

# How inclusive education is understood by principals of independent schools

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## Abstract

*Inclusive education has become a practice that has been adopted by many schools across the globe and most usually in first world countries. As a whole-school system it occurs less frequently in developing countries including South Africa which unlike many developing countries has a sound infrastructure and many excellent schools in both the state and the independent sectors. 'Education White Paper 6: Special education: Building an inclusive education and training system' was published in 2001 with the express intention of developing an inclusive education system in South Africa. Some South African independent schools have successfully implemented valuable forms of inclusion in their schools and this is the phenomenon that was*

*studied. This study reveals various aspects of the inclusive process including the pivotal role that principals play in the transformation process of which inclusive education is the harbinger. It also analyses why principals choose to embrace a paradigm that on the surface is uncomfortable and not an easy option. We used narrative research as methodology for this qualitative research. The basic tenet was that inclusion leads to belonging and excellence in education. The major findings were that inclusion to most principals was about taking action, humanity and emotion. The principals also described inclusion as personal and pragmatic. The implications for action are of interest not only to principals, but to anyone who is seriously interested in innovative and more humane forms of anti-oppressive education.*

**Keywords:** principals, independent schools, inclusion, humanity, pragmatic, anti-oppressive

## **Introduction**

The process and adoption of inclusive education may differ markedly from school to school. As a result, there are numerous studies of how inclusive education is being implemented across the globe. These studies are derived, for the most part, from research conducted in the North (for example, Ainscow et al. 2004; Ballard and MacDonald 1998; Evans and Lund 2002; Kenny and Shevlin 2001; Messiou 2006; Mordal and Strømstad 1998; Persson 2000; Sands et al. 2000; Vlachou 2004). This does not mean however that important and timely studies are not emerging from developing countries, studies which contribute to the understanding of the inclusive process in developing contexts (refer for example to Engelbrecht et al. 2000; Howell and Lazarus 2003; Koen 2003; Maghuve 2003; Pandey and Moorad 2003; Sathiparsad 2003; Sayed 2003; Rouse and Kangéthe 2003; Swart et al. 2002; Swart and Pettipher 2005; Watermeyer et al. 2006; and Wildeman and Nomdo 2007). Although there are some studies of how inclusive education is being implemented, practiced and understood in developing countries, more studies are needed to expand this knowledge base. It is for this reason that we examine the practice of inclusive education in South Africa, and more specifically, how inclusive education is understood by principals of independent schools. We begin by outlining the historical background to inclusive education in South Africa and to what extent it is being practiced. We then examine instances of independent schooling where mindful inclusive education was taking place, and we conclude with relevant themes that have emerged from this study.

South Africa is a rich and fertile source for a number of innovations in education including the adoption of inclusive education. This study seeks to contribute to the knowledge base for the field of inclusive education in a developing country.

## **Background**

Transnational organisations such as the Mexico Declaration (UNESCO, 2006), the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education, and the Dakar World Education Forum (UNESCO, 2000) set the stage to transform education, to create more inclusive schools, and to create a greater awareness of disability issues, as a result many governments were compelled to adopt EFA practices and principles in education. The South African government was no exception. The *Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an inclusive education and training system* (also known as WP6 or sometimes EWP6) was promulgated in 2001. The overall intention of this

framework of action was to introduce and facilitate the adoption of a more inclusive system into the existing educational system and it was thus a reflection of, and a response to, the global trend of a changing education system to reflect a more diverse population of students, particularly children with disabilities or 'special needs'. WP6 set the scene therefore, for the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa.

Despite the adoption of inclusive education by the South African National Department of Education (DoE) however, there is disparity between the policy and what actually happens in schools. This dilemma is adequately illustrated by the 260 000 to 280 000 children with disabilities who are still excluded from the South African education system. These children do not receive 'proper care and provision' (Soudien and Baxen 2006, 152) years after WP6 was published and despite the publication of subsequent DoE documents such as the Conceptual and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of Inclusive Education and the Draft National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (Department of Education, 2003, 2005 and 2006). Although this document was meant to further facilitate the implementation of inclusive education since the publishing of White Paper 6 (2001), children continue to be actively excluded from the South African education system. This study searched for an understanding of how it is that some principals, despite the seemingly insurmountable problems associated with inclusive education, rose to the challenge of including children with disabilities into their schools.

The instances where inclusive education is taking place successfully are varied and widely spread across schools and occur very often as a matter of expediency rather than of choice. This includes public schools, rural schools and independent schools. Good examples of where inclusive education is occurring as a matter of choice is therefore the subject of this paper and the schools studied were independent schools in five provinces in South Africa. It is however imperative that the context of South Africa is clearly understood. Most schools in South Africa are in rural, under resourced settings with challenges of poverty, HIV Aids and unemployment. These schools are found largely in agricultural surroundings. In contrast there are fewer schools that would equate with schools in developed countries, having resources, access to technology and skilled people to support the school in general. These are found in mainly urban environments (Department of Education 2008). The independent schools in this study are from diverse settings, but were mostly elite independent schools. The schools however were selected because of their inclusive education programmes and not necessarily on locality and context.

The objective of the study was to determine how principals of independent schools understood inclusive education. Schools that were purposefully chosen for the study were sites where inclusive education was being practiced. As will be seen, how inclusive education was practiced differed from school to school but they were nevertheless good examples of inclusive education in a developing country. The hypothesis was formulated in such a way to ensure that the study answered the research questions that guided it. The questions were,

- How is inclusive education understood by principals in independent South African schools?
- What implications does the understanding of inclusive education have for the practice of inclusive education in individual schools?

## **Defining inclusive education**

A variety of models for inclusive education exist and definitions are understood differently depending on the context. According to Sands, Koslezki and French (2000), inclusive school communities are rooted in the philosophy that all children can learn and that they belong in mainstream schools and in society. These and other authors such as Swart and Pettipher (2005), define inclusive education in terms of school reform that focusses on students rather than extraneous issues such as instructional practices, personnel issues or subject matters. An author such as Patterson (2005) advocates the diversity and different ways of learning as a universal remedy for leaving 'no child behind.' According to Ainscow et. al. (2004), inclusive education is an approach that seeks to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. The South African Department of Education has adopted the definition that echoes the South African Constitution which describes inclusive education as being "a learning environment that promotes the full personal, academic and professional development of all children irrespective of race, class, gender, disability, religion, culture, sexual preference, learning styles and language." Corbett and Slee (2000) define inclusive education as an unabashed announcement, a public and political declaration and celebration of difference which requires continual proactive responsiveness to foster an inclusive educational culture. Ainscow argues that inclusive education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society.

The notion of inclusive education is a complex one. Inclusive education is neither an ideological option, nor is it an add-on (Rice, 2005). It is not about segregation where children are educated in different settings nor is it about integration which is inclusion in name only. Inclusive education is in fact not about disability per se. It is not about the notion of sameness or egalitarianism (Vlachou, 2004), nor is it about equal opportunity. Rather, inclusive education is a call to think differently about education. It is a challenge to the status quo. Inclusive education is the catalyst in bringing change that is needed in education across the globe to make education more accessible, participatory and meaningful for all children (Kumashiro, 2002).

In this study, as said before inclusive education is not a focus on disability, instead it is a panacea for a type of education that will benefit all children. It is an acceptance of the fact that all children face problems or barriers at school (Alur, 2002). It is understood as being a system that is built upon ideals of social justice where participation and success are irrespective of race, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, age and disability, so that disadvantage is not reproduced (Alur, 2002).

For the purpose of this study, therefore the definition of inclusive education is a broad one that sees inclusive education as being a system that provides for all children, one that is not only based on education as a human right but also one that offers solutions to an existent system that continually fails to prepare children for an ever changing world (Vlachou, 2004). For inclusive education to become the norm, society itself and the way in which it view itself, needs to change radically.

## **Principals as leaders in inclusive education**

There is convincing evidence to prove that school success is determined by a strong and motivated leader. Leaders are people who shape goals, motivations, and actions of others (Department of Education 2008). Frequently, they initiate change to reach existing as well as new goals. One of the elements that result in inclusive education being adopted is a shared vision of preferred conditions for the future (Swart and Petipher 2005). This shared vision is usually driven by the principal. Strategic leadership is essential in the implementation of inclusive education in a school. Therefore, principals are important in managing the paradigm shift that is necessary to transform schools into being inclusive. Shields, Bishop and Mawazi (2005) explain that transformative (rather than transformational) leadership focuses on social justice, on redressing wrongs, and on ways to intervene in educational processes to ensure that equitable use of power and widespread empowerment. Transformative leadership challenges deficit thinking, attitudes and policies that compromise the education processes of children. A number of these inclusive-minded approaches emphasize the importance of specifying the ends for which leadership should be directed, which in this case is inclusion. Emancipatory leadership approaches and leadership for the differently abled are first and foremost concerned with social justice. It postulates that leadership as need to be organized to pursue these ends on both a local and global scale (Ryan 2006). According to Ryan (2006), the task of leadership is to get people to recognize injustices and work together to change them. He is of the opinion that leadership enterprises should focus on pursuing inclusion in schools as well as communities.

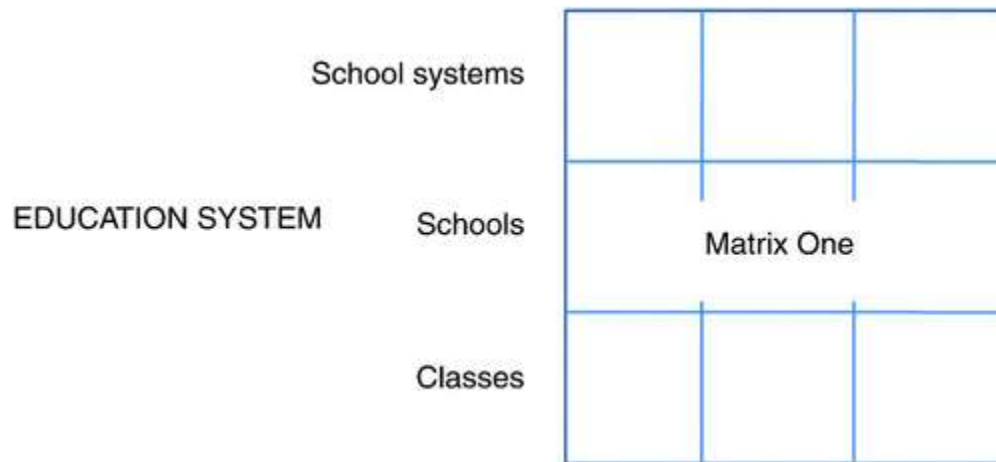
Inclusive leadership consists of a number of distinct practices. They include advocating for inclusion, educating for participants, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasizing student learning and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision- and policy-making strategies, and incorporating whole school approaches (Ryan 2006). Leadership processes should be organized to advocate for inclusion. Advocacy can counteract commonplace resistance to inclusive ideas and practices. Ryan (2006) also believes that educating the whole-school community is important and can be achieved by nurturing dialogue within the school system, as well as in the community. To be inclusive, schools must establish inclusion as an overarching goal that permeates throughout everything they do, with principals leading the effort to specifically define and refine the direction to be taken (Edmunds & Macmullin 2010). School leaders have a moral, legal and ethical obligation to provide for the education of those with special needs alongside their non-disabled peers in schools. Sometimes it requires that additional resources be allocated to physically adapt the environment, or to group or regroup students. On occasion it might also require the modifications of learning goals and objectives.

One of the reasons that school change is effective in some schools is because leadership has the courage to make the changes that are needed, even in the face of tradition, opposition or resistance. There is significant proof that the success of an inclusive programme is largely attributable to the leadership of the principal and the ability of that administrator to create an inclusive school environment (Edmunds et.al 2010).

## **Methods**

The research design was qualitative and we adopted crystallisation (Ellingson 2009) as quality strategy. Briefly, crystallisation gave the researchers leeway and liberty to involve all the senses in the writing of the thesis, a strategy that suited this research on a number of levels including the

engagement of a poetic layout of the data segments. The conceptual framework was borrowed from Wedell (2005). It is served as the theoretical framework of the paper. In order to understand the data in more depth, we used aspects of the three matrices designed by Wedell (2005) to shed light onto the difficulties that characterise the implementation of inclusive education.



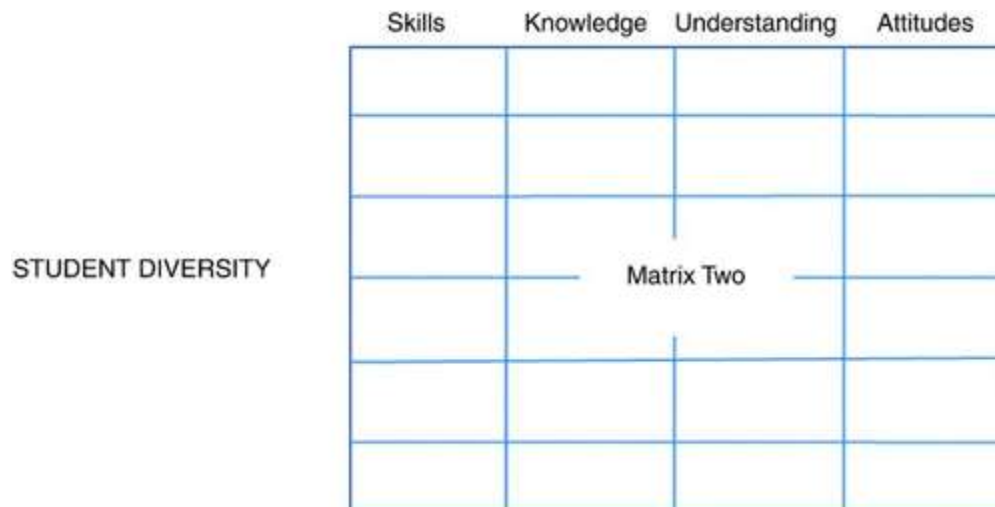
**Figure 1.** Matrix one: Curricular and assessment specifications (Wedell 2005).

Matrix One (refer to Figure 1), ‘provides the framework for discussing a number of the rigidities emerging from the education structures’. For this study the challenge was to pinpoint the rigidities in the schools we studied to ascertain what hindered or enhanced the inclusive process in those particular settings.

*Matrix One explained* – the horizontal dimension of the *education system* is concerned with the rigidities in the system that affect all children in general such as compartmentalised services, fragmented funding and the diversity of needs. Rigidity within a *school system* may include the problems associated with the transition between primary and secondary school when learner progress plateaus or declines. Rigidities in individual *schools* that impact on inclusive education can include issues such as inflexible timetables or reluctant staff. An example of a rigidity in a *class* set up are schools that still tend to set classes on traditional dominant groupings that do not necessarily take diversity into account.

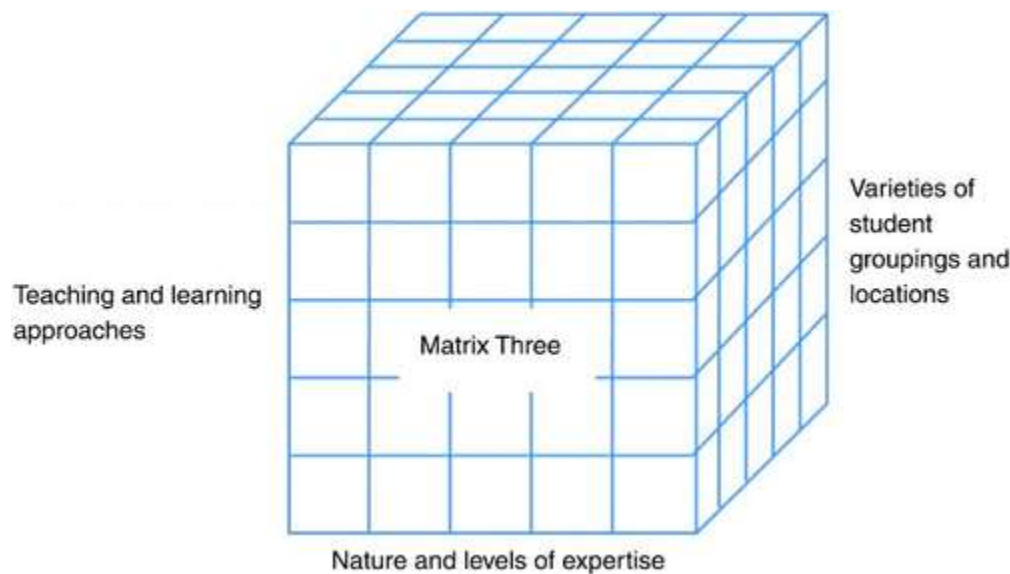
The vertical dimension of the matrix refers to mainstream curriculum and conventional assessments, neither of which as they stand, is suitable for effective inclusive education. For the purposes of this study we were particularly interested in how the schools that were researched adapted their timetables, service delivery, their curricula, and their assessment procedures in their quest to be more inclusive, as viewed and understood by principals.

Matrix Two (refer to Figure 2) measures the interrelatedness between student diversity and curricular expectations and highlights that inclusive policies need to take diversity into account in the planning stages.



**Figure 2.** Matrix two: Curricular expectations (Wedell 2005).

*Matrix Two explained* – this matrix offers a different starting point for moving towards flexibility (Wedell 2005). It is intended to show the interrelatedness between learner diversity and curricular expectations with a view to facilitating the delivery of a curriculum that specifically meets the needs of a more diverse population of students. We were particularly interested in using matrix two to understand the nuances of this interrelatedness at the schools that were studied.



**Figure 3.** Matrix three (Wedell 2005).

Matrix Three (refer to Figure 3) examines the problems of implementing inclusive education in conjunction with the concern that the present system fails to prepare students for the future. This matrix provides a realistic evaluation of the changes that need to be made if inclusion is to be successful.

*Matrix three explained* – the third matrix offers a framework for a realistic evaluation of the changes that are needed for a more inclusive system specially the interrelatedness of teaching-

learning approaches, the nature and levels of expertise, and the variety of learner groupings and locations in which learning occurs (Wedell 2005). Issues that particularly interested us from this matrix included how the principals enhanced inclusivity in their schools.

These three matrices as a whole were pertinent to the research questions as set out in the purpose of this study. Matrix One, served to focus on how the understanding of inclusive education by principals shaped the school system and what happened in individual classes. Matrix Two illuminated how the understanding of inclusive education influenced the planning of inclusivity within a school, and Matrix Three answered how the understanding of the inclusive system affected the steps that were taken to make a school more effectively inclusive. The information that was gathered from this process was qualitatively analysed for tentative answers to the two main research questions.

## **Research design**

### ***Research aim***

The intention of this research was to use narrative research to describe and explain how principals in independent schools in five different provinces in South Africa understood the concept of inclusive education. It was our intention to highlight what it was that enhanced or limited the implementation of inclusive education in independent schools in terms of how principals understand inclusive education. We accepted that some of the independent schools included in the study may have had more resources than public schools.

### ***Research paradigm***

We made use of feminism to frame this study. According to Moss (2002), feminist theory does not understand life as a neat plot, but rather a narrative that is contradictory, changing and differently available, depending on the specific social forces that change our lives. The narrative approach was an integral part of the study and links well with the views of Moss (2002). Although feminism is primarily concerned with gender issues it is also concerned with power issues. Feminism questions the authenticity of processes that contributes to oppression and which keeps groups hidden (Cohen et al. 2004). It seeks to level unequal power relations by substituting with a different agenda, an agenda of 'empowerment, voice, emancipation, equality and representation for oppressed groups' (35). Its concern is not only with those who are hidden but also with those who have been silenced. To this end, the emancipatory nature of this kind of research interrogates the status quo (Olesen 2000 and Palestini 2003). According to Lather (2001), feminist methodology is interested in personal voices, archival resources, such as diaries and journals, dialogue and interactive interview formats. Therefore, a less exploitive more innocent way of approaching research.

### ***Research methodology***

The empirical component of this research was to engage narrative research in order to examine eight independent school systems in South Africa. The schools were elite independent schools in five different provinces of South Africa namely the Western Cape, Gauteng, the North West Province, the Limpopo Province and Mpumalanga. Exploratory discussions with principals confirmed that it was likely that these particular schools were willing to participate in the



research. The eight schools had all adopted the practices of inclusive education at some point in the past and have slowly but consistently moved forward as inclusive schools in terms of having admitted children with a variety of disabilities. As mentioned before we view inclusion as wider than the mere inclusion of children with disabilities it is in fact the creation of learning environments that support the learning of all its children.

Narrative research is used to ‘describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people’s lives, and write narratives of individual experiences’ (521). Narrative research therefore gathers stories and then discusses the meanings of those experiences (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). We used a purposive sampling strategy to select principals in suitable school contexts that met the criteria (Neuman 2006 and Trochim 2001) we wished to study.

### **The participants**

The interviews took place on the school campuses and generally in the principal’s office. The principals were given pseudonyms in alphabetical order and the schools were simply called Schools A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. School D was on the campus of School E whereas the rest of the schools were separate independent entities.

As mentioned, eight principals were selected. Six of the principals were permanent principals at the time the research took place. A seventh principal had moved on from his school where he had implemented inclusive education during his tenure at the school and had subsequently become a Director of Education of eighty schools in a neighbouring province. The selection of the eighth principal for the study rested on her previous position as principal of an exclusive school for children with disabilities. Although she was the head of School D, which is on the campus of School E, she met the criteria we had chosen to interview the principals. The criteria were to interview individuals who as principals had been actively involved in implementing inclusive education in their schools. All the principals selected fulfilled these criteria even though the positions of two of them had evolved and changed with time.

The selected sample represented a particular group that did not necessarily represent the wider population. A purposive sample is suitable for ‘small scale research’ (102). It is important to highlight that research based on purposive sampling has limited, but valuable, external validity (Trochim) and the findings can not necessarily be generalised. We have stated that from our knowledge of where inclusive education was taking place, we believed that the study would be most useful if it was undertaken in the context of independent schools for the following reasons:

1. Although WP6 is the policy framework for inclusive education in South Africa, there are numerous challenges within the education system. The independent schools that we selected to study are pioneers in the field of being inclusive in five of the nine provinces in South Africa.
2. Remembering that the success of inclusive education depends on a strong leader (Angelides 2004; Cole 2000; Coleman 2002; Daane et al. 2001; Hunt et al. 2000; Palley 2006; and Taylor 2005), understanding the conditions that contribute to why some schools are open to adopting the notion of inclusive education while others are not, will assist in the creation of tentative understandings within the field.

3. The third underlying principle for selecting these schools was a practical one. In our dealings with the Independent Schools Association of South Africa (ISASA) we knew the principals through association. Being known to the participants made access easier for in-depth engagements with the principals.
4. The final selection of the schools was dependent on:
  - The granting of permission for the study by the principal concerned.
  - The willingness of the principal to participate in the study.

### ***Data collection methods***

The methods of data collection for this study provided the linkages between the broad research questions and the data analysis. Three different methods (Trochim 2001) were used to prepare the data namely:

- Individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to interview the principals.
- Cursory direct observations were used to observe the school in action. Interactions between the principals and their staff and students were observed, although this was not a major data source in the study.
- Legal and policy documents as well as the websites that represented the public faces of the schools were examined for references to the inclusive nature of the schools.

Appointments were made in advance for interviews and the list of questions were forwarded to the participants beforehand in order for them to familiarise themselves with the content. Although all participants had received the questions by the time of the interview, not all of them had read through them prior to the interview. Without fail the interviewees were approachable, empathetic and enthusiastic to share their stories about inclusive education in their own settings with the researcher. In Table 1 we have added further demographic details of the participants and have outlined and included the highest qualifications of participants, their ages and the position they hold as professionals in their fields. We have also included the number of years that they have acted as principal, both previously and currently.

**Table 1** Background information of participants

<b>Name of Principal</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Position Held</b>	<b>Years as Head</b>	<b>Highest Qualification</b>
Adam	43	Male	Principal of a Co-Educational Preparatory School-School A	6* School E 4**	Honours
Benjamin	48	Male	Principal of a Co-Educational Middle School/Director of Education in SA-School B	17**	Completing a Master's Degree
Cass	63	Female	Retiring Principal of a Girls' Preparatory and High School-School C	18**	Masters
Dee	37	Female	Principal of School D on campus of School E	10**	Honours
Ed	55	Male	Principal of a Co-Educational Preparatory School-School E	10* 4**	Masters
Frank	55	Male	Former principal of School F. Now Director of Education overseeing 80 Primary and High Schools	14* 1**	Bachelor Degree
Guy	63	Male	Principal of a Co-Educational Preparatory School-School G	17* 13**	Teaching Diploma
Hal	50	Male	Principal of a Boys' Preparatory School- School H	14* 13**	Honours MBA

\*This number represents a first period as head. \*\*This number represents the current period as head.

## **Data analysis**

The themes that emerged from the literature review formed the conceptual framework for the analysis of the data that surfaced from the research. To understand the data in more depth, the three matrices designed by Wedell (2005) was initially used to shed light on the difficulties characterised by implementing inclusive education in the school system. The information that was gathered from this process was qualitatively analysed to find tentative answers to the research questions. The data analysis was therefore consistent with the principles of qualitative research and was inductive and progressive.

Data analysis was done by using coding (Cresswell, 2005) on the data segments, the field notes, the legal documents and the websites. The coding was done from the data and was at first broad descriptions which were narrowed down into broad themes. The themes were then grouped together into new categories which finally resulted in five themes with several subthemes. This was done as outlined by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2004). Firstly, the responses of the participants were compared with observed behaviour and field notes. Secondly, linkages between the data were identified and described. Thirdly, reading and rereading transcripts as well as listening to audiotapes to establish the nuances not evident in the written word. Care was taken to portray a fair presentation of the context. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) points out that an inquirer composing a research text looks for the patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes either within or across an individual's experience and in the social setting. The intent was to seek out answers to questions surrounding meaning and social significance despite the uncertainty that accompanied such an exercise.

## **Discussion**

It can be deduced after theme analysis in this study that inclusion is profoundly personal. Subsequent themes that arose were that inclusive education is about taking action, it is about a pragmatism that results in a good practice, it is about our humanity at a deep level, and it is about emotion. These major themes are discussed in the following section.

### ***Inclusion is personal***

We were interested to know why leaders would be open to inclusive education, whether there had been 'moments of significance' (Kumashiro 2002, 17) in their lives that had previously shaped them to be aware of forms of exclusion within their own schools. We wanted to know why it was that some principals were open to inclusive education while others remained closed or oblivious to forms of oppression within their own communities. Like Kumashiro (ibid) we wanted to 'examine these moments to see what difference their stories can make to my theoretical framework, to see how they can help educators think differently about anti-oppressive education' (18). Furthermore, we wanted to see how their moments of significance, along with their stories, confirmed our theories, 'how they disconfirmed them, how they troubled them, how they stretched them or pointed to the gaps' (ibid, 8). What then began the stories of our participants in the first place?

The moments of significance the participants shared were particularly sacrosanct and they gave the interviews a depth and a richness that was unexpected. Most of the moments of significance

were deeply personal and moving. Adam acknowledged that he struggled with some aspects of disability, but he nevertheless overcame his own misgivings, his sense of inadequacy and fear, and took the step of disrupting the status quo by putting inclusion into practice. Dee's experience had been a life-long exposure to children with disabilities as a result of her parents fostering children when she was small. Two of the principals understood inclusion from a religious perspective, Ben for one saw inclusion at his school as an extension of 'community' as understood in Judaism. The Rabbi in the community commented that it is because of Ben that,

*... we looked at ourselves, did a bit of introspection and said if we are a community school why is it that 200 children who should be in our schools, can't be in our schools because they are in remedial schools...*

Some of the principals had academic reasons for implementing inclusion. Cass' experience was both personal and academic. She had known people in her personal life that had severe challenges, but the latter experience occurred in a geography class as she grappled with why a particular boy in her class kept on failing.

*...I think for me as a teacher it was actually a very simple moment when a young boy in my class was failing all the time and I sat down with the teacher psychologist...and we, we made our own discovery of what we are not teaching properly...we had enormous success by instructing teachers to teach meanings...*

Like Ben, Cass used her experience to bring change to the whole school where she was deputy head at the time. This experience must have influenced her later role as head at the girls' school. And she said,

*...what's really important is that everybody has the right of a good education, ...wherever you come from or whoever you are...*

Two of the principals were influenced by speakers and visits to schools in Australia where inclusion is the status quo in many schools.

### ***It's about taking action***

Five of the eight participants mentioned that what they were doing was 'risk-taking', in other words, implementing inclusive education was a 'risky business' but one they took anyway. Dee responded as follows,

*I really see us as, really starting off and it was a huge risk, it was an emotional move... to expose our children and to make sure they were not going to be hurt...*

Frank said the following,

*...because to do it in one school is quite a risk in terms of long term sustainability...*

In addition, the willingness to take the risks was accompanied by a humility which was evident in most of the interviews. How principals took action once again differed amongst individual participants. Adam was instrumental in starting the inclusion process at School E along with Dee who was heading up a separate and small school for children with a variety of very severe disabilities in a church hall in the same town. It was after much thought that Dee packed up her

little school and trekked across town to join the bigger bushveld campus of the brand new independent school on the outskirts of the town. Ben is not only a principal of his school but he is also the Director of Education of a large number of Jewish schools in South Africa. He was one of the first principals in his area to introduce inclusive education in a broader sense to what was already taking place in his school because as he pointed out, the Jewish community spirit was naturally extant in the school at the time. Cass is an experienced principal who brought great depth to the interview. The school, of which she was principal from 1990, caters for girls of all ages. The term 'Round Square' embodies within it the concept that there will always be a place for a child despite the chances of her being a round peg in a square hole. The Round Square motto according to Cass is that 'There is more in you than you know'. The philosophy of Round Square suffuses the school and its philosophy and in all probability, it was one of the factors that shaped the inclusive nature and outlook of those entrusted with leading it.

Frank is the Director of Education in a tribal area and he oversees 80 state schools that are situated on royal land. The king of the area was a former student of Frank's and when he ascended to the throne, he contacted Frank and asked him to work for him. Frank was previously the principal of the prestigious school F where he, like Adam, was instrumental in introducing inclusive education into his school when he realised soon after arriving there that it was an extremely unpleasant place to be. Despite the resistance along the way, he eventually, with the help of others, and a particular parent in, accomplished a type of inclusion that embodied the maxim that 'belonging leads to excellence'. Guy is the principal of school G. Other than being inclusive racially, the school has not been traditionally inclusive of children with disabilities. It was Guy however, who started bringing children into the school that needed some kind of additional support.

### *It's pragmatic*

Pragmatism in this context is about good practice which underscores the education that takes place in all schools. In our estimation good practice in the schools we studied began with having an inclusive philosophy. This philosophy in some cases was imposed on the staff autocratically, while in other schools it was a process that was already happening when the principal was appointed at the school. When Cass arrived at her school in 1990, the inclusion process was already in motion. The school was small, and as she stated that they accommodated all children whether they were able to complete their schooling or not. Five of the eight participants were responsible for introducing inclusive education as a new concept into their schools.

Adam was instrumental in implementing inclusive education at his school, but it was a slow process that evolved along with building the new school. Most of the principals acknowledged that they were learning about inclusion as it unfolded over time, but it was interesting to see the extent of their individual inventiveness which obviously brought with it a sense of enjoyment, whether it was science and sewing, finding simple solutions such as a child requiring spectacles or a hearing aid, or introducing offbeat sports such as skateboarding and wall-climbing.

One of the outcomes of the interviews was that pragmatism is about good practice which underscores the education that takes place in all the schools. It is practice that goes beyond including children who are different, who will never complete their schooling or who need very high support. Examples of good practice are supported in the research by authors such as Hegarty (2004), who argues that like individual piano tuition, some students may benefit from

withdrawal from class while others will benefit from separate education ‘away from peers’. For practice to be good, it requires having support in place for both children and staff. According to Mittler (2000) the ‘provision of a support system is the key to progress.’

A pragmatic approach in this study can be seen as a mark of good practice, if a child needs to learn a skill that will see her through her adulthood, she is likely to lose out if she attends a school that cannot teach that necessary skill. Most principals concurred with this option. In addition all participants reported that extraordinary changes started taking place as they implemented inclusive education and as their understanding of inclusive education increased. Adam reported that teaching all types of children made him firstly examine his own methodology and secondly, it forced him to intentionally look at individual needs of a child. As a result, his interaction in the class improved as he practiced teaching inclusively. He said,

*...What inclusive education has done for me is it's created an issue, something important, something cerebral that one can sit down and look at a real sort of issue... The other thing inclusive education does is it makes you look at the child, at the specific child...*

### ***It's about our humanity***

Throughout the interviews we became aware of an intense focus on humanity and on the generosity of spirit within each principal. There was also much evidence of an extreme sensitivity and love for children and for their well-being. This sensitivity and emotional maturity was often noticeable, not so much by what was said, but by how it was said. Norman Kunc, a consultant and speaker who was born with cerebral palsy and experienced both segregated and mainstream education during his school career, had a positive and profound effect on the principals who heard him speak and what he said had a permanent impact on them.

Some of the principals commented that their experiences of inclusion also changed their education styles. According to Frank teachers in inclusive schools have to change the way they teach and what is needed in an inclusive community are teachers that are aware of the different ways in which a child learns as well as how different cognitive levels can stimulate thought processes. Guy realised that the process of inclusion was on going and that there are always new things to learn. When the participants were asked how the practice of inclusion had shaped their understanding of it, Frank, for instance, said,

*...I can't believe how it suddenly accelerated my own understanding of just cognitive stuff..*

A thread that ran through the interviews was how important belonging is to a child and how belonging is a prerequisite for learning. It was Norman Kunc who planted the seed that ‘belonging leads to excellence’ and this was taken by heart by those who attended his lectures. Ben mentioned that he used Maslow’s hierarchy of needs but that he customised it to create a more inclusive ethos,

*...If I look back and say what was the most important thing I've done in my educational life, I would say is to give kids a sense of belonging...*

The way that bullying and teasing was addressed by schools is telling as it demonstrates the caring ethos of a school. Most principals dealt with the issue sensitively by addressing the incidences as they arise. Cass for instance gathers the children in the school chapel if there are incidences of bullying or teasing. The matter is discussed and questions are answered. She believes that by addressing issues, fears are allayed and understanding of others gets formed. Inclusive education has shaped Adam and Frank into becoming more introspective and it made them examine their own dealings with children.

### ***It's about emotion***

The passion that was portrayed by most of the principals was obvious and their support of, and fervour for, inclusion in their schools often came across as genuine excitement, especially when they related the success stories that some of their students experienced in their lives during and subsequently after school. As Frank recollected this story he often apologised for becoming emotional. He wanted to change his school into a gentler, friendlier place.

*...he would come running and launch himself into my arms... I mean I used to get tears in my eyes...*

The participants on the whole were energised by the process for they spoke with unmistakable conviction and confidence. Adam said that changing the way he thought about his practice as a result of accommodating children who were different from the norm, stimulated him because they 'forced' him to re-examine the way he did things in class. Ben said he knew he could make a difference to the lives of children on a daily basis. Dee admitted that she was passionate about special needs education,

*...but I knew I could make a difference, ... and I'm passionate about it you know..*

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how principals understand inclusive education in independent schools in South Africa. The study aimed to clarify how inclusive education is understood through crystallisation and narrative research. The methodology used in this qualitative study was narrative research with purposeful sampling of principals of eight independent schools inclusive education was already taking place.

The rationale for this study was spurred on not only by White Paper 6, but also by the large number of children who are still excluded from schooling in South Africa. It was therefore imperative to understand why some principals were willing to practice inclusive education in their schools despite the difficulties associated with it. The University of Pretoria is interested in contributing to research relating to inclusive education, as there are limited studies available in developing countries. This is also a focus area for the Department of Education. Although the practice of inclusive education occurs on a limited scale in South Africa, what is not available is a wide knowledge base on how it is practiced in schools. With a timeframe of twenty years to implement inclusive education in schools, it is of utmost importance to respond to White Paper 6 by developing relevant research programs such as this one.

The conceptual framework of this study included three matrixes designed by Wedell (2005), which helped to shed light onto the difficulties associated with the implementation of inclusive education in schools. Matrix One dealt with rigidities, curriculum and assessments, matrix two offered insight into the interrelatedness between student diversity and customised curriculum, as well as the amount of expertise that is needed and levels of needs, while matrix three examined the realistic changes that needed to be made to accommodate a variety of student groups.

Through the study we discovered common threads at the different schools practicing inclusive education. The themes that emerged were that inclusion is personal, pragmatic and emotional. Inclusion is also about humanity and taking action. The overall philosophy of the eight principals was either overtly or covertly creating a 'sense of belonging' by valuing each child for who they are as well as meeting the needs of each child. This practice in turn shapes how the schools function and in addition, extends the understanding of 'diversity' in the independent school sector which incidentally still has a narrow view of what diversity means (that is, that diversity refers to racial diversity only). Our participants created 'helpful spaces' for children with a variety of disabilities. The schools we studied have broken away from the status quo and are preparing their children to break down barriers and to defragment society as adults.

As reported earlier, independent schools have the capacity to further individualism which will in fact work against policies that entrench dominant elites (Henning 1993, 21). The independent schools we studied not only worked for a policy of inclusion they also 'offer an opportunity for developing a unique inclusive education system that is not a blueprint for an existing one' (Swart and Pettipher 2005, 21). Although we believe that the principals in our study are pioneers in South Africa blazing a trail for others to follow, they would in all likelihood not see themselves in those terms because of their own humility in the process.

### **Recommendations for future research and implications for action**

The following suggestions can be made for further research regarding inclusive education in South Africa.

- An ethnographic study with principals of state schools on how inclusive education is actually practiced in their schools.
- Researching case studies to establish how much support the education districts are offering schools regarding inclusive education.
- A comparative study to explore the differences between urban and rural schools regarding inclusive education.
- An exploratory study on what prevents principals from adopting inclusive education in their schools.
- An in-depth article on the contribution of Wedell's matrices in this study.



## Notes on contributors

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