Reducing prejudice against learners with disabilities in inclusive settings through the Afrocentric model of inclusion

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Introduction

This paper reports the findings on reducing prejudice against learners with disabilities through the Afrocentric inclusion model in inclusive settings. Following the educational transformation experienced by the South Africans post-1994, discriminatory laws promoting layers of inequalities in the education spectrum were abolished. Following the adoption of Inclusive Education (IE) and its implementation, policies on inclusion, like the White Paper 6, were also implemented. According to the Department of Education (2001), South African schools admitted learners with disabilities to receive education alongside their peers in their neighborhood environment. Including disabled learners in inclusive schools is a social justice move the country's Constitution promotes. It aims to enable disabled learners to realize their full potential and meaningfully contribute to society.

The Education for All (EFA) initiative, first put forth in 1990 by the international community, marked a global movement towards providing quality basic education to all children, youth, and adults (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2000). Specific goals were proposed to accomplish this initiative, like eliminating education inequalities and improving all aspects of education to provide quality education for all. In 2000, 189 countries renewed their commitment to reaching these educational ideals by adopting the Sustainable Developmental Goals (UNESCO, 2000); South Africa is a signatory. To effectively attain her set goals, particularly SDG 4, which speaks about quality education and inclusive education, South Africa must fight attitudinal barriers, which can be attributed to the legacy of the education policies instituted under apartheid.

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ABSTRACT

Attitudinal barriers and discriminatory practices continue to prevent the full participation of learners with disabilities in developmental learning contexts. Although disability has been on the psychological agenda for some time, there is limited empirical evidence on adopting African models to buffer prejudices. This paper addresses this critical gap by examining the experiences of disabled children in their learning environments. It aims to

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Engelbrecht (2006) states that “[t]he central feature which distinguishes South Africa from other countries in terms of education provision is the extent to which the institutionalization of discriminatory practices led to extreme disparities in the delivery of education, a reflection of the fragmentation and inequality that characterized society as a whole.” According to Donohue and Bormann (2010), “[a] general lack of support, as well as the prevailing negative attitudes toward disability, contribute to the general bewilderment in South African schools towards inclusion.” In school systems, there is a prejudice that learners with disabilities are not as capable or as smart as the other abled learners and that they need to be excluded from inclusive classrooms to receive special education services. This prejudice is a barrier to including these learners and integrating special needs learners in inclusive classrooms.

Although prejudice and discrimination are often used synonymously, they have distinct meanings. Prejudice, defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as "an adverse judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without the knowledge or examination of the facts" (2003), is an attitude or belief that can be distinguished from discrimination that is exhibited and experienced at the behavioral level (Pine & Hilliard, 2010). Discrimination is the behavioral manifestation of prejudice. This social group suffers from prejudice. It is stigmatized and called names just because they have different abilities. Attribution to prejudice is about ascribing a differential, often negative group-based treatment to discrimination (Major & Sawyer, 2009). Discrimination is often a counter-normative behavior (Cambon & Yzerbyt, 2017; Crandall et al., 2002; Klonis et al., 2005; Plant & Devine, 2008) that is inconsistent with the prevalent egalitarian norm and thus largely socially disapproved (Monteith & Walters, 1998; Czopp & Monteith, 2003).

Attitudinal barriers and discriminatory practices continue to prevent the full participation of learners with disabilities in learning developmental contexts. Although disability has been on the psychological agenda for some time, there is limited empirical evidence on adopting African models to buffer prejudices. This study addresses this critical gap by examining the experiences of disabled children subjected to prejudices in inclusive settings and the adaptation of the Afrocentric model to buffer those behaviors. Prejudice is an adverse judgment formed beforehand or without knowledge of the facts. The rationale for this study is the high dropout rate of disabled learners who complain about stigma, attitudes, and discrimination in schools. The stereotypical views held about those with disabilities affect the development of learners who receive both blatant and subtle messages that challenge their integrity as learners. Many will never reach their fullest potential because of their exposure to prejudice and discrimination (Gleason, 2011; Derman & Sparks, 2013).

Learners who are different often experience isolation and rejection in school settings. Even at the preschool level, learners with disabilities may not be chosen as friends or playmates (Diamond, 2004). They may sometimes be excluded because other learners do not believe they are interested or can participate in a particular activity (Diamond, 2004). Exclusion may also be based on how children view differences. If the differences are considered deficits, they may devalue the child with a disability, resulting in further isolation and discrimination.

The prejudicial messages go beyond affecting achievement and attack the child’s concept of self and others. Children internalize these messages and that hampers their self-esteem (Aboud, 2008). Nano, et al. (2016) report similar phenomena in the area of exceptionality. Their study revealed that both children with and without disabilities preferred themselves and others without disabilities to those with different disabilities. The study conducted by Roy (2019) revealed that teachers create prejudice within their classrooms without even realizing they are doing it. Roy (2019) also revealed that there have been many different attempts at eliminating these prejudices in the classroom, but none have been proven to work one hundred percent of the time. The goal is to find new ways to incorporate special needs learners in the classroom without excluding them from activities. Teachers affect the acceptance of children by the attitudes they model in the classroom. Nano et al. (2016) found that educators were significantly more negative toward learners with disabilities and that learners imitated the teachers’ ridicule of learners who were viewed less favorably. On the other hand, the literature is replete with accounts of how educators influence discrimination of learners with disabilities (Derman-Sparks, 2013; Gollnick & Chinn, 2010; Parish et al., 2010; Pine & Hilliard, 2010; Whalen, Henker, Dotemoto, & Hinshaw, 2003). Gleason (2011) asks us to consider the need for multicultural education in preparing educators to accommodate learners with disabilities. In South Africa, multicultural education failed to address the inclusion and acceptance of learners with disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Banks, 2009). Hence, another framework that can assist or compel educators to accept learners with disabilities is needed. As proposed by the paper, the Afrocentric inclusion model can arrest the situation.

Literature Review

Prejudices against the disabled child

A person is defined as disabled when his/her physical, intellectual, or mental health is different from those of the same age group for a certain time by impeding or not making it possible for them to participate in social life normally. Prejudicing is a wrongly unbiased thought that makes somebody judge or act (Furmaco, 2017). It is a negative, unjustified attitude against a particular group of people (Aranda, 2015). Children with disabilities face widespread stigma and discrimination based on deeply rooted negative perceptions about disability. These attitudes and beliefs reflect what is known as “ableism,” a value system that discriminates against people with disabilities based on the idea that certain ways of appearance, functioning, and behavior are essential for living a life of value (Emmerson et al., 2012). Due to ableist assumptions, children with disabilities are considered to need “fixing”, less able to contribute and participate, less worthy of attention, and in general to have less inherent value than others. That is why eliminating stigma and
discrimination is a human rights imperative (Ali, et al, 2012). Changing attitudes, behaviors, and social norms that underlie the stigma and discrimination faced by children with disabilities is a complex process (Walker & Scior, 2013). Attempts to change attitudes and counter discrimination seemed fruitless. Looking at changes over time, the limited data available supports the impression that attitudes have become much more favorable of the inclusion of people with learning disabilities in educational and social settings than they were some 50 or 100 years ago (Staniland & Byrne, 2013).

More needs to be done to tackle negative attitudes toward individuals with learning disabilities and to break down barriers that prevent people with learning disabilities from being accepted within society and from accessing a wide range of opportunities and experiences taken for granted by people without disabilities (Morin, et al, 2013; Seewooruttun & Scior, 2014). These aims are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which promotes a rights-based perspective instead of, for example, the charity discourse so long applied to people with learning disabilities.

Afrocentric model of inclusion

Although Inclusive Education is popularly perceived as a Western philosophy, it is embedded in Afrocentricity. According to Phasha (2016), Inclusive Education is not a foreign phenomenon in Africa because of the embeddedness of its practices and ideals in the lives of Africans. The alignment of the principles and values of Inclusive Education with the principles and values of African theories reveals that it is not an exclusively Western fundamental pedagogical innovation of aspiration and contention of the century (Phasha, 2016). An Afrocentric model of Inclusion is entrenched in theories that originated in the African continent, including Ubuntu, Africanization, and Indigenous Knowledge instead of imported from elsewhere, as is the case with Eurocentric theories (Van Wyk, 2014; Sotuku & Duku, 2014). Employing Afrocentricity as a best practice in inclusive schools is considered advisable across every educational context. There is a need for more research on Afrocentric practices as one of many culturally responsive techniques to best teach culturally diverse students, especially learners with disabilities, in educational settings (Ringstaff, 2023).

Theoretical Background

The study was underpinned by Allport’s Social Reflection Theory (Allport, 1958), which provides insight into why some groups may be targets of prejudice and discrimination. According to this theory, children adopt attitudes and stereotypes about groups of people according to the power and status held by those groups. Often, children will adopt parental values, which may be directly taught or merely observed and imitated by the child. The child associates negative emotions with labels describing individuals, later associates these labels as corresponding to categories or groups, and finally may generalize the labels and associated attitudes to all persons within the group. At this point, the child’s views are an integral part of his or her personality and are difficult to alter. This theory is appropriate for the study because certain groups of learners (learners with disabilities) are targeted in schools because of their status. The adults also practice discrimination against these learners; hence, the other children observe the behavior of adults and practice it.

Research and Methodology

The qualitative single case study type was adopted for this study because it helps answer questions about the complex nature of the phenomena, often describing and understanding the phenomenon from the participant's point of view (Greig & Taylor, 2009). The fact that it looks at a single case, namely, reducing prejudice against learners with disabilities in inclusive settings through the Afrocentric model of inclusion, helps us understand the complex nature of a phenomenon.

The research was conducted in schools regarded as a model of inclusion in the northern part of Tshwane in Gauteng province, South Africa. The schools consist of grades 7, 8, and 9 and are situated in a semi-rural area. Participants were 20 educators and 40 learners (both disabled and abled). Purposive sampling was used to choose participants in the study. Purposive sampling was selected as a method of selecting participants because the researcher wanted to do research in inclusive schools involving educators who interact with the learners in question daily and the group in question, disabled learners. As Palinkas et al. (2015) stated, purposive sampling is assembled by intentionally seeking individuals for a situation likely to yield new instances and a greater understanding of a dimension or concept of interest. Participation was voluntary, following a thorough explanation of the study and research ethics. Consent was obtained from parents, allowing their children to participate, and their confidentiality was assured. Their names were protected by using pseudonyms. Recruitment of participants (educators and learners) began as soon as permission from higher authorities (Provincial Department of Education, District Office, and Principals of the schools) was granted. In initial meetings with each participant before the actual data collection sessions, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and their right to protection and withdrawal without penalty or negative consequences. Each was offered an opportunity to ask questions before signing a consent form. Each participant was given a summarised copy of the research proposal to peruse in their own time before deciding on their participation. The interviews were conducted in the selected schools’ after-school activities. There were questions guiding the interviews. The data collected was analyzed through qualitative thematic data analysis.

Discussions

This paper addresses this critical gap by examining the experiences of disabled children subjected to prejudices in inclusive settings and the adaptation of the Afrocentric model to buffer those behaviors. Research stipulated that it is a challenge for educators to
accommodate learners with disabilities in their classrooms because of a lack of training and being underqualified to teach learners with disabilities. Mpofu (2023) states that the Afro-centric approaches to inclusive education are molded around the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which is unique and embedded in the moral value systems of Africa. African epistemologies equip learners with relevant skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes grounded in local culture. Educators don’t need training to apply the practices and philosophies of Ubuntu.

The following themes are derived from the thematic analysis of the data. This paper presents the burning themes expressed by teachers:

- Afrocentric model of inclusion-Ubuntu, Truth, Harmony, And Fairness

![Figure 1: Summary of the themes and how they relate to each other.](image)

**The Principle of Ubuntu**

The participants expressed kaleidoscopic reactions to reducing prejudice against learners with disabilities in inclusive settings. They mostly emphasized the concept of acceptance- accepting that children with disabilities are still exposed to and oppressed by prejudice and discrimination.

Educator 4: “Yes, I agree that this school treats poor children badly. It is really heartbreaking.”

Educator 18: “another day, the educator scolded a disabled learner in front of other children, and she even said: you don’t listen when I am talking; that is why God made you disabled”.

Educators indicated that acceptance may be the first step to reducing learner's prejudice.

Educator 12: disabled learners are being treated badly here in school, but when we [educators] deny it. We deny the truth. We should agree. We should accept that discrimination is alive.”

The second step they emphasised was the concept of Ubuntu- showing kindness, love, support, and togetherness to everyone in schools.

Educator 2: “I think we [educators] should show love towards these learners, following how we were raised, the African way.”

Educator 11: ‘ the government is paying us to teach all the learners and to support them equally so that they can pass at the end of the year, but it is clear that we fail them because they drop out of school. I also agree that we lost our humanness as educators.”

Teacher 6: but we are prepared to change; it is not too late; let us show them love and support them as our children, the African way- if it were in our community, they would say that a child belongs to all of us-we should nurture them.”
During observation, the researcher noted that some learners did not practice any form of discrimination because of the presence of the stranger within them. Some treated the learners with disabilities nicely, but the responses from the learners with disabilities indicated that they were amazed or shocked by the love other children displayed. They are not used to that love. According to Akabor and Phasha (2022), the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu is the sense of togetherness and collaboration, viewing people as part of a larger whole and attributing success as a collective of society. In other words, one's success should be the success of all. The correlation between the concept of Ubuntu dovetails with the cooperative and collaborative values of an inclusive education system.

Ubuntu calls upon humans to react with respect, dignity, and sensitivity toward one another (Mbti, 1969). This aspect resonates well with the biblical verse – Luke 6:31, which says to treat others as you would like to be treated. Individuals are valuable irrespective of their characteristics. Learners (irrespective of their differences) are seen as having unique potential, abilities, and talents. Together with their age-mates, they should be nurtured and developed by educators who respect their uniqueness. Any form of treatment that makes learners different from others is frowned upon as disturbing harmony and the development of proper relationships. Such treatments make learners view themselves differently, as superior or inferior, and could promote feelings of intolerance and undermine social solidarity (Phasha, 2016).

Educator 7: we are killing these kids by not loving them. Where is humanity? What is our conscience saying to us? Yes, we are facing many challenges in schools, like overcrowding and lack of resources, but the poor learners are not to be blamed. Some educators treat these learners badly because they want them to be in special needs schools to reduce overcrowding?"

Educator 3: Let us return to the ways of our forefathers- ubuntu- loving and caring for one another.”

From Ubuntu’s perspective, an individual needs to be in the midst of others to qualify for the status of a human being (Meltz 2011). In other words, an individual’s humanity is recognized only if they are integral to the community. According to Phasha (2016), Ubuntu does not put people in cubicles; it situates them within the web of relationships. An African child is born into a world of connected people, not necessarily by blood. This makes the child a relative of many people in their community.

Educator 8: some of these learners are also orphans. They don’t have parents. We, the community, should raise them well, to be better persons tomorrow; to be leaders of tomorrow.”

Educator 10: some learners are good, clever, and need support to boost their self-esteem. We should encourage support from their relatives and communities, but maybe we should start it here in the school.”

The disabled learners should receive treatment equal to their age mate. This aspect makes learners stay in solidarity with their members. Therefore, anything that separates them from their peers violates their rights and constitutes a denial of support (Phasha, 2016).

Educator 2: the other teachers will even ask their peers to hit them, so how will other children love them?

The researcher noted that learners with disabilities are always isolating themselves and are withdrawn. They show that they are not well treated and supported, and their self-esteem is very low.

**The Afrocentric principle of advancing the truth in our praxis**

According to Reviere (2011), the concept means that the educator is vital in executing the role of a moral builder and a pastoral caregiver in supporting, promoting, and instilling good citizenship practices in his or her lesson preparation at all times. According to Afrocentric educationists, the principle, therefore, mandates that knowledge creation must be done within the context of the school community and, in particular, in the inclusive curricula and the community’s own experiences (Reviere, 2011).

Educator 18: “Some educators in these schools are pastors, and they are trying so hard to preach about loving one another and especially the circumstances faced by some of the children here.”

Educator 20: educators are mandated to love and support all learners in schools, regardless of how they are; I don’t know why we are failing.”

Educator 5: “Some of us here have done courses in educating special needs children; we know that we should accommodate these children so they can feel at home; we need to change our attitudes.”

Educator 2: We must not only admit them in schools but also change the curriculum to cater to their learning needs because we are not talking about learners who are physically challenged only; we also have intellectually challenged [slow] learners and learners with neurological conditions.”

**The Afrocentric principle of harmony**

The principle of harmony means ‘create harmony for the sake of peace and respect.’ Scholars argue that educators, as agents of change, should prevent unnecessary conflicts but instead supply good role models for learners (Reviere, 2011; Shockley, 2011). Educators must try to create and support healthy interactions among groups.

Educator 17: “Schools are places where learners should live in peace and harmony, not fighting all the time.”
Educator 19: “We recently had a workshop on building safe schools for children. I think we will use the information to create a safe and harmonious environment.”

Educator 16: as Africans, we should embrace our differences and strive for connectedness and unity. How are we going to be united if we discriminate against others?”

Educator 3: Educators are regarded as agents of change- we should bring changes to schools- change people's thinking, the attitudes of teachers and other learners and the behaviour of the school community at large.”

The Afrocentric principle of fairness

This principle requires a learning process that is fair to all learners and a process that is applied with the well-being of all the participants in mind. Fairness, or justice as defined by this principle, must apply to all communities with a stake in the outcomes of the educational process, that is, everyone (Reviere, 2011). Fairness asserts that educators consider the interests and well-being of the community being served to build a just society. The best interests of learners should be at the forefront – this is what justice means. Applying fairness also means that one cannot ignore the historical and social context in interpreting and responding to any element of the learning process.

Educator 1: some disabled learners drop out of school, and they stay home where they are subjected to all forms of abuse. What are we educators saying?”

Educator 4: what is happening here is an injustice to the learners with disabilities. It is unfair, especially when practiced by educators.”

Educator 6: The country's Constitution protects all children, but we are doing the opposite. I say “we” because if we allow other educators to practice injustices, it means we are promoting it, and we are also part of those who practice it.”

Educator 9: I call upon all educators to create a safe and harmonious environment and eradicate all forms of prejudices against learners with disabilities.

Conclusions

It has been proven that there is a prejudice that learners with disabilities are not as capable or as smart as the other learners and that they need to be excluded from the normal classroom. They are even subjected to verbal and physical abuse in schools. Both teachers and classmates practice the abuse. This showed a lack of empathy and humility in the school community. Where is humanity? What happened to our African ways of embracing and accepting each other? Why are we fighting against what God created? The answer to all the questions above was to return to the African ways of accepting one another. Truth, justice, and harmony are the answers to working towards eliminating this prejudice and giving learners with disabilities the best possible opportunities so that they can succeed.

Recommendations from this paper call for a longitudinal study where teachers will implement the findings of this study and observe the improvement in the performance of disabled learners in schools. A comparative study where the Afrocentric model on learner outcomes is compared with other cultural models of inclusion.

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