

## The geographies of inclusion of students with disabilities in an ordinary school

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*With the release of Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education — Building an Inclusive Education and Training System the issue of inclusive schooling has formed a growing part of the education debate in South Africa. There have been inclusive education pilot projects undertaken by the national and provincial education departments and various school-based initiatives that have engaged with inclusive education policy implementation. This study explored one school-based initiative that aimed to include children with disabilities and implement the imperatives of Education White Paper 6. The research participants were five teachers and the school principal. Data collection techniques included in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations in classrooms and document analysis. The findings in the study emphasize the importance of spatiality to understanding how ideological and structural forces impinge on a school that is grappling with the inclusion of students with disabilities. The study highlights how the everyday individual and cultural practices in the specific school spaces play out to reinforce dominant normalizing discourses of traditional forms of special education.*

**Keywords:** children's geographies; disability; inclusive education; policy implementation; quality education for all; school spaces; teachers' ideologies

### Introduction

Internationally since the 1990s, the inclusive schools movement has become the cornerstone of educational reform in many countries (see, for example, Armstrong, Armstrong & Barton, 2000; Lupart & Weber, 2002; UNESCO, 2002; Engelbrecht, 2006; Kristensen, Omagar-Loican, Onen & Okot, 2006; Miles & Ahuja, 2007; Spurgeon, 2007; Riddel, 2009; Miles & Singal, 2010). The key premise is that schools are about providing quality education for all children and youth regardless of differences in respect of race, class, culture, language, gender, ethnicity, ability/disability. In other words, the notion of inclusive education is viewed more comprehensively as a reform that has as its agenda the delivery of quality education for all children (Engelbrecht, 2006; Miles & Singal, 2010). International guidelines have provided the overall framework for policy developments in inclusive education. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Disabled Persons (United Nations, 1993) and the Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All (UNESCO, 2000).

In South Africa inclusive education is framed within a human rights discourse as evident in Education White Paper 6: Special Education — Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001). This policy foregrounds key values of equality, social justice, human rights and a respect for diversity. Education White Paper 6

provides a framework for systemic change where the goal of the education system is to respond to the full range of barriers to learning and participation experienced by learners, including those that may arise from HIV/AIDS, language, disability, race, class, gender and socio-economic status differences. Thus, building an inclusive education system requires changes to the way in which people understand, conceptualise, explain and thus respond to diversity in the learner population.

Internationally, the implementation of the inclusive education policy agenda has been fraught with tensions, contradictions and complexities (Moss, 2003; Graham & Slee, 2005; Slee, 2006; Spurgeon, 2007; Wildeman & Nomdo, 2007; Miles & Singal, 2010). A key issue surrounds the terminology and discourse of inclusive education in that there are various competing discourses which result in diverse meanings and understandings (Graham & Slee, 2008). Researchers have drawn attention to the persistence of normative assumptions of traditional special education that shape and drive policy implementation (Barton, 2003; Dunne, 2009). The need to develop more sustainable and context-appropriate policies and practices in more developing contexts has been raised (Miles & Singal, 2008; Pather, 2008). In South Africa, studies have drawn attention to a lack of teacher preparedness and support (Hay, Smit & Paulsen, 2001; Eloff, Swart & Engelbrecht, 2002), and poor funding of the inclusive education initiative (Wildeman & Nomdo, 2007). In many countries, including South Africa, market-based reforms have turned some schools into competitive terrains in the belief that this will raise educational standards. The result is that schools tend to adopt exclusionary practices in respect of students who are seen as a threat to success as determined by measured forms of assessment (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004).

The study presented in this paper explored a school based initiative in the province of KwaZulu-Natal that has included students with disabilities.

### **The notion of geographies**

In the context of human geography, the notion of 'geographies' refers to a focus on detailed and explicit attentiveness to everyday spatialities in the lives of individuals and in social institutions. According to Horton and Kraftl (2005:136) "geographies are always already encountered and lived in, and of particular everyday moments, in ways which are inherently personal, partial, individual, subjective, embodied and contingent." Schools as institutions are 'richly textured, power laden spatialities of everyday life' (Van Ingen & Halas, 2006:382). Van Ingen and Halas (2006:380) further argue that schools are 'contact zones' — places where the values, ideologies and practices intersect in often highly unequal relations of domination and subordination. In a similar vein, Lefebvre (1991) asserted that schools are landscapes of power.

Over the past two decades there has been substantial research in an area of human geography referred to as 'children's geographies' (for example, Cahill, 2000; Matthews, 2003; Holt, 2004; Ryan, 2005; Morrow, 2008). The focus is a study of the places and spaces of children's lives in their experiential, social, political and ethical formations. Researchers in the field argue that children's lives will be markedly different in differing times and places and in differing circumstances such as family, school, gender, ability/disability and class. The notion of children's space is a key concept in the field of children's geography (Wyness, 2003). Exploring children's geography means that one is inherently concerned with power relations surrounding the category 'children' and the spaces they occupy (Weller, 2006). Van Ingen and Halas (2006) explain that much of research shows that certain societal spaces within children's geography are normatively skewed towards adult power and authority.

In this paper, we argue that space is central to the construction of disability in a schooling context that has included children with disabilities. Horton and Kraftl (2005) have challenged the field of children's geographies to contribute more significantly to contemporary debates and practices in schooling contexts. These scholars argue that there is a need for research and reflection regarding spaces of/for education.

Drawing upon an in-depth case study, we use a geographic focus to unpack the visual, political and ideological dimensions of school spaces as they are experienced in the everyday lives of disabled students in an ordinary school. This paper has two broad aims. It highlights the experiential aspects of disabled children's inclusion in an ordinary public school, and it examines the processes that maintain or challenge the spatial conditions under which inclusion and the identity of disabled children are produced.

## **The study**

### **Context and participants**

The school is situated in a densely populated semi-rural township in the northern part of the province of KwaZulu-Natal, more than 25 km away from the nearest town. The community experiences high levels of unemployment and poverty. At the time of the study, the school had a learner population of 1,250. The age range of learners was between 3 and 17 years. The school offered classes from preschool to Grade 4. Over the years, the learner population had become very diverse. There were 95 over-age learners, who should have been at high school according to the departmental regulations for admission.

Disabled learners were admitted when the school took a conscious decision to open its door to 'out of school' disabled learners in the community. There were 93 learners classified as learners with special needs: 10 deaf, two epileptic, four physically disabled, three cerebral palsied, one autistic and 73 experiencing various forms of learning difficulty. These learners ranged in age from 6 years to 17 years. They had been placed in Grades 1 to 4. All learners were black African, and the majority came from the area in which the school is located. The language of learning at the school was English for hearing learners and South African Sign Language for deaf learners. The school had one teacher proficient in South African Sign Language. The home languages of learners included South African Sign Language, IsiZulu and Sesotho.

### **Data production**

Semi-structured interviews were held with the school principal and five teachers who had disabled learners in their classes. Two of the teachers were studying towards an honours degree in special needs education. The teachers had teaching experience ranging from six to thirty years, and they had been teaching at this school for a minimum of six years. They were all black African women teachers. Participants were interviewed individually for about one hour. Interviews were audio-taped.

Observations were done in four classrooms over three full days each in order to try to gain a sense of the nature of interactions between disabled learners, able-bodied learners and their teachers. Non-participatory observation was used with an intention to reduce any interaction with the participants and to focus the attention on the events (Burns, 2000). Observations were also conducted at three staff meetings to document the conversations teachers held about their experiences of including learners with disabilities in the school. During observations, field notes were taken and cross-checked with the teacher participants to ensure that interactions and

activities were correctly recorded and interpreted.

The school was willing to allow us access to its documents on condition that they remained confidential. A careful examination was made of the relevant documents, including various school policies, children's workbooks, snap survey reports,<sup>1</sup> admission forms,<sup>2</sup> learners' progress reports and departmental correspondence.<sup>3</sup> Documents and artefacts were used to triangulate data elicited through other methods and to enable a rich and deep understanding of issues explored (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

The audio-taped interviews were translated from isiZulu into English and transcribed. Transcribed interviews were validated through a process of member checking involving participants. The transcriptions were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Initial coding involved identifying broad categories of issues. Both emic and etic categories were defined (Headland, Pike & Harris, 1990). Emic categories represented insider's views such as terms, actions and explanations that are distinct to the setting. The aim was to represent the situation from the participants' perspective (Merton, 1972; Pike, 1967). Etic categories represented the researchers' interpretations, concepts and explanations. The categories came from the researcher's personal research experiences or from prevailing literature (Merton, 1972). The second phase of data analysis involved theorising the coded data in search of themes that would exemplify the dimensions of school spaces significant to the inclusion of children with disabilities. This process involved a merging of insights from literature on the notion of geographies and spatialities and inclusion/exclusion debates. Three key themes that emerged in this process will be discussed for the purposes of this article.

### Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the Department of Education, the school management and the participants in the study. We informed participants that their participation in the study was voluntary, and assured them of confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical clearance was obtained through the University Research Office, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

## Findings

### Teachers and ideological spaces

The study revealed that although the admission of disabled children to the school was well intentioned, deficit thinking and the pathologising of the lived experiences of disabled learners shaped teachers' understandings of inclusion. When the school was opened to learners with disabilities, these constructions of difference which hold individuals in a 'mechanism of objectification' (Foucault, 1977:187) continued to exist. The study revealed that teachers at the school generally constructed disabled learners as individual objects to be "treated", "changed", "improved", and "normalised as will be illustrated below.

Within this schooling context, all five teachers understood their role as helping disabled learners do 'normal' things, in order for them to gain the required amount of social capital, the condition of which was to become 'more like us'. One teacher shared with us the school's achievement that a certain number of the disabled learners who were included,

*"... can now fit in the mainstream classroom ..."*

The above excerpt illustrates the fact that disabled children were expected to "adjust and fit" in the mainstream classroom. None of the teachers in this study alluded to the fact that they had adjusted their teaching styles to accommodate disabled learners. Classroom observations revealed that all five teachers were still teaching in conservative ways that used the learning

styles of able bodied learners as a measure of defining how learning had to happen for a disabled child. There was no evidence of curriculum differentiation which is a key strategy in the achievement of an inclusive curriculum (Department of Education, 2008b; UNESCO, 2004).

A number of questions arise from these observations. Firstly, despite having spent more than four years with disabled children, discourses of difference as deficit still emerged in how the five teachers constructed the disabled learners' identities. Learners were often constructed as not meeting some pre-established norm or standard of the 'real' child as was also evident in a study by Reay (2004:32). Teacher narratives revealed that learners with a disability were receiving the judgement that they were different, marked or inferior. Two of the teachers reported,

*They [disabled children] are very short-tempered. They are easily irritable ... This other boy, Sizwe, he is a bully — he beats others.*

*Most of them [disabled children] are very disruptive. They are disruptive even in the classroom.*

Generally, disabled learners who were constructed by the five teachers in more positive terms were judged against the measure of the dominant discourse of normality. This is how one teacher described Sabelo,<sup>4</sup> an epileptic learner, in her class:

*This boy, Sabelo, is very good. He even beats those that are normal.*

Adams, Bell & Griffin (1997) contend that a condition of oppression exists when the dominant group has the power and authority to define and enact reality for the oppressed groups. We found that in this school context the network of power is embedded in the pervasive spaces of normative discourses. Graham and Slee (2005:8) explain that normalization produces oppression "through normalizing discourses that affirm or negate particular ways of being." We argue for an analysis of power in schools which have included students with disabilities to make overt 'tactics of domination' (Foucault, 1980:102). Foucault argues that 'power must be analysed as something that circulates... through a net-like organization' (Foucault, 1980:98).

Secondly, these oppressive social relations lead to a situation where the oppressed group is undergoing constant surveillance. It is in a constant state of continuous, conscious and permanent visibility (McHoul & Grace, 1993). For instance, disabled children are not allowed a space to become who they are capable of becoming. They have to fit into the spaces constructed for them by normative imperatives of dominant discourses. This is not to undermine the agency that disabled children possess, but such agency may be suffocated by the pervasive forces of the dominant discourses at the school that subject disabled children to perpetual prejudice and stigmatization.

Thirdly, we observed the pervasive practice of homogenising children with disabilities. Watson (2004) warns that this obscures differences amongst disabled learners in respect of race, gender, geographical location, sexuality, class, impairment, and so on. Homogenising disabled learners can deny their individuality and tell little about the actual experience of living with impairment or the personal experience of disablement (Miles & Singal, 2008). The danger with this is that disabled learners will cease to be seen as individuals, as the commonality of their experience becomes all-important. The teachers in the above excerpts fail to understand that bullying and disruptive behaviour are not disability specific rather they are the behaviour patterns that can be found amongst all children, whether able bodied or disabled, in many schooling contexts.

Fourthly, the teachers' construction of the normal/not normal binary leads to another pervasive practice — that of 'othering'. Davis and Watson (2001) assert that children are

labelled as "Other" through negative representations of difference. For instance, one teacher thought that the school should,

*"... mix them [disabled learners] with those that are 'normal' in the mainstream class".*

Another teacher conceded that,

*"I am now more comfortable with these disabled children".*

The above comments reflect an intersection of the deficit discourse and the charity discourse. There is an acknowledgement that the disabled children have deficits and that a form of benevolence is required. The charity model treats people with disabilities as helpless victims needing paternalism, compassion and protection (Handicap International, 2008). The deficit discourses reflect the socio-spatial construction of the 'normally developing child' (Holt, 2004). Falling outside of these expected trajectories of normality can result in children being "othered" and represented as "different" in a negative sense.

However, there was one teacher whose views reflected an alternate discourse that spoke to the need to embrace and respect disabled people as individuals in their own right:

*"Disabled people have not created themselves ... they were made disabled by certain circumstances, and society should not think of them as outcasts ... or people that we should pity all the time."*

Barton (1995) argues that the way in which disability is constructed and defined, by whom, with what consequences for the individuals concerned and the society in which they reside are fundamental issues. Portraying disabled people as passive or as unfortunate recipients of charity significantly inhibits notions that they have rights and can actively work to contribute to improving their circumstances. Howell & Lazarus (2008:52) draw attention to the need to overcome "the historical conditioning that has taught us to see difference as a justification for the labelling, exclusion and marginalisation of people in our society." Holt (2004) warns that charity model driven educational interventions which are intended to be beneficial can actually compromise disabled children's rights.

### **Interrogating the internal spatiality of the classroom**

Observations in classrooms revealed that inclusion presents limited opportunities for disabled children to gain access to quality education. We are of the view that the classrooms tended to reflect a spatial convergence of general and special education provision. In such spaces, difference tended to be reinforced. Classroom cultures and practices were clearly constraining to the students with disabilities and learning difficulties. The vision of an inclusive school encapsulated in Education White paper 6 was not evident in the classroom spaces.

The school appeared to be site of social reproduction whereby adults enacted and reproduced unequal social spaces, often unconscious of the insidious nature of their practices. For example, the study revealed that school policies and classroom cultures constrained access to the curriculum and presented limited opportunities for the development of a positive disabled identity. The school made virtually no systemic changes to create an enabling environment for the diverse group of disabled students. For example, the 93 disabled children who ranged in age from 6 to 17 years and had diverse disabilities were placed in Grades 1 to 4.

There are some key issues that emerge when one interrogates the internal spatiality of the classroom. The study revealed that teachers needed urgent training around curriculum and assessment practices that would be responsive to the diversity in their classrooms. Although the school had opened its doors of learning to disabled children, the five teachers adhered inflexibly to the practice of a strict grade system. For instance, there was a 17 year old disabled

learner placed in Grade 1. Although he performed well academically, there was no thought given to the possibility that he could be fast tracked through the Grade 1 curriculum. The thinking was that he had to spend the whole year in Grade 1. Two teachers reported that certain learners had not been assessed to ascertain their levels of functioning academically, but “*we just took the parent’s word and placed the child without finding out what the child’s strengths and difficulties are*”.

The diversity amongst the disabled learners in their classrooms posed a challenge to the teachers. The five teachers complained that they had not received in-depth training on how to teach learners across different categories of disability, including the autistic child. This is reflected in the words of one of the teachers “*our knowledge and skills are limited*”. One of the teachers lamented,

*“There was a point where I could not understand this child. I know you should really understand what you are doing and not depend on general knowledge about supporting disabled learners.”*

The teachers felt that although intuitive knowledge was helpful it was insufficient to engage with the intricacies of differentiating a curriculum to accommodate disabled learners with diverse needs. In discussing the ethos of their classrooms, teachers reported that they taught disabled learners “*like the other children*”. In promoting a ‘one size fits all’, the school failed to interrogate its norms, beliefs and values of operation. Curriculum access for the Deaf learners posed a related difficulty at the school. A key barrier was that there only one teacher proficient in South African Sign Language. The school was, therefore, compelled to accommodate Deaf learners in one classroom irrespective of the grade level at which each learner was functioning. This teacher was expected to adapt the curriculum to accommodate the learning needs of learners at different grade levels.

Observations in the classrooms revealed the entrenchment of a classroom hierarchy based on ability and an unproblematic grouping of children by meritocratic stratification. For instance, in one of the classrooms observed, children were arranged predominantly according to their assumed academic ability to participate in the teaching and learning process. Children were divided into three groups. The red group included children seen as having lower ability and who were struggling with many aspects of their work. This group also included the disabled learners, whom the teacher referred to as “LSEN”, an acronym for Learners with Special Educational Needs. Most disabled learners at the school were over-age as they had no previous access to schooling. In the classrooms, these learners were allocated to the ‘red group’ with the assumption that they were functioning at a lowest level academically. The ‘orange group’ comprised children of what was termed ‘medium ability’. The ‘green group’ comprised children who were seen as having higher ability. They appeared to have good self-esteem and were always called upon by the teacher to demonstrate tasks to other children. From our observations, there was little doubt that the classroom arrangements were designed to spatially contain, regulate and reinforce difference.

A major tension was that the learners were very aware of how they came to be in their groups. For example, after a spelling task, Khetha<sup>5</sup> broke down and cried. There was absolute silence in the classroom at the time. When asked why he was crying, he replied still crying, “*I do not want to belong to that group anymore. I did not even obtain a single correct answer*”. The student seemed to believe that the act of being allocated to the ‘red group’ resulted in his poor achievement. Holt (2004) argues that establishing hierarchies is more stigmatizing than an open label and that the hierarchy of ability-disability becomes something shameful that

cannot be resisted. Barton (2003:12) makes a strong argument about systemic change that is needed for inclusion to become a reality:

Inclusive education is not about the reform of special education nor is it a sub-specialism of special education. Inclusive education is about why, how, when, where and the consequences of educating all learners.

### **The policy-practice chasm**

The school on their own initiative embarked on what it believed was a groundbreaking innovation. It is laudable that school management, teachers and the school community saw the need to provide access to 'out of school' learners with disabilities in the area. In 2001, it was estimated that 260,000 to 280,000 children with disabilities were out of school in South Africa (Department of Education, 2001). Sadly this innovation has not been supported by the Department of Education, according to the five teachers in the study. It emerged that teachers and school management were in dire need of professional development and support to implement inclusive education policy at school level. Department of Education programmes had not reached out to the school. The study found that negative and harmful attitudes towards difference, especially disability, on the part of teachers at the school remained a critical barrier to making their school welcoming to all their learners. A teacher lamented,

*"We still experience attitudinal problems from us as teachers. Some teachers do not want to have anything to do with that child. People had been praying that "Let them not come to my class."*

A teacher was reported to have voiced relief that she was not going to have a disabled learner allocated to her class,

*"Fortunately, the principal said the [disabled] children would be accommodated in other classrooms; they would not be integrated into our classrooms. And thanks God that was going to be the case."*

The study also found that teachers in whose classes disabled children were integrated received very little support from their colleagues. Sachs (2003) asserts that engaging with issues of inclusion and exclusion in schools necessitates collaborative efforts through the forging of new relationships within schools and across schools.

An important strategy in the implementation of Education White Paper 6 policy imperatives is the development of a community based model of support to schools. This suggests a shift from a highly specialized model of support to a model that locates support as close as possible to schools and their communities. The key support structures articulated in Education White Paper 6 are: The District Based Support Team (DBST) and the Institution Level Support Team (ILST). From interviews with the staff at the school there had been no training from the Department of Education on the establishment and functioning of these structures. Teachers and school management had this to say about the nature of support they received and their attempts to access help and support:

*"PGSES [Psychological, Guidance and Special Education Services] does not visit our school ... they have never visited our school ... you call them, they do not come ... that frustrates us a lot."*

*"Sometimes I find that some departmental officials' views obstruct what I am trying to do here."*

*"The Department does conduct workshops, but facilitators lack in-depth knowledge of inclusive education. You see when a person is talking about something that he does not*



*understand. The bad thing is that we expect something better from these people. They are our seniors.”*

*“My prayer is that if people could learn not to be crazy about promotions and want to be promoted to offices before they are mature and experienced. Because you find that once people are in these offices, they do not know what to do and how to do it. You find that if you need help and you call these people (district department officials) to the school, they have no clue how to go about dealing with your case.”*

*“Sometimes you find that they do not invite us (to workshops)... I do not understand why they sometimes sideline us as if we do not belong in this district ... that frustrates us ... having our progress working against us.”*

The above excerpts paint a picture of department officials who are failing to provide support to teachers at a school that has embarked on an innovative initiative. Creating inclusive schools involves engaging with transformation and change, risk taking and a constant critique of values, beliefs, structures and school cultures. One cannot underestimate the complexity of the process. Support is therefore crucial. International best practices have documented that support in the form of processes such as networking, collaborative partnerships, knowledge sharing at school and wider levels is the cornerstone of successful inclusive education (Peters, 2004; Miles & Ahuja, 2007; UNESCO, 2009; USAID, 2010).

## Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to examine the experience of including students with disabilities at a semi-rural ordinary school. The findings in the study emphasize the importance of examining spatiality to ascertain how structural forces impinge on schools and teachers and how the everyday individual and cultural practices in specific school spaces play out. Holt (2004) argued that schools are porous spaces located in space and time and within diverse social relations.

The study raises some important questions for transformation in schools and teacher professional development in the context of inclusive education. These questions have been raised by other scholars in the field such as Slee (2006) and Sayed (2003). What assumptions might inform our personal and collective philosophies of inclusive education and disability? What do we mean when we aim to include learners? What should happen when we include? How can teachers become active social agents who can contest and transform the cultures and ethos of their schools and the classrooms to ensure that all learners are equally valued and affirmed?

## Notes

1. Statistical data on learners in a particular school for a specific year
2. Forms that have to be filled in when learners are being admitted to a school
3. Circulars written by the Department of Education to schools
4. Pseudonym
5. Pseudonym

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