

PERSPECTIVES OF LEARNERS IN MAKING SCHOOLS MORE INCLUSIVE SPACES

Thabo Makhalemele, Rachel Rirhandzu Mayimele, & Pateka Pamella Jama
North-West University, COMBER (Republic of South Africa)

Abstract

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

Keywords: *Inclusive education, learners voice, full-service school, photo voice, inclusive teaching.*

1. Introduction and background

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

Prominent in the literature on inclusive education is a focus on the role of teachers, teacher training, and other aspects (Engelbrecht, 2020) while the quality and relevance of inclusive education can be better enhanced by including learner perspectives on its implementation. To fulfil this mandate, a screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS) policy requires that learners be involved in the decision-making on how this support is carried out (DBE, 2014). Although policies such as Education White Paper 6 [EWP6] highlight that inclusive education is based on social justice for all learners (DBE, 2001) but learners' voices are still missing, though it is a catalyst for the promotion of inclusive education (Messiou, 2019).

The voices of the learners include their thoughts, emotions, views, and actions to bring about change (Mangiaracina, Kafallinou, Kyriazopoulou, & Watkins, 2021). Even in full-service schools, the preference is for placing learners with learning barriers in separate special classrooms (Engelbrecht, 2020) thus reinforcing the idea that inclusive education is a renamed special education (Engelbrecht, 2019). Against this background, Messiou (2019) asserts that if learners' voices remain marginalised, it impedes the quality necessary for the relevance of the education provided to each learner because their ideas are critical to the formation of school practices. He further suggests a critical role of collaboratively participatory approaches in the field of inclusive education as they allow co-researchers time to have detailed discussions about learning and teaching, thus opening opportunities for the empowerment of all participants who are part of the research. Mangiaracina et al. (2021) assert that the perceptions learners

have of themselves and of their learning are crucial to inform teaching and learning practices. Therefore, Ainscow and Messiou (2017) developed an inclusive inquiry that involves talking about diversity, learning from experience, developing inclusive practices, and engaging learners' views. Research indicates that learners' views make a difference in responding to learner diversity (Messiou, 2019) and in addressing behaviours such as bullying (Siperstein, et al., 2022), thus inventing new possibilities to introduce learner involvement in school improvement. Therefore, we are determined to find out how learners' perceptions can be helpful in facilitating inclusive practices.

2. Methodology

Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) is one of the participation action types of research, that was used in the project. The PALAR approach allows all participants to take ownership of the solution to the problem affecting their community as they engage in a cyclical process of learning through action, discussion, and reflection to achieve a mutual goal (Wood, 2019). Purposive sampling allowed 25 learners who are experiencing barriers to learning and now part of the full-service school to be co-researchers (Creswell, 2014). The learners were recruited by an independent person to avoid power relationship issues and were allowed to indicate their interest in the study, their parents signed consent forms on their behalf (Wood, 2022). Photo voice, as a visual research method that allows participants to take photographs and make powerful statements about the issue while making their voices heard, was used to generate data (Evans-Agnew, & Strack, 2022; Wood, 2019). All co-researchers in three action learning sets, with two having eight members, while in the other learning set, nine co-researchers were given a prompt to take photos and write narratives that depict their perceptions on how full-service schools can be made more inclusive. Thereafter a discussion of why a particular object was chosen and how it relates to the research problem was followed to enrich data from individual photo voice. Data were thematically analysed using the six steps of Braun and Clark (2014). Ethical approval for the project was granted with the number (NWU - 00413 - 23 - A2), and the adherence to justice, beneficence, and respect for the people.

3. Theoretical framework

In this study, the integration of transformative learning theory forms a solid foundation for understanding and fostering inclusive education. Transformative learning theory, as proposed by Fleming (2022), underscores the active contribution of learners in their own learning processes, emphasizing the need for effective changes in individuals' frames of reference. This theory challenges the common tendency among teachers to dismiss ideas that do not align with preconceived notions, advocating for an inclusive educational space where learners' perspectives are valued (Messiou, 2019).

Uddin (2019) further contributes to the discourse by emphasizing the importance of allowing learners to have a voice in their education. According to Uddin, teachers play a crucial role in making inclusive education meaningful by showing an interest in meaningful learning experiences and employing suitable strategies that encourage learner participation. Uddin's perspective aligns with transformative learning theory, emphasizing the active role of learners in shaping their educational experiences.

The synthesis of transformative learning theory is particularly powerful in the context of inclusive education because it emphasizes the need to challenge existing norms and systems of oppression and promote equity. Therefore, the application of transformative learning theory underscores the importance of creating an open and inclusive educational space that not only acknowledges diverse ideas but actively seeks to break away from traditional tendencies that may hinder inclusive practices.

This theory suggests that to make inclusive education meaningful from the perspectives of learners, teachers must embrace transformative practices. This approach encourages teachers to recognize the value of diverse ideas, actively involve learners in decision-making processes, and implement strategies that foster meaningful learning experiences. In addition, it emphasizes the potential for transformative change and collective action between teachers and learners to create more inclusive educational spaces (Uddin, 2019).

4. Data presentation and discussion

In this section even though we had 25 participants working in three action learning sets, this study presents only a few responses representing each action learning set due to the restricted number of pages expected for the article. Based on different photo voice and narrational given by learner participants during data generation, learners feel excluded as they are not given the opportunity to voice their views and opinions regarding the implementation of inclusive policies in full-service schools that are supposed to be inclusive spaces. The themes emerged are presented below.

Theme 1: Learners experiencing learning barriers have no voice in inclusive policies.

Figure 1. Photo voice 1.



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

Figure 2. Photo voice 2.



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

The above extracts indicate that learners have no contribution to how inclusive policies are implemented, and that becomes another barrier to their learning. This finding confirms Messiou (2019) and Uddin (2019) when they assert that inclusion can only manifest when the voices of learners are also heard as necessary to achieve quality education and other school practices. It also magnifies what Engelbrecht (2019) and Mabasa (2021) state where full-service schools are said to reinforce marginalization of learners experiencing barriers to learning as their views are not considered to be central in their learning.

Theme 2: Teachers are privileged to influence inclusive teaching, while learners are only expected to be recipients.

Figure 3. Photo voice 3.



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

Figure 4. Photo voice 4.



This picture shows the helplessness and low self-esteem that come with being excluded from the teaching practices that are supposed to accommodate my learning needs. The bag is ruined representing the discouragements I experienced in the mainstream school, as I was criticized by other teachers and other learners. Although there is support that I get in a Full-Service School that brings back long lost hope, I feel excluded when it comes to the support that is supposed to be provided to me [Participant 14].

In the above extracts, it is evident that even though learners saw a future when they were referred to a full-service school, the dominant voice of influence is that of the teachers, while learners are just recipients of what teachers thought best for the learners. This contradicts Uddin's (2019) point of view, which highlights that although teachers are expected to play a crucial role in employing suitable strategies, it does not overrule the importance of collective union between teachers and learners to create more inclusive educational spaces (Uddin, 2019).

5. Recommendations

The support services led by the school-based support team and district-based support team need to incorporate what inclusive policies recommend which is to ensure that learners who are receiving support should have a voice in whatever support that is prepared for them. This is necessary to ensure that inclusive teaching practices are collaborative, as learners guide support providers about their learning styles, preferences, and other aspects that may help ensure that the support given addresses the barriers experienced. On the other hand, teachers in Full-service schools should know how they can engage learners as equal members in support provision.

6. Conclusion

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

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