more narrowly on teachers' attitudes towards disabilities and implementation of inclusive education, leading to calls for more effective initial teacher education programmes to support teachers, sometimes without taking complex cultural-historical factors into account (Andrews 2020; Eloff et al. 2002; Swart and Oswald 2008). In an effort to establish a multidimensional knowledge base that could shed light on how teachers' attitudes and sense of self-efficacy influence their enactment of inclusive education in unique cultural-historical contexts, a comparative mixed-methods research project, conducted over a period of five years in Finland and South Africa, focused on teachers' roles in inclusive education. The research findings indicated that although South African teachers in principle support the justification of inclusive education on social grounds, they have serious doubts about their self-efficacy in its implementation, thereby raising doubt as to its educational justification (e.g., Engelbrecht et al. 2013; Engelbrecht et al. 2015; Engelbrecht and Savolainen 2018; Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel, Koskela and Okkolin 2017; Makoelle 2012; Nel, Engelbrecht, Nel and Tlale 2014; Savolainen et al. 2012). Interrelated cultural-historical challenges identified within individual South African schools included negative attitudes towards (dis)ability in wider school communities and difficulties around issues of diversity, ineffective and authoritarian school leadership which limited teachers' individual agency, a resultant lack of support within schools, and the lack of effective initial teacher education for inclusion (Engelbrecht et al. 2015).

In other research studies on enacting inclusion in diverse school contexts, researchers have also increasingly emphasised context-specific findings, by illustrating how individual school systems experience difficulties defining diversity within their own unique contexts (Andrews 2020; Moletsana, Hemson, and Muthukrishna 2004; Oswald 2014). For example, Andrews (2020) indicated that the majority of teachers in his four case-study primary schools, while motivated and committed to teach inclusively, were constrained by leadership-imposed teaching practices within their schools, based on challenging socio-economic complexities within their wider school communities and the need for meaningful further education opportunities. These findings were confirmed by Materechera (2020), who stated that teachers continue to be caught in a dilemma between their beliefs in the value of human rights and the complex realities in their schools. It is clear that these contextual realities influence the way in which teachers respect and respond to a diversity of learning needs, potentially increasing their fears that they are unable to align their general belief in the ideals of the Constitution with the provision of quality education for every learner.

Research findings on the nature of teacher education for inclusive education, based on teachers' negative perceptions of the way they have been trained, indicate that initial teacher education programmes do not respond to the increased demand for newly qualified teachers in South Africa to teach inclusively (Republic of South Africa 2015; Walton and Rusznyak 2014, 2017). Additional stand-alone courses on diverse educational needs and learner support are generally added to the overall curriculum in initial teacher education programmes, but they are rarely extended to broaden the boundaries of inclusive education by integrating their contents with the broader pedagogical practices of teachers in mainstream classrooms (Engelbrecht and Ekins 2017; Walton and Rusznyak 2017). Furthermore, the continued focus on (dis)ability and the lack of theoretical as well as practical guidelines on inclusive participation, diversity, and equity are contributing factors in the

ineffectiveness of these programmes (Engelbrecht and Ekins 2017; Kamanga 2013; Walton and Rusznyak 2017).

Positive developments in the implementation of inclusive education

At the national policy level, it needs to be noted that in a more recent progress report on inclusive education, the government has reaffirmed its commitment to realising the vision of *Education White Paper 6*, in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2018; United Nations 2015). A progress report from 2015 identifies not only challenges (as mentioned in the previous section) but also positive developments at a national level (Department of Basic Education 2015). These include an increase in the number of learners with identified diverse educational needs in mainstream schools, from 77,000 in 2002 to 121,461 in 2015, an increase in the number of full-service schools, from 30 in 2002 to 715 in 2015 (Department of Basic Education 2015), and access to external funding for the development of initial teacher education programmes.

Recent enhancements in teacher education for inclusive education increasingly feature both a stronger focus on culturally responsive inclusive teaching strategies in mainstream classrooms and the enhancement of teaching practicum experiences, as well as the infusion of a social justice framework, to enable teachers to examine dominant values, discourses, beliefs, and actions that could perpetuate exclusion and negative attitudes towards diversity. In addition, there is strong evidence of individual school leaders and teachers who, despite contextual and policy implementation challenges, continue to engage with implementation strategies and to display agency in responding to inclusive education policy imperatives in their own school communities (Andrews 2020; Oswald and Engelbrecht 2013).

Calls to transform teacher education for inclusive education programmes have focused not only on building teachers' practical competencies in diverse school contexts, but also on giving them the skills to engage competently with issues of oppression, discrimination, and diversity in classrooms, thereby contributing to advancing rights to education and rights in education. Teacher professional development initiatives that focus on inclusive education have increasingly been enhanced by the inclusion of social justice education frameworks, to enable reflective examination of dominant discourses, values, beliefs, and actions that perpetuate exclusion and oppression (Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018; Reygan and Steyn 2017; Sayed, Motala, and Hoffman 2017).

For example, the critical diversity literacy (CDL) framework, developed by Melissa Steyn, provides opportunities for teachers to develop an analytical orientation towards and understanding of the intersectionality of power, privilege, and differences, including differences in race, class, gender, and religion (Reygan and Steyn 2017). CDL, also referred to as "reading practice", provides teachers with a set of analytical skills for reflecting on and deconstructing their own social attachments and identities, and for "seeing themselves as agents of social change in the goal to make certain schools are safe, caring, inclusive and non-discriminatory contexts" (Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018, p. 8; Walton and McKenzie 2020). Researchers indicated that using CDL in professional teacher development programmes can strengthen both educational and social justifications of inclusive education within schools, as well as in teacher education institutions (Kiguwa 2018; Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018).

As pointed out by Ngcobo and Muthukrishna (2011) and Singal and Muthukrishna (2014), inclusion in complex local communities, including school communities, is a cultural-historical product that depends on the overall culture towards diversity within that

unique community. It is therefore almost impossible to formulate solutions to the challenges of implementing inclusive education without taking into account the cultural-historical contexts and the lived realities of community members within specific school communities. Recent calls to decolonise inclusive education in Southern African countries (e.g., Mfuthwana and Dreyer 2018; Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018; Phasha et al. 2017; Walton 2018) also emphasise reclaiming culture, knowledge, history, and the identities of learners, by developing contextually relevant knowledge production in inclusive education. As a result, more recent research studies in South Africa have acknowledged the importance of locally situated inclusive education approaches, and research is increasingly focused on recognising difference as a strength, developing an understanding of individual schools as grounded in their communities—using, for example, multiple case studies and cross-case analysis of findings (e.g., Andrews 2020; Engelbrecht 2019; Phasha et al. 2017).

It is therefore encouraging, against this background, to find examples in the literature of how individual schools, despite contextual challenges, enable administrators' and teachers' agency in responding positively to the implementation of inclusive education in their schools (e.g., Andrews 2020; Engelbrecht and Muthukrishna 2019; Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht 2018; Oswald and Engelbrecht 2013). Cross-cutting characteristics of these schools include: meaningful and adaptive leadership at the school management level; expansive teacher learning for inclusion, which succeeds because leadership activities in the school allow for active and collaborative engagement with a change initiative; an understanding of the contextual strengths and weaknesses in the wider school community; the development of collaborative partnerships at all system levels; and a conceptualisation of inclusivity that is fluid and relevant to its context.

Case study: A brief example of successful implementation

A case study of a rural full-service school offers positive evidence of the realisation of inclusive education on both social and educational levels, within a unique cultural-historical context. In 2018, my colleague Nithi Muthukrishna and I (Engelbrecht and Muthukrishna 2019, pp. 89–106) conducted a case study of a full-service primary school situated in a rural context in South Africa. We placed our study within a complexity theory framework, which gave us new spaces to explore explanations and new ways to develop understandings of the development of inclusive education practices, processes, and outcomes in this school.

The school was designated to serve as a full-service school in 2013. According to district officials, it was initially selected for conversion from a general/mainstream school to a full-service school on the grounds that the school leadership, including the teachers, had already begun to regard themselves as agents of change by exhibiting a willingness—despite some initial reservations—to innovatively engage with the proposals of *Education White Paper 6*. These reservations included the staff's initial view that this was an added burden for them, and there was clearly some initial resistance to the uncertainty of new policy implementation and the implied move away from a traditional, deficit-based, linear-causal construction of learners who experience learning difficulties in classrooms. Furthermore, the thinking, based on the staff's initial teacher education training, was that these learners would need specialised professional support, and that the teachers were not qualified to support them to learn effectively.

The school, as a full-service school, provides a moderate level of support and serves as a resource and referral centre for surrounding schools and communities. It has slightly

greater resourcing and staffing than mainstream schools, and it accommodates about 270 learners with moderate physical, intellectual, and hearing impairments in mainstream classrooms. The school has approximately 1,500 total learners, from Grade R (preschool) to Grade 7, and 41 staff members. The wider community context in which the school is situated is characterised by complex socio-economic challenges, which influence the way staff at the school set priorities and make decisions.

A qualitative research design was used, sampling was purposive, and participation was voluntary, following an informed consent process. Data generation involved document analysis, in-depth individual interviews, as well as focus group interviews with identified participants. Key participants included the school principal, members of the school-based support team and the learning support teacher, and a small number of other teachers. Interviews were digitally recorded and were later transcribed and analysed using content analysis. Two interlinked themes identified from the data analysis (*leading change in a complex system* and *networking for change*) illustrate how the staff's professional judgement and inclusive education enactments were continually influenced and shaped by the complexity of the school and the wider school community context.

Specifically, the data suggests that leadership is generally an adaptive and interactive dynamic within the school system, and that it is socially constructed in and from context. The leadership at the school has, from the outset, embraced changes emanating from new policy imperatives that have emerged from *Education White Paper 6*. As a result, school staff have taken the initiative to engage proactively in responding to diversity and working to create an inclusive schooling context. The school now has an ethos that is welcoming and affirming of diversity, and it is committed to providing access and creating opportunities for each learner to participate in learning activities.

The data also indicates ongoing staff development at a professional level, and that staff at the school are building their own contextual knowledge of issues of inclusion and exclusion, shaped by contextual demands in the wider school community. However, their actions may not always have been coherent and consistently in line with policy principles and international imperatives for inclusive education, which shows the continuously developing nature of inclusive education practices in unique contexts. For example, two separate classrooms for learners experiencing difficulties in learning were initially established. But they were later discontinued by staff on the basis of their reflective evaluation on the lack of benefit of these structures—in terms of the goal of inclusive and quality education for all—and of their own developing professional judgement and attitudes towards difference.

It is clear that teachers' attitudes and the nature of their professional judgement have changed over the years as teachers have engaged proactively with inclusive education issues and learner support. So far, they seem to be allowing the complexity of what they are involved in to emerge. The school has been able to forge stronger links with the community and is taking on a participatory leadership role in the district, for example by arranging and holding workshops for teachers from other schools in the district. Forging such networks, the study found, was vital for sustainable change and development. School staff members are committed to building collaborative partnerships in the community to access human and social capital, so they can better address challenges and exclusionary pressures on learners and their families.

Despite the encouraging emerging practices highlighted above, it must be stressed that this school, like most schools in South Africa, faces challenges in education policy implementation—particularly a lack of funding to support innovative initiatives, large classes, under-resourced classrooms and teacher shortages. Moreover, despite efforts to develop continuous professional opportunities, teacher professional development is still inadequate.

Thus, the question is whether such initiatives are sustainable in the long term, as systemic inequities remain a challenge in schooling contexts.

Concluding thoughts

Inclusive education and its implementation in South Africa must be seen in the context of the broader political, social, and cultural developments in the country since 1994, since the systematic and progressive transformation of education is an important overall goal for the government and citizens alike. Implementation of inclusive education can therefore not be discussed meaningfully without taking account of the justification of inclusive education on social, educational, and economic grounds in the country. The important role that the national government (in collaboration with individuals within the education system) plays in respecting, promoting, and achieving equitable quality inclusive education for each learner cannot be overemphasised.

In contrast to earlier idealistic predictions about implementation, policymakers as well as researchers now acknowledge that inclusive education in South Africa is a continuously evolving process. It does not follow a predictable linear path of formulation of policy, adoption of policy, and uncomplicated implementation of guidelines—especially in complex and localised educational contexts. Teachers and other staff in leadership, along with district, provincial, and national education staff and policymakers, need to recognise schooling contexts and education systems as unique complex systems. But they also need to recognise the developing nature of implementation, as illustrated in the case study. I must agree with the statement by Singal and Muthukrishna that "it is only when we truly begin to develop a deeper appreciation of the context and make efforts to understand individual and collective stories that we can open up the moral and political space for effective educational reform efforts" (2014, p. 300). Knowledge and acceptance of emerging innovative changes that are aligned with the aims of inclusive education in South Africa, in localised cultural-historical settings, can therefore be invaluable in addressing the multiple intersecting factors that negatively impact the implementation of inclusive education in specific school communities.

However, consistent gaps between idealistic inclusive education policy and the realities persist, specifically a lack of technical and human resources in schools, and funding remains critical in ensuring sustainable long-term implementation strategies. Policymakers therefore need not only to be more specific about the goals and targets of implementation, but also to concretely indicate, after consultation with all role players, the funding needed to achieve these goals and targets. By acknowledging both the challenges which constrain implementation *and* the positive developments which innovatively advance implementation in unique contexts, scholars and policymakers can inform thinking, policy, and practice in the successful implementation of inclusive education—and South Africa's continued commitment to an inclusive education agenda.

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