

## **DEVELOPING A SUPPORT PROGRAMME FOR TEACHERS INVOLVED WITH INCLUSION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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*The establishment of an inclusive education system in South Africa will require the development of appropriate support services at both a school and district level. Recent policy documents in South Africa propose that such a support system should take a systemic approach utilising district support teams that focus on management and personnel support rather than providing direct face to face interventions for individual learners. This paper discusses the development of a support program that is based on research findings regarding the aspects of inclusion that mainstream class teachers in South Africa find most stressful and how they best cope with this stress. It is posited that by addressing the specific stressors associated with inclusion teachers will have an enhanced sense of efficacy and be more enthusiastic about participating in inclusive classrooms.*

For many teachers in mainstream classrooms in South Africa there have been changes in practice and attitudes that few would have foreseen as they entered the profession. Until recently, it was assumed that learners with disabilities should be educated in special schools and that the predominant educational approach should be that these learners will not be successful in meeting traditional demands in mainstream classrooms (Bradley & King-Sears, 1997; Fraser, 1996). Teachers were trained accordingly and the separate mainstream and special education teacher preparation programmes did not provide trainees in mainstream education with the experience to develop the necessary skills and dispositions to handle learners with disabilities in their classrooms (Engelbrecht & Snyman, 1999; Villa, Thousand & Chapple, 1996).

Over the past six years, reform in education in a democratic South Africa has stimulated a commitment to the development of a single, inclusive system of education which has the capacity to provide for appropriate ways and means to facilitate learning and meet the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. The increasing demand to educate learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms has received little consideration. The lack of teachers prepared to provide quality inclusive teaching to these learners and the limitation of existing support structures both impact on inclusion. The education of learners with and without disabilities relies on the commitment and effective support of teachers. The result has been that in response, mainstream teachers see inclusive education as being foisted upon them and they have raised many concerns regarding the implementation of inclusive education (Buell, Hallam & Gamel-McCormick, 1999; Forlin, Douglas & Hattie, 1996; Hall & Engelbrecht, 1999; Oswald, Ackermann & Engelbrecht, 2000; Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff & Pettipher, 2000).

Until 1994, different educational support services in South Africa were managed by racially segregated education departments and service provision was characterised by glaring inequalities and inconsistencies, a lack of co-ordination, and a lack of national focus and clarity on the nature of support services (Department of Education, 1997). In addition, there has been a tremendous shortage of professionals, including educational psychologists, particularly in rural areas in South Africa. Together with a focus on an

applications-only approach, individually-focused interventions have prevented professionals in support services from responding appropriately to the needs of teachers and learners in an inclusive educational context (Department of Education, 1997; Sharratt, 1995). The NCSNET/NCESS report (Department of Education, 1997) addresses the challenge facing support services in South Africa by the recommendation that support provision should reflect a commitment to an integrated approach. The aims and principles of an integrated approach would draw on all relevant resources to understand and address diversity and possible barriers to learning and development. This would include using local and indigenous resources in the process of providing support; an understanding of problems and their solutions in a systems framework which emphasizes the need for system transformation and on prevention and health promotion (Lazarus, Daniels, & Engelbrecht, 1999).

In the development of an inclusive educational approach as discussed in the Draft Policy Document White Paper 5: Special Needs (Department of Education, 2000), it is clearly stated that the establishment of an inclusive education system will require appropriate district as well as school-based support services. The White Paper proposes that support should move away from supporting individual learners to a much broader support focus. It is suggested that a systemic approach to support the assessment of individuals and the development of preventative and intervention programmes in inclusive classrooms is necessary in order to respond appropriately to the needs of all learners. In strengthening education support services district-based support teams should comprise of staff from provincial, district and regional offices as well as from existing special schools. The primary function of these district support teams will be to assess programmes, diagnose their effectiveness and suggest modifications. Through supporting teaching, learning and management they would build the capacity of schools to recognise and address severe learning difficulties and to accommodate a range of learning needs.

An analysis of relevant policy and other documents in South Africa regarding support services reveals that although a systemic approach is emphasized, there is currently a conspicuous absence of specific support strategies that will address the needs of teachers in order to ensure the successful implementation of inclusive education. The demands that teachers face in the performance of their professional roles and responsibilities and the variables that teachers report as stressful in inclusive education are not addressed.

In an investigation of the factors that contribute to teachers' ability to meet the educational needs of learners with disabilities in inclusive settings, the stress and coping skills of teachers in Gauteng and the Western Cape (who had a learner with a physical disability or cognitive disability in their mainstream classrooms), were examined (Eloff, Engelbrecht & Swart, 2000). The *Teacher Stress and Coping (TSC)* questionnaire (Forlin, 1998) was adapted for the South African context on the basis of a pilot study (Engelbrecht, Swart, Eloff & Newmark, 2000). The resultant version elicited perceptions on the severity of stress regarding 75 potential stressors for mainstream teachers who were involved with including a learner with either a cognitive or physical disability. In total, 107 teachers completed the TSC questionnaire in a purposefully selected sample (55 learners with cognitive disabilities; 52 learners with physical disabilities).

Overall, the most stressful issues for these teachers during inclusion were those that related to the parents of the children with disabilities, the teachers' perceived professional self-competence, administrative issues, and those related to the behaviour of the learners. Limited contact with parents together with the parents' perceived lack of understanding of the learners' capabilities and long-term prognosis were all stressful. Issues that they considered might impact on their professional competency also stressed teachers. They reported pre-service or in-service training was inadequate to prepare them for inclusive education. They were also stressed by the need to sustain an active learning environment for the learner with a disability and by determining how much to challenge the learner. Their reduced ability to teach other learners as effectively as they would like when including a learner with a disability was also stressful. Administrative issues that were stressful for these teachers revolved around two aspects of inclusion. Firstly, they were concerned by having to take full responsibility for the learners' welfare and also being held accountable for the learners' educational outcomes. In addition, adapting the curriculum to meet the learners' needs, adjusting unit plans and obtaining funding to support the learner were all stressful. Regarding the behaviour of the learner with a disability, the most stressful aspects here were the short attention span of the learner, together with poor communication skills. The use of inappropriate social behaviour, being attention

seeking, and disturbing others were also stressful behaviours exhibited by learners with disabilities that these teachers experienced.

The teachers were subsequently asked to indicate the most useful coping strategies that they employed to help them deal with this stress. The most useful strategy was that of *making a plan of action and following it*. Similarly, *maintaining a sense of humour* was also rated extremely highly. Other useful strategies tended to be related to contact with others including *seek help and resources from other teachers*, or *discuss the situation with colleagues, the learners' parents or specialist personnel* (e.g. the school psychologist).

Results of this research have provided a clear picture of the actual stressors experienced by mainstream class teachers during inclusion, and the usefulness of a range of coping skills employed to help ameliorate the stress. Based on this knowledge, the goal of this paper is an exploratory initial step in developing a support framework that will promote and support inclusive education by addressing potential areas of stress for teachers using the suggested best coping skills. Teachers' perceived perceptions of their own skills and responsibilities and level of support provided for them, are likely to affect their willingness to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms. Indeed, access to an effective support system that focuses on effective ways to increase teachers' sense of efficacy, can have a positive effect on innovative practices in inclusive classrooms (Buell, Hallam & Gamel-McCormick, 1999; Soto & Goetz, 1998).

### **A Collaborative Approach To Support In Inclusive Education**

#### **Changing roles in support**

Support programmes need to respond effectively to the demands of an inclusive educational system and in particular to the needs of the teachers who will be directly involved in the day to day implementation of these programmes. To do this effectively educational support must move away from an outdated focus on exclusion, individualism and isolation to an emphasis on ecosystemic values, such as promoting sustainability, alliance, co-operation and mutual support. The latter elements form the basis of collaborative relationships which are based on direct interaction among co-equal partners, who voluntarily participate, make decisions together and grow to trust and respect one another. Generally there is a need to interweave a network of varying supports into a comprehensive and coordinated system of support at a national, district and school level. All parties involved can then enter the interaction as co-equal parties, work towards successful inclusion and share responsibility and accountability for the outcomes of the interaction (De Jong, 1996; Lazarus, Daniels & Engelbrecht, 1999; Sands, Kozleski & French, 2000; Stainback & Stainback, 1990).

This implies that teachers and members of traditional support services are facing significant changes in their roles, responsibilities and expectations. Furthermore, the members of a collaborative team will vary depending upon the needs of learners and if necessary, parents, learners, peers and other school and community members deemed necessary, may be included in the team.

Traditionally, mainstream teachers have worked in relative isolation within their own classrooms and have been primarily responsible for being the instructional leader and manager in the classroom. When learners have experienced difficulties, the teacher referred the learner to a professional for assessment and possible placement in a separate educational setting. In a collaborative approach to support, mainstream teachers need to be recognised as full partners with professionals, parents and others and will consequently have increased responsibility for coordinating the activities of learners with disabilities (Givner & Haager, 1995). It is now accepted that teachers have to *wear a number of hats* to be successful in helping all learners gain the skills necessary for becoming independent and productive members of society. Professional support providers, such as educational psychologists, also have to move out of their traditional role as independent experts who focus on the individual needs of learners. There is now a need for professionals such as educational psychologists knowledgeable in the facilitation of supportive relationships and who can coordinate inclusion programmes, communicate with other professionals, teachers, parents and learners through informal and formal consultation and collaboration (Stainback & Stainback, 1990).

#### **A framework for a support programme for teachers**

As schools and classrooms change from segregated to inclusive educational institutions, learner support and inservice development in instructional modifications are usually the main focus of change in a

collaborative support system. Although it is tempting to implement learning support strategies quickly while more and more learners with disabilities are included in South African schools, time should be allowed for adequate planning and preparation of all involved before new support structures are implemented. Committed teams, that are either district- or school based, need to focus initially on the stress and coping skills of teachers as the existing system (which they know so well) is being dismantled and replaced with one in which purposes, process and outcomes (and in which they have not being trained) are at an initial stage. Without the acknowledgement of the stress involved as changes are made to facilitate development and successful implementation of appropriate new initiatives, district- and school level implementation of a collaborative approach to support maybe fraught with unevenness and resistance. A well-planned training and professional development programme facilitated by a professional, such as an educational psychologist, or school counselor, is essential to support teachers in overcoming doubts and resistance in order to become committed to significant innovation and change and willing to participate in collaborative support teams (Kochhar, West & Taymans, 2000; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Walther-Thomas, Bryant & Land, 1996; Stainback & Stainback, 1990).

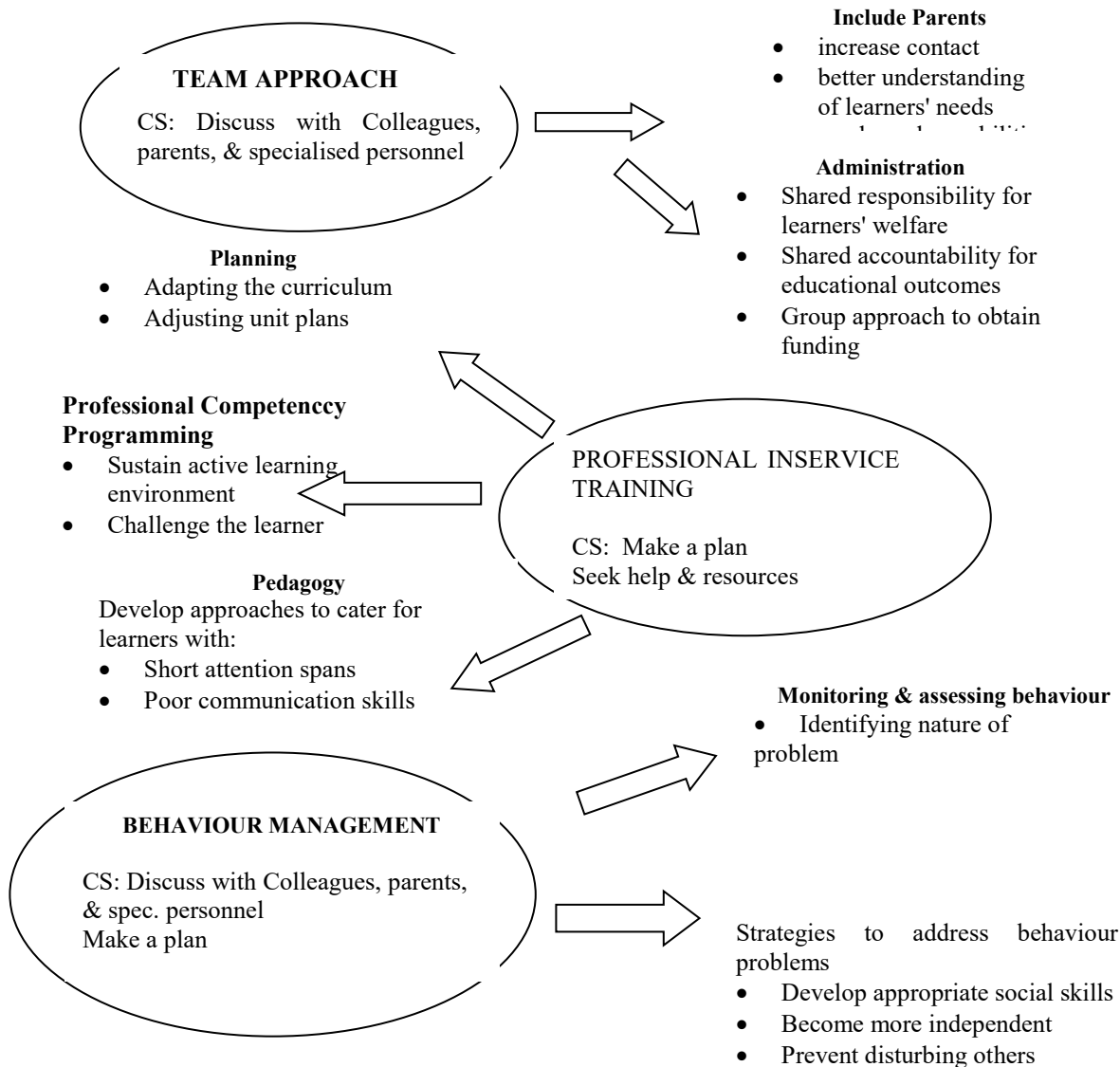
Our proposed first phase in the development of a support framework for teachers in South Africa focuses on instilling a sense of efficacy in those who are being prepared to implement inclusive education so that they have the confidence to apply their knowledge when the appropriate situation arises. Research suggests that teachers with a higher sense of efficacy are shown to be more open to new educational approaches than those with a lower sense of efficacy. Furthermore, teachers, who have a high level of belief in their own professional and personal competencies, are also more likely to want to work collaboratively with other professionals on various learner-related concerns. An efficacious teacher may accept the risk of appearing unskilled to others, which is somehow implicit in collaboration (Soto & Goetz, 1998; Wood, 1998). Clearly, the teachers involved in our study were stressed by threats to their perceived professional competence together with the new administrative requirements associated with the inclusion of a learner with a disability in their classes. As potential stressors for other teachers becoming involved in inclusive education these issues need to be appropriately addressed as part of the development of new support structures for schools.

The following framework for support (based on the work of Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996 and Soto & Goetz, 1998) is suggested as appropriate for meeting the needs of schools required to implement the proposed changes outlined in the Draft White Paper (see Figure 1). This support programme focuses on addressing the issues that teachers who are currently involved with including learners with disabilities have found most stressful. It additionally aims to employ the coping strategies that these teachers have indicated are most useful for them.

The proposed support program features three key areas of attention namely a team approach, professional inservice training and behaviour management. Each key area is designed to address specific stressors identified by teachers in regard to including a learner with a disability into regular classes. Selections of focus coping skills are based on those indicated by teachers as being most useful during inclusion. Although the use of maintaining a sense of humour has not been categorically stated in this support programme this type of strategy should be considered at all stages of intervention.

The implementation of the different types of support can incorporate a range of formats such as interactive presentations, small or large group discussions, applications during sessions and practice between sessions. It is posited that by addressing the stressors found to be associated with inclusion this will simultaneously enable teachers to develop a higher sense of efficacy. Such a support programme will provide teachers with a range of opportunities to gain knowledge about their own performance, to access further knowledge, and have appropriate opportunities to practice the skills and apply the knowledge in own classrooms. Regular meetings to discuss learner concerns will also provide opportunities to discuss and experience their own and others' struggles and challenges which are crucial to ensure participants that they are capable of successfully coping with inclusive education.

Figure 1  
 Framework for providing support for inclusion



The first phase must be followed by a second phase. This should focus specifically on the expressed needs of support providers, parents, learners, teachers and other school personnel regarding the skills needed to establish and facilitate school and district-based collaborative support teams to promote and support the ongoing implementation of inclusive education. The implementation of appropriate action research would inevitably form an important part of the support program. This will allow for continued monitoring of the program and the incorporation of adaptations and new material as needed.

## CONCLUSION

In inclusive school communities, responding to and supporting learner diversity should be a shared responsibility of teachers, support providers, families, peers and community members, which necessitates expanding traditional roles. Many of the pressures of changing roles require especially classroom teachers to assimilate proposed changes, examine their own current coping strategies and in the light of new requirements, modify their pedagogy. One of the major points to come out of our research is that it is

critical to identify and understand the conditions that are likely to cause teachers most stress during inclusion. This will allow more appropriate support to be implemented that can focus on the key potential stressors for teachers. By addressing prospective areas of highest concern it is hoped to ameliorate negative consequences associated with inclusive education. It is envisaged that this will in turn help teachers become more involved and efficacious in implementing effective inclusive practices in their classes.

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