




Teachers' engagement with learners in inclusive foundation phase classrooms



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Background: The research study responded to the need for a deeper understanding of the engagement of foundation phase teachers with learners in our ordinary, public, primary school classrooms in South Africa and the extent to which classroom practices are inclusive.

Aim: To examine how inclusive education was enacted by teachers in real classroom settings, with attention paid to ways in which learners experience barriers to learning and the provision of necessary support for these learners.

Setting: This study provides an in-depth critical analysis of the engagement of three foundation phase teachers from classes in each of Grades 1–3, with learners in their classrooms at an Eastern Cape public school.

Methods: A micro-level analysis was conducted in a single unit case study, using a qualitative research approach in an interpretive paradigm. Questionnaires, in-depth observations and semi-structured interviews generates in-depth data.

Results: The study provides evidence of inclusive education practices enacted at the school and in the classrooms, providing examples of what can work in the South African context. It includes an organisational tool for analysing inclusive practice at the micro-level of the classroom. Criteria were identified as indicators of inclusive education of learners in the classroom, including those experiencing barriers to learning.

Conclusion: The three foundation phase teachers used numerous inclusive teaching and learning practices, strategies, features, skills and techniques when engaging with learners in their classrooms. There remain various challenges faced by the school, teachers and the Department of Basic Education in enabling the implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords: public school classroom; foundation phase teacher; inclusive education practices; barriers to learning; micro-level.

Introduction

Teachers in South Africa have been attempting to practice inclusive education in schools for over 18 years, ever since the introduction of an inclusive system and the issuing of the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education by the South African Department of Basic Education, in 2001 (DoE 2001). Numerous studies have been carried out on the policies of inclusion and their implementation in South African schools (Geldenhys & Wevers 2013; McConnachie 2013; Shadaya 2012), as well as on teachers' attitudes and perceptions of inclusive education and the many challenges that they face in implementing inclusivity under our current education system (Mohamed & Laher 2012; Siebalak 2002; Swart et al. 2002).

Strong arguments have been made, however, for more research on actual school and teacher engagement with learners, including learners experiencing barriers to learning, in ordinary, public school classrooms, and on the extent to which classroom practices are inclusive (Engelbrecht et al. 2015; Walton 2006). There is a dearth of empirical data on teacher engagement with learners in the classroom, and so the classroom practice in the field as teachers strive to implement the policy of inclusivity is not fully understood. For this reason, both the effects of policy and the implications for policy review and improvement are not clear.

Recommendations have been made for future research by Davis, Florian and Ainscow (2004) to:

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[C]onsider teaching and learning in real settings in order to take account of ways in which teachers do their work in respect to the wide variety of situations they face. (p. 37)

Walton (2006:181) recommends further research in inclusivity in public schools and the details of teaching and learning strategies being employed in the classroom. She states that 'learning about the inclusive culture and practices at these schools is instructive as it provides examples of what can work in the South African context' (Walton 2011:244).

The larger study (Skae 2018) on which this article is based responded to the need to extend the understanding of how inclusive education is being enacted by teachers with learners, including learners experiencing barriers to learning, in an ordinary, no-fee paying, public primary school at the level of the foundation phase classroom. The overarching goal of the study was to generate rich data on teacher engagement with learners in a school (henceforth referred to as Baobab School) and classroom context, where teachers were striving to implement inclusive education. The overarching research question was: How do teachers engage with their learners, including the learners they identified as experiencing barriers to learning, in ways that promote inclusivity and inclusive learning in the classroom? The study included additional research questions and sub-goals formulated to explore various aspects of inclusivity of the learners in the school and foundation phase classrooms that are not discussed in this article. These are summarised in Table 1.

A theoretically informed organisational tool for the analysis of classroom process was developed for this work (Skae 2018:109). This micro-level tool was used to analyse and make sense of the data gathered on how three foundation phase teachers engage with their learners in ways that promote inclusivity and inclusive learning in the classroom.

This article contributes towards closing the research gap relating to the classroom implementation of inclusive education. It presents the micro-level tool developed in this research. It then shows the results of using it to analyse the inclusive classroom practices of the participant teachers in the Baobab School. Finally, several factors constraining and

enabling inclusive teaching practices in the school are then identified, based on these results.

Inclusive pedagogy

An inclusive classroom

White Paper 6 (DoE 2001) states that classroom teachers are the main resource for achieving the goal of inclusive education and that they should be able to address the learning needs of all their learners, including those experiencing barriers to learning, in their classrooms (Engelbrecht et al. 2015). Ultimately, it is at the level of the classroom that inclusive education is put into practice.

An inclusive classroom ensures that all learners participate within an effective learning environment (Rose & Howley 2007). Inclusive education in schools and the classroom is not only about access to education by all learners but also about the 'belonging, nurturing and educating all students, regardless of their differences in ability, culture, gender, language, class and ethnicity' (Engelbrecht et al. 2015:1).

Foundation phase classrooms are particularly important because it is at this phase that the fundamentals and groundwork of learners' education and development are laid down, including intellectual, mental, emotional, physical and social development (eds. Makoelle & Van der Merwe 2016). It is also important that classrooms 'provide learners with a safe space to develop tolerance and understanding of different races, languages, genders, personalities and abilities' (eds. Makoelle & Van der Merwe 2016:89) at a young age. The research study entered at the level of the Foundation Phase, in order to acknowledge the importance of this phase.

Florian (2014) points out that

[I]nclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners, but avoids the marginalization that can occur when some students are treated differently. (p. 289)

Inclusive education importantly should, therefore, include those learners experiencing both intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to learning, where these learners 'continue to be taught by the regular teacher in the regular classroom, but receive appropriate support' (eds. Makoelle & Van der Merwe 2016:8), such as additional support from the class teacher, the School Based Support Team (SBST) and professional specialist personnel outside the school.

All learners have specific individual learning needs and it is the responsibility of an inclusive school to recognise and accommodate this diversity, which would include the elimination of barriers to learning inherent in the system itself (eds. Engelbrecht & Green 2001).

Inclusive practice in the classroom

According to Prinsloo (2001), teachers in the classroom have two main objectives to fulfil with their learners, namely

TABLE 1: Summary of research questions and sub-goals.

Research question	Sub-goal
What is the contextual background and characterisation of the school in terms of the educational inclusivity of its learners?	To generate rich data to investigate and understand the commitment of the school and principal to inclusive education.
What do the foundation phase teachers understand of inclusive education in the school and classroom?	To generate rich data to investigate and understand the commitment of the teachers to inclusive education.
What types of barriers to learning (intrinsic and extrinsic) have teachers identified as being experienced by learners in their classrooms?	To generate rich data to investigate and understand the class composition of learners with barriers to learning.
What, if any, are the challenges experienced by the foundation phase teachers in the implementation of inclusive education in their classrooms?	To investigate the implication of data for guiding inclusive education policy and practice.

Source: Skae, V.A., 2018, 'Teachers' engagement with learners in inclusive foundation phase classrooms: A Case Study Analysis, Unpublished master's thesis, Rhodes University, Grahamstown

'meeting the needs of all learners, and actualising the full potential of all learners' (p. 344). Teachers in inclusive education classrooms prefer teaching and learning strategies that are learner-centred and participatory, taking into consideration the individual learner's prior knowledge and then catering for learners experiencing barriers to learning (Okeke, Van Wyk & Phasha 2014). The learner-centred and participatory teaching and learning approach is recommended in an inclusive classroom where the diverse needs of every learner are addressed and responded to, by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion (Engelbrecht, Oswald & Forlin 2006:122). Inclusive education should be concerned with the identification and minimisation of barriers to learning of learners in the classroom (Ntombela 2011).

Beattie, Jordan and Algozzine (2006) name four important factors, which they contend are necessary for inclusion to succeed in schools and classrooms, namely positive attitudes of the teachers, committed and supportive parents, professional development of teachers and collaboration of all stakeholders. For any teaching practice to be inclusive and most effective, the support of parents and paraprofessionals is important.

Teachers require pre-service and ongoing, supportive in-service professional training in inclusive education and the identification and minimisation of barriers to learning to emotionally facilitate them and help develop their confidence, competence and a positive attitude (Swart et al. 2002). Teachers need to understand what barriers to learning are, how to address them, and to be trained in hands-on strategies to promote inclusion in the classroom (Walton et al. 2009).

Parents need to be willing to devote time, resources and sacrifices to ensure that their children receive the education to which they are entitled (Donohue & Bornman 2014). It is generally acknowledged that the involvement of parents in their children's school and education has a positive effect on the success of their children at the school (eds. Engelbrecht & Green 2007). Pienaar and Raymond (2013:28) reiterate that 'parental involvement can enhance academic performance, reduce discipline problems and the drop-out rate, promote the well-being of learners and address barriers to learning'.

Teacher's attitudes would be more positive if, along with training, they received appropriate professional support for working with learners experiencing barriers to learning, such as support from professional personnel, special equipment and educational resources, accommodations and teacher aids in the classroom to assist with learners with disabilities (Donohue & Bornman 2014). The importance of collaboration amongst all stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, SBST, education support professionals and community members to improve learner achievement also should not be underestimated. Brice and Miller (2000:240) state that 'successful inclusion requires formal and informal communication for teams to meet and discuss the progress of students in the inclusive environment' and that it is necessary to find 'time for teachers and paraprofessionals to meet,

discuss, plan and modify instruction' for learners. All members of the collaborative partnership are of equal importance and 'are expected to continuously contribute their expertise in a collegial, trusting manner towards a shared goal' (eds. Engelbrecht & Green 2001:34).

Okeke et al. (2014) state that there are two aims of an inclusive education classroom, firstly to ensure easy physical access for all learners around the school and classroom environment, and secondly to:

... gear every method, every means of instruction, and every learning strategy towards ensuring that every learner, regardless of disability, socio-economic status, linguistic and cultural background, and regardless of competence in the language of learning and teaching, is able to acquire as much knowledge as possible, and to experience educational success, friendship, and a genuine sense of belonging to the learning community. (p. 219)

Features of an inclusive education school and classroom

In keeping with these two main aims for teachers, Okeke et al. (2014:219) and Westwood (2007:5) note that some important features of an inclusive education school and classroom are strong leadership on the part of the school principal and the development of a whole-school policy supportive of inclusion and a supportive learning culture, in which learners feel comfortable, appreciated and safe.

Numerous studies have indicated the importance of the teacher's positive attitude for successful inclusion (Swart et al. 2002) in helping to create a supportive learning environment. Okeke et al. (2014:219) and Westwood (2007:5) mention that it is necessary for teachers to have a shared sense of responsibility with other teachers, support staff and members of the community, with a commitment on the part of all staff to work collaboratively and to share expertise. There needs to be regular assistance of paraprofessionals and effective links with outside agencies and services. The ongoing training and professional development of staff is important, as well as the provision of adequate resourcing in terms of materials and personnel. A responsive curriculum is needed, in which the curriculum is adaptable and responsive to the different learning needs that learners have in an inclusive classroom environment. Finally, there needs to be close liaison with parents and, where possible, direct parental involvement in a child's educational programme.

Skills to support teachers in the inclusive classroom

Beattie et al. (2006:24) in America discuss the important skills that help teachers support inclusion in their classrooms. These include: the organisation of classrooms and physical space to support diverse learning styles; the planning, organising and presenting of lessons that encourage diverse learning styles; managing behaviour and motivation to keep learners actively engaged; teaching reading relentlessly to support learning in other content areas; teaching cognitive strategies to support diverse learning styles and

typical learning problems; providing accommodations and modifications to encourage all learners to learn; monitoring progress frequently with appropriate assessments and grading practices; and providing family friendly educational experiences.

Teaching and learning strategies in the inclusive classroom

Davis et al. (2004) and Okeke et al. (2014) address some teaching and learning strategies for learners in the inclusive classroom, including learners experiencing barriers to learning. The strategies include the early identification and intervention of barriers to learning, collaborative co-teaching, scaffolding where varying degrees of the structure are provided to match the learner's needs, differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, positive reinforcement and peer-oriented interventions, such as the 'buddy' system.

The early identification and intervention of learners experiencing barriers to learning helps ensure that interventions for the learners start as early as possible to attempt to prevent the development of more extensive problems in these learners (eds. Landsberg, Krüger & Nel 2005). An Individual Education Programme (IEP) can be formulated for the learners in which interventions can be planned and implemented that enable individual learners to succeed.

Collaborative cooperative teaching occurs when 'two or more education role-players enter a collaborative relationship as co-equal partners', bringing their own knowledge and experience to the partnership to support learners experiencing barriers to learning (Pienaar & Raymond 2013:225). This could include the teacher and specialist personnel, such as a psychologist or learning support teacher, or it could include a teacher aid.

Bruner (1978:19) refers to scaffolding as the steps that need to be taken to reduce the freedom of a child in carrying out a task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill he or she is trying to acquire. Nel, Nel and Hugo (2013) explain that scaffolding is the process whereby the teacher starts with modelling knowledge structures and strategies, then he or she assists the learners by making sure they understand and internalise that knowledge. The teacher then gradually decreases the amount of help given.

Differentiated instruction is 'a way of teaching and learning that allows teachers to accommodate the needs of learners with differing abilities in the same class', whereby 'teachers structure their teaching so that it fits the diverse interests, abilities and experiences of learners in the class' (Pienaar & Raymond 2013:140). The teacher uses different teaching and learning strategies on many levels, with varied content, processes and resources to accommodate all the learners in the classroom. There should be ongoing assessment and feedback to the learners.

Cooperative learning involves learners working together in pairs or groups in problem-solving and other educational

activities to facilitate learning, whilst at the same time building social relationship skills, such as listening skills, decision-making skills and respecting individual differences (Pienaar & Raymond 2013). Examples of cooperative learning are peer tutoring and 'buddy' systems, whereby learners tutor or assist each other.

Accommodations and modifications to instructional materials and assessment measures are specific techniques that provide teachers with the means of meeting the unique needs of learners experiencing barriers to learning (Beattie et al. 2006). Walton (2006) states that accommodations could include reading the task to the learner and allowing an oral response, allowing additional time to complete the work or reducing the length of the task. Concessions can also be given to learners who experience barriers to learning, such as not being penalised for handwriting and spelling mistakes. Modifications can be made to the conceptual difficulty of a task or scaffolding can be introduced to support the individual needs of the learner. Other modifications would also include the use of assistive devices such as computers, Dictaphones, video recordings and Braille. Assessment accommodations and modifications would also need to be considered when including learners experiencing barriers to learning. The Curriculum Adaptation Guidelines of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (South Africa. Department of Education [DoE] 2005) provides guidelines for South African teachers to adapt their teaching, learning and assessment of their lesson plans.

The researcher was interested in observing if any of the above-mentioned inclusive teaching and learning practices, strategies, features, skills and techniques were being used in the three foundation phase classrooms.

Research method

Guided by the primary research goal and question, a qualitative case study method with an interpretive orientation was adopted. One no-fee paying, public, primary school in the Eastern Cape (Quintile 3) was selected and three foundation phase English medium teachers at the school, each in Grades 1–3, were invited to participate in the study. The researcher decided to focus on the narrow unit of study of one school because of the complexity of the study topic and the depth of data needed to be collected from the classroom (Yin 2011:92).

The researcher chose to study the foundation phase classrooms at the school, because of the importance of this phase in ensuring that learners receive a good foundational level of education. It was decided to enter the three English-medium foundation phase classrooms so as to not require an interpreter or translator, as the researcher was not proficient in the other two teachings and learning languages at the school (Afrikaans and isiXhosa). Observing the English-medium classrooms would provide the researcher with the rich data required for the research, especially amongst learners not learning in their home language. Pienaar and

Raymond (2013:155) point out that here in South Africa 'many children bring to school a home language that differs from the school's language of learning and teaching' and so 'teachers should be aware that this usually leads to learning problems and underachievement in these learners' (eds. Landsberg et al. 2005:37).

Questionnaires, in-depth interviews and observations were used to explore and describe the units of analysis, to provide multiple sources of information rich in context (De Vos et al. 2011:321). The interviews and observations provided six data sources, each involving the collection of extensive data generated by in-depth interaction with the teachers in the classroom, extending over a reasonable period of time.

Research process

The research was carried out in four phases:

- First phase: Critical review of the questionnaire.
- Second phase: With the informed consent of the teachers of Grades 1, 2 and 3, they were initially asked to complete a questionnaire. The teachers were then interviewed on a one-to-one basis to generate a deeper understanding of the teacher and her class. Finally, the teachers were observed in their respective classrooms for one morning each to see first-hand the interactions of the teacher with her learners in the classroom.
- Third phase: The Grade 2 teacher volunteered to have a full week of further observations in her classroom to provide more in-depth observations.
- Fourth phase: Follow-up interviews with the Grade 1, 2 and 3 teachers.

Data generation/collection

The responses to the questionnaires from the three teachers were collated into one spreadsheet so that their answers could be readily and easily compared and analysed.

The audio- and video-recordings from the interviews and observations were transcribed and, once again, the data collected from the three foundation phase teachers and their classes were collated to compare and analyse the information received. The responses from the interviews were categorised under intrinsic and extrinsic factors, as well as additional factors. Also, notes were made of the 'stories' told by teachers about learners in their classes experiencing barriers to learning, what barriers they were experiencing, what support they needed, what support they were receiving and what difficulties were being experienced in meeting some of their needs.

The micro-level web: Analysing the inclusive classroom

The author (Skae 2018:108) developed a micro-level organisational tool (Figure 1) for the analysis of an inclusive classroom informed by literature, the use of Walton and

Nel's (2012:10) inclusion web of a school and what emerged in the data generated for the research study. The inclusive teaching and learning practices, strategies, features, skills and techniques resulted in finalising the tool that allowed a more appropriate analysis of teachers' engagement with learners. It was used as a heuristic to assist in addressing the inclusivity of Baobab School and the inclusive practices in the foundation phase classrooms.

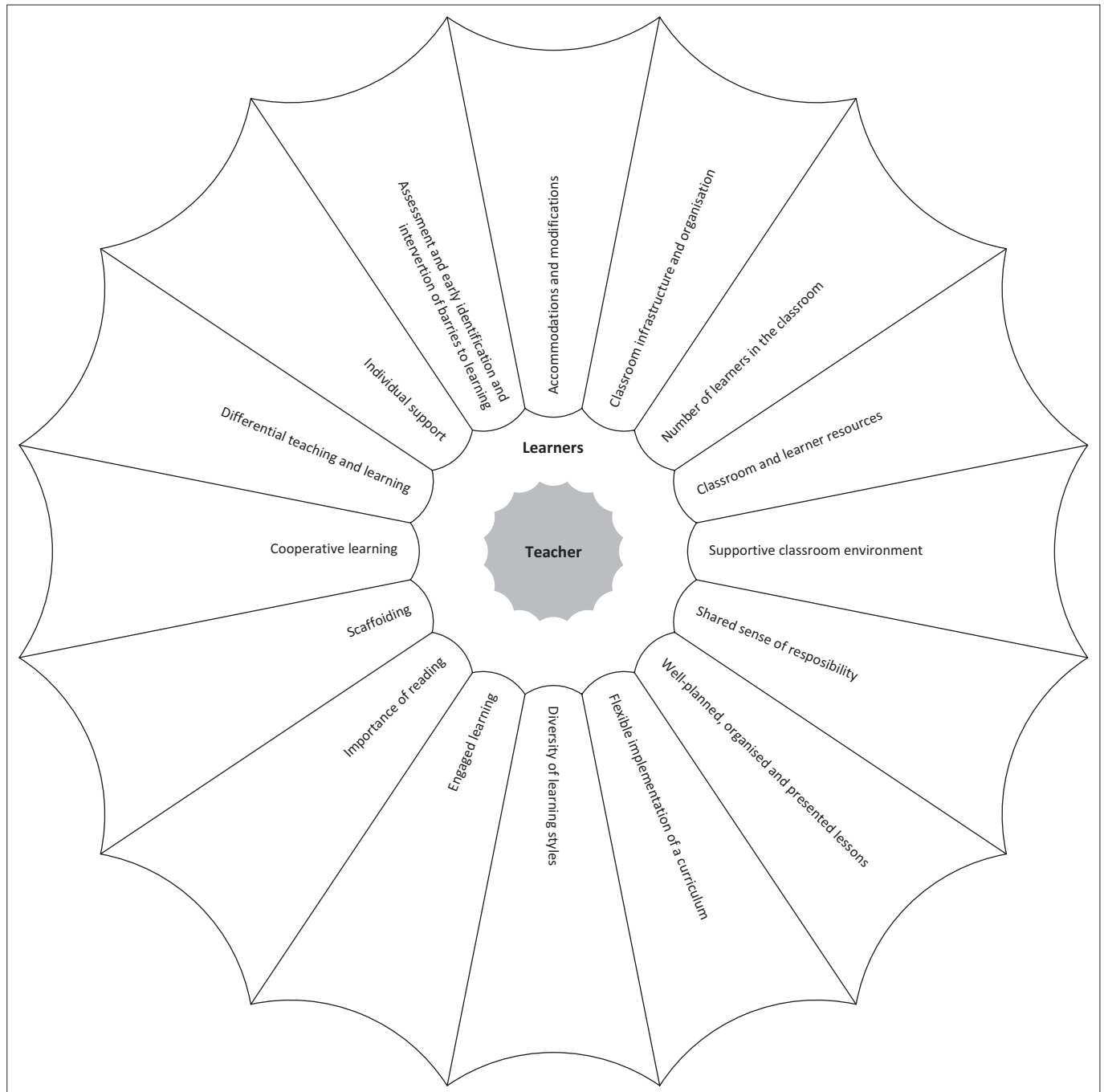
In the organisational tool, the inclusive classroom, with the teachers and their learners, is depicted as a micro-level web, which could 'attach' comfortably to Walton and Nel's inclusive web of a school.

The inclusion web of the school, as depicted by Walton and Nel, would have many micro-level webs connected to it, one for each teacher or teaching and learning space. Each micro-level web would then have its own radii branching off from its centre. The centre would be made up of the teacher surrounded by his or her learners, including learners experiencing barriers to learning. The radii would include the following criteria of an inclusive classroom influenced by literature and informed by research:

- Number of learners in the classroom
- Infrastructure and organisation of the classroom
- Classroom and learner resources
- Shared sense of responsibility
- Supportive classroom environment
- Well-planned, organised and presented lessons
- Flexible implementation of a curriculum
- Diversity of learning styles
- Engaged learning
- The promotion of the importance of reading
- Scaffolding
- Cooperative learning
- Differentiated teaching and learning
- Individual support
- Assessment and early identification and intervention of barriers to learning
- Accommodations and modifications.

As in the building of a web, the radii of an inclusive classroom are not finite, but can be extended by other criteria that can promote the inclusivity of the classroom. The building of inclusivity in a classroom would be an ongoing process.

In the larger analysis and discussion of Baobab School and the foundation phase classrooms, informed by the research, Walton and Nel's (2012:10) spider's web analogy of an inclusive school was used to act as a lens and heuristic to identify the criteria at the macro-level. The micro-level criteria were then addressed, which included the teaching and learning strategies, practices, techniques and skills that the foundation phase teachers used in their classrooms to enable an inclusive education for their learners, including the learners experiencing barriers to learning, depicted as the radii in the micro-level web (Figure 1).



Source: Skae, V.A., 2018, 'Teachers' engagement with learners in inclusive foundation phase classrooms: A Case Study Analysis, Unpublished master's thesis, Rhodes University, Grahamstown

FIGURE 1: Micro-level web: The inclusive classroom.

Data analysis and interpretation

The data analysis was carried out in three phases, with the aim of providing insights into the research questions:

Phase 1: Through inductive reasoning, and moving from concrete observations to general theoretical explanations (De Vos et al. 2011:49), patterns and trends in the questionnaire, interviews and observation transcriptions were identified. Open coding was used to synthesise and classify patterns and trends into categories and broad emergent themes (Merriam 2001:179), taking into account the inclusive culture and policies of the school, the inclusive practices, strategies, features, skills

and techniques adopted in the classroom by the teachers (Beattie et al. 2006; Okeke et al. 2014), and the intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to learning experienced by some of the learners, and what was being carried out to assist them.

Phase 2: The emergent themes were organised into related groups, using the inclusive classroom web (Skae 2018:109) as an analytical tool. This provided a more coherent conceptualisation of the inclusive classroom environment of the school.

Phase 3: The emergent themes were analysed and interpreted, helping to gain insights as to the engagement of and

interactions between the teacher and the learners, including those experiencing barriers to learning, in the foundation phase classroom.

Findings and discussion

The discussion contained in this article focuses only on the findings pertaining to the micro-level of the classroom.

Various factors emerged from the findings from the questionnaires, in-depth interviews and observations of the three foundation phase teachers. These were grouped using the criteria in the radii of the inclusive classroom web (Skæ 2018:109), to provide a synthesis of these emergent factors. These synthesised categories and criteria are provided in Table 2. A more detailed discussion is then given of the findings under each of these criteria in relation to how they enabled or constrained the inclusive education of the learners in the classroom.

Language of teaching and learning

The main language of teaching and learning in all three foundation phase classrooms that were observed was English, with Afrikaans and isiXhosa being taught as additional languages. Learners who could not speak English were unable to enrol into the English medium classes at Baobab School. The school did, however, provide Afrikaans-medium classes, and isiXhosa and English were taught as additional languages in these classes.

Ms Miya (pseudonym) (Grade 2) was multilingual, being able to speak all three languages. She stated that,

‘With some you notice that they are still reliant on their own home language to be able to identify the things in English, so if they are confused then I say it in their own language.’ (Teacher, Grade 2, female)

TABLE 2: Synthesised categories of the emergent factors.

No.	Category	Includes
1.	Language of teaching and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English-medium classes Additional languages – Afrikaans and isiXhosa
2.	Classroom size, infrastructure and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> inadequate resources insufficient books for differentiated reading levels
3.	Supportive learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> positive attitude of teachers shared sense of responsibility well planned, organised and presented lessons flexible implementation of curriculum routine and structure set boundaries praise discipline few distractions
4.	Teaching and learning strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing previous lesson short, clear instructions repetition modelling think-aloud techniques use of a variety of examples accommodating different learning styles active involvement of learners scaffolding differentiated teaching and learning reading skills and techniques use of concrete resources working in pairs/groups – cooperative learning individual/one-on-one support accommodations/modifications assessments

It was an asset and of benefit to her learners that she could speak all three languages, as she would assist learners with the understanding of an English word or term, by translating into the learner's home language of isiXhosa or Afrikaans.

Organisation and practices to support inclusion in the classroom

• Number of learners in the classroom

All three foundation phase teachers stated their concern that having a maximum of 36 learners in their classrooms was still too large, because that number made it impossible for them to offer sufficient individual time and attention to every learner, especially those experiencing barriers to learning. That number made the struggle to deal with the variety of challenges and diversity of needs of all their learners even more difficult. The teachers felt that a teacher aid could possibly enable a smaller teacher to learner ratio and provide additional support for the learners.

• Infrastructure and organisation of the classroom

Ms Miya's classroom was too small to accommodate all her 36 learners comfortably, making it difficult for her to access learners at the back of the classroom. Ms Snyman (pseudonym) (Grade 3) also had difficulty accessing her blackboard, which was positioned above shelves. The teachers, however, had cupboards and shelves in which to store their classroom resources, and wall space to display educational posters, to enable an organised and stimulating classroom space.

The teachers organised the desks of the learners facing each other in groups of three or four desks pushed together, allowing for six or eight learners to be seated in a group (two learners per desk). Seating the learners so that they were comfortable and able to interact with one another, was conducive to an atmosphere of inclusivity and this enabled cooperative learning (eds. Makoelle & Van der Merwe 2016:151).

• Classroom and learner resources

The three foundation phase classrooms all had old and tattered educational resources in the form of posters, charts, abacuses and scales. These were not necessarily outdated and could still be effectively used. The only visible new resources were the classroom libraries and Mathematics resources donated by NGO initiatives. The teachers spoke of a shortage of reading resources in terms of books with differentiated reading levels, which they felt constrained the sufficient access to reading material by the learners at the different reading levels.

• Shared sense of responsibility

There was a shared sense of responsibility at Baobab School emanating from the principal and radiating out to the teachers and other staff members. They were actively involved with the learners throughout the day at the school. Together they worked at instilling respect in the learners for the school, their elders and their peers, and thereby created an environment conducive to learning. The learners were enthusiastic and interested in their learning, attempting to complete their daily work and activities in the classroom. This shared sense of responsibility also encompassed finding the best possible support for learners who experienced barriers to learning at Baobab School.

• Supportive classroom learning environment

The three classrooms all had a supportive learning environment, where it could be seen that the learners felt appreciated, comfortable and safe. The learners felt appreciated when the

teacher responded to their questions, listened to their concerns and worked with them on an individual basis. They felt comfortable to freely ask questions and safe as they were seen to hug the teacher and were actively involved in the classroom activities. The teachers had a positive attitude about the inclusive education of learners in their classrooms, including the learners who experienced difficulties.

The teachers were always on time, starting their lessons punctually to present planned and organised lessons. Structure and routine were established in the classrooms, so that the learners knew what was expected of them and what their boundaries were. The teachers were interested in their learners and engaged in conversation with them. Engelbrecht and Green (eds. 2001:76) point out that 'the attention given to learners is a distinctive indicator of the quality of a responsive learning environment' for learners. The learners received positive reinforcement in the form of praise when seen to be working well and were disciplined if necessary. The teachers went out of their way to spend extra time in their classes with the learners who struggled with concepts and with their work.

Distractions arose when learners approached Ms Miya throughout the morning to have their work marked when she was busy with a struggling learner. There was a need for her attention by a learner experiencing barriers to learning, which impacted on the attention she could give to other learners. Ms Miya and Mrs Coetzee (pseudonym) (Grade 1) both suggested that it would be of benefit to have a teacher aid in their classes to assist them where necessary, or a smaller class size in ensuring more effective inclusion.

- Well planned, organised and presented lessons

The lessons presented by the teachers in the foundation phase had been planned and organised. Copies of worksheets on the concepts to be taught were made for the learners or they had their subject workbooks to work in. The previous lesson in the subject was reviewed to remind the learners what they had covered previously before they began with the next concept or stage in their learning. The instructions given by the teachers were short and clear, with the use of repetition and a variety of examples, and think-aloud techniques were modelled for the learners so as to better understand what was required of them. These techniques enabled all the learners in their inclusive education, especially those who struggled or were slow in completing their work.

There were learners who were engaged in Ms Miya's lesson, but still struggled to grasp the concepts taught. One such instance was when the concept of mixed multiplication by grouping, repeat addition and skip counting was taught in one of the Mathematics lessons. There was confusion amongst learners as to the different groupings leading to the same answer, such as 6 groups of 3 = 18 and 3 groups of 6 = 18. Even the Mathematics textbook was unclear on this and added to the confusion. Ms Miya attempted to overcome this confusion by having some of her learners who were struggling utilise counters to help illustrate the groupings concretely, showing teacher mastery of the skills needed to deal with learners experiencing barriers to learning, as well as resource availability.

- Diversity of learning styles

The teachers presented their lessons in a manner that catered for the diverse learning styles of their learners, encouraging visual, auditory, tactile and kinaesthetic learning. They used concrete and semi-concrete resources, such as counters, Lego blocks and

100s counting tables (donated by NGOs), with their learners, so they could use visual, tactile and kinaesthetic learning to help them better understand various concepts in Mathematics.

In learning the phonetic sound 'ar', Ms Miya had her learners use various forms of learning styles, from saying out the 'ar' sound as auditory learning, to tactile and kinaesthetic learning when they wrote the sound on each other's backs, to visual and kinaesthetic learning when they wrote the words with the 'ar' sound in them in their exercise books, underlining the 'ar' in colour. Pienaar and Raymond (2013) stress that 'the best practice for teachers is to provide multiple and flexible approaches to teaching and learning that will empower all their learners to learn optimally' (p. 56).

Ms Miya stated that learners experiencing learning difficulties benefitted especially from concrete methods of teaching and learning because concrete resources enabled these learners physically to see, touch and manipulate the educational resources, remaining at the concrete level for a longer period than the academically stronger learners who could understand concepts being taught through semi-concrete or abstract examples.

- Engaged learning – active involvement of learners

Ms Miya on several occasions actively involved her learners in her lessons by using a variety of strategies and methods for the learners to practise their knowledge and skills, such as working in pairs or groups, using different concrete materials, having learners come up to the front of the class to demonstrate a concept, and playing games. The use of these varieties of methods was seen to engage and enable the learners with their learning and provided 'differing amounts and types of practice to achieve skill mastery and to maintain learning' (Pienaar & Raymond 2013:135).

Rote learning, such as when the learners said their numbers, tables, days of the week and months of the year, over and over again, to memorise them, did not always engage all the learners. The learners in Ms Miya's class were easily distracted and appeared bored when doing their numbers and tables every morning.

- The promotion of the importance of reading

All three foundation phase classes had reading lessons every day, as in this phase the learners were learning to read and the teachers emphasised the importance of reading as a necessary skill for their learners to have.

They had class reading, where the teacher read to the entire class using a large, colourfully illustrated book; group reading, with the learners reading in groups of five or six, each taking a turn; and finally, paired reading, when learners read to each other in pairs. They did not take any books home to read for homework or pleasure. They did, however, have access to their classroom libraries during the school day, where they were encouraged to read if they had finished their classwork. The school was fortunate that the classroom libraries were donated by an NGO as they had no main school library. The learners had access to books in the libraries in all three languages, English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa.

The teachers used various reading strategies and techniques to help learners with their reading. The learners were encouraged to look at the illustrations in their books to help them better understand what was being read, as well as to predict what may happen further on in their book. They were also encouraged to

discuss what they thought was happening in the book in order to establish their comprehension of the text. The strategy of breaking up and sounding out words was used to assist learners to establish the word they were attempting to read, as well as the use of their finger to point at the words they were reading to help them track the text.

The teachers expressed their frustration as to the lack of sufficient standardised reading books for the learners. The learners had to share books or make do with photocopies of reading material. Some of the reading material was too difficult for some of the learners in the class, so they were unable to follow what was being read. The teachers stated that certain of the learners would have benefitted from reading at a simpler level and possibly would have been less discouraged.

The university had established a reading initiative with Baobab School and some of the learners also attended a literacy programme held one afternoon a week at the school's daycare centre.

The parents who had attended the parent workshops held once a week by another initiative of the university were encouraged to take their children to the local city library, where they could withdraw books and attend storytime.

- **Scaffolding**

The teachers provided support for their learners in small incremental steps so that they did not become overwhelmed; but as was evidenced in learners' exercise books, they achieved success at each stage, before moving on to the next stage. Mrs Coetzee illustrated scaffolding when she worked with a number at a time per Mathematics lesson and a letter at a time per writing lesson.

- **Cooperative learning**

The teachers encouraged their learners to work together in groups or pairs, supporting each other to achieve a common goal, such as in Ms Miya's classroom when working in groups or pairs with the Lego blocks when learning the concept of 'the difference between' in Mathematics. They also had learners read in pairs or groups, allowing for the learners each to take turns with reading in a relaxed setting. The learners were shown how to support each other when reading, first allowing their peers to attempt to read a word, and only then prompting when they could not read the word correctly. Pienaar and Raymond (2013) note that cooperative learning should provide the teaching of group work skills and having learners help each other and work together effectively.

Mrs Coetzee stated during her interview that she seated some of her academically weaker learners next to academically stronger learners, so that they could support them 'at the level that the child understands and on a co-equal basis' (Pienaar & Raymond 2013:248).

- **Differentiated teaching and learning**

The teachers were aware, and conscious, of the fact that their learners did not have the same prior knowledge and skills, did not have the same interests or cultural backgrounds and did not learn in the same manner, or at the same pace. Ms Miya had been taught at the university she attended about differentiated teaching and learning, which allowed for teachers to accommodate the needs of their learners with differing abilities in their classes. She had attempted to introduce this strategy in her class, but had found it too onerous because of the workload, time constraints and insufficient resources. She had resorted to

helping the learners who were struggling with their work on an individual basis. The other teachers informed me during their interviews that they used this same strategy when working with learners experiencing difficulties with their work. Once again the teachers mentioned the difficulty in managing the rest of the class when working with a learner experiencing difficulties in a lesson.

- **Individual support**

The teachers chose to work on an individual basis with learners who were experiencing difficulties with their work in their classes. They did this whilst the rest of the class were completing work or at break time. The teachers felt that this was the most effective way to support them, as they could concentrate specifically on the one learner and his or her difficulties.

It was, however, difficult for the teachers to monitor the whole class whilst they were working with a particular learner, because the other learners became restless and noise levels rose, especially as they completed their work more quickly than those learners experiencing difficulties. Ms Miya explained that,

Learners cover different concepts at different paces. I am working with one learner that is slower and the others are already done and then there is a distraction and then in the end you have to split yourself, come and see this one and that one.

Ms Miya told her learners to collect a book from the classroom library when they had finished their work as a solution to keeping them occupied. The teachers felt that a teacher aid would facilitate assistance with the management of learners in their classes.

- **Assessments and early identification and intervention of barriers to learning**

The teachers would call in the parents of learners they perceived to be experiencing barriers to learning in their classes and then, along with the SBST, attempt to identify the learner's difficulties and needs and to put a support plan in place for them. They advised the parents to approach the psychiatric hospital to have educational, scholastic and behavioural assessments carried out with various psychologists there, as well as any necessary counselling. This was carried out free of charge. They also approached the university counselling centre to have psychologists there help learners needing support, once again free of charge. When medical intervention and medication were required, clinics were approached for assistance. Teachers asked parents to take their children to specialists, such as an eye specialist for visual impairments or a physiotherapist for a learner who had suffered a stroke. Otherwise, teachers attempted to provide additional academic support in the classroom for the learners through one-on-one tuition.

They would fill out the Special Needs Assessment (SNA) forms with the SBST and parents, and send these to the District Based Support Team (DBST). They stated that they did not receive any follow-up or support from the DBST, where Mrs Coetzee said,

'For example, if you fill in all those thick forms (SNA forms) that you submit to the department, they don't come back to you. They don't screen the child – nothing.' (Teacher, female)

They, therefore, had to use various initiatives in the community. No formal Individual Education Plan (IEP) was written up for any of the learners by the teachers.

- Accommodations and modifications

Learners experiencing barriers to learning were accommodated by being seated at the front of the class or close to the teacher's desk, or they were placed next to an academically stronger learner. Additional time was allowed for slower learners. Also, prompting assisted with the understanding of an exercise or the completion of a test by a learner. No modifications were carried out on any work for learners experiencing learning difficulties.

Lessons learned

Enabling and constraining factors

It was heartening to observe the extent to which inclusive education practices were carried out at the school and in the classrooms.

Several factors were identified that enabled or constrained inclusive teaching in the classroom considered. Enabling factors included:

- The teachers were committed to inclusive teaching in their classrooms, in particular investigating a great deal of effort to effectively teach the children in their classes who experienced barriers to learning. There was a shared sense of responsibility amongst the stakeholders, a supportive classroom environment, well-planned, organised and flexibly presented lessons, emphasis on the importance of reading, use of a variety of teaching strategies allowing for varied engagement and diverse learning styles, and the early identification and intervention of learners experiencing barriers to learning.
- Teachers appreciated the diversity in their classes in terms of prior knowledge and skills, interests, cultural backgrounds, preferred modes of learning and pace of learning and varied their teaching in the effort to accommodate this diversity.
- Teachers carefully scaffolded learning opportunities in the effort to enable children to master each stage of learning before moving to the next.
- The teachers could approach and work with the SBST, which had the capacity to mobilise several resources available on the local community, for children experiencing barriers to learning in the different classes.
- Teachers put in the effort to give individual attention to children experiencing barriers to learning, in-class time or break time, in order to help these learners master their work.

Constraining factors included:

- At times the extensive attention given to children experiencing barriers to learning resulted in disruptions to the learning of other learners, because of the lack of attention of the teacher.
- Teachers acknowledged that differentiated teaching could more effectively accommodate the diversity in their classrooms, but were not able to implement this in their classes because of work load, time constraints and the lack of resources.
- Facilitation of an inclusive classroom was a difficult task and the teachers were not always able to engage all the

learners effectively, particularly when faced with the multiple conflicting needs for teacher attention in such a class. This highlights the complex nature of inclusive teaching and the need for highly skilled and flexible teaching for this to be well implemented.

- The size of these Foundation Phase classes made it extremely difficult for teachers to adopt the flexibility and responsiveness required for effective inclusive teaching. Although teachers suggested that the use of teaching assistants may help overcome this constraint, it could be questioned whether teaching assistants would display the teaching proficiency needed to effectively facilitate teaching in such diverse classes.

Conclusion

This article responds to the need for a deeper understanding of the engagement of teachers with learners, including learners experiencing barriers to learning, in our ordinary, public, primary school classrooms in South Africa, as well as the extent to which classroom practices are inclusive. It addresses Walton (2006) and Engelbrecht et al.'s (2015) contention that there is a need for empirical studies on actual teacher engagement with learners, including learners experiencing barriers to learning, in ordinary, public school classrooms, and on the extent to which classroom practices are inclusive.

On entering a no-fees paying, public, primary school in the Eastern Cape and three of its English-medium foundation phase classrooms, it was heartening to observe the extent to which inclusive education and practices were carried out at the school and in the classrooms.

There remain, however, various challenges that are faced by schools, teachers and the South African Department of Basic Education in enabling the implementation of inclusive education which need to be addressed. These include the need for further provincial and national support in providing 'clear directives for appropriate responsibility and control of implementation' (Engelbrecht et al. 2015:532) of inclusive education by the appropriate authorities such as the DBST, well-structured professional teacher training and development programmes in inclusive teaching practices and external funding for school and classroom infrastructure and resources. The successful implementation of inclusive teaching and learning practices is also needed by teachers who would benefit from supportive assistance by expert personnel, resources and assistive devices for learners experiencing barriers to learning.

Future research could aim at providing a comprehensive picture of the factors enabling and constraining the successful delivery of inclusive education in the classroom on the basis of larger samples than are offered here. The focus could be extended to include not only other primary schools in other areas in South Africa but also preschool institutions and secondary schools.

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Authors' contributions

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Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance for the research project entitled 'An Eastern Cape, public, primary school's engagement with children in an inclusive foundation phase classroom in the presence of barriers to learning: A case study analysis' was granted by the Faculty of Education Higher Degrees Committee of Rhodes University and received clearance number 2017.4.04.14.

Permission to access the school was obtained from the Eastern Cape Department of Education. The teacher participants were fully informed about the research goals, that pseudonyms would be used to ensure anonymity, that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the study. Informed consent was obtained to undertake classroom observations and two of the three teachers agreed to their classes being video-recorded. Written notes were made when observing the third teacher.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the author V.S. The data are not publicly available because of their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect an official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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