

Chapter # 26

VIEWS OF LEARNERS ON TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS INTO MORE INCLUSIVE SPACES

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has gained prominence as an essential educational approach throughout the world. In the South African context, inclusive policies recommend the active participation of learners in the education process to develop and extend their potential as equal members of society. This study explores the perceptions of learners regarding inclusive education and its potential to improve teaching practices. This participatory research study, using transformative learning theory as a lens will employ photovoice and narratives. The participants were 25 full-service school learners in Gauteng and North-West Provinces of South Africa. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the data. The study findings revealed that learners do not have a voice in the implementation of inclusive policies; only teachers are privileged to influence inclusive teaching, while learners are only expected to be recipients, and that learners are treated as empty vessels. Although the study has found that learners are disadvantaged in contributing to inclusive practices, it recommends an integrated approach among teachers, learners, and education policy developers to ensure that learners' voices are heard in schools to improve inclusive teaching practices.

Keywords: inclusive education, learners' voice, full-service school, photovoice, inclusive teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Inclusive education evolved as a social issue that promotes human rights while challenging any exclusionary policies and practices. The benefit of inclusive education is understanding collective stories that include teachers and learners as stipulated in the South African Constitution Act 108 of 1996, to be a way of upholding a democratic state where all learners pursue their learning potential to the fullest (South Africa, 1996). Hernández-Torrano, Somerton, and Helmer (2020) argue that asking adults about the views of learners is no substitute for their (learners') input. Therefore, since learners are beneficiaries of inclusive teaching approaches (Crawford & Tindal, 2006) in this study, we wanted to hear their perspectives to allow them an opportunity to add their views to enhance inclusive education implementation. This is affirmed by the Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) and Mabasa (2021) which state that learners must be at the centre of what the education system and schools do by considering their views, experiences, and opinions.

The prominent focus in the literature on inclusive education is on the role of teachers, teacher training, and other aspects (Engelbrecht, 2020), while the quality and relevance of inclusive education can be better enhanced by including learner perspectives on its implementation. To fulfil this mandate, a screening, identification, assessment, and support (SIAS) policy requires that learners be involved in the decision-making on how this support is carried out (DBE, 2014). Although policies such as the Education White Paper 6 [EWP6] of the Department of Basic Education (DBE), highlight that inclusive education is based on

social justice for all learners (DBE, 2001), but learners' voices are still missing, although it is a catalyst for the promotion of inclusive education (Messiou, 2019). The voices of the learners include their thoughts, emotions, views, and actions to bring about change (Mangiaracina, Kafallinou, Kyriazopoulou, & Watkins, 2021).

Moreover, EWP6 further classifies schools, according to the severity of disabilities in which learners experience barriers to learning, to receive additional support (DBE, 2001). Learners with severe level of support needs are accommodated in special schools while full-service schools cater for those learners with moderate level support needs and the mainstream school for those with low level support needs. Full-service schools came into existence as part of South Africa's journey to fulfil the mandates of inclusive education (Ayaya, Makoelle & Van Der Merwe, 2023). Even in full-service schools, the preference is to place learners with learning barriers in separate special classrooms (Engelbrecht, 2020), thus reinforcing the idea that inclusive education is a renamed special education (Engelbrecht, 2019). Against this background, Messiou (2019) asserts that if learners' voices remain marginalised, it impedes the quality necessary for the relevance of the education provided to each learner because their ideas are critical to the formation of school practices. He further suggests a critical role of collaborative participatory approaches in the field of inclusive education, as they allow co-researchers time to have detailed discussions about learning and teaching, thus opening opportunities for the empowerment of all participants who are part of the research. Mangiaracina et al. (2021) assert that the perceptions learners have of themselves and of their learning are crucial to inform teaching and learning practices. Therefore, Ainscow and Messiou (2018) developed an inclusive inquiry that involves talking about diversity, learning from experience, developing inclusive practices and engaging the views of learners. Research indicates that learners' views make a difference in responding to learner diversity (Messiou, 2019) and in addressing behaviours such as bullying (Siperstein, Ballard, Jacobs, Rodriguez, & Shriver, 2022), thus inventing new possibilities to introduce learner participation in school improvement. In a study conducted in Gauteng Province of South Africa on how learners' voices can impact the quality of teaching in full-service schools (Ayaya, 2021). The findings revealed that learners in a full-service school often feel embarrassed when a teacher asks them a question they cannot respond to. The learners' voices in the study highlighted scenario's teachers need to be familiar with and therefore avoid. The following came as an impact brought about by their participation:

- A deeper understanding of how best they can be taught,
- Uncovers how family and social circumstances affect inclusive practices,
- It also transforms teachers' thinking practices as they were challenged to be innovative in their teaching practices.

Learners' voices led to flexibility, choice, and collaborative experiences as they indicated that they benefit much when it is their peers that are explaining the work to them. In cases where learners are taken as experts of their learning, teachers tend to be informed on how they can support these learners (Scarparolo & MacKinnon, 2024). According to Education White Paper 6 (DBE, 2001), inclusive practices include converting primary schools to full-service schools. Conversion of schools does not lead to inclusive processes, which include differentiated curriculum, inclusive pedagogies, as well as sense of belonging to learners who were previously excluded in learning processes (Shapiro, 2020). For inclusive practices to be accommodative to all learners, these learners need to be allowed space to express their desires, interests, and strengths so as to inform the teaching strategies used by their teachers (Bolourian, Losh, Hamsho, Eisenhower, & Blacher, 2021). Collaboration among stakeholders is also mandated by the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), as it promotes togetherness with the intentions to reach the final goal of being inclusive in every way

possible. Ownership, self-reflexivity and awareness are important aspects in inclusive practices additional to accommodation based on adapting content and process (Bonati & Andriana, 2021). Furthermore, Scarparolo and MacKinnon (2024) assert that the voice of learners needs to be sought for differentiated instruction, which is a participatory pedagogical practice to inform teachers' planning. Giving learners a voice in how they learn is seen as a democratic principle that allows them to choose a focus area for their learning.

Therefore, we are determined to find out how learners' perceptions can be helpful in facilitating inclusive practices. In the past, learners experiencing barriers to learning were excluded from participating in education, but inclusive education needs to provide them with opportunities to actively engage in learning (Karimupfumbi & Dwarika, 2022). Furthermore, when learners are involved in the transformation of their learning by creating a sense of agency, an improvement in the implementation of inclusive practices can be different from what it is currently (Bonati & Andriana, 2021).

2. METHODOLOGY

Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) is one of the types of participation action research that was used in the project. PALAR, as mentioned by Wessels and Wood (2019) is a holistic, integrative concept that incorporates related concepts and values such as participation, collaboration, communication, community of practice, networking, and synergy. PALAR is an integrated methodology of lifelong action learning (AL) and participatory action research (PAR) (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015:5). Kearney, Wood, and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) have identified the essential characteristics of the PALAR process as underpinned by democratic values and principles, clustered as the 'seven C's', namely, communication, critical reflection, commitment, coaching, collaboration, competence and character building and are developed through an action learning process grounded in the 'three Rs', namely, relationship, reflection and recognition. According to Wood (2019), PALAR follows a cycle commonly known as the cyclical PALAR process, which involves the following: Cycle 1 - Collaborative identification of needs (start-up workshop), Cycle 2 - Deciding on the best course of action and implementing the action (Action), and Cycle 3 - Evaluating it and then deciding what further action to take, based on the participants' critical reflection upon the process (Reflection). As part of what happened in the first cycle, at each site, we needed to have relationship building meetings, as they are helpful for co-researchers to agree on the primary research questions, also agree on the data generation methods, and for building trust among us (Neethling & Nel, 2021; Wessels & Wood, 2019). The PALAR approach allows all participants to take ownership of the solution to the problem affecting their community as they engage in a cyclical learning process through action, discussion, and reflection to achieve a mutual goal (Wood, 2019). Purposive sampling allowed 25 learners from full-service schools to be co-researchers (Creswell, 2014). The learners were recruited by an independent person to avoid power relationship issues, they were allowed to indicate their interest in the study, and their parents signed consent forms on their behalf (Luthuli & Wood, 2022). Photovoice, as a visual research method that allows participants to take photographs and make powerful statements about the issue while making their voices heard, was used to generate data (Evans-Agnew & Strack, 2022; Wood, 2019).

A photovoice is seen as a pedagogical tool that can be useful to amplify the voice of learners experiencing a barrier to learning (Smith, 2018). It bridges the gap between language barriers and expression of feelings without having to feel disempowered by insufficiency in vocabulary (Lögdberg, Nilsson, & Kostenius, 2020). Exhibition of the photovoice to the stakeholders concerned can influence their decisions, and every time teachers prepare

individualised support, their decisions will be based on the feelings associated with strengths-based lens to which learners point their own competencies (Eckhoff, 2019). It is also a recommended visual method to facilitate inclusive teaching practices, as it supports aspects of social inclusion when inviting the voices of learners in the support provided to them. Ciotoli (2019) asserts that a photovoice is a powerful form of agency in which learners are provided with an opportunity to express themselves while also developing their abilities to be vocal about their learning needs.

A prompt given to all co-researchers in three sets of action learning was 'take photos and write narratives that describe your perceptions of how full-service schools can be made more inclusive'. Two of the sets of action learning had eight members while in the other set of learning, nine co-researchers 'take photos and write narratives that represent your perceptions of how full-service schools can be made more inclusive'. Each person was expected to take an individual photovoice and this was after what this visual method entails was explained and a discussion was also carried out in which ethical considerations like avoiding taking photos of human beings were communicated. Thereafter a discussion of why a particular object was chosen and how it relates to the research problem was followed to enrich data from individual photovoices. Data was thematically analysed using the six steps of Braun and Clarke (2014) namely: familiarising ourselves with the data, generating initial code, searching for the themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally writing up the report as informed by the findings.

In this study, the integration of transformative learning theory forms a solid foundation for understanding and fostering inclusive education. Transformative learning theory, as proposed by Fleming (2022), underscores the active contribution of learners in their own learning processes, emphasising the need for effective changes in individuals' frames of reference. This theory challenges the common tendency among teachers to dismiss ideas that do not align with preconceived notions, advocating for an inclusive educational space where learners' perspectives are valued (Messiou, 2019). Uddin (2019) further contributes to the discourse by emphasising the importance of allowing learners to have a voice in their education. According to Uddin, teachers play a crucial role in making inclusive education meaningful by showing interest in meaningful learning experiences and employing suitable strategies that encourage the participation of the learners. Uddin's perspective aligns with transformative learning theory, emphasising the active role of learners in shaping their educational experiences.

The synthesis of transformative learning theory is particularly powerful in the context of inclusive education because it emphasises the need to challenge existing norms and oppression systems and promote equity, making it more relevant to this study, which looks at learners' views as opposed to taking into consideration teachers' voices only. Therefore, the application of transformative learning theory underscores the importance of creating an open and inclusive educational space that not only acknowledges diverse ideas but actively seeks to break away from traditional tendencies that can hinder inclusive practices. This theory suggests that to make inclusive education meaningful from the perspective of learners, teachers must embrace transformative practices. This approach encourages teachers to recognize the value of diverse ideas, actively involve learners in decision-making processes, and implement strategies that foster meaningful learning experiences. In addition, it emphasises the potential for transformative change and collective action between teachers and learners to create more inclusive educational spaces (Uddin, 2019).

Ethical clearance was received from the Research Ethics Committee of the North-West University, with the number (NWU - 00413 - 23 - A2), and the adherence to justice, beneficence, and respect for the people were considered. This research was carried out in the Gauteng and Free State Provinces of South Africa. Since our participants were learners, parental consent was also sought from parents of learners who participated, and the learners just gave their assent.

3. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes emerged during the analysis of the data from this study: Learners experiencing learning barriers have no voice in inclusive policies, teachers are privileged to influence inclusive teaching, while learners are only expected to be recipients, and learners are seen as empty vessels. For the benefit of this chapter, it is important to note that even though we had 25 participants working in three action learning sets, this study presents only a few responses representing each action learning set due to the restricted number of words expected for the book chapter. The themes that emerged are presented and discussed in the section that follows.

3.1. Theme 1: Learners Experiencing Learning Barriers Have No Voice in Inclusive Policies

Participants relate their expectations of participating in the supported program envisaged, as well as their participation, determining the type of support to be provided to them in a full-service school. However, these participants noticed many challenges that hinder them from accessing efficient support provision in full-service schools. Amongst the challenges, the following were highlighted by participants as critical: getting support depending on what teachers see necessary, no teacher bothers to find out from learners in what ways they can be supported, a big gap between learners and teachers; and learners do not have any opportunities for input on what support should be provided to them. This finding is well rationalized by a photo taken by Participant 1 in Figure 1 where she showed a blossom out from the flower planted within the tire. The flower is surrounded by some old, cracked bottles that she compared with the challenges of getting support in a full-service school. Furthermore, the photo in Figure 2 was presented by Participant 4 who has the same impression as the Participant 1. In this photo there is an open area used as assembly when the teaching day starts and there is a classroom that indicates where she actually belongs. The narration in this photo suggests the strength of this participant, as it is aroused from being in the company of other learners who are determined to get an education despite the obstacles caused by barriers they face. However, Participant 4 also mentioned a large gap between them and teachers as a challenge because this gap hinders opportunities to give their input on the kind of support that should be provided to them in a full-service school.

*Figure 1.
Photovoice 1.*



This picture reminds me of how I saw my education when I was referred to a full-service school. I hoped to get support that would make my future blossom like this plant. The surroundings around the plant represent challenges such as getting support depending on what teachers see necessary, and no one bothers to find out in what ways I can be supported. Life in a township is also a challenge, as it is influenced by many things that lead many of us to drop out of school [Participant 1].

*Figure 2.
Photovoice 2.*



I took this picture to show my sense of belonging when I joined a full-service school. Being in the company of other learners who are determined to get an education despite the obstacles caused by barriers they face, gave me hope to achieve the education that I long for. The only challenge is that there is a large gap between us and teachers; as learners, we do not have input on what support should be provided to us as part of full-service teaching practices [Participant 4].

Munna and Kalam (2021) reflect on the value of involvement of learners in their education and describe it as glue that holds together all aspects of the learning and growth of learners that ultimately allow them to excel academically. However, although inclusion policies promote the participation of learners in their education, they do not allow learners to influence its implementation. The findings of this study highlight that learners make no contribution to how inclusive policies are implemented, and this becomes another barrier to their learning. This finding confirms Messiou (2019) and Uddin (2019) when they claim that inclusion can only manifest when the voices of learners are also heard as necessary to achieve quality education and other school practices. It also magnifies what Engelbrecht (2019) and Mabasa (2021) state, where full-service schools are said to reinforce marginalisation of learners experiencing barriers to learning as their views are not considered to be central in their learning.

3.2. Theme 2: Teachers Are Privileged to Influence Inclusive Teaching, While Learners Are Only Expected to Be Recipients

Most of the participants agreed that teachers in full-service schools have a privilege to influence inclusive teaching, and this portrays learners as mere recipients of inclusive education. Being unable to attend to the loneliness of learners, disallowing learners to share their opinions, being excluded from the teaching practices that are supposed to accommodate their learning needs, has emerged as factors that liberate teachers to have greater influence in inclusive teaching. In addition, it is perceived that they have a huge impact on the performance of the participants that led them to believe that they are just recipients of inclusive education, and no platform is created for them to have a say. In this respect, the photo in Figure 3 as captured by Participant 20 resembles a lonely learner in the school premises where there are neither teachers nor learners around. This equates with the loneliness she experiences during teaching and learning, whereas she knows how she can learn best in an inclusive setting. In her narrative, the participant explicitly reflects on her feeling that learners are treated as recipients of what teachers think will work for them. The understanding in this finding is that learners perceive inclusive education as being imposed on them, and the expectation is just to follow what is recommended for their support. Moreover, the photo and narration in Figure 4 from Participant 14 concur with this finding. This participant took a photo of a ruined school bag lying on the floor. The narration in the photo relates to his helplessness and low self-esteem that comes with being excluded from the inclusive teaching practices that are supposed to accommodate their learning needs. The most interesting fact is that the participant is aware of the existing support provided to him in a full-service school and acknowledges that it brings back long-lost hope, but still feels excluded when it comes to the support that should be provided.

*Figure 3.
Photovoice 3.*



I took this picture to show the loneliness that I experience in all the classes. Although I am in school, when teachers teach, I feel lost, like this girl, because even though I know how I learn best, no one bothers to find out what I prefer. I feel like we are just treated as recipients of what teachers think will work for us. Sometimes, even when I want to share my opinions, I get scared that when I see some teachers, I will look like I am undermining their professionalism [Participant 20].

*Figure 4.
Photovoice 4.*



This picture shows the helplessness and low self-esteem that come with being excluded from the teaching practices that are supposed to accommodate my learning needs. The bag is ruined representing the discouragements that I experienced in the mainstream school, as other teachers and other learners criticized me. Although there is support that I receive in a full-service school that brings back long lost hope, I feel excluded when it comes to the support that is supposed to be provided to me. I see myself as a mere recipient of support. Whatever comes to us is packed up there for us, as if we are just recipients who must just take what is provided. [Participant 14].

In the above extracts, it is evident that even though learners saw a future when they were referred to a full-service school, the dominant voice of influence is that of the teachers, while learners are just recipients of what teachers thought best for learners. This contradicts Uddin's (2019) point of view, which highlights that although teachers are expected to play a crucial role in employing suitable strategies, it does not overrule the importance of collective union between teachers and learners to create more inclusive educational spaces (Uddin, 2019). Furthermore, excluding learners to whom the support is prepared in the planning process so that they can have a say, seems to be a perpetual oppression on the learners experiencing barriers, as they have no control and voice to what is given to them. This defeats the expression 'Nothing about us without us', which was used as an opposition to the oppression experienced by people with disabilities (Charlton, 1998:3).

3.3. Theme 3: Learners Perceived as Empty Vessels in Inclusive Education

In this theme, it emerged from the participants that inclusive education exists in their school but their nonparticipation in determining its implementation made them think they are perceived as empty vessels. To illustrate this, Participant 2 took a picture of an empty bag hung on the closed window and provided a narrative, as shown in Figure 5. In her description of the picture, she mentioned that the empty bag looks like inclusive education, whereby no teacher is prepared to hear from learners how they perceive their support package. In this way, inclusive education will provide minimal support to learners experiencing barriers to learning, as the best support package can be derived from the learners themselves. The poor system of education has negative effects on learners because they leave school without having acquired the basics, which greatly impedes the social and economic development of the countries from which they come from. Furthermore, Participant 13 confirms the emptiness of inclusive education to them as he equates it to the empty chairs and table in his photo (Figure 6). His emphasis on emptiness is that teachers do not care to know what his interests and preferences are, and he does not have a say to what teachers do to support him, even when their practices are of no help.

Figure 5.
Photovoice 5.



This bag refers to how education is for us in the so-called full-service schools. When referred to a full-service school, I thought I would have a better opportunity to tell which teaching practices can make it easy for me to access education, but I noticed that it was not different from where I came. When you go to a full-service school, the expectation is that additional support is sure, but when you get to the school, it is something that you cannot influence. This makes me feel that the inclusive system of education is empty to us like that bag, because no teacher is prepared to hear from us how we perceive our support package. [Participant 2].

*Figure 6.
Photovoice 6.*



This picture represents inclusive education in a full-service school. From this picture you can see the emptiness, only empty seats and tables. I perceived our education in this full-service school as if it is empty as these chairs, no one cares to know what my interests and preferences are, I do not have a say in what teachers do to support me, even when their practices are of no help to me. [Participant 13].

The significance of the narratives mentioned above lies in the idea that while teachers ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education without consulting the learners during the process, they also discourage learners from accepting any form of support provided and fail to prepare them to have the necessary skills that will enable them to cope when they finish school. Mayimele and Makhalemele (2020) warned that if learners at risk are exposed to lack of support, their academic performance is negatively impacted, and they may withdraw from schools. Buckley and Lee (2018) added that such learners may have less time to devote to non-academic activities than other learners.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter aims to explore the perceptions of learners about inclusive education and its potential to improve teaching practices. The findings revealed that learners do not have a platform to influence the implementation of inclusive education and a variety of challenges that hinder their participation were raised. However, this study was not expected to generalize but to focus on the sample that was limited to the accounts and experiences of people in a specific context.

Surprisingly, learners feel that even though they are in a full-service school, there is no hope in their education, as there is still a gap between what teachers do and what learners would like to be done when it comes to the support they receive. Furthermore, they feel excluded from full-service schools, as was the case when they were in mainstream schools. They do not see any implementation of inclusive policies where they are supposed to also have a voice. This implies that, even though being referred to a full-service school, brought some hope to these learners, thinking that they will get prepared for their future careers.

The barrier at hand now is teacher domination that does not allow them space or opportunities to contribute to such inclusive practices. It is necessary to ensure that inclusive teaching practices are collaborative, as learners guide support providers about their learning styles, preferences, and other aspects that may help ensure that the support given addresses the barriers experienced.

On the other hand, teachers in full-service schools should know how they can engage learners as equal members in support provision. The support services led by the school-based support team and the district-based support team need to incorporate what inclusive policies recommend, which is to ensure that learners who are receiving support should have a voice in whatever support is prepared for them. Based on the findings of this study, it can be noted that there is still a gap between what teachers do and what learners would like to be done when it comes to the support they receive. Additionally, learners feel excluded in full-service schools, as was the case when they were in mainstream schools. They do not see any implementation of inclusive policies where they are supposed to have a voice. This implies that although being referred to a full-service school brings some hope to these learners, the barrier at hand now is teacher domination, which does not allow them space to contribute to such inclusive practices.

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