

# Implementing inclusive education in schools

## A step in the right direction



Denise Shelley Newnham

A world appeal has been launched by UNESCO for inclusive education. Though there has been much progress in this field, there is still much to be done. New policies create inevitable new problems. This paper argues such policies do not clarify how teachers are to go about applying the principles of inclusive education. Within modern states and those of the developing world too often there are socio-political structures, policies and statistics that comply with human rights and equality, yet in reality large rifts between policy and practice exist. To overcome this rift, there first needs to be an implementation of change undertaken at all levels, macro to micro, that is from political aspirations and practices to that of social structures, agents and finally families. Secondly, for such practices to become enduring and meaningful, each member of a society should be made aware of his or her beliefs in order to visualise, conceptualise and realise higher and more equal universal rights in general and educational rights in particular. Changing an activity requires careful analysis of that system. Such change requires some form of intervention/mediation in order to 'facilitate both intensive, deep transformations and continuous incremental improvement' (Engstrom, Virkkunen, Helle, Pihlaja, and Poikela, 1996).

### Education for All

At the turn of the 21st century, many of the world's countries committed themselves to the principles of Education for All (EFA) by the year 2015. Due to this initiative, progress has been made; for example, school attendance at primary-school level has increased and there has been a decrease in gender discrimination. However, the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2008, 2009) indicates that not all of the goals associated with EFA will be reached by 2015. The report sends a warning to governments that they must tackle the problem of inequality in education, as education leads to an empowered and fulfilled life.

While we cannot neglect the importance of such reports, a question that remains unanswered is why the practice of inclusive education is presenting problems. It appears that it is not at the level of government policy or rhetoric that there is a discrepancy but rather at the level of implementation. While the policy states that all children should go to school – and governments are enforcing this rule – in many cases quality learning is not taking place, which is contradictory to the ethos of inclusive education as laid down by UNESCO. It appears logical to inquire as to what form of pedagogy is to be used in a situation where teacher–student ratios have reached 1:43 and where pupils of diverse abilities are

taught together. The most common approach to date is direct teacher transmission and testing of students' ability to reproduce the facts. This is not surprising, as historically schools are a place of large contradictions between justifications of outcome and learning for everyday life. Non-resolved contradictions of this nature give rise to teacher workshops, where teachers learn new methods that are never implemented; in the end, it is easier for teachers to resort to former practices, as historically socially constructed contradictions are often difficult to overthrow. The reality is that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children are often the targets of poor pedagogical methods, the reasons for which are highlighted in the extract taken from Roth and Lee (2007) below.

*Katherine, a fifth grade teacher in a rural district, is busy planning an introductory lesson on electrical circuits. Because she already has taught her students in previous grades, she feels that the model lesson plan provided in the teachers' guide will be ineffective, if not a big turn-off for these children, who value meaningful, hands-on learning. This feeling is exacerbated because there are a few children in the class who find handling the English language and the language of science concurrently almost too great a burden to bear. 'I'll give them lots of time to explore, in small groups, to set up the two circuit layouts and to discover about the concept of current flow at the same time'; she ponders by herself. With the push toward increased accountability by her school board, however, Katherine feels compelled to abandon this option and instead rely on direct teaching as the method of choice, given its economy of instructional time and assurances of mastery learning and higher achievement scores. During the week, she sees excited faces slowly dim, although she finishes the learning objectives comfortably within the prescribed time slot. Experiencing some remorse for her pedagogical decision, Katherine consoles herself by saying, 'One or two will ultimately make it very big, although most will find their own niches in society and be equally happy. Anyway, I'll make it up by giving them a couple of fun experiments at another time.'*

### Inclusive education – but whose model?

As the extract above indicates, teachers often have well-informed pedagogical intentions, but these are usually repressed, due to the overall outcome demand. Many parents and teachers query the continual contemporary pedagogical shifts. These shifts can in part be explained by means of a cultural concept. Humans create culture in order to satisfy a need, when that need is no longer of

importance or is no longer being satisfied by the present practice, they discard, transform or change previous behaviour and tools to make new objects and outcomes possible. Development is therefore a back and forth movement between changing practice and being changed in the process (Vygotsky, 1978). However, all too often that change is difficult to negotiate, and the more complex the system, the more difficult it is to understand why and what needs to be done. Change is therefore not always positive nor can it always be seen as going forward. The introduction of inclusive education into the activity system of schools may require a change of teachers' vision of what teaching is and who it is for, how to approach topics, and what the role of the student and the students families are in the learning process.

What needs to be understood is that education is primarily a cultural institution and therefore there can be no justification for a universal and homogenising pedagogy if indeed teaching and learning are contextual activities. A universalised pedagogy necessarily marginalises pedagogies based on alternative epistemologies. For example, by treating learner-centred pedagogy as a 'one-size-fits-all' method of teaching and learning, pedagogies that are based on indigenous knowledge systems become marginalised. What then is the way out of such double binds? Engestrom (1987, 1996) suggests that an activity confronted with change should be worked through by the subjects of that activity. Such a process of expansive learning has phases where practice is historically questioned and contradictions of present and past practice come to the fore. Remodelling such practices in order to produce new expansive forms is seen as the way forward.

## An activity system under revision

A literary revue on the overall historical context of education in Botswana highlights the progresses that have been made in the direction of inclusive education as well as the complications that have arisen out of these changes.

Until 1961, primary schooling in Botswana was completely financed by tribal treasuries, with some tribes spending up to 70 per cent of their budgets on education. Education at the primary level lasts for seven years, although it is not compulsory. Secondary schooling needed to be addressed and so between 1985 and 1994 the government launched a major programme of secondary school construction, where the objective was 'education for all' and the outcome an 'educated nation'. This disposition has not been and is not without its problems despite contemporary Botswana having a strong political commitment to education that is concretely manifest in the allocation of 20 per cent of its national developmental budget (UNESCO, 2005). Since launching the programme ten years ago, implementation of educational facilities has followed a rapid upward curve without neglect of rural areas. Educational policies state that it is not the learner's school attendance that should be seen as the outcome, but instead the learner's right to a worthwhile education, for only that will pave the way to a healthy future. Inclusive education desires an education for all that is adapted to the culture of the learner and not the contrary. However, research carried out by Arua et al. (2005), Maruatona (2006) and UNESCO evaluations indicate that there are several factors that are for the moment impeding such ideals.

- Firstly, the social reality does not facilitate this task. The high level of AIDS victims is producing many orphan children, the media is introducing ways of the outside world, and the low grades and dropout statistics are just a few of the difficulties that the social context is struggling with.
- Secondly, pupil–teacher ratios in 1999 were 27:1 at the primary level. Since then, 84 per cent of primary-school-age children have enrolled in school, while 59 per cent of those eligible now attend secondary school, illustrating that the student–teacher ratio has risen to an average of 40:1.
- Thirdly, there is the problem of coping with the diverse ability levels in the classroom. In line with UNESCO's EFA goal, the government of Botswana provides a ten-year universal access to basic education, which consists of seven years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education. As its National Development Plan 9 (Government of Botswana, 2003, p.272) indicates, 'a 100 per cent transition rate from primary education to junior secondary education has been achieved'. This 100 per cent transition rate is possible due to automatic promotion. While in statistics this appears encouraging, it creates challenges for the junior secondary and senior secondary divisions of formal education due to a growing diversity in pupils' abilities.
- Fourthly, a further problem between policy and practice is that there is no legal right to education in Botswana. The Constitution provides that children under the age of 18 can be kept in school by their parents or by a court order without their consent. Though the Education Act states that a child may start school at 7 years of age, it does not make school attendance compulsory. Due to conflicts between school and home and some children's school results, parents in certain regions of the country prefer to send their children to the cattle post, as they find that this is a more valuable way of spending their time.

Ideologically, the aim of providing education for all, as highlighted in Botswana's Vision 2016, is to build an educated and informed nation. Education is thus seen '...as an investment that will lead to a higher quality of human capacity and productivity in the future, and to a better quality of life for everyone' (UNESCO, 2005). The national education department of Botswana appears well aware of the initiatives that need to be taken, and maintains that 'the practical difficulties in the short- and medium- terms should not be underestimated. The possible expansion of education is limited by the pace of national development in a variety of other areas' (Vision 2016, p.30). Botswana's 2007 vision for education incorporates the need for improvement on the quality of education (Vision 2016, p.18). However, teaching in such an environment remains a challenging affair. It therefore appears necessary to guide teachers and communities through a redesigning of their activities in order to meet such new and challenging demands.

## Conclusion

It appears that it is not enough to draw up policies. New policies contain the message of change and change is often fraught with practical difficulties and psychological double binds due to unearthed contradictions. Although new teaching tools are often produced to comply with the policies, teachers do not always

engage with them; this is due to several reasons arising out of contradictions within the system, such as increasing social problems, marriage break-ups, AIDS pandemic orphans, lack of teachers and a rising numbers of students of different levels in the classrooms. Based on the literary data of Botswana, one could seriously ask the question as to whether education contributes to social diversity and more inclusive societies or whether it is reproducing new forms of discrimination and exclusion. As the rapid economic and industrial growth of the Western world becomes increasingly dependent on value of production and exchange, education systems follow suit and they too become more complex, longer and abstracted from everyday reality. This produces a vicious circle, as through such a process inclusive education remains a constantly elusive outcome. In this sense it can be understood that exclusion does not only refer to those that cannot attend school but also to those who are discriminated against because of their social or individual characteristics or capacities within the classroom. This paper therefore argues for new, stronger methods that can guide teachers and communities through the change process.

#### References

- Arua, E.A. and Lederer, M. (2003). What are students in Botswana's high schools reading? In A.E. Arua, ed. *Reading for All in Africa: Building Communities Where Literacy Thrives*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Arua, E.A., Moanakwena, P.G., Rogers, T. and Tierney, R.J. (2005). *Improving the Quality of Literacy Learning in the Content Areas. Situational Analysis of Secondary Level Education in Botswana*. UNESCO Section for General Secondary Education. Division of Secondary, Technical and Vocational Education. International Reading Association. France: UNESCO.
- Engestrom, Y., Virkkunen, Y., Helle, M., Pihlaja, J. and Poikela, R. (1996). The change laboratory as a tool for changing work. In T. Alasoini, M. Kyllonen and A. Kasvio, eds. *Workplace Innovations – A Way of Promoting Competitiveness, Welfare and Employment*. Helsinki: National Workplace Development Programme/Ministry of Labor.
- Engestrom, Y. (1987). *Learning by Expanding: An Activity-Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research*. Available at: <http://communication.ucsd.edu/LCHC/MCA/Paper/Engestrom/expanding/toc.htm>
- Goalathe, B. (1997). *Long-Term Vision for Botswana. Towards Prosperity for All*. Presidential task group for a long-term vision for Botswana.
- Maruatona, T. (2006). *Adult education, deliberative democracy and social re-engagement in Africa*. *Journal of Developing Societies*, 22(1), pp.11-27. Sage Journals.
- Newnham, D.S. and Virkkunen, J. *Double Binds in Child Rearing* (under revision). *Ethos CHACDOC Special edition*.
- Roth, W.M. and Lee, Y.J. (2007). 'Vygotsky's neglected legacy': cultural historical activity theory. *Review of Educational Research*. 77(2), pp.186. Sage Publications.
- Tabulawa, R. (2003). International aid agencies, learner-centered pedagogy and political democratization: a critique. *Comparative Education*, 39(1), pp.7-26.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society. The development of higher psychological processes*. M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner and E. Souberman, eds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**DENISE SHELLEY NEWNHAM** has studied Anthropology and Psychology with a focus on education in South Africa, Switzerland, Finland and England. She is currently a researcher on a Finnish school development project in Botswana. Denise has an MA in Educational Anthropology and Educational Science. She also has several publications in academic journals and has edited books that deal with inclusive education, processes of learning within transitional states and sense-making during social exclusion.

