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Perspectives on education of students with disabilities in South Africa: challenging a culture of silence

Perspectivas sobre a educação de alunos com deficiência na África do Sul: desafiando a cultura do silêncio

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Abstract: South Africa has established an inclusive education system that retains special schools to cater for students with high support needs and to serve as resource centres to neighbouring schools. While there has been much discussion on the value or not of special schools, relatively few studies exist that share the perspectives of student within the schools. This study is based on interviews with 39 students in 6 special and 2 full-service schools. Interviews were transcribed and subject to a thematic content analysis which revealed that the students felt frustrated that their disability is not understood by teaching staff. They expressed a need for more social and psychological support relating to their experiences of schooling, disability and social problems. They also discussed a need for teachers to be patient and committed. Students in hostels highlighted the poor living conditions and lack of support from hostel carers that impacts on their ability to learn. The needs that have been identified by students should inform teacher education in the interests of improving their quality of education.

Keywords: South Africa; Inclusive education; Disability; Students.

Background to the study

In South Africa the national prevalence rate of disability among 5 to 9 year olds is 10.8%, while in the 10 to 14 age group it is 4.1%, and 2.6% for 15 to 19 year olds¹. There are 464 special schools across South Africa, each of which caters for specific impairments; for example, there are schools for students who are blind and partially sighted, D/deaf and hard of hearing, intellectually impaired and physically impaired. Over 119,500 students were enrolled in special schools and, in 2017, close to 11,500 children with disabilities were on waiting lists to enrol in special schools². An estimated 600,000 children with disabilities remain out of school in South Africa, but the government has not published accurate data³.

The 2011 census also showed that, at all phases of education, school attendance for students with disabilities was lowest among students with severe difficulty in walking and communicating¹. This echoes international findings which illustrate that, on average, persons with disabilities (when compared with persons without disabilities) are less likely to ever attend school, more likely to be out of school, less likely to complete primary or secondary education, and less likely to have basic literacy skills⁴. This exclusion from education is out of line with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa⁵, which asserts the right to basic education of all children, and the goals of Education White Paper 6 (EWP6), which states that students who experience barriers to learning should receive appropriate support and education in a range of educational settings⁶.

While there are many reasons for exclusion, including poverty and inadequate resourcing for disability, two key reasons for exclusion and marginalisation of students with disabilities are that the educational needs of students with severe to profound disabilities are not fully understood in South Africa, and that teachers lack the skills in disability practice, and are consequently challenged by students, often without any of the necessary support⁷. Against this backdrop, this research began with the premise that, in order to strengthen teacher education so that teachers are able to provide quality education and support for students with disabilities, it is imperative that a sound empirical background of the educational needs of students with disability.

Literature review

The World Health Organization's 'World Report on Disability'⁸ states that inclusive education seeks to enable schools to serve all students in local communities. Although the ultimate goal is full inclusion, the report acknowledges that this may be difficult. It suggests that a flexible approach to placement should be encouraged, where students are placed in the most integrated setting possible. Educational needs must be assessed from the perspective of what is best for the individual child and the available financial and human resources within the specific context of the learner.

The South African context

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa⁵ protects all those living in the country from any form of unfair discrimination, including on the basis of disability, and states that everyone has the right to basic and further education. The South African Schools Act⁹ states that schools should support children's educational and other support needs without any discrimination. This includes, as far as possible, accommodating children with special educational needs. Parents have the right to decide which type of school they would like their children to attend, including enrolment into a mainstream school instead of a special school.

Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education⁶, South Africa's policy on inclusive education, presents policy approaches to accommodating students' needs, including students with disabilities. It acknowledges that students have a broad range of needs which, when they are not met, lead to barriers to learning and development. These barriers can arise because of many factors including inaccessible environments, language of teaching and learning, inappropriate communication and unsafe environments.

In 2014 the on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS)¹⁰ was mandated for the determination of support needs of children who experience barriers to learning. SIAS identifies educational placement options for students – in mainstream, full-service and special schools – through a systematic process of examining support needs. Rather than focusing on disability categories, educational placement options are based on whether the child requires low, medium or high levels of support and how each type of school can meet these needs. As a result of this process, diversity and appropriate specialised support for students should be features of every classroom.

In addition, the DBE has developed guidelines for responding to learner diversity in the classroom¹¹ to be used in conjunction with the national curriculum, the 'Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement' (CAPS) adopted in 2011. The guidelines are aimed at assisting teachers to develop differentiation strategies to accommodate students who face various barriers to learning in the classroom.

Despite the sound policy framework for inclusion of students with disabilities in place in South Africa, implementation lags far behind. In addition, even when these students do get access to education, the quality of education that they receive is not up to standard, with a large percentage of students being unable to access the curriculum effectively and many students in special schools not having access to the same subjects as those in mainstream schools³. Evidence suggests that students with disabilities have not been provided with sufficient reasonable accommodation or support to ensure that they can access education that is on an equal basis to that of their peers³. Further, one of the biggest challenges in educating students with disabilities is the entrenched attitude among teachers and within schools that children with disabilities are not able to learn to the same standard as children without disabilities³.

There is a dearth of research in low to middle income countries like South Africa that looks specifically at the educational needs of students with disabilities, especially research that uses an integrated approach, drawing on multiple perspectives. In this paper, we report on a study on educational needs for children with disabilities drawing on perspectives of parents, teachers, students and education officials. Our specific focus is on the views of students and how they identify their learning needs.

Students' voices

A quick Google Scholar search reveals a plethora of literature on the views of teachers regarding inclusive education, with the views of families coming a far second. There is minimal consideration of the voices of disabled people and almost no consideration of the voices of children with disabilities currently education¹². Gibson¹³ attributes this to a culture of silence surrounding the practice of special education, drawing on the work of Paulo Freire. This describes how the voices of the powerful silence those of the oppressed. In the context of special education, the voice and reason of the professional

remains the truth: “The professional remains in control, the dominator, the one with the authoritative, legitimate voice, who stands on the platform of valued knowledge”^{13: 322}. This reflects a culture of silence where the students voice is not heard due to the unequal power relationships within schooling such that we ignore: *His/her subjective way of perceiving and understanding him-/herself and others, his/her subjective way of grasping what his/her needs are in relation to his/her education, ways in which variables impact on him/her and in turn are impacted upon by him/her, remain cloaked in a culture of silence.*

In this research, we challenge the culture of silence and elicit the participation of disabled children to hear their views on their educational needs and outcomes¹². This approach is in line with that of disabled children’s childhood disability studies which positions the voice and experiences of disabled children and their families/allies at the centre of inquiry¹⁴. Within this framework the child is viewed as an agent in their own lives and capable of making decisions and understanding phenomena that affect them. Therefore, in this paper we ask the research question: What are the views of disabled students on their own educational needs and preference?

Research methodology

Context of the study

This study was part of a situation analysis carried out in a broader research project – Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion (TEDI), which focused on the educational needs of students with severe to profound sensory or intellectual disabilities. Data were collected from six special schools and two full-service¹ schools across three provinces in South Africa, interviewing students with disabilities, teachers and school management team members, parents, and district and provincial education officials¹⁵. The aim of the larger study from which this paper is drawn, was to develop an understanding of the educational needs of students with disabilities and the teacher education required to meet these needs. This paper focuses on students’ perspectives, exploring students’ views on their own learning needs.

¹ Schools that are supported and adapted to meeting the needs of students with disabilities in mainstream settings.

Research design

We adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, drawing on a naturalistic perspective to examine the phenomenon of the learning needs of students with disability in South Africa in its natural state¹⁶. Qualitative research aims to explore people's subjective experiences of the world¹⁷. The qualitative descriptive approach focuses on providing a comprehensive summary of the topic, ensuring that there is descriptive validity resulting in an account of events that is consistent with other observers and congruent with the subjective meanings that participants attribute to those events¹⁸. Data was collected by means of focus groups and interviews and analysed, in our case, by means of an inductive thematic analysis.

Participants

Participants who were 14 years or older were recruited from special schools or full-service schools in three provinces of South Africa: Eastern Cape, Gauteng and the Western Cape. Students under the age of 18 gave assent, and consent was obtained from their parents. Letters of information and consent forms were given to students over 18.

Given that students with disabilities are a heterogeneous group, the researchers ensured that every learner understood the study through simplified language, seeking interpretation from people who understood the communication needs of the participant when necessary¹⁹. In confirming informed consent, participants were asked three questions about their understanding of the project, their knowledge that they can stop.

Interviews

The interviews with students focused on their experiences having a disability; the challenges and difficulties they face in the classroom and schooling environment; the support they receive, and would like to receive, in improving their learning environment; how they feel teachers can best support them; and what training they feel teachers should receive in order to meet their learning needs. Students who

were under the age of 18 or were intellectually impaired could request that a teacher be present during the interview. A total of 39 students with either intellectual, visual or hearing impairments were interviewed.

Data analysis

Data for this study were analysed using thematic analysis, a process of methodically classifying, putting together and providing an understanding of the patterns or themes in a dataset²⁰. This was done with the support of Dedoose²¹, an online application used to analyse qualitative and mixed methods research data. Initial coding of the data which we draw upon for this analysis was undertaken by the TEDI research team, consisting of experienced qualitative researchers. These codes were then combined into categories that addressed the project's research questions as overarching themes.

Ethical considerations

The University of Cape Town Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the broader research project within which this study falls (HREC REF: 151/2017). The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki abiding by the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and beneficence¹⁷.

Study context

Research was conducted over a three-month period in three provinces: Western Cape, Eastern Cape, and Gauteng. These provinces were chosen to represent a range of better resourced (Western Cape and Gauteng) and lesser resourced (Eastern Cape) areas. The research team selected eight schools (six special schools and two full-service schools) ensuring representation of province, impairment category, resourced and under-resourced, rural and urban schools. The six special schools comprised two schools for students with severe intellectual disabilities, two for students who are blind or have low vision, and two for students who are D/deaf.

To secure site visits at each school, the research team was guided by the national Department of Basic Education. After gaining written permission from the provincial education departments and district offices, the research team made direct contact with the principals of each school to introduce themselves and confirm interview dates to ensure minimal disruption to the school's teaching and learning. The research team made a preparatory visit to each school one week in advance of the interviews, which were conducted over three days.

Findings

The following themes were identified in the analysis of students' views:

- Social and psychological support
- Appropriate classroom discipline
- Understanding disability
- Appropriate teaching pace
- Patient and committed teachers
- Hostel experiences

Each of these will be discussed below. The quotes are identified by participant group codes as follows:

- SID: Student with intellectual disability
- SVB: Student with low vision or blindness
- SDHH Student who is D/deaf or Hard of Hearing

Social and psychological support

Students described a lack of, but need for, social and psychological support relating to their experiences of schooling, disability, and community-based problems such as violence. When discussing access to support one learner noted: "Nothing. I do not get support from anyone" (SDHH).

When discussing the kind of support needed, another learner said: "They must also know how to create that kind of environment where you can express how you feel about certain things and that they should understand exactly what it is that you are trying to say" (SVB).

However, there were also some accounts of students who found teachers approachable and supportive: “There is a teacher who teaches me Economics and Religion. That teacher she became a mother to me at the school. She motivates me with all the things like the personal life or general life of mine” (SVB5).

Some students praised specific teachers for: “going the extra mile (LVB7). As one learner noted: Support that I receive is from teachers ... they can come to the hostel and help me. They are not supposed to come ... but they can come for me if I ask, if I say ‘I can’t see this’” (SVB).

Appropriate classroom discipline

Students reported problems with classroom discipline, in particular, noisy and chaotic classrooms resulting from, among other things, a lack of adequate control by teachers and a mix of age ranges in hostel study classes. “They can’t mix us together in one room all the grades, because it’s chaos there. Some of the children make noise, and it’s hard for us to study, and they don’t want us to study in our rooms. They want us to stay there in the study room and I don’t think that’s right because children make noise there” (SVB).

Understanding disability

Students also discussed teachers’ understanding of disability. An overarching attitude of inclusivity based on a recognition of the right of all to quality education was absent. The following excerpt highlights confusion or ambivalence about what students can reasonably expect in terms of appropriate teaching and accessible resources:

It’s good because here people understand us you know. It’s not like normal school, they understand us. Although sometimes the teachers they don’t understand us ... but most of the time they do understand us. For example, when they give us notes, they always give us large-print notes, and everything we need we get it here. Teachers they supply us with everything, although sometimes they give us small-printed notes, sometimes they forget that we have visual impairment, and they give us small-printed notes and sometimes they complain you know. But I feel like 90% of the time I have good experience here (SVB).

Here, a D/deaf learner describes relating to a teacher with limited awareness of D/deaf lifestyles: “The challenge we are having with some of the teachers is that some of them do not

understand what our culture is as a D/deaf nation. Some of them do not understand sign language so I am forced to read whatever it is” (SDHH).

Participants raised some concerns about a lack of training in teaching students with disabilities. One learner noted: “[Teachers need to] know how to handle kids with visual impairment ... If a kid who is blind is running into you, you must have the patience to tell the children not to run, instead of just barking at them like they are dogs” (SVB).

Another learner said: “I would have loved the staff to get educated about their attitude amongst the students, how they should treat us” (SVB).

Teachers’ lack of awareness in creating an inclusive school environment appeared to extend to physical environments that were not suitable or safe for visually impaired students, even during orientation and mobility training at the school: “There is someone who trains us once a week outside the school. So inside the school there is always obstacles, hanging things around, gates that is open and I mean it is dangerous if a blind person walk into a gate that is standing open. What will happen to that person? Like this school is a blind school but the environment is not blind friendly” (SVB).

In schools where accessible learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) and appropriate classroom facilities for teaching students with sensory impairments were not readily available, students with more severe impairments were required to rely on those whose impairments were less severe. This reflected, according to the following learner, a lack of understanding among teachers of the gravity of access concerns: “To be honest we are sometimes neglected in class ... And what the teacher also does sometimes is she tells us to work with sighted students. I think it is not their responsibility. It is [the teacher’s] responsibility to give us the work fully and give it to us so that we can do it on our own. We should not depend on someone to read or to explain to us what is happening” (SVB).

Appropriate teaching pace

Several students shared that some teachers were not able to appropriately pace their lessons or the amount of work to be taught before assessments: “When she explains she is fast, so we do not understand her well. Teachers who are fast I cannot understand them” (SID).

Another learner noted: “They do not understand sometimes, especially when it comes to the pace of working. I think we have 45 minutes when it is normal school time for one period. I think that is too little, especially when you are working with a sighted and Braille class at once” (SVB).

As a result, students identified feelings of stress and pressure about work being behind schedule and rushed: “They teach you the work, now they tell you study this that we have covered, not really giving you insight... until a day before you must write ...and that really causes some panic to some students ... And some teachers they are so lazy they give you notes a day before ... then you have to study the whole night” (SVB).

Patient and committed teachers

Many students identified problems with teachers’ patience and understanding of their needs: “The teacher was screaming [at] me and the teacher didn’t respect [me]. I think that’s why I couldn’t learn. I just went to other people to ask them to help me because the teacher didn’t [have] patience” (SDHH).

One learner with a visual impairment contrasted this idea of sensitive treatment with his experience of being asked ‘*What can you see, what can’t you see?*’ (SVB). Other students saw teachers as allowing their own emotional struggles to interfere with their work: “The biggest problem with me ... with most teachers is the ability to have patience and to assist the students accordingly and they cannot bring their personal issues to school” (SVB).

Students felt that teachers: “... must also know how to create that kind of environment where you can express how you feel about certain things and that they should understand exactly what it is that you are trying to say” (SVB).

It was difficult to get an idea of the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities due to communication barriers, language issues and insufficient modification of the research instruments to meet their accessibility needs, which can be seen as a limitation of the study. However, it was noted that students felt that their teachers helped them with their work and that they received support for their ideas and activities: “He help me with sums, and then he give me work, and then I colour it in” (SID); “I receive a lot of support. If I can come with idea I need to make something nice at the school, and I want to open some market at school, they support me very lot because sometimes I have a good

idea. I make those bracelet for the hand and they will support me every teacher and they buy it. At the school I can sell it to the teachers” (SID).

Some students stated that they were happy to ask questions in class when they did not understand: “I don’t always understand but then I stand up to ask the teacher to just tell me, or just to explain me something, or just to explain me over then I will understand”. (SID)

It was also important for some students to be part of the regular ritual and identity of school life:

Interviewer: What do you like most at the school?

Participant (SID): To wear a white shirt and look professional. To wear a tie.

Hostel experiences

Although the hostel is not strictly a part of teaching and learning, it fits within our approach as students’ hostel experiences have an impact upon their learning needs. For example, they may or may not receive support with homework in the hostel, which will then affect their needs for support in the classroom. Hostel life and living away from home is a pervasive feature of special needs education in South Africa, which makes it important to engage with. Five of the six special schools that were visited had hostel facilities, which meant that many of the students were in the full-time care of school staff.

Many students experienced hostel life as boring, lacking entertainment and lacking opportunities to participate in sport and other pursuits. “It is boring here at school”. (SDHH); “The only thing we do at the hostels is to sit and chat. There are no sports, nothing to keep you going” (SVB).

Several students noted that their hostels had no televisions and no access to the Internet. Students also described the problem of theft in hostels: “Some teachers have to have two keys on their cupboards because they are afraid that their stuff will get stolen, because previously kids’ shoes disappear, their underwear disappear ... Who steals underwear”? (SVB).

Some hostel students problematized the fact that carers had no South African Sign Language (SASL) and/or Braille ability: “The house mothers cannot help us if we have homework because they cannot communicate with us” (SDHH).

Others felt that the hostel carers had little understanding of their impairments: “In the hostel, the aunties ... those who take care of us, they don’t understand us as visually impaired people” (SVB).

They also described a lack of support from the carers when it came to completing school work: “We need a study time that we can have a teacher ... to monitor us and make sure that we do our homework or assignments ... Sometimes we also need someone to tell us go and study, like at home we would have parents who would tell us go read your books” (SVB).

Many students also described poor living standards in the hostels. For example, when discussing food preparation one learner said: “The bread, peanut butter, they just paste it there ... it’s not in the right form. They just grab it and put it there and put the bread and give it to you. And also the coffee in the morning is cold, I think they just open the geyser water and put the coffee and put it on the table” (SVB).

In talking about the living conditions at a hostel another learner said: “It feels like living like prisoners, the beds are uncomfortably ... it makes your back sore ... the blankets are so thin it looks like hospital blankets, but then they expect you to sleep under those blankets if you don’t bring your own. Some kids ... cannot buy or bring their own, so they have to sleep under those blankets even during winter” (SVB).

Discussion

Students with intellectual impairments are significantly affected by stigma, which parents and teachers hope to address through a caring and nurturing educational environment. Students with visual impairments placed a high emphasis on accessible LTSM, whether this be through Braille, large print or assistive technology. They feel disregarded and disrespected when these needs are not met. Students who are D/deaf and hard of hearing express very strongly the need to be taught by teachers who are proficient in South African Sign Language (SASL) and able to adapt the curriculum to cover the range of subjects offered in the national curriculum. They feel that teachers do not make an effort to know who their students are and what their needs may be, demonstrated by the perceived lack of effort on the part of teachers to learn SASL.

This study demonstrates that breaking the culture of silence and listening to the voices of children in understanding inclusive education has value in two respects. Firstly, it enables them to speak about their experiences of marginalisation and exclusion providing a pathway to increased empowerment in the arena of their own educational trajectory²². Secondly, educators can be guided

on effective teaching practices that can be implemented in their classrooms. McKenzie, Kelly, Moodley and Stofile²³ show how listening to students needs can guide a reconceptualising of teacher education for inclusive education. Indeed, the data presented in this study leads to the following recommendations for teacher education:

- Understanding disability as an issue of social justice with an awareness of the social identity of persons with disabilities and the difficulties this imposes.
- Developing empathic and caring relationships with learners and their families.
- Responding to diversity with inclusive teaching methods
- Understanding the nature of different impairments, how these impact upon learners' ability to access the curriculum and how to minimise these impacts
- Understanding the use of assistive technology and becoming skilled in the use and teaching of this technology
- Increasing skills in Braille and sign language¹⁵

The implementation of inclusive education needs to pay closer attention to the voices of students with disabilities with regards to their experiences of exclusion, learning and their goals and desires for their own education.

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