

# “They discluded me”: possibilities and limitations of children’s participation in inclusion research in South Africa

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*Beyond realising the right of children and young people to be heard in routine interactions, there is much scope for research with (rather than on) children. This is particularly pertinent in the field of inclusive education where there is potential for the voice of children and young people to be a lever for change and to promote inclusive practice. South African inclusion research has, however, given little attention to the perspectives and experiences of children and young people. In advocating for research to listen to the voice of insiders – children who have experienced inclusion and exclusion, this paper explores the dilemma of inclusion research. Selecting some children to participate in inclusion research on the basis of disability or other marker of difference undermines the inclusive endeavour. But without their perspective, we may never expose excluding and marginalising practices and attitudes, even within inclusive contexts. Four research initiatives which highlight this dilemma are described, concluding that the dilemma is unresolvable, but that the ongoing debate is valuable. Ultimately the call is for research that is both participatory and emancipatory, resulting in the reduction of exclusionary cultures and practices and the inclusion of young voices in the discourse that produces inclusion knowledge.*

**Keywords:** Participation, voice, children, young people, inclusion research, inclusive education, inclusion, disability, exclusion, marginalisation

## Introduction

Explaining why she was alone and tearful on the playground, Lerato said, “They [pointing to a group of four eleven-year-old girls] discluded me!” I suggested helpfully, “I think you mean that they excluded you”. She assured me that she meant discluded, because, as she explained, she was still part of the group so she wasn’t excluded. Yet, in some configuration of pre-teen girl social politics, she was not welcome in that particular group at that time. Lerato, in Grade five in a Johannesburg school, offered a potentially useful and alternative way of thinking about the inclusion/exclusion binary or continuum. She expressed something about the messy and contradictory nature of inclusion, framed by Benjamin, Nind, Hall, Collins and Sheehy (2003: 547) as “moments of inclusion and exclusion” in contexts of multiple inclusions and exclusions. Her neologism incorporates the insult or belittlement that the prefix ‘dis(s)’ meant to her as she conveyed her dismay at her (apparently temporary) expulsion from her social group. This anecdote, albeit recorded outside a formal research context, is a useful reminder of the insights, perspectives and contributions that children and young people can make if they are heard.

## The value of the voice of children and young people

Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states that children have the right to express their views and be heard in matters pertaining to them, has given impetus to a growing body of research that foregrounds the opinions and experiences of children. Instead of being positioned as research objects, there is increasing recognition of children and young people as social agents (with rights of freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion) with the potential to be participants in research. Children are “experts by experience” (Fleming, 2010:5) and listening to their voices is a way to understand their lives (Lewis, 2004:1). Children can reveal novel or different aspects or perspectives of situations which may be invisible to adults (Fleming, 2010:7; Prout, 2002:68). In addition, children’s voice can contribute to the development of theory and has the potential to change their own and

others' lives (Lewis, 2004:1). In the context of schooling, children offer crucial and distinct perspectives which are necessary to provide a complete account of schooling (Masson, 2004:44) and their voice could contribute to the improvement of education and increase teachers' understanding of their learners (Roaf, 2002:102). It has also been suggested that children and young people also benefit from participation in research. Griesel, Swart-Kruger and Chawla (2004:278) in their study of South African children address claims that participatory research results in the enhancement of self esteem, an increased sense of self-efficacy, internal locus of control, awareness and appreciation of democratic processes, greater sense of responsibility towards their communities and improved communication skills among children and young people. In addition, Fleming (2010:10) suggests gains in self confidence, the belief that their views are important and can bring about change, meeting new people and the development of skills that may be relevant in seeking future employment.

Research is, obviously not the only way children's perspectives can be heard. Clark (2005:491) includes "everyday listening" by those who work with children regularly to the "one-off consultation" that occurs with a specific issue or event. There is clearly much scope for the development of listening skills among teachers and others who work with children and young people. Haynes (2009:38), for example, refers to the Philosophy for Children Approach that emphasises reflective dialogue in a community of enquiry as an innovation that promotes children's participation in education. At individual, classroom and school level there are many opportunities for the promotion of listening, conversations, questions, participation in decision-making and other encounters that help to realise children's rights as conceived by the UNCRC. For the purpose of this paper, however, I have chosen to limit my discussion to the issue of participation of children and young people in research, and in particular, research within the context of inclusive education. Within these limits, I have not engaged with the debates about the definition of childhood and the construction of the child, but acknowledge the usefulness of considering that the child is constituted relationally (usually in relation to the adult) and that notions of childhood are not universal, but culturally specific (Burman, 2008:81, 82). I have, unless quoting, used the South African term *learner* to designate a child or young person in school, rather than the words *pupil* or *student*, which are found in the international literature.

## Participation and voice in inclusion research

The need to hear (and heed) the voices of children and young people has been a recurring call in the international literature on inclusive education (Allan, 2007; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Lewis, 2005). Those who have engaged with children and young people about their experiences of inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation have found that the voices of learners can be a powerful lever for change (Ainscow & Kaplan, 2004). Messiou (2008:35) maintains that listening to children and young people helps us to understand inclusion in schools, the creation of effective inclusive environments, and that it is essential in the development of inclusive practices. She also says,

*"... the perspectives that are of most importance are those of 'insiders' especially children themselves, since they are the ones who experience the impact of either inclusive or exclusive practices" (2006:306).*

Listening to children and young people who have been marginalised or excluded provides valuable insights into their experiences (Corbett & Slee, 2000:135), and where learners with disabilities are included in schools their voice needs to be heard because teachers and other learners without disabilities are not likely to recognise obstacles to access in the environment (Wendell, 1996:46). Giving voice to children and young people has become something of a 'hot topic' in research in inclusive education internationally with a variety of innovative methodologies being harnessed to facilitate the expression of views and experiences (for example, Fitzgerald, Jobling & Kirk, 2003; Jones & Gillies, 2010; Lewis, 2005; Lewis, 2008; Susinos, 2007). South Africa, by contrast, has seen little research with children and young people about their views and experiences of inclusion and exclusion in schools. Before describing the dilemmas inherent in conceptualising and executing such research, and suggesting some possibilities for the way forward, I offer an orientation to the concept and context of inclusive education in South Africa. This is

important, because how inclusive education is conceived will determine any research focus in the field. Similarly, researchers' assumptions and beliefs about human difference and diversity (including disability) will direct their gaze and influence research methods, findings and interpretations. For this reason, Allan and Slee (2008:98) advocate "[s]melling your own sweat" as a way of saying that researchers need to recognise their ideologies as they engage in inclusive education research.

## The concept and the context: inclusive education in South Africa

Prior to 1994, South African state education was characterised by segregation. Not only were learners educated separately and unequally according to racial classifications, a separate special education system served (mainly white) learners deemed to have disabilities. As a result, the post 1994 education department inherited a fragmented education system, characterised by multiple exclusions. There were, and still are, at least 200 000 children and young people of school going age not in school, and factors to do with disability are highlighted among reasons for this (Department of Education (DoE), 2001; Govender, 2009; Republic of South Africa, 2010). Exclusion in education is not, however, limited to the children and young people who are not present in schools, but describes the experience of learners *in* schools where systematic learning is not provided (Pendlebury, 2010:65) and where learners are excluded from accessing and participating fully in teaching, learning and assessment opportunities and belonging in school communities.

Against this background, and in the light of constitutional, human rights and social justice imperatives, international trends in schooling and United Nations initiatives like *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (Unesco, 1994), South Africa has embraced inclusive education. As a concept, inclusive education is somewhat difficult to describe, given contextual variations in practice and contested definitions within the discourse community (Mitchell, 2005; Rose, 2010; Walton & Nel, forthcoming). While the debates about what constitutes inclusive education are beyond the scope of this paper, I would suggest that in broad terms, inclusive education can be understood as reducing exclusionary pressures in schools (or other sites of learning) and promoting access to and participation in curricula, and belonging in school communities (Booth & Ainscow, 1998:2). Inclusive education is thus concerned with achieving equity by identifying and addressing direct and indirect impediments to access, participation and belonging in school cultures, facilities and curricula. This is not achieved by attempts at normalising or assimilation, but by the radical reconstruction of schools and schooling to meet the learning needs of a diverse learner population. Individual learners and groups of learners may find themselves particularly vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion in or from schools, and much of the literature on inclusive education focuses on ways of promoting their inclusion. While aspects to do with disability are not the only reasons that some learners cannot fully access the social goods of education (poverty, race, gender, sexual orientation, migrant status and geographical location are all factors that may contribute to marginalisation or exclusion), disability issues have become a particular, if not central, focus of the inclusive education discourse in South Africa and internationally. This may be a result of the legacy of separate education and the visible and systematic segregation or exclusion of learners based on individual deficit explanations for school failure. It may also be because inclusive education has been integral to the expression of the rights of persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and the fact that disability can compound other vulnerabilities. I attempt in this paper, to reflect both the broad reaches of the concept of inclusive education in South Africa by discussing a study on the experiences of marginalisation of refugee children in a school, and also a more narrow (and prevalent) view of inclusive education that focuses on issues of access and participation for learners who, because of special education needs or disabilities, are particularly vulnerable to being excluded in or from schools or schooling.

Since the publication by the Department of Education (DoE) in 2001 of *White Paper Six: Special Needs Education* that describes the framework for building an inclusive education system in South Africa, a variety of research initiatives have addressed aspects of the conceptualisation, understanding and implementation of inclusive education in this country. Within this research, there has been an overwhelming emphasis on investigating teachers' attitudes, perceptions, experiences and challenges towards inclusive

education or educating learners with disabilities in their classrooms (Lorenzo & Schneider, 2006). The experiences, perceptions and opinions of learners towards inclusive education are relatively neglected in this country<sup>1</sup>.

## **Participation of children and young people in inclusion research in South Africa: challenges**

It would be potentially valuable to understand how inclusion and exclusion in education are experienced and perceived by children and young people in South Africa. In particular, the opinions and challenges experienced by children and young people with disabilities or other barriers to learning could influence the way inclusive education is conceived and practised here. Lewis (2005:215) confirms that it is vital to explore the views of child participants in inclusive settings, but warns that doing this in valid and reliable ways is problematic. There are problems associated with any research with children, for example, regarding informed consent, unequal power relations that operate with adult researchers and child participants, and legal issues. There are questions about how authentic the researched voice of the child is (Burman, 2008:121) and how to move beyond tokenism to translate children's views into meaningful change in policy and practice (Lundy, 2007:937). These problems are not insignificant and do require attention, but for the purpose of this paper, I will not explore them further in favour of addressing some conceptual difficulties associated with research with children and young people in the specific context of inclusive education. I have also chosen not to address some of the possible practical challenges of research in this field when the focus is on children with disabilities. These may be the need for additional time, communication difficulties that result from impairments or language differences and ethical/legal complexities that arise from the compounding vulnerability of children with disabilities, especially those with cognitive or learning disabilities whose consent may be contested.

I propose that the major problem of research with children and young people in the context of inclusive education is an aporia, (a "double contradictory imperative" (Allen, 2007:81)) or a dilemma. On the one hand, we need the voice of the insider, particularly in South Africa as we enter the second decade of inclusive education. We need to know how new policies and practices are being experienced by children now included in schools which previously would have excluded them. Although many (black) children who experienced barriers to learning were included by default in schools in years prior to 1994, this is the first generation of learners to be schooled within the ambit of inclusive education policies. These learners have unique challenges. They are coming into schools which themselves are finding their way (not always successfully) to inclusive cultures, practices and policies. Engelbrecht (2006:260) has already suggested that the official policy and rhetoric of inclusion has not always translated into classroom experience, with bullying and exclusion experienced by those deemed to be 'different'. Researchers need to identify and engage with individual children and young people who, in South African schools, would be "information-rich informants" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:401) about the experiences of inclusion, marginalisation and exclusion. This would give expression to Article 7(3) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (to which South Africa is a signatory), which states "*State parties shall ensure that children with disabilities have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them ... and (to) be provided with disability and age-appropriate assistance to realize that right*" (UN, 2006).

The dilemma lies in that generating a sample population for such research involves selecting and labelling some children and young people, and marking them as different (Allan, 2007:45). In so doing, research becomes complicit in legitimising and perpetuating the categorisation of learners in a world where different is often cast as deficit or deviant. In giving a voice to children or young people, much international research tends to assume disability categories as self evident rather than constructed as they describe the research participants (see, for example, Cocks, 2008; Mitchell, 2010; Monteith, 2004; Whitehurst, 2006). While interrogating the process by which certain children and young people come to be thus labelled would probably be regarded by the researchers as beyond the scope of their research, the effect is to buttress a discourse of individual pathology rather than the social construction of disability. This concern is not insignificant in South Africa. After decades of segregated special education (albeit mostly for white

learners) and pedagogies based on conservative epistemologies, dividing and describing learners according to categories is still pervasive. Current text books for teachers and student teachers continue to offer, in discrete chapters, information designed to help readers understand children with a variety of 'barriers', including sensory impairments, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviour (see Bornman & Rose, 2010; Landsberg, Kruger & Nel, 2005 among others).

Compounding this, selecting specific children and young people on the basis of disability or other marker of difference to participate in research positions them as the *other*, called the "exotic other" by Allan (2007:44). Unlike the experiences and views of 'regular' learners, their experiences and views are presumed to be unusual, unfamiliar or strange, therefore warranting investigation. The act of research thus produces these children and young people as strangers, an identity that is reinforced by the injunction to welcome them in schools (DoE, 2008:29). Research with an emphasis on children who are defined as having special needs also risks reproducing stereotypes (Messiou, 2008:28) and confirming the "excluded identities" (Susinos, 2007:120) that participants may have constructed themselves. Furthermore, casting some children in the role of being at-risk, vulnerable or marginalised risks a research orientation that does not expose learners' strengths and coping strategies. Sookrajh, Gopal and Maharaj (2005), for example, found in their study of refugee children in a Durban school that the construct of vulnerability imposed by the school did not correspond with the needs of these learners.

Focusing on certain children on the basis of their having special needs or experiencing barriers to learning is problematic in other ways too. It limits the potential of research to uncover contextual and other factors that lead to marginalisation or exclusion. Children's life-worlds reflect a complex interplay of race, language, ethnicity, gender, class, age and sexual orientation, all of which may contribute to their experience of marginalisation and exclusion. This approach also risks becoming an essentialising practice with the potential to construct the identity and experience of child participants in a monolithic way (hooks, 1994:90), positioning an aspect of their identity (like disability) as the core of their identity. In addition, we cannot ignore the warnings from the wider field of disability research about "obsession with experience" (Mercer, 2002:235) or "methodological individualism" (Oliver, 2009:112), which can reinforce an individual tragedy lens through which to understand experiences of inclusion and exclusion in schools, instead of seeing experience embedded in social, cultural, political and economic processes (Skeggs in Mercer, 2002:235).

The dilemma, crudely put, is this: to promote inclusive education, we need to understand the experience of inclusion and exclusion in schools from the inside and so we have to listen and respond to the voices of children and young people who have been included and or excluded. Yet, in doing this, our research selects, labels and positions them as 'the included' or 'the excluded', marks 'them' as different from 'us' and so undermines the very essence of inclusive education. The field of inclusive education, encompassing dual imperatives of responding simultaneously to the universal and the individual, is no stranger to dilemmas and aporias (see, for example, Allen, 2007:81, Ferguson & Ferguson, 1998:304; Lunt & Norwich, 1999:39). With due recognition of the dilemma operating include research, I would like to highlight four examples of research initiatives that could merit replication, extension or development in a South African quest for the voice of children and young people.

## **Participation of children and young people in inclusion research in South Africa: possibilities**

One way of sidestepping the pitfalls of selection of individuals to participate in research in inclusion is to engage with a whole class or group. This avoids labelling anyone in particular and potentially reveals insights from learners who would not necessarily be regarded as experiencing barriers to learning. Marginalisation is a sensitive issue, however (Messiou, 2008:29), and creative ways need to be found to explore authentic attitudes and experiences such that individuals are not hurt or humiliated. Research has to be carefully constructed, as talking to a group of learners about some aspect of inclusion may "present as potentially problematic an area that had not previously been perceived as unusual" (Lewis, 2005:217), for example, the presence, activities or support of certain peers. It is not surprising, therefore,



to find researchers using hypothetical peers and vignettes to investigate attitudes and behavioural intentions of children towards others in inclusive classrooms (Frederickson, 2010:7). Popular literature also offers possibilities for research in inclusive education. Grade 10s in a Johannesburg high school studied Mark Haddon's *The curious incident of the dog in the night time*. Their teacher set an anonymous questionnaire to evaluate the impact of the book and how it was experienced by the learners. By focusing on Christopher Boone (the protagonist), rather than any of their own classmates, the learners revealed their understanding of ways in which schools (and their school in particular) and scholars include and exclude. This is congruent with Fisher's (2008:76) assertion that stories offer the opportunity for children to consider themselves in the process of looking at and thinking about others. The teacher reported that at least half of the learners recognised that Christopher would be teased, mocked and ridiculed if he were to be admitted to their school (Walton, 2009). The learners articulated a number of ways in which their social interactions, teaching strategies and school organisation would have to change in order for Christopher to be safely included in their school. This approach may be flawed by focusing on Christopher as an individual (making Christopher seem like the problem), but it does suggest a way in to explore and address issues of inclusion and exclusion for high school learners. This whole group approach allows for the participation of all class members, irrespective of how they may be different from each other, and provides insight into the range of views, attitudes and concerns about inclusive education that prevail among young people, but because it does not disaggregate the responses according to learner characteristics, it cannot reveal the insider perspectives which are possible when specific individual and sub-group participants are identified in inclusion research.

The Young Voices Project (YVP) in Uganda and Tanzania (Lewis, 2008) drew on both disabled and non-disabled participants to hear about what made them feel included in or excluded from education. Using a variety of approaches, including photographs, drawing, drama and discussions, the YVP foregrounds issues of environment, policy, practice, resources and attitudes that need attention if schools are to become more inclusive. The selection of drawings, quotations and photographs presented in the report clearly indicates whether the contributor is a learner with a disability. So while a wider group has participated in this YVP, and the voices selected for publication in the report have been given expression without commentary, the mention of the presence and type of disability (where applicable) positions the contributing learner in the mind of the reader in a particular way. Whether this identification ultimately works for inclusion (by highlighting the experiences of exclusion of learners with disabilities, like Moses Ochom, who explained the difficulty of having no suitable toilet in the hostel (Lewis, 2008:21)) or against inclusion (by highlighting and entrenching labels assigned to some learners and not others), is debatable. This research does, however, reflect the value of using multiple modes to give expression to the views of children and young people. Called a mosaic approach, multi-method research was developed by Clark (2004:144) as a way of harnessing the strengths of young children, and included observations, child conferencing, tours and map-making. Extended to the field of inclusion research, where some participants may be unable or unwilling to engage in traditional research methods like interviews or questionnaire completion, a mosaic approach, as used in the YVP, has much potential. It is inclusive in that it can facilitate the participation of a variety of children and young people by offering modes of expression best suited to individual ability and preference.

Interviews remain a valuable way to give voice to children and young people about their experiences of inclusion (Lewis, 2005). Tracy (not her real name) was included in an ordinary (as opposed to special) Johannesburg school, despite the numerous learning difficulties that she experienced. An interview with her after the successful completion of Grade 12 revealed useful insights into the ways in which the school both facilitated and frustrated her inclusion and participation in school life (Walton, 2010). She commented, for example, on teachers' practice of 'peer assessment' in which her spelling tests were 'marked' by her peers, and how she hated the practice as it exposed her severe spelling difficulties to her peers. Teachers receiving this feedback commented that they had never thought of this practice as disempowering, seeing it as merely functional. Without the mechanism of the interview, and the dissemination of its content to the teaching staff, this practice may have continued unquestioned. In their study of the development of

inclusive practice, Ainscow, Howes, Farrell and Frankham (2003:234) found that it was useful to ask teachers to consider the views expressed by individual children within their school and to consider the implications that these views had for their practice. In this regard, Shevlin (2010:116) asserts that great benefits derive from having “structured explicit pupil consultation” as a normal feature of school life. This suggests that schools in South Africa would be well advised to consider ensuring that there are on-site personnel who are attuned to the voice and views of learners, and who mediate these views with teachers.

The “powerful and compelling” personal stories told by *foreign* learners (the term is preferred over *refugees*) in a Durban school reveal “richly textured” lives (Sookrajh, et al., 2005:5). Their narratives also reveal experiences of exclusion and marginalisation within a school that, unlike other schools that had denied them access, had supposedly included them. The learners expressed embarrassment at the use of the term *refugees* by the school principal and felt unwelcome among peers who often called them *makwerekwere* (a derogatory term for *foreigner*). The curriculum was perceived as alienating, and learning Afrikaans (one of South Africa's 11 official languages) was problematic. The foreign learners were also physically separated from others, ostensibly for the provision of support. Much as the narratives revealed exclusionary practices, selected teachers were able to ensure that foreign learners' experiences were shared with all learners by using the stories in lessons in a variety of ways. As such, Sookrajh and colleagues regard the narratives within a “reviewed curriculum” as emancipatory (2005:10). Not only did the stories highlight the multiple dimensions of foreign learners' experiences, views and identities, they also enabled teachers to construct and convey different meanings of the lives of these learners.

Did identifying Tracy and the foreign learners for participation in research promote inclusion by revealing schooling practices which the well intentioned staff had never considered as exclusionary and which could then be changed? Or did it impede inclusive thinking by perpetuating the division of learners into categories such as learning disabled or foreign? Most likely, it did both. We would do best to refuse closure and either-or-thinking and learn to be comfortable with dilemmas which cannot always be resolved, and rather continue debating how we can best apply inclusion (Allan, 2007:82).

## **Conclusion: Voyeurs or agents of change? Emancipatory imperatives in inclusion research**

Fundamental to any inclusion research with children and young people is the question of whether their opinions and perspectives are interesting, or whether they count. Fleming (2010:3, 4) cautions against mining children for information, saying that researchers with children should be “builders, not borrowers”. Oliver (2009:117), writing in the general context of disability research, adds the metaphors of researchers as “tourists” or “colonizers”, engaged in “exploitative investigatory research”. To counteract this, there is a call for research that is empowering and emancipatory, such that it reveals social barriers, changes perceptions of disability and generates political action (Mercer, 2002:237). When applied to research about inclusive education with children and young people, this means that it is not good enough to reveal children's experiences by giving them voice as an academic exercise that only materially and professionally benefits the researcher. Griesel et al. (2004:292) note that children are frustrated when they are listened to, and no concrete action results, and Lundy (2007:933) maintains that “influence” (children's views being acted upon) is a vital component of the right of children to be heard. Research with children and young people in the context of inclusive education should thus be constructed in such a way that the findings can lead to meaningful change or practical outcomes for all learners and especially those vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation. Important, too, are interventions that should take place after children's and young people's views have been expressed, especially if these views reflect negative, discriminatory or stereotyping attitudes. Without this, research may be seen as legitimising such attitudes by indulging them with time and interest. Both Fleming (2010:3) and Messiou (2008:29) express the need for the researcher to give something back to the children who participated in the research by building relationships or engaging in classroom activities.

Inclusive education is an elusive and contested concept, continually in the process of construction by the discourse community through theory, research, practice and reflection. As South Africa is in the nascent stages of constructing its unique understanding of inclusion, we would do well to incorporate the voice of children and young people in that construction intentionally, by facilitating their participation in the discourse. In this way children and young people become more than a source of knowledge about inclusion, they participate in the production of that knowledge. Like Lerato who was mentioned earlier, they could disrupt our knowledge and suggest new and useful ways of knowing about inclusion and exclusion in South African schools. The challenge then, in our second decade of inclusive education, is to commit research energy and resources to listening and responding to the voices of children and young people.

## Notes

1. Of post-graduate research listed by the National Research Foundation 26 studies between 2001 and 2009 focus on teachers' attitudes toward, perspectives on and experiences with inclusive education. In the same period, only four deal with learner perspectives of inclusive education. A further four studies on learners in inclusive settings are listed as current (<http://stardata.nrf.ac.za/starweb/CCRPD/servlet.starweb>, accessed 28 June 2010).

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