Intellectual Disability in Inclusive Education in South Africa: Curriculum Challenges

Judith McKenzie
University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract

The move toward inclusive education is a global one which has been in process for over 25 years since the Salamanca statement in 1994. The approach has been adopted in many countries, both high and low income with varying degrees of policy development and legal frameworks to ensure effective implementation. South Africa, a middle-income country with high levels of inequality, has engaged seriously in developing enabling policy. In this study, I will examine how inclusive education policy in South Africa considers intellectual disability (ID) as one of many barriers to learning within the related legislation, guidelines, and curriculum. I will then look at two critical and related events in education for ID in South Africa. The first is the legal process whereby the right to education for children with severe-to-profound ID was established, and the second is the development of three different curricula in South Africa for children with mild-to-moderate, severe, and severe-to-profound ID, respectively. I will conclude with some consideration of how inclusion policy deals with the problem of curriculum which is a critical one for ID.

Keywords: curriculum, inclusive education, intellectual disability, South Africa

Background to Inclusive Education for Children with Intellectual Disability in South Africa

The origins of inclusive education in South Africa are complex and inextricably tied in with the historical injustices perpetrated under apartheid, a white supremacist ideology that systematically and comprehensively allocated resources in a discriminatory way according to race. The so-called Bantu education system was predicated upon rendering the black population docile while developing them as an unskilled labor force to service their white capitalist masters (Gwalla-Ogisi, Nkabinde, & Rodriguez, 2006). With the advent of democracy in South Africa, the pressing issues that faced education in South Africa (and still do to a greater or lesser extent) included providing compulsory and free education for children of all races, lack of early childhood development services, high rate of adult illiteracy, a large number of out of school youth and quality issues, largely relating to the years of neglect of teacher education (Gwalla-Ogisi et al., 2006). In addition, the implementation of curriculum was a very sensitive one with a huge impetus for change toward one curriculum for all which aimed to empower and create opportunities rather than to render docile (Nkabinde, 1993).

In order to address special educational needs, a consultative process over several years resulted in the development of Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (abbreviated as EWP6). This policy aimed to address the post-apartheid configuration of special education as one of racial inequity, limited educational access and segregation of children with disabilities (Department of Education (DoE), 2001). Furthermore, it was recognized that there were multiple causes of educational disadvantage. “Special needs” should therefore embrace issues of economic, social and linguistic contexts, and psychosocial challenges, such as the effects of HIV/AIDS. The term “barriers to learning” was adopted by the National Commission into special needs education as one which reflects the diverse nature of barriers and which emphasizes the removal of barriers through environmental or social interventions rather than through individualized therapy or treatment. The policy attempted to move the focus away from a medical or deficit model of disability toward an environmental focus on “barriers to learning and development” (Engelbrecht, 2006). This, it was proposed, would facilitate transformation in the educational system as a whole as Lomosky and Lazarus (2010) noted: “The factors which were conceptualized as barriers to learning and development were those which led to the inability of the system to accommodate diversity, leading to learning breakdown or preventing learners from accessing educational provision” (p. 311).

In order to achieve this goal, the vision of an inclusive education system was adopted where all children would learn together within a seamless system of support that would address not only disability but also a range of barriers to learning arising from poverty, inequality, and other social conditions (DoE, 2001). This system is built upon two pillars:

1. A process for identifying barriers to learning and establishing support needs that must be addressed to reduce these barriers. This is presented in the Policy on Screening, Identification,
Assessment, and Support (SIAS) (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2014).
2. Differentiation of the curriculum such that teachers can respond to diversity in their classrooms and schools. Strategies to achieve this are presented in the Guidelines to Responding to Learner Diversity (DBE, 2011).

In this study, I will examine how intellectual disability (ID) has emerged within the inclusive education discourse in South Africa against this background. I will then consider the court case that was required to ensure the right to education for children with severe-to-profound ID and the ensuing development of three different curricula for ID before providing some thoughts on the impact of this development which is in its very early days.

ID in Inclusive Education Discourse

The place of ID within inclusive education deserves special attention since ID is linked to scientific racism throughout South African history. Scientific racism—the pseudoscientific premise that evidence exists to prove white superiority and justify racial discrimination—fuelled in South Africa an association between intellect and race such that black people were viewed as intellectually inferior (Dubow, 1991). This myth was further reinforced by the implementation of intelligence testing which derived low IQ scores for black children without consideration of the appropriateness of the measurement. Low IQ scores of black children were attributed to biological factors, while low levels of achievement of white children were seen to reflect an impoverished environment which could be addressed through educational and other strategies (Dubow, 2011). As will be discussed in the following section.

Moving to the democratic era, I will refer to three foundational documents of inclusive education policy, namely, EWP6 (DoE, 2001), the Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity (DBE, 2011), and the National Strategy on SIAS (DBE, 2014). The first remains in the form of a white paper rather than legislation, despite having been issued nearly 20 years ago. The second is in the form of a guideline that may and should be consulted in planning for inclusive education, but which is not mandatory. The third is a legislated process that is mandatory for provincial educations systems to follow when considering placement and support of children who are identified as experiencing barriers to learning. These three documents are central to the overall policy and its two main supporting pillars of identifying and supporting learners and adapting the curriculum to meet a range of learning needs.

Education White Paper 6

In the overall policy, ID is identified as a factor that gives rise to different learning needs. It is singled out as an impairment that will not take a lot of resources as in the following:

We are persuaded that the inclusion of learners with disabilities that stem from impaired intellectual development will require curriculum adaptation rather than major structural adjustments or sophisticated equipment. Accordingly, their accommodation within an inclusive education and training framework would be more easily facilitated than the inclusion of those learners who require intensive support through medical interventions, structural adjustments to the built environment and/or assistive devices with minimal curriculum adaptation. (EWP6, p. 25)

The perceived simplicity of dealing with ID is used as an argument to support minimal additional spending on learners who experience this barrier. This is reflected in the policy position:

The Ministry will link the provision of education to learners with disabilities stemming from impaired intellectual development and who do not require intensive support to the general restructuring of the further education and training sector currently being undertaken. (DoE, 2001, p. 31)

It seems ironic that ID is viewed as the least challenging to inclusive education when many would argue that it is actually the most challenging due to the need to adapt the very core of national education systems—that is, the national curriculum. In fact this position has since been heavily challenged and has resulted in the proliferation of curricula in the past eight years, as will be discussed in the following section.

Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity

The guidelines recognize that curriculum is a significant barrier to learning and lay emphasis on having one curriculum for all learners which is differentiated to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners. The guidelines make little or no reference to forms of impairment but rather examine how the content, learning environment and teaching methods can be differentiated. Importantly for ID, this also includes differentiation of assessment as it allows for lower levels of achievement to be recognized for the purpose of progression to the next grade or level. The Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Attainment of Knowledge is recommended for learners with ID and these are then based on the general grade level content: “but at reduced depth, breadth, and complexity” (DBE, 2011, p. 19). Similarly Alternate Assessment Based on Modified Attainment of Knowledge can be applied for various reasons to learners who “may require more time to master the content. These assessments measure a learner’s
mastery of grade-level content with reduced load or at a more functional level” (p. 19). It is suggested that one group this might apply to is learners with moderate ID. The vision then is one where learners with ID can be educated in the mainstream classroom with adaptation and progress with their peers.

Policy on SIAS

This policy identifies three levels of ID—namely, mild or moderate, severe, and profound (DBE, 2014). These are all included together as a “domain of specialized support” (p. 8), called “cognition.” Each domain requires integrated specialized support services which should be available: “at high, medium and low intensity levels in ordinary and special schools” (p. 18). Thus, the level of support need is not tied to school placement. Support is offered within four “programs,” namely,

- Provision of specialist services by specialized professional staff
- Curriculum differentiation which includes adjustments and accommodations in assessment
- Provision of specialized Learning and Teaching Support Material and assistive technology
- Training and mentoring of teachers, managers and support staff. (p. 18)

The diagnosis of ID should be made by a clinical psychologist, educational psychologist, counseling psychologist, psychiatrist, or pediatrician. While an IQ test is not recommended, especially where it has not been standardized in the child’s home language, it is suggested that it may be useful in determining which of the following supports the child may need: “remedial interventions, assistive technology, adapted learning and teaching support materials, educational or physical support by peers, teacher, personal assistant or therapist, etc.” (Annexure D, p. 2). The diagnosis should also include a specification of the severity of ID.

The Curriculum Battle

In the initial stages of inclusive education in South Africa, there was a firm commitment to one curriculum for all and this is reflected in the policy discussion above where curriculum adaptation is seen as the major strategy for ID. The ideal of one curriculum for all arose partly from the apartheid history of curriculum for children with ID in South Africa.

The Growth of Special Schools

In the move toward inclusive education, special schools were retained as an important part of an overall support system where they would meet high support needs as well as serving as a resource for mainstream schools (DoE, 2001). With increasing overall access and provision of basic education under democracy, numbers in special schools grew. However, in 2001, there were 380 special schools catering for 64,603 learners (DoE, 2001), by 2014 there were 444 special schools catering for 111,477 learners (DBE, 2016). In a report on the implementation of inclusive education, the DBE reported that in 2013 the most common impairment type accommodated within special schools was mild, moderate, and severe ID accounting for just fewer than 50% of the special school population. The report further notes that: “In contrast with the Special Schools, the highest incidence of learners with disabilities in ordinary schools is learners with Specific Learning Difficulties, Attention Deficit Disorder and Partial Sightedness.” (p. 19). Thus, it is apparent that despite the assertion that ID is easier to accommodate in the regular classroom with curriculum modification, there is a strong tendency to educate these children in special schools.

Within these special schools it was noted that there was a poor standard of curriculum delivery and that most learners with ID in special schools were following vocational or skills-oriented curricula. Although teachers were expected to differentiate the curriculum for learners with ID, the DBE considered that there was a need for a more structured, functional curriculum for these learners. In response to this, a working group was set up by the DBE in 2013 to develop a basic education curriculum and exit-level qualification for learners with mild-to-moderate ID who would undergo vocational education in schools for skills. The working group was also responsible for developing learning programs within the framework of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for learners with severe ID and learners with profound ID. However, the program for mild-to-moderate ID was to be a full qualification with its own curriculum as part of the NCS, the others were to be learning programs that are merely within the framework (DBE, 2016). In this way, the idea of one curriculum for all receded although the framework of the NCS is evident across all of these curricula.

During the course of the curriculum development process, the curriculum became allied with a place of teaching—children with mild-to-moderate ID would be in schools of skills for vocational training, children with severe ID would be in special schools (previously for children with “severe mental handicap”) and the curriculum for profound ID would be for children currently not accommodated in the education system but who had won the right to be included through a court case which will be discussed below.

The Right to Education Court Case

Despite the development of an inclusive education policy, children with severe-to-profound ID remained excluded from education in both special and mainstream schools. In response, these mothers of such children started special care centers for their own children, which have been extended to accommodate other disabled children (Geiger, 2012). In 2010, the DBE spent R6,632 ($60) per child for attending a mainstream school, and R26,767 ($260) per child for attending a special school but there was no educational provision for children in

In 2010 after much lobbying and advocacy, the Western Cape Forum for ID (WCFID), which represented a range of organizations working with children and adults with ID and their families, tackled these issues in a case against the National Government of the Republic of South Africa as well as the provincial government of the Western Cape Province (Wood, Essop, Watermeyer, & McKenzie, 2019). The applicants fought the case on the basis that the state was not fulfilling its obligations as laid out in the South African Constitution and other legislation toward children with severe and profound ID who found themselves excluded from the provisions of formal education. They were not admitted into mainstream schools and neither would special schools accept them because of their high-intensity support needs. The judgment delivered by the Western Cape High Court found for the WCFID and concurred that the National Government and the Western Cape Government were in breach of the children’s constitutional rights to basic education, protection from neglect, equality, and basic human dignity (Western Cape Forum for ID v Government of the Republic of South Africa and Government of the Province of the Western Cape, 2011). The judgment laid out a series of actions that needed to be taken in its call for quality education for learners with profound ID including the development of appropriate learning programs or curricula, which has now been done alongside the vocational and skills curricula noted above. This program for children with profound ID was therefore linked with other curriculum initiatives in an attempt to bring this neglected group into the framework of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (DBE, 2011) presumably in an attempt to increase accountability for their education in an equitable manner, taking into account their specific learning needs in a distinct curriculum.

Where Does this Leave us with Inclusive Education?

Inclusive education for learners with ID in South Africa has seen a shift from one curriculum for all within the general education system as a relatively low-cost and simple solution to an elaborate system of three different curricula. The battle for the curriculum would seem to be between academic content, general curriculum, mainstream on the one hand and the functional skills, separate curriculum, and special school curriculum on the other, reflecting curriculum debates happening in other countries (Shurr & Bouck, 2013).

It remains to be seen whether separate curricula are effective in meeting the needs of children with ID but there are dangers inherent in such an approach. Firstly, they may perpetuate segregated education. Although the policies specifically state that these curricula are programs that can be delivered in any setting, it is clear that they are intended for and feed into a range of special school placements. They are certainly understood in this way by education officials and teachers (McKenzie, Kelly, & Shanda, 2018). In this sense they represent a return to special education and certainly push the pendulum back in that direction.

Another danger is the possible over-representation of black and poor children within these curricula. This is a not uncommon occurrence within special education in the United States and has been a matter of concern for scholars in the field of disability studies in education (Collins, Connor, Ferri, Gallagher, & Samson, 2016). Given the history of scientific racism in South Africa, it is important to be very circumspect about how intelligence is viewed and the consequences of any forms of categorization. The flexibility in moving from one curriculum to the other needs to be considered. If a child is allocated to the curriculum for profound ID how and when and by which criteria would he or she be moved into a different curriculum? What level of assessment is needed to determine the relevant curriculum and is this level of expertise available in the system? Currently, it is not uncommon for children with less severe ID to be placed in special care centers where they follow a restricted curriculum due to their rejection by mainstream local schools (McKenzie et al., 2017).

In closing, it is apparent that the customization of curricula to levels of ID is a complex exercise prioritizing intellectual ability over social skills and belonging. It is not clear at this point whether benefits of targeted learning programs will outweigh the possibility of exclusion and the opportunities to learn with their typically developing peers.

Acknowledgment

This study is made possible in part by a National Research Foundation grant for rated South African researchers. The contribution is gratefully acknowledged.

References


Western Cape Forum for intellectual Disability v Government of the Republic of South Africa and Another 2011. South African Western Cape High Court.