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Teaching learners with Autism in the inclusive classroom: the experiences of teachers in Johannesburg and how they are affected by government's policy on Inclusive Education

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Abstract

Inclusive education is commonly discussed worldwide, but the actual application of its goals and precepts are not as widespread as the talking points. Due to inaction, many children still experience marginalisation despite living in countries where official policies support the enhancement of their participation in educational environments. As lack of action persists, children with disabilities, notably in developing countries, experience increasingly harsh realities of deprivation of educational opportunities. It is also concerning the fact that neurological disorders such as autism are rising sharply, yet little attention has been given to teaching affected learners in ways that will benefit them. This study looked to find out how teachers are developed in their practices as a result of the Education White Paper 6 in South Africa as an inclusive education policy. The sample included 7 teachers from 3 schools in the Johannesburg Metropolitan Area: 2 mainstream schools and one special autism school. Data was collected using phenomenological interviews, and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis, with emerging themes also singled out from the data and discussed. Concepts from the capability approach were used to evaluate the educational well-being of learners, judging on how much freedom teachers have to teach in proper response to the needs of individual learner. Unfortunately, the participating teachers scarcely relate their professional development to this policy, which shows that there has been little commitment from government and other stakeholders to making the national education system truly inclusive. Nevertheless, some of the techniques that the teachers have used as they gained field experiences bode well for the development of future policy goals. As a policy, the Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) was found to be relatively well aligned with the international goals of inclusive education, the main issue is that it does not have clear goals, and leaves teachers confused about how to apply it to their work.

Key terms: inclusive education, autism, policy on inclusion, capability approach