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SOUTH AFRICAN PARENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has featured strongly in the South African education landscape since it was first incorporated into policy in 2001. Although parents are key stakeholders in the successful implementation of inclusive education, there has not been much research exploring parents' understanding within this space. Therefore, this study aimed to explore parents' understanding of inclusion and exclusion in education from seven primary schools in the Johannesburg area. This paper is based on the qualitative data drawn from a larger mixed methods study where 559 written responses exploring parents of primary school learners' understanding were analysed and 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the results. Four core themes were identified, namely, inclusion/ exclusion criteria, levels of inclusion and exclusion, effects of exclusion and the effects of inclusion. Sub-themes of interpersonal and extra-personal characteristics emerged for the theme of inclusion/exclusion criteria, while further analysis of levels of inclusion/exclusion resulted in the sub-themes of formal and epistemological access. It was clear that parents' understanding of inclusion and exclusion was grounded more in the practices of inclusion/exclusion as opposed to a more abstract, theoretical understanding. These results are discussed within the context of the SASA and Education White Paper 6 policy within South Africa, as well as literature around the types of educational access.

Keywords: *parents, inclusion, exclusion, education, South Africa, barriers to learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

Parental participation in the schooling of learners with and without barriers to learning is an important factor in the successful implementation of inclusion (De Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010; Lui *et al.,* 2015). This is recognised locally and internationally, with new legislation calling for the enhancement of parental involvement (Srivastava, De Boer & Pijl, 2015). Involvement empowers parents and provides a sense of autonomy as it allows parents to take responsibility for decisions regarding the educational placement of their

children. Additionally, parental attitudes towards inclusion influence attitudes and behaviours of children (De Boer *et al.,* 2010; Leyser & Kirk, 2011). The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report on Exclusion (GEMR) (2018) also argues that communities, of which parents are a part, can prevent children from accessing education based on their own beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion.

Given the key role that parents have to play in the implementation of inclusion, research has focused on their attitudes towards inclusion (De Boer & Munde, 2015). However, what is not understood is whether parents, in fact, understand what inclusion and exclusion means. An understanding of this is important since attitudes are with reference to "objects of thought" or "referents" (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995: 13). In this instance, the referent is inclusion. Research into parental attitudes towards inclusion overlooks parents' understanding of what inclusion is and thus assesses their attitude towards this referent under specific conditions. These conditions include the inclusion of children with various disabilities and disorders, such as physical and intellectual disabilities and autism (Bossink, Van der Putten & Vlaskamp, 2017; De Boer & Munde, 2015; Sproston, Sedgewick & Crane, 2017), to name a few. Vlachou, Karadimou and Koutsogeorgou (2016) found that more than 50% of their participants did not know what school inclusion meant. Literature has highlighted that inclusion has numerous interpretations (Brantlinger, 2003), often contextually based, and thus research into the attitudes of parents towards inclusion may yield results of an attitude towards different referents based on the parents' interpretation and understanding. What does emerge in the literature is parents' attitude towards "who" is being included and "what" they are being included in (Arjmandnia, Kakabaraee & Kermanshah, 2011). Not knowing what parents understand by inclusion could result in a misalignment in proposed interventions and support offered. As demonstrated in figure 1 below, this study aims to evaluate what parents understand by inclusion and exclusion with the aim of establishing how this may influence their level of support for, and role in the implementation of inclusion in the South African context. This aim is premised on the knowledge that understanding impacts attitude and attitude determines behaviour.
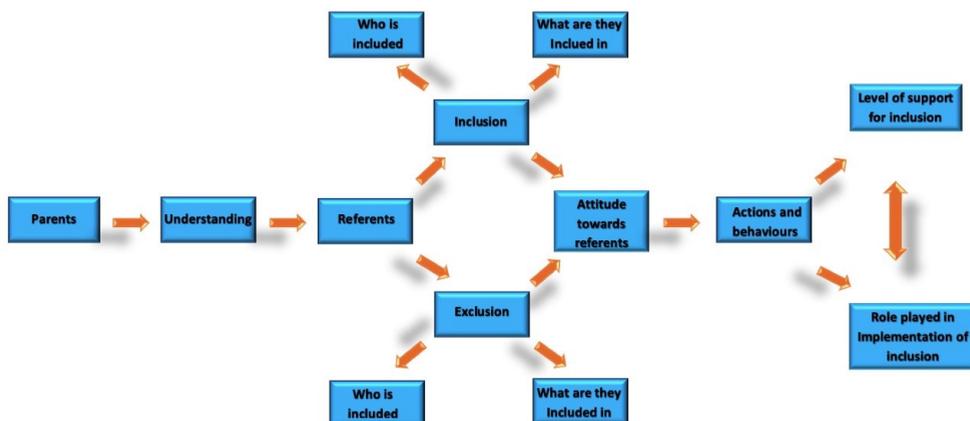

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

As outlined in figure 1 above, parents hold an understanding of the referents of inclusion and exclusion. This means that they assign meaning to the terms inclusion and exclusion.

This meaning includes their belief of who is to be included/excluded and what they are to be included/excluded from. Parents' understanding of the referents influences their attitude towards inclusion and exclusion. The attitude that is formed then results in specific actions and behaviours (Cross, 2005; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). Regarding this study, the parents' understanding of inclusion and exclusion informs their attitude towards such, which in turn determines the level of support that they give to inclusion and the role that they are willing to take in the implementation thereof. As such, investigating what parents understand by the terms inclusion and exclusion is an important step in facilitating attitude change and support of inclusion.

In South Africa, the move to inclusion was heralded by the Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001). This document proposed a move away from the notion of "special needs education" and the adoption of the idea of "barriers to learning". In this way, recognition and respect for diversity are encouraged. The policy explains that barriers to learning can result from intrinsic medical conditions, such as disability and illness, as well as from extrinsic factors, such as poverty, language, culture and socio-economic status. In addition, the Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) and the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994) note that inclusion is not merely about physical presence in a specific environment, but should focus on access, acceptance and participation in education (Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit & Van Deventer, 2016).

Given that inclusion is contextually specific, short definitions of exclusion and inclusion are provided followed by a brief overview of formal and epistemological access and an exploration of studies that focus on the understanding of parents' perceptions of inclusion.

2. DEFINITION OF EXCLUSION

Exclusion, similar to inclusion, can be understood from different perspectives. One such perspective is that the exclusion of certain individuals emanates from societal biases regarding difference. Slee (2011) argues that the exclusion of individuals emanates from the way society differentiates between people. Children are excluded from education because of the broadly espoused view of their particular barrier to learning. Thus, exclusion results from a distinct set of decisions that are made around their differences (Slee, 2011) such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, migrants and poverty that exclude these groups of individuals from particular contexts and societies.

An alternative perspective of exclusion is presented by Silver (1994) who defines exclusion within three paradigms: solidarity, specialisation and monopoly. According to these paradigms, exclusion is attributed to different causes and associated with varying philosophies. Within the paradigm of solidarity, exclusion is attributed to the breakdown of the bond between society and the individual (Silver, 1994). Concerning specialisation, exclusion is the consequence of "social differentiation resulting in specializations within the various spheres of life" (Silver, 1994:542). Within the third paradigm, monopoly, exclusion arises from the interplay between "class, status and political power" (Silver, 1994:543). This last paradigm creates "social closure" in which individuals are kept out of something, and thus promotes inequality (Silver, 1994:543).

3. DEFINITION OF INCLUSION

While the concept of inclusion is often used in the educational environment, it is not easily defined and there are many interpretations and definitions on offer. Two distinctions are made between the definitions of inclusion: a narrow definition and a broad one. The distinction between the two definitions refers to "who" needs to be considered for inclusion. In terms of the narrow definition, inclusion only occurs for those individuals whose functioning has been impaired due to cognitive and psychiatric difficulties. However, a broad definition addresses the manner in which all individuals can be included meaningfully in education and addresses such concepts as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic status and HIV status, to mention a few (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010), i.e. any identity marker that would render an individual vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion.

According to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD),

> inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers (CRPD, 2016:4).

The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report on Inclusion (GEMR, 2018:4) however notes that inclusive education is a "statement of political aspiration, an essential ingredient to the creation of inclusive societies", while Ainscow, Booth and Dyson's (2006) principled approach to inclusion foregrounds the guiding principles of "equity, participation, community and respect for diversity" (Messiou, 2017:147). In South Africa however, the Education White Paper 6 states that it hopes that inclusive education would provide "a cornerstone of an integrated and caring society" (DoE, 2001:10). While these explanations of inclusion vary, they all meet the requisites of a broad definition of inclusion and converge on the element of society with the Education White Paper 6 and the GEMR referring to inclusive education having a positive influence on the society. However, the variety in explanations leaves room for parents to develop their own understanding of inclusion, which may well diverge from the intended use.

The GEMR (2018:6, 7), goes on to refer to the dimensions of inclusion; physical, social, psychological and systematic inclusion, while the elements of inclusion refer to

> [n]ational legal frameworks and policies, governance and finance, curricula and learning materials, teachers, school leaders, and education support personnel, schools, and finally communities, parents and students.

4. FORMAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS

Within the education sphere, the first step to inclusion speaks to access to institutions afforded to individuals. Consequently, an exploration of parents' understanding of inclusion, necessitates a discussion of what is meant by access. The Consortium for Research in Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) refers to access to education as admission, on age progression, attendance and achievement of curricular norms, access to post-primary education and equality in learning opportunities (Lewin, 2007). Morrow however, argues that access to education occurs across two levels: formal access to an institution in terms of being admitted or enrolled, while epistemological access refers to "the goods distributed by the institution" (2007:37). The consideration of formal and epistemological access is embodied in the principled approach to inclusion where "presence, participation and achievement" (Messiou, 2017:147) for all children is the ultimate outcome.

In South Africa, formal access to schools is espoused in various policies governing education within schools (DoE, 2001; Republic of South Africa, 1996a, 1996b), however, in practice, access to schools is not guaranteed. Learners may be denied formal access to schools based on the language of instruction, proximity to home and ability to pay school fees. Epistemological access is also denied to as many as 50% of South African children (Du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014). Of these children only 45% who enter the system in Grade 1, exit the system in Grade 12 (Roberts, 2019). Furthermore, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Howie *et al.,* 2017) demonstrated that 78% of Grade 4 learners who participated in the study are functionally illiterate (Howie *et al.,* 2017). This means that, even though children are in school (formal access), they may not be able to access what is "at the heart of basic education", that is, "learning to read and write" (Pendlebury, 2009:25). Thus, while children are included in schools, they are excluded from the teaching and learning that takes place in these environments.

5. PARENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSION

While this study's focus is on parents' understanding of inclusion and exclusion, there is a dearth of literature in this regard. Instead, literature presents findings regarding parents' perceptions of inclusion, which has been included here. A review of the literature found that parents generally hold positive perceptions towards having children with special education needs in mainstream classrooms (De Boer *et al.,* 2010; Elzein, 2009; Peck, Staub, Gallucci & Swartz, 2004). Their perceptions are impacted by, firstly, socio-economic status that was found to be a determinant of parental perceptions towards inclusion in South Africa (De Boer *et al.,* 2010). Specifically, parents with high to average socio-economic status held significantly more favourable perceptions towards inclusion than parents with a low socio-economic status. In South Africa, this is particularly relevant because of the large discrepancies in the economic status of its citizens. Secondly, another influencing factor is that of parental education level. Studies have found that parents with only a high school education are less favourable towards the inclusion of learners with barriers to learning than parents who have continued their education beyond Grade 12 (Leyser & Kirk, 2011; Tafa & Manolitsis, 2003). Given South Africa's history, this finding is important as many individuals did not have access to quality education during the apartheid era and did not complete their formal schooling (Lu & Treiman, 2011; Thomas, 1996).

Based on the literature reviewed, parents identify positive outcomes for their children experiencing barriers to learning (Elzein, 2009; Lui *et al.,* 2015; Peck *et al.,* 2004). Parents placed these benefits in three categories, which are "general benefits for development, social/behavioural benefits for development and cognitive/language benefits" (Seery, Davis & Johnson, 2000:274). Parents find that, as a result of inclusion, children develop increased self-concepts, improved social and emotional development and an acceptance of individual differences (Peck *et al.,* 2004; Duhaney & Salend, 2000).

Despite the predominantly positive outlook on inclusion, parents also harbour concerns. The allocation of teacher time was a concern for some parents who felt that their children without barriers to learning will receive less attention than learners with barriers and that this will compromise their children's academic development (Lui *et al.,* 2015; Narumanchi & Bhargava, 2011).

On the criteria parents use when thinking about inclusion, Peck *et al.* (2004) found that parents were more open to having a child with a physical disability included in the class but were less open to having children with behavioural difficulties in the class.

6.   PARENTAL PARTICIPATION

Internationally, parental participation in both the decision-making about their children and their education is defined in reform acts and regulations (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). South African legislative policies, such as the South African Schools Act (DoE, 1996b) and the Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001), espouse parents' rights to educational placements of their choice for their children as parents are considered to be

> integral partners in developing a more inclusive system, where decision-making and the responsibilities for outcomes are shared (Swart *et al.,* 2004: 81).

From the research outlined above, it is clear that inclusion is a multi-faceted concept that is the most effective means of "combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (UNESCO, 1994:ix). In South Africa, this is particularly pertinent given the country's history as it is viewed as a means of addressing the inequalities of the past. Even though parents are integral to the success of inclusion, the literature has only focused on their attitude towards inclusion without a clear indication of what parents understand by inclusion. Therefore, the research question guiding this paper is to explore parents' understanding of inclusion and exclusion with the aim of indicating how this understanding may influence their role in its implementation.

7.   METHODS

7.1 Research design

The current paper is part of a larger study that investigated the attitude of SGB members and non-SGB members towards inclusion. The study employed a mixed method explanatory design, as the quantitative data was collected prior to conducting the interviews (Cresswell, 2012). The quantitative results were used in conjunction with literature to develop the interview questions in the qualitative phase of the study (Barnes, 2012). The focus of this paper was on parents' understanding of inclusion and exclusion. To this end, the qualitative data collected from the surveys and the interview data was analysed.

7.2 Sample

For the quantitative phase, a non-probability sample of 861 parents of learners from four non-fee-paying schools and three fee-paying schools in the Johannesburg area completed questionnaires, of which 559 completed the open-ended questions used for analysis in this article. The sample was primarily female (n=436, 78%) and the majority identified as black (n=377, 67.4%). Participants' level of education ranged from some education (n=87, 15.6%) to doctoral degree (n=1, 0.2%), with the highest frequency of parents having obtained a matric certificate (n=167, 29.9%). The age of the parents ranged between 19 years and 77 years with a mean age of 34.1 years (SD=8.84). For the qualitative phase, a non-probability, convenience sample of 12 females and one male agreed to be interviewed. Ten of these participants identified as black, while three identified as coloured. Their education level ranged from some high school education to a bachelor's degree, while their ages ranged from 28 years to 67 years.

Table 1:   Demographic information

Demographic		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	118	21%
	Female	436	78%
Race	Black	377	67.4%
	Coloured	156	27.9%
	White	4	0.7%
	Indian	2	0.4%

7.3 Instruments

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of a number of sections that assessed parents' perception of inclusion and exclusion. For this paper only the first two sections were pertinent. The first section was a biographical section (including age, gender, race, highest level of education, number of children and grade that children are currently completing). The second section of the questionnaire comprised open-ended questions that asked respondents about their understanding of inclusion and exclusion in education in general and gave them the opportunity to make any additional comments. The questionnaire was piloted on 19 parents resulting in edits being made to the presentation of the questions and the wording of a few of the questions.

The semi-structured interview schedule comprised 10 questions. These questions allowed parents the opportunity to express their understanding of inclusion and exclusion in more depth as well as discuss the exclusionary and inclusionary criteria used within their child/ren's specific school. Parents also expressed their views on what "types" of children they would prefer to have in a classroom with their child. The interview schedule was piloted on two parents.

7.4 Data collection and analysis

Ethics clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Witwatersrand (Protocol no. H16/08/14) and permission to approach the schools was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education. Of the twelve school principals who were approached, seven gave permission to access the parent sample. The questionnaires were distributed via the school to the parents. Based on the questionnaire responses, parents who indicated a willingness to be interviewed were contacted and arrangements were made to conduct the interview at a time and place convenient for them. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the interview transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clark (2006). Codes were generated and potential themes identified. Descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, were used to analyse the demographic data as well as the occurrence of themes.

8. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the interview transcripts. These were inclusion/exclusion criteria, levels of inclusion and exclusion, the effects of exclusion and the effects of inclusion. These themes

elicited several sub-themes, as is shown in Table 2 below. Interviewees are referred to using numerals, e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. Data from the questionnaire responses is referenced using letters and numbers to indicate the different schools (letters) and the participant (numbers), e.g. AA1:1.

Table 2:   Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Results from questionnaires	Results from interviews
		N	*N*
Inclusion/Exclusion criteria	Interpersonal characteristics	144	10
	Extra-personal characteristics	81	13
Levels of inclusion/exclusion	Formal access	106	12
	Epistemological access	38	9
Effect of exclusion		37	6
Effect of inclusion		22	9

8.1 Inclusion/Exclusion criteria

The data gathered and analysed indicated that parents thought about inclusion and exclusion in education in terms of individual characteristics. This implies that parents thought about interpersonal and extra-personal characteristics that would result in children being included and excluded. Interpersonal characteristics refer to characteristics that are innate to the child and include disabilities, learning abilities and those with behavioural difficulties, while extra-personal characteristics refer to characteristics that are external to the child and include home language and socio-economic status. Parents predominantly referenced physical access being granted or withheld, linking to Morrow's (2007) formal access.

Interpersonal characteristics

Parents responses indicated that they consider interpersonal characteristics when thinking about inclusion and exclusion. Interpersonal characteristics can be understood as those characteristics that are intrinsic to an individual. Inclusion and exclusion, for these parents, is thus aligned to the medical model, where deficits are seen to result from the individual. This understanding contrasts with policy documents that view barriers as emerging from the environment. From the data sources, interpersonal characteristics emerged as the most prominent criterion for inclusion with many parents (interviewee, n=10; questionnaires, n=144). Thus, most parents considered factors that were intrinsic to children, such as disability, learning ability and behavioural difficulties:

> *Ok, firstly we have disability right. This highly determines whether learners can access the school, for example, if a child is in a wheelchair, there is no way he/she can go around in a school with no ramps and elevators to allow him to move around so the school can decide no, that the child should not be admitted (Participant 3).*

> *We also have so-called slow learners, which we say they are slow in comparison to other learners, which are the majority in the school. These learners require special attention at all times, leading to a time-consuming process … Then in such a case … we need them to be removed from schools that cannot teach them fully for their safety and convenience of other students (Participant 3).*

With reference to the data above, parental thinking around interpersonal characteristics coincides with Slee's (2011) understanding of exclusion that results, not necessarily from the individual, but from decisions that are taken around an individual's difference. This means that parents believe that barriers to learning can emanate from the individual (DoE, 2001). If an understanding does not look at how the education system further constrains those with intrinsic barriers, then learners with factors, such as disability, learning ability and behavioural difficulties, will continue to experience stigma and discrimination.

Extra-personal characteristics

Analysis of the data indicates that parents consider extra-personal factors, such as language and socio-economic status (SES), as criteria for inclusion and exclusion (interviewee, n=13; questionnaires, n=81) that are outside of the child's control. Thinking around extra-personal characteristics is strongly related to formal access for children with hints made towards epistemological access. The finding regarding the impact of SES on inclusion is echoed by Meny-Gilbert and Russell (2012) who found that SES impacts formal access. The focus on formal access only captures part of what inclusion means and ignores the learning experiences, participation and environment once formal access is gained (CRPD, 2016; Messiou, 2017).

Participants noted that,

> schools around our area are divided into tribes and languages (Participant 12).

> children's home languages are the reason children are not well integrated in their learning environments (Participant AA4:78).

> abilities plays a crucial role too, we have parents who cannot afford to pay fees for their children (Participant 10).

8.2 Spaces of inclusion and exclusion

It emerged that parents identified four "spaces" that children are given access to namely, schools, classrooms, activities and teaching and learning. These "spaces" reflect Morrow's (2007) notion of formal and epistemological access. Thus, while parents reference the different spaces what is communicated is a notion of admission into spaces and being able to engage meaningfully with the curriculum. However, most parents referred to formal access, through school and class admission, in contrast to epistemological access, through activities and teaching and learning. This contrast reflects that parents are more concerned about the physical admission into school and class, compared to what happens when a child is in those spaces. This may lead to children being internally excluded. Distinguishing between these various spaces of inclusion and exclusion was found in 12 interview responses and 136 questionnaire responses.

Formal access

Despite the fact that inclusion is about more than mere placement (Runswick-Cole, 2008), formal access, through enrolment at school and admission into classrooms, was noted by 12 interviewees and reflected in 106 questionnaire responses. Admission to school is noted in the following excerpts:

> My understanding of exclusion, it means not allowing a child to enter a school (Participant 10).

> *When your child is excluded from school, when educators can't help them (Participant CC3:80).*

> *Not allowing a child to be enrolled in a school (Participant 11).*

These reflect being enrolled in the school as an element of inclusion. Parents identified the type of school that children would have access to by stating:

> *All students attend … their neighbourhood school (Participant CC3:156).*

> *Inclusion involves admitting all children into class (Participant 4).*

> *All learners should be accommodated into mainstream classrooms (Participant CC3:212).*

These excerpts prove that parents differentiate between public/private and mainstream/special schools, along with regular and special classes. The type of access referred to by the parents correlates with the first dimension of inclusion identified in the GEMR (2018), that of physical inclusion. This understanding of inclusion does not include the other dimensions, which imply a shallow understanding of inclusion.

Epistemological access

For some parents, notions of inclusion and exclusion moved beyond mere presence within a school or classroom to include an understanding that inclusion implies that children develop their knowledge and understanding of content within the spaces that they have been allowed to access. This type of access, epistemological access, was noted by nine interviewees and in 38 questionnaire responses:

> *Inclusion takes into account the classroom activities whereby, as a teacher, you are able to accommodate even the weakest learners in the classroom (Participant 4).*

Thus, parents are able to identify that a mere presence in the classroom does not automatically result in teaching and learning but that, in fact, children should be "integrated in their learning" (Participant AA4:78) and that exclusion is

> *being deprived from certain learning areas especially if the child is disabled or suffers from some sort of impairments (Participant CC3:61).*

> *taking everyone into consideration when you teach children. Here we talking about being able to reach all the learners in a meaningful manner that ensures they understand the content [that] you, as a teacher, is delivering to them. So I would say a school that is serious about inclusion … includes all children in the learning process (Participant 15).*

Given that learning does not only occur within the classroom, parents also considered the aspect of being included in school activities and believed that exclusion is when "children do not take part in any of the activities in school" (Participant CC3: 39). One such activity could be school outings where

> *children are left out of opportunities to learn because they cannot afford the ticket to go to the trip with their peers (Participant 13).*

The idea of being excluded from learning because of finances is captured in the final dimension of inclusion as per the GEMR (2018), systematic inclusion.

It is clear from the aforementioned that parents think about inclusion not only in terms of physical access but also in terms of gaining an understanding of the content being taught. However, their understanding does not seem to include the dimension of social and psychological inclusion (GEMR, 2018). Furthermore, many more parents referenced formal access rather than epistemological access, indicating an understanding of inclusion linked to placement as opposed to participation and achievement. A focus on placement may be linked to changes that occurred in the school application system. This change has meant that parents can apply to a school of their choice, be it a neighbourhood school, a school close to their place of work or a school where siblings attend (Inside Education, 2018).

8.3 Effect of exclusion

Six interview respondents and 37 questionnaire respondents referred to the effect of exclusion in their understanding of inclusion and exclusion. The effect of exclusion was however, understood through the impact it had on children with barriers to learning specifically. The effect of exclusion is a novel finding in this study with previous studies demonstrating parents' understanding of the positive and negative effects of including learners. This focus on the effects of exclusion may have emerged in this study as a result of the country's history, which is marred by exclusion. The majority of the respondents in this study would have had first-hand experience of being excluded in one way or another resulting in an awareness of the effect of exclusion. The first aspect identified was the emotional development of the child:

> *Now, when we talk about excluding that learner, it also becomes painful to him and challenges his sense of self and worth … because one of them must be removed due to disability. The entire friendships and relationships they had are stripped away from that child's life (Participant 3).*

The emotional element of exclusion was substantiated by participants, who noted that,

> *exclusion may cause children to lose their self-confidence and to lose concentration (Participant AA4:58).*

> *when you start to exclude, by not involving the child now in classroom activities, they become aggressive. As a result, the child lacks concentration in class because of feelings of being inadequate and being different (Participant 10).*

Thus, parents noted that exclusion has a negative impact on children's behaviour with the possibility of causing

> *children to be violent towards each other and not help each other with their school work (Participant AA3:41).*

> *problems of bullying and victimisation of children with special needs and lack of empathy and mutual understanding (Participant 4).*

The child's attitude towards learning was also thought to be affected by exclusion as it makes

> *learners become lazy about learning because they are afraid that no-one cares about them (Participant AA2:77).*

This demotivation regarding learning could be linked to exclusion understood as a reason for learner attrition, for example:

> *Exclusion is the reason why kids drop out of school (Participant AA2:56).*
>
> *We should end exclusion at schools because it leads to children dropping out of school (Participant AA1:34).*

8.4 Effect of inclusion

It is evident that parents' views on the effects of inclusion for children with and without barriers to learning shift their understanding from formal access to epistemological access. Thus, instead of being concerned with where children are included (formal access), parents start to think about what that access may be and the consequent outcomes thereof.

Parents' understanding of inclusion (interviews, n=9; questionnaires, n=22) was expressed through the predominantly positive impact inclusion had on the typically developing child as well as those traditionally excluded from learning. For the typically developing child,

> *inclusion prepares them for life after school and international travel, and they are exposed to different cultures which makes it easier for them to adapt (Participant 1).*

Being educated in an inclusive environment was thought to assist children in interacting with those with differences, give them the opportunity to learn from others and develop friendships. The pro-social outcome of inclusion is echoed by the parents in the De Boer *et al.* (2010), Duhaney and Spencer (2000), Elzein (2009) and Ferguson (2008) studies. These studies noted that children developed increased self-concepts, improved social skills and that an acceptance of individual differences was fostered through their interactions with children with barriers to learning. Parents also referred to the possibility of inclusion developing more inclusive societies, which is one of the aims of the Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001). Despite the positive outcomes of inclusion, the negative impact of inclusive classrooms is reflected by Participant 3, who stated,

> *Now you can imagine a situation where my child is being held back by another child who was supposed to be in a school for slow learners but now delays the rest of the learners. This may not be fair to other learners … slow learners, I don't think they should necessary take them to the school because they take time and slow things down a lot, in a way, they waste other kids' time.*

This reflects the notion that parents are in favour of inclusive education provided that it does not affect their child negatively. This is supported by a parent in Seery *et al.* (2000) who stated,

> *I don't think all education should be inclusionary because then someone always is lacking, missing out … I don't want the needs of the other children jeopardised.*

Positive outcomes for the children who were being included were also identified. A parent noted that,

> *mixing with other children also positively impacts on their self-esteem. The child does not have self-hate that they are in a school for the disabled and they are all disabled around him. The child in an inclusive school can feel that they can associate with other people, even though they have whatever condition they have. Mixing can also help them to accept themselves (Participant 2).*

Not only did inclusion have a positive impact on the children emotionally but parents also felt that it had other benefits:

> *Inclusion in education gives one the opportunity to excel in their studies and to be more involved (Participant AA1:47).*

> *[Inclusion] allows them to develop individual strengths and gifts with high and appropriate expectations (Participant CC1:4).*

These findings are consistent with Seery *et al.*'s study (2000), where parents identified the benefits of inclusion in the social/behavioural and cognitive domains for children with barriers to learning along with Elzein (2009) who found that parents perceived social and academic improvements in their children.

As with children without barriers to learning, a disadvantage to inclusion also emerged for children with barriers:

> *Others are afraid to say that they do not understand because other learners catch things much faster. Now he may feel stupid (Participant 2).*

While inclusion was identified as having a predominantly positive impact, a negative emotional impact was also identified. This parental concern was found by Leyser and Kirk (2004) with parents expressing concern about the emotional well-being of the child being included.

The identification of positive outcomes by parents for children with and without barriers to learning is supported by Nussbaum (2006:205–206) who states that the mainstreaming of children with disabilities

> *can be defended on the grounds of benefit to the mentally disabled child, who will be given more incentives to develop cognitively and who may be less likely to be stigmatised as type apart. It can also be defended because of the benefit it offers to so-called normal children, who learn about humanity and its diversity by being in a classroom with a child who has unusual impairments. They learn to think for themselves, their own weaknesses, and the variety of human capability, in a new way.*

The positive outcomes of inclusion were also noted by Duhaney and Salend (2000) who found that parents noted improvements in their children's self-concepts and acceptance of difference.

9. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The biggest limitation of the study was that only parents of learners attending township schools were included. This resulted in not all of the population groups being sufficiently represented, along with the fact that only public schools were included.

10. CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to explore parents' understanding of inclusion and exclusion in education and how this may influence their role in its implementation. The results of this investigation show that parents' understanding of inclusion is represented in four themes, namely, inclusion/exclusion criteria, levels of inclusion and exclusion, effects of exclusion and effects of inclusion. Analysis of the data showed that parents' perceptions of inclusion are

strongly linked to the practice of inclusion as opposed to a deeper theoretical understanding. Thus, much of their understanding of whom and where children should be included links strongly to formal access. This lack of understanding from an epistemological stance is problematic since what happens to the children once they are granted formal access goes largely uninterrogated. Given that South Africa aims to use inclusion in education as a gateway to developing a more inclusive, understanding and tolerant society, a narrow understanding of inclusion will not assist in developing that but may instead further entrench separation and exclusion of those who are perceived as being different.

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