

# Teaching Learners With Diverse Needs in the Foundation Phase in Gauteng Province, South Africa

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## Abstract

This qualitative study draws from Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, which emphasizes interaction between the systems of education. The study argues that if teachers are able to cater for diversity in their classes, the vision of inclusive education will be realized. Inclusive education requires all learners with the diverse needs to be able to access education and succeed in their schooling careers. Ten teachers who are teaching in the Foundation Phase were purposively selected to form part of the study; data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Teachers indicated that large classes, lack of parental support, training for teachers, and social problems of the learners were making the teaching of learners with diverse needs challenging. This article focussed on the factors that are considered by teachers in the study as barriers to catering of learners with diverse needs, concluding that if teachers are provided with support, more learners will be able to sail through the system of education.

## Keywords

teachers, diversity, inclusive education, barriers, support

## Introduction

Teaching of learners with diverse needs can be a challenge to most of the teachers. However, inclusive education (IE) policy in South Africa requires all the teachers to be able to cater for diversity in their respective classes. Of all the professions that focus on the development of learners, teaching is regarded as one of the most complex. It is not a “simple, straightforward enterprise” (Snowman, McCowan, & Biehler, 2009); therefore, when policies are changed, demands on teachers are increased. In the light of this, the various changes that have taken place in South Africa since 1994 can be seen as having added an unreasonable amount of stress to teachers. One significant educational reform in the 21st century has been the movement toward IE. The White Paper 6 policy, building an IE and training system (Department of Education [DoE], 2001), requires that all learners, irrespective of race, gender, language, class, religion, disability, HIV/AIDS status, and culture, have a right to access education, and acknowledges that all children can learn with support. However, many teachers in service have not had the benefit of being trained to teach learners with diverse needs and so often find it difficult (Phasha, Mahlo, & Maseko, 2013). The aim of this article was to find out how teachers cater for diversity in their respective classes when they are required to implement IE. The study on which it is based sought to investigate how teachers perceived their

roles on the inclusion of learners with diverse needs in the Foundation Phase. The researcher argues that while some teachers in service were not initially trained in IE, they should still take their responsibility seriously and have a more reasonable expectation as teachers.

## Responsibilities of Teachers in the Foundation Phase

The term *Foundation Phase* refers to Grades R to 3 and includes learners from 6 to 9 years of age (DoE, 1997; White Paper 5, Document Grades R-3). This is a 4-year phase, starting with the reception year and running important learning programs, notably Numeracy, Literacy, and Life Skills. Davis (1994) affirms that during this phase, a learner develops in totality, that is, as a physical being who develops control over his or her gross and fine motor coordination, as a psychosocial being who is able to control his or her emotions, and as a cognitive being who is able to comprehend the surrounding world. This is the phase in which the foundation

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of learning is laid effectively, a critical time for promoting interest in education and positive attitudes toward school when self-concepts are developed. Joshua (2006) maintains that if a child fails at this stage, he or she will be adversely affected and may even drop out of the schooling system before having had an opportunity to explore his or her learning potential. Gargiulo and Kilgo (2011) point out that early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every child to participate in a broad range of activities.

Although IE is a priority in South African schools, there are factors in the system that affect the implementation as conceived by the policy. It is against this background that the researcher considers challenges at the different levels of the education system when catering for learners with diverse needs. Socioeconomic factors contribute to large classes, lack of parental support, and other social problems. Learners are faced with challenges that put them at risk of psychological, social, and academic difficulties, and that cannot be dealt with in isolation because they interact in a dynamic way. Therefore, this article examines some of the factors at macro and meso levels which affect the teachers and learners, as the school at micro level is responsible for the policy implementation. With the increasing extent of change in the educational reforms has come greater inclusion of learners with diverse learning needs. The teachers should identify learners experiencing barriers to learning as early as possible within their phase and give necessary support, observing them carefully in all the learning areas so that necessary adaptations can be made.

One strategy in the development of a single IE system is the *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support* (SIAS; DoE, 2014), which targets all learners in urban and rural settings who need support, not only those with disabilities, specifically those from the poorest communities in townships, informal settlements, or rural areas, as they have previously suffered from the unavailability of and lack of access to services (DoE, 2005). The policy provides guidelines and information on the procedures in supporting learners who experience barriers to learning, outlining the role of teachers, especially in the Foundation Phase; parents; managers; and support staff within a framework of a new vision of how support should be organized. According to the DoE (2005), teachers should identify learners who are in need of enriched and support programs; require diagnostic help in specific aspects of a learning program; have a learning barrier; are overaged; have a mismatch between home language and the language of teaching, learning and assessment; have physical disabilities, such as with vision, speech, general health, hunger, and emotional stability due to harassment or violence; do not attend school regularly; and/or show signs of abuse or neglect.

The SIAS policy is thus clear on which learners could be in need of support. It is affirmed that previously the responsibility of assisting learners with barriers to learning lay with specially qualified persons employed either by educational

support services or special schools. This implied that teachers and schools did not view the assistance of learners experiencing barriers to learning as their responsibility, but rather their duty was only to identify and refer them to more specialized people.

It is evident that the teaching of learners with diverse needs requires teachers with specific knowledge and skills to enable them to identify and help learners, thus cultivating a positive attitude and willingness to accept them in class and assist them. It is evident that the teachers do not conceptualize their roles clearly as the IE policy requires them to perform some duties to which they were not accustomed.

The White Paper 6 states that classroom teachers now have a responsibility toward learners with diverse needs as they are being educated in the ordinary classes. As Giangreco, Carter, Doyle, and Suter (2010) acknowledge, support provided to classroom teachers is essential, and although classroom teachers are not expected to have all the answers or undertake the task of IE alone, they must realize that while the foundational principles of teaching and learning do not change, those principles may need to be applied differently or used more systematically.

Singal (2010) maintains that even when children with disabilities do attend the mainstream classrooms, the teachers do not always regard them as their primary responsibility. This is contrary to the guiding principle underpinning inclusion, that regular schools should accommodate all learners regardless of their physical, intellectual, sensory, emotional, or other special needs (Forlin, 2008). They should, therefore, have appropriate skills, and as such, the expectations on teachers are greater, which then affects attitudes toward IE.

Teachers need to be reflective, critical thinkers if IE is to be successful (Naicker, 2005) as they are the ones implementing IE in the classrooms and without their support the vision would not be a reality. It is important for teachers to evaluate their level of professionalism and how they define themselves as teachers. Korthagen (2004) identifies essential questions that are important in developing a professional identity, and the teachers need to answer questions such as follows: Who am I? How do I see my role as a teacher? What kind of a teacher do I want to be? By engaging in such dialogues, they may realize why they chose teaching as a profession among all the available ones, and do justice to the learners. It is frustrating being in employment that one does not like, and one, therefore, does not put maximum effort or energy into it. Teachers need to be proud to be teachers, be competent and be willing to make an extra effort. The interaction of the different levels in the education system has an impact on the successful implementation of the policy, which particularly requires teachers to cater for diversity.

## Theoretical Framework

This article draws on the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), in which there is interaction between

an individual's development and systems within the general social context. Regarded by Haihambo (2010) as an example of a multidimensional model of human development, it posits that there are layers or levels of interacting systems resulting in change, growth, and development, namely physical, biological, psychological, social, and cultural. What happens in one system affects and is affected by other systems (Swart & Pettipher, 2005); thus, human behavior, experiences, and actions cannot be understood if the contexts in which they occur are not considered.

An individual is seen as part of the subsystems of society, which are also interrelated. Bronfenbrenner identifies five structures or environmental systems in which human beings develop, and they are macro, exo, meso, micro, and chrono systems. What happens in one system affects and is affected by other systems (Swart & Pettipher, 2005), which implies that human behavior, experiences, and actions cannot be understood if the contexts in which they occur are not considered. This article focuses on the micro level, in this case the school, on which the implementation of IE takes place and teachers are required to cater for learners' diverse needs. It encompasses the immediate environments in which an individual develops, characterized by events closest to his or her life, and involves continual face-to-face contact, with each person reciprocally influencing the other (Swart & Pettipher, 2005). In the new education system, the school is supposed to become a caring environment in which learners are accepted and treated equally with respect, regardless of their different needs. Donald, Lazarus, and Lolwana (2009) define the micro system as one in which learners are closely involved in proximal interactions with other familiar people, such as the family and school, and it involves daily activities that shape many aspects of cognitive, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual development. As teachers at school level are responsible for the implementation of IE policy, their attitudes toward learners experiencing different barriers to learning affect learners' academic careers. They need to work together with stakeholders, such as parents, social workers, and counselors, so that the effective implementation of IE can take place.

## Teachers' Attitudes Toward IE

One of the most difficult challenges in preparing teachers to work in diverse classrooms is that of ensuring that they have a positive attitude toward learners with different backgrounds and special educational needs (SEN), and that they are willing participants in the inclusion movement (Forlin, 2010). This suggests that if they do not have an understanding of diversity, a positive attitude, and belief in inclusion, they cannot be expected to embrace such a philosophy. Florian and Rouse (2010) maintain that most mainstream teachers do not believe that they have the skills or knowledge to teach learners with learning barriers because they have not taken a specialist course. They believe there are experts "out there"

to teach those learners on a one-to-one basis, and therefore, teaching them is not their responsibility. This type of thinking becomes a barrier to IE, as developing effective inclusive practices is not only about extending teachers' knowledge but also about encouraging them to do things differently and getting them to reconsider their attitudes and beliefs about children with barriers and schooling. According to Phasha et al. (2013), teachers need to change their attitude toward learners who experience barriers to learning.

Many attitude problems occur through human interaction in the school community, which includes relations between teachers, principal and teachers, teachers and learners, teachers and parents, and between learners themselves. The relations between teachers are important not only in the context of developing a healthy working environment but also as a model for learners themselves (Engelbrecht & Green, 2001). One of the challenges facing the implementation of IE is "attitude," and that of the teacher is crucial to the promotion of IE through catering for diversity. The challenge facing many South African teachers is that they have not been trained to cope with diversity of learners now entering schools. It can be seen that teachers need reorientation, assistance, and support as well as fundamental shifts in their consciousness and attitudes (Phasha et al., 2013). Gordon Porter maintains that teachers need to be helped to achieve positive changes in attitudes toward new teaching methods and circumstances to achieve effective inclusion in schools (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2000).

The task of implementing education policies, including White Paper 6, is performed at the provincial level, then filters down to the districts or regions, and finally to schools. This provides an opportunity for the provincial staff to design the implementation program and strategies in context. Teachers are the main role-players in the school and are expected to provide quality education for all learners, irrespective of religion, HIV/AIDS status, disability, language, race, culture, gender, and belief. Unianu (2012) finds that the teachers' attitudes toward IE could be formed and developed in the context of an educational system that can provide some specific conditions to have a good practice in this field. However, in a study conducted by Nel et al. (2011), they concluded that teachers have negative attitudes toward IE policies both in South Africa and Sweden.

It is then critical to recognize that inclusivity is complex, to be seen not only as an issue of placing learners with diverse needs and barriers into regular classes, but also as a model of holistic development of modifying and adapting community and teachers' attitude to enable all learners to fully engage with the curriculum. Teachers have their own attitudes, ideas, and beliefs about what they consider to be right when it comes to inclusive practices, but they need to be accredited and considered important because if they are not well addressed, it is not possible to have an inclusive society that incorporates diversity in schools. Of particular significance are the attitudes

and beliefs of teachers regarding inclusive educational practices as they are considered the most influential aspects of determining the success of inclusion. As teachers, it is critical that opportunities are provided for reflection of their attitudes, personal beliefs, values, and expectations, while developing the desire to become inclusive to seek out the skills. If teachers have the good will and positive attitudes, they will seek the skills to embrace diversity.

In a study in Australia of community attitudes towards IE, according to Gilmore, Campbell, and Cuskelly (2003) respondents stated that people felt uncomfortable when interacting with individuals with disabilities, problematic emotional behavior, and communication disorders. It was believed that this was mainly due to their lack of knowledge and understanding of diverse needs of individuals, and only 17% of the sample reported that they knew many of the diverse types of disabilities or other learning challenges, while 20% said they knew very little or had no knowledge at all. This affirms the findings of the study by Gilmore et al. (2003) on the general education teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and their acceptance of the inclusion of students with disabilities. The study revealed that teachers in general in the UAE had less than encouraging attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities, which allows and encourages the establishment of policies that guarantee a student's right to be educated in regular classrooms. The above scholars affirm that if a country is aiming to change its education system and push for inclusion, the teachers' attitudes need to change. Gilmore et al. suggest that accurate knowledge and positive but realistic expectations are important for enhancing the acceptance of individuals within schools and communities.

The practical implementation of IE in developing countries such as Uganda and Zambia is hampered by insufficient teacher training, inadequate human and material resources, large class sizes, and negative attitudes (Silupya, 2003). Meanwhile, South African teachers are currently being expected to make major changes in the way they understand teaching and learning, especially in diverse classrooms. Teachers may need support to focus on the positive rather than the negative aspects of change (Engelbrecht, 1999), and should be sensitive to their own attitudes and feelings about inclusion.

In a number of studies in South Africa, the attitudes of teachers toward educating learners with diverse challenges to learning have been put through as a decisive factor in making schools more inclusive. Engelbrecht, Swart, and Eloff (2001) focused on the coping skills of educators who had learners with Down's syndrome in inclusive classrooms, finding that teachers experienced stress due to lack of support and inappropriate training for inclusive programs. Bothma, Gravett, and Swart (2000) maintain that attitudes of primary school teachers toward South African IE policy were largely negative and could become a critical barrier to successful implementation. Naicker (2003) asserts that

although inclusion seems to be well researched and established in the developed world, it should not be regarded as problem-free. Notably, children in the West who are in special education classes are there because of poverty, language, and inappropriate education practices.

Belknap, Roberts, and Nyewe (1997) discuss what could be interpreted as samples of inclusive environments. They acknowledge that students with disabilities are likely to place higher demands on the teacher. Attitudes play an important role, therefore, and when necessary, those transmitting education should change from targeting a selected few to supporting all students. It is evident that attitudes and support cannot be separated, because if one has a negative attitude toward learners with barriers, one cannot provide that support to the learners. In a similar vein, if one's attitude toward IE is negative whatever effort is made to make IE a reality will be shut down. If IE practices are promoted in schools, negative attitudes and perceptions will fade, perhaps much sooner than expected.

## Method

A qualitative approach was used, and data were collected through semistructured interviews; this allowed the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of social realities and derive a comprehensive portrait of a range human endeavors, interactions, situations, and perceptions (Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999). A phenomenological design was undertaken, as it is based on the theoretical point of view that advocates the study of direct experiences taken at face value. The researcher wished to hear the participants' point of view about teaching learners with diverse needs in the Foundation Phase. Following a purposive sampling method, a total of 10 Foundation Phase teachers were selected, an important criterion being experience in their current position for at least 5 years, that is, since 2010, when their schools began implementing IE. They should have thus accumulated relevant experience about the topic studied. The researcher included only those who were prepared to participate in research and willing to share the information (Morse & Richards, 2002).

Data were collected by means of semistructured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Semistructured interviews were used because they provided firsthand information from the Foundation Phase teachers. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), they provide the researcher with an opportunity to ask individually tailored questions and do not limit the field of enquiry. The researcher began with a predetermined set of questions but allowed some latitude in breadth of relevance. One-to-one interviews were conducted after working hours, not exceeding 1 hr. Data were audiotaped and independently transcribed.

The following questions were asked:

- What are your opinions about teaching learners with diverse needs in the Foundation Phase?

- How do you experience the implementation of IE in the Foundation Phase?
- Which factors are affecting the implementation of IE in the Foundation Phase?
- What strategies are followed to cater for learner's diverse needs in the Foundation Phase?

Observations of Foundation Phase teachers offering a lesson to learners with diverse needs were made and field notes taken. Observations were included because the researcher wished to gather data from natural settings, that is, the Foundation Phase classrooms. This entailed a systematic noting and recording of events, behavior, and objects in a social setting of the chosen study. The study necessitated a nonparticipant observation wherein the researcher was an observer but not interfering with the proceedings.

Documents analysis entails scrutiny of relevant documents, which can be a valuable source of information (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit 2004) and gave the researcher an idea of the current processes and strategies followed to assist learners with diverse needs and experiencing barriers to learning. Documents are also valuable sources for supporting the findings made through other research methods such as interviews and observations (Best & Kahn, 2006). Document analysis included intervention programs and registers of learners experiencing barriers.

Content analysis (Maree, 2013) was used, because the researcher analyzed qualitative responses to interviews and summarized the messages from documents to identify the units of meaning relating to the topic. Audio-taped data were listened to several times to gather emerging categories and themes, and all the data were read, with large bodies of text broken down into smaller meaningful units in the form of sentences or individual words. It was perused several times to get a sense of what it contained, and in the process, the researcher wrote in the margins possible categories or interpretation. Identification of themes was based on the assumption that at that point it was easy to get a sense of what the data meant. Finally, data were integrated and summarized. Audio-taped data were listened to several times to gather emerging categories. The following themes emerged from the data.

### *Lack of Parental or Caregiver's Support*

Teaching learners with diverse needs in inclusive settings will be successful if there is a partnership between the home, school, and the learner but due to socioeconomic status and unemployment, most parents in South Africa leave the children in the care of siblings or grandparents. Sometimes, it is difficult for grandparents to take care of the well-being of the children, especially when they are illiterate and cannot assist with schoolwork. The majority of teachers felt that lack of parental or caregiver support affects the implementation of IE negatively, especially on catering for learners with diverse

needs. When teachers identify the needs of learners, they sometimes need a parent to be part of the process. It becomes a problem because even if they are called to the school, they do not attend. If parents and caregivers are not involved in activities of learners at school, learners' performance and confidence in the classroom can suffer, causing a learner to experience more barriers to learning, as affirmed by responses on the following questions:

*"What are your opinions about teaching learners with diverse needs in the Foundation Phase?"* Classroom teachers mentioned parental support as the greatest challenge. As the primary educators of their children and responsible for them throughout life, parents have the most important and enduring influence on their children's development (Winkler, Modise, & Dawber, 2004, p. 25). However, classroom teachers felt that parents were neglecting their responsibilities as primary educators, leaving the responsibility to the classroom teachers. This was clear from one teacher who said, "Parents need to be taught how to parent their kids; you cannot bring a child in this world and then ignore their responsibility of taking care of that child." This was reiterated by another classroom teacher: "If you call the parent to come and discuss the problem of the learner with you, the parent does not come, because they think you are going to tell them that their child is going to fail." Echoing the sentiments was another teacher, who said,

Parents are not supportive; they don't even come when you call them to the school, there are some problems which you cannot solve without the parents' consent, so the issue of inclusion becomes irrelevant when we look at real practical issues.

Parents should be supportive of classroom teachers, especially in solving problems of learners who are experiencing barriers to learning. If parents take the responsibility for their children, the classroom teachers will also be encouraged to support the learners because they know they also have the parents' support.

Schools have to take responsibility for making parents feel that they are accepted as partners in the education of their children. As such, the learners' confidence and performance in the classroom will improve because they realize that even their parents and caregivers are interested in their well-being. This was evident also during the documents analysis, as the registers containing invitation letters to the parents revealed that parents who were invited to the school because their children were experiencing barriers to learning did not attend. Teachers had several letters as evidence.

The above incidences and reports of teachers show that parents were not supportive, and therefore, teachers felt helpless and frustrated. During one observation session, when checking the learners' books, the section which the parents should sign after helping the children with homework was not signed, regardless of the teacher's effort to indicate that the parent should sign. Parents' and caregivers' involvement

in school activities is regarded as the most important factor in the education of learners, because when parents know what is happening at the school they are able to support and motivate learners to learn.

### *Large Classes*

Regarding the classroom teachers' opinions on implementation of IE in the Foundation Phase, all indicated that large class sizes were making it difficult, as evident in the following statements: "I have too many learners in my class, when do I find time to concentrate only on one learner who has a problem?" The sentiments were echoed by this teacher:

It is not easy to implement this inclusion thing and cater for the diverse needs of all learners, because, you can see how many learners I am dealing with. This individual attention is not possible with so many learners. We are trying to accommodate the learners who are struggling, but there are too many learners in class, so you end up doing only what you can.

The frustration of this teacher can be heard in the following words: "We have too many learners in classes; I don't know how they expect us to perform miracles with such big classes." The statements above indicate that the classroom teachers were frustrated by the large number of learners in the classes and, therefore, found it difficult to attend to learners with diverse needs individually. Teaching and learning will not take place as planned if there are too many learners in the classroom.

The researcher observed that in most classes the teacher was supposed to teach as many as 40 learners, and to affirm this, the documents analyzed revealed that there were more learners in the register for learners who had been identified as experiencing barriers than the few not in the register. This is a serious problem in most of the Foundation Phase classes as it prevents the effective implementation of IE in the Foundation Phase and therefore the diverse needs of learners in class are not catered for.

### *Social Problems of Learners*

Classroom teachers also indicated that they need help to deal with different social problems of learners. Those who find themselves in situations in which they are supposed to intervene in social problems, such as abuse and/or violence, are sometimes unable to assist because they do not know what to do. As such, they are helpless and frustrated by the situation, as made clear by one teacher: "Most of our learners experience different problems whereby parents always fight, and the learner is always thinking about what was happening in the house so they do not even hear what you are teaching in class." The problem is intensified when classroom teachers are not sure how to intervene, as clear in the words of this teacher:

Yes, in some cases you find that the learner is bullying others, you need to refer that learner to the counsellor. Learners who are naughty stealing others possessions, then you will find that those learners may not get love from home, so social worker or the counsellor helps us there, because we don't know what to do in such cases, actually we are clueless in catering for this learners.

From the statements above, one can conclude that the counsellors and social workers are mostly required to resolve social problems that the classroom teachers are unable to handle. During the observation session, the researcher realized that the learners were mostly asleep during the lesson and many did not have the proper school uniform or lunch boxes. Most depended on the feeding scheme, which sometimes was not operating so they went hungry. To affirm this, the registers of learners experiencing barriers to learning also revealed that more experienced social problems than academic problems, and if not attended to it would be difficult to help them succeed academically.

### *Training for Classroom Teachers*

In responding to the question, "What strategies are followed to cater for learners diverse needs in the Foundation Phase?" most teachers indicated that they needed to be well trained in how to deal with learners experiencing barriers to learning. Literature reveals that, in inclusive classrooms, teachers require diverse knowledge and skills (Borman & Rose, 2010). Most of those interviewed indicated that they needed intensive training in IE so that they would be able to support and cater for the diverse needs of learners in the classes. They were frustrated by situations they were unable to handle, such as abuse, and different cultures, languages, and races. They reported that they wished to help them but they not know how, as was evident in the following statement: "Sometimes you find that you suspect a learner in your class has been abused, how do you then talk to that learner? Seriously you need skills to do that without offending the learner." In addition, the classroom teacher mentioned only having been trained once in IE and catering for learners with diverse needs: "We went for training only once; we need more training on this inclusive education so that we can implement it correctly, for now what we are doing is just trial and error." The statements above affirm that classroom teachers do not have appropriate skills and knowledge to implement IE or cater for learners with diverse needs. There is a desperate need for more intensive training so that the classroom teachers can be confident in supporting learners with diverse needs in their classes. During observation lessons, it was clear that the teachers did not know how to intervene when a learner was experiencing a problem. For instance, if learners did not spell the word correctly, the teachers asked them to repeat the correct word 20 times in the book, but did not establish why the word was spelled incorrectly the first time, whether there was something

wrong with the way learners were taught or how to pronounce the word. This was also affirmed by the record in the registers, as six teachers recorded that the learners had problems with spelling yet there was no evidence of how they were dealing with that particular issue. When asked what they did in such cases, they said they had not been taught how to teach spelling or phonics so just let the learners repeat the word that was wrongly spelled several times. There is an urgent need for teachers to be trained in the areas mentioned above if IE is to be implemented effectively, and assistance provided to learners with diverse needs.

## Discussion

It was noted that although Foundation Phase teachers are having learners with different needs in their classes, there are other factors that make catering for them problematic. All teachers agreed that IE is an educational strategy that could contribute to a democratic society because it embraces the democratic values of equality, human rights, and recognition of diversity. However, Foundation Phase teachers who formed part of the study had their reservations regarding the implementation thereof, believing it to be good on paper but difficult to implement without adequate support. They further mentioned that parents and caregivers could play an important role in ensuring that they support the IE policy so that learners with diverse needs can be catered for. Foundation Phase teachers alluded to a number of opinions on implementing IE but in particular indicated more support for teachers so that they could help learners experiencing barriers to learning and development. Conversely, as the researcher argues, it is not beneficial to be educated in a school in which there is little or no support. Findings from this study revealed that lack of support has a significant impact on the implementation of IE and catering for diverse learners in the schools. IE requires schools to respond to the diversity of learners and provide equal opportunities for all.

Many schools in South Africa are affected by overcrowding, and findings from this study revealed that teachers still had around 40 learners in one classroom, rendering effective learning and teaching difficult and implementation of a new policy such as IE highly impractical. Teachers thus develop negative attitudes toward the learner who experience barriers to learning, and the large classes make it difficult for them to identify learners who experience barriers to learning and provide them with the appropriate attention. The diversity of learners in class makes the task of the teacher difficult to achieve. The study further identified gaps that interfere with the implementation of IE in the Foundation Phase as the teachers do not know how to intervene when faced with problems, as such learners who experience barriers to learning are not included in the teaching and learning and some teachers do not know how to help them. Teachers indicated that without support, the vision of IE would not be realized. The findings reinforce Bronfenbrenner's theory that

underpins the study as the school is at the micro level of the system of education, where the policies are practically implemented and if careful consideration is not made at that level regarding the implementation, it will affect all levels.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory explains the direct and indirect influences on a child's life by referring to the many levels of environment or contexts that influence a person's development. A major challenge of the education system is to understand the complexity of the influences, interactions, and interrelationships between the individual learner and multiple or other systems that are connected to the learner (Swart & Pettipher, 2005). The learner does not exist in isolation, and all the systems determine whether he or she will be successful in an academic career, including the system of education, teachers, the parents, and the school. If all systems work together, all learners in schools, even those experiencing barriers, will benefit.

## Recommendations

The researcher recommends that integrating school activities with community activities in catering for learners with diverse needs is of the utmost importance. Traditionally, leaders in the community are respected, and whatever they say is listened to, irrespective of whether they are educated or not. Foundation Phase teachers can form partnerships with the community leaders who usually invite parents and guardians to community meetings. There are also ministers, priests in churches, and burial society chairpersons, who as leaders can allocate a slot in their gatherings to talk about the importance of supporting school activities so that the teachers can be supported in catering for learners with diverse needs.

It is, therefore, recommended that to minimize class sizes, most activities should take place outside the classroom. Learners in the Foundation Phase learn by playing, which could be enhanced by employing assistant teachers to give extended classroom support, especially to those experiencing barriers to learning. Teachers could also group learners for activities so that they also learn from each other. Regarding the social problems experienced by learners, the researcher recommends that the practice and use of available resources in the community should be encouraged, such as home-based organizations and those that offer voluntary counseling to vulnerable children in the form of guidance as well as help in schoolwork and general health. The DoE could also employ social workers and counselors on a better salary package, as in the private sector, so that they can be attracted to work in schools and assist learners who experience barriers to learning. More campaigns on awareness of social problems that can affect the learners in class are recommended because if the parents or the caregivers know that the problem could affect the learner in future, they should respond appropriately. Intensive training for Foundation Phase teachers on the intervention strategies to cater for diverse learners in their classes is recommended as most of the teachers indicated that while they could identify the problems of the

learner, they did not know how to intervene. The interaction of all the stakeholders above affirms Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the interaction between an individual's development and the systems within the general social context.

## Conclusion

In this article, the researcher discussed Foundation Phase teachers' roles and responsibilities in an inclusive classroom and the factors that may be causing the barriers to the implementation of IE, thus making it difficult for them to cater for diversity. Teachers feel overwhelmed by the responsibility placed on them to teach and cater for diversity. While the researcher acknowledged that South Africa has well-written policies in place, such as on IE, their practical implementation will remain problematic if the factors highlighted in this article are not considered. The researcher is particularly concerned about the extent to which these factors are addressed because that will determine whether the vision of implementing IE will be realized.

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