

Special Education in the South African Context: A Bio-Ecological Perspective

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Abstract : Prior to 1994, special education in South Africa was marginalized and fragmented. Moving away from a Medical model approach to special education, the Government, after 1994, promoted an Inclusive approach, as a means to transform education in general, and special education in particular. This transformation, however, is moving at too a slow pace for learners with barriers to learning and development to benefit fully from their education. The goal of the Department of Basic Education is to minimize, remove, and prevent barriers to learning and development in the educational setting, by attending to the unique needs of the individual learner. However, the implementation of Inclusive education is problematic, and general education remains poor. This paper highlights the historical development of special education in South Africa, underpinned by a bio-ecological perspective. Problematic areas within the systemic levels of the education system are highlighted in order to indicate how the interactive processes within the systemic levels affect special needs learners on the personal dimension of the bio-ecological approach. As part of the methodology, thorough document analysis was conducted on information collected from a large body of research literature, which included academic articles, reports, policies, and policy reviews. Through a qualitative analysis, data were grouped and categorized according to the bio-ecological model systems, which revealed various successes and challenges within the education system. The challenges inhibit change, growth, and development for the child, who experience barriers to learning. From these findings, it is established that special education in South Africa has been, and still is, on a bumpy road. Sadly, the transformation process of change, envisaged by implementing Inclusive education, is still yet a dream, not fully realized. Special education seems to be stuck at what is, and the education system has not moved forward significantly enough to reach what special education should and could be. The gap that exists between a vision of Inclusive quality education for all, and the current reality, is still too wide. Problems encountered in all the education system levels, causes a funnel-effect downward to learners with special educational needs, with negative effects for the development of these learners.

Keywords : bio-ecological perspective, education systems, inclusive education, special education

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