

Exploring the vulnerable children in South Africa : How vulnerable children have or have not been after the new dispensation of government in 1994

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1. Introduction

South Africa became a democratic country in 1994 when President Nelson Mandela became the first president. The African National Congress government took over from the apartheid government, new policies were introduced among which the caring and the taking care of the children with some vulnerability were considered. In this research study we examine the practices and the development effected by the policy shift since 1994 to the present in South Africa. South Africa has nine provinces that were formed when the country was liberated from the apartheid government. This study chose Kwa Zulu Natal province which has the highest population. Since this province is very big and highly populated, we focussed our study on the Durban area. This paper focuses on how primary schools in particular support vulnerable children. It also outlines some of the current practices that have developed during this period. The study intends to exemplify on how primary school teachers support vulnerable children and also the challenges they face in the identification of their individual needs. In conducting this study we tried to understand who the most vulnerable children are in South Africa and how they are supported by the schools, parents, environment and society as a whole. In order to answer these questions, we had to identify the number of primary schools that are around Durban and also visited some places of safety where they are protected. We further had to spend some time with them to observe the reality of the situation. We tried to define the word vulnerability but we also discovered that it was not easy as it was echoed by

many researchers such as, Brown et. al (2009). They echoed that it is easy to talk about than to define it, they call it a 'vague and nebulous concept'. We also echoed the same sentiment as we encountered the realities in the centres and schools that we visited.

In the primary schools and centres that we visited we identified children with different needs as a result they are all grouped by the education department as schools of children with special needs. Within this grouping some of the children are physically disable, others mentally disable because of mentally development or because of being affected by abuse or rape or health reasons. There is also another group who are out of school most living on the streets begging. According to Skinner et. al (2004), they call them '*street kids*'. They describe street kids as children who have run away from home and live on the streets. Many are believed to be orphans while the rest run away from home due to lack of parental love, care and poverty. There is usually no safety in the children living on the street as they are often abused and sometimes work as sex workers in brothels for food and survival. We were able to visit a street (Albert Park) where such children are staying as beggars and drug sniffers who are out of homes because of various reasons. We interviewed some of them and captured some of their stories in this paper. The Durban residents have created a special word for them and call them, '*amaphara*'. This is a Zulu word taken from the English word *parasites* because of them begging for food and money most of their time for survival.

It is argued that services often fail children because they do not intervene until problems arise. Teachers at the school have an advantage of seeing

children's everyday as a result they are well placed to identify the needs at an early stage and respond to vulnerability in partnership with other agencies like the health departments and psychologists and social workers depending on the identified need. Oppenheim et. al (2009) , echo that early intervention for vulnerable children through public services, in which they include other schools and health providers are crucial in identification of the needs. The understanding and concerns for sustainable and inclusive education development was the key priority for the South African government after 1994. This paper further explores and discusses the practices and the implementation of these as envisaged by the government.

2. Research methodology

To examine, understand, and interpret the magnitude and nature of the problems of vulnerable children, potential support systems and care for vulnerable children, as well as social conditions of these children, this study draws on the qualitative research approach. This approach contributes to the process of constructing research knowledge (Creswell, 2005) as we observe, interview, record, describe, interpret and appraise settings as they are. Within this context, qualitative researchers interact with participants, such as orphans, vulnerable children and their practices, as they attempt to understand and make sense of the social world or natural setting from the perspectives of the targeted participants. Considering that the importance of qualitative research lies partially in exploring the participants' multiple realities and experiences of the social phenomenon under investigation, we used semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to gain insights into the issues related to the behaviour of, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, knowledge and values regarding vulnerable children. There were two senior government officials who were interviewed and who provided us with the policy documents and the training documents that they use for training the teachers who are teaching at schools with learners that have various disabilities. Topics covered in these documents included the policies of the government and the implementation processes in the Durban area. We further conducted an interview with the university professor at the local university who is an expert on this field and she highlighted to

us the reality of what was happening in the country. She once taught at a special needs school as a teacher some years ago and her experiences enriched our understanding of children with disabilities. She further shared with us some of her masters' students' thesis who were researching on some of the implementation of inclusive education and children with disability. We further conducted interviews with community workers, caretakers and NGO leaders that support the street children around Durban at Albert Park where they usually gather every morning.

Since our research gathered massive information about vulnerable children around Durban, we thus streamlined our study and focussed on the case study based on one primary school that provide education as a special school, the Westpark primary school. We believe that this case will be in a better position to answer our questions. Our argument is that schools exist to cause learning that is intellectually meaningful, productive and socially valuable. Accordingly, we contend that schools exist to develop and deepen students' understanding of important ideas and process equipping them to transfer their learning in the meaningful and effective ways, lifelong habits of life and survival. We argue that all the many visions reflect a common goal: developing the key habits of mind that signify a mature and effective adult. What is the current curriculum reality when comparing it with the actual vision of the training? The curriculum is expected to produce a specific character or a pattern of behaviour, especially for training that produces moral and mental improvement in communication to identify factors accurately. The classroom environment should be conducive liveable during school hours. Day to day living routines should make the learners to adjust to the existing environment. Teachers are expected to tailor and personalize the work of change to suit the interests, experience, talents and the readiness level of the learners as individuals. This study offers an explanation of these elements, the rationale and the occurrences within the contexts of schools that have vulnerable children.

3. The policy and implementation challenges

Firstly we outline the dynamic, social and general complexities of the problem situation. One of the most pressing questions that South Africa faces is how to

provide a response that can be both loving and sufficiently large in scale to support and to take care of all the vulnerable children that are socio-economic results from the apartheid era. The department of education adopted the term inclusive education in 2001. It has been in the existence for 15 years now but little has been done. The projection by the education department was that by 2021 all schools will be fully inclusive. The meaning of inclusive education is seen as an umbrella body of many vulnerable learners with various disabilities or general barriers to learning. The senior official from the department of education explained that inclusive education for them has to do with 3 things, namely,

- A) Career guidance
- B) Psycho Social behaviour
- C) HIV/Life skills

These three groups were guided by the UNESCO declaration which is EFA-(Education For All). She strongly said that the agreement in 2006 at Ugu district. One of the districts in Durban, reads "Let us not move children but the schools should address the barriers of the learners". She further mentioned that they have challenges in the implementation of inclusive education and she cited the following as challenges:

- I. Funding to offer the necessary equipment and support needed by the schools.
- II. Staff with relevant qualifications and passionate to teach learners with a variety of disabilities
- III. Resources that are user friendly and important to the vulnerable learners eg. Dismantling of stairs to cater for ramps.
- IV. Understanding of terms and terminology that are related to physiology even in the province which becomes very confusing to the teachers that have to implement the training and also the material used in the normal school situations.
- V. Curriculum management challenges of 560 schools in the Durban area that are supposed to be monitored and to be supported by her team of only 10 personnel.
- VI. Readiness and preparedness of the educators to offer the curriculum in the classroom and also to cater the needs of the individual learners while they were not trained to be in such a situation.
- VII. Cost cutting measures impact on the personnel and implementation

When she was asked on what they have achieved so far since 1994, she listed the following as achieved by her department:

- Funding; more money for high level of support was offered by various industries
- Employing teacher assistants to help the teachers
- Purchasing of resources gradually as per the urgent need of the school
- Revamping of buildings to make it accessible to all learners
- Full service school stability in accommodating some children with physical disabilities
- Functionality in the district as some schools were coping with this situation
- Schools monitoring set the end of the term progress and evaluation of what works and what needs to be improved
- The Durban area was awarded for being the best directorate to implement inclusive education

While there were some progress and some work happening in some schools the term inclusive education became a very broad term that is usually not understood even by the teachers who are supposed to teach in the classroom. This inclusive education demanded a need for collaboration, innovation, leadership and commitment to all the stakeholders at community level, school level and at the society at large. At the community level it aimed at promoting awareness, dialogue and engagement with the society and the families. The challenge faced by the school is that the program fosters education around children's rights that promotes awareness and reporting of sexual violence cases. The major challenge for education in the school situation is to create a learner centred peaceful and safety environment. There were main stream schools that were to provide support to full service schools which were clustered in districts. Within the 560 schools around Durban there are 19 special needs schools of different kinds. These were for remedial purposes, special support services, intensive disabilities that had to do with individual learners and the centres for pregnancies and trauma. These were special schools which were fully resourced for the learners with intensive disability. The major challenges that teachers in these centres faced is that they had no clue of what their expectations were. There was no continuous training provided in some cases

and in other cases most teachers were not trained to work with children with disabilities. Since there were very few skilled personnel to implement the prescribed curriculum resolution effectively in most school this was a big challenge.

We also had a chance to interview the psychologist who works closely with Director in the 560 schools around Durban. She explained and discussed with us the teacher in service training procedures. She mentioned that it usual takes place after school for two hours from 1pm to 3pm. If the course has a lot of information it usual lasted two afternoons because the school policy requires teachers to be at school teaching and not attending workshops. Learner support educator and a counsellor are based in each district for consultation at all times. In most cases these workshops include School Management Teams (SMTs). Staffing is always an issue in the identification of grade R and grade one which is an early intervention and this process is known as Screening, Identification, Assessment and Intervention (S.I.A.I). This is very important for the first time school goers as for identification of learning needs, learning capabilities and disorders. Each learner profile is kept in order to track the individual learner support and progress which is still needed. This is thus the major task that she is responsible for in the region together with her team. Besides the vulnerable children that are at school and safety environment, we have some of such children that are on the streets as abused children that are on the places that are not safe.

4. Out of school children (Lost generation)

The study revealed that there were cases of vulnerable children who experienced abuse from parents and relatives. Parental negligence could also be a form of abuse as it left such children in economic situations that drove them from home. We perceive such children as lost generation because they are either at school or at home. Such children ended up roaming the streets as 'street children'. Interviewing Mandla, one of the street kid, an orphan, he said, *"I left home when I was doing grade 5 when my mother died, as I was told to go and work in order to buy food as my uncle was not working and also was a drunkards. I got a job as a gardener and the money that I got was demanded by my uncle to buy liquor. I sometimes slept*

with no food except where I worked where I was offered some slices of bread and jam for the day. I made decision and left home. I walked for 25 kilometres on foot and survived by sleeping at the petrol stations on the way and started begging. I even went to an extent of sniffing glue so as to keep myself warm and to forget about life". The same sentiments were frequently echoed by other orphans in group discussions, who also reported that the ill-treatment for some orphans to leave home and become street children. There was also evidence of sexual abuse by older men and women who were either relatives or non relatives. These children lacked parental love and guidance and as a result an undisclosed number of them ran away from home and became street children. Talking to the NGO leader he mentioned that everyday they receive one or two children joining the team. Most of them are in the ages between 12 and 16. They become very shy and obedient as the beginning and usually find it difficult to relate their stories. After a few days they get well together and click with the other children in the team.

5. The case study at Westpark Primary School.

The school is situated in Chatsworth. It used to be White Afrikaans speaking community school during the apartheid era but it has been converted into a school for learners with special needs. It caters for learners that are transported from children's homes and their families. They are transported by buses from these places. These children have mixed disability needs varying from physical and mental disabilities. The school is supported by the department of education and has competent teaching staff that is qualified to teach pupils with special needs-based on the two teachers that we interviewed. They are already doing their masters degree on related courses based on children with disabilities. The principal mentioned that he had a lot of problems with staffing the previous year, and as a result he had to reshuffle his staff. The nature of the school is to get learners that are legitimately approved by social workers and officials from the education department. The school had all the required facilities. We were taken to the room which used to be the open space but it has been revamped and changed to be a sewing room where school uniforms are sawn. Besides the sawing room

there were other rooms that we saw like the kitchen or domestic science room where food is prepared and served, and the prayer room which is a very peaceful place for meditation. The principal took us to his office where he discussed how he developed and introduced the Continuous Assessment and Appraisal System (CAPS) curriculum for his own school. The CAPS assessment criteria are adapted to be suitable for his own learners. He has distributed more than 100 copies nationwide. He also introduced Mr Douglas to us who is his new teacher for motor mechanics. He also has a child with a disability (autism). Mr Douglas informed us that he was in the automobile business. He intends to bring the connection between the skills that are taught in the classroom with those that are needed by the business so that the learners can be employable after leaving the school at 18 years. He mentioned examples of wheel alignment, fixing punctures, painting cars, etc. He even showed us the motor mechanics classroom where practical work is done by the learners. He mentioned also the lack of funds for the machines that needed to be replaced because of advancing technology.

Interview with the two teachers (Julie and Vanessa)

These two teachers have been teaching at this school for a few years. They are best friends and always share what they experience in their classes on a daily basis because they both teach junior phase. They have 12 learners in a class, but the age is always neglected as the focus is on the capability and the disability. They told a lot of stories about their disabled learners, starting from learners who came to the school who did not know how to eat, sit, talk, and brush their teeth and many other basic things that we usually take for granted. The teachers mentioned the following issues as major experiences that the children have. They mentioned that besides being mentally and physically disabled is the attitude of not being accepted by society, and being seen as stupid and having a negative stigma. They are further neglected by their own family members as not part of them especially their siblings. In most cases some of them have some facial and other physical deformities that make their families and other children in the society not to want to be associated with them. Some of them are HIV positive as they have been sexually abused by family members who included uncles, fathers,

aunties, mothers and family friends. When they were asked what made them to teach in this particular school, one of them mentioned the fact that she was invited to come and help in doing some administration work and she was then interested in teaching in this school otherwise her specialisation is in environmental education. The other teacher has a husband who is a principal in one of the schools similar to this one, and who used to share his experiences with her. Then she became interested in teaching in such schools. She applied and was employed at this school. She has been at this school for 5 years. The school based workshops and meetings have made them to love teaching at this school especially because the principal is very supportive and the training workshops organized by the department have enhanced their interest in teaching at this school.

We noticed that some teaching staff became interested in teaching learners with special needs due to having disabled family members such as children and siblings, e.g. a principal whose son was disabled and passed on at the age of 29 few months ago; the mechanics teacher who has a son who is disabled. We asked the teachers what would be an effective teacher to teach in this particular school of learners with disabilities and they mentioned the following qualities; positive thinking, realistic and measurable goals, compassion, creative, innovative, individual attention and individual learner centred teaching strategic methods.

When the children turn 18, they have to leave the learning centres and go back to their communities. When they leave these centres, they need to have the survival skills. They are expected that they should acquire most skills of surviving independently and could be in a position to cope with the community and the societal values. The teachers are expected to give them life skills that will enable them to be able to do things themselves independently. They should be able to interact with their families, communities and society at large in future. As teachers we monitor their progress in reaching their goals of independence. When they were asked about the challenges that they faced, they mentioned the lack of support from the parents and the families. In most cases the parents or the members of the family are not educated and could not read nor write as a result written communication is a challenge. Teachers usually prepare and send a copy of a home programme work with the

hope that the parents will respond to parents and to give feedback but in most cases they do not get any feedback from them and they mentioned that some of the reasons might be the language as some of the children stay with grannies who are not educated. These two teachers that we spoke to expressed the fact that teaching at this school was like God speaking on them because their feelings and anxiety of working in this situation were high and have enhanced their spiritual growth. They further mentioned that the job they are doing is seen by them as a calling from God. They related how painful it was to lose one of their learners who passed away and the image of that child is still left with them.

4. Discussion

The understanding and concerns for sustainable and inclusive education development was key priority for the South African government as mentioned by the government officials as well as the psychologist. The plan and policies are very progressive and meaningful but implementation and strategies are lacking. A key priority for the state was to promote and maintain economic growth and development in education to all its citizens. It was envisaged that this will improve the life conditions and the quality of life of the people after 1994. It was also hoped that it will secure rights of the growing population with dependency inclination. A major obstacle in the promotion of social development is the uneven distribution of access to universal health and education coverage for disadvantages communities. In general, women and girls disproportionately carry the burden of poverty, inequality caring and female households are prone to poverty and poor access to education and health services. Drawing on the study done by Taylor (2014), some of the main features of the system cover grants for children, youth, elderly and the disabled. Decisions on the categories of the beneficiaries depend on the experiences of the vulnerabilities in the stage of life-cycle and whether the recipients meet the qualifying criteria based on the means test of financial resources. Children in poverty receive a child support grants. Grants are also available for children with disabilities and in foster care, unfortunately in most cases this money is misused and hardly take care of the vulnerable children. Some families just keep the disable

children home rather than the school because of the stigma that is associated with their cultural beliefs. Some cultures see them as a curse and a punishment from their ancestors.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

We found an almost universally high level of readiness to change especially at the Westpark Primary school. The need for collaboration, partnership and innovation was repeatedly mentioned by both the principal, community leaders and also the teachers at the school. The long term strategy must include a greater commitment to address the problems and challenges in the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa. Most teachers that teach such learners have no qualification except for the on job training. This training also concentrates on general issues and not on specific issues that can be in a better situation to address the specific and the individual needs of the learners. The department of education adopted inclusive education in 2001. The projection by the department was that by 2021 all schools will be fully inclusive but the information given to us was that little progress has been done to achieve such. The professor that we interviewed mentioned the fact that she was involved in working with the department in some of the workshops that they explored the implementation of the policy on inclusive education. There were mainstream schools that were to provide support to full service schools which were clustered in districts and there were special schools which were resourced for the learners with intensive disability. Unfortunately very few of such schools are fully functional. There was no on going training that equipped the teachers with the skills to teach vulnerable children and this led to teachers experiencing difficulties.

When we asked her about the training and the qualities that make a teacher effective in the teaching of such learners, she confirmed that there is a very thin line that will differentiate an effective teacher in a normal school to that of learners with disabilities. She mentioned that it should be someone who can see and learn from what she sees: the learners with disabilities are loving and they suffocate you with love because they see people as the same. They see us as human beings as equal without status or hierarchies, etc. The

only difference with them is that they are unprepared for life. The communities are now free to expose their children to the government through social workers so that they can get social grant from the government but there is still a stigma in the community. One case was narrated of a mentally disabled child who was under the foster care of his grandmother because the mother passed away. Because of HIV and Aids related disease he was chained on the tree everyday from morning to sunset due to his grandmother's piece jobs that she did to earn some money. She was reported by the neighbours to the social worker that took her to court but because she was protecting the child from getting lost and being abused by the community. The child is now in one of the schools where he is taken care of. It is important for us to know that there is now the community awareness on child abuse and also the opportunities given to the children to live in a safe and healthy environment instead of being chained on the tree.

It was quite clear to us that a lot of research has been conducted on inclusive education policies but very little have been done on implementation and the way on how successfully or unsuccessfully it was. We discovered that the challenges in the implementation are where there are bottlenecks at the infrastructure, resources and compartments. Individual compartments were still not competent in handling and giving directions to what is happening and what are supposed to be the mindset within schools is that from this rigid to inclusive. All learners have potential to learn. It should be an ongoing process. We believe that as a starting point from which agencies could develop training and helping initiatives would be truly responsive to the needs of the particular school. There should be inter-personal skills to create sustained relationships within and without school community. These initiatives should promote basic, safety, self esteem and needs of learners. Policy development must be accompanied by policy informed practices whose implementation is monitored and supported. Creation of safe trusting environment should be based on negotiated and accepted values. Moola, (2006) , echoes strongly that the environment must adapt to meet the needs of each learner, since every learner has a right to learn at his or her own pace rather than focusing on trying to 'fix' the learner experiencing barriers to learning. All teachers could be trained in basic coun-

seling skills and assisted to develop strategies to help them cope with stress and negative attitude. Policies could also be developed around how to offer material and emotional support to vulnerable children, which would combat the need for individual teachers to try and provide basic needs as they are currently doing. School leadership could take the initiative to implement and monitor strategies that would promote the creation of a safe, trusting environment based on negotiated and accepted values that are acceptable to the society. We suggest that the long term strategy must include a greater commitment to address the problems and challenges in the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa as envisaged that this would have been achieved in all schools by 2021. Provision of technical and vocational training is also important for children who have become working age. Further intervention programs should take into account the needs of the physically and mentally disabled children when they leave the safety environment such as schools.

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