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The affordances and constraints to inclusive teaching in four South African schools: a cultural historical activity theory perspective

Andrews, Douglas

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ABSTRACT

South Africa has experienced teacher education and system reform initiatives in line with a mandate that promotes the ideas of inclusive education. Despite this, learners with different learning needs remain at risk of not accessing equitable learning opportunities. The extant literature points to various reasons why inclusive teaching remains constrained within South African school environments. However, there is little evidence of research that considers the systemic relationships between the various interacting components within schools and with other systems in society, and how these might influence research findings. This study uses Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a theoretical framework to explore why teachers are enabled or constrained from implementing inclusive teaching strategies in South African schools. A qualitative study was undertaken in four schools in a South African city. At each school, data was gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers and school principals and by observing lessons. These data were analysed and emerging themes were considered through the perspective of the Five Basic Principles of CHAT and the associated theoretical tools of relational agency and relational engagement.

Constraints to inclusive teaching include tensions between the teachers and other components in the school system and beyond, such as the external national curriculum; tensions intrinsic to teachers as a result of their under-preparedness for inclusive teaching, negative attitudes and low self-efficacy for teaching learners with different learning needs. Teachers are confused about what constitutes inclusive teaching and find it difficult to distinguish it from special needs education. Enabling inclusive teaching requires a positive orientation of school principals towards the ideas of inclusive teaching and leadership actions in support of this. Implementing inclusive teaching strategies is further enabled by collaboration between teachers, through active engagement, despite teaching in school systems where multiple systemic factors acted against them. The findings are significant in that they reveal opportunities for further research that considers the hidden, historical motives existing within and between the components in a school system and how these enable or constrain inclusive teaching. Furthermore, the findings show that in order for the ideas of inclusive teaching to gain traction in a school system these ideas need to overcome systemic contradictions and transform an existing *object-of-activity* that is not supportive of inclusion.