

Perspectives on teacher education needs for teaching children with intellectual disability in an inclusive education system in South Africa

Background: South Africa has adopted excellent inclusive education policies but has been less successful with implementation. An area of major concern is the continued exclusion and lack of quality education for children with severe sensory or intellectual impairment (SSII). This paper reports on a situation analysis in support of a European Union funded project (Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion, at the University of Cape Town) to develop four short teacher education courses, one of which relates to severe intellectual impairment.

Design: The large study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the learning needs of the child with severe sensory or intellectual impairment?
2. What teacher education is needed in order to address these learning needs?

In this paper we related the study to children with severe intellectual impairment (SII) which includes many children with Down Syndrome.

Methods:

Once the necessary permissions and ethical approval were obtained, 111 interviews and focus groups with 130 participants were conducted in three provinces and eight schools in South Africa. Children, parents, teachers, school administrators and district officials shared their understanding of learning needs and teacher education for children with SII. This paper focuses on two inclusive and two special schools attended by children with SII. The data were transcribed and coded deductively in terms of the different participant group perspectives. These perspectives were then interpreted to provide answers to the research questions.

Results:

Children with SII have learning needs around the use of assistive technology including augmentative and alternative communication. They require appropriate classroom discipline, inclusive teaching strategies and an appropriate teaching pace which is delivered by patient teachers. Learning and teaching materials that are adapted specifically to intellectual impairment are needed. Parents and children felt strongly about the need for psychosocial support.

The teacher education priorities are therefore training in teaching with assistive technology, knowledge of specific impairments and the associated pedagogy. The study also highlighted the need for "soft" skills in relationship building and advocating for social justice for children with ID.

Implications:

While the implementation of inclusive education is to be welcomed, there is still a need to recognise the specific needs of children with intellectual impairment. A two pronged approach is suggested where inclusion in the mainstream is supported by specialist knowledge of Down Syndrome and impairment specific pedagogies. The challenge lies in educator development strategies that make this a reality in all schools.