

**FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE:
A South-African Perspective
*On Implementing Inclusive Education Policy***

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Introduction

The advent of a democracy in South Africa ushered in refreshing changes within the South African context. Given South Africa's dark apartheid history, every policy intervention had to ensure a human rights ethos prevails. Inclusive Education, through the publication of the policy document Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (2001) set out to create a single education system for all learners within a twenty-year period. The White Paper was launched in July 2001.

Four years after the launch, policy developers and implementers have arrived at a realization that there are several challenges and possibilities associated with the implementation of Inclusive Education in South Africa. Whilst there is enough reason to be highly optimistic about the future of inclusive education in South Africa, the caveat is not to underestimate the challenges and complexities of developing a single education system for all learners.

This paper will attempt to discuss the challenges by highlighting the following issues: (i) epistemology, (ii) entrenched special education theory and practices, (iii) curriculum 2005 and, (iv) ideological and political factors.

CHALLENGES FOR INCLUSION

Epistemology

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge. (Heylighen, 1993) Heylighen goes to say that the first theories of knowledge stressed its absolute, permanent character, whereas the later theories put the emphasis on its relativity or situation dependence, its continuous development or evolution, and its active interference with the world and its subjects and objects. The whole trend moves from a static, passive view of knowledge towards a more and more adaptive and active one (p.1). The South African apartheid education doctrine focused on control, absolute understanding of the world and a very authoritarian approach. Arguably this kind of approach impacted on thinking, teaching and practice in classrooms. For educationists at all levels to be more adaptive and active, understandings about epistemology or theories of knowledge must surface.

One would assume given the revolutionary nature of the political change in South Africa with education policy emphasizing non-racism, equity, non-sexism, access for all and non-disabilism that the pedagogical content would be a radical departure from the past. The trend from static to adaptive and active is obviously guided by different knowledge background or different theoretical frameworks. Ten years after democracy the claim be made here is that South African policy relating to inclusion and access to a single Revised National Curriculum Statement stops short of a pedagogic revolution and is stuck at a political level since it ignored epistemological issues in the training of educationists. The following discussion attempts to explain this shortcoming.

At an international level, this scenario seems to be problematic. David Mitchell (2005) citing Emanuelsson, Haug & Persson, argues that even in Sweden and Norway, which are often held up as the pioneers of inclusive education, while policies are based upon thinking with roots in the relational perspective, the traditions within the school systems are essentially categorical and assume a two-track organisation, with special education as one and regular education as the other track. Mitchell (2005) citing Slee in Australia (Queensland in particular), says that the tension between new inclusive education policies and the adherence to old special education perspectives. The latter is particularly evident among advocates for the large and resilient special school sector.

Within the South African context it is common knowledge that bureaucrats and public service government officials pay scant respect to disciplines that examine knowledge itself, its origins and nature. However, it must be noted that the majority of personnel who join government departments are not employed to train. South African educationists, mainly those in the employ of government were forced to implement education policy and train for several reasons. Firstly, policy had a transformative agenda and the emphasis was on creating the conditions for transformation. In general government was skeptical of bringing on board university academics since many of them emerged from very conservative traditions as a result of the apartheid era. In other cases universities had limited resources and as a result could not participate in the “retraining” process. On the other hand, there were academics that existed merely to criticize and did not have a sense of social responsibility. These academics contested any new development with a view to raising their profiles and offered no solution to the complex challenges that faced the country. Further, many academic institutions in this country did not apply their minds to radical paradigmatic shifts both at a theoretical and practical level. This becomes obvious when one peruses the course content of many of the education faculties at universities.

In the light of the above, the conceptualization, production of knowledge, roll-out of training and orientation as well as the monitoring and evaluation concerning Inclusive Education and the Revised National Curriculum Statement was left to bureaucrats. It is extremely difficult to train or orientate others if one does not possess sound understandings of epistemological issues and how they impact thinking, practices and transformation in general. In many cases, the insecurity concerning training and the lack of knowledge have led to routine and control, instead of being open, reflective, and critical and create new meanings.

South African educationists in general were influenced by fundamental pedagogy. Many of the trainers and leaders were indoctrinated by this philosophy Moll and Naicker (2001) argue, then (in apartheid times), as now, teaching practices do not emerge from just anywhere. They are informed and shaped by theories of learning. The problem was that education departments and teacher training institutions in South Africa adopted or developed theories of learning that supported this idea that teachers should be controllers in the classroom. The following example illustrates this point: *Psychopedagogy* was a "sub-discipline" within the broad tradition of *fundamental pedagogy*, which is widely acknowledged to be the educational theory of apartheid. Psychopedagogicians, when speaking about learning, placed a lot of emphasis on innate ideas (in the most extreme versions, blacks had less innate ideas than whites!). Teaching was thus seen as providing, in the classroom, the well-established facts, exercises and mental drills which would get these ideas going. Knowledge came to be seen as fixed, innately known, and learning involved its repetition in order to get it out and get it going.

Inclusive education as well as the Revised National Curriculum Statement is learner centered and could be located within the framework of learning theories such as constructivism. Constructivism assumes that the subject of the knowledge builds up all knowledge from scratch. There are no givens, no objective empirical data or facts, inborn categories, or cognitive structures. This is a radical departure from what most South Africans are familiar with (Moll & Naicker, 2001).

In the light of the above, bureaucrats did not train teachers but oriented them to Inclusive Education and Revised National Curriculum Statement policy goals and aims. Issues relating to epistemology, which provide the conceptual tools to guide teachers to navigate the new educational pedagogy, has been absent. This has hindered the growth of knowledge about knowledge and conceptual developments, innovation, creative thinking and imagination.

Entrenched Special Education Theory and Practices

In order to move towards inclusive education at in terms of thinking and practices, South African educationists are required to shed entrenched special education theory and practices.

The writer argues elsewhere (Naicker, 1999) that the 1948 Special Schools Act in white education in South Africa introduced into special education a medical and mental diagnosis and treatment model. This model, focused on the individual deficit theory and viewed the person as a helpless being, was firmly entrenched in the charity and lay discourses (Fulcher, 1989). The medical discourse shaped and largely influenced exclusive practices in the field of education, which continued for decades after their introduction. According to Fulcher (1989), the medical discourse

suggests, through its correspondence theory of meaning, that disability is an observable or intrinsic, objective attribute or characteristic of a person, rather than a social construct. Through the notion that impairment means loss, and the assumption that impairment or loss underlies disability, medical discourse on disability has deficit individualistic connotations. Further, through its presumed scientific status and neutrality, it depoliticizes disability; disability is seen as a

technical issue, (and) thus beyond the exercise of power. Medical discourse individualizes disability, in the sense that it suggests individuals have diseases or problems or incapacities as attributes. (p.28)

Thus, disability was associated with an impairment or loss. The entire focus was on the individual who was viewed as helpless and dependent. The individual deficit theory viewed the person as in need of treatment and assistance outside regular education. No attempt was made to establish the deficiencies of the system; for example, a physically disabled person using a wheelchair required a ramp to gain access to a mainstream school, which was not provided for by the system. Access to education was prevented as a result of barriers, which reflect a deficient system and not a deficient person.

Given, the underestimation of epistemological issues, it is increasingly difficult to shift thinking and practices. South African educationists need to be exposed to epistemological issues in order to understand the type of changes that need to take place in teaching and learning. In the past, the medical model underpinned by fundamental pedagogy excluded learners from classrooms. The new framework of thinking requires teachers to be dynamic, creative and reflective. In other words anything is possible in classrooms where universal laws do not apply to the specificities of diverse contexts. However, these dynamic responses to diversity do not emerge if the “training” and orientation are restricted to policy goals and aims. The training should be of any in-depth nature that takes on board theories about knowledge and the relationship between theory and practice.

Curriculum 2005 and the Revised National Curriculum Framework

Curriculum 2005 was introduced in 1996 as a counter hegemonic strategy to the apartheid curriculum which is described above as dogmatic, authoritarian, teacher based, racist, sexist and a doctrine that perpetuates the status quo. There was no room for being interventionist, context specific and adaptive. Learners within the old curriculum were separated into two streams, which included a regular education and special education component.

Curriculum 2005 was described as a single curriculum that was learner paced, learner based and of an inclusive nature. Therefore one would assume that the retraining will forefront epistemological issues since different theories of knowledge inform the old and new curriculum. This failed to materialize and most knowledge production and training packaged practical activities in the absence of a theoretical framework.

It has been widely documented that the curriculum is the vehicle to create the conditions for inclusive education. Widespread criticism saw the revision of the Curriculum in 2002. The Revised National Curriculum Statement was introduced highlighting as principles inclusion, human rights, healthy environment and social justice. However, the orientation or “training” of teachers did not inject any difference in terms of theories of knowledge. The “training” or orientation concerning Curriculum 2005 and the RNCS focused on the different features of the curriculum, principles, aims and goals. Based on the principles one of the central thrusts of the RNCS related to inclusion and access for all. The “training” or orientation did not contrast sufficiently the radical departure of RNCS at a theoretical level in relation to the traditional curriculum.

Curriculum 2005 and the RNCS comprised of a different theoretical framework, assumptions, practices and tools. The framework of thinking was consistent with learner centered theories such as constructivism or could be located with a critical theory paradigm that focuses on liberation, empowerment, emancipatory and a liberatory space. Constructivism as a learner centered theory is compatible with the key principle of inclusion within Curriculum 2005 and the RNCS.

Teachers in classrooms were exposed to a week of “training” or orientation. Exposure to various theories and engagement with epistemological issues is time consuming and requires more time. By creating the conditions for greater understandings of knowledge that informs practices, teachers may tend to achieve greater success in dealing with the specificities of their different contexts. Exposure of this nature will also encourage teachers to move away from the dominant culture, which promoted universal norms and forms that existed independent of any subject trying to apprehend to them.

Political and Ideological Factors

The change to a democratic government in South Africa was the dream of every oppressed South African. After ten years, much has to be done to change the ideology, to change the idea of pedagogic liberation into a plan of action. South African educationists must work together with universities to deliver education transformation. In order to create the conditions for inclusion and a curriculum that is accessible to all, educationists to arrive at a common understanding concerning ideological issues. A critical mass of educationists must emerge with the intellectual tools, not just principles, aims and goals. In the final analyses within the intellectual tools, principles, aims and goals become rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

South African educationists, publishers and other stakeholders run the risk of reproducing the status quo. At a time where there is a wonderful opportunity to create space within a developmental and interventionist state for creativity, imagination and adaptive minds to the specificities of diversity, knowledge production and training in most spaces is lacking a sound theoretical framework. Sound theoretical frameworks provide the intellectual tools to understanding assumptions, models, practices and tools of the new policy. The call for practical activities that teachers can understand contradicts the suggestions of the teachers’ guide of the National Department of Education (DOE). The teachers guide calls for teachers to become curriculum leaders. Being curriculum leaders is an intellectual task and therefore the intellectual tools must be provided.

For inclusive education to take hold in South Africa, the curriculum is the single most important vehicle since it was the traditional curriculum that alienated learners from mainstream classes. If frameworks of thinking are ruptured and alienated learners and other resources provided, an inclusive system is possible in South Africa.

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