

Active facilitation of focus groups: exploring the implementation of inclusive education with research participants

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In this article, we explain how we took an “active” approach to focus group discussions with teachers in three South African schools. The topic of discussion was their views on the implementation of inclusive education. We shall also show how we sought feedback from the participants on their experiences of these discussions. In seeking this feedback, we were interested in seeing if they interpreted the sessions as being learning experiences – that is, as sessions that enabled the participants to learn from each other as well as from facilitators with a view to promoting mutual learning. We indicate how the participants chose to use the feedback opportunity to suggest that further processes should be put in place (by us) in the light of their expressed concerns. Finally, we outline how we took responsibility by creating a further forum for discussion with those who were regarded as having additional “actioning” power.

Keywords: feedback on focus groups; focus group facilitation; opening spaces for collaboration; researcher-participant relationships

Introduction

In South Africa, as elsewhere, the complexity of the implementation of inclusive education policies is an ongoing concern for both theorists and practitioners of education (*cf.* Sayed & Soudien, 2003; Tlale, 2008; Miles & Singal, 2010; Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011; Nel, Müller, Hugo, Helldin, Bäckmann, Dwyer & Skarlind, 2011; Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011; Ntombela, 2011; Hill, Baxen, Craig & Namakula, 2012). The focus group research reported in this article forms part of a broader international project exploring teachers’ roles in inclusive education. The project involves six countries: China, Finland, Lithuania, Slovenia, South Africa and the United Kingdom. In this comparative study, a mixed-method design was executed in two phases. The first phase consisted of the administration of questionnaires; the second phase employed focus group interviews (which, as we shall see, we prefer to call *discussions*). The rationale for this mixed-method design was that the questionnaires would offer statistically analysable data, while the focus groups would delve more fully into participants’ experiences of teaching in inclusive classrooms and provide “high quality data” in specific contexts.

As far as the use of different methods explicitly involving paradigmatic reflections

is concerned, we (the three of us involved in the focus groups in South Africa) chose to handle the focus group sessions in relation to the questionnaire results by adopting a position somewhere between a “pragmatic” and a “transformative” approach. Our pragmatism can be classed as what Onwuegbuzie, Johnson and Collins (2009:1268) refer to as a “dialectical pragmatism”; this form of pragmatism embraces a philosophy of “careful listening to multiple perspectives” rather than upholding a strong form of realism.¹ Furthermore, our form of pragmatism veers in the direction of including features associated with the transformative paradigm as elucidated by Mertens (2010). Mertens (2010) indicates that, within the transformative paradigmatic outlook, it is recognised that it is part of the researcher’s responsibility to consider the uses that might be made of their work, and to take into consideration the way in which research outcomes can be linked to social justice.

In whatever way we conceptualise our approach, what we emphasise is that we addressed the focus group part of the research in South Africa in terms of a conception of “realities” as being re-searched/re-examined with the research participants. We believe that the survey method, and the results generated from this method, can be seen as offering one way of gaining a perspective. Briefly put (because this is not the key focus of this article), the survey conducted during the first phase was geared towards comparing (across the countries) teacher profiles of attitudes towards implementing inclusive practices as well as perceived self-efficacy. Perceived self-efficacy was measured in terms of scales relating to participant teachers’ instructional competencies in an inclusive education context, their competencies in behaviour management in the classroom, and their efficacy in collaborating with others.² (See Savolainen, Jiacheng, Nel, Gaber, Alisaukiene & Engelbrecht, 2012). As far as the analysis of the findings is concerned, South African teachers regarded their ability to manage behaviour as the strongest aspect of self-efficacy. They obtained lower scores on the other scales, and scored lowest on their belief in their ability to collaborate. It was further found in comparing three of the countries where the results have thus far been analysed (China, Finland and South Africa) that collaboration (which involves team work) was the best predictor of attitudes towards possibilities for implementing inclusive education.

The focus groups

Focus group interviews (as planned in the overall project) were designed around the following three questions, which were considered in all participating countries to be suitable starting questions to guide the discussions:

1. *If you look at/think of your own classroom, how do you deal with all the children and their needs?*
2. *If you talk of support for learners in your classroom, what do you mean? Describe specific support strategies – adaptations, accommodations and modifications. Did they help to assist you in implementing inclusive education?*
3. *How would you describe the social and the learning interaction of the learners in your classroom?*

In this article, we concentrate on the focus groups conducted by us, the researchers, in South Africa and also on the feedback obtained from participants. The questions we used to guide the feedback process were:

1. *How did you experience the focus group session?*
2. *How did you experience the process of facilitation?*
3. *How did you feel about the facilitator's questions – did they make sense to you – did they make you think?*
4. *Do you think you learned anything from the facilitator?*
5. *Do you think you learned from others in the group and can you give examples?*
6. *Would you have liked us to ask any other questions?*

The responses obtained during the feedback sessions conducted directly after the focus groups indicated that participants considered the focus group questions as an invitation to talk about issues of concern to them – and moreover they felt that the discussion had been a learning experience. Furthermore, they felt stimulated and motivated by the discussion as they experienced that their perspectives were taken seriously by the facilitators. The focus group discussions also gave them the opportunity to speak freely with colleagues about their challenges and about some of their attempts at dealing with these challenges. Regarding our own inputs in the discussion,³ participants expressed a variety of views: some felt that the suggestions offered by facilitators as options for possibly addressing problematic situations were helpful – for instance, as one participant put it: “Guidance from the facilitator was helpful.” Others felt that even more concrete advice could have been given. For example, they stated that: “You could offer something in terms of solutions to the challenges”, or “need further ideas from facilitators’ experiences”.

The focus group sessions, which we choose to call active focus group sessions, were clearly interpreted by the teachers as intended to be beneficial to them in some way. Exactly in what way expectations on the part of participants might be met can, of course, pose dilemmas for those involved in “active facilitation”, because different participants may expect different degrees of input (as also was evident from the feedback we received).⁴ In our case, we tried to meet additional expectations that were suggested, i.e. where participants used the feedback sessions to express to us inclusive education issues they felt could be further dealt with in different forums. In this article, we specifically highlight how we acted in view of requests to carry forward their concerns.

We propose that, taken as a whole, the approach we adopted as researchers can be considered as *active* in the sense that we actively tried to make a difference to the field of practice in which participants were operating. McKay and Romm (2008: 151-152) make a distinction between “traditional” action research and what they call “active research”. They claim that action research in which definite plans can be set, implemented, and evaluated via an action research cycle, may not be appropriate for contexts where broader development goals are at stake, and where trajectories of change cannot be clearly determined as part of the research process. Via what McKay

and Romm (2008:165) call “active research”, openings are sought by researchers (with participants/co-explorers) identifying spaces for “transformative possibilities” along the way; this is what we suggest was done in this case.

Selection of participants, and justification of research procedure

With the assistance of a district official, we selected three schools located in a poor socio-economic area in Tshwane South. These schools were chosen because they had functional Institutional Level Support Teams (ILSTs) as defined in *Education White Paper 6* (Department of Education, 2001).⁵ We believed that the research participants (teacher-members of the ILSTs in the respective schools) would be able to offer rich perspectives based on their experiences as teachers. The principals of the schools asked for volunteers and, in the process of seeking their consent, we held further discussions with them about the purpose of the research. The sessions were conducted in June 2012. Focus groups 1 and 3 consisted of seven teachers and group 2 consisted of six teachers, making a total of 20 participant teachers. (In all the focus group sessions, the vast majority of teachers were female, and the age range was 30–60 years). One-hour (approximately) focus group discussions were conducted in each school followed by 20–30 minute feedback sessions.

As pointed out in the Introduction, the guiding questions for all three focus groups were taken from those used in the larger international project. For comparison purposes, these questions had to be similar. That said, we arranged, with the South African research participants, to offer feedback on, among other things, our questions: this gave them the opportunity to engage in discussions about other questions of interest/concern as raised by them. The pre-formulated questions were developed to complement the 283 responses to a questionnaire posted to 605 students enrolled for the Advanced Certificate in Education: Inclusive Education (47.3% return rate).

As far as the organisation of the overall project is concerned, there are different teams handling the research process in different countries. Sometimes, in these various participating countries, the composition of teams for the questionnaires and those for the focus groups differed. We support Teddlie and Tashakkori’s (2010) suggestion that a methodologically eclectic approach enables all researchers involved in a project to contribute to that project, and to creatively add new contributions/ideas on how to develop the project. We also agree with Johnson (2009:449), who proposes that a pragmatic approach be geared to “provide pragmatic, ethical solutions to local and societal problems”. This was the intention of the South African researchers involved in the questionnaire administration and in the focus groups – with a slightly different team handling the focus groups. (Nel and Tlale were part of both teams; in the questionnaire administration another researcher other than Romm was the third person on the team.) We suggest that a “pragmatic” umbrella can serve as a justification for mixing otherwise apparently contradictory philosophical and epistemological perspectives on what it means to conduct “quality” social research (Romm, 2010:438-439).

In our own approach, given our pragmatic purpose to “make a difference” via the research, we were interested in treating the focus group sessions as a forum where participants could feel they were already learning from their involvement in the research/exploration process. We were also interested (having heard participant feedback) in acting as mediators in setting up further discussion/collaboration processes (as will be discussed later).⁶

Focus groups as learning encounters and as potentially leading to additional outcomes
From our review of the literature, it appears that most researchers conducting focus groups regard them as primarily a method – alongside other research instruments – for researchers to “gather evidence” about how people converse on certain topics. This material, it is argued, may later (or may not) be used by other audiences such as policy makers (*cf.* Silverman, 2000; Hennink, 2007). The idea has been put forward by certain authors that the group communication in a focus group can be a source of learning for participants and thus be beneficial to participants. However, these authors have surmised this from an analysis of interactions occurring in the group – without their having specifically sought participant feedback on this (*cf.* Gregory & Romm, 2001; Wibeck, Abrandt-Dahlgren & Öberg, 2007; Bay-Cheng, Livingston & Fava, 2010). Furthermore, authors have not, generally speaking, reported on the manner in which – if at all – the focus group facilitators introduced the sessions in a way that people became encouraged to treat the sessions as co-learning encounters. This is what we attempted to do in what we call our “active facilitative” endeavours.

To start with, we specifically introduced the discussions in this way – thus gearing participants in this direction from the outset. We presented ourselves as having come with some questions that derived from an international research project, but also made it clear to participants that we wanted to create a forum where we could all re-search (re-look at) issues connected with the implementation of inclusive education.

During the feedback process at the end of the sessions, we asked the teachers whether they felt that they had learned anything from each other (as well as from the facilitators). As it turned out, they were positive about the learning they had experienced. As expressed by one participant: “When we share as a group we gain from each other and can implement what we get from others”. Or, as another stated it: “Learned from examples that others offer about how they deal with situations.” Another indicated that she “learned that our colleagues are trying to cope”. (A full account of the participants’ feedback in relation to learning from colleagues and from the facilitators forms the topic of another article).

During the feedback sessions many participants expressed the view that our style of asking questions was helpful in drawing out their concerns, and also that what they had said during the focus group discussion should be taken seriously and carried forward. They felt that this would be an important outcome of the discussion. One participant stated this by suggesting that we needed to “carry the baton” by taking their

views into forums where they would be heard. As she put it: “It [you being here] shows that someone cares and wants to know what is happening. You have been listening carefully to us and we are happy about it. Maybe someone will [now] carry the baton.”

In order not to betray their trust in expecting us to make the focus groups a more worthwhile encounter by “speaking to the right people”, we decided to arrange a session with the district officer (who had originally helped to select the schools) and the participants from the focus groups. The idea was that, at this “report back” session, we could discuss our synthesis of what we had learned from all three groups (about what was needed for inclusive education policies to become more manageable for teachers). We also thought it was imperative to raise certain issues that were relevant to the District and Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) head office, issues of concern that are voiced by the teachers in all the schools, namely:

1. They felt that they were not getting enough support from the District.
2. When personnel do visit schools, they do not show them what to do in situations with learners experiencing difficulties.
3. They are not sufficiently aware of the problems and challenges faced by teachers, which is why schools are described as “underperforming” – a label that the teachers resisted (because those who applied this label did not know enough about the circumstances under which teachers worked).

A meeting with three Tshwane South district officials (Inclusive Education Unit) and a GDE Head Office official (Inclusive Education) was subsequently arranged.

Meeting with focus group participants and stakeholders (10 December 2012)

The meeting was held at the University of South Africa (Unisa), and lasted about three hours. Below we present a narration of this meeting, highlighting what we consider to be the main trajectory of the discussion.

On arrival we asked a group of participants whether they had, since the focus group sessions in June, had any further discussions with each other as a result of the focus group sessions. Some participants (from one school) said one of the issues which they had decided to discuss further was the issue of poor parental involvement; they had started to discuss strategies as to how to get parents more involved – especially when the children in their classes were not achieving in the way they should be. The conversation then turned to what they, as the ILST, can do when children are not performing well. At this point a district official entered the conversation by noting that the ILST can put in an application to the District Office if they feel a learner requires a special school. This district official also pointed out that, in the case of learners who have writing difficulties but who can perform better orally, there are forms to fill in in order to obtain special permission for a learner to be assessed orally. She also mentioned the option of applying for a class of Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) at the school. In this class, the children concerned obtain learning support and

are sent back to the mainstream classes once the particular problem has been addressed. She expressed her concern that ILSTs in some schools are “too lazy” to fill in the forms, which means that the opportunity to make use of these options is not fully explored. Finally, the district official stated that help could be given to aid the ILST through the process of filling in these forms and that she wanted to recommend this as a course of action. To this a few people at the meeting replied that “you will get applications next year”.

At the official start of the meeting, one of us presented the context of the research results based on the questionnaire administered in the various participating countries. This researcher indicated that these results showed that South African teachers do not collaborate in the way they should – with one another, with principals, with the District Office, with professionals such as psychologists and speech therapists, and with “us at the university”.

Turning to the focus groups, she reported that the material from the focus groups also pointed to the need for more collaboration by all involved, including personnel employed at the District Office. She stated that it seems teachers (including ILST members) and district officials appear to be living in two different worlds; indeed, sometimes they do not even know each other. The researcher remarked that this meeting was a starting point for people to get to know one another, to begin (or further) communication, and set the scene for future communications.

At this point, one of the ILST members stated that she would like to “confess” that sometimes the teams are less than functional owing to their workload and because the forms seem so onerous to fill in. Also, being so busy “the whole week”, she said that they cannot perform “at their level best” to attend to all the learners in the class. One of the district officials thanked her for her honesty and the discussion proceeded along the lines of how they could manage to fill in the forms by seeking support from the District Office in this regard. She also indicated that not all teachers are able to handle the challenges posed by the need to deal with “inclusive education” classrooms, and that, in her unit at the District, there were only 11 people available to service 260 schools.

The discussion turned to the problem of how they could obtain buy-in from senior management at schools (such as principals) so that teachers could plan to go for training. A problem seems to be that people are informed about training at the last minute, which means the right people are not sent for training. Furthermore, even when some of the right people are sent on training, the information is not cascaded down to the other teachers. The question about how to encourage “buy-in” was then discussed.

One of us referred back to the focus group sessions and claimed to be encouraged by the fact that, in the feedback sessions, the participants seemed to be excited that they had learned from one another, e.g. they stated that “I never knew what you were doing in your class that is working.” This author mentioned that the focus groups were

an opportunity for participants to talk about their problems and to learn from each other (and thus to collaborate). However, he was concerned that the attitude of the district officials sometimes made it difficult for teachers to feel that they could develop a working relationship with these officials. He said that a gap in collaboration needed to be bridged. He asked the question: “How often do head office people or district officials go to schools to praise them about the good work that they are doing?” He suggested that it would be very motivating if people could be praised for the good job they do in the face of so many constraints and challenges. The visits to schools could perform the function of being supportive – in other words, these visits could help people deal with the challenges facing them, but not based on the attitude that teachers themselves are guilty of “underperforming”. This same researcher stated that part of the feedback from the focus group sessions was that participants had told us they were now more motivated (they had been extremely demoralised), because the facilitators had shown an appreciation of their situation and what they were doing – and had understood that teachers were working in difficult circumstances.

His statement helped to set the tone for the rest of the discussion: the district officials asserted that, “We normally say to teachers that ‘you are doing a good job’ and we try to encourage them in this way”. They also reminded the teacher-participants that “the District” is not one thing (or homogenous entity): some of the problems, for example, in implementing the Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) – which teachers expressed they found difficult – were not of their doing. In addition, the District Unit that dealt with the GPLMS sometimes seemed to be pulling in a different direction from that of the Inclusive Education Unit. In short, initiatives needed to be integrated. The head office official responded to the concerns raised about the GPLMS by saying that she was “noting it down” – and that she would take these issues up with head office.

Towards the end of the meeting we made the point that the university could offer help if called upon to do so. The person from head office said that they were already making use of support from the university, for which they were grateful, and she said she would take up the offer for further support – for example, from staff that could help learners with barriers “on the scholastic side”.

After the close of the meeting, teachers, district officials, and the head office official continued their conversation: as a result, further meetings were being set up between district officials and teachers and between one of the district officials and the person from head office.

It is worth highlighting here that the structure of discussion during the seminar/meeting can be seen as representing a shift from the vertical relationship between district officials and teachers, in which the former are normally given a higher status from which they pronounce their “knowledge”. For our part, we tried to lay the groundwork for an alternative “knowing” relationship via the seminar forum where the conversation could be, in Stokes and Carr-Chellman’s (2007:94) terms, “horizontal, on a level

playing field [and] where all participants communicate with each other” in order to “explore various approaches to an issue”.

Further deliberations

Pragmatic and transformative underpinnings: some reflections

We have indicated that we consciously adopted a pragmatic orientation towards our involvement in the international project. This orientation was informed by our understanding that constructions of alternative realities can be generated via different methods and our appreciation that, in the course of social life, there are multiple perspectives on issues of social concern. We follow Johnson’s (2009:454) suggestion that “scientific research in education” should “refrain from writing [and acting] as if our way of viewing reality and knowledge were the only (‘one’) way”. We also agree with him that pragmatism need not be associated with a stance of claiming that some methodological design (which involves, say, mixing methods) *works* – because the question still arises as to what is interpreted as “working” and for whom it can be seen as “working”. (See also Romm, 1996; Midgley, 2000; McIntyre-Mills, 2008; McKay & Romm, 2007; Naidoo, 2008; and Velez-Castiblanco, 2012, for further elaboration.) Questions therefore need to be asked about how any proposed or emergent research design can be said to benefit more vulnerable groups of people in society (as indeed emphasised by Mertens (2010:13) in discussing her understanding of the “transformative paradigm”).

We agree with Mertens (2010:12) that, in embracing a transformative agenda, researchers need to take it upon themselves to “push the [ethical] regulatory principles of respect, beneficence and justice” while also taking some responsibility for how use might be made of the research in society. Our way of showing respect for teacher-participants (as research participants), and earning their trust to the point that they asked us to “carry the baton”, as well as our way of taking responsibility for the way the research could be carried forward, is in tune with her account of a transformative paradigm.

Creative (active) approach to “member checking”

A further question worth addressing relates to whether we can “justify” our interpretations of the material that arose in the focus group discussions. The question arises as to whether, if at all, we engaged in a process of “member checking”. As Romm (2010:259) points out, this activity itself can be guided by a constructivist approach, where it is admitted that the process of “member checking” (even in one-to-one depth interviewing) is, at the same time, an opportunity for both the “members” and the “researchers” to re-engage with the gist of what was said earlier in the discussion. As Romm (2010:259) puts it, while referring to Cho and Trent’s (2006:327) remark that member checking can operate within a range of epistemological outlooks, “member checking can be seen as part of the process of developing enhanced intersubjective understanding as a dialogical process”.

What is important to mention here is that, while the discussions were taking place during the focus groups, the primary facilitator made a point of, from time to time, checking her understanding of the gist of what participants were saying. And, at times, the secondary facilitator also added interpretive comments. We have chosen the following excerpt from one of the focus groups as an example, because it also relates to an issue that was taken up with district personnel during the meeting of 10 December:

- Participant: The advisors [from the District Office] come here and tell us what to do. We have our own inputs, remember, but we are not allowed to say anything. They think because we are underperforming they must tell us what to do. We are considered underperforming. We have got diplomas and degrees and short course training but she can come as if we are underperforming and there is something wrong with us. This is not fair.
- Facilitator 1: So they put a label onto you without looking at your challenges. [This was a reference to the earlier discussion about challenges.]
- Facilitator 2: Your challenges are more intense.
- Participant: Yes!

It is noteworthy that the participant speaking in this extract does not individuate herself – but speaks to some extent on behalf of the group. Murdoch, Poland and Salter (2010:585) indicate that, owing to the character of the “data” generated in focus group discussions, where the material is an outcome of collective discussion (as indeed we were encouraging), “the analytic lens” is not focused on individuals and their (individual) statements. Instead, the statements generated are regarded as a product of interaction between people. These authors suggest that, once we (as analysts) recognise this, we need to be careful of “imposing different research methods and techniques – such as member checking – on the talk of participants” (Murdock et al., 2010:582). In line with their caution, we believe that our method (i.e. the facilitators making synthesising statements from time to time to “sound out” participants) was an appropriate approach, which indeed the participants appreciated, and which we suggest other researchers may wish to bear in mind as an option.

At the meeting of 10 December, we had another opportunity to “member check” in our (creative) fashion, by outlining for all the participants what we took to be some of the gist of the discussion in all three focus groups – with participants having the chance to talk to (and around) the brief presentation, and to extend it further. The “reporting” process thus became an opening for additional action-relevant discussion among the participants. We see this as in keeping with a pragmatic-transformative oriented approach.

Conclusion

In this paper we discussed how, as researchers/facilitators, we considered our responsibilities as including attempting to develop processes that would enable focus group participants to feel they were more or less directly benefiting from the focus group – rather than their thinking that, “at some later date” perhaps policy makers or others may notice the research results and possibly make use of them. For this reason we indicated to participants at the start of the sessions that we regarded the focus group discussions as a mutual co-exploration process, one in which everyone could – hopefully – learn from one another in the encounter. Furthermore, with the participants’ agreement, we arranged to set aside “feedback time” for participants to express how they had experienced the sessions, so that we could learn from this for future facilitative processes and so that we could hear of any concerns/suggestions of theirs that could be taken forward.

We have named our approach as active in the sense that we did not try to divorce our “scientific” inquiry from the realm of “practice” (as if this binary can be maintained), but *consciously set out to make a constructive difference to people’s experience of the quality of their (working) lives* – as far as opportunities and openings arose.

It should be noted in conclusion that, in expanding somewhat on the remit of the international project as far as our conduct of the focus groups in South Africa was concerned, we “touched base” with the project leader from time to time – and she agreed with our approach. She offered enthusiastic comments about the way in which we creatively worked with the project design by interpreting and developing the research remit in the way we did.

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Notes

- 1 See Romm (2010:1-8) for a discussion of realism in relation to epistemological alternatives.
- 2 This scale, which includes three subscales, was developed by Forlin, Earle, Loreman and Sharma (2011) to measure the perceived self-efficacy of teachers in implementing inclusive education.
- 3 We did not shy away from offering input at times in order to enrich the process of the discussion, as also advised by Gregory and Romm (2001). For example, the primary facilitator had, in the past, been a district officer serving a number of communities; she drew on her experience to suggest, among other things, how support structures could be accessed and also how buddy systems could be generated. Our active involvement in offering content interventions is in line, too, with Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) account of active interviewing – although they discuss this more in terms of one-to-one interview encounters (rather than focus group sessions).
- 4 One of our anonymous reviewers pointed out that this can be a dilemma in particular

- during “interventionist/action research projects”, where some focus group participants may expect a form of “workshop training”.
- 5 White Paper 6 also specifies that District Based Support Teams (DBSTs) are put in place to support ILSTs: The primary focus for DBSTs is the development and ongoing support of local institutional-level support teams (Department of Education [DoE], 2001:29).
 - 6 We appreciate Ferreira’s (2012) urging that “research findings be applied to practical problems and facilitate social transformation”. In the spirit of this plea, the focus of our research was on facilitating the exploration of solutions to specific, practical issues. This means (for us) that the research “findings” already contain a practical component. (See also Romm, 2001, 2007).

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