Deaf Educators' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education in the Gauteng Province, South Africa

Andile Alfred Mdikana[1*]

[1]*Department of Inclusive Education, School of Educational Studies, University of South Africa,*
P.O.Box 392, Unisa 0003, South Africa.

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the nature of the attitudes of Deaf educators towards inclusive education. The respondents were a non-probability sample of seven educators (Speaking educators = 3 and Deaf educator = 4) aged between 40 years and 55 years and with more than five years of teaching Deaf learners. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was designed and piloted before being administered. The data collected was analysed thematically. The results show that the respondents have a negative attitude towards inclusive education, with the main reason given being that mainstream schools are not yet ready for inclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education emerged as a key international policy at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994 in Salamanca, Spain [1]. The purpose of the Salamanca conference was to further the objective of education as a fundamental human right by paying attention to the major policy shifts necessary for the development of inclusive education. These needed to be aimed at enabling schools to serve all learners (staff and families), including those experiencing barriers to learning. Further, acknowledgement was given to

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*Corresponding author: Email: mdikaaa@unisa.ac.za, amdikana@gmail.com;

processes such as education systems that recognise and respond effectively to diversity. The emphasis was therefore on developing inclusive education systems that:

> Accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic and other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups [2].

Fundamental and continuous school improvement and renewal is therefore essential for implementing inclusion [3]. Inclusive education shifts the focus from learners having to adjust to "fit into" the system to schools transforming themselves to be capable of accommodating and addressing the diverse needs of all learners so that each individual learner receives a learning experience that "fits". Such transformation efforts are not possible without a radical shift from one set of assumptions, beliefs, values, norms, relationships, behaviours and practices to another, based on values of mutual acceptance, respect for diversity, a sense of belonging, and social justice.

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child is an African regional human rights instrument adopted by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union (AU), on 11 July 1990 [4] The Charter entered into force on 29 November 1999. It was adopted within a year of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In terms of Article 11 of The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, every child has the right to an education; this point is particularly relevant to Deaf learners as most of the time they are relegated to the periphery of the educational concern, even though this is changing gradually in South Africa. South Africa has adopted inclusive education, but Deaf learners are still confirmed in specialised educational settings. The role and attitudes of educators cannot be ignored as they have to play a critical role in teaching these learners. Their voice counts.

The South African Constitution [5] guarantees the right to freedom of expression, and this means that everyone has a right to say what they want. Deaf educators are the people who are involved in the teaching and learning of Deaf learners and they have first-hand experience. This means that their attitudes need to be taken seriously. This is probably the first study in South Africa that has sought to investigate the attitudes of educators of Deaf learners. This is, however, a small scale study and a more comprehensive study needs to be conducted nationwide.

It should be noted that South Africa is one of the few countries in the world that have made advances in terms of inclusion education. The passing of the South African Schools Act (1996) paved the way for an inclusive society in which Deaf education would be taken seriously. It puts teaching and learning at centre stage, including in respect of learners with special education needs, including Deaf learners. To advance this cause, the South African government published Education White Paper 6 [6]. This framework policy document aims to develop an education system that promotes education for all and develops inclusive and supportive centres of learning that allow all learners to participate in the education process to achieve their full potential and participate as equal members of society.

The discussion so far has focused on the international initiatives, policy and legislation for advancing inclusive education, and the fact that the role of Deaf educators is critical. Attention will now be paid to the research conducted on Deaf educator's attitudes towards inclusive education. It is worth noting that the literature survey indicates that most research has been conducted on the attitudes towards inclusive education of both general educators and preservice educators. This state of affairs is concerning, as it shows that neither the role of Deaf educators, nor the way that they feel, is prioritised, and this reflects the trend both here in South Africa and globally.

Subban and Sharma [7] investigated the attitudes of educators in regular education toward the implementation of inclusive education. The results implied that educators are, in the main, positively inclined towards the philosophy of inclusive education. Educators are seen as key persons to implement inclusive education. Positive attitudes are therefore argued as playing a considerable role in implementing this educational change successfully. While this is a positive result, the major shortcoming of the study is that it focused only on mainstream educators.

Another study that did not seem to pay attention to the attitudes of Deaf educators, was one conducted by Al-Zyoudi [8]. The study also focused on regular educators' attitudes towards inclusive education and, again, the results showed a positive inclination towards inclusive education. The study showed that educators' attitudes were strongly influenced by the nature and severity of the disability condition presented to them, as well as the length of teaching experience and their training.

Mashiya's [9] study, which also investigated educators' attitudes, found too that more educators were in favour of inclusive education. This finding follows the trend of the international findings, but what is evident is that no attention is paid to the attitudes of Deaf educators. Mashiya's findings – like the research findings of the studies discussed so far – have serious implications for Deaf educators as they might feel that they are not taken seriously. This mindset has to change as research has to be inclusive. Researchers need to broaden their scope of thinking and should be paying attention to the areas where there is a dearth of knowledge.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was informed by Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour, an extension of the theory of reasoned action [10]. According to this conceptual framework or model, attitudes toward a behaviour may be influenced by past experiences, prior knowledge and newly acquired knowledge [10,11]. Attitudes play a critical role in determining behaviour [11]. More specifically, this study is based on the premise that the attitudes of Deaf educators are influenced by past experiences and their anxiety about the implementation of inclusive education. A study by Mdikana, Ntshangase and Mayekiso [12] also yielded a similar pattern. They explored preservice attitudes towards inclusive education and also found positive attitudes towards inclusive education. At this point, it is important to acknowledge the initiatives that have been advanced so far in research, but more effort needs to be put into prioritising research that is aimed at understanding the attitudes of Deaf educators.

Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behaviour; they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behaviour [11]. As a general rule, the stronger the intention to engage in a behaviour, the more likely should be its performance. It should be clear, however, that a behavioural intention can find expression in behaviour only if the behaviour in question is under volitional control. Collectively, these factors represent people*s actual control over the behaviour [10]. To the extent that a person has the required opportunities and resources, and intends to perform the behaviour, he or she should succeed in doing so.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design and Instrumentation

Given the sensitivity around the issue that was being researched and my interest in subjective realities, a qualitative research design was deemed appropriate for it assumes the subjective construction of reality of those under investigation. Unlike quantitative design that restricts the investigation of the phenomena to predetermined parameters, qualitative research design takes place in a natural setting [13], and it is frequently more open and involved (Flick, von Kardoff, & Steinke 2005:5). In this way, participants get an opportunity to express their experiences in their own words and meanings and thus provide the researcher with an understanding of each participant's uniqueness [14].

3.2 Research Design and Instrumentation

This is a case study. A case study attempts to shed light on a phenomenon by studying, in-depth, a single case example of the phenomena. The case can be an individual person, an event, a group, or an institution [15], (Creswell, 2003). A questionnaire containing open-ended questions was designed and piloted. The term 'pilot studies' refers to mini versions of a full-scale study (also called 'feasibility' studies), as well as the specific pre-testing of a particular research instrument such as a questionnaire or interview schedule [15]. Pilot studies are a crucial element of a good study design. Conducting a pilot study does not guarantee success in the main study, but it does increase the likelihood of success [16]. Pilot studies fulfil a range of important functions and can provide valuable insights for other researchers. There is a need for more discussion among researchers of both the process and outcomes of pilot studies.

The rationale behind using an open ended questionnaire was to enable the Deaf educators concerned to write down their responses as there was a language barrier between the researcher and the researched, who most of them communicate using sign language. One of the advantages of open-ended questions is that they are easier and quicker for respondents to answer than questions in other formats and the respondents are more likely to provide answers concerning sensitive topics [16,17].

3.3 Respondents and Setting

The respondents were from the School for The Deaf in the Gauteng Province in South Africa. The participants had been at the school for more than five years and were all proficient in Sign Language. The school is located in a poor socio-economic environment. The school is well kept and the school has learner care and support structures such as the School Based Support Team. Effective school leadership and management structures are also in place. Despite the location of the schools, it is one of the best performing schools in the Gauteng Province, South Africa.

3.4 Sampling

Respondents were a non-probability sample of seven educators (Speaking educators=3 and Deaf educators=4) aged between 40 years and 55 years and with more than five years' experience teaching Deaf learners. The type of non-probability sampling chosen was convenience sampling. Convenience sampling (also known as availability sampling) is a specific type of non-probability sampling method that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in a study.

3.5 Data Analysis

A thematic method of data analysis was primarily followed. Thematic analysis is one of the most common forms of analysis in research. It emphasises pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data. Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and that are associated with a specific research question [3]. The themes become the categories for analysis. Thematic analysis is performed through the process of coding in six phases to create established, meaningful patterns. These phases are: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report [18].

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that the respondents have a negative attitude towards inclusive education and the main reason given was that mainstream schools are not yet ready for inclusion. What follows is a presentation of the research findings organised in themes: It should be noted that fictitious names are used. The following themes emerged from the data analysis: Inclusion of Deaf learners, Perceived challenges for the inclusion of Deaf learners, Suggestions for the successful inclusion of Deaf learners and Suggestions for the successful inclusion of Deaf learners

4.1 Inclusion of Deaf Learners

All seven of the Deaf educators who participated in this study were of the view that the inclusion of Deaf learners is not a good idea. This sentiment is evident in the following statement made by one of the respondents:

> Dingi: No. Deaf learners should be in special Deaf learners schools because they need special attention of teachers who know and understand Sign Language better. In regular schools, teachers are talking and pay more attention to learners who they hear and communicate with.

If one looks closely at the above statement, it seems that this educator considers Deaf learners as learners with special educational needs. She favours a specialised learning environment where the needs of Deaf learners can be given consideration. According to this respondent it appears that regular or mainstream schools are not Deaf learner friendly. This is anxiety is understandable as most schools in South Africa in particular do not appear to be ready for inclusive education [19]. Educator training and development for educators need to be enhanced for the successful implementation of inclusion education [20]. It should be noted that South Africa has started the process of providing training for teachers in inclusive education, but there is still much that needs to be done. The South African government has started to introduce inclusive schools and is in the process of converting some ordinary schools to full

service schools (inclusive schools) and of converting special schools to resource centres that will be able to play a role in the empowerment of educators in the identified full service schools [21]. This proactive approach by the South African Education Department is now yielding positive results as the schools for the Deaf are seeing the light as inclusive education in South Africa is becoming a reality.

The fact that Deaf learners have special educational needs is also echoed by the following participant:

> Lwanele: No. Deaf learners should be taught in special schools. Most of them have barriers to learning. The level of understanding is very limited. They are very slow to grasp the information that you give them. They need special attention because psychologically they are special, but physically they are normal like every child. We cannot treat them like learners in the mainstream Schools as mainstream schools do not have interpreters.

The sentiment expressed above seems to be based on the respondent's personal experience that Deaf learners tend to have barriers to learning. It should be noted that this educator has more than five years' experience in teaching Deaf learners. It must also be pointed out that what is expressed here cannot be generalised to the entire Deaf learner population. Research indicates that Deaf learners have the same ability and intelligence as their 'normal counterparts' [21]. The opinion expressed by the educator should, therefore, be viewed with caution. In approaching the teaching of Deaf learners, the authorities should be sensitive to the views of the Deaf educators so that they can have the will and the buy in. This means that consultation and co-operation between the South African Department of Basis Educators and the Deaf educators should be prioritised.

Lack of awareness about the Deaf community and unpreparedness of South African society seems to be behind the negative sentiment expressed by the following respondent:

> Masiki: No. Not now. There hasn't been a thorough awareness made about the Deaf community. Amongst the South African society, therefore being mixed will make them uncomfortable.

Awareness is critical for any intervention programme, meaning that this respondent has a point here. Awareness to target Deaf educator and learner communities especially in mainstream schools should be enhanced. Deaf learners cannot be included merely for the sake of including them. Deaf learners have always been relegated to the periphery of educational concern and awareness programmes and psycho-education should form a critical part of the process if the inclusion of Deaf learners is to be successful.

4.2 Perceived Challenges for the Inclusion of Deaf Learners

The respondents in this study expressed a variety of challenges regarding the inclusion of Deaf learners. Some of these challenges are noted below:

- There is a lack of training in Sign Language of mainstream educators.
- Inclusive education is a costly exercise. Funding has to be sought for the provision of support. Interpreters would have to be employed to advance teaching and learning in the classroom.
- Isolation. Since regular schools teachers and learners are not proficient in Sign Language, Deaf learners would likely feel isolated. They would also likely feel marginalised and possibly not benefit from the teaching and learning experience.
- There is a lack of educators in inclusive classroom teaching.
- For the successful inclusion of Deaf learners, the classroom environment and teaching itself have to be reorganised. Deaf learners also depend on visual learning materials.

What is implied above is that successful implementation of inclusive education is not a child's play. The education authorities in South Africa need to be aware of the challenges faced by the successful implementation of Inclusive Education. The institutions of civil society and the political will is required for the successful implementation of Inclusive Education.

4.3 Suggestions for the Successful Inclusion of Deaf Learners

The respondents believed that the inclusion and teaching of Deaf learners is not impossible and, as a result, they made the following suggestions:

- Educators should be trained in Sign Language, which this would enable them to communicate with and teach Deaf learners more effectively.
- Training and employment of interpreters
- Parents should be given an opportunity to undergo training in Sign Language.
- District Based Support Team (DBST) officials should be knowledgeable about Deafness and should also be aware of the specific needs of Deaf learners.
- The DBST in particular should, from time to time, obtain the input of Deaf educators.
- To be successful, inclusion should be implemented in such a way as to give Deaf learners an opportunity to learn according to their own needs.
- The curriculum must meet the needs of the Deaf learners, but at the same time be the same for the hearing learners.
- Deaf learners should be organised in semi-circles in class as, normally, they learn better when this is done.
- Good lighting should be provided in every classroom.
- The educator should always face Deaf learners when teaching them.

If one looks at the suggestions for the effective implementation of inclusive education, this demonstrates a positive approach. There is no sense of hopelessness and helplessness. This sounds good as it is apparent that the Deaf educators are willing to see the change provided that their concerns are addressed.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the attitudes of Deaf educators towards inclusive education. The literature survey shows that there is a dearth of research attempting to investigate the attitudes of Deaf educators. Most studies conducted seem to focus on regular or mainstream educators' attitudes towards inclusive education. This knowledge gap requires that more research needs to be undertaken in this area. The negative attitudes displayed in this study should be understood against the background of the education system in South Africa, which is still undergoing changes and experiencing a number of challenges in terms of the implementation of inclusive education. The anxieties of Deaf educators should be understood within this context as a lot of work still needs to be done for the successful implementation of inclusion.

This study also revealed that there is still a lot of work that needs to be done for learners with Special Educational Needs, particularly the Deaf learners. Moreover is clear from this study that there a need for a concerted effort to change the negative attitudes of the Deaf educators. Furthermore, attitude change should be accompanied by the empowerment of the Deaf educators. There is a will from the side of the educators to change. The Department of Basis Education is South Africa should use this opportunity to act swiftly. Finally, it is important to note South Africa is one of the few countries in the world that is advancing education. Where there is a will, there is a way. One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size and the fact that it was conducted in one school. Future research should focus on more schools and more teachers and be conducted in the Gauteng Province as a whole. With the increased sample size using focus group discussions one would have a much better idea of the attitudes of the educators in the Gauteng Province.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

The University of South Africa research ethics committee and the Gauteng Department of Education approved the study (DoE reference: 020121231). The Deaf educators consented to participate in the study in writing. The respondents were reassured that their true names would not be revealed. The researcher used fictitious names. They were informed that they can withdraw anytime if they feel uncomfortable during the data collection process. The data collection process was conducted with the researcher after school hours. English was considered appropriate for the data collection process as the participants spoke different South African languages. It is important to note that the data collection process took place in the staff room. The teachers did not have competing interest as they were all concerned about the plight of the Deaf learners.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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