TREKKING BACK TO MAINSTREAM FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This research explores challenges faced by the schools when learners from specialized institutions are referred back to mainstream for Inclusive Education. Ecosystemic perspective on Inclusive Education and systems theories underpin this paper. The study was done through interviews, field notes and observations of 120 participants comprising of the Senior Management Teams, educators and parents. The GDE 450 'A' forms were also analyzed. The findings indicate that schools face many challenges in managing diverse learner needs. A lot has been published on Inclusive Education, but none of them offer ecosystemic management strategies for the school management teams, teachers, parents and learners.
Key words: *ecosystemic theories; inclusion; Inclusive Education; systems theory.*

Introduction

An historical background is necessary to understand the rationale behind Inclusive Education for learners who are in need of 'diverse education'. For many years learners who experience barriers to learning in South Africa received inadequate or no educational provision at all. Specialized education and support were only provided for a small percentage of learners with disabilities within 'special' schools and classes. The majority of learners with disabilities either fell outside of the system or have been 'mainstreamed by default'. The education system and the curriculum as a whole have generally failed to respond to these learners. As a result, there were massive dropouts, push-outs, and failures. According to the White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) it became inevitable that South Africa had to transform from 'special and ordinary' education to an inclusive outcomes-based approach to education. This approach led to embracing all 'normal and special learners' in mainstream schools. The apartheid era education in South Africa had promoted divisions based on race, class, disability, gender and ethnicity instead of unity amongst citizens belonging to one nation (White Paper 6, Department of Education, 2001).

Debates on Inclusive Education are very comprehensive. However, the major challenge is to effectively manage learners with diverse needs who are being referred back to mainstream schools. Schools still do not have 'specialised services' as promised by the Department of Education (DoE, 2001). Therefore, this paper focuses on the urgency for all schools to implement ecosystemic management strategies in order to provide effective management in schools. In this context, effective management is finding ways and (maintain them) of accommodating diverse learners' needs with little or no resources to enable the learners to reach their maximum potential.

Research Questions

- To what extent are inclusive schools able to manage the implementation of Inclusive Education?
- What ecosystemic management strategies should be employed for effective implementation of Inclusive Education?

In this section, we highlight the theoretical underpinning of this paper. The eco-systemic perspective on Inclusive Education's central argument is that individuals and groups at various levels of the social context are linked in dynamic, interdependent and interacting relationships (Donald, Lazarus, Lolwana, 2010). The ecosystem theoretical framework sees learners as being influenced by forces around them and as constantly making meaning of their lives within their social context (Castle, 2001; Kim, 2001). Therefore, when considering the constructivist worldview, reference to the context of the family leads to the concept of an 'ecosystem perspective' (Grove and Burch, 1997: 259; Castle, 2001). Groups of people operate as systems and depend on the interaction of their subsystems for survival. Every human being has a particular relationship with the world. This relationship includes all knowledge and conceptions of a philosophical, theological, scientific, historical and theoretical nature (Davis, 2005).

The system interacts with other systems on the outside. For example; 'grandparents', 'parents', and 'children' may be seen as subsystems within a family, while the family as a whole may interact with systems on the outside, like other families, a school, or church. The systems theory maintains that cause and effect relationships are not seen as taking place in one direction only, rather they occur in cycles. Because of the interrelationship between the parts, an action in one part of a system cannot be seen as the cause for action in another part in a simple, one-directional way. Actions are seen as triggering and affecting one another in cyclical, often repeated patterns (Boyle, Kay and Pond, 2001). Capra (1996; Allen, 2001, 2003; Allen *at al.,* 2001) and Canham, Cole and Lauenroth (2000) explain this interrelationship as follows: "… a learner with a disability exists within a larger family and any change without considering the family system could lead to negative side effects. In contrast, knowledge about the family system can aid in the selection of learner and family focus interventions".

In the light of the above, it is clear that Inclusive Education needs to be considered in relation to the systems theories. The idea of Inclusive Education would then be to contribute towards the development of an Inclusive Society and social integration, where all citizens are able to achieve their potential, fully participate and function optimally.

Corbett (1999, 2001; Allen, 2001, 2003; Allen *et al.,* 2001) argue that a focus on a child with disability, while ignoring other family members, is short sighted. The family members of children with disability have a great deal to teach educators and other professionals, because they have an intimate knowledge of their child and his/her particular impairment.

In addition, research also shows that in many countries parents of learners with special education needs (Daniels and Vaughn, 1999: 49) have brought about transformation of schools and education. Inclusive Education presents many exciting opportunities as well as challenges for education in South Africa. The major challenge at this point is to develop and involve support structures both inside and outside of the school (Beverly and Thomas, 1999: 179; Allen, 2001, 2003; Allen *et al.*, 2001).

Krall and Jalongo (1999: 83; Bricker and Cripe, 2004) identify in-school support as educators supporting learners, support between educators and support to educators and learners from an outside source. In this context, support means positive interaction between parts of the system and also between these parts and outer medium of the system. While this description may reflect prevalent practices, the emphasis within inclusion is on the integration and infusion of education support services. Lewis (1999: 275; Brown and Bergen, 2002) state that Inclusive

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Education may be perceived as a complex issue in terms of the practical implementation of its principles.

In this regard, "inclusive education" means making unified efforts between all systems in order to accommodate diverse learner needs in the school. With the help of educators and parents who understand learner profiling, the learners can adapt the information to understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Such information can be used successfully to become better learners and to develop learning style flexibility (Allen and Schwartz, 2001: 50).

A collective effort to understanding learners as individuals who are all different will build bridges towards appropriate support for all learners. The educator must be aware of the eco-systems that operate around the learner which might result the success of the learner in the classroom. Below is a diagram of a hierarchy of eco-systems in inclusive education that should operate to the benefit of all lear

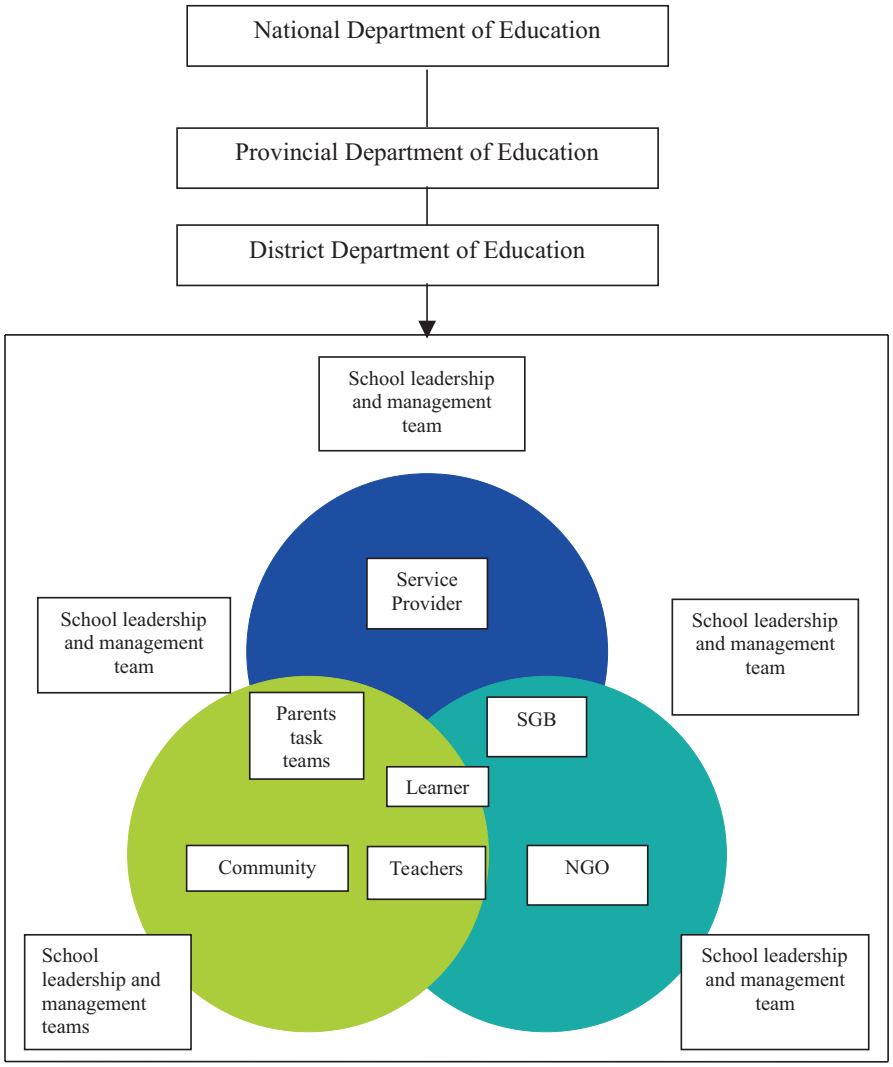

Figure 1: Hierarchy of eco-systems in inclusive education.

Educators must facilitate thinking and acting that allows every individual to feel accepted, valued and safe. An inclusive community consciously evolves to meet the changing needs of its members. Through recognition and support, an inclusive community provides meaningful involvement and equal access to the benefits of citizenship.

The above discussion highlighted the interdependence of different corresponding systems which may be used as pillars for the implementation of Inclusive Education.

Research Methodology

The goal of this research was to find ecosystemic management strategies for inclusive schools. The interviews focused on the extent to which Senior Management Teams (SMT), educators and parents are able to manage the implementation of Inclusive Education in mainstream schools when following main concepts and structures of systems theory or systems thinking.

The research design that was used in this study is qualitative, which as Berg (2003: 5) states, helps the researcher to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible. The interviews, field notes, observations were done with the SMT, teachers and parents. The only documents analysed were GDE 450 'A' forms which are completed by grade educators in order to provide educators in the next grade with information about learners who experience barriers to learning. Such information should assist these educators to support learners who experience barriers to learning.

The interviews focused on the extent to which Senior Management Teams (SMT), educators and parents are able to manage the implementation of Inclusive Education in mainstream schools when following main concepts and structures of systems theory or systems thinking. The aim of the observations was to confirm the information gathered during the interviews. Field notes were taken to gather information as it happened. The GDE 'A' forms were analyzed to gather information regarding the effectiveness of the information provided about learners who experience barriers to learning.

The population of this research comprised Senior Management Teams (SMTs) of schools, educators and parents in the Vaal Triangle (District 8 of the Gauteng Department of Education), a total of 1 200 (N=1200). The sample was 10% (N=120). As no detailed information regarding the number of SMTs, educators and parents could be obtained from the Sedibeng West District (D8) of the Gauteng Department of Education, the researcher decided to determine the research sample.

In purposeful sampling, it is important for the researcher to first determine the selection criteria to be used in choosing the participants. These criteria must reflect the purpose of the study and guide the process to be followed (Denzin, 2001: 61). A sample of 10 %, 120 participants (N=120) of the total population of 1200 (N=1200), 40 educators (N=40), 8 focus groups of Senior Management Teams, 5 members each (N=40) and 40 parents (N=40) were selected from former model 'C' schools, private schools and township schools in the Vaal Triangle. These participants were selected from one Former model 'C' school, one government funded Catholic school, one Section 21 non-profit private school and one township school in the Vaal Triangle area. These schools have 100% ethnic African/black learners. The parents were mainly ethnic African. The selection of the sample is based on the first names on the lists of educators on post level one that school principals gave to the researcher and the Senior Management Team of the schools. The first ten educators on the list were selected per school. Likewise, the first ten names of parents on the list of learners who were classified as learners who experienced barriers to learning were selected for the research. All the participating schools have approximately 600 hundred learners in each school. The participating educators' teaching experience ranges from 4 years to 25 years. The age range of participants is between 28 to 55 years. The parents' ages ranged from 28 to 60 years.

The relevant people holding key positions such as principals in the selected private schools, township schools and the former model 'C' schools working in inclusive settings, gave permission for this research in the Vaal Triangle. The provincial Department of Education and the Department of Education district office gave their permission too. The collected data

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and the participants' names are treated as confidential. The research aims and objectives were explained to them before participating in the research (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport, 2003).

Results of Research

Findings from the data indicated that mainstream schools lack direction and scope regarding inclusivity. The following theme was identified:

Management of the implementation of White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education challenges which was further categorised and sub-categorised as indicated in the table below:

Table 1. Themes, categories and sub-categories.

Theme	Category	Sub-category
Management of the implementation of White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education challenges	Lack of direction and scope regarding inclusivity	• Learners with academic problems • Learners with behavioural problems

The findings under the above themes, categories and sub-categories unfolded as follows:

Management of the implementation of White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education challenges

Category: Lack of direction and scope regarding inclusivity

The responses from the participants regarding the challenges that they experience brought to light that they lack direction and scope regarding inclusivity. The schools vision and mission statements do not reflect inclination towards inclusive education.

An educator indicated that:

'School Management Team members are also educators, they have classes, and they are teaching, they have the same problems, so they cannot help us with Inclusive Education in our classrooms'.

The educators depend on Senior Management Teams' assistance but if they cannot help the educators, then they are helpless, they have no one to turn to.

A principal of a school indicated that:

'The district office has no specialist to help with the challenges of running schools with inclusive learners. They have a psychologist, but there are more than a hundred schools he must visit. There are too many learners needing help and that complicates the situation'.

If there is no capacity to deal with Inclusive Education challenges, it becomes impossible to think of the implementation of White Paper 6. For the policy to be implemented effectively staff must be trained for the task and the Department of Education must employ sufficient personnel to deal with the challenges.

In the above category, the sub-categories emerged as 'learners with academic problems' and 'learners with behavioural problems'. The analysis will be done in the following paragraphs:

Sub-category: Learners with Academic Problems

One hundred percent (100%) of the educators indicated that the majority of their learners require intensive learner support. They indicated that the majority of learners in their classes have learning challenges that educators in a 'normal' classroom cannot cope with as they lack the expertise to deal with the problems that these learners present.

Fifty-four (54%) of the learners who were classified as possible 'failures' had repeated their grades previously. Learners are not supposed to repeat a grade twice or repeat twice in a phase. Therefore, a learner who fails a grade once will automatically move to the next grade the following year. It does not matter whether they have made any progress or not, they are condoned for various reasons, but mainly due to age, because if a learner repeats a grade twice, he/she might be over the age limit for him/her to repeat another grade. Educators complete the referral forms so that psychologists can help but as they are also under-staffed, they do not attend to these cases. The GDE 450 'A' forms are filled-in for the educator in the following grade to follow-up and attend to the learners in terms of giving them support. However, finding an educator who is prepared to attend to these cases is very rear. There are too many learners with academic challenges. Therefore the GDE 450 'A' forms become a waste of time.

A Head of Department (SMT) indicated that:
'The learners fail because they do not make any effort to perform better. They are aware that they will be condoned due to age. It becomes very discouraging for the learners who work hard to be promoted because they find themselves in the same grade with learners who they know did not make it to that grade. It is very discouraging! It is also frustrating for the educators when we take the schedule to the District and the failed learners come back as condoned'.

According to the researcher this scenario favors a lazy learner who knows the loopholes of the system. If a learner knows that he/she is too old to repeat, the learner is often not motivated to work hard. The Department of Education must have measures in place for learners who float through the system due to age and find themselves in the next grade without any foundation from the previous grade. This does not just frustrate learners; it frustrates the educators and the school system as a whole, as these are normally learners who also cause disturbances in the school.

Schools do not receive most of the profiles of new learners from the schools that the learners come from. If some schools sent the profiles, educators have no time to read the information and the files are locked in the archives of the school.

A deputy Principal explained that:
'It was a way of making space for our own documentation, if we include the previous schools documents, there will be no space in the filing cabinet'.

Frustration due to academic failure breeds behavioral problems in the school. The following paragraphs focus on learners with behavioural problems.

Sub-category: Learners with Behavioural Problems

The learners who are academically challenged pose serious behavioural problems as a way of hiding their learning challenges.

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One educator was very open about these cases and said:
'Why should we worry about these learners, compulsory education is up to Grade 9, who has time for these learners? They are wasting our time, this is a hopeless situation and there is nothing we can do about it, we must just find a way of getting rid of them as quickly as possible, I am sick and tired of them, they get on my nerves all the time, even their own parents don't care'.

The interviewed parent said:

'This child is just like that even at home, he does not listen'.

We cannot talk about Inclusive Education when the educators are looking for ways of getting rid of learners who do not cope well with academic work. There must be strategies in place to accommodate such learners, instead of pushing them out of the system. In this case where the family system is not working well too, the parents are failing to discipline their children, the schools find themselves without support.

Forty percent (40%) of the learners on the possible failure list have serious behavioral problems and Senior Management Teams, educators and parents do not know how to deal with this situation. If they are corrected, they get very upset. They just want everybody to accept the problems they are causing. They disrupt the smooth running of the school. This percentage is too high to cope with in the classroom of teaching and learning because classroom management and discipline becomes a problem. Much as managing the Inclusive Education Policy is a challenge, managing the ecology of the learner proved to be problematic too.

Discussion

The chaos in the schools is caused by the Education system. Most of the learners are condoned to the next grade without achieving the desired outcomes for the grade. The condonation discourages those who worked very hard to pass the grade. The learners are condoned from Grade 1 until Grade 12 due age and other contextual factors which make the district offices decide that the learners were not given enough support that is why they failed, therefore they must be condoned to the next grade or teachers must produce enough evidence of support given from the beginning of the year, which they normally do not have. This is very difficult if you are teaching a class of 92 learners. Lazy learners love this system because they do not have to do anything to be condoned. It is easier to discipline learners who know that the consequence of their bad behaviour is failure. In this case the school can do all they want, the learners will do all they want too but they know that they will ultimately be promoted. Parents do not worry when they know that their child will be in the next grade, they do not understand condonation, and they do nothing to support the school system.

Recommendations

It is reasonable to recommend the following systemic management strategies for successful implementation of Inclusive Education:

Management Strategies for the Implementation of White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education for the Department of Education

For White paper 6 on Inclusive Education to be managed and implemented effectively, the Department of Education needs to consider the following suggested strategies:

- Find a way to determine the specific needs and goals for all mainstream schools regarding the implementation of Inclusive Education.

- Conduct a survey to determine the availability of the necessary resources to assist learners with learning problems in all schools, District offices and in the community.
- Set direction on how different schools can implement Inclusive Education because of the differences in the needs of the various schools in which they must include consequences for learners who are not prepared to work. The Department of Education must initiate a 'back to school mobilization campaign' for all learners in the community, including those who dropped out or were pushed out. They must develop motivation, feeling and understanding of the needs of real working life! Work, work, work - a system of different jobs for different people is the main or fundamental social problem to-day. The Department of Education must develop strategies to empower educators through workshops, seminars and other forms of training to be able to deal with the diverse needs of learners.

Management Strategies for Implementation of White Paper 6 for Senior Management Teams

For Inclusive Education to be implemented effectively as a corresponding response (effect) of Inclusive Life, Senior Management Teams must consider the strategies suggested below:

- Formulate a task team for assisting with the identification of learners with diverse learning needs. This task team should consist of parents, educators, administrators and professional support staff, such as a psychologist, special education educators and social workers.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive school plan for managing Inclusive Education.
- Facilitate communication within and outside the school to harness resources effectively, for example contacting the local municipality for recreational facilities available in the community. Senior Management Teams need to give all those involved a sense of programme ownership and purpose. This could be through participation in the formulation of the programme, if they take part in formulating it, they will take ownership of it.
- Make sure that consensus is reached before decisions are made. Matters that will involve specialist educators within the school must be discussed with them before decisions are made.
- Focus on the school climate, academic programmes and staff development.
- Assess and modify the school programme where it is necessary to accommodate learners with diverse learning needs.
- Coordinate effectively and create highly positive interactions among all the stakeholders in the schools.

The ultimate goal is to reach a point where all systems are coordinated, and work together to bring all necessary resources to help the school achieve their inclusive education dream.

Management Strategies for the Implementation of White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education for Educators

For Inclusive Education to be implemented effectively as a corresponding response of Inclusive Life, educators must consider the following suggested strategies:

- Develop a close relationship with learners as this will enable them to identify learners' emotional and intellectual needs and their individual learning styles.
- Promote awareness and acceptance of diversity; they must also encourage learners to recognise similarities as well as differences.
- Know that each learner has unique values, talents and abilities that can add value to the classroom as well as the school.

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- Make learning interesting and relevant for the learners.
- Develop appropriate, meaningful learning activities and must use thematic or integrated instruction; co-operative learning, inquiry and authentic learning.

Management Strategies for the Implementation of White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education for Parents

For Inclusive Education to be implemented effectively, parents must consider the following suggested strategies:

- Participate in programmes designed to assist educators and administrators, for example standing in for supervision when educators are on sick leave.
- Be involved in the daily activities of the school and they must be involved in parent's organizations.
- Discuss community perspectives regarding the planning and management of activities.
- Develop strong positive attachments with the school and vice-versa.
- Become involved in the areas of their greatest expertise and interest in the school.
- Together with the educators, support the holistic development of learners in the school to improve teaching and learning in the classroom.
- Participate in family support programmes and courses for parents, for example family literacy, health and nutrition.
- Be informed regarding the skills required for learners in all subjects/learning areas at each grade. This information must be supplied to the parents so that they can make sure that their children have the necessary skills required for the grade.
- Be given information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss school work at home.
- Participate in setting learners' goals each year and in planning for tertiary education or work.

Management Strategies for the Implementation of White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education for Learners

- Be involved in the daily activities of the school.
- Develop strong positive attachments and motivation for the school.
- Be involved in the areas of their interest in the school.
- Be involved in activities that enhance holistic development of learners in the school to improve teaching and learning in the classroom.
- Be involved in skills development required for learners in all subjects/learning areas at each grade.
- Follow all timetable (homework, assessment, learning area), monitor their own progress and discuss school work with their parents.
- Set learners' goals each year and plan for tertiary education or work.

Conclusion

Schools without ecosystemic management strategies for Inclusive Education schools will become nothing but 'dumping grounds' for learners in need of diverse learning. Knowing that mainstream schools have no options but to admit these learners' raise concerns about effective implementation of Inclusive Education. Mainstream schools must be sensitized towards the fact that Inclusive Education cannot be implemented effectively without harnessing the necessary resources from their communities by including people in working life - this is the main task for Inclusive Life and for Inclusive Education.

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