

Stress and coping skills of teachers with a learner with Down's syndrome in inclusive classrooms

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Against the background of the recent move towards inclusion in South Africa, ten mainstream primary school teachers with a learner with Down's syndrome in their classrooms took part in a research programme which aims to identify stressors for teachers in an inclusive educational approach and coping skills employed to ameliorate the negative effect of these stressors. Teachers' knowledge, attitudes, stressors and coping skills were qualitatively analysed with the help of semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. Preliminary findings indicate that stressors experienced and coping skills vary. The variation appears to be related not only to their perceived professional and personal ability to handle the needs of the learners but also to external factors such as collaboration with support groups and parents.

Introduction

In recent years inclusive education has risen to prominence, becoming a dominant issue within education across a range of national contexts. Within the South African context inequalities resulting from apartheid and economic deprivation have had a significant impact on the provision of education for learners traditionally seen as having special educational needs (National Department of Education, 1997; National Department of Education, 2001). Since 1994 the new Constitution of South Africa together with the introduction of new education legislation and policy, based on the principles of human rights and equity, have provided a framework for recognising diversity and providing quality education for all learners within an inclusive education system. The result has been that the demand to educate learners with special educational needs in inclusive educational settings continues to grow.

The rise of an inclusive educational model in South Africa has been accompanied by mounting criticism, ranging from concerns that the so-called "typical" learners will suffer in the distracting environment of an inclusive classroom to arguments that teachers are not sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of learners with special needs, especially those with an intellectual impairment (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994/1995: 23). Much of this criticism has resulted from the varying effectiveness of initially including learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. As a result, the efficacy of teachers in coping with these learners has been questioned and according to the Department of Education (1997) there appears to be a disturbing lack of awareness and skills for dealing with diversity among learners, for identifying needs within learners and within the system, and for evaluating support effectiveness.

It is interesting to note that in many instances the "working knowledge" derived from teachers' personal experiences, beliefs, values and goals, has not been taken into account in determining whether change actually takes place. Several international studies indicate that to some teachers, inclusion and special needs carry negative connotations. These include feelings that there are insufficient support resources, that policies are confused and that inclusion has been imposed from the top, without adequate consultation (Bender, Vail & Scott, 1995; Forlin, Douglas & Hattie, 1996; Giangreco, 1997; Mitchell, Buist, Easter, Allen, Timutimu, MacFarlane, Moltzen & Quinn, 1999).

Previous research has found that inclusive education makes addi-

tional demands on teachers and that teachers' sense of efficacy in including learners with disabilities in mainstream classes play a defining role in the successful implementation of an inclusive educational policy (Forlin, Hattie & Douglas, 1996; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000; Soto & Goetz, 1998). Inclusive education changes the fundamental responsibilities of teachers in mainstream classes. The need to cope with change is listed as a major source of stress for teachers (Kyriacou, 1998:8). Occupational stress among teachers can be conceptualised as the effect of task demands that teachers face in the performance of their professional roles and responsibilities. Stress is usually accompanied by potentially harmful physiological changes that results from aspects of the teacher's job. This can occur when there have been prolonged, increasing or new pressures that are significantly greater than coping resources. Stress levels of teachers are dependent on the specific stressor encountered, their appraisal of the stressor, and their perceived ability to cope with it. Teachers' perceptions of potential stressors in the work environment and the role of coping skills have to be appraised and addressed to ensure the successful implementation of inclusive education in schools and classrooms (Cecil & Forman, 1990; Male & May, 1997; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997).

Within the South African context the needs and coping strategies of those mainstream teachers who already have a learner with a special need in their mainstream classroom, have either remained largely unidentified or have taken second place to the development and implementation of educational policy. Yet, it is against the backdrop of stress and coping skills of such teachers that the effectiveness of inclusive educational practices must be established for inclusion to be feasible (Petty & Sadler, 1996).

Much of the initial pressure for inclusive education in South Africa has come from parents with children with Down's syndrome and learners with Down's syndrome have been steadily included in mainstream classes.

Down's syndrome is a chromosome disorder, usually resulting in an extra chromosome in every cell in the child's body. Learners with Down's syndrome have 47 instead of the normal 46 chromosomes. The causes for Down's Syndrome are unknown and a baby with Down's syndrome can be born into any family, to parents at any age, race, religion or social background. Down's syndrome occurs one in every 700 live births making it the most common cause of learning disability. Until recently it was assumed that all learners with Down's syndrome would be severely delayed in their development and that most would become dependent adults with severe difficulties. More normal family and social experiences, better health care and early intervention, better educational opportunities and more positive social attitudes towards disabilities have changed this assumption. Current research indicate that there is a wide range of development, with some learners making faster progress than others, and there is no substantiated evidence of a cognitive plateau being reached by the majority of learners before adulthood (Bird & Buckley, 1994; Wishart, 1993).

Although there are some common factors in the development of learners with Down's syndrome, each learner is unique and has his/her own potential and own unique range of experiences. Physical disabilities may affect their development of which the most common are

hypotonia, heart defects, and hearing and visual impairments. The main differences between the learner with Down's Syndrome and other learners which the teacher will need to take account of in supporting the learner, are language delays, speech production difficulties and smaller short-term auditory memory spans. The majority of learners with Down's syndrome experience difficulties with mathematics (Bird & Buckley, 1994; Eloff, 1997).

Indications are that learners with Down's Syndrome accommodated in inclusive schools have higher academic attainments in reading, writing and mathematics and have good social and self-help skills and a better language proficiency than learners accommodated in special schools (Bird & Buckley, 1994; Wishart & Manning, 1996).

The purpose of the present study was to

- Investigate the stressors teachers attributed to coping with a learner with Down's Syndrome in their mainstream classroom;
- Identify the range of coping strategies these teachers employ to ameliorate stress during inclusion.

Method

In order to identify and explore the stress and coping strategies of the teachers a qualitative methodology was chosen. Qualitative methodologies have become increasingly popular in inclusive educational research because they permit researchers to gain in-depth understanding of social realities and derive a comprehensive portrait of a range of human endeavours, interactions, situations and perceptions (Zollers, Ramanathan & Yu, 1999: 161). For the present study a qualitative methodology was chosen to gain a more in-depth understanding of teachers' perception of the stressors and the coping strategies employed within an inclusive classroom. Teachers were interviewed after they completed the questionnaire. The interviews were more structured as the completed questionnaire formed the basis of the discussion.

Setting and participants

In the focus on Down's syndrome five teachers in the Western Cape province and five teachers in the Gauteng province of South Africa who each have a learner with Down's syndrome in their mainstream classes were identified. Permission from either the provincial education departments or local school governing bodies was sought to interview the teachers after they have completed the questionnaire in the presence of a researcher. The sample therefore can be described as non-random, purposeful and small (Merriam, 1998).

The 10 teachers were all female with ages ranging from 26 to 56 plus. They had between 12 to 38 years of teaching experience but for seven of them it was a first experience with a learner with Down's syndrome in an inclusive classroom. Only three of the teachers had any formal training in dealing with learners with special needs. They had completed a Further Diploma in Remedial Teaching at an earlier stage. In addition to the learner with Down's syndrome the teachers had to deal with other learners with special needs in their classes of which 24 experienced learning difficulties, five had a speech impairment, three were vision impaired, two hearing impaired, one had a physical impairment and one an intellectual impairment. Three of the teachers indicated that they had to deal with learners at risk (mostly from broken homes) in their classes, as well. The schools involved in this project are former Model C mainstream schools and although agreeable to accommodate learners with special needs according to Section 5(1) of the S A Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996) all have the condition that education within a mainstream classroom can only be continued if learners cope (as underscored by section 12(4) of the Schools Act).

Of the learners with Down's syndrome in the 10 inclusive classrooms five were male and five female. Four of them were in Grade 1, of whom three were eight years old and one nine years of age. The two learners in Grade 2 were both 11 years old. The one learner in Grade 3 was 13 years of age and the three learners in Grade 4 also 13 years old.

Data collection and analysis

The following sources of data were relevant in this study: a questionnaire as well as richly descriptive field notes and transcripts based on interviews with members of the sample after they had completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire in question was a localised version of the Teacher Stress and Coping (TSC) questionnaire (Forlin, 1998).

Part A requested biographical information of teachers. Information focused on gender, age, experience, location and training of teachers.

Part B considered the class structure and was used to rate each teacher on the potential difficulties of the class based on the number of learners with special needs included in it.

Part C listed potential stressors for mainstream class teachers who are involved with including a learner with Down's syndrome in their mainstream classroom. This part contained eight sections that related to different issues associated with inclusive educational practices.

Part D considered teachers' beliefs about the usefulness of different types of coping strategies for reducing the stress experienced by them when involved with inclusion. The 36 coping options contained in this section were selected for their appropriateness for recording the situation specific event of teachers' evaluation of coping with a learner with Down's syndrome in a mainstream classroom.

Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert scale. The degree of stressfulness was scored from 1 (not stressful) to 4 (extremely stressful). The measure of usefulness of a range of coping strategies was scored from 1 (not useful) to 4 (extremely useful).

Data were analysed qualitatively. The process involved the simultaneous coding of raw data from the questionnaire, interviews and field notes, the construction of categories that capture the relevant characteristics of the data's content as well as the further clustering of categories into broad themes (Bos & Tamai, 1999; Merriam, 1998).

In order to enhance validity and reliability the following strategies were implemented:

- Peer examination: colleagues were consistently asked to comment on the findings as they emerged, in order to clarify possible inconsistencies.
- Collaborative mode of research: the research was conducted by a research team of three researchers who were involved in all the phases of the research from conceptualizing the study to writing up the research.
- Clarification of the three researchers' assumptions, worldview and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study (Merriam, 1998).

When considering the findings as reported in the following section, it is also important to bear the following in mind: The questionnaire and personal interviews focused on the participants' understanding of, experience with and attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with Down's syndrome. According to Petty and Sadler (1996) the introduction and completion of the questionnaire during a semi-structured interview has the advantage over a postal questionnaire in that it permits rapport to be established, the observation of respondents and clarification of responses as required. Interviews can however be highly subjective and as such open to bias on the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee, where respondent bias may be the result of an attempt to please the researcher or protect their own interests. Furthermore, the small size of the sample should be kept in mind. However, working within a qualitative methodology, the assumption was made that "the general lies in the particular; that is, what we learn in a particular situation we can transfer or generalize to similar situations subsequently encountered" (Merriam, 1998:210). In order to enhance the generalisability of the research results the research was conducted in both the Gauteng and Western Cape provinces of South Africa to maximise diversity and to allow the results to be applied to a greater range of other situations.

Results

Stressors

The first research purpose was to investigate the stressors teachers attributed to coping with a learner with Down's syndrome in their classroom. On the basis of the TSC questionnaire the following categories were identified:

- Administrative issues
- Support
- Health, safety and hygiene issues
- Learner behaviour
- Issues related to the classroom
- Parents of learners with Down's syndrome
- Professional competence
- Personal competence

A few broad themes emerged from a further process of clustering. The overall theme identified by the teachers participating in the research programme related closely to teachers' perceived self-competence. The teachers indicated insufficient pre-service and in-service training regarding Down's syndrome as a main stressor. This resulted that in almost every instance teachers reported that they were not always able to meet the educational and behavioural needs of the learner with Down's syndrome and that they found it difficult to manage their classroom in general.

No, it's not stressful, but having one for the first time ... You try so many different things because you don't know, you are not sure if you are really handling the situation.

Yes, I do find that quite stressful especially now where the gap is a lot more evident than in the beginning. When she starts feeling the pressure she's not always coping.

So, ja ... It is quite easy for a teacher to lose sight of the other's needs in a situation like this and just to focus on the one child but you must not allow yourself to do that. So I can say that that can be quite stressful.

That every learner with Down's syndrome is an individual in his or her own right was emphasised in a second theme on learner behaviour. In most instances teachers mentioned the learner's limited speech and poor communication as stressors, but there the similarities ended. In some instances teachers emphasised the learner's short attention span.

Her attention span is much shorter and she gives up easier and she only works for so long before she says she doesn't want to any more.

Some teachers perceived the learner as attention-seeking whereas others experienced the learner as withdrawn.

Yes, this is quite stressful because he demands attention, you know. When he wants me to have a look at his work or mark his book I must do it **now**.

In some instances the learner displayed inappropriate social behaviour that could be disruptive in class. Only two teachers mentioned that the learner physically attacked others. One voiced this as follows:

She will push them and spit on them from time to time.

It was obvious from the interviews with the participating teachers that medical factors do impact on the learning process of the learner with Down's syndrome. One teacher responded as follows:

He takes antibiotics every day because he has a chest problem — because he was born with a heart defect and he had a heart operation. I think his resistance to colds, etc. is very low, so he gets colds very easily and has to stay out of school.

Four teachers mentioned that the learner often lapsed into bouts of active imagination which could be disruptive in class. The teachers found this difficult to manage and quite stressful. One of the teachers, however, identified this as an opportunity to enhance the learner's language skills.

I play along with her because I feel that this is an opportunity to really communicate with her. She sometimes uses advanced vocabulary when talking to me.

Maintaining the safety of the learner with Down's syndrome was quite stressful for some of the teachers and one responded as follows:

Yes, that is stressful because they often go walk about and leave you and run away and then you worry. I find it stressful leaving 29 others to run after one.

Quite a few teachers indicated the learner's stubbornness as a stressor.

She can be very stubborn and if she has made up her mind, she is not going to change it and do her work.

Meeting the needs of the other learners in the class was an important third theme that emerged. Teachers experienced difficulty in monitoring other learners when attending to the learner with Down's syndrome.

No, I but kill myself not to neglect the other learners, because you feel so responsible for every one of them.

Whilst the least stressful issues for the five teachers in the Western Cape were related to the learner's parents and support in general, the group of teachers in the Gauteng area did experience lack of support.

It must be wonderful to have a teacher aide. It is, however, non-existent. The Department promised support, but...

Furthermore, four of the five teachers in Gauteng perceived a lack of parent's understanding of the learner's capabilities and unwillingness of the parents to come to terms with the Down's syndrome as stressful. Gauteng teachers also experienced stress regarding the location of age-appropriate educational resources and securing suitable resources for the classroom.

It is difficult to find learning material that suit her needs. I try everything. I use grade one material or pre-school material.

Coping strategies

The second research purpose was to identify the range of coping strategies these teachers employ to ameliorate the stress during inclusion. The following three broad themes of coping strategies emerged that teachers chose to employ as resources to combat stress within an inclusive educational approach:

- Problem-focused strategies would include the following:
 - Make a plan of action and follow it
 - Come up with different solutions to difficult issues
 - Concentrate on what has to be done next
- Collaborative strategies would include the following:
 - Enlist the help of other learners in the class
 - Discuss the situation with your colleagues
 - Seek help and resources from other teachers
 - Discuss the situation with the learner's parents
 - Discuss the situation with your principal
- Emotion-focused strategies would include the following:
 - Maintain a sense of humour
 - Try to look on the bright side of things
 - Seek spiritual and religious support

One of the teachers shared this moment during the interview to emphasise the importance of a sense of humour as a coping strategy in the classroom.

You know, he was so cute the other day. We did the bean and we planted a bean and everything and then I showed them the inside of the bean and then I said that this is the root that is starting because we have given the bean water for a little while and then I said, "If people really want to be clever, we call that the tap root." So he looked at the tap of the wash-basin in the classroom and at the bean and said, "No, it's just the root." And the next I said, "There are also the little leaves starting and we call that the shoot". So he said, "It hasn't got a gun."

Discussion

Results from this study suggested several interesting conclusions. First of all, it was apparent from the findings that, despite an increase in the number of learners with special needs included into mainstream classes in South Africa in recent years, teachers' experience of inclusive education is very limited. Neither is this lack of experience counter-balanced by an increase in feelings of professional competency. Lack of effective in-service or pre-service training regarding the implemen-

tation of inclusion and special needs like Down's syndrome reinforces the high levels of stress associated with adapting the curriculum to meet the learner's needs and sustaining an effective learning environment for all learners in their classrooms. Considering that only three of the teachers received any form of formal training in special needs, this is an issue that needs to be addressed. The separate general and special education programmes in teacher education have not provided teachers with the necessary training and experience to develop the necessary skills and dispositions to handle diversity (Engelbrecht & Forlin, 1998; Villa, Thousand & Chapple, 1996). The focus of pre-service training in South Africa should move strongly towards supporting diverse needs within inclusive educational settings and the planning of effective in-service training should reflect an acknowledgement of the specific needs of teachers. Teachers' confidence in their own ability to work with learners with diverse needs, their belief that they can have an impact on learners' outcomes can begin to be addressed in in-service training (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick & Scheer 1999).

A review of the literature on teacher stress (Forlin, 1998) and teacher perceptions of inclusion (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) highlights similar issues. A lack of appropriate professional training particularly where teachers are being required to implement new practices with inadequate ongoing training in order to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse learner population is a particular source of stress. In the experience of the researchers in many instances inclusion has occurred without an understanding of the implications for teachers who have much of the responsibility for implementing new policies.

Results of this study confirmed a strong relationship between teachers' sense of efficacy and the specific contextual variables that combine to shape the classroom. For example, learners with Down's syndrome in the Western Cape attend a pre-school training centre where learners and parents are supported regarding the preparation for inclusive education. After entering a mainstream classroom parents and classroom teachers attend at least one support group meeting per term at the training centre. Teachers at the training centre as well as lecturers at a local university are also available on a continuous basis to support parents, teachers and learners, affecting their confidence in working with learners with Down's syndrome. The Gauteng teachers, although also supported by an effective Down's syndrome association, but without a similar support program to that in the Western Cape, believe that they have a low level of support.

A support network provides teachers not only with the opportunities to build on learners' strengths but the access to resources increase teachers' perception that they can have an impact on the educational outcomes of learners with special needs. (Buell *et al.*, 1999: 153). The development of models of local school, provincial education departments, community and university collaborative ventures in comprehensive in-service training to support inclusive education is a necessity (Villa *et al.*, 1996:48). Through in-service training agendas, a community and its teachers can team up to create inclusive learning environments and therefore collaborate to respond to the self-identified needs of teachers, parents and community workers. Working together in all aspects of the systems, people concerned with inclusive education can successfully collaborate to provide the ongoing support teachers, parents and learners with special needs are asking for.

The lack of collaboration across areas of expertise, especially for the Gauteng teachers, is reflected in the coping strategies that teachers reported as the most useful. Even though the act of collaboration is the most important one teachers need to perform in order to "survive" in a profession in which no one person could possibly meet the needs of all the learners in their charge (Villa *et al.*, 1996) the teachers in this small research group tend to fall back on own initiatives within the relatively isolated context of own classrooms. The result is that teachers find it difficult to directly intervene with the source of the stress in a way that minimises the stressful situation. Seeking the support of others to discuss and develop more realistic expectations and implementation strategies for learners with Down's syndrome in inclu-

sive classrooms can go a long way toward relieving guilt, worry and subsequent stress. Expecting teachers to manage their stress effectively in an unsupportive environment where clear role expectations do not exist, is an unproductive approach to resolving issues regarding inclusive education. Efforts to create more productive, caring, supportive and clearly defined approaches to inclusive education can be the best prevention against teacher stress (Brownell, 1997).

Conclusion

While acknowledging the risk of attempting to generalise findings from a small scale study to the situation in general in South Africa, it does not seem improbable that a similar situation may be found in other inclusive classrooms in former Model C schools in South Africa. The stressors that have been identified in this research can be addressed by the provision of more appropriate training and support for teachers in inclusive programmes to successfully address the individual needs of all the learners in the classroom. Mainstream teachers must feel more supported and empowered.

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A constitutionalised perspective on freedom of artistic expression

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In terms of section 16(1)(c) of the South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996, artistic creativity is regarded as a manifestation of freedom of expression. However, unbridled artistic expression can sometimes go to the extremes of repulsiveness. For example, art, which takes on the form of pornography, can for instance be an insult to the dignity of women. In terms of the South African Constitution, a too liberal (and harmful) expression of artistic creativity can be limited in terms of section 36 of the Constitution by means of law of general application. The vital issue is to decide when and how to limit artistic creativity so that it does not unnecessarily hamper freedom of artistic creativity but at the same time to ensure the protection of societal norms against the unacceptable vulgarity of unbridled art. In an effort to find the correct recipe, this article takes a few pages from American litigious experiences and together with a few South African statutory directives, it tries to determine when, how and under what circumstances freedom of artistic creativity is to be limited.

Introduction

The urge to express oneself in various ways is a characteristic of the human being. The existence of freedom of expression is essential in order to create a democratic social and political society built on constitutionalism and human rights (Van der Westhuizen, 1994:264). The various ways in which a person expresses him/herself include verbal and non-verbal communication as well as various forms of artistic creativity. According to De Waal, Currie & Erasmus (1999:305) the need to protect the creation of art flows from the fact that artists are sometimes responsible for radical criticism.

The objective of this article is to determine the legal basis for freedom of speech (i.e. artistic creativity) and to try and explain the full meaning of the concept. Another objective is to analyse the South African Constitution as well as applicable American litigation regarding the various manifestations of freedom of expression in order to deduce the effect it may have on freedom of expression (i.e. artistic creativity) in South African schools.

Definition of concepts

In an effort to define the relevant concepts, an analysis of the concepts *freedom of expression* and *artistic creativity* amplifies the following:

freedom of expression

The word expression in the first instance refers to verbalisation of thoughts. The Oxford Dictionary explains it as a process "to put thought into words" (Sykes, 1976:366). This obviously includes speech. Van der Westhuizen (1994:264) says that it arguably includes "utterances with some intelligible content intended to inform, ask, or persuade". He contends that it also includes "appeals to the emotions

or the senses, through sound, colour etc." (Van der Westhuizen, 1994: 264). The latter opens the way for the inclusion of the concept of art.

artistic creativity

It is almost impossible to give a satisfying definition of the concept *art*. It is even more difficult to define the concepts artistic creativity and artistic expression. One of the reasons for this lies in the fact that "beauty lies in the eye of the beholder". In *Cohen v California* (1971) this age-old truth was phrased as follows:

one man's vulgarity may be another's lyric

A very liberal and broad approach to the description of the concept artistic expression is to be found in the literature of Heins (as quoted by Chaskalson, Kentridge, Klaaren, Marcus, Spitz & Woolman, 1999:20-23):

[Artistic expression] should include books, movies, paintings, posters, sexy dancing, street theatre, graffiti, comics, television, music videos — anything produced by creative imagination, from Shakespeare to sitcoms, from opera to rock. Freedom of expression may mean that we have to tolerate some art that is offensive, insulting, outrageous, or just plain bad. But it is a small price to pay for the liberty and diversity that form the foundation of a free society.

A local approach by De Waal *et al.* (1999:305) to the concept freedom of art should be regarded as more moderate and narrower. They define it as to include activities such as the making of films and music. Their further amplification of the concept shows that it includes all the activities associated with the creation of art — both art as a product as well as those activities or processes necessary for the creation of the art product (De Waal *et al.*, 1999: 305). Van der Westhuizen (1994:286) takes it one step further when he suggests that unsuccessful and experimental attempts at producing art will also enjoy constitutional protection.

The advantages and dangers of a broad definition

Some of the advantages of a broad (and liberal) definition (e.g. as portrayed by Heins) are:

- The interpretation of the broad definition reduces the problem for the court to decide whether a specific activity can indeed be classified as art for the purposes of constitutional protection, or not.
- A wide definition of the concept acts as a safeguard against censorship.
- Artistic creativity should be limited as little as possible because of its function in the promotion of self-fulfilment, autonomy and dignity in the life of an individual.
- The supporters of the liberal approach regard it as their right — as citizens of an open and democratic society based on human