

# **The Implementation and Challenges to Inclusive Education Policy and Practice in South Africa**

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There is a long-standing debate as to whether inclusive education, relating to affording quality education to visually impaired learners, can be practically and effectively implemented in third world countries. In countries which were, and many of which still are, plagued by unstable and weak economies, poverty, discrimination, exploitation and segregation, where democracies are non-existent or in its infancy, inclusive education would indeed be the ideal to promote the freedoms, equalities and rights in accordance with the spirit and ethos of liberal constitutional democracies. Whether this strategy would be practical in countries having poor financial, infrastructural, social and human resources has to be considered.

It is not always a foregone conclusion that what has worked in developed countries, will succeed in other countries less developed or less committed to the freedoms promoted in developed countries, and could therefore be a recipe for disaster. As my research deals with Inclusive education in South Africa, my familiarity is with the inclusive education policies and practices that exist there. Its history mirrors most of the developing countries in Africa: previously colonised; a history of discrimination; civil war; high illiteracy rates and a recent very unstable economy. Considering that democratic South Africa is now part of the advanced third world, problems that they experience, will undoubtedly be even more pronounced in most other third world countries.

South Africa followed international trends in accordance with the social rights discourse and favoured inclusive education. The policy document, namely, Education White Paper No: 6 (2001) outlined and accepted its responsibility to provide a supportive inclusive education environment for learners with special needs. However, the pressing concern of critics of inclusive education lies with the fact that if not evaluated, coordinated,

implemented and monitored effectively and judiciously, learners who are visually impaired would still be exposed to a different and inferior education than their sighted counterparts. This is supported by clause 1.4.3 of EWP 6, “Believing in, and supporting a policy of inclusive education are not enough to ensure that such a system will work in practice.” (1) In the inclusive education model, the capacity and competency of key role players, adequate available funding and a uniform stance of national implementation are key determinative factors as to whether inclusive education will effectively and qualitatively address the needs of the greater learner population.

EWP 6 has a 20-year long-term implementation plan. It’s immediate to short-term strategy extends from 2001 to 2003, but has been delayed to 2006, due to lack of funding. This is the first barrier to the success of Inclusive education. The amount of funding that is needed to implement all the provisions has not been fully quantified, but implementing its short-term strategy has conservatively been estimated at ZAR 300 million. The dominant source of funding is donor funding, and government has made no substantial contribution from the national budget to date to help facilitate implementation. Similarly, in developing and third world countries lack of funding will stunt the implementation of inclusive education practices. “In the countries of the South, the major constraint is the serious shortage of resources – lack of schools or inadequate facilities, lack of teachers and/or shortage of qualified staff, lack of learning materials and absence of support.” (2) These situations are clearly worse in the rural areas where the scarcity of even basic resources is strongly pronounced.

The short term strategy outlined in EWP 6 involved conducting an audit of special schools which enabled the department to ascertain what limitations exist and what improvements need to be made. Further, the Department is to embark on field-testing the strengths and limitations of the ideas in the white paper. The key aspects involved are converting 30 ordinary primary schools into full service schools; converting 30 special schools into resource centres and establishing 30 district based support teams.

In 2006, DBST’s are not properly constituted yet and many of the employment posts still remain vacant. The 30 special schools selected are under resourced and are unable to adequately serve the needs of their target learner population, and are far from being able to cater for the needs of learners with varying disabilities. The FSS are not admitting learners who are visually impaired, citing that they will not be able to cater for their needs as they don’t receive the necessary support required from the department.

**The long-term strategy includes:**

- a) Converting 500 primary schools into FSS equipped with the necessary physical, human and material resources, catering for a learner population with varying disabilities and learning needs. However, placing these learners together in one classroom will require educators to be trained to teach, and adapt, a curriculum

catering for the proper access and assessment of all learners, who have diverse and often conflicting learning needs. EWP 6 in 2.2.1.5 refers to facilities that will be provided at FSS, but doesn't specifically stipulate the quantity, quality or exactly what types of facilities will be provided for learners who are visually impaired. It is clear that children with disabilities will inevitably be lumped together again in designated FSS's, re-enforcing feelings of exclusion, segregation and difference.

- (b) Converting 500 special schools into resource centres. This requires special schools to assume a new character with enormous responsibilities. It involves strengthening special schools with upgrades making it possible to undertake their new responsibilities. However there are only 380 existing special schools in the country (per EWP6), therefore it would be impossible for 500 special schools to be converted. The role of these resource centres was to be two-fold: Firstly, they would be required to provide education to those amongst the targeted learner population who require high intensity support. Secondly, they will be integrated into DBST's, to help with support, and services, to the targeted learner population attending FSS's and mainstream schools. Special schools' staff will be required to play a vital role with training and holding workshops with staff at FSS and mainstream schools that have learners with disabilities.

The problem is that there are only 19 special schools for learners who are visually impaired, making it an average of two special schools catering for VIP learners per province. Given the geographical spread of the provinces, the majority of the 500 FSS's will not be supported by resource centres catering specially for learners who are visually impaired, nor will their DBST's have special schools for the visually impaired integrated into them. If FSS are not properly supported, they will not be able to provide adequate and effective education support and services to learners who are visually impaired. The department has decided to solve this problem by de-specialising all special schools, requiring them to diversify their services, resources and expertise. Instead of only enrolling and providing support to the targeted learner population, they would also have to accommodate and support learners experiencing barriers to learning due to other disabilities. The necessary human, technological, infrastructural and capital resources supporting learners with all disabilities are absent, needing a large injection of funding, which the department does not have.

The biggest problem is that the teachers at a special school for the deaf, for example, will not be specialists on teaching and supporting learners who are visually impaired. Therefore, they would not be able to support teachers or learners with visual disabilities in FSS's and mainstream schools. Further, teachers spending lengthy periods of time training other teachers and also receiving training,

would mean less time with learners requiring high intensity support at special schools.

- (c) Establishing 500 DBST's. These teams would constitute professionals across the spectrum who each have different responsibilities in the education support and services received by learners with disabilities and learners who experience barriers to learning in their district. "Their primary function will be to evaluate and through supporting teaching, build the capacity of schools, early childhood and ABET centres, colleges and further and higher education institutions, to recognise and address severe learning difficulties and to accommodate a range of learning needs." (3) These professionals include psychologists, social workers, education support personnel et al. Each would have an enormous workload and will rely heavily on special schools to assist. The problem is that there is such a great demand for their services but they lack capacity, as a staggering number of designated posts are vacant.

In the developing countries, there are serious challenges to inclusive education, with lack of funding being most crucial. In the countries in the south, further challenges include stereotyped attitudes and practises caused by religion, custom, cultural beliefs and financial status. This is compounded by the challenges that many countries in the North also face in their efforts to stabilise effective inclusive approaches in education. These challenges include reluctance to transform due to entrenched and well-established mind-sets and attitudes created by the past segregationist education policies and practises for learners with special needs.

In South Africa, apart from funding, other challenges facing implementation of inclusive education are:

### **1. Early Childhood Development:**

EWP 5 2001 and EWP 6 2001 state that early childhood intervention is essential for all children, but even more so for the child who is visually impaired. Early infant stimulation and Education need to begin, for a child who is visually impaired, as early as 3 months. Unfortunately, currently there is no support structure in most of the Provinces. This lack of funding causes extreme problems, as NGO's cannot build capacity to grow the services, and this is compounded by the fact that there are minimal personnel who are qualified, trained or experienced to carry out the service. The SANCB has been trying for years to start a national ECD service, but due to lack of funds this has not happened. Nearly five years after EWP 6, nothing has yet been initiated for ECD of the visually impaired. This does not auger well for the preschool child, whose parents might find that they have to send their child who is visually impaired to a mainstream facility with no specialist trained personnel to help prepare the child properly for primary school.

## **2. Full-service and mainstream schools are not prepared:**

The training of educators to teach learners with varying disabilities simultaneously has not begun. There has been a few power point presentations held which have frustrated educators, as they do not have faith in inclusion because they do not receive the support promised by the department. Officials are not accessible and queries have to be left on a telephone voice mail, or their names recorded on a waiting list to receive support from the DBST. Some ramps have been built at FSS's, but simple adaptations required to make physical environments more user friendly for learners who are visually impaired have not been done. No necessary resources, or additional staff was allocated to special or FSS's. There are a few affluent schools that have taken in learners who are visually impaired, but on the condition that the parents purchase all the resources, books, and assistive devices needed, as well as pay for a full time facilitator to work alongside the learner in the classroom. In South Africa a minimal number of parents can afford this, with the majority, who are usually illiterate, unskilled, poor and living in rural areas, being left to rely on schools who cannot accept them because they are not ready to do so due to lack of support from the department.

## **3. District based support team (DBST)**

Braille instructors, facilitators, or itinerant teachers are not provided for on the DBST's. Currently itinerant teachers are expected to come from under staffed and due to de-specialisation, untrained staff of special schools. Learners are expected to learn skills such as Braille in special schools, and having mastered it, are expected to cope with no extra assistance in classes that have an average of 45 learners per class. DBST's who don't have specialist theoretical and practical expertise are given this huge task to identify and support educators and learners. However, if these key personnel are not employed according to specialised needs, inclusive education will not afford visually impaired learners a quality education.

## **4. Social conditions.**

South Africa's legacy from the struggle for democracy was the emergence of a violent, reactionary culture. It is not unnatural for young children, youths and adults to settle differences by violent means, often with fatal results. This violent nature often spills over into schools, and what would normally be a playground scuffle, in South Africa it could end with serious consequences. The Department either has no statistics available, or it does not want to divulge them, but here follow a few cases, from media reports, of violence against able-bodied learners in mainstream schools. What then of the visually impaired learners who have to attend these schools?

"Cops arrest school kids for possession of weapons;" (4)

"Grade 1 Pupil raped at primary school: a grade seven learner raped a grade one learner;" (5)

“School stunned by boy’s murder. Eleven year-old at primary school, the third pupil of the school to be murdered in the last five years. The grade four pupil was found on the floor in the toilet with multiple stab wounds to his chest, arms and stomach” (6)

These are issues that are of concern of parents of visually impaired learners, who have not been given assurances that their children would be safe in mainstream schools having violent incidents such as these, where incidents of gangsterism occur whereby learners are forced to belong to a gang. The issue of drugs is another social problem that is increasingly raising its head at mainstream schools, and the authorities have no clear plan on how to deal with that. Educators, faced with class numbers of 40-50 learners, find it extremely difficult to maintain discipline and still have to cope with these problems. The reluctance surrounding inclusive education by parents and educators is understandable when one gives cognisance to these realities.

## **5. LEGISLATIVE REDRESS**

Despite EWP 6 being passed as national policy and being gazetted in July 2001, no legislation has yet been promulgated, nor is any legislation envisaged for the future, to deal specifically with the education of learners with special needs. The department argued that it is adequately supported and protected by clauses and principles contained in other legislative enactments. On the other hand, any policy that is inconsistent with any enactment, is invalid to the extent of such inconsistency. Although all learners have the constitutional right to education, Section 12(4) of the South African Schools Act provides, “The Member of the Executive Council must, where reasonably practicable, provide education for learners with special education needs at ordinary public schools and provide relevant educational support services for such learners.” (7) Further, with the large illiterate and sub-economic population, it would be a monumental task for such persons to even know their rights, let alone enforce them.

There is certainly a long way to go before this inclusive education exercise will bear positive results in practise in South Africa and in countries with a similar political/economic/social history.

### **END NOTES:**

1. Department of Education July 2001 p16
2. Unesco, 2001
3. Department of Education July 2001 p47
4. Bailey, C. 26 August 2005
5. de Bruin, S. 22 November 2005
6. Hawker, D & Prince, N. 22 February 2006
7. Department of Education. 1996, p5.

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5. Department of Education. 2001(b). Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education: Meeting the Challenge of Early Childhood Development in South Africa. Government Gazette, Vol.436. No.22756. 17 October 2001. Government Printer. Pretoria.
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8. Hawker, D & Prince, N. Cape Argus, 22 February 2006.
9. Ministry in the Office of the Deputy President (November 1997). The White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy. Pretoria: Office of the Deputy President.
10. UNESCO 2001 Overcoming Exclusion through Inclusive Approaches in Education - A Challenge and a Vision (Conceptual Paper for the Education Sector)