

**EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS
WITH CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES
IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS**

by

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RESEARCH ESSAY

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ABSTRACT

After the change in government in 1994, the development of and commitment to the democratic values of liberty, equality and civic rights, led to the wider notion of inclusion in South Africa. Inclusive education has recently been enforced by the White Paper 6, which promotes the access of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools and protects the rights of all learners from discrimination. Education must therefore be structured in such a way that all learners can have access to a single educational system that is responsive to diversity, regardless of learners' physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other differences.

In establishing inclusive education in South Africa, parents are regarded as an important form of support. At institutional level, partnerships will be established with parents so that they can, armed with information, counselling and skills, participate more effectively in the planning and implementation of inclusion activities, enabling parents to play a more active role in the learning and teaching of their own children, despite limitations due to disabilities or chronic illnesses. Parents are thus, through legislation, empowered to be partners in the education of their children. Research on inclusive education in South Africa mainly focused on policy development and the attitudes and perceptions of teachers. The purpose of this research is to contribute to the knowledge base that could promote effective parent-school partnerships.

Through the use of a qualitative research design and the theoretical framework of inclusive education, the aim of the study was to gain an understanding of parents' perceptions and experiences of inclusive education. Six 'information-rich cases' were selected for in-depth interviews. Field notes, as secondary data, were taken as it is a classic medium for documentation in qualitative research and it contributed to the trustworthiness of the study. Through the use of the Constant Comparative Method, the data gathered were analysed and finally categorised into three main findings: qualities of the principal as leader and manager, the role of the teacher in determining the success of inclusive education and supporting the siblings of the learner with a disability.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the research essay submitted for the M. Ed. degree in educational and learning support to the Rand Afrikaans University, apart from the help recognised, is my own work and has not been formerly submitted to another university for a degree.



Melanie van Heerden

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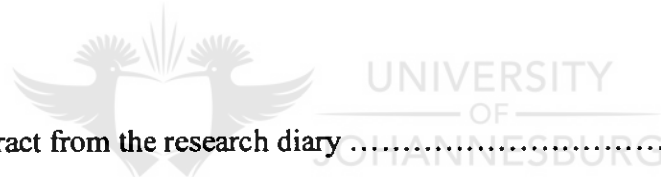
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SECTION ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

After the change in government in 1994, the development of and commitment to the democratic values of “liberty, equality and civic rights” (Engelbrecht, Green, Naicker & Engelbrecht, 1999:7), led to the wider notion of inclusion in South Africa. In a democratic society, diversity is celebrated and equality of opportunities promoted in the whole social system. This movement implied the contextualisation of education where schools are seen as a reflection of society with the focus on “social justice and equity rather than isolation and neglect” (Engelbrecht, et al. 1999:7) for learners’ diverse needs. In South Africa the inclusion of all learners in mainstream schools have recently been enforced by the Constitution of South Africa which protects the rights of all learners from discrimination by stating: “Everyone has the right to a basic education and to equal access to educational institutes” (Engelbrecht, et al. 1999:14) in their local community. Education must therefore be structured in such a way that all learners can have access to a single educational system that is responsive to diversity, regardless of learners’ physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other differences.

As educators questioned the traditional segregation of learners with special educational needs, a new approach to disability and special education were adopted. This development of an inclusive philosophy in schools were embodied by the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education (Unesco, 1994:ix) by stating that schools with an inclusive orientation are “... the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all, moreover, they provide an effective and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system”.

In compliance with the demands of the Salamanca Statement and the Constitution of South Africa, the White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) advocated an action plan for human rights in education. The main objective is to acknowledge the rights of

all learners to basic education by extending whole-school development¹, enabling the recognition and accommodation of the diverse range of learning needs in the general educational system. Through establishing an inclusive culture, the nature of school and classroom environments, the curriculum and the role of the teachers, parents and communities are altered.

In establishing inclusive education² in South Africa, parents are “regarded as an important form of support” (Department of Education, 2001:34). “At the institutional educational level, partnerships will be established with parents³ so that they can, armed with information, counselling and skills, participate more effectively in the planning and implementation of inclusion activities, and so that they can play a more active role in the learning and teaching of their own children, despite limitations due to disabilities or chronic illnesses” (Department of Education, 2001:50). Parents are thus, through legislation, empowered to be partners in the education of their children.

The history of parental disempowerment in South Africa were also challenged as educators recognised the value of partnerships with parents and legislation enforced parental rights. The influential and constructive role of the family system on education provision is acknowledged in inclusive education through the belief that partnerships with parents not only enhance effective education for all learners, but enforce the ideology of an inclusive community.

Partnerships are based on the premise that collaborating partners have common goals and a sense of mutuality that support their joint efforts. It involves sustained mutual collaboration, support and participation in activities that can directly and positively influence the common goal, namely to promote effective education and growth in the

¹ Donald, et.al (1997:85) state that *whole-school development* involves all the aspects of the school as an organisation. It includes the following: identity, human resources, school culture, strategy, technical support, structures and procedures, management and leadership of the school.

² It describes the policy, guiding the school as a learning environment to “promote the full personal, academic and professional development of all learners irrespective of race, class, gender, disability, religion, culture, sexual preference, learning styles and language” (NCESS, 1997:vi).

³ *Parents* imply more than the dictionary’s definition of a parent as “one who brings forth or produces” (Collins, Consise Oxford, as cited in Wolfendale, 1992:20), but also include the broader sense of a parent being the person or persons who has care, custody and control over, or concern for, a child (South African Schools Act Policy, 1997:1A-17).

learner, school and community. Furthermore, it implies that teachers and parents share responsibility for the learners' education, the relationship is based on mutual respect, the acknowledgement of the assets and expertise of each member and the sharing of rights and responsibilities. The collaborative nature of the parent–school partnership implies shared decision-making “in governance, planning, delivery and evaluation in education” (Engelbrecht & Green, 2001:23). It can be added that Engelbrecht, et al. (2001:23) describe collaboration as a pluralistic form of education where people of dissimilar backgrounds work together with equal status. Therefore effective parent-school partnerships can provide learners with comprehensive, accessible and coordinated support, because they involve the strengths of professionals, families and the community.

As relatively little research has been done on the views and experiences of parents in the South African context, it was proposed that an in-depth study be conducted into the experiences and perceptions of parents of children with disabilities included in mainstream educational settings. The enquiry focussed on parents' subjective views and attitudes on inclusive education through personal participation and experience. Gaining an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of parents was significant, as it can inform the process of making parents an integral part of an inclusive educational system and inform the design of projects with sustainable participation from the community.

The concepts of inclusive education and parent-school partnerships have become generally accepted and adopted in literature, however there is a need to investigate inclusive education in practice.

1.2 Research problem

The research question of this study is:

How do parents of learners with disabilities perceive and experience inclusive education?

In an attempt to answer this question, the proposed study will focus on the perceptions and experiences of parents of children with disabilities who are currently receiving education in mainstream settings.

1.3 Aim of the study

Although there is ample literature on the attitudes of principals, teachers and professionals (Bailey, 1997:1; Dale, 1996:66; Dowling & Osborn, 1994:54) towards inclusive education, changing roles for teachers, practitioners and parents (Wood, 2001:20; Engelbrecht & Green, 2001:21; Bradley; King-Sears & Tessier-Switlick, 1997:57), initiatives for the implementation of parent-school partnerships (Wood, 2001:110; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000:58; O'Shea; O'Shea; Algozzine & Hammitte, 2001:227) and policies promoting parental rights (Kochar & West, 1996:9; Department of Education, 1997:110), there is an absence of detail about the practicalities of working with families in schools and insight on how parents perceive this experience (Bennett, Deluca & Bruns, 1997:117). Due to the limited scope of a research essay, the focus of this study was concerned only with the views and experiences of parents.

The aim of this study was therefore, to gain an understanding of parents' perceptions and experiences of the inclusive process and to describe the findings in a meaningful way. Ultimately, an understanding of parents' experiences can inform the design, implementation and continuation of successful parent-school partnerships.

1.4 Research design and methodology

The design of this study employs basic, interpretive and qualitative research, as it is concerned with understanding the meaning people construct and how they make sense of their world (Merriam, 2002:3). The conceptual framework of inclusive education was incorporated to develop an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of parents with children with disabilities in general education settings, and to create a research design allowing case-to-case generalization of findings (Flick, 1998:2).

Interpretative possibilities and the researcher's construction of findings were made possible through a qualitative enquiry method. According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000:13), qualitative research is "orientated towards analysing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity, and starting from people's expressions and activities in

their local contexts". Qualitative research methods therefore, accommodate diversity of perspectives of participants and reflexivity of the research and the researcher. Furthermore, qualitative research works with texts, making this type of research suitable for producing data and the transformation into texts as needed for my inquiry. This type of research works mainly with two sorts of data, namely visual data and verbal data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000:11). For the purpose of the study, verbal data was collected through in-depth individual interviews and a group interview with parents of learners with disabilities. Following this step of data collection, the verbal data was transformed into texts by means of transcription. This was followed by coding and categorising of emerging themes, data presentation and interpretation.

1.4.1 Methods of sample selection, data collection and analysis

The following considerations were taken into account in the selection of participants: participants were parents or caregivers of children with disabilities; children had to attend mainstream schools; participants were residents of the Gauteng province of South Africa.

In conducting interviews, the researcher, as primary instrument for data collection and analysis, acknowledged the "complex stock of knowledge" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000:82) that the interviewees had about the topic. Verbal data were obtained by conducting individual and group interviews. The aim of in-depth individual interviews were to gather data describing the diverse experiences of individual parents about the inclusion of their children in mainstream schools. A group interview was included as can orientate a new field, generate hypotheses based on parents' insights and it is compatible with interview schedules (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000:123). As described in section three, the ethical considerations of informed consent, right to privacy and protection from harm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:372) was acknowledged in conducting this research.

Although an initial question was asked to direct the individual interviews, a flexible and adaptive approach to questioning was essential as new themes and frameworks, different from the expected, emerged. As an important part of the editing process, spoken words were recorded and transcribed to ensure the transformation of verbal data into texts, enabling the researcher to analyse and interpret the data. Field notes were included to

complement the interview data and assist the researcher in gaining an understanding of the parents' perceptions and experiences of inclusive education.

Analysis of the data took place during the process of collection, as this limited interference with data obtained in other interviews. By making use of the Constant Comparative Method⁴, the process underwent continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process, continuously giving feedback to the process of category coding. Glaser and Strauss, cited in Lincoln and Guba (1985:339), name the four stages of this method: comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting and writing the theory. Throughout this process the researcher's impressions, associations, questions, ideas, and experience of the process were documented in code notes.

"The interpretation of data is the core of qualitative research" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000:178). The final phase of the research was characterized by the translation and interpretation of the findings into a "rich, thick description" (Merriam, 2002:7) using references to the literature that framed the study.

As this was an initial research experience, a research diary was continually updated. Typical documentation included notes (see Appendix 1) on experiences and problems encountered in the planning, executing of the research and the compiling of an academic research document. Documentation of this type also served as a source of supportive data, apart from providing an opportunity for reflection on the process.

1.5 Conclusion

Through the use of a qualitative research design and the theoretical background of inclusive education, it was the goal of this study to gain an understanding of parents' perceptions and experiences of inclusive education. As there is a gap in existing

⁴ The *Constant Comparative Method* of data analysis constantly compares basic incidents from interviews and field notes, with another incident in the same set of data or in another set. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are compared to each other and to other instances. "Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualisation until a theory can be formulated" (Merriam, 1998:159).

literature, this research can inform educators on the views and needs of parents regarding inclusive education and enhance the design of positive parent-school partnerships.

The inclusion of learners with special needs into regular classroom settings is rapidly becoming the “dominant educational ideology” (Jones, Thorn, Chantal, Chow & Wild, 2002:624). Nonetheless, if inclusion is to become a successful reality, all the systems involved with the education of children must be recognised. The family system, specifically ‘parents’, need to be recognised for the potential role they can play in determining the fate of inclusive education in South Africa. Assessing the parental factor is paramount, as the rights of parents are enforced by legislation and parents are becoming more active participants in making educational and placement decisions for their children. The perceptions and experiences of parents, concerning inclusive education need to be heard, as it can inform inclusive practices and guide educators towards establishing collaborative parent-school partnerships. Through partnerships with, and acknowledgement of these role players, inclusive education can be brought to life in South Africa and parents can be given a voice.

In the next section, a literature review of inclusive education was developed and a theoretical framework for the inclusion of parents as important role players in this process, enforced.

SECTION TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

In this section I will review the literature on inclusive education, focussing on the family system and the value of parent-school partnerships when including learners with diverse needs into mainstream educational settings. Through reference to the theory of inclusion, Bronfenbrenner's Systems theory and the Personal Construct model, I will aim at developing a theoretical framework, describing the need to include parents as partners in inclusive education.

Traditionally, education focused on a typically medical deficit approach to learners with barriers to learning and development. This approach led to the belief that only professionals had the knowledge and skills to educate and address the so-called 'special needs' of learners. "Expert power" (Dale, 1996:67) was maintained by excluding parents from intervention practices and devaluing parents through labelling them as 'dysfunctional' and 'blameworthy', restricting their options and subordinating them to the dominant power of the professionals (1996:68). Furthermore, the role of parents and caregivers in educating their children shifted from primary to secondary educators, as teachers became *in loco parentis*. This led to patterns of non-participatory decision-making, high levels of frustration, disengagement, disempowerment and resentment in the majority of the community involved.

A shift away from a medical model of interpretation of disability to an educational model acknowledging the human rights sociological approach, was demanded not only by role players such as parents, but also by socio-economic challenges, the diverse needs of learners which had not been met, inadequate educational provision to all learners and changes in national policies. In contrast to the past policy of apartheid and its consequences, major policy documents and legislation such as the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996)¹, the White Paper on Education and Training (Department of National Education, 1995), the White Paper on an Integrated National

¹ In this section, policy documents and legislative references have been cited in Engelbrecht and Green (2001). To avoid repetition, I have referenced them respectively on the Acts.

Disability Strategy (Department of National Education, 1997b), the Education White Paper 6 (2001) and the South African Schools Act 84 (RSA, 1996b) recently voiced the “new goals of equity, redress, quality, efficiency and the right of all learners to equal access to the widest possible educational opportunities” (quoted in Engelbrecht & Green, 2001:20). Educational change thus implies the inclusion of learners with disabilities amongst others, in general education classrooms with appropriate in-class support in a least restrictive environment and parental involvement within these inclusive educational settings.

The purpose of this section is to sketch the background to the problem of parental participation in schools and to develop an understanding of the family as a system within the macro system of the society, as well as to gain an understanding of the impact of having a child with disability on this family system by making use of the Personal Construct Model. To emphasize the potential of partnerships with parents, I will continue by developing a rationale for parent-school partnerships and refer to emerging initiatives as well as barriers to partnerships and how it can be overcome through effective communication.

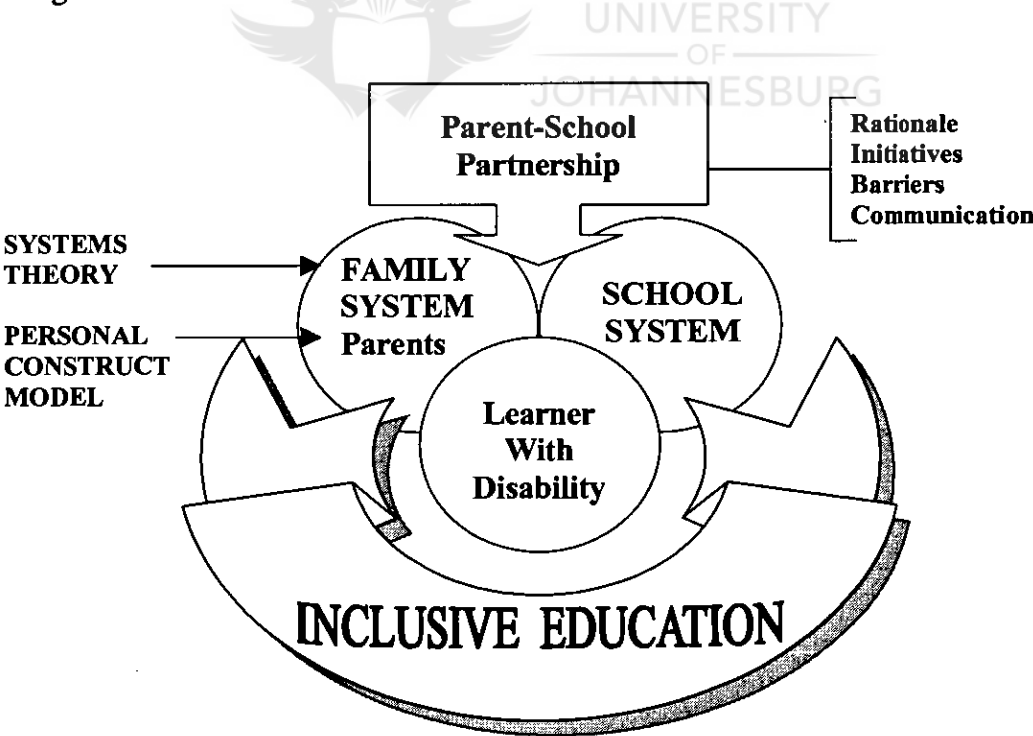


Figure 2.1 Illustration of the main concepts in the literature review

2.2 The Family as a system

When considering partnerships with parents, we need to develop an understanding of the family as a system, the characteristics of a family and the influence a child with a disability has on the family. These insights can inform educators on parents' needs and be valuable when designing and implementing a parent-school partnership.

According to O'Shea, O,Shea, Algozzine and Hammitte (2001:30) the drastic changes in family compositions taking place in contemporary society, mean that no single definition of families, that embodies all the particulars known about how and where individuals live, can be given. Taking this into consideration, Sands, et al. (2000:79) attempt to define 'families' by stating that families may or may not contain members who are connected by genealogy, consist of two or more generations and exist on a long-term or short-term basis. Typical family compositions in modern society include the nuclear family, stepfamily, single-parent family, foster family, families of mixed ethnicity and religions and grandparents raising children. The intersection of issues like race, age, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation and personality operate within each individual and family adding to the complexity and diversity of the family system. O'Shea, et al. (2001:53) state that professionals often have a limited view of learners' families, as always being nuclear families consisting of a mother and father. Typically, teachers tend to communicate more often with learners' mothers and expect them, not fathers, to be involved in learners' education, accordingly generalizing the family to mothers only. This type of generalization made by teachers is evidence of the misperceptions and lack of knowledge that teachers often have about family diversities.

2.2.1 The Systems Theory

It is essential for educators to recognise diversity in families and understand how interactions within these systems occur and their relationships with other systems like the school. Bronfenbrenner, as cited in Bennett, Deluca and Bruns (1997:116), describes the family as an interactive system within other systems in the social context, in his model of ecological units. His model describes units or subunits of persons in society on whom the individual or the family relies for support. He continues by stating that social networks may be conceived "topologically as a nested

arrangement of concentric structures each embedded within one another” (Sands, et al. 2000:79). At the innermost level is the developing child and his or her family members. This family unit is embedded in broader ecological subunits consisting of extended family, friends, and other personal acquaintances. These subunits are furthermore embedded in even larger social units, including social organisations like the school. Bronfenbrenners’ model helps educators to conceptualise the complexity of the family as a system and the way individuals function within the family and society (Sands, et al. 2000:79). As seen in figure 2.2, Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (1997:37) complemented Bronfenbrenner’s theory with the diagrammatic representation of the family system.

Lambie and Daniels-Mohring (cited in Sands, et al. 2000:79) name the fundamental principles of the family systems theory, which should be considered by educators when working with families by stating that no individual can be understood without looking at him or her as part of a whole family. Furthermore, they state that families have rules for structure and change, organising their day-to-day functioning like daily routines. Families also have both productive and non-productive interactions with the school, community, extended family and friends.

In addition to a family’s background, culture has a major impact on, and undeniably influences the behaviour of its members through a unique set of values and beliefs that guides the members in social interactions. Misinterpretation of culturally linked behaviours like ways of communication (speaking loudly, not making eye contact and ways of greeting) can cause conflict in expectations between learners, their families and the school. The challenge for teachers is to use diversity knowledge constructively to support learning and home-school partnerships.

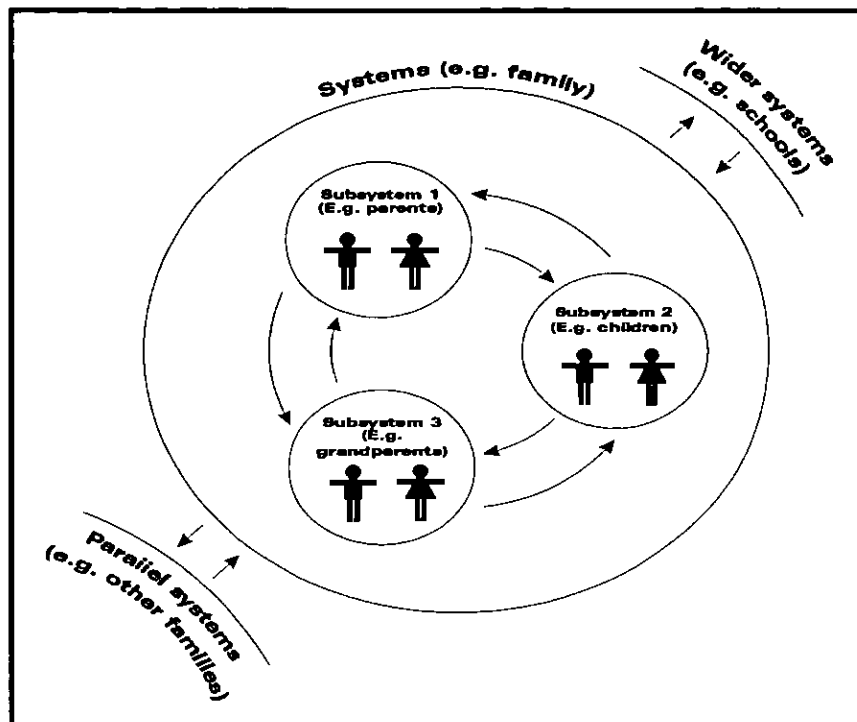


Figure 2.2 *Systems and subsystems of the family and their interactions*

By understanding families as systems within their social context, educators can recognise external influences on the family system, interactions within the system and the need for different levels of parent participation in school activities.

2.2.2 The impact of children with disabilities on their families

Over the years educators have created a stereotype view that all families with children with disabilities are under severe stress, affecting their coping ability with these challenges. However, today it is recognised that challenges caused by children with disabilities may strengthen families and that positive aspects of raising a child with disabilities must be recognised as a more realistic view. This challenges educators to firstly view the child with a disability as a person and family member and the disability as secondary.

Parents perceive their children with disabilities as making contributions similar to those of other siblings to their family life. Abbott and Meredith (as cited in Sands, *et al.* 2000:87) reported on parents' views of the positive contributions children have on the family, as contributing to build a stronger family, adding to every family

member's personal growth, including more patience, compassion, and unselfishness and greater appreciation for the simple things" (Sands, *et al.* 2000:87). Positive contributions to the family furthermore included the claim that these children are sources of joy, life's lessons, love, blessing and fulfilment, pride and family strength (Sands, *et al.* 2000:87), providing them with opportunities for increased happiness, strengthened family ties, expanded social networks, accomplishment, knowledge about disabilities and child rearing, tolerance and sensitivity, expanded career development and increased personal growth (Turnbull, Behr, Tollefson, as cited in Sands, *et al.* 2000:87). It is evident that although certain stress factors exist, there seem to be more similarities than differences between families with and families without children with disabilities. Nevertheless, there are stresses that these families have to cope with.

Psychosocial stresses associated with childhood disability are described by Seligman (2000:85) as intellectual stress (associated with the process of gathering information), instrumental stress (involves tasks that are necessary to incorporate the child's treatment into the lifestyle of the family), emotional stress (psychogenic and reactive responses to the demands of care-giving), interpersonal stress (stress involving family members, friends and professional personnel) and existential stress (the family's ability to construct an explanatory meaning framework for its existence). The way each family copes with these stresses must be seen as just as unique as the family system itself.

Various psychological models attempt to explain parents' coping strategies and reactions to the stress of having a child with disability. Due to the limited scope of this study, I will only discuss the Personal Construct Model. This model emphasises diversity amongst families' coping strategies and their unique perspective on children with disabilities.

2.2.2.1 The Personal Construct Model

In contrast to other models such as the Stage Model and the Chronic Sorrow Model, the Personal Construct Model focuses on the ways people tend to anticipate what happens to them and others around them, as they construct mental models in order to anticipate events, make accurate predictions, and adjust adequately to their situation.

After the diagnosis of a disability or birth of a child with a disability, parents can experience “extreme crisis” (Dale, 1996:59) creating a situation outside of the parents’ range of constructs, leading to “massive anxiety” (1996:59). After these initial intense reactions, parents may set about rebuilding a framework for understanding and reconstructing their constructs. Reorientation will gradually lead to the process of adapting to the challenges of having a child with a disability.

Families not only describe their cognitive constructs as diverse, but also that their emotional responses relate to a variety of factors. Different parents may even experience fluctuation in emotions at different times. Emotions can be triggered by events and reappear or disappear at any given time or during times of transition such as movement in support provision, services and routines. Furthermore, research indicates that the type of disability influence both the reactions of the family members, as well as their interaction with the child. These reactions can vary from overprotection to rejection of the child. The severity and nature of a disability can influence the way the family copes psychologically, as well as the way they can effectively make physical adjustments in their home environment.

Although parents’ experiences are unique and diverse, the types of emotional responses parents go through bear similar characteristics. Blancher (in Sands, *et al.* 2000:85) describes three stages of adjustment: (1) emotional crisis characterized by shock, denial, and disbelief, (2) a period of alternating feelings of anger, guilt, depression, grief, lowered self-esteem, rejection of the child, and over-protectiveness, and (3) acceptance. Anderegg, Vergason and Smith (as cited in Sands, *et al.* 2000:85) name these stages of adjustment respectively as confronting, adjusting, and adapting. Theorists state that movement through these stages doesn’t always proceed in a sequential manner and that acceptance and adjustment cannot always be seen as the final stages. Rather than stages, these emotional responses should be thought of as “states” (Sands, *et al.* 2000:85), allowing for many variations in family reactions and perceptions effecting not only the way they perceive their children with disabilities, but also partnerships with the school.

The Personal Construct Model has significant value in emphasising the importance of approaching parents as individuals, with their own unique perspective and experiences. “If we are to work in a respectful partnership with parents we have to

accept the reality of their interpretations and not oppose or ignore them” (Cunningham & Davis, as cited in Dale, 1996:60). When planning and implementing a collaborative parent-school partnership, the recognition of multiple perspectives and individual diversities provide the foundation for working in an anti-discriminatory way with parents. This model, furthermore, informs educators and professionals involved in partnerships to adapt and readjust their constructs and perceptions of partnerships with parents as a result of ongoing experiences with parents. Knowledge of this should also inform parental support initiatives.

2.3 Educational structures supporting families

The connection between the roles and responsibilities of parents and teachers extends beyond the delivery of lessons, to broader-based views of educating the whole child. They share aspirations for the child’s welfare and the maximising of the child’s abilities and competencies through education at school and home. Through exposure to the school, parents become progressively informed and knowledgeable about educational matters, while teachers learn from first-hand practical experience what the learners’ and families’ needs are and how to provide them with sufficient support.

Generally, parents’ perceptions of support provision range from feeling optimistic about the support given by many individual professionals to a fairly uniform dissatisfaction on aspects of professional services (Dale, 1996:70). ‘Optimistic’ parents can be regarded as the fortunate few whose needs have been met incidentally. According to the research findings of Dale (1996:70), most parents reported on “the lack of services or insufficient help; slow responses and delays; inaccessible, poorly coordinated or disorganised provision; and rapid staff turnover and lack of continuity in assistance”. He continues by describing the negative feelings parents have about individual professionals as “poor communication, impersonal and insensitive intervention, lack of availability, lack of technical competence and lack of specialist knowledge” (1996:70). From these findings it was evident that traditional initiatives in support provision was inadequate to support the needs of parents successfully.

Traditionally, educators and professionals supported parents of learners with disabilities by making use of direct and indirect support services. Direct support services imply services offered directly to parents, aiming to circumvent the results of

risk factors. Parental training on health, educational and other relevant matters are included in direct support services. However, indirect support services are offered to the children of at-risk families in the school settings and are made up of a variety of professionals, including general and special educators, school principals, parents and school psychologists, with the purpose of supporting the general education teachers in developing strategies for supporting learners at risk as well as their parents. Parent-school partnerships are therefore part of a multidimensional support system aiming at assisting families to meet their emotional and informational needs.

2.3.1 The Parent-school Partnership

The focus on provision of equal educational opportunities for learners with disabilities has led to changing roles and responsibilities for teachers, parents and learners. No more are teachers seen as the only experts but parents are increasingly involved and recognised as equal members of educational teams and demand the rights of their new roles as partners in education.

The collaborative nature of the parent-school partnership as described by Stanovich (as cited in Engelbrecht, 2001:23) implies informal or formal decision-making, planning and the solving of problems by all the involved parties to reach a mutual goal. Schaffer and Bryant (as cited in Engelbrecht, 2001:23) add that it implies shared decision-making “in governance, planning, delivery and evaluation in education” and is a pluralistic form of education where people of dissimilar backgrounds work together with equal status (2001:23).

Partnerships are furthermore based on the premise that collaborating partners share a sense of mutuality that supports their joint efforts and common goals. Teachers and parents have a common goal for joining in a partnership, namely the need to foster positive education and growth in their children (Swick, 1992). Epstein (1992) adds that a partnership approach gives both parents and the community a greater opportunity to determine options for school involvement, to participate in a wide range of activities and to assume key roles and responsibilities in school improvement efforts and the decision-making process.

In contrast to 'parental involvement' in school activities and homework, *partnerships* are characterised by parents being "active and central in decision-making and its implementation, perceived as having equal strengths and equivalent expertise, able to contribute to as well as receive services and able to share responsibility so that they and professionals are mutually accountable" (Wolfendale, 1992:14). Although parent-school partnerships challenge the long-standing supremacy and autonomy of teachers and principals, it holds the promise of mutual benefit.

2.3.1.1 Rationale for Parent-school Partnerships

As all connections between families and schools are "lifelines that sustain inclusive school communities" (Sands, *et al.* 2000:76), it furthermore creates opportunities for collaboration and mutual support between families and the school.

The establishment of a mutual support system can be seen as one of the primary advantages of a parent-school partnership. Not only can parents and teachers benefit from this partnership, but learners too. They benefit from a wider support system as more opportunities for meaningful learning are created, a positive attitude towards schoolwork and the school is encouraged, improvement of school attendance and home work occurs and additional assistance is provided in the classroom (Kochar & West, 1996:25). A further advantage is the experience of synergy, as collaboration between the school and home leads to greater results on emotional, behavioural and scholastic areas. Learners are therefore exposed to more positive and motivating messages from a variety of different adults, creating opportunities for positive contributions and increased scholastic and cultural achievement.

Schools and teachers also benefit from this "circle of support" (Kochar & West, 1996:46). The assistance offered by parents in some of their duties and tasks not only reduces the workload, but saves time and energy as duplication of efforts and resources are restricted. Partnerships not only provide a source of extra personnel and human resources at the school, but also provide schools with parents who are knowledgeable about the school's needs (Wolfendale, 1992:57). It also creates opportunities for the partners to communicate without the pressure of having to defend their position. Improved communication between parents and teachers will lead to an atmosphere of trust and openness, higher ratings of teachers by parents, and

teachers having an improved awareness of the diverse needs of families and learners. Whole school development will furthermore be encouraged as the school gains a better reputation in the community, greater enrolments occur, school attendance improves, higher graduation rates are evident and school activities are successful due to parental support. When parents are provided with a broader support network, they can make links with other parents, professionals, administrators and the school, empowering them to be equal partners in the education process. Furthermore, parents are supported and prepared to strengthen personal decision-making, goal setting and self-advocacy in their children (Kochar & West, 1996:25), parents develop higher opinions of themselves as parents and educators of their children. As a result, parents have higher expectations of their children and motivate them to achieve to their full potential. Teachers also have higher opinions of the parents and higher expectations of their children.

Although the rationale for parent-school partnerships has clearly been developed, parents' views and perceptions should be acknowledged before successful models for partnerships can be designed.

2.3.1.2 Emerging initiatives in Parent-school Partnerships

The traditional 'deficit model' whereby the child received appropriate stimulation from the school to compensate for alleged social and environmental deprivation, made way for a broader view of the child as part of a viable and dynamic family system that is socially valid. This new paradigm recognises the family system approach by acknowledging the primacy of parents in children's lives and their influence on children's education, along with the view that schools share this responsibility for children's education.

Initiatives involving parents must be perceived by parents to be beneficial to them, creating opportunities for them to learn, to grow, to explore different possibilities for partnerships and to become familiar with the school as an organisation and the local educational authorities. Parents must not only be able to work within these systems, but also have the confidence to challenge existing structures and traditions. According to Wolfendale (1992:3) empowerment of parents refers to "the means as

well as the ends of realizing and expressing wants, needs and rights and of ensuring that the parental voice is heard and has influence”.

As seen in Table 2.1 many initiatives have been designed to make parents part of the education process. It must however be emphasised that the success of these models can only be measured if the needs of parents are known and effectively supported.

Models for parent-school partnerships vary and can be divided into different participatory levels. Broad based participation implies that all parents are supportive in their children’s education and participate in the variety of activities presented by the school. On another level, parents as volunteers can be integrated into the daily life of the school as classroom assistants, tutors and aids. Another form is parental involvement in decision-making, giving parents the opportunity to learn social, organisational and political skills through their involvement in school affairs.

Table 2.1 Parent-school Partnership initiatives

Name of Programme:	Cited in:
Parent Education	Anon
School Transition Environmental Program (STEP)	Anon
PET	Gordon, 1975
PIP	Anon
Family Link in Leisure Education	O’Shea, et al. 2001:196
Home-based Parenting Skill programmes	Anon
Parent Child Education Program	O’Shea, et al. 2001:257
Parents as Teachers Program	O’Shea, et al. 2001:257
Parent Training Today	O’Shea, et al. 2001:257
Individual Family Service Plans (IFSP)	O’Shea, et al. 2001:138
Parent Support Groups	O’Shea, et al. 2001:94
Parent-teacher organisations	O’Shea, et al. .2001:94
PACER (Parents and children enjoy reading)	Wolfendale, 1992:140
PACT (home-school reading)	Wolfendale, 1992:140
IMPACT (Home-school Maths)	Wolfendale, 1992:122
Teachers involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS)	O’Shea, et al. 2001:194
Parents with Careers	Wolfendale, 1992:140
Co-teaching	Sands, et al. 2000:129
Nurturing Programmes	Anon
Emotional Coaching	Anon
Parent Panel	Anon
Parent to Parent Program	O’Shea, 2001:257
Parenting of the 90’s	Dowling & Osborne, 1994
Parent-teacher associations	Wolfendale, 1992:74
Epstein’s Model for Home-school Partnerships	O’Shea, et al. 2001:94
Comer’s Model for Parent-School Collaboration	O’Shea, et al. 2001:186

Although parental involvement in a child's educational program can make an important difference for a learner in inclusive settings, educators must realize that a parent may or may not choose to become involved at various levels of the educational programme (Wood, n.d:126). Wood (n.d:126) also claims that the level of parental involvement can vary not only from one learner to another, but also between two parents of the same child and for an individual parent over time.

Initiatives in parent-school partnerships can cause barriers between parents and the school if the diversity and needs of the family are not recognised and supported.

2.3.1.3. Barriers to Parent-school Partnerships

Implementing inclusive education to serve learners with disabilities in mainstream schools requires complex changes in the school as an organisation, in the role-players' attitudes and it demands comprehensive knowledge and skills to ensure success. According to Kochar and Erickson (as cited in Kochar and West 1996:29) barriers to collaborative parent-school partnerships can be clustered into three categories namely, organisational, attitudinal and knowledge.

Organisational barriers are related to the incongruities in classroom and school structures and management, the goals they define and the design of instruction practices (Kochar & West, 1996:29). Kochar and West (1996:36) describe organisational barriers to parent-school partnerships as inadequate time for daily planning and communicating with parents during contract time; unsuitable resources and limited funding; weak or non-existing interagency partnerships amongst the school and the community leading to responsibilities and resources not being shared; curriculum that is not supportive to learners' individual needs and inflexible assessment methods without parent participation. O'Shea, et al. (2001:267) add to these barriers by stating that school policies can be in conflict with parents' needs and teachers often lack training in strategies for working with families and in communication skills.

Attitudinal barriers describe various difficulties that may get in the way of becoming attuned to the partner's perceptions and feelings. Parents may not want to reveal their feelings and even give contradictory signals about their needs, which can confuse teachers. They alternatively express intense feelings, overwhelming the teachers who

might experience these interactions as anxiety provoking and stressful (Dale, 1996:68). Teachers, on the other hand, might find it hard to understand the parents' reactions and experiences of grief or trauma, because they haven't had similar experiences or exposure to similar circumstances. This distance between the home and the school can lead to interactions characterized by defensiveness, lack of co-operation and even open aggression and conflict (Dowling & Osborne, 1994:70).

Attitudinal difficulties can also arise when parents and teachers do not share a common perception of the nature or severity of a problem, either because of diverse cultural norms or different tolerance levels. These difficulties can also lead to territorialism, where teachers may feel threatened by new team teaching relationships and new attitudes (Kochar & West, 1996:36). Dale (1996:69) suggests that developing empathy and understanding parents' perceptions are essential skills in the success of parent-school partnerships.

Knowledge barriers in inclusive education refer to the differences in the skills and knowledge of various role players concerning the instruction of learners with special needs, the provision of support services, curriculum adaptation and the structuring of the classroom (Kochar & West, 1996:30). Knowledge barriers that can be experienced by teachers and parents as lack of knowledge about inclusion and inclusive programmes include knowledge about parent-school partnerships, the roles of the teachers and parents concerning the continuum of placements, assessment, teaching interventions and the individualized education program (Kochar & West, 1996:37). It can be added that a lack of knowledge about the parents' diverse views, needs, backgrounds, cultures and experiences can form a barrier to inclusive practices.

It is clear that a negative attitude and approach towards parents uphold the prevailing discrimination and contribute to the injustice of segregation and long-term disadvantage for the child and the whole family system. Partnerships in education do not rely on sameness and equality, but on celebrating differences. Partnerships are about the valuing of contributions from different sources and respecting those who hold information and expertise. Parents and teachers are thus in a joint enterprise which requires mutual support to succeed.

As effective communication is one of the primary solutions for the barriers that parents and teachers are faced with, it will briefly be discussed.

2.3.1.4. Effective communication between partners

The exchange of information, suggestions and ideas through effective communication is crucial to establish a working relationship between educators and parents. Improved communication with parents promises to positively affect the inclusion experience and contribute to the social, academic and developmental skills of the child (Bennett, Deluca & Bruns, 1997:129).

As communication skills are the binding elements in home-school partnerships, it is crucial for teachers to have a certain measure of competence in several fundamental areas of communication. Sustained training in the people-focussed skills of initiating and sustaining dialogue, listening, responding sensitively, working co-operatively to an agenda and shared problem-solving are said to be as important as training in teaching (Wolfendale, 1992:82). These skills include setting the scene for a meeting, encouraging parents to talk, showing and sharing feelings, preparing to discuss matters of concern, closing the conversation and appreciating each other (1992:82).

When considering effective ways of communicating with parents, non-verbal or paralinguistic cues to interpret messages must not be overseen. When defining 'nonverbal behaviour', Seligman (2000:163) describes general body movements, gestures and facial expressions and such 'paralinguistic behaviour' as the tone of voice, inflection, spacing of words, emphasis and pauses when communicating.

A genuine willingness to listen to parents is important for a teacher's ability to learn and work effectively with others. Effective listening involves the elements of listening for the real content of the message, listening for the feelings in the message, restating content and reflecting feelings and allowing the speaker to confirm or correct your perception. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2002:38) add to these skills the need to depersonalise situations, identify common goals and solutions and to monitor the process to achieve the common goals.

In the reviewed literature, it is evident that parents want to communicate about the learners' progress, assessments, school developments and also solicit their

involvement and support (Wolfendale, 1992:73) on a regular base. There are various traditional as well as new ways of communicating with parents, ranging from informal meetings, newsletters, written reports and formal meetings to home visits and PTA's. Parents are however, as members of school-based support teams provided with the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and to communicate their needs to the school.

Generally, schools seem to do the talking and parents are limited to just listening in this monologue. It seems that ways of inviting parents to communicate through a dialogue with the school have been neglected in practice and literature. This speculation enforces the aim of this study: to give parents a voice and to listen to their experiences and views. Through effective communication parents' views and perceptions of inclusion can be heard and collaborative partnerships built.

2.4 Conclusion

Recent changes in the educational system led to the reality of the inclusion of all learners, irrespective of their special needs, into mainstream schools. This reality of inclusive education did not only provide equal rights and opportunities to all learners with disabilities, but also empowered parents with the right to be equal partners in their children's education. Parents, teachers and the general school community must therefore accept the shared responsibility of providing equal opportunities for all learners, regardless of their individual barriers to learning and development.

Despite the legal support for partnerships with parents, not much attention has been directed at understanding parents and children as part of a family system with diverse needs and backgrounds. Insufficient knowledge of theories such as the Systems theory and the Personal Construct model can lead to misinterpretations and inadequate support provision by teachers and the school. As a result, many models for parent-school partnerships led to further frustration and exclusion, rather than being of multidimensional benefit to parents, teachers and learners.

In order to substantiate my argument of the need for collaborative partnerships between parents and the school, I discussed the nature of a true partnership, partnership initiatives, the benefits of and barriers to parent-school partnerships, as it

is noted in existing literature. Furthermore, the need for effective communication in this team-approach was emphasised, as it is crucial when addressing barriers to developing partnerships. Although knowledge about relevant theories and partnerships are necessary, teachers need to acknowledge diversity amongst parents and develop an understanding of their view and experiences, in order to provide individualised support to parents through the use of parent-school partnerships.

In the next section I will utilise the knowledge gained through the literature review to enhance a qualitative research design, informing the researcher on the views and experiences of parents with children with disabilities in mainstream educational settings.



SECTION THREE

THE DESIGN AND THE DATA OF THE INQUIRY

3.1 Introduction

It was the aim of this exploratory study to gain an understanding of the experiences and views of parents of children with disabilities, receiving education in mainstream schools. Although an extensive literature study was conducted on the role of parents in inclusive education, clarity on parents' first hand experiences and attitudes within the South African context, could not be substantiated. As an introduction to the research design, I would like to define the terminology and the concepts of importance to this section.

Huysamen (1994:1) describes the term *research*, by stating that it refers to a process used to expand knowledge in a field of study, through the use of specific methods. *Research design* is a plan or map for the process of finding solutions to the research problem (Merriam, 1998:44). De Vos (1997:37) adds to this discussion by clarifying the term *methodology*, as “the way in which we proceed to solve problems, it is the research process”. This process, also referred to as the research design, includes every aspect of a research study, from the conceptualisation of the problem to the dissemination of the findings (Grinnell, 1988:219).

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study, as it aims at constructing meaning from the ‘real world’ of parents and acknowledges the “human phenomenon” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:68), thus recognising learners and their parents as part of the context (family and school systems) in which it occurs. Qualitative research therefore provides a researcher with “a deeper understanding of the social phenomena” (Silverman, 2000:89), focussing on underlying meaning and patterns of relationships. Neuman (2000:21) defines the descriptive component of qualitative research as providing “a picture of the specific details of the situation, social setting or relationship”. Inductive reasoning contributed to this process of giving meaning, by attempting to discover relationships or patterns once data has been generated. As insufficient research has been done on the experiences of parents in inclusive education, an inductive approach was appropriate as literature provided “only a topic and a few vague concepts” (Neuman, 2000:49). Through the inductive

process, data was finally interpreted into a conceptualised framework of parents' views and experiences on inclusive education. This was achieved through a process of refining concepts and developing empirical generalizations (Neuman, 2000:49). It can be added that the design of this research was interpretive by nature, as it explored the experiences and attitudes of parents of children with disabilities in inclusive educational settings.

The research design, as it informed the successive processes of sampling, data collection, data analysis and categorization of data, is illustrated in figure 3.1.

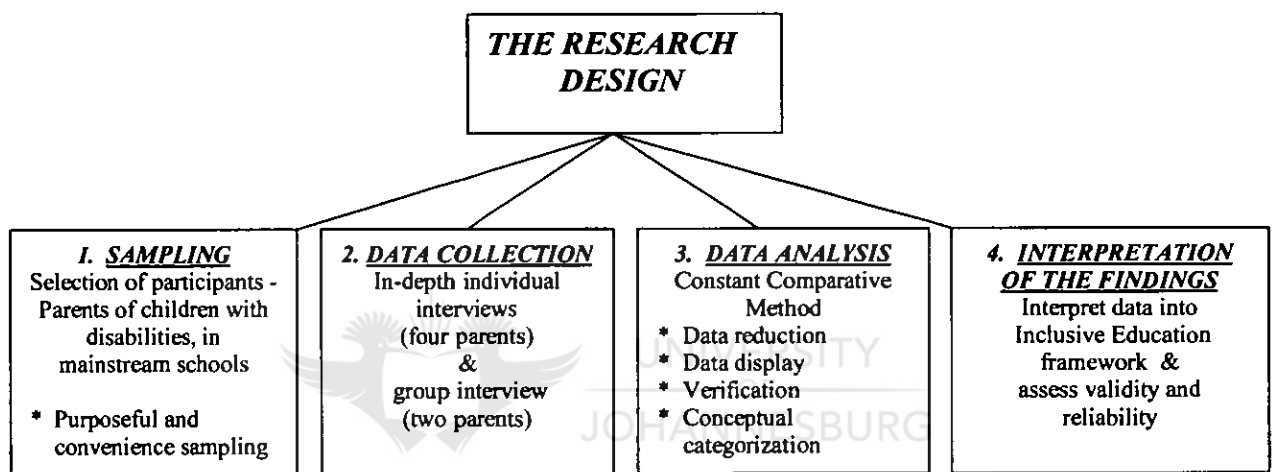


Figure 3.1 The research design

Methodological limitations to the study include a relatively small sample size and geographic area wherein the research was conducted. As a representative sample of the population is not a requirement for qualitative research, I chose to do interviews until adequate data was collected to saturate categories, irrespective of the number of participants involved. Although the above mentioned factors limited the extent to which the research findings could be generalized into the larger parent population, these findings could present a starting point for future in-depth research on the experiences of parents involved in inclusive education.

3.2 The research design

Apart from planning the research design, the development and application of the sampling process can be seen as the initial step towards conducting the research.

3.2.1 Sampling

Since the qualitative researcher seeks to understand the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned. According to Alvesson and Sköldböck (2000:62), sampling emerges at different points of the research process. During this study it was connected to decisions about which persons to interview (case sampling), from which groups these persons should come (sampling groups of cases) and which interviews should be transcribed and interpreted (material sampling). Sampling also arises when presenting the findings and decisions are made about which cases or parts of texts are best to demonstrate the findings (presentational sampling). In this section, I will limit my discussion to case sampling and group sampling.

Two concepts that are synonymous with the sampling process are *population* and *samples*. The term *population* is described by Seaburg (as cited in Grinnel, 1988:133) as “the totality of persons, events, organizational units, case records, or other sampling units with which the research problem is concerned”. In this study the population consisted of parents or caregivers of children with disabilities, from a variety of ethnical backgrounds and age groups. Gabor, as cited in Grinnel (1988:154) contributed to this discussion by describing *sampling* as the selection of some units (parents) to represent an entire population (parent community) from which the units were drawn.

Through the use of purposeful sampling and a snowball effect of obtaining participants, six ‘information-rich cases’ were selected. The first participant was located by contacting a school. This parent referred the researcher to a hydro-therapist for possible leads and to other parents who also qualified to participate in this study (see the abstract from the researcher’s diary in Appendix A). As it is evident from the sampling process, the profile of the learners’ disabilities was not selected intentionally, it derived from the parents chosen through the use of purposeful sampling. The parents of learners that would have previously been excluded from mainstream schooling due to their disabilities, have been chosen for this research.

The selection criteria used during the sampling process were:

- Participants had to be parents or caregivers of children with disabilities.
- These learners had to attend general educational settings.
- These learners with disabilities would have been accommodated in special, segregated education settings in the previous educational system.

Table 3.1 The profile of participants and their children

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Gender of learner</i>	<i>Age of learner</i>	<i>Years in mainstream school</i>	<i>Type of disability</i>
Participant 1	Male	9 years	3 years	<u>Physical disability affecting mobility</u> Scoliosis of the lower spine Growth defect
Participant 2	Male	16 years	2 years	<u>Neurological disability due to brain cancer</u> Mild intellectual difficulties
Participant 3	Female	8 years	1 year	<u>Physical disability affecting mobility</u> Scoliosis of the lower spine Growth defect Intestine abnormalities
Participant 4	Male	8 years	1 year	<u>Physical disability affecting mobility</u> Amputated leg
Participant 5	Female	7 years	1 year	<u>Physical disability affecting mobility</u> Both legs amputated
Participant 6 (same learner as participant 5)	Female	7 years	1 year	<u>Physical disability affecting mobility</u> Both legs amputated

The sample size of six participants were seen as adequate to ensure the saturation of categories through the collection of sufficient data.

3.2.2 Data collection

Qualitative data is most often participant's words and actions, and therefore requires methods that will allow the researcher to capture language and behaviour. In this study, interviews were used as the main method of collection, to enable the researcher

to develop an understanding of parents' experiences and attitudes towards inclusive education. Understanding the way in which parents as individuals and part of family systems interact and perceive the inclusive school system, can ultimately inform inclusive practices such as whole school development and parent-school partnerships.

To achieve this understanding, the researcher was concerned with the experiences parents have as active participants in inclusive schools and how these experiences were connected to, and affected the entire life of the parents. The experiences of parents were questioned, as experience (*erlebnis*) is described by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000:55) as "something with which every exploration of reality or mental processes must start". Gadamer, as cited in Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000:55), explains the difference between *experience* and *perceptions*, by stating:

First, experience does not constitute a passive reception of something outside the subject; instead it is active, creating and provided with intention, meaning. Secondly, experience is more 'global' than a single perception: it covers an overall subjective situation, not an isolated fragment thereof, and it is also connected with the whole life of the individual, making up an organic part of this.

Applied to this study, it means that we need to listen to the experiences parents have while being actively involved in inclusive schools, in order to understand inclusive education as a whole.

As discussed in section two, the perceptions and experiences of parents must be viewed through the lenses of the Personal Construct Model, as complex and multi-faceted concepts that serve the need to order and create consistency in what people say, think and do in certain circumstances. In-depth interviews can provide the researcher with knowledge and insight about these individual constructs, as well as explore new terrain in parent-school partnerships. It furthermore provides a greater breadth of information than other interview types due to its qualitative nature.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000:367) state that the goal of interviewing is understanding, therefore it is essential for the researcher to establish rapport and put the participants at ease before conducting the interview. The researcher gained the trust of the participants by being objective to the parents' remarks, by not being bias and by using effective listening skills. The ability of the researcher to adjust herself to ever-

changing situations during the interview, as well as the use of open-ended questions, gave the participants the freedom to express their feelings and experiences freely.

The initial questions posed by the researcher were:

- **What are your experiences as a parent of a learner with disabilities in a mainstream school?**
- **What are your views regarding including a learner with a disability in a mainstream school?**

In the privacy of the participant's homes, interviewees responded to these questions and elaborated on issues relevant to their personal experiences. Further questions evolved from the responses of the parents and therefore influenced the length of the interviews (approximately one hour). The interviews were recorded by means of an audio tape recorder, releasing the researcher from the dual tasks of listening and recording the data. Recording of the interviews was an essential step to promote accountability and contribute towards the trustworthiness of the findings. Every interview was transcribed directly after it was conducted (see the example of an extract of one interview, Appendix B).

Following the individual interviews, a group interview was held with two additional parents. As group interviews are similar to focus group interviews, they are useful for "orienting oneself to a new field and generating hypotheses based on informants' insights" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000:122). During the group interview, the role of the interviewer was to prevent single participants from dominating the interview and to encourage reserved members to participate, covering the topic as far as possible. The main advantages of group interviews include that it is cost efficient, it provides greater richness of information as a result of direct interaction with discussants, it allows for clarification of responses and the ability to react to and build upon other participants' responses. A further advantage is the complementary alignment with a participatory approach to systems change. For the traditional school system to effectively change towards inclusive education, it is necessary to acknowledge and involve individuals (parents) in the process of providing information and making decisions about the process itself (York, 1995:32).

The group interview was conducted after the individual interviews at the researcher's home. The interview was preceded by time to establish rapport and to introduce

participants to each other. Open-ended questions were asked to verify tentative themes as it emerged from the interviews held with individual parents:

- **What influence, if any, does the principal have on the success of inclusive education?**
- **How do you see the role of the teacher?**
- **How do other siblings in the family experience their schooling with the learner with disabilities in the same school?**
- **What changes must take place in schools to accommodate learners with disabilities?**

Field notes, as secondary data, were taken as it is a “classic medium for documentation in qualitative research” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000:170) and it contributes to the trustworthiness of the study. These notes were taken during the interviews, or as soon after as possible, containing essentials of the interviewee’s answers and other applicable information like observations. This procedure was followed during the individual interviews and achieved with the help of an observer during the focus group interview. Throughout and after the process of data collection, the analysis of the data proceeded.

3.2.3 Data analysis

Qualitative analysis, according to Patton (2002), transforms data into findings. It involves a process whereby the researcher identifies patterns and themes in the data and then draw certain conclusions from it (Mouton, 1996:111). A comprehensive data management and analysis process were designed, dividing this phase of the research design into stages, providing structure and adding to the validity of the research.

The challenge is to make sense of the data. This process involves data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:429), respectively occurring before, during and after the collection of data. These processes are initiated by the transformation of verbal data into texts, achieved by transcribing the interviews (see Appendix B).

Although the processes of data management and analysis were complemented by the Constant Comparative Method, I also included stages to personalize this research design.

Table 3.2 The process of data management and analysis

STAGE 1

Data reduction

This stage was characterised by the reduction of the mass of data as obtained from interviews with parents, through use of the Constant Comparative Method, for the identification and comparison of themes in the data. It furthermore included organising and coding of the data in relation to the research question.

Step 1: Transcribe recorded interviews *verbatim*.

Step 2: Study data and identify emerging themes.

Step 3: Develop categories. Compare incidents applicable to each category across interviews.

Step 4: Integrate categories and their properties.

STAGE 2

Data Display

During this stage data was organised and displayed in such a way that interpretations and conclusions could be drawn from the findings.

Step 1: Transfer analysed data into graphic form for the purpose of comparison and to draw conclusions.

Step 2: Draw tentative conclusions.

STAGE 3

Verification and Conclusion drawing

Data was interpreted into the theoretical framework of Inclusive education, in order to draw meaning from it and to verify it in relation to validity criteria.

Step 1: Interpret data in relation to the research question and the literature review.

Step 2: Assess the validity and reliability of the study.

The *Constant Comparative Method* is described by Merriam (1998:159) as compatible with the “inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research”. It constantly compares incidents from a particular interview or field note, with another incident in the same set of data or in another set. Merriam (1998:159) continues by stating that “comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualisation until a theory can be formulated”.

Table 3.3 gives evidence of the use of the Constant Comparative Method in this study.

CATEGORIES

Qualities of the principal as leader and manager
The role of the teacher in determining the success of inclusion
Supporting the siblings of the learner with a disability

Figure 3.2 Main Categories

Although three main categories were evident, the qualities of the principal as leader and manager in determining the success of inclusive education were prominent throughout the interviews. This main category was sub-divided into four themes, as seen in figure 3.3. Furthermore, the two additional categories that derived from the research data were summarised as (figure 3.4) the role of the teacher in determining the success of inclusion and (figure 3.5) supporting the needs of the siblings of the learner with a disability.

QUALITIES OF THE PRINCIPAL AS LEADER AND MANAGER

Theme 1

The principal's vision in relation to the demands of the school community

- Philosophy of education and child centeredness and it's seen or unseen influence inside and outside the classroom
- Willingness to include 'convenient' and challenging types of disabilities
- Marketing strategies not promoting 'normality' and perfection, but essential life skills education preparing learners to be valuable members of society.

Theme 2

Effective communication skills

- Clearly communicates his perception of inclusive education and the details surrounding the inclusion of each learner, as well as what is expected of teachers, learners and parents to ensure the success of the process
- Soft listening skills:
 - invites parents to express their needs
 - hearing the entire message – respecting the context
 - being open for suggestions
 - listening and responding to the questions and needs of other learners in the school

Theme 3

Authenticity – the way the principal relate to people in a genuine and trustworthy way

- The humane way in which the principal accommodates and treats learners and parents in the school
- Genuine interest in the well-being of the learner and parent
- Expression of empathy not sympathy
- Sensitivity to the needs of learners, teachers and parents

Theme 4

The way in which the principal objectively empowers participants

- Shares control:
 - Before initiating the process of inclusion, involve the parents in decision making
 - Creating an environment and climate promoting shared responsibilities
 - Involve parents, when solving problems concerning their children
- Provides social reinforcement
- Provides emotional support

Figure 3.3 Qualities of the principal as leader and manager

The second category describes the way in which parents perceived the role of teachers in making inclusive education a success in the school.

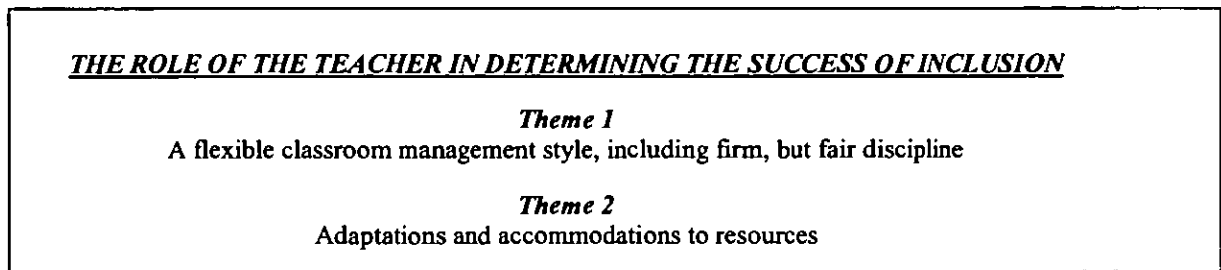


Figure 3.4 The role of the teacher in determining the success of inclusion

A flexible management style and firm, but fair discipline, are not the only influences in the classroom affecting the successful inclusion of learners with disabilities into the classroom. Parents also recognised accommodations and adaptations made to various resources and structures, as contributing to this success.

According to the findings of this study, the success of inclusion apparently depends greatly on the principal and teacher, although the influence and needs of the family must not be overseen. The third category stressed the importance to support the siblings of the learner with a disability in the inclusive school. This category was divided into two themes describing the possible influences on the sibling of the learner with a disability, as well as the new roles these brothers and sisters sometimes adopt.

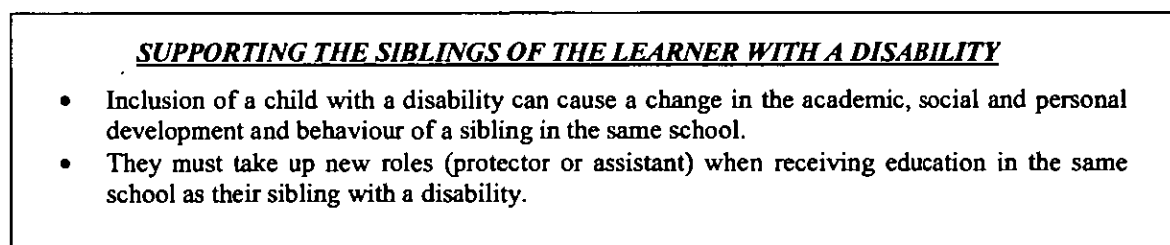


Figure 3.5 Supporting the siblings of the learner with a disability

Before these categories can be discussed in detail in section four, the validity and reliability of the findings need to be assessed.

3.2.4 Validity and reliability of the study

In this part, I will discuss the validity and reliability of this qualitative study, followed by the ethical issues intertwined with the trustworthiness of the findings.

Internal validity poses questions on the congruence of the findings in relation to reality. According to Merriam (2002:25), reality in qualitative research implies that there are multiple and changing realities, and individuals uniquely construct their own reality. The researcher interprets these diverse realities through symbolic representation, such as numbers and words. The understanding of reality is therefore “really the researcher’s interpretation of participant’s interpretation or understanding of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 2002:25). In this study it was essential to gain an understanding of the perspectives of parents in the context of inclusive schools, and to present a holistic interpretation of their views and experiences.

In order to get “closer to reality” (Merriam, 2002:25), the researcher was, true to qualitative research, the primary instrument for data collection and interpretations of reality was accessed directly through interviewing. To contribute to the internal validity of this study, the researcher employed the strategy of member checks. Participants were asked to comment on the researcher’s interpretation of the data. They were given the opportunity to make suggestions and adjustments, ensuring that their perspectives were captured accurately.

An important question for qualitative researchers regarding the *reliability* of the study, is “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 2002:27). Consistency in research, lies in other’s concurring that given the data, the results make sense and are consistent and dependable. In this study the researcher ensured the reliability or consistency of the findings by making use of an audit trail. Merriam (2002:27) describes an *audit trail* by stating that it implies that independent readers can authenticate the findings of the study by following the trail of the researcher. To establish an audit trail, full details on how data were collected, how categories were derived and how decisions were made throughout the research process, were specified in this document. Furthermore a research diary (see Appendix A) was frequently updated, capturing the researcher’s reflections, questions, ideas and problem issues throughout the inquiry. This provided a “running record” (Merriam, 2002:27) of the

researcher's interaction with the data. An issues such as reliability, through the establishment of audit trails is paramount when evaluating qualitative research.

The first question to ask when evaluating qualitative research, is whether the research problem was appropriate for a qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2002:19). As this research was concerned with the experiences and views of parents, it did “uncover or discover the meanings people have constructed about a particular phenomenon” (2002:19). The research problem was furthermore situated in existing literature, drawing from the theory of inclusive education, but also seeking to fill the gaps in literature on parents' views on inclusive education. This was achieved by informing the reader through a literature review on the importance of partnerships with parents and of the contribution this research can make to partnership initiatives.

Contributing to the validity and reliability of the study, the research design has been clearly set out in this section. During the selection of the sample, specific criteria had been taken into consideration and were discussed with a description of the final participants (see 3.2.1). As interviews were used as the primary source of data, a full description of the types of interviews, the questions posed and information on practicalities (times and venues) were included. Furthermore, the use of the Constant Comparative method for data analysis was illustrated and described to provide a chain of evidence and enhance the validity and reliability of the study. The findings of the study presented “rich, thick descriptions” (Merriam, 2002:21) of the experiences and views of parents with learners with disabilities. Enough data was presented and supported by ‘raw’ data to convincingly support the findings of the study.

3.2.5 Ethical considerations

Research challenges us to define our ethical principles and to honour these choices in conducting the research and in composing a document for submission. Obvious ethical choices include: “Thou shall not ...” steal by plagiarizing, lie by misreporting, and not destroy sources of data (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 1995:255). Less obvious, but implicit choices include the submission of data of which the accuracy you have reason to question, not to conceal objections that you cannot rebut, not to caricature those with opposing views and not to write reports that deliberately make it difficult for readers to understand (1995:256).

Ethical concerns are intrinsic to qualitative research, as it include the values of the participants (Guba & Lincoln, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:215). Denzin and Lincoln (2000:372) warns that because the objects of inquiring in interviewing are human beings, extreme care must be taken to avoid any harm to participants. The traditional ethical considerations that were acknowledged in this research were 'informed consent' (consent received from the subject after he or she has been carefully and truthfully informed about the research), right to privacy (protecting the identity of the subject) and protection from harm (physical, emotional or any other kind) (2000:372).

In this study, preliminary procedures required the obtaining of approval and support of the various parents for conducting this research. Permission to conduct the interviews were obtained from the relevant parents after a telephonic explanation, followed by the completion and signing of a letter of consent (Appendix C) before the initiation of interviews. Participants were furthermore ensured of their anonymity and the use of pseudonyms when referred to in the research document. Parents were also offered feedback on the findings, after completion of the research.

3.3 Conclusion

In this section of the research essay I described the research design by capturing the processes of sampling, data collection, data analysis and conceptual categorization. Through the use of the Constant Comparative Method, the data gathered was analysed and finally categorised into three main categories: qualities of the principal as leader and manager; the role of the teacher in determining the success of inclusive education and supporting the siblings of the learner with a disability. Finally, the validity and reliability of the study were discussed, along with the ethical considerations guiding qualitative research.

The research findings, as introduced in this section, will be analysed and interpreted in relation to existing literature in the final section of this essay.

SECTION FOUR

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

4.1 Introduction

In the previous sections the literature on inclusive education was reviewed and the framework for the research design discussed. In section four of this paper, the reader can expect a rationale supporting this qualitative research approach through the discussion and interpretation of the findings.

The aim of this study was to explore and gain an understanding of the experiences and views of parents with children with disabilities attending mainstream schools. The data were collected through interviews, transcribed and the Constant Comparative method used to derive meaningful categories (Figure 4.1). After this process of constant refinement and resorting, the findings were interpreted.

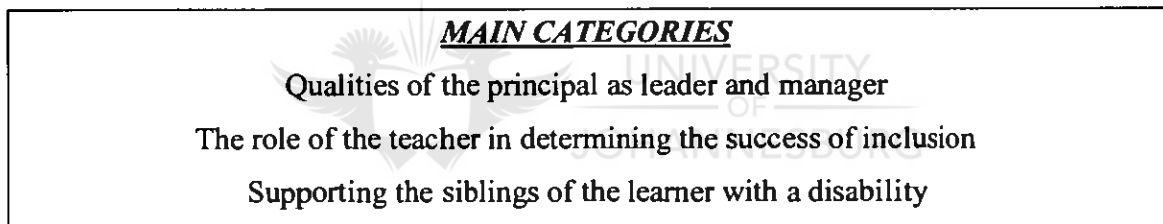


Figure 4.1 Main categories

In this section the categories will be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework of inclusive education.

4.2 Qualities of the principal as leader and manager

Although three main categories were derived from the findings, the qualities of the principal as leader and manager of the school in determining the success of inclusion, were prominent throughout the interviews. Figure 4.2 illustrates how this category was sub-divided into themes.

QUALITIES OF THE PRINCIPAL AS LEADER AND MANAGER

Theme 1

The principal's vision in relation to the demands of the school community

- Philosophy of education and child centeredness and its seen or unseen influence inside and outside the classroom
- Willingness to include 'convenient' and challenging types of disabilities
- Marketing strategies not promoting 'normality' and perfection, but essential life skills education preparing learners to be valuable members of society.

Theme 2

Effective communication skills

- Clearly communicates his perception of inclusive education and the details surrounding the inclusion of each learner, as well as what is expected of teachers, learners and parents to ensure the success of the process
- Soft listening skills:
 - invites parents to express their needs
 - hearing the entire message – respecting the context
 - being open for suggestions
 - listening and responding to the questions and needs of other learners in the school

Theme 3

Authenticity – the way the principal relate to people in a genuine and trustworthy way

- The humane way in which the principal accommodates and treats learners and parents in the school
- Genuine interest in the well-being of the learner and parent
- Expression of empathy not sympathy
- Sensitivity to the needs of learners, teachers and parents

Theme 4

The way in which the principal objectively empowers participants

- Shares control:
 - Before initiating the process of inclusion, involve the parents in decision making
 - Creating an environment and climate promoting shared responsibilities
 - Involve parents, when solving problems concerning their children
- Provides social reinforcement
- Provides emotional support

Figure 4.2 Qualities of the principal as leader and manager

According to the participants in this research, the process of transformation into an inclusive school depends greatly on the qualities of the principal as leader and manager of the school. One parent enforced this statement by saying: “n Hoof maak of breek ‘n skool” (L.p.6)¹.

Newstrom and Davis (2002:163) describe the qualities needed by successful principals as leadership and management. They define *leadership* as the process of influencing and supporting others to work enthusiastically towards achieving objectives and that it is furthermore “the catalyst that transforms potential into reality” (2002:163). Leadership is

¹ In this section, references made to the interviews were done by firstly providing a representative letter for the particular participant and thereafter, by providing a page number, referring to the particular page in the transcription.

also seen as an important part of management. In this discussion *management* refers to the planning of activities, organising of structures and the controlling of resources to promote inclusive education. The difference between leadership and management lies in the belief that leaders create a vision and inspire others to achieve this vision, whereas managers achieve results by directing the activities of others. Leaders “energize workforces with compelling visions of the future, guiding them through difficult crises, create supportive corporate cultures, and increase stakeholder value” (2002:165).

Parents expressed their beliefs that principals with effective leadership and management skills can promote, facilitate and successfully implement inclusion in a school. Through positive leadership a principal can inspire the staff to share his vision for the inclusion of learners with disabilities in the school. Effective management skills can furthermore complement this vision and attitude by giving direction and support in the planning and executing of adaptations and accommodations that need to be made. “n Hoof wat die regte seining het van die saak en wat oop-kop is, hy gaan vir die onderwysers sê hoe om die saak te hanteer ...” (L.p.6). It was however evident that not all parents experienced the principal as supportive towards this vision of inclusion. It was recognised in statements like: “ ... maar as ons, ons skoolhoofde kan verander sal dit ‘n groot sukses wees” (L.p.14) and “daar is maniere om dit te hanteer, maar jou probleem lê daarin om die hoof te oortuig” (A.p.7). It was clear that parents view the principal as an important agent of change.

4.2.1 The principal’s vision in relation to the demands of the school community

Theme one identified the principal’s vision of the school in relation to the changing demands of the school community. Principals should see the purpose of the school as preparation for life in society (preparation to cope and engage with life and contribute towards a quality of life which all citizens can enjoy) (Davidoff & Lazarus, 1997:7). Schools therefore provide the base for all learners to participate in, and contribute towards a meaningful life in an inclusive society. Davidoff and Lazarus (1997:10) states that “what happens at schools lay the foundation for what will happen later on” in society. Inclusion embodies this value as it is “dedicated to ensuring that all learners are

empowered to become caring, competent and contributing citizens in an inclusive, changing and diverse society” (Engelbrecht, 1999:6). This vision of an inclusive society was supported by a parent’s comment on inclusive education and therefore the reason for placing the child in a mainstream school: “... jou kind kry ‘n baie meer afgeronde opvoeding, hy leer ook hoe om te kommunikeer en oor die weg te kom met gestremdes in ‘n gewone speel situasie in die klas, wat eintlik ‘n eendag se werk situasie is” (L.p.7). Another parent agreed by comparing inclusive schools to ‘special schools’ in relation to its value for society, by saying: “Dis ‘n samelewing in die kleene, waar hulle nie gestremdes eenkant en normales anderkant het nie ... hulle moet inskakel ... en hulle kry nie geleentheid hiervoor as hulle in spesiale skole is nie.” (D.p.14). Without a vision for the inclusion of learners with disabilities into mainstream schools, and without deep humane values building the structures to support these learners (Davidoff & Lazarus, 1997:10), change cannot occur in society itself. Therefore, how schools are managed and led by the principal, becomes a crucial dimension of the foundation for an inclusive society.

The interaction and interdependence between the school and society is described by Bronfenbrenner’s Systems theory. According to the Systems theory, the school is a smaller system within the wider system of society. The school system also consists of sub-systems like managerial staff, teachers, learners and parents. Principals have an influence on and interact with other sub-systems in the school, influencing them with their beliefs on inclusive education. This in turn, influence other wider systems in the community, and ultimately affect the inclusion of people with disabilities in society. Davidoff and Lazarus (1997:10) enforces this belief that a single system or part thereof can directly influence wider systems like society, by stating: “... we talk about engaging people at a grassroots level to build a nation of empowered people ... How our schools are organised, therefore, becomes a crucial dimension of the extent to which we are able to provide such a foundation for our students and for our society”.

Parents of learners with disabilities discussed their concerns about the principal’s awareness of the changing needs in society regarding inclusion, and its influence on education. It seems like a principal with a positive attitude towards learners with

disabilities will find ways to accommodate these learners in a mainstream school irrespective if the norm in the community is exclusive by nature. One of the participants talked about the decisions principals make in favour of inclusive education, in contrast to decisions and marketing strategies promoting the school as a 'perfect' organisation.

Die hoof het regtig uit sy pad uit gegaan om aanpassings te maak ... Daai menslikheid, stel meer belang in die kinders as die 'image' van die skool. Baie van die skole deesdae is so gestel op hy moet bemark en die beeld van die skool ... hy's so volmaak, hy's volmaak wat akademie betref, wat sport, kultuur en alles. En 'excuse me' as daar nou gestremde kinders in die skool is, dis nie goed vir die beeld van die skool nie. Dis nie volmaak en normaal nie. Enige iets wat afwyk van die normale is nie reg nie (L.p.8).

She continued by adding that change towards an inclusive society in adults can only be expected once children have been given the opportunity to learn and play with learners with disabilities.

Jy staan op 'n afstand van 'n gestremde af, jy wil nie met 'n gestremde meng nie want jy kan dit nie hanteer nie ... maar dit gaan begin verander. Soos wat hulle so graag sê 'die grassroot level' ... ons moet op 'grassroot level' begin ... as jy jou kind se siening van klein tyd af regkry, dan is hulle as grootmense reg." (L.p.11)

The principal's sensitivity to the needs of the people in his community, rather than the promotion of the school as a 'flawless' organisation, promoting the enrolment of selected learners and the exclusion of learners with disabilities, play a crucial part in the adoption of inclusive education in schools.

4.2.2 Effective communication skills

Theme two disclosed that a principal with effective interpersonal communication skills contribute to the success of inclusion in a school. Communication skills are described as traits of a successful manager and leader. According to De Vito (1998:7) interpersonal *communication* takes place between people who have established a relationship or may in

some way be connected. All interpersonal interactions serve a unique combination of purposes, are motivated by a unique combination of factors and therefore can produce a unique combination of results (1998:18). Table 4.1 illustrates the general purposes of communication between parents and principals and it provides an indication of the frequency of it being mentioned by parents in the interviews.

Table 4.1

The general purposes of communication and the number of referrals made to it

To support: Attend to needs of others	To learn: Acquire knowledge of oneself, others or skills	To relate: Establish or maintain interpersonal relationships	To influence: To control, manipulate or direct
12 incidents	6 incidents	6 incidents	1 incident

From the table above it was clear to see that parents experience communication with the principal mainly about mutual support, learning from each other and to establish a relationship between the role players.

Parents expressed their need for open channels of communication between the principal and themselves by making statements such as: “As ek ‘n probleem het moet hy asseblief na my luister” (R.p.6) and “solank daar net goeie kommunikasie is ...” (R.p.9). Unfortunately parents also described negative, uninviting forms of communication they have experienced, like “... dit was meer kritiek as ondersteuning ...” (R.p.4) and “... meer as een keer moes ek hoor dat ek neuroties is, dat ek die mat onder alles uitruk en dat ek getik is ...” (R.p.5). It was evident from the findings that effective communication provided parents with the support they needed to form partnerships with the school.

However, effective communication must not just be limited to the parents, but the communicative needs of the other learners in the school must also be satisfied. In this study it was evident that the way the principal communicated with the rest of the learners, facilitated the acceptance of the learner with a disability in the school. “Die hoof het aan

die begin van die jaar reguit vir die kinders gesê, dit is al haar probleme, maar sy's nie dom nie, sy's nie blind nie, sy's nie doof nie ... julle kan haar help ... sy kan 'n goeie maatjie wees vir julle ... solank jy met 'n kind eerlik en reguit is, is daar nie probleme nie ... jy sê vir 'n kind reguit, dis hoe dinge is ...” (L.p.5).

Principals must acknowledge and respect the inquisitive nature of children and provide the opportunity for other learners in the school to ask questions and to be answered – “as julle iets wil weet, vra vir haar of as julle nie vir haar wil vra nie, vra vir juffrou” (L.p.5). This is necessary as the other learners “ken nie hierdie dinge nie” (R.p.10) and they are unsure how to communicate and interact with a learner with a disability. “Ek het nooit met iemand te doen gehad wat in 'n rolstoel was nie en wat is jou reaksie as jy met iemand in 'n rolstoel te doen het ... jy dink hierdie kind kan nie praat nie ... jy praat bo-oor sy kop met die persoon wat die stoel stoot ... weet jy hoe vat jy daai ou in die gesig?” (R.p.8). Therefore the ability of the principal to welcome the learner with a disability into the school and to promote acceptance amongst the other learners, teachers and parents in the school, is crucial in determining the way the parents and the learners will experience the inclusive process.

Another communication skill needed by the principal, is soft listening skills. It involves inviting parents to express their needs (“ ... kom sê net vir my dat ons dadelik die probleem kan uitsorteer ..” L.p.6), hearing the entire message and respecting parents' responses (“ ...nie net om hulle af te vee aan ouers nie ... te luister as ouers iets het om te sê ...” D.p.3), being open for suggestions (“ ... ons kan dit maar probeer ...” D.p.6) and listening and responding to the questions and needs of other learners in the school (“As julle iets wil weet vra vir haar of as julle nie vir haar wil vra nie, vra vir juffrou” L.p.5).

Parents identified soft listening skills as an important ability for principals working with parents and learners with disabilities. As explained in section two through the use of the Personal Construct model, parents experience their children with disabilities in diverse ways and therefore will also need individualised support. It is therefore paramount for principals to listen to parents and respect their individual needs. “Mense sien situasies uit verskillende oogpunte” (L.p.10).

4.2.3 Authenticity - The way the principal relates to people in a genuine and trustworthy way

The way the principal relates to teachers, learners and parents in a genuine manner, was categorised as a theme in this research study. Sensitivity to the needs of participants, expressions of empathy, “empatie, nie simpatie” (R.p.9) and a genuine interest in the well-being of the people involved (“hy het elke tweede dag gebel en gevra hoe gaan dit met ons kind ... daai menslikheid, hy stel belang” L.p.6), contributed to positive experiences parents had in mainstream schools.

In contrast to this, insensitive behaviour from the principal contributed to feelings of frustration and negativity in parents:

“Kom sien my, jou kind is ‘n probleem!” (R.p.3)

“Wees net lief vir jou kind en los die res vir ons” (Group, p.3)

“Van die hoof se kant af sou emosionele ondersteuning ‘great’ gewees het. Hy’t nooit aangebied om te help nie. Dit was meer kritiek as wat daar ondersteuning was” (R.p.4)

The inclusion of learners with disabilities into mainstream schools is a matter close to the heart of many parents. Parents expressed their serious concern for their children’s well-being in the school through statements as “hy’s vir my baie spesiaal, en jy gaan vir my op jou rug kry ...” (R.p.7). Principals with an authentic way of treating parents and learners create and encourage positive experiences for all involved.

4.2.4 The way the principal objectively empowers parents

The role of the principal in empowering parents, influenced the experiences of these participants in inclusive schools. Newstrom and Davies (2002:185) define *empowerment* as any process that provides greater autonomy to participants through the sharing of relevant information and the provision of control over factors affecting the education of learners. *Empowerment* does not only imply invitations to participate in decision making, problem solving and the sharing of responsibilities, but can be extended by the promotion of adequate training opportunities to promote organisational and personal development within the school. This was emphasised by one parent when she said: “Ek was saam met

die onderwyseresse, hulle het my gevra om saam te gaan na 'n kursus ... wat hulle gehad het vir verdere onderwys ... om speelgrond toerusting aan te pas ...” (L.p.3).

The parents in this study found the principal's ability to share control, to provide social reinforcement and emotional support, as empowering. Feelings of shared control was achieved by allowing parents to share in decision making and creating opportunities for shared accountability. One parent described a discussion she had with the principal, where she was given a choice about her daughter's first school day seeing that the other learners still had to be prepared for the inclusion of a learner with a disability into the school: “... hy't vir my gevra: moet ek dit voor haar doen of moet sy eers 'n dag later skool toe kom?” (L.p.5).

Apart from feelings of shared control, principals should use social reinforcement to foster and create positive experiences for parents. Principals need to praise, encourage and give verbal feedback to raise the self-confidence of the parents. This need was expressed by a parent when she said: “... ek wil nie net weet hoe doen my kind akademies nie, ek wil weet hoe doen ek as ouer ook ...” (Group, p.4).

Parents furthermore described the role of the principal as the provider of emotional support to learners and parents, the reducer of stress parents suffer from (concerning their children's education) and to be honest and caring towards all the role players. This was echoed in a statement made by a parent: “... emosionele ondersteuning ook, maar partykeer het die ouers maar bietjie 'pepping-up' nodig ...” (L.p.9).

Parents identified the essential traits of a principal as the ability to bring a personal vision of inclusion to life in the school, effective communication skills, an authentic way of relating to people and an ability to empower the participants. Although the role of the principal was prominent in the interviews, the influence of other participants on the inclusive process must not be overseen.

4.3 The role of the teacher in determining the success of inclusion

The second category describes the views of parents on the role of the teacher in making inclusive education a success in the school. Figure 4.3 illustrates the main concepts of this category:

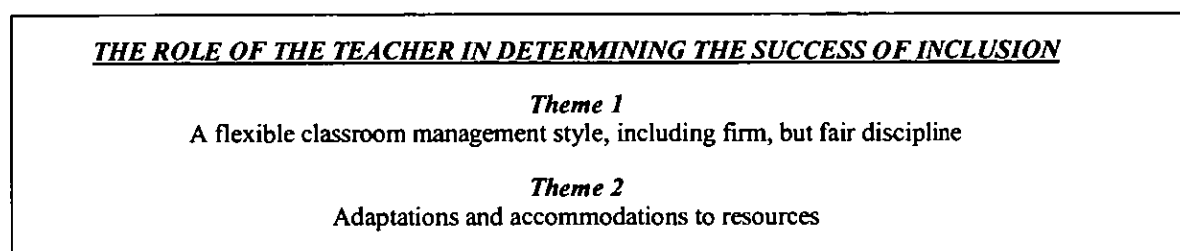


Figure 4.3 The role of the teacher in determining the success of inclusion

Flexibility in classroom management as well as the teacher's ability to make suitable adaptations and accommodations to resources were identified as the main themes influencing the views and experiences of parents.

Cooper (1999:223) defines *classroom management* as that set of activities by which the teacher establishes and maintains classroom conditions to facilitate effective and efficient instruction. This includes the teacher's ability to establish conditions that enable the learners to be productive, maintain a high level of morale, settle conflict and minimize management problems (Johnson & Bany, as cited in Cooper, 1999:251).

A least restrictive classroom context is described by parents as paramount for the successful inclusion of learners with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. Parents recognised accommodations and adaptations made to various resources and structures in the classroom and playground as contributing to the success of inclusive education. *Accommodation* is described as "changes made either in the way a lesson is taught or in the scope and sequence of what is taught" in order to meet the individual learner's needs (Sands, et al. 2000:358). In this study *adaptation* refers to changes to instructional procedures in order to ensure that all the learners have the opportunity to learn (Sands, et al. 2000:358).

Parents remarked on the different ways teachers created a least restrictive environment inside and outside the classroom. The parent of a learner with a physical disability, affecting her mobility and bladder control, described the ways in which the teacher accommodated these impairments in the classroom. She named the adaptations made to physical structures in the classroom by saying: “sy het ‘n spesiale stoel en tafeltjie gemaak vir haar” (L.p.3). Seating arrangements were also flexible and complemented the learner’s needs. The placement of a learner with a bladder control deficiency next to the door, close to the bathroom, enforced the teacher’s sensitivity to the needs of the learner. “Haar tafeltjie was by die deur gewees ... sodat sy by die badkamer is” (L.p.3). Her parent also referred to the tendency of some children with disabilities to use the disability as an excuse. “Sy was streng genoeg gewees, want gestremde kinders is geneig om groot kansvatters te wees” (L.p.3) The teacher managed this habit by providing firm, but fair discipline.

The teacher’s willingness to make adjustments and adaptations to her management style to address the needs of the learners, strongly depends on her personal perceptions of inclusive education. Parents felt that teachers might feel threatened and unsure of the way to handle a learner with a disability in the class – “dis baie vreemd ... mens moet verstaan, almal is besig om te leer” (D.p.6). This seemed to be due to the fact that mainstream teachers seldom had contact with learners with disabilities and that they feel unsure of the way to communicate and interact with them. “Want ons het in ‘n gesonde wêreld grootgeword. Ek het nooit met iemand te doen gehad wat in ‘n rolstoel was nie ...” (R.p.8).

Lack of knowledge and inadequate training can lead to insensitive and offensive circumstances in the classroom. A parent of a learner with a neurological disability described a scenario where the teacher’s lack of knowledge about a particular disability led to an insensitive and unprofessional way of handling a situation:

En hy wil in die konsert deelneem, dis al hoekom hy wil skool toe gaan, want hy wil in die konsert wees. En juffrou het eendag vir hom geskree voor die hele skool: ‘Jy’s useless’ en my kind was nooit weer dieselfde nie. Alles oor een vrou wat vir hom geskree het omdat hy korttermyngeheueverlies het en hy nie sy

woorde kon onthou van gister na vandag nie. Hy kon nie onthou wat ons gister gedoen het nie (R.p.7).

The following extract from an interview with a mother of a child with a physical disability describes the impact of the teacher's way of enforcing discipline on the child.

... 'n juffrou wat hulle gedissiplineer het op 'n manier waarmee ek nie saamgestem het nie ... sy't hulle op hulle knieë laat staan met hulle handjies agter hulle rug, en hy kan dit nie doen nie. Hy was daai aand doodmoeg, hy kon nie beweeg nie (R.p.3).

Parents view the role of the teacher as vital for the successful inclusion of learners with disabilities into mainstream schools. Concerns about a flexible management style, fair discipline and the teacher's ability to make suitable accommodations and adaptations were voiced.

As described in section two, the family system does not only comprise of the mother and father, but includes the siblings of the learner with a disability. Parents voiced their concern for these siblings receiving education at the same school as their brother or sister with a disability (as seen in figure 4.4).

4.4 Supporting the siblings of the learner with a disability

Parents voiced their concern about the siblings of the learner with a disability. Figure 4.4 introduces the two themes in this category.

SUPPORTING THE SIBLINGS OF THE LEARNER WITH A DISABILITY

- Inclusion of a child with a disability can cause a change in the academic, social and personal development and behaviour of a sibling in the same school.
- They must take up new roles (protector or assistant) when receiving education in the same school as their sibling with a disability.

Figure 4.4 Supporting the siblings of the learner with a disability

The inclusion of a learner with a disability into a school where one or more of his siblings attend the school, can have an impact on the sibling's academic, social and personal

development. Parents noticed a change in the routine and interests of the siblings. “Hy is sportbehep, ‘n rugby en krieketspeler by uitstek, maar hy het nie ‘n voet op ‘n rugbyveld of sy voet op ‘n krieketveld gesit nie ...” (R.p.11).

One participant shared her views concerning other siblings: “En hierdie kind moes eenkant aangaan, hier op sy eie eilandjie aangaan ... ‘n verskriklike ervaring, so dat ek vir jou sê die ander boeties en sussies het amper meer aandag nodig as die gestremde kind in die huis “ (R.p.12). According to the Personal Construct Model (see 2.2.2.1), people experience situations in various ways. This can also be said of the brothers and sisters of learners with disabilities. Some siblings might constantly need the support of the teachers and parents, whereas others might cope successfully on their own without any formal support. Parents felt that the principal and teacher should offer these siblings support and often communicate with them on their feelings and experiences. “Die hoof het nie een dag met hom gepraat en gesê: kom ons praat ‘n bietjie, kom ons kyk bietjie wat ons kan doen om jou te help nie” (R.p.10). Principals and the teaching staff need to recognise the individual needs of these learners and respect them as individuals. Parents furthermore stated that these siblings often lose their identity when a brother or sister with a disability is included into the school. One parent stated that her son is often referred to as “M se boetie” (R.p.10) and that he must be able to handle the attention that the learner with the disability gets. “Hy kan die ‘gefaf’ van mense om J nie meer hanteer nie” (R.p.10). It was clear that these siblings also need the support of the school to adjust to the demands of inclusive education.

Parents also noted that these siblings need to take on new roles in the school. They often have to protect or assist the learner with the disability during school and socializing activities. One participant commented on the younger sister’s role, by saying “sy moet maar help, sy’s haar sussie” (L.p.13). Although parents identified the needs of the siblings for support, the task of the school is to form a partnership with the parents, to enable effective support for these siblings.

4.5 Summary of the findings

The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences and views of parents with children with disabilities on inclusive education. When reflecting on the findings of the study, I realise that although inclusive education is becoming a common educational phenomenon in South Africa, the structures for support and partnerships with parents are not yet in place. If the experiences of the participants in this study are taken into consideration, it can be said that inclusive education is still in the initial stage. Some attempts to include learners with disabilities in mainstream schools have been driven by a vision of inclusion, although a lack of knowledge and training, support practices and involvement of role players are still evident.

The role of parents as partners in this process needs to be recognised before inclusive education can be successfully implemented. Not only must parents be seen as partners in the process of educational change, but their diverse needs and experiences must be recognised, respected and supported in the school system. In this study it was evident that the role of principals, teachers and parents are equal in determining the success of inclusive education. Mutual respect, collaboration and dedication to the process are necessary to ensure the successful inclusion of learners with disabilities into mainstream schools. It was furthermore evident that parents' concerns lie not only with the learners with disabilities, but also with their siblings in inclusive schools. The family as a system needs to be supported and included in a partnership with the school.

Parents not only expressed their need for open channels of communication, but expressed their need for recognition as mutual partners, sharing the responsibility of educating learners.

4.6 Recommendations

The development of inclusive schools depends to a large extent on the roleplayers' commitment to clear principles and values guiding the implementation process of inclusion. "A shared philosophy of inclusion where everyone is accepted and valued and diversity is viewed as a rich resource to support learning for all" (Engelbrecht, 2001:21)

is needed by the role players. These inclusive principles and values emphasise participation and accountability in the educational process. A holistic approach is needed to develop inclusive schools within an integrated framework to whole-school development. Not only will all the aspects of the school as an organisation be influenced, but transformation of the roles of the principal, teacher and parent will have to take place. This calls for a change of perspective, from an individualistic and a-contextual approach to an approach that is contextually relevant and systemically sensitive.

Whole-school development involves more than just merely changing roles in education. A comprehensive and ongoing whole-school development approach that involves all the role players is needed to include the context of the whole school.

As recommendations for the development of inclusive schools, I have adopted the core principles and strategies of whole-school development, as it were described by Swart and Pettipher (2001:33):

- *Include all.* All learners and parents within the local community should be included irrespective of their culture, ethnicity, language, ability, gender and age.
- *Teach and adapt for diversity.* Design instruction to accommodate the diverse needs of learners and engage parents as partners in the education process.
- *Build community and support learning.* Establish collaborative networks and community resources to build support for all the role players.
- *Build partnerships.* Schools should build meaningful collaborative partnerships within the school, with families and the community.
- *Develop and share leadership.* Shared leadership is aimed at mobilising the active contribution and vision building of every member of the school community.

It is evident that inclusive education requires change on many levels. Therefore educational change implies the redefinition of the roles of the role players. These changing roles can only contribute to the process if it occurs in the context of whole-school development. “Changing roles require reflection; rethinking of one’s values, beliefs and attitudes towards diversity, education and learning; movement from isolation

to collaboration; changing leadership roles and perceptions of leadership; and a focus on new instructional strategies to accommodate diversity” (Swart & Pettipher, 2001:43). This process of educational change demands time, courage, patience and mutual support.

For inclusive education to become a value, and not just an add-on practice (Swart & Pettipher, 2001:30) in schools, the roles of the all the role players must change to make collaborative partnerships possible.

4.7 Recommendations for further research

The findings of this study and the gap in existing literature, have shown that there is a need to do a further investigation on the experiences of parents in inclusive education. The experiences of all the members in the family system should be investigated. As it was evident from the findings in this study, the experiences and views of siblings of learners with disabilities are overlooked. It was the experience of the researcher that fathers of learners with disabilities are also often overlooked, as schools seem to focus on the mothers, instead of families. The influence on and perceptions of inclusive education of the school and family system need to be clear before a realistic picture can evolve.

The following questions pose possibilities for further research:

- What are the experiences and views of fathers of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools?
- What are the experiences and views of siblings of learners with disabilities in the same mainstream school?
- How can support provision be structured to address the needs of the entire family system?

4.8 Conclusion

This study provided a framework, enabling the reader to gain an understanding of parents’ perceptions and experiences in inclusive schools. Initially, background information was provided, followed by a literature review, providing a theoretical framework of inclusive education, the Systems theory and the Personal Construct Model.

Thereafter, attention was given to the research design and the data of the enquiry. This was followed by a discussion on the findings of the study.

Through analysis of the data, three main categories were identified and discussed. The categories were qualities of the principal as leader and manager, the role of the teacher in determining the success of inclusion and supporting the siblings of the learner with a disability.

Inclusive education must not just be seen as an option for education, but as the strategy most likely to achieve a democratic and just society (Green, 2001:5). Through participatory democracy previously marginalized communities and individuals can now be recognised as partners in inclusive education. The potential role parents can play in determining the success of inclusion need to be recognised. Including parents into the process of educational change implies that parents must be seen as collaborative partners in decision-making, planning, delivery and evaluation of education. In a partnership, the needs of the partners are recognised and supported. As not all parents share the same circumstances and needs, teachers and principals need to listen to the experiences and views of parents. Parents embrace the opportunity to embark on this educational journey, but need the support and recognition partners deserve. This commitment and need was echoed by one of the participants: “Kom ons stap die pad saam” (L.p.12).

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APPENDIX A

EXTRACT FROM THE RESEARCH DIARY

14 September 2002

Phone schools in my neighbourhood and inquire about learners with disabilities included into the school.

Get as much information about the learners and their parents as possible.

Essential information: What is the nature of the disability?

The names and surnames of the learner and his/her parents

Contact numbers or physical address

Outcomes of the day: School X provided me with a contact number for the mother of a learner with a physical disability.

15 September 2002

Phone schools in surrounding neighbourhoods to inquire about learners with disabilities included into the school.

Contact the mother of the learner with the physical disability, ask her permission to conduct an interview with her and/or her husband.

Outcomes of the day: I received the permission of the mother to participate. She also provided me with the contact number of a hydro-therapist for further possible leads.

When I phoned a particular school, I had an unpleasant experience with one of the secretaries. After I explained the nature of my research to her and asked her if she could provide me with possible names of participants, she rudely ended the conversation by saying: "Even if I knew I wouldn't tell you. You have no right to ask me this!" After this experience I felt scared to phone a school again.

APPENDIX B

AN EXTRACT FROM A TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW

O- *En die hoof?*

R- Die hoof is, hy's nog 'n jongerige ou, hy het regtig uit sy pad uit gegaan om aanpassings te maak, as hy my sien dan sê hy asseblief, jy't nog nie met my kom praat nie, 'as daar 'n kind is wat lelik praat met Leone, kom sê net vir my dat ons dadelik die probleem kan uitsorteer'. Maar sy sorteer haar eie probleme uit. Maar die belangstelling, want tussen in was sy vir 'n rukkie uit, wat sy 'n operasie gehad het, wat hy elke tweede dag gebel het en gevra het: hoe gaan dit met ons kind? Daai menslikheid, stel meer belang in die kinders as in die 'image' van die skool. Baie van die skole deesdae is so gestel op hy moet bemark en die beeld van die skool moet wees, hy's so volmaak, hy's volmaak wat akademie aan betref, wat sport, kultuur en alles. En 'excuse me' as daar dan nou gestremde kinders in die skool is, dis nie goed vir die beeld van die skool nie.

O- *Hoekom dink jy dat 'n skoolhoof sal dink dat 'n gestremde, insluiting nie vir hom 'n promosie is nie.*

R- Dit is nie volmaak en normaal nie. Enige iets wat afwyk van die normale is nie reg nie. Dit is die houding wat jy kry.

O- *Kyk insluitende onderwys is in die pyplyn. Sou jy sê dat ons probleme gaan kry by die hoof.*

R- 'n Hoof maak of breek 'n skool. 'n Goeie hoof kan 'n skool net goed doen, 'n slegte hoof kan 'n goeie skool afbreek. Jou eerste belangrike ding is om met die hoofde te werk en hulle sienswyse te verander. As jy daai ding het, het jy drie kwart van die stryd gewen. 'n Hoof wat die regte siening het van die saak, en wat oop-kop is, hy gaan vir sy onderwysers sê: kyk dis hoe ons die saak hanteer, en klaar.

O- *So jy sê hulle sien dit meer in die besigheid sin as in die opvoeding ...*

R- Absoluut, dit is die groot probleem met die model C skole, alles gaan oor die 'bottom-line figure' dit gaan nie meer oor die kind nie. Dit is die groot lelike ding wat ingekom het, want ons moet meer kinders trek van meer goeie ouers. Kyk jou kinders wat die ouers nie kan rond 'shop' nie gaan nou nie 'demand' nie, maar hulle soek die ouers wat die geld het. Ouers wat kan bekostig om vir hulle kinders bietjie beter onderwys te gee gaan rondshop vir die beste skool.

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF CONSENT

44 Nerina Avenue
Verwoerdpark
1453

September 2002

Dear Participant,

Re: Consent to participate in the research

I am a registered student at RAU in the Department of Education and Nursing, currently completing my Master's Degree in Education and Learning Support, under the guidance of Mrs Raine Pettipher and Professor Estelle Swart. The data collected from the interviews, will be used for the completion of a research essay as the partial fulfilment of the requirements for this degree.

The topic of this study is: "The experiences and views of parents of children with disabilities, attending mainstream schools." Interviews with several individual parents and a focus group interview with five parents, will be held to gain an understanding of parents' perceptions on inclusive education.

I would, according to prevailing practice, like to assure you that whatever is discussed in the interviews, will be subject to the utmost confidentiality and that participants will remain anonymous. I am furthermore, prepared to share the findings of the research with you, if you so wish.

Please complete the attached form, indicating that you give your consent for participation in the research and the use of data arrived from the interview.

Thanking you in anticipation,

Melanie van Heerden
902-7374

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Name:

I give my consent to participate in the research data gathering process for the research essay being prepared by Mrs Melanie van Heerden, on parents' views on inclusive education.

I understand that all information will remain anonymous and confidential. I give my consent for her to use any comments that illuminate the research.

Signed: Date:

