

Part 4

Higher Education & Teacher Education and Training

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Affirming Inclusive Education at University: A Case of Two Sub-Saharan African Universities

Abstract

This research aimed to investigate the experiences of students with learning disabilities (LD) at two universities in Sub-Saharan Africa. While universities are increasingly addressing the needs of students with sensory and physical disabilities, there is less emphasis on LD which does not present physically, thus often referred to as invisible or hidden disabilities. The research was conducted as qualitative case studies, guided by Vygotsky's social cultural theory (SCT). A basic qualitative research methodology, embedded in an interpretive paradigm was used. Data was collected through an online background survey and semi-structured interviews. Thematic qualitative content analysis was used to analyse collected data systematically. From a social justice perspective, the major findings suggest that there are several factors that impede on equal education for students with LD at university. The research outcomes revealed that the hidden nature of LD becomes apparent as participants must self-declare their needs. They further experienced a lack of acknowledgement and support from lecturers. Most participants revert to valuing the support of family and friends more than that of lecturers. While both universities have policies and structures of support for students with LD, it is concluded that university lecturers need to adopt an inclusive pedagogical stance by acknowledging the factors that affect the learning of students with LD. Recommendations from the findings include the need for professional development for lecturers and increased awareness of learning support services on campus. It is further concluded that university lecturers need to be reflective of their pedagogical practices to transform higher education learning spaces in pursuit of authentic inclusion.

Keywords: learning disabilities, inclusion, university lecturers, transformation, inclusive pedagogy, social cultural theory, learning support, policy

Introduction

Inclusive education has been solidified as priority by many countries across the globe. Developing countries, too have accepted this challenge to prepare trainee teachers to be able to teach within diverse educational settings and being able to address diverse needs of students. With this, higher education institutions (HEI) have instituted various courses and modules within their teacher education programmes that are designed to prepare students to be able to teach a diverse learner population (Jacobs & Dreyer, 2022). Several years later, this has proven valuable and has contributed to establish inclusive educational practices in basic education systems. This become apparent as there is currently an increase of students at university that present with disabilities and particularly also learning disabilities (Ebo, 2016). Our contention is that as we prepare trainee teachers to be able to apply inclusive education practices, these practices need to be acknowledged and demonstrated by lecturers who teach these students.

The South African Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education (DoE), 2001) states that the term “barriers to learning and development” refer to a diverse range of factors. These factors may lead to the education system being incapable to address diverse needs of learners. This can negatively impact on the learning process and prevent access to the provision of appropriate educational support even at higher education level. Dreyer (2015) identifies four broad categories in which barriers to learning can be grouped: 1) systemic; 2) societal; 3) pedagogic and curriculum; and 4) intrinsic. Intrinsic barriers are further classified as neurological, physical, sensory, and cognitive. Learning disabilities falls within the category of neurological barriers. For this paper, it is acknowledged that all four types of barriers come into play at some point as we endeavour comprehending the subjective experiences of the participants in this study.

The debate on inclusive education in higher education institutions is directly related to the efforts to transform higher education (Couzensa et al., 2015).

Transforming higher education

Many African countries have embarked on policy and strategies to transform the educational landscapes that were shaped by colonial forces. In order to enact transformation in higher education, it is imperative that these efforts are contextually responsive (Dreyer, 2021). Namibia and South Africa have close links established under colonial rule. With this shared history both countries are currently still on a path to rectify and transform society to promote unity within the diverse populations. It, then, come as no surprise that both countries are signatories to various declarations and conventions on inclusion, such as the Salamanca Statement and the Jomtien Declaration on Education for All, among others. With this they have also accepted the call for inclusion as a “strategy” to transform higher education (Department of Education, 1997; Ministry of Education, 2013). Both Namibia and South Africa have enshrined, in their respective constitutions, inclusion as a social justice issue. There is a large body of literature on social inclusion in pursuit of social justice internationally and both these countries (Polat, 2010).

As basic education progressed with inclusive education, these students are now entering university. This is aligned with the international trend that higher education institutions are increasingly also accepting students with disabilities (Hadjikakou & Hartas, 2008; Ebo, 2016). According to research there is a strong link between learning

experiences of students, the contextual factors (such as policies and institutional support structures), and pedagogy applied by teachers. In this paper, due to its limited scope, we want to briefly touch on all three these aspects. Regarding student experiences, research (Gibson, 2012) indicates it is important to listen to the views (voices) of students with disabilities to fully understand their education experiences. While universities are increasingly accepting students with disabilities, studies show that students do not always get the required support or feel that they belong (Ryan, 2007). The notion of pedagogy is frequently used to refer to how teaching is undertaken. However, research (Loughran, 2013) indicates that pedagogy should instead be viewed as the complex inter-relationship between teaching and learning. According to Moriña (2020), an inclusive pedagogy does not refer solely to teaching actions, but that it involves other teaching skills as well. However, it is significant to note that to fully contextualise students' experiences, one needs to acknowledge pre-university factors.

Student voices

International research mainly focuses on the implementation of education and policies on restructuring policies. However, it is becoming increasingly important to listen to the voices of those included. Their subjective views on their experiences of inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation are important. There is a growing body of knowledge on the significance of the voices of students with disabilities, regarding their experiences of being included in higher education. This can contribute significantly assessing their needs, identifying barriers and subsequently inform provision of support (Gibson, 2012). Barriers to learning refer to a range of factors, including disability, which impede on access to and participation in educational institutions (DoE, 2001).

Contextual factors play a significant role in how students with disabilities experience university. However, according to Ryan (2007) very few studies investigated the experiences of students once they have been accepted at university. Contextual factors that influence students with disabilities' experiences vastly range from classroom and lecturer experiences to access and knowledge of institutional support structures.

Learning disabilities are not as observable as sensory or physical disabilities but have an effect on the basic cognitive processes essential for comprehension and/or the use of spoken or printed language. These are very important in education at any level but particularly so at university. These students are commonly of average or above average intelligence. It is therefore significant that lecturers are cognisant and reflective of their own pedagogical stance. Research is increasingly pointing out that teachers at university should embrace an inclusive pedagogy. Florian (2015) asserts that an inclusive pedagogy challenges some traditional ways of rationalising inclusive education. It encourages teachers to be contextually responsive to the changing demographic composition of educational institutions. Instead of focussing on providing support to some students, which is a deficit model approach, to a pedagogical stance which supports everybody while acknowledging difference (diversity) in the class.

Lastly, research has shown that pre-university factors can play a fundamental role in student experiences and success at university (Pather et al., 2017). These include family support, food- and financial security, etc. These external factors can influence students' experiences at university.

This paper aimed to comparatively highlight the experiences of students with learning disabilities (LD) at two universities in Sub-Saharan Africa. While universities are

increasingly addressing the needs of students with sensory and physical disabilities, there is less emphasis on LD which does not present physically, thus often referred to as invisible or hidden disabilities. The emphasis is on students' voices to inform policy implementation and the provision of student support services at HEIs in pursuit of transformation.

Theoretical framework

This research is framed by Vygotsky's social cultural theory (SCT). SCT embraces the notion that social, cultural-historical, and individual factors are key in human development and learning. Inclusive education and thus also, an inclusive pedagogy embraces the notion that there are individual factors that play a role in a students' (dis-)ability. At the same time, it does not assume that these individual differences between learners are attributed to problems located within the learner. This is a deficit, medical approach to disabilities, which assumes that these differences should be "treated" by a specialist. It thus does not hold an inclusive pedagogy.

The socio-cultural perspective is significant in that it allows teachers to consider individual differences as something to be expected. It further provides an understanding of these differences in terms of the interactions between several different variables. Difference is thus not seen as a problem. SCT allows us to understand that students differ as result of social, cultural-historic, and other individual factors. Furthermore, it highlights how the different aspects of human development interact with experience to produce individual differences (Florian, 2015). Vygotsky further saw human learning and development as the transformation of shared social activity to internalised processes. Learning thus takes place on two levels; first on a social level where knowledge is constructed during shared activities such as lectures, group work, discussions, etc. The classroom provides the social context in which these learning activities play out and the teacher takes on the role as more knowledgeable other (MKO) as they provide guidance through the learning process. On the second level, the individual level, the student internalises the learning and new experiences. The new learning subsequently becomes part of their cognitive repertoire.

This theoretical underpinning provides a premise from which we can understand the complex inter-relationship between teaching and learning. It can thus provide insight into the experiences of students with learning disabilities at university.

Methodology

A basic qualitative research methodology, embedded in an interpretive paradigm was used. The research was, conducted as qualitative case studies, guided by Vygotsky's social cultural theory (SCT). The goal of case studies is not to generalise but to explore and understand participants experiences, understanding and beliefs, regarding the phenomenon of interest. In this study, the experiences of university students with a learning disability.

The participants were purposefully selected from the 2 identified university campuses. The criteria for participation were that they had to be:

- 1) full-time registered students currently studying education in the Faculty of Education;
- 2) diagnosed with a learning disability while at school;

- 3) have received educational and assessment support up to and including grade 12;
- 4) and that they have access to the internet.

All possible participants were invited to take part in the study through both universities' online platforms. With the initial invitation, students had to indicate their willingness to take part in the project. From the South African university, there were 14 students who responded positively and 13 from the Namibian university. There were thus 27 participants. This small sample is representative of the relative still small number of students who have learning disabilities at university. It may also be an indication that there are students who did not want to self-declare that they have a learning disability due to fear of possible stigmatisation. Although not all the participants in this study had a formal diagnosis of learning disability, they voluntarily acknowledged that they experienced most of the learning difficulties that characterise LD. They were further all conscious of the possibility of being labelled negatively as a result thereof.

Data was then collected through an online background survey and semi-structured interviews. Data from the background survey was used to inform the interviews. During the interviews the themes that emerged from the survey could be explored in more detail. Thematic qualitative content analysis was used to analyse collected data systematically.

Findings

The following five themes have emerged during the data analysis process: 1) Support received at school; 2) Knowledge of support structures at university; 3) Requesting academic support; 4) Experiences of inclusion; and 5) Factors contributing to academic success. The findings are presented below, showing the student experiences in comparison between the two institutions.

Theme 1. Support received at school

Uni.SA	Uni.NAM
The support provided at school level was mainly focused on providing support during assessment opportunities in the form of concessions such as extra writing time.	The main form of support provided at school was in the form of afternoon classes or summer school. Some did not get any support.

Theme 2. Knowledge of support structures at university

Uni.SA	Uni.NAM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New undergraduate students generally did not know that support is provided at university level before they started the academic program. • However, parents played an instrumental role in enquiring. • Not all students felt comfortable about self-declaring their LD and are thus reluctant to request any form of academic support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% of the who responded to this question, indicated that they were not aware of any support services for students with learning disabilities at university. • Friends played a valuable role as sources of information. • Participants who responded indicated that they did not inform the lecturer that they have a learning disability. They cited fear of stigmatisation for disclosure.

Theme 3. Requesting academic support

Uni.SA	Uni.NAM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student generally explained that they would rather ask a classmate or friend for help when necessary. • One in 1st year group would ask lecturer for help. • In the 2nd year group no one would ask the lecturer. • 3 indicated that they would rather ask a family member for help. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The majority prefer to request support from the lecturer. • Some would ask friends to help. • A few indicated that support would consult the psychologist. • 2 of the eleven respondents indicated that they would not ask anybody for help.

Theme 4. Experiences of inclusion

Uni.SA	Uni.NAM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the first-year students reacted positively since they experienced a general feeling of being included in academic activities. • One exception - not feeling included and explained: <i>No, because I did not make them aware of my issue.</i> • In contrast, most second-year students were ambivalent since they experienced varied forms of inclusion (or exclusion) from class to class. • One student who felt excluded from the class, specifically mentioned the difficulty experienced in trying to keep up focussing and making notes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the participants responded positively to the question: <i>Do you feel that lecturers include you in classroom activities?</i> • Only one indicated that he/she only feel included at some points. • While another indicated that none of the lecturers made her/him feel included.

Theme 5. Factors contributing to academic success

Uni.SA	Uni.NAM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the participants indicated that support from their friends were the main contributors to their academic success. • Only 1 regarded support from lecturers as contributing to their academic success thus far. • 1 attributed success to concessions received. • 1 to student support services at university. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-university factors plays a fundamental role in student experiences and success at university. They highlighted contextual social factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the need for the university to “meet students halfway to render financial support”; ○ university must “provide meals to improve their concentration” as they come from different backgrounds, and some has this need; food security.

Discussion

It has been established that internationally basic education systems are increasingly supporting students within inclusive education systems. This includes students who have been identified with a learning disability. Therefore, students with learning disabilities

are increasingly entering higher education (Couzensa et al., 2015; Kendall, 2016; Ryan, 2007). While higher education institutions are challenged to accept students with learning disabilities, they must, at the same time, provide them with opportunities for equal participation. This poses some challenges as learning disabilities do not present in the same way as physical and sensory disabilities and are often referred to as invisible disabilities (Couzensa et al., 2015). Therefore, unlike at school level where teachers and parents are the first to identify that the child has a learning problem and seek appropriate support, students at university must self-declare that they have a learning disability in order to access academic support.

The findings indicate that in comparison to students in South Africa, the Namibian students did not receive any formal support while at school. This might be attributed to the possibility that they were mostly not formally diagnosed with a learning disability. They, however, received some formal support through extra classes after school. In contrast, the students at the SA university reported to have received support in the form of assessment concessions, such as extra writing time and a scribe, during examinations.

Students from both universities were aware of possible stigmatisation if they should declare their disability. Nevertheless, before students can request support, they need to be aware of available support structures. In both cases, most students did not know that the university have academic support policies and support structures in place. This is even though both universities have information regarding the available support services on their websites. While parents played an important role to enquire about support for their child at uni.SA, findings suggest that most students at uni.NAM relied on their friends for information. This reluctance to enquire about support at the university stems from a fear of stigmatisation. This is true for participants at both the universities which corresponds with the literature internationally.

This reluctance to enquire about possible support for students with learning disabilities inevitably spills over into the lecture halls. However, while students at uni.SA would rather ask family and friends to help them, most of the participants from uni.NAM did not have any problem asking the lecturer for help. This is further confirmed in that the majority of participants from uni.NAM experienced that they were positively included during lectures. In contrast, only the participants from the first-year cohort at uni.SA had positive experiences of being included in the lecture room. The students in their second year were indecisive as they experienced different levels of feeling included which differed from class to class. These findings resonate with the literature on student experiences (Ebo, 2016). It also resonates with the understanding of an inclusive pedagogy (Florian, 2015). It seems as if lecturers at uni.NAM have greater success in providing support to all students.

Some unanticipated responses emanated to the question “What do you think contributed most to your academic success thus far?”. While participants at uni.SA focussed on the support they receive from friends and family, participants from uni.NAM pointed out some pre-university factors such as food- and financial insecurity and the needs they have, to enable to continue their studies successfully. This finding resonates with the notion of SCT that there are various social and other factors that impact on the learning and development of the individual. It affirms the differences of the individuals that goes beyond the learning disability. It is further interesting to note that only two students from uni.SA attributed their experience of success to the support structures of the university and concessions provided during assessment.

While both these universities have policy and structures for the support of students with LD, it is clear that they are not as visible as they should be. Furthermore, these findings indicate that university lecturers need to adopt an inclusive pedagogical stance by acknowledging the factors that affect the learning of students with LD.

Inclusive education in pursuit of transformation in higher education, requires a whole repertoire of knowledge and skills from lecturers. It is also imperative that the voices of students with learning disabilities, are listened to. The implications of the findings from this research are thus two-fold: 1) lecturers need to continuously develop as professionals through in-service training; and 2) existing support services for students at the two institutions must be made more visible through explicit information sessions to new students.

Conclusion

From a social justice perspective, the major findings suggest that there are several factors that impede on equal education for students with LD at university. The social cultural lens through which these findings are viewed helps to understand the contextual lived realities that students with learning disabilities experience at university.

Recommendations from the findings include the need for professional development for lecturers and increased awareness of learning support services on campus. It is concluded that university lecturers need to be reflective of their pedagogical practices to transform higher education learning spaces in pursuit of authentic inclusion.

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