

**EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSIVE LEARNING CONTEXTS: AN
EXPLORATION OF COMPETENCIES**

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**Dissertation (article format) submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Master in Research Psychology at the North-West University, Potchefstroom
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PERMISSION TO SUBMIT ARTICLE FOR EXAMINATION PURPOSES

We, the supervisors, hereby declare that the input and effort of Ishmael Magare in writing this article reflects original research he conducted on this topic. We hereby grant permission for him to submit this article for examination purposes in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts in Research Psychology.

Signed on this day at the North-West University.

.....

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Supervisor

.....

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Notes on referencing

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Book

Freire P 1995. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Journal article

Matome BM 1998. Reconceptualising teaching models in teacher education. *Perspectives in Education*, 17(2), 13-37.

Contribution to multi-author work

Bellew RT & King EM 1993. Educating women: lessons from experience. In King, EM & Hill, MA. (eds). *Women's education in developing countries: Barriers, benefits and policies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Unpublished works

Matsapa JK 1981. Wastage in Lesotho education system. Unpublished doctoral thesis (PhD). Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Conference papers

Makau BM 1994. Review of significant statistics on education of girls and women in Kenya. Article presented at a *National Symposium on Education of Girls*, Garden Hotel, Machaka, Kenya.

Articles and reports in news articles and magazines

Rees S 1996. End the rhetoric: we need efficiency. *Sunday Times*, January 14, 32-33.

Government documents.

National Department of Education. 1997. Human and social sciences illustrative learning programme. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Personal communication

Jansen JD 2001. Information given to S Berkhout during a personal communication.

Electronic references

No author:

Managing seizures at school. 2001. [Online]. Available url:

<http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org/answerplace/teachers/managing.html>. Accessed 2 May, 2001.

Violence and discipline problems in U.S. schools: 1996-97. 1998. [Online]. Available url: <http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubs98/violence/98030001.html>. Accessed 3 June 2000.

Published under author's name:

Riak J 1999. *What the experts say about spanking*. [Online]. Available url:

<http://zipmail.com/moms-experts.html>. Accessed 6 August 2000.

Burbach H 2000. *Violence and the public schools*. [Online]. Available url:

<http://www.people.Virginia.EDU/rkb3b/Hal/SchoolViolence.html>. Accessed 4 March 2001.

Method of citation

For a direct quotation in the text of one or two lines use double-inverted commas. The author's name(s), the date of publication and the page reference must be included e.g.

and know, we used Nigel Hall's ideas and suggestions about ways to get children to "write with their own voices" (Robinson *et al.*, 1990, 11).

Do not italicise quotations

Quotations exceeding two lines should be indented, with no inverted commas, e.g. According to Freire (1970) this phenomenon, which is preceded by conquest, occurs when

the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group; in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression (150).

Quotations in a language other than English must be *italicised* in the text, without quotation marks.

For quotations not referring to a specific author, use single inverted commas e.g. All students are expected to 'burn the midnight oil' during exam time.

Tables and figures

Each **figure** (graph, line drawing, etc.) should be an original of good quality (not photocopies). Clear, dark lines are required (**no fill or grey shading may be used**), as well as lettering of good type quality. The lettering must be large enough to withstand the same reduction as the drawing itself. **Tables** and **figures** should be numbered consecutively and be accompanied by a brief descriptive heading/caption. Each table/figure must be referred to in the text. Tables/figures are usually positioned after the first paragraph in which they are mentioned.

Indication of level of significance and effect size

Table 1: ANOVAS for Total Group with Difference Scores on Subscales, and Mathematics as dependent variables, and Grade, Group, and Sex as Main Factors and Interactions of Grade.Group, Grade.Sex and Group.Sex (n = 427)

Source of variance	F ratio by score, effect size (d) in brackets for significant values						
	Study Attitude	Mathematics Anxiety	Study Habits	Problem Solving Behavior	Study Environment	Information Processing	Mathematics
Grade	3.39	0.43	0.50	0.26	0.06		0.00
Group	3.26	2.64	1.27	0.03	0.21	0.49	12.21** (0.03)
Grade.Group	1.67	0.74	0.91	0.06	0.28		0.00
Gender	1.45	3.58	0.72	0.19	4.16* (0.01)	0.04	1.74
Grade.Gender	2.42	2.81	0.00	0.17	1.60		4.13* (0.01)
Group.Gender	0.03	0.28	1.22	0.10	0.30	1.06	1.43
Shapiro-Wilk test p-values	0.64	0.05	0.25	0.19	0.05*	0.23	.39

* p.05
 ** p.01
 () d < 0.2 (small effect)

Table 2: Contingency table representing parental status of expectant fathers and population group (p-values for χ^2)

* $p < 0.05$
 ** $w < 0.3$ (small effect)

Special note on effect sizes

In line with APA guidelines, *PiE* insists that effect sizes be reported in addition to p-values.

Special note on confidence intervals

The APA manual (2001, 22) states that confidence intervals are "in general, the best reporting strategy". Below the interested reader will find a table which exemplifies one way in which to report confidence intervals.

Table 3: Paired (two-sided) t-test comparisons between managers' (self score) scores and observers (subordinates) scores (n = 134)

Variable	M	SD	SE	T	P (Effect size (d))	95% confidence interval of the difference brackets
						Lower Upper
Self	49.035	5.201	0.449			48.146 49.924
Obs	44.689	5.788	0.500			43.700 45.678
Difference (effect size)	4.346	7.334	7.57	6.86	<0.001* (0.574**)	3.092 5.599

p < 0.05

** : Medium effect size

Please note:

The names of all co-authors of a particular work should be provided in an initial textual reference. Thereafter *et al.* can be used. In the case of more than three authors, the first author's name and *et al.* is used in the first reference.

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Do not use footnotes. Use endnotes only (**not more than five** endnotes per article).

Direct quotations: Use the following style:

"... the ostensible thrust of the civilising mission was to remake Africans in the European image" (De Kock, 1996, 3). (Use the period at the end of 'image' only if the original quotation contains a period.)

"... within every 'knower' by his own efforts" (Department of Education and Science, 1976, 49-50). (Omit the period only if the original sentence does not contain a period after the word "efforts".)

Please note that the editors will not be able to accept for publication final versions of articles that do not comply with the above conditions.

EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSIVE LEARNING CONTEXTS: AN EXPLORATION OF COMPETENCIES

SUMMARY

The successful implementation of an inclusive education system relies heavily on educators, since they engage daily in reciprocal interactions with learners. The implementation of an inclusive education system in South Africa was part of the educational reforms that occurred after 1994. Inclusive education promotes the full personal, academic and proficient development of all learners and is based on values such as human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedom. Although most educators were only trained for either mainstream education or specialised education, they now had to cope not only with the diverse challenges posed by individual learner barriers, but also with broader systemic issues such as non-protective legislation and policy, cultural prejudice, inaccessible and unsafely built infrastructure, and lack of parental involvement. The complexity of the interactive relationships between different systems such as learners, educators, families, schools and the learning context were recognised and therefore the ecosystemic perspective was applied.

The purpose of the research was to explore the experiences of educators in ordinary schools regarding the challenges involved in inclusive learning contexts, and to identify the competencies that they apply to deal with some of these challenges. A qualitative research design was chosen, using a case study to obtain an in-depth understanding of educators' experiences in a specific context. The study was conducted in the North-West province at Klerksdorp Secondary School. The school is characterised by its cultural diversity among educators and learners. Various contextual and microsystemic barriers that threatened an enabling learning environment were observed. Seven educators, one male and six female, participated in the research after ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the

University, the Department of Education, the Head of the school as well as the individual participants. Participants were involved in the research through purposive sampling. Three methods of gathering data were used in this research, namely written assignments that were completed by the participants; in-depth follow-up interviews and a focus group with all the participants. Thematic content analysis was used to identify themes and subthemes in the educators' descriptions of their experiences.

The findings indicated that educators demonstrated competencies that enabled them to support learners and initiate and form collaborative relationships in an inclusive learning environment. The competencies associated with supporting learners included unconditional acceptance, focussed observations, adaptation and flexibility and motivating and encouraging learners to achieve. The competencies associated with the initiation and forming of collaborative relationships included involving parents in the learning process and forming collaborative relationships with colleagues. The findings clearly indicated that although educators had not received formal training in dealing with learners challenged with barriers to learning, they intuitively explored various ways of co-creating enabling learning contexts. Various implications for the Department of Education and school management teams are suggested. The Department of Education's training policy should acknowledge teachers' existing competencies. Educators should form part of advisory committees that could advise the Department of Education about the development of inclusive learning contexts. School management teams and institutional support teams could emphasise collective planning for inclusion so that educators' expertise is explored and further developed.

Key words: Barriers to learning, competencies in inclusive education, deficit-based approach, asset-based approach

**OPVOEDERS SE ERVARINGS VAN INKLUSIEWE LEERKONTEKSTE: 'N
ONDERSOEK NA BEVOEGDHEDE**

OPSOMMING

Die geslaagde implementering van 'n inklusiewe onderwysstelsel steun swaar op opvoeders, omdat hulle daaglik betrokke is in wederkerige interaksies met leerders. Die implementering van 'n inklusiewe onderwysstelsel in Suid-Afrika was deel van die opvoedkundige hervormings wat na 1994 plaasgevind het. Inklusiewe onderwys bevorder die volle persoonlike, akademiese en vaardigheidsontwikkeling van alle leerders en berus op waardes soos menswaardigheid, die bereiking van gelykheid en die bevordering van menseregte en vryheid. Alhoewel die meeste opvoeders slegs opgelei is vir óf hoofstroomonderwys óf gespesialiseerde onderwys, moes hulle nou die diverse uitdagings hanteer van individuele leerders se leerhindernisse, maar ook van breër sistemiese kwessies, soos nie-beskermende wetgewing en beleid, kulturele vooroordeel, ontoeganklikheid en onveilig geboude infrastruktuur, en 'n gebrek aan ouerbetrokkenheid. Die kompleksiteit van die interaktiewe verhoudings tussen verskillende sisteme soos leerders, opvoeders, gesinne, skole en die leerkonteks is erken en daarom is die ekosistemiese perspektief toegepas.

Die doel van die navorsing was om die ervarings te ondersoek wat opvoeders in gewone skole het rakende die uitdagings wat geassosieer word met inklusiewe leerkontekste, en om die bevoegdhele te identifiseer wat hulle toepas om sommige van hierdie uitdagings te hanteer. 'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsontwerp is gekies, en 'n gevallestudie is gebruik om tot 'n indiepte begrip van opvoeders se ervarings in 'n spesifieke konteks te kom. Die studie is gedoen in die Noordwes-provinsie, by Klerksdorp Secondary School. Die skool word gekenmerk deur kulturele diversiteit onder opvoeders en leerders. Verskeie kontekstuele en mikrosistemiese struikelblokke wat 'n bedreiging was vir 'n instaatstellende leeromgewing is waargeneem. Sewe opvoeders, waarvan een manlik en ses vroulik was, het deelgeneem aan die navorsing nadat etiese goedkeuring verkry is van die

Etiekkomitee van die Universiteit, die Departement van Onderwys, die skoolhoof sowel as die individuele deelnemers. Deelnemers was deur middel van doelgerigte steekproefneming betrek in die navorsing. Drie metodes van data-insameling is gebruik in hierdie navorsing, naamlik geskrewe opdragte wat voltooi is deur die deelnemers; indiepte opvolg-onderhoude; en 'n fokusgroep met al die deelnemers. Tematiese inhoudsanalise is gebruik om temas en subtemas te identifiseer in die opvoeders se beskrywings van hulle ervarings.

Die bevindings het aangetoon dat onderwysers bevoegdhede gedemonstreer het wat hulle in staat gestel het om leerders te ondersteun en om samewerkingsverhoudings te inisieer en te vorm in 'n inklusiewe leeromgewing. Die bevoegdhede wat geassosieer word met leerderondersteuning was onder andere onvoorwaardelike aanvaarding, gefokusde waarnemings, aanpassing en buigzaamheid, en die motivering en aanmoediging van leerders om te presteer. Die bevoegdhede wat geassosieer is met die inisiëring en vorming van samewerkingsverhoudings het onder andere behels om ouers te betrek by die leerproses en om samewerkingsverhoudings te vorm met kollegas. Die bevindinge het duidelik getoon dat alhoewel opvoeders nie formeel opgelei is om te werk met leerders met leerhindernisse nie, hulle intuïtief maniere ondersoek het om saam te werk aan die skepping van instaatstellende leerkontekste. Verskeie implikasies vir die Departement van Onderwys en skoolbestuurspanne word voorgestel. Die Departement van Onderwys se opleidingsbeleid behoort onderwysers se bestaande bevoegdhede te erken. Opvoeders behoort deel uit te maak van advieskomitees wat die Departement van Onderwys sou kon adviseer oor die ontwikkeling van inklusiewe leerkontekste. Skoolbestuurspanne en institusionele ondersteuningspanne kan kollektiewe beplanning beklemtoon vir insluiting sodat opvoeders se kundigheid ontgin en verder ontwikkel kan word.

Sleutelwoorde: Leerhindernisse, bevoegdhede ten opsigte van inklusiewe onderwys, laste-gebaseerde benadering, bate-gebaseerde benadering.

MANUSCRIPT FOR EXAMINATION PURPOSES

**EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSIVE LEARNING CONTEXTS: AN
EXPLORATION OF COMPETENCIES**

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EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSIVE LEARNING CONTEXTS: AN EXPLORATION OF COMPETENCIES

ABSTRACT

The successful implementation of inclusive education relies heavily on educators. Inclusive education is based on values such as human dignity, equality, human rights and freedom. The complexity of the interactive relationships between different systems such as learners, educators, families, schools and the learning context were recognised and therefore the ecosystemic perspective was applied. The purpose of the research was to explore the experiences of educators in ordinary schools regarding the challenges involved in inclusive learning contexts, and to identify the competencies that they apply to deal with some of these challenges. A qualitative research design was chosen, using a case study. The study was conducted in the North-West province at Klerksdorp Secondary School. Various contextual and microsystemic barriers that threatened an enabling learning environment were observed. Seven educators, one male and six female were purposively selected. Three methods of gathering data were used in this research, namely written assignments, in-depth follow-up interviews and a focus group. Thematic content analysis was used to identify themes and subthemes. The findings indicated that educators demonstrated competencies that enabled them to support learners and initiate and form collaborative relationships in an inclusive learning environment. Various implications for the Department of Education and schools management teams are suggested.

Key words: Barriers to learning, competencies in inclusive education, deficit-based approach, asset-based approach

Introduction

The implementation of an inclusive education system in South Africa was part of the significant educational reforms that occurred after the democratic elections of 1994. The movement towards an inclusive education system has been informed by the outcomes of the Salamanca Conference held in Spain in 1992 (UNESCO, 1994; 2006). The reforms required that all learners should be given the fundamental right to basic education, consequently addressing the imbalances of the past by focusing on the key issues of access, equity and redress (Department of Education, 2001; Engelbrecht, Green & Naicker, 1999). The values guiding these reforms include human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedom. Inclusive education promotes the full personal, academic and proficient development of all learners, notwithstanding their strengths in any area of development (The National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training [NCSNET] and National Committee for Education Support Services [NCESS], 1997).

The successful implementation of an inclusive education system relies to a large extent on the educators, since they engage in direct relationships with learners on a daily basis (Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff & Pettipher, 2002). According to Muthukrishna and Sader (2004), the focus in the implementation of inclusive education should be on the development of enabling education structures, systems and learning methodologies that meet the needs of all the learners. The inclusive education discourse furthermore focuses on a critical appraisal of issues of school organisation and classroom practice, and particularly on the ways in which educators can be more inclusive in their educating approach (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart & Eloff, 2003). The way in which educators construct the learning context thus impacts directly on facilitating the inclusion of all learners within an inclusive education system.

An inclusive education system reflects a society in which all individuals have the right to an equal and full citizenship, irrespective of class, disabilities, race, gender, learning styles and other differences (Department of Education, 2001; Engelbrecht et al., 1999; Rustemier, 2002). The implementation of inclusive education in South Africa implied that all learning contexts became inclusive ones that ensure access to all learners. In these contexts all educators should be able to provide quality education to all learners. In the dispensation prior to 1994, educators were only trained for either mainstream education or specialised education. Educators in ordinary schools thus assumed that they did not have the capacity to deal with the barriers associated with inclusive education (Forlin, 2001a; Forlin, Hattie & Douglas, 1996) since they did not receive sufficient training to support learners who experience barriers to learning (Swart et al., 2002). Barriers to learning include mild to moderate learning difficulties in reading, written language and mathematics, speech, language and communication difficulties. It also includes individual needs of learners with developmental delays and physical, neurological and psycho-neurological and sensory impairments. Barriers to learning also imply the social and community dynamics which either support or hinder the teaching and learning process. This include non-protective legislation and policy, socioeconomic barriers, cultural prejudice that does not value learning and education, the physical environment such as inaccessible and unsafely built infrastructure, as well as inappropriate and inadequate provision of support services, and lack of parental involvement and recognition (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Department of Education Directorate: Inclusive Education, 2003; Department of Education, 2001; Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001).

The ecosystemic perspective recognises the interactive relationships between different systems such as learners with special needs, educators, families, schools and the learning context (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002; Hay, 2003). The reciprocal nature of the systems implies that educators with competencies such

as commitment, awareness of the self and others, effective communication, collaboration, effective management of relationships and good facilitation abilities could promote a relational learning environment in which learners with special needs may pursue their goals, thereby contributing to their physical and emotional well-being (Hamill, Jantzen & Bargerhuff, 1999; Hines, 2008; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Roos & Temane, 2007). Competent educators are an integral part of the co-created processes and social structures that enable engagement in and outside the inclusive learning environment (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2008; Hines, 2008; Roos & Temane, 2007). However, educators often stigmatise and stereotype themselves as lacking in competence (Rapmund & Moore, 2002). They view themselves as the objects of policies, rather than as active participants in the co-creation of solutions. Systemic barriers such as the lack of training and the limited support provided by the Department of Education through its support structures such as the Education Support Services (ESS) also limit the inclusive learning environment (Hay, 2003).

Nonetheless, educators are coping with the diverse challenges posed by the implementation of inclusive education despite not being trained in the implementation of inclusive education. This begs the question: how do educators experience these challenges and what competencies do they have to be able to deal with the facilitation of an enabling learning environment? The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of educators in ordinary schools regarding the challenges involved in inclusive learning contexts and to identify the competencies that they apply to deal with some of the challenges.

Research method

Qualitative research was used in this study to make sense of the experiences of educators regarding their involvement with inclusive learning environments. An in-depth exploration of educators' experiences of inclusive learning contexts was

considered suitable to provide insight into the subjective experiences of educators in their context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Research design

The case study methodology was selected for its detailed and intensive nature that allowed the educators' experiences to be studied in a specific context (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Through this method it is possible to explore the experiences of educators in an inclusive learning context from a multiplicity of perspectives, generating an in-depth understanding of inclusive learning experiences. In this way, the researcher may connect closely with the phenomenon and see connections between educators' experiences (Fouche, 2002; Lewis, 2003; Smith & Eatough, 2007).

Research context and participants

The study was conducted in the North-West province at Klerksdorp Secondary School. Klerksdorp Secondary School was predominantly an Indian school before the South African democratic elections of 1994. At present the school serves a catchment area populated primarily by black (Tswana-speaking) and Coloured communities. The school has over one thousand learners aged between six and seventeen years old with an average class size of 45 learners. Many of the black learners come from the lower income bracket of the community. Most learners come with no preschool exposure. The Coloured learners constitute about a quarter of the whole school. Many learners have to walk long distances to the school through all weather conditions as they cannot afford to pay for transport. As such, they reach school already tired and sometimes very cold. The area is hard hit by the HIV/AIDS scourge and many learners survive on government grants as they are either orphans

or have to care for their sickly parents. School attendance sometimes suffers as a result of the contextual and personal challenges.

Most educators struggle to communicate in Setswana, which is widely spoken in the area; and the learners are often not conversant in English. Educators complain of substance and alcohol abuse among some learners. The school has a total of twenty-five educators in all. It has classrooms conducive to learning, an administration block, kitchen and library, and clean and orderly playgrounds. The networks of roads around the premises are mostly tarred. The school is equipped with telecommunication facilities such as telephones, fax and internet, and a few computers.

Seven educators, one male and six female, participated in the research. Their ages varied from 20 to 48 years with a mix of qualifications and experience. The older educators mostly had diplomas which they had obtained through distance education, while the younger educators had university degrees and less experience - their experience ranged between two and seventeen years. The educators represented a mix of the Indian, Black and Coloured communities. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and, following Neuman and Kreuger (2003), Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003) and Strydom and Delport (2007), were selected because of their ability to enrich the research with their specific experiences. The following selection criteria were used:

- None of the educators should have received any prior training for barriers to learning / Education for Learners with Special Education Needs (ELSEN).
- All the participants should be educators actively involved in learning contexts that included learners with barriers to learning.
- The chosen learning environments should consist of races that are representative of the South African population, namely Black, Coloured and Indian people.

- The participants should be qualified educators with a minimum qualification being a diploma in education and the highest being a Bachelor of Education Honours.

Procedure

The researcher obtained permission to undertake the study from the Ethical Committee of the University (ethical clearance number 05K14). This was followed by a visit to Klerksdorp Secondary School where the principal and the education manager for the North-West Province also gave their permission. The researcher visited the school to familiarise himself with the environment, and a meeting was scheduled with the educators to explain and clarify the aim of the study and ethical considerations before the research commenced. The seven educators were purposively selected to participate in the research. After each phase of the interviews the participants discussed the verbatim transcription to make sure that nothing was added or omitted to their accounts.

Data gathering

Three methods of gathering data were used in this research, namely written assignments that were completed by the participants; in-depth follow-up interviews; and a focus group with all the participants. These methods of data gathering resulted in three discrete but interrelated sets of data.

Written assignments

The following question was formulated for the written assignment: *Please think of a situation in your career where you had to deal with a learner who experienced any form of barriers to learning and describe how you dealt with it.* This written assignment aimed to raise self-awareness and provide educators with the opportunity to reflect about their own subjective experiences on an individual and

private level, and generate momentum for creative thoughts from the participants. This created a platform for them to begin to focus on the emotional competencies which they applied on a personal and interpersonal level (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

In-depth interviews

The in-depth interviews were used to provide an understanding of the educators' experiences through descriptions, explanations and evaluations; and it allowed the researcher to probe and explore the meanings the educators attached to their experiences in inclusive learning contexts. The range of probing enabled the researcher to achieve depth of responses in terms of the feelings, opinions and beliefs that the educators attributed to their experiences, and directed them to explore some thoughts that they had never questioned before (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003; Ritchie, 2003). Probing questions included the following:

- In terms of inclusive education, what are your personal strengths as a teacher regarding the implementation of the policy on inclusion?
- What do you consider to be your strengths within an inclusive setting framework?
- What are the things you have done better?
- Pick a specific situation or learner experiencing barriers to learning and explain the process that you went through in helping that particular child. What intervention methods do you use for such learners?
- What internal drive keeps you going?

Focus group discussions

Focus group interviews were included because of their ability to generate data as the educators interacted freely to share their views and experiences and had the opportunity to hear others' experiences (Finch & Lewis, 2003). In responding to each

other's stories, educators revealed more of their experiences to other participants. This enabled them to consider their own experiences further by asking questions and seeking clarity. The setting provided them with a social context in which to explore how other educators thought about the phenomenon (Ritchie, 2003), shape their ideas, and see how these are moderated and generated by others. The following question was asked to initiate discussions in the focus group:

The government has introduced inclusive education into the formal system. Hence many educators have not been trained to handle learners with learning barriers yet find them in their classrooms. However, you are not sitting back. Something is being done to handle the situation. So I would like to hear from you: what are your different perceptions regarding this?

The research questions that were used for the written assignments and the focus groups were developed to understand the competencies of educators in dealing with barriers to learning in an inclusive learning context, and to explore what these competencies meant to them (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions directed the researcher's attention to a meaningful and narrower portion of the educators' experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Data analysis

During the data analysis the researcher identified the common themes in the educators' descriptions of their experiences and analysed the written descriptions, the transcribed notes from the individual and focus group interviews. This was done with a view to exploring the descriptions of how the participant educators dealt with barriers to learning in inclusive contexts (Creswell, 1998; De Vos, 2002). This process involved examining the texts for the presence of themes (Charmaz, 2003); bearing in mind that a single text may contain a number of themes and a particular passage may reflect more than one theme (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The identified

themes were then grouped into categories that reflected the various contextual competencies. The researcher used the various meanings identified to develop an overall description of the phenomenon as the educators typically experienced it (Charmaz, 2003; De Vos, 2002).

Table 1: An illustration of the descriptive data analysis procedures

Steps	Process
Identify statements related to the topic	The researcher separated relevant from irrelevant information in the interviews and then broke the relevant information into small segments that reflected specific experiences.
Group statements into meaningful units	The researcher grouped the segments into categories that reflected the various experiences of inclusive learning contexts as they were experienced by the educators.
Seek divergent perspectives	The researcher considered the different ways in which different educators experienced inclusive learning contexts for barriers to learning.
Construct the composite	The researcher merged the various meanings identified from all the different types of data and developed an overall description of experiences of inclusive learning contexts as the educators typically experienced them.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, Guba's (cited in Shenton, 2003) propositions were used, which include credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability.

Table 2: Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness

Strategy	Criteria	Application
Credibility	Field work. The researcher obtained data from the participants by prolonged engagement in their work environment	Educators were visited in the school context to establish trust and rapport. Informal visits during and after the interviews allowed the researcher to spend sufficient time with the research participants to understand their reality.
	Authority of the researchers	Researchers are qualified psychologists who have training in qualitative research methodologies, have knowledge of courses in Special Needs Education, Remedial Education, a Certificate in Internship for Registered Counsellors and other relevant experience.
	Interviewing process	The researcher reframed and repeated questions to elicit full descriptions of participants' experiences as far as possible.
	Member checking	The interviews were sent to participants for comments and confirmation of the findings.
	Peer examination	The findings and discussions were subjected to various discussions.
	Selection of sample	Purposive sampling was used to recruit the

Transferability		participants.
	Dense description	Descriptions of methods, data gathering and analysis were presented in a comprehensive report. The findings were supported with direct quotes from the participants.
Dependability	Audit trail	All records of the phases of the interviews were filed and the procedure was described in detail.
	Dense description	Full description of research methodologies allows for the replication of the study.
Confirmability	Audit trail	Full description of research methodologies allows for the replication of the study.
	Triangulation	A literature survey was conducted where similar studies in the field of psychology and inclusive education were presented. This formed the basis for comparing and contrasting the findings. The written interviews, in-depth interviews and focus group interviews increased the study's authenticity, added depth to the data under investigation and complemented one another.

Ethical aspects

This study is part of a larger study entitled “An exploration of enabling contexts” for which permission to undertake the study was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the University (ethical clearance number 05K14).

This study also adheres to ethical principles set out by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2002). The participants were informed about the purpose of the research, expected duration, and procedures, their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun. They were also told of any prospective research benefits, limits to confidentiality, whom to contact for questions about the research and their rights as research participants. The researcher provided an opportunity for the participants to ask questions and receive answers. The researcher obtained written informed consent from research participants prior to making recordings.

Integrated discussion of findings

The findings indicated that educators demonstrated competencies that enabled them to support learners and initiate and form collaborative relationships in an inclusive learning environment. The competencies associated with supporting learners included unconditional acceptance, focussed observations, adaptability and flexibility, and motivating and encouraging learners to achieve. The competencies associated with the initiation and formation of collaborative relationships included involving parents in the learning process and forming collaborative relationships with colleagues in the school as well as in the district. A visual presentation of the findings is presented in table 3.

Table 3: An overview of the major themes and categories of educators' experiences of inclusive learning contexts.

Main themes	Sub-themes
Supporting learners	Unconditional acceptance
	Focussed observations
	Adaptability and flexibility
	Motivating and encouraging
Collaborative relationships with parents and colleagues	Involving parents
	Supporting collegial relations

Supporting learners

Supporting learners implies emotional nurturing, building positive relationships, communicating openly and in a trustful manner, with the right attitude. It further includes forming emotional attachments that are dependable, reliable and encouraging.

Unconditional acceptance

Unconditional acceptance implies that learners are not accepted solely for what they are capable of doing or what they can offer; rather, educators expressed love and acceptance naturally and unconditionally. One educator described it as follows: *"Your child is your child regardless of any negative attributes. One does not give his own child love because he does something positive"*. This statement implies that this educator simply accepted learners with barriers to learning, although recognising their differences. This is clearly illustrated in the following quote: *"I am too much of a mother than a teacher. I just become a mother, and then the teacher part of me comes later"*.

The educators ensured that they took time to get to know the learners and their abilities, but more importantly, they took time to build trusting relationships with the learners to boost their confidence. One educator said the following: *"Once I get a*

class, the first two to three weeks, I will know all of them as I become intimate with them. I do have that motherly connection, so whenever they have a problem they always come to me”, and another added: “There seems to be a lot of trust, openness; and communication goes to a deeper level where children freely share with you how they feel”.

The educators who interacted with learners in this manner conveyed total and unconditional acceptance for learners that was not related to the learners’ personal qualities, beliefs, problems or situations. This finding is also widely supported in the literature (e.g., Engelbrecht & Forlin, 1998; James & Gilliland, 2005). The educators reported that they did not require learners to make specific responses as a condition for acceptance. According to James and Gilliland (2005), if educators demonstrate caring and appreciation for the learners, regardless of their difficulties or circumstances, the learners will more likely accept and respect them.

Another competency that emerged is that educators considered the psychological and social contexts in which learners learn, and designed friendly and accessible contexts to accommodate learners’ diversities. For example, one educator indicated: *“You cannot ignore them [the learners]. You work with them to make them function at a special level, by focusing on life skills, working in a group setting, taking up responsibilities and delegating them, for example, class monitor of the week and so forth”.* Educators intentionally adjusted the learning context to provide learners with space and time to engage in the learning challenges. This became clear in the following: *“I plan, move at the learners level, and break down topics into very small units. In that way you find that I achieve 80% pass rate under most circumstances, as the learners operate at their level. I also put up extra lessons and try as much as I can to help these learners”.*

These educators fostered acceptance, tolerance and caring in all learners, a finding echoed by Engelbrecht et al. (1999). This approach seems to create and

maintain an atmosphere that nurtures the personal, cognitive and social development of the diverse learners under their care (Donald et al., 2002).

Focused observations

Focused observations means that educators take special notice of learners who are experiencing learning barriers, and identify and gather information to plan appropriate interventions for enhancing the optimal learning environment. This information could either be used for placement purposes or to determine the current level of functioning so that appropriate instructional materials are prepared.

The educators applied holistic assessment approaches after intensive observations of learners' achievements and their progress to set the direction for ongoing teaching and learning. One educator said: *"Sometimes I observe that there is anger in them. When you talk about something they just become angry. They become so aggressive. I make follow-ups, and do some checks"*. The educators pointed out that they *"observe all what goes around, use it to create a child profile based on the strengths and weaknesses and later utilise the information"*. Another confirmed this: *"knowing the learner's background a little more, the state of mind, the benefits and the culture"*.

The above findings clearly indicate that using assessment procedures influences an educator's decisions to facilitate optimal learning and instruction and outcomes for barriers to learning. This is supported in the literature (Engelbrecht et al., 1999; The Centre for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2007). Observations promote efficient and effective feedback for educators and promote their professionalism (Farrant, 1994). Consistent and well-planned observations in inclusive educational settings are a motivating milestone for addressing barriers to learning as they enable educators to measure their progress and develop realistic judgements of their capabilities, needs, and achievement levels, interests and self-reflection (Engelbrecht et al., 1999; Department of National Education [DNE], 1998).

This provides educators with information about learners' emotional challenges in inclusive settings (Engelbrecht et al., 1999; Mwamwenda, 2004), as well as knowledge of learners' backgrounds and emotional needs, all of which are needed to enable educators to assist them.

Adaptability and flexibility

Adaptability and flexibility refer to educators' ability to adapt their plans to the benefit of learners. This implies sensitivity to the needs of learners who experience barriers to learning.

Adaptability and flexibility are demonstrated in a variety of ways. Educators in inclusive learning contexts adapt their instruction by simplifying the learning material to match the cognitive level of the learners, taking into consideration the learning characteristics of individual learners with barriers to learning. They thus adapt the learning context of the classroom to accommodate those learners. They use their professional judgement to adapt the curriculum to suit individual needs. Based on their knowledge, educators may also devise some means to determine exactly what each learner needs and select learning activities suitable for their level. For instance, one participant noted: *"I plan, move at the learners' level, and break down topics into very small units"*.

The participant educators also adjusted their methodological approach. One educator said that: *"I use the three approaches to teaching, namely, concrete – using real objects, semi-concrete, drawing the pictures of those objects to the abstract, learners writing and reading sentences matched to the pictures"*. This meant that educators are able to use their judgement in the selection of teaching methods as a way of accommodating a diversity of learning styles.

There are many methods which can be of benefit to learners with barriers to learning. Farrant (1994) describes a method whereby the educator divides the learning content to accommodate the diverse abilities of learners. Some educators

indicate that they slow down and emphasise the specific skill they want the learners to achieve (Engelbrecht, Green, Swart & Muthukrishna, 2001). Instead of providing learners with a large amount of information, the work is reduced to small achievable units. This manageable workload is increased as the learners master the skills required. An example of this approach is reflected in the following participant's words: *"Instead of doing five sums, I emphasise the skill that I want them to learn"*. Another said: *"I also change the teaching approach if the method I brought is not working"*. This finding is also supported in the literature, namely, that breaking work into small units with a focus on a specific skill can highly benefit slow learners (Gage & Berliner, 1992).

Engelbrecht et al. (1999) emphasise that instruction for learners should proceed from oral to written instructions, and proceed from using pictures to words, and then to using words in context. Educators' ability to assist learners in different ways of instructing indicates a flexible approach in dealing with barriers to learning as they realise that one form of instruction does not cater for the learning requirements of all the different learners (Donald et al., 2002; Hamill et al., 1999).

Motivating and encouraging learners

Motivating learners refers to building and sustaining learners' interest and their will to achieve. It means praising and rewarding the desired learning behaviours to facilitate sustainable behaviour. One educator said: *"I identify strength areas through interviews and guide learners to follow their passion"*. Another confirmed this: *"Talking to them, getting to know them is more like you are motivating. Counselling gives a sense of openness, of trust of being able to talk to me, not only as a teacher, but as a sister, a parent. I give them some sort of assurance and hope."* One educator maintained that: *"Children, especially the slow learners, need lots of love and lots of praise. Any achievement even if it is not that big needs to be reinforced. By so doing you encourage them to engage in their learning actively and feel as*

valued members of the class". The data revealed that the participants used appropriate motivational techniques. They created supportive learning environments to set realistic expectations regarding the behaviour of learners who experience barriers to learning. Realistic expectations presented the learners with a sense of success and the urge for more. One educator suggested "*starting with basic things*."

Successful educators build small success into every possible activity and reinforce it with efforts that indicate to learners how they are progressing. Social rewards such as being the class monitor of the week (Donald et al., 2002), complemented with positive educator attitude such as recognition, helps learners with learning barriers to develop self-control, self-esteem, coping and positive interactions with the significant others (Engelbrecht et al., 1999). The inclusion of each learner individually, and making accommodations for each one's temperament, personality, resources and interests have equally motivational and supportive benefits in inclusive learning contexts (The Centre for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2007). Motivation in this regard is an enhancement or an urge that causes a learner to engage in learning more actively (Gage & Berliner, 1992; Mwamwenda, 2004).

Collaborative relationships with parents and colleagues

Collaborative relationships are those that emphasise collective partnership, such as involving parents, fostering supportive relationships, and consulting colleagues.

Involving parents

Involving parents means recognising that parents are the most important source of support for and information about their children. They may provide comprehensive information on the children's social and emotional well-being as well as their learning styles (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, Kitching & Eloff, 2005; Hodge & Runswick-Cole,

2008). Parental involvement plays a major role in the education of learners with barriers to learning. One educator said that: *“For those parents who turn up when we call them, we share with them where they could help their children. I encourage parents to communicate with learners in English, to do a lot of reading in English for learners whose communication is backward”*. Another educator pointed out: *“As an educator, one cannot achieve much without the full cooperation of the parents. It does not work if you do not have further reinforcements from home. I encourage parents to read stories to their children”*.

Educators in inclusive classrooms have a responsibility to initiate the development of parent-educator partnership to facilitate collaborative decision making. One educator remarked that: *“We call in the parents, and [they] know who lives with whom. We speak to them and let them know the problem of the child and how they could help the child, for example attitude change, school performance, etc”*.

As a way of engaging parents, educators visit homes when they deal with learners experiencing barriers to learning: *“Sometimes I go to parents’ houses. I realise some are orphans, they stay with grandparents, and they are divorced. I have to be aware of such things - different things and different situations”*. Through home visits the participant educators learnt many things that gave them insight into how to deal with individual learners. International research points out that constructive involvement of parents in the life of the school has great benefits for the educators, the learners, the parents, and their mutual relationships (Donald et al., 2002; Yang & Shin, 2008). Educators need to draw on the knowledge of the parent or family as they are closely involved with the child (Donald et al., 2002).

Research by Engelbrecht et al. (1999) indicates that a partnership between educators and parents can provide educators with a realistic expectation of what to expect from learners and the level of support that the family can offer. In this regard, the White Paper on Education (Department of Education, 2001) states that the driving force of the advocacy campaign for the introduction of inclusive education in

South Africa targeted parents as a crucial form of support. This encourages continued communication with parents where information is shared and discussed through School Governing Bodies (SGBs), Parents Teachers Associations (PTAs), newsletters and other forms of structures (Engelbrecht et al., 1999).

The home, peer group, community and school have an influence on the growth and development of learners in relation to their continuum of development (Donald et al., 2002). For such reasons it is imperative that educators involve parents to discuss joint educational goals concerning learning barriers. Successful interaction with parents demands a variety of skills and qualities such as confidence, trustworthiness, empathy, sensitivity and honesty (James & Gilliland, 2005). Different documents like the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 2006) and the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) emphasise the importance of parental involvement in the education of their children, and therefore should be part of the decision-making process.

Supportive collegial relations

Supportive collegial relations imply that educators do not work alone. Rather, they ask for advice and interact with colleagues. This may be done through planning together, team teaching, peer teaching and coaching and directing small group instructions (Forlin, 2001b). The supportive collaboration environment does not only apply to the immediate learning context. Educators may also refer to outside collaboration such as the Department of Education or community members.

The results indicated that the participant educators take an active role by cooperating and building positive relationships with colleagues and other professionals in educating learners with barriers to learning. In accordance with Grangeat and Gray (2008), the participants found that positive relationships and supportive interactions created good working environments within their practice.

Supportive relations also refer to support received from other specialised professionals or personnel such as counsellors, psychologists, social workers, and learner support staff (Hamill et al., 1999). Hall, Campher, Smit, Oswald and Engelbrecht (2004) add that the development of supportive relationships among educators contributes to the sharing of expertise and the accommodation of the diverse needs of all learners in inclusive education contexts.

Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005) add that the power of collaboration lies in the capacity of merging unique skills, which could enhance educator's capacity to promote the personal, relational and collective well-being of learners with barriers to learning. One educator noted: *"In teaching a new group, I liaise with the previous [educator] and use the record available to inform my planning. Discussing their problems and programmes with other [educators] and [learners], whoever they trust, or someone else they know can help and peer groups. I also utilise the [learners] to explain instruction [and] in carrying out the tasks assigned"*. Another said: *"Sometimes I even seek help from other teachers to assist me, if I find that I am not making any progress"*. One educator stated: *"What we always do - not me individually. I have to meet the H.O.D., principal and other teachers who are teaching that learner; for example, a learner with a reading problem, an English teacher comes and helps us in that matter"*. Collegial support among educators in dealing with barriers to learning is further emphasised: *"I consult the heads of department, the former class teachers - to get a complete picture of the child, intellectual, social and emotional aspects."*

The practice of passing the learners' portfolio to the next educator helps other educators to know where to start and to familiarise themselves with the learner (Donald et al., 2002; Engelbrecht et al., 1999). This is demonstrated by one educator: *"I utilise peer teaching by other teachers"*. The educators believed in the contributions of their colleagues and involved them in discussions about learners who experience learning barriers. This was emphasised by an educator who

indicated that the importance of being involved was to initiate discussions about learners' problems: *"Discussing their problems with other teachers, whoever they trust, talking about whatever they don't understand if not to the[other] teacher, then to someone else they know can help, peer group, or somebody."*

Engelbrecht et al. (1999) hypothesise that collaborative teamwork brings about changes to the curriculum and creates a positive and caring educational environment. Through interactions educators develop professional skills and positive coping dispositions such as perseverance and confidence (James & Gilliland, 2005; Mwamwenda, 2004). Supporting colleagues in inclusive education offers opportunities for capitalising on the diverse and specialised knowledge of educators and enables schools to provide quality learning support for all their learners (Engelbrecht et al., 1999). Collegial support to this effect brings about a sense of value, and some satisfaction to individual educators (James & Gilliland, 2005).

Relevance of the study

The findings of this research clearly indicate that although the participant educators did not receive formal training in dealing with learners challenged with barriers to learning, they intuitively explored various ways of co-creating enabling learning contexts. Educators displayed the ability to adjust to diverse challenges in inclusive learning contexts. They were able to provide learners with unconditional acceptance, thereby creating an atmosphere in which learners had the space and opportunity to engage and to develop their potential. For example, educators adapted their learning instructions and methodological approaches to fit the unique need of each child. They realised that one size does not fit all and applied their knowledge and skills firstly as humans and then as educators to create an enabling learning environment. This was made possible by applying the skill of careful and informed observation to create an optimal fit between the learning contexts, the learning

material and the individual learner's needs and potential. In line with Ebersöhn and Eloff (2003), it seems that these educators spontaneously applied an assets-based approach by focussing on the potential of the learners, and were not paralysed by the learners' inabilities. Educators adopted a proactive approach to assist learners who were experiencing barriers to learning.

Educators realised the importance of supportive, interpersonal systems. They involved parents as important role players in the learning environment and used the knowledge and insight that they gained to facilitate an enabling learning environment. They realised that systems have open boundaries and that learners with barriers to learning cannot be dealt with in isolation by only focussing on their school performance.

Educators also engaged with colleagues and thereby strengthened and contributed to their own potential and abilities. A strong interpersonal collegial network alleviated the limitations that some individual educators experienced. The ability of educators to work in teams provided a context for co-constructing knowledge, planning, reviewing and supporting individual, group and systems efforts in the challenging task of excelling in inclusive learning contexts.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This was an exploratory qualitative study, with a limited number of participants due to time and financial constraints. Although the competencies clearly emerged, there are still many blind areas that need to be explored.

The application of a mixed-method approach whereby the specific competencies under examination could be assessed and compared would provide more meaningful recommendations for training and policy. Variables that could be included and compared are age, training, work experience and different contexts. Mixed-method approaches consistently complement each other and provide greater

depth in opening up blind areas that a single approach would not effectively manage to do.

Implications for practice and policy

The Department of Education's training policy should acknowledge teachers' existing competencies for inclusive environment within diverse learning contexts. This could be done by identifying existing competencies in workshops and creating opportunities for educators to apply these competencies in training workshops, facilitated by the Department of Education. Educators should form part of advisory committees that could advise the Department of Education about the development of inclusive learning contexts, and through their participation, inform future policy dialogue. School management teams and institutional support teams could emphasise collective planning for inclusion so that educators' expertise is explored and further developed to enable them to provide professional guidance and practice.

Conclusion

The research contributed to the insight that although educators involved with learners who are challenged by barriers to learning have not received formal training in the development of inclusive learning contexts, they have many competencies that assist them to deal with the challenges that these contexts present. These competencies enable educators to provide relevant learning opportunities for challenged learners by embracing contextual factors.

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