

RHIANNON

Hi, my name is Rhiannon Moore, and I'm joined today by Dr Jennifer Agbaire, who will be telling us a bit about her work on inclusion and inclusive education. Jennifer, thanks for joining us. Could you tell us a bit about your research on how teachers in different countries conceptualise inclusion and inclusive education?

JENNIFER

Yes. My research is funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and is led by the OU, of course. It's titled *Ibali*, which means 'story' in an Indigenous southern African language called Xhosa. Now the research team, we worked with teachers and young people separately in the three countries that we are from: South Africa, Nigeria and the UK, using a storytelling approach developed by our colleague Joanna Wheeler, to explore what educational inclusion means to the participants, as well as how and why meanings based on the experiences and perspectives might be different across the different contexts. So in each country we worked with a group of 12 to 13 teachers in four to five day long workshops involving a collective storytelling process.

The teachers shared their experiences and insights into inclusion and exclusion. Among the things we have found so far is that while there is some synergy in how the teachers in the different countries are thinking about inclusion in education, for example, in terms of its importance, the priority areas which also linked to the key messages that they are eager to share, tended to vary quite a lot. For example, in the UK, the teachers had this key and resounding message about the contrasting outcomes of different ways of supporting learners with disability. Whereas in Nigeria, the key message was around teacher agency, which sort of surprised us a little, as the teachers had been prompted to think about their students' inclusion in school. So notably, in Nigeria, teachers' own exclusionary experiences in their personal lives, their pre-service training, their current and professional practice, surfaced quite strongly in some of the stories, and teachers presented these as closely connected to how they understood young people's exclusion and what they can or cannot do about it.

But students' inclusion tended to be treated separately to teachers' experiences, both in policy, in interventions and generally in practice. So, I guess from the research, an emerging message from these stories is the need for an expanded notion of educational inclusion in this context, that embeds or kind of incorporates teachers' own experiences and their agentive capacities as integral to the meaning and the enactment of inclusion in education.

RHIANNON

That's really interesting, thank you. And I think this builds on what you were just saying, but in your view, how does the way teachers conceptualise inclusion shape their use of inclusive practices in the classroom, and what other factors do you think might be important?

JENNIFER

That's a very interesting question, actually. Personally, I think that more often than not, how teachers understand inclusion will determine how they consider learners in terms of needing their support, or what kinds of support they offer or embed in their practice.

So, for example, going back to my research and the point I was making about Nigeria, the teachers opened the workshop by asking us to tell them what inclusion meant, and we responded that we had not come to impose a meaning but would like to hear their own understanding of inclusion, and inter-mesh at the beginning of the workshop that largely because of policy emphases, they had predominantly thoughts of inclusion in that part of Nigeria only in terms of special educational needs and in terms of educational access; that is, being in school or attending classes, and not necessarily as an active classroom responsibility of the teacher.

As we went through several days of the workshop and teachers' experiences began to be unravelled and discussed, reshaping their perspectives in a way, we all saw clearly significant shifts in how they conceptualise inclusion. And with this new re-conceptualisation came their own suggestions, very excitedly, of practical, relevant and innovative ideas and activities to step up inclusive practice, but in terms of striving to identify the needs of all learners and not just those that are always considered as special needs learners, and meeting diverse needs through teaching and pastoral support.

But other factors may also shape teachers' use of inclusive practice in the classroom, as you alluded, Rhiannon, such as the amount and type of training and mentorship that they receive,

their level of experience and capacity working with different inclusive practice or practices, and the local resources or other supports available to them, their working conditions, including class size, for example. The list is not exhaustive, but those are some factors to consider.

RHIANNON

Thanks very much. And finally, what role do you think context plays in shaping understandings of inclusion and inclusive practice in education? And is a universal understanding of inclusion possible?

JENNIFER

So, when I think about contexts, I think about the plethora of intersecting things. I think about why the social culture dominantly values history or historical antecedents, and I think about education policy, which is fed into from all of these things, and which then, in turn, tends to guide what inclusive practice looks like.

And all of these things are often different in different places. So, aiming for a universal understanding of inclusion might be a stretch and may not necessarily be desirable. Contemporary research shows that understanding of inclusion and inclusive practice needs to be context-specific in order for them to be relevant. So, I think fundamentally, there can be a universal understanding that inclusion is important, but what counts as inclusive practice would not always be similar, even with reference to addressing similar factors or characteristics across different contexts. So, context plays a pivotal role in determining what is prioritised in the definitions of inclusion and where action might be mostly focused on within an inclusive practice in education. So, for example, in Nigeria, nomadism has been identified as a significant cause of exclusion from formal schooling, and there has been an argument that an inclusive practice should entail adjusting school calendars to respond to the nomadic lifestyle, rather than planning to lure the children of nomads out of their generational means of livelihood.

But nomadism is not a key dimension of the inclusive practice discussed in, say, the UK, for example. In the UK there have been discourses about how best to safeguard the rights of schoolchildren who have indicated that they want to become transgender, for example. But in many countries in Africa and Asia, national policy criminalises LGBTQ+ on religious and cultural grounds, and this tends to shape the educational discourse on inclusive practice in this country, which in this case becomes very dissimilar from the debates in England, Wales or Scotland, for example.

So, for education practitioners, an inclusive practice would involve paying attention to the lived experiences of diverse groups in any educational system and the prevailing factors that account for these in the context that they are in to decide what is needed, what is possible and what would work. So, such contextual nuance is useful to developing sustainable inclusive practice, I think.

RHIANNON

Thank you very much Jennifer, it's been really interesting to talk to you and hear a bit about your work.

JENNIFER

It's been great to talk about it, thank you.