

## APPLYING A TRANSFORMATIVE-PRAGMATIC PARADIGM TO ENGENDER COLLABORATION IN EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES

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### ABSTRACT

The transformative-pragmatic paradigm as applied in this paper has as one of its principles an emphasis on partnerships between researchers and participants, with the understanding that participants are themselves co-researchers who shape the research process. This paper elaborates on this starting point and indicates how in a particular research project undertaken in South Africa to examine the implementation of inclusive education, the initiating researchers (Nel, Romm, and Tiale) conducted focus groups with the intention of encouraging collaboration of various kinds. Collaboration as a way of thinking and organising is particularly important in the field of inclusive education. This paper shows how we, with teacher participants or co-researchers, set up collaborative processes at various levels, including:

- between researchers and teacher-participants (co-researchers),
- between teachers as part of institutional level support teams in schools,
- between teachers, the district support team and others in the Department of Education.

**Key Words:** Transformative-pragmatic paradigm, inclusive education, collaboration.

### INTRODUCTION

Within the theoretical framework that Prof Romm has presented, one of the principles this paper aims to highlight is the partnerships that were forged between researchers and participants and to illustrate how the latter evolved as co-researchers in the research process.

It all started with the initiation of an international collaborative, comparative research project titled: *A comparative analysis of teachers' roles in inclusive education* which included researchers from England, Finland, Lithuania, Slovenia, China and South Africa. Our main aim with this project was to ascertain how teachers from the different countries perceived the development of inclusive education in their particular contexts. It thus necessitated the researchers to consider the context and cultures of these countries when comparing their education policies and practices. Comparative studies do have limitations, seeing that there are a great deal of differences between countries in terms of culture, language, geography, education systems and so forth.

It is difficult to arrive at a unified conclusion as Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick, and Jament (2012, p.182) tried to understand "how different European countries provide for the inclusion of children with SEN (Special Educational Needs) ... to breach the linguistic and conceptual gaps". What was of significance about their study was "how different countries can learn from each other to implement better and more effective strategies... and inform each other's provision for training and professional development". Relevant to this paper is that Devecchi et al. (2012, p.182) identified the need to provide effective and meaningful training as well as continuous support and effective collaboration for teachers in order to realise effective inclusive education.

The research was based on a cultural-historical framework. Our research design was a sequential mixed-method design using convenience sampling for the quantitative part (300–500 teachers in each country) and

purposeful sampling (purposeful sampling, eight focus groups consisting of six teachers in each group). The data collection methods were:

(a) Quantitative: The sentiments, attitudes and concerns about Inclusive Education Scale (SACIE); Self-efficacy in implementing the Inclusive Practices Scale – pilot testing for readability and understanding of concepts (sample – 20 teachers)

(b) Qualitative: Focus group as well as individual interviews; document analysis

The data analysis used the SPSS for the quantitative part and content analysis for the qualitative part.

The three data collection phases were to be conducted over three years. In phase one, a quantitative survey involving four themes of inclusive education which emerged, was conducted which teachers had to complete. Phase 2 consisted of the focus group interviews and phase 3 (two years after the first survey) is a quantitative follow-up survey concerning inclusive education which will be conducted. Collaboration was identified in the quantitative part of the project as being pivotal for inclusive education and therefore one part of the focus group interviews consisted of the following questions:

1. How do you understand collaboration within inclusive education?
2. Tell me about your experience with collaboration in including learners who are experiencing barriers to learning at your school.
3. How do you see your role as a teacher within a collaborative network to support learners experiencing barriers to learning?

The South African researchers consisted of a researcher from the North-West University (residential) and two researchers from the University of South Africa (Unisa) – an open and distance learning university – of which one is the author of this article.

It is, however, necessary to refer to findings reported by Nel, Engelbrecht, Nel, and Tlale (2013: 11-12) which formed part of this collaborative project. The results from participant responses to open-ended questions and focus group interviews indicated that there was a general wish for collaboration between role players such as professionals and parents. However, numerous challenges prevent this from realising. A positive outcome of the interviews was that the participants expressed their feelings of being afforded the opportunity to express their feelings of frustration and inadequacies.

## REPORTS ON THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

As an outcome of the abovementioned collaborative international research, Malinen, Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Xu, Nel, Nel and Tlale (2013, p.34) which explored teacher efficacy for inclusive practices in China, Finland and South Africa, “the predictive power of other variables differed from country to country” was illustrated. However, despite these differences, and based on our findings, we were able to illustrate how teacher education can be improved in order to respond better to the challenges which inclusive education holds in the global arena. A significant finding, which pertains to this paper, is that there was a commonality between the three countries, that is, that experience in teaching learners with disabilities and “mastery experiences are assumed to be the strongest source of efficacy evaluations” and the variance in the collaboration dimension of self-efficacy was best explained.

As a further outcome of this collaborative research, Nel, Engelbrecht, Nel, and Tlale (2013) focused on understanding teachers’ views on collaboration in an inclusive education system in South Africa. They found that teachers believed that their training and skills are inadequate to collaborate, hence reverting to referring learners experiencing barriers to learning to other structures and professionals for support. Although the participants appealed for collaboration between role players, the challenges they faced makes it difficult to forge collaborative partnerships. This study had its limitations, particularly the small sample, that is three focus groups consisting of six teachers (at two South African universities, one residential and the other an open and

distance learning university). Therefore, the findings are not generalisable, but the recommendations are significant, namely that a collaborative effort should be made by the provincial Departments of Education and Higher Education to develop strategies where pre-service and in-service teachers are provided with opportunities to develop a “deeper understanding about collaborative strategies”, particularly in their specific school contexts.

In response to the recommendations for teacher training made in the abovementioned paper, Nel, Muller, and Savolainen (2013) focussed on the implications of the international collaborative research project, findings for an open and distance learning (ODL) university, the University of South Africa (Unisa). One of the constructs that surfaced and has a considerable impact on the successful implementation of inclusive education for all participating countries, is teachers’ self-efficacy in inclusive education practice, which can be addressed in the pre-service and in-service training programmes offered at Unisa. Taking cognisance of the findings in the different phases of the research project as a whole, particularly teacher self-efficacy regarding collaboration, it is recommended that Unisa offers initial teacher education programmes which will equip them with specialist skills to teach learners with disabilities. In addition, skills to accommodate these learners in inclusive schools and (Mays and Glennie in Nel et al., 2013) “knowledge-in-practice” skills, inter alia collaboration, which is a pivotal part of these programmes, must be taught. It is also important to consider the school structure and planning regarding inclusive education at government, provincial and school level. This calls for “extensive and well-orchestrated collaboration between Inclusive Education Schools and ODL Higher Education institutions such as Unisa.

With this bird’s eye view of the main research project and some of the significant findings which have been written up in the three papers above, I reflect on the focus group interviews that took place during the second phase of the research project and the initiative taken by Nel, Romm, and Tlale (2013) to take it a step further. We co-explored with the participants of the focus groups the implementation of inclusive education and provided space for them to reflect on their experiences of the focus group sessions with the three researchers.

#### **AN EMERGENT DEVELOPMENT EMANATING FROM THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS**

This article reports on an additional avenue that was not planned. This evolved from the focus group interviews in phase 2 with reference to the three questions posed in the focus group interviews. During this phase another researcher joined the Unisa researchers (Prof Romm) injecting the “transformative research paradigm with pragmatic twist” (Romm, 2014) in the focus group interviews. Nel, Muller, and Savolainen (2013) to be published in a special edition of *Progressio* (2014) as an outcome of the international collaborative research project mentioned) report on the quantitative findings that, where teachers have experience teaching learners with disabilities in an inclusive education (IE) environment and where there is diversity in the classroom, they are familiar with IE practice, their attitude is that of concern and their self-efficacy in terms of collaboration is heightened.

The evidence above suffices to conclude that for inclusive education to succeed, the collaboration of all stakeholders is needed. This propelled the authors of this article to report on the activity initiated by the three Unisa researchers after the focus group interviews were conducted (in June 2012), that is, to request the participants to voluntarily participate in further reflections on the process of the focus group interviews, directly after the interviews, with the aim of encouraging collaboration on various levels and realise “co-learning encounters” (Romm, Nel & Tlale, 2013). In these sessions, which were limited to ten minutes, the following guiding questions were posed to the participants:

1. How did you experience the focus group session?
2. How did you experience the process of facilitation?
3. How did you feel about the facilitator’s questions—did they make sense to you—did they make you think?
4. Do you think you learned from the facilitator?
5. Do you think you learned from others in the group and can you give examples?
6. Would you have liked us to ask any other questions?

It should be noted that the three participating schools formed part of the Gauteng Primary Literacy Strategy (GPLMS), which aims to improve numeracy and literacy skills in Grades 1–3 in 792 underperforming primary schools in the Gauteng province. The emphasis is on consolidating and expanding the current support provisioning model in order to ensure early identification of barriers and to offer learners access to a least restrictive learning environment and support system. The main aim of the strategy is to ensure that learners' literacy skills are enhanced by means of improving the teaching of literacy. This is done by training teachers, providing textbooks, workbooks, phonic charts and mobile libraries. Teachers, DBSTs, learner support educators, Gauteng Province learner support coaches, officials in inclusion units and special schools' therapists and support staff need to be capacitated to identify and provide support to learners. It is, however, noteworthy that there is a huge number of learners in regular schools who do not have disabilities, yet experience barriers to learning due to a range of reasons such as language barriers, socio-economic barriers, poorly trained teachers and the like. It is reported that, even though some teachers try to accommodate learners with diverse needs by differentiating and adapting the curriculum, there are others who find it difficult to do so and they are also resistant to making these changes (Department of Basic Education (DoBE) 2011-2014: 2, 10-14).

Although the GPLMS initiative is currently being implemented, the participants in the selected schools often digressed from the questions posed to them in the interviews, as they expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that they have been labeled as underperforming schools and hence have been identified to be part of the GPLMS. Having been labeled as GPLMS schools influenced their responses during the interviews and the further post interview sessions and this could be considered a limitation in the research. The researchers would pose the questions and the participants would respond positively to the interview process, but then consider it as a platform to expand on the challenges they are encountering with the GPLMS, particularly the lack of support from the DBST and the policy makers. They also expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that they are not recognised for the hard work that they are doing in very trying circumstances such as lack of resources, lack of training and support and the like. They expressed their hope that the researchers have come to help them and to act as mediators between the school and the DBST and Head Office, that is to convey their concerns to the powers that be and that it will bear fruit. With this background and the context in which we conducted our interviews in mind, and taking into consideration the participants' positive responses as well as the concerns they raised, we were able to facilitate collaboration between the DBST and Gauteng Department of Education's Head Office. We intentionally concentrated on social transformation through transforming "traditional" research relationships and simultaneously facilitating collaborative relationships between teachers, DBST officers and the GDE Head Office.

By adopting the storywork approach as discussed by Romm (2014), the communicative and transformative validity criteria were met. Romm cites various researchers regarding storytelling, which evokes "insights as well as feelings, where stories offer openings for inviting co-reflection with others on values and critical themes". We thus attempted to shift "towards transforming social relationships towards a more relational style of human relating" (Romm, 2010: 10).

#### **A SYNOPSIS OF THE PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES**

From a transformative agenda, Romm (2014) explains that "[i]t is argued that *research itself should be a process of creating more equitable human relationships, where particular 'knowers' do not pose as authorities by virtue of their using 'scientific methods'*". The following responses illustrates the participants' freedom to co-reflect on issues of inclusive education, in particular collaboration and further on the process of the focus group interviews, which ultimately assisted the researchers to facilitate collaboration between teachers, the school's ILST, the DBST and the GDE head office.

By the very nature of our questions that were asked after the focus group interviews, we were able to help the participants to discover the necessity of collaborating in an inclusive education environment. The participants responded to the questions as follows:

### **Question 1 How did you experience the focus group session?**

The participants felt that they were able to air their views and that they had the freedom to say what they wanted to say, such as being able to speak about policies and at the same time learn from one another and that there were people who were willing to listen to them. They were able to listen to each other's views and their experiences, which they felt were informative and, at the same time, motivating. However, they did express a need for more time to share their views and that they were concerned about what would be done about their frustrations.

*I believe that information sharing is very good because there you will get a chance to listen other people's views. And hopefully learn from one another. It is good to hear other people's experiences. I mean, I have never been to Grade 1 class. I did not know that Mam Talane has got a difficult learner that she needs her special attention. This interview was very fruitful and informative.*

*I think that I am very motivated because I was very very demoralised. Prof Nel dominated and conducted the whole interview session very well and professionally, she also gave us motivation by saying that you guys are doing a great job.*

This question also led to the participants' expectancy that something was going to be done about their dire situation, that is, to attend to their frustrations. *At least you guys are going to do something with the information you got from us, maybe things are going to change.*

### **Question 2 How did you experience the process of facilitation?**

The participants expressed their impressions on the facilitation process by pointing out that the questions were appropriate for the information required by the researchers. The facilitation was professionally conducted as the interviewer was friendly, patient and a good listener, allowing them to express the challenges they face. Probing questions were asked without being prescriptive, allowing them to talk spontaneously. They knew exactly what to expect as the interviewer explained how the interview was going to be conducted and what they could expect.

*Yes, she was very patient and she is again a good listener.*

*The questions were very straight forward and they were more understandable.*

*Yes, the questions were also open-ended. We were given a platform to say and relate our experiences in the classroom. I did not find anything problematic about the questions as they were straight forward.*

*You were probing enough – you probing to get what you wanted from us and you gave us practical examples and you asked us to give you examples to see if you we understood what you were asking.*

*Ja I think it was ok because like when Patricia was saying that some of the problems – she's dealing with some of the problems I've taken some of the hints that I will be using.*

### **Question 3 How did you feel about the facilitator's questions—did they make sense to you—did they make you think?**

The participants responded to this question by saying that they felt the question and subquestions were relevant, meaningful, straightforward and understandable, which led them to express their experiences in class and to provide practical examples. As two participants explained: Participant 1 – *We've got a very nice little word; we do code switching for language barriers. We have learners who speak Xhosa sitting next to English speaking so that they can explain to one another and also the opposite where you take a stronger child and you put them next to a weaker child. There the stronger child assists the weaker child.*

Participant 2 – *I found that some children are stronger visually than auditory and I pair them together, the auditory ones together and the other together but as you said about cooperative learning in my situation it works because children learn easier from a child than from grownups.*

The questions also allowed them to speak freely and where difficult questions were asked, the interviewer allowed them time to think about it and to provide the answer.

#### **Question 4 Do you think you learned from the facilitators?**

The responses of the participants were very positive, as they felt they had learned interviewing skills such as the guidance given by the interviewer to reflect on what could be done and to try something else, despite their challenges; that the interviewer could summarise what was being said; and that the questions were posed in such a way that they could elicit original ideas from the participants. The interviewer asked the following question: *“Are you saying that just because we’re coming in and asking questions from a slightly different angle that we are helping you to re-look at things?”* and the answer was:

*Yes, I have learned how people are interviewed.*

*Very true, that is one of the skills we have acquired, for example, if you are an SGB member you will know how to address the questions.*

*Like in most situations she is the guiding us on how to handle those situations.*

*And what made me think was am I doing enough in the classroom – that’s what made me think about when you were asking the questions even though we have the challenges that we have, is it made me think am I doing enough as a teacher in the classroom shouldn’t I be trying something else or doing something else.*

However, the participants expressed their needs for more ideas from the interviewer’s experiences and to offer solutions for their challenges. The interviewer indicated that the district was there to assist them with their challenges and that they could ask the DBST to help them.

*Ee maybe to talk about how we feel about the problems that we are experiencing in class, ja, we cough it out we say and you are going to help us to do that since you are going to take it to the district level so that they should know the problems that we are facing at this point in time.*

#### **Question 5 Did you think you learned from others in the group and can you give examples?**

It was quite clear from the participants’ responses that they experienced the interviews as informative. It was also a learning experience for them as they felt that they learned from the examples which their colleagues gave and that they could share ideas and how they deal with their diverse challenges. They also felt that they were not alone and that their colleagues were also frustrated although they are trying to cope; that they were not receiving the support they needed from the district officials; and that policies development and implementation differ.

*[For instance], like Killie was explaining that the learning problem with the learners’ foreign languages—I didn’t know that and the way that maybe a child doesn’t understand when she’s teaching she’ll ask another to explain in mother tongue, aaa you know I’ve learned a lot.*

*It reinforces it, yes. And when the teacher says, uh, they take, they-they have a remedial book, I didn’t know that. It’s there in junior phase so now I have that idea, there’s a book. So I will get that in the senior phase.*

#### **Question 6 Would you have liked us to ask any other questions?**

The participants felt that questions needed to be asked around teacher/learner ratios and work allocation; the GPLMS and how it is supposed to be implemented; and the many learners and their diverse needs and the support that is required in the different situations; about district officials and their much needed support which is inadequate and inconsistent; the policies and the system, and how teachers are expected to implement them.

*Like a question of big classes. If she could have asked how many learners we have in our classrooms, because we are now experiencing an issue of having so many learners in one classroom like now I have 53 learners in my class.*

*Again we haven't touched the teacher ratio, because our teacher ratio at the moment is 1:40 but I feel that it is a lot.*

*To add on what has been said, work allocation is really a burden, for example, if the assistant can concentrate on one child with the learning barriers one has to pay attention to the rest of the class.*

### OUTCOMES OF THE CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS

Of significance was the participants' positive response to the facilitation process, that is, that it was a learning experience for them. However, they also expressed their concerns by informing the researchers of their needs as summarised under question 6, inter alia a cry for greater support from the district. In response to these expectations, we committed ourselves in "carrying the baton forward" by engendering collaboration in the current educational processes as discussed in the following sections.

This involves collaboration between:

- The researchers and the teacher participants, who by this time were regarded as co-researchers. At this stage, the researchers and participants were engaged in the process of action research where the stage was set to establish collaborative support structures for teachers. Nel, Muller and Savolainen (2013, to be published in *Progressio* in 2014 special edition) report on South African teachers' sense of self-efficacy in inclusive education practice and implications for their education within an open and distance learning context, where the sense of self-efficacy as collaborators is highlighted. The latter research formed part of the first phase of the main study as the questionnaires used in the quantitative part of the research and distributed by the Unisa researchers to qualified teachers enrolled for the Advanced Certificate in Education: Inclusive Education. During the interviews, the teachers became aware of the possibilities of establishing support structures by strengthening the functioning of the ILSTs and also the support from the DBST and other stakeholders.
- Between teachers and members of the Institutional Level Support Team (ILST) of their school. The ILST comprise the teachers, head of departments, parents, therapists, community members and other stakeholders from, for example, the Department of Health, and the principal is responsible to see that such a team has been set up and is functional. Among others, the ILST members help teachers and guides them in developing and implementing individual support plans and to differentiate the curriculum; conducts consultation sessions with parents; identifies teacher training needs and organises staff development and support (Department of Education, 2010, p.23). Throughout the interviews, the teachers and those serving on the ILSTs were given the opportunity to vent their frustrations and at the same be guided by the interviewer to realise the necessity of collaborating, co-operating and supporting each other in a more organised way.
- Between teachers and the District-Based Support Team (DBST), the Provincial Department of Education (Gauteng) and Unisa. The DBST comprise departmental professionals who are responsible for promoting inclusive education by means of "training, curriculum delivery, distribution of resources, identifying and addressing barriers to learning, leadership and general management" (DoB E, 2010, p.49).

The fact that these participating schools were part of the GPLMS – which meant that they were labelled as underperforming schools – ultimately led to teachers' feeling that they were not recognised for the hard work that they were doing, despite the challenges they were faced with. In addition, they felt that they were not supported by the district and their plea for more support motivated the researchers to arrange a seminar where the district, three officials serving the participating schools, a GDE head office official from Inclusive Education and the three researchers were present.

## DESIRED OUTCOMES RESULTING FROM THE SEMINAR

The seminar, which also served as a way of member-checking, was held in December 2012 at Unisa. Whilst waiting for officials to arrive, casual discussions took place between the attending teachers, a district official and the researchers. The teachers were asked whether they had reflected on the focus group interviews. They responded by saying that a lack of parental involvement is a concern and expressed what they felt the ILST can do to address the problem. The district official offered that the children with barriers to learning could be referred to the District Office for consideration of placement in a special school. In addition, she explained how special concessions can be applied for at the district office for those learners who have writing barriers and referred to relevant forms that need to be completed. However, she also emphasised that ILSTs in general are too “lazy” to fill in the forms and encouraged the teachers to make a concerted effort to do so.

On arrival of the rest of the officials, we sketched the background of the research and pointed to collaboration as the most significant aspect in inclusive education, which surfaced from the quantitative results as well as the focus group interviews. We expressed our concern about the different worlds that the DBST and the teachers work in and that in some cases they are not even aware of one another. On this note, the researcher explained that this was an opportune platform and time to get full-steam collaboration going, as teachers are able to express their concerns and district officials and the head office official is in a position to respond and offer solutions and to forge a communication network.

As the discussions continued, it became clear that both the ILST and the DBST have their unique challenges. For example, the ILSTs are not always as functional as they should be, as teachers are burdened by a heavy workload, which prevents them from attending to individual learners whilst the DBST, on the other hand, have limited human resources as they are 11 officials expected to service 260 schools. The problem of getting principals to “buy in” for the training of teachers was raised as the concern is that notification is received too late from the District Office and sometimes teachers are not informed resulting in teachers not attending the training. Although teachers felt that they learnt from one another in the interviews, they felt that further support from the District and Head Office was lacking as their attitude towards teachers were that of “underperforming”, never praising them for the good work they were doing, which ultimately led to no collaborative relationships. The teachers’ request was that district officials support them and help them to address their challenges in a developmental way. In response to these comments, the district officials explained that they do praise teachers. However, they are not involved with the GPLMS and that there is sometimes no cooperation between the GPLMS and the Inclusive Unit at the District Office and that integration of the two units is needed. The head office official took note of the discussions and committed to taking the concerns raised to the authorities.

With reference to the researchers and the role they played in the interviews, the teachers explained that for once they were listened to, that they were given time and an opportunity to express their feelings and that they were not prescribed to and that the researcher understood their situation. The researchers also offered their assistance to the teachers in helping them to address the challenges they were experiencing, particularly with learners experiencing barriers to learning. The head office official also acknowledged our working relationship with them.

At the closure of the seminar teachers, district officials and the head office official were continuing their discussions and planning future meetings.

## CONCLUSION

This paper focused on offering an example of researchers taking some responsibility for their ways of conducting research processes so that the “results” are likely to make a positive difference to the quality of life of participants and wider communities. This indeed means that during the process of the research itself, as well

as in offering (draft) results, researchers orient the research enterprise so that it can offer mutual learning opportunities, as well as opportunities for considering courses of action among concerned stakeholders. This paper gives a detailed account of how we set up the focus groups with this intention and also how we were sensitive to emerging possibilities, also in relation to participant requests. One of the emergent options was the organisation of a meeting where the researchers, with participants, could, as one participant stated it, carry the baton further, so that voices could be heard in forums that were likely to “make a difference” to the way in which inclusive education could be addressed. At the same time, the participants were able to make their challenges known to the district officials and the head office official and vice versa, thus shedding light on each other’s challenges and eradicating misunderstandings, ultimately forging good relations with one another and opening communication channels.

The article indicated that this intention to be alert – as researchers – to possibilities for contributing to the field of practice, in this case the practice of implementing inclusive education, can be seen to fit in with the “transformative paradigm”, albeit that this does not necessarily exclude other paradigmatic orientations (as explained in Romm, 2014).

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