

Disability, the Invisible Handcuff: Challenges Faced by Learners With Disabilities in Institutions of Higher Education in Zimbabwe

Herbert Mandicheta^[a]; Vincent Mabvurira^{[b],*}; Brighton Ndebele^[c]

^[a]Department of Development Studies, Lupane State University, Lupane, Zimbabwe.

^[b]Department of Social Work, University of Limpopo, Polokwane, South Africa.

^[c]Department of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine challenges faced by learners with disabilities in institutions of higher learning. The research adopted a qualitative approach using a sample of 32 disabled persons in four provinces in Zimbabwe. Data were collected through unstructured in-depth interviews. The results of the study indicate that the term “disability” is a “disabling word” that had limited people with disability to make progress in their lives. Despite their effort to live positively, disabled persons suffer a glut of challenges, which include stigmatization, social exclusion and inaccessibility of facilities and failure to cope with fast moving technology. Disability is used as a ‘dividing curtain’ between those with “disabilities” and those without.”The term has promoted the “them and us dichotomy”. Many people with disabilities are called by nature of their disability instead of their real names especially the visually impaired and physically challenged. This affects people with disability in education, employment arena and their interaction with the wider society.

Key words: Disability; Invisible handcuff; Self-fulfilling prophecy; Psychological loss; Enabling resources

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The quest to empower people living with disabilities through the provision of education has gained momentum across the world as it is well enunciated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The rise in accidents and chronic diseases continue to impair people despite efforts to exterminate traditionally disabling factors. Major chronic diseases like diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and mental health disorders among many other factors affects people to function independently even in old age. For most of the people with disabilities, the term ‘disabled’ has become the ‘definition of destiny’ to the extent that, it now acts as a glass ceiling avoiding people to achieve their goals and desires.

To define disability is like to chase a butterfly. The definition changes from time to time and place to place. Culture, norms, values and beliefs change over time hence there is no universally agreed definition of disability. The term is more complex, broad and multi-dimensional. This is because, to define disability one has to define what it was before, what it is now and what it will be in the future. Apart from traditional and cultural factors promoting discrimination of people in Zimbabwe, the phenomenon has been theologised. Disability in Old Testament is God’s punishment to sinners or those who disobey him while New Testament narratives and “Pentecostal Churches” regard disability as demon possession. Eiesland (1994) disagrees with this form of theology; he referred it to as “a disabling theology.” Disabilities and conditions found in the Bible includes,

visually impairments (Leviticus 19:14, Zephaniah 1:17) intellectually challenged (Luke 8:26-39), bareness (Psalm 113:9), hearing-impaired (Mark 7:31-37), physically challenged (2 Samuel 4:4), paralysis (Luke 5:18-25) and leprosy (2 Kings 7:3). Barren women were laughing stocks in Ancient Israel even in this 'modernised' society. It was shameful to be barren; having children was regarded as a gift from God (Psalm 127:3-5).

Historically, persons with disabilities (PWDs) have been marginalized and denied equitable participation opportunities, including participation in higher education. According to Hughes (2005) in Ancient Greece, the elders inspected born children, and if found lacking the standards expected of warriors, they left the child to die in harsh conditions or eaten by wild animals. Nevertheless in Zimbabwe there is no particular or clear legislation which promote integration of persons with disabilities (Mpfu, 2004). However, there are several government policies such as the Education Act of 1996 and Disabled Persons Act of 1996 which are compatible with the goal of inclusive education. According to the Education Secretary's Policy Circular No .P36 (1990) "all students, irrespective of creed, religion, gender, race and disability must have access to basic or primary education". The Secretary for Education's directive for inclusive education calls for all schools to provide equal opportunities to education to all children without discrimination on the basis of disability. Any school that denies admitting a child on the basis of disability will be breaching the Disabled Person's Act and will face charges from the District Education Office. However, this demand does not touch high schools as if literacy is accomplishable at Grade 7 (Mutepha, et al, 2007). Furthermore the Disabled Persons Act (1996) does not charge the government to rendering inclusive education in any concrete way; in fact it deters persons with disabilities from litigating the Zimbabwean government concerning government facility access issues that may impair their participation to acquire education. This is because the act does not have any compulsory decree which stipulates the services to be offered to PWD and by who, how, when and where (Kasayira, et al, 2006). According to Dakwa (2014, p.1) "In Zimbabwe inclusion of children with visual impairments (CWVI) in the main stream education institutions was initiated in 1962 at Waddilove Institute of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe". He also propounds that during the same year, the Royal Common Wealth Society of the Blind (RCWSB) formed the Council for the Blind, an organization which has been in subservient in the effecting of the vast resource units plying for the integration of the children with visual impairments in Zimbabwe. However, Chikerema, (2010) and Dakwa, (2009) propound that though Zimbabwe has incorporated the policy of inclusive education, children with impairments are not fully integrated due to lack of resources to provide services to

enable them to fully participate in all school activities. Thus the Nziramasanga Commission (1999) found that some institutions had no proper equipment for use by children with visual impairments and these include Braille books, writing frames, Perkins Brailles and mobility appliances for both low vision and totally blind children to equip children with visual impairments to be operational in an educational environment. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to examine challenges faced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was informed by the social constructionist theory of disability which was put forward by Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011). They state that the social constructionist theory of disability refers to the way in which society directs itself, taking fiddling account of persons with disabilities and shutting them out from engaging in main stream society activities. They further describe the social constructionist theory as a framework which helps to explicate the ways in which society reacts to persons with disabilities and to critique the appropriateness of its reactions. More so, this theory also stresses that the problems of persons with disabilities dwell on the societal response to the individual impairment and physical environment which is made by the society (Oliver, 1996). The social constructionist theory of disability states that disabilities are created by the unfavourable conditions or environments which hinder persons with disabilities from participating in societal activities. This theory also describes disability as a socially constructed phenomenon.

Furthermore, some disability activists such as Barnes (2011) stipulate that disability is not a personal calamity but it is the responsibility of the society to ensure that PWD are included in all levels of education. According to Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) the social constructionist theory of disability identifies three barriers that are encountered by PWD which include physical, institutional and attitudinal barriers. Physical barriers include environmental factors such as inaccessible buildings. Institutional barriers comprise of ignorance and ejection of PWD by none disabled people in social, religious, educational, and political institutions. Attitudinal barriers include the negative attitudes of the non-disabled people towards persons with disabilities. Therefore answers to problems that affect persons with disabilities must come from the changes in the families, communities or environment in which PWD are living in, not the individual impairments as it is suggested by the medical model of disability (Oliver, 1996). Moreover Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) state that social constructionist theory of disability raises strong arguments against the

medical model of disability. It asserts that the medical model is problematic because it expresses that disability within individuals is caused by physical and psychological factors and rejects the fact that disabilities may be created by the unfavourable environment surrounding people with impairments (Barnes, 1991; Oliver, 1996). Moreover the medical model of disability provides a systematic arrangement for categorizing disabilities, and a designation procedure that can lead to labelling of PWD (Barnes, 1991). It also predicates the handling of PWD by medical and paramedical professionals and makes herculean interests in the medical diligence to discover cure for disability or preventing it (Oliver, 1996). Furthermore Oliver and Barnes, (1993) suggest that, it implies a barbarous professional attitude towards PWD, a paternalistic relationship between the professional and the PWD, and it encroaches upon people's privacy. It also predicates the medical handling of PWD, which entails stigma, unneeded hospitalization, and placement in asylums (Oliver & Barnes, 1993).

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative research approach in gathering data. According to Neuman (1994) qualitative research is the observation and interpretations of people's perceptions in their natural setting. It allows researchers to measure feelings and attitudes of the individuals in their vicinities and to understand in-depth concepts such as experience, beliefs, motivations and intentions.

An exploratory case study design was employed in carrying out the study. The main purpose of exploratory case study was to put across the limits of the environment in which the problems, chances or circumstances of interest are likely to domicile and to discover the outstanding factors or variables that might be found to be of relevance to the study (Parahoo, 1997). According to Polit et al (2001) exploratory case studies are conducted when investigating a new field about a particular topic or when there is little information about an area of interest.

The study targeted students in institutions of higher learning in four provinces in Zimbabwe: Mashonaland Central, Masvingo, Manicaland and Matebeleland North. A study had a sample size of 32 students who were selected using purposive sampling. The principle of saturation was used to determine the sample size. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and were analysed using thematic content analysis.

RESEARCH ETHICS

Ethics are the codes of conduct or guidelines which one is obligated to observe when carrying out research. During the study the researchers observed several research ethics which include informed consent, respect of human dignity

and anonymity. In the genesis of the study the researchers upheld the ethic of informed consent through asking permission to carry out the study from the participants. The participants were informed that they were going to be recorded during interviews. The participants were also informed that it was not mandatory to partake in the study and they were free to quit from the study at any time if one felt that he or she could not continue. Furthermore during the study, respect for human dignity and worth was also considered which required the researchers to respect the norms and values of the participants. This was done to enable the researchers to be accepted by the participants. The researchers respected autonomy by not seeking participants' personally identifying information.

RESULTS

Results of the study revealed that PWDs face a number of challenges in both institutions of higher learning and the society in general. Data were collected from 32 PWD who were students in institutions of higher learning in four provinces in Zimbabwe. Most of the participants (20) were males while 12 were females. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 33 years. They were pursuing various academic and professional qualifications (certificates, diplomas, undergraduate degrees and postgraduate degrees). Challenges faced by the participants are presented below.

Mobility

Many public buildings in Zimbabwe do not have wheelchair ramps. Many buildings have been constructed without the concern of other people who uses wheelchairs. There is an assumption that everyone can walk on stairs though that is not the fact. Disability access to premise building has become a hindrance for the physically impaired. Most public toilets do not have sections accessible to those who use wheelchairs and the visually impaired. According to Stewart, Harris and Sapey (2010) governments are punishing disabled people for being dependent whilst simultaneously being the cause of their dependency.

Some of the study participants identified mobility as their biggest challenge. The infrastructure at some institutions of higher learning was built without persons with disabilities in mind because the buildings do not have Braille guides and rails which allow a visual impaired person to move independently within the buildings or even ramps for wheelchairs. The results of the study indicated that it was difficult for students with disabilities to walk alone within the university campuses because some of the roads in the campuses and the community were full of pot holes and the changes that take place due to construction of new buildings. Furthermore in as much as the visually impaired students would want to use their sense of hearing even when walking alone, their mobility was disturbed

by the noise of the construction machines, lawn mowers and some other very noisy machines which are used to cut trees and grass. One female participant said:

“Sometimes I get in to the lectures late because of failure to get someone to guide me to the lectures in time.”

As a result they would lose some of the information because lecturers would not wait for them. This would also affect them socially and emotionally because they had to be always depending on others to guide them to the lectures. This was stressful to them in the sense that sometimes their sighted peers would refuse to guide them to the lectures when busy with their own school work.

It was also found that students with visual impairments had their unique challenges in that their mobility was affected by other students who would be standing everywhere making noise. Therefore they would be bumping against chairs and students which had potential to cause injuries. The study also discovered that some of the hostels were not built with persons with disabilities in mind. These hostels were not user friendly because they had too many stairs and corners which would make it difficult for students with disabilities to navigate their way. Chikukwa and Chimbwanda (2013) also discovered a similar problem at Zimbabwe Open University. They noted that students with disabilities encountered environmental changes such as digging of trenches, car parks and construction of new buildings throughout the city on their way to the campus. These findings show that integration of learners with disabilities was not fully implemented since they continued to suffer mobility challenges that were precipitated by the unfavourable environment. This is a direct opposite of the social constructionist theory of disability which suggests that conducive environments must be created for persons with disabilities through infrastructural adjustment to promote inclusivity and participation of persons with disabilities in the societal activities or community (Oliver, 1996).

Social Exclusion

The research also discovered that students with disabilities were socially excluded in some extra curricula activities or events which take place in the institutions. Some participants reported that the visual impaired and hard of hearing students were not able to listen to the football commentary in television rooms because their sighted peers would make a lot of noise when watching football, yet they would want to use their sense of hearing or seeing to listen to what is being said on the television. One of the respondents had to say:

My sighted colleagues make a lot of noise, I find it worthless to go to television rooms”.

Some participants reported that they were excluded in using gym facilities. One participant said:

“...those who do monitoring of students who use gym facilities denied us to enter in the gym hall basing their argument on the fact that we might get injured”.

Spatial Distribution of Services in University/ College Campuses

The study also found long distances from one place to another within college/universities a very big barrier to students with physical disabilities. Many physically disabled students get trouble in moving from point to point due to long distances between one building and another or between one office to another in one building. For example, long distance from lecture rooms to laboratories or dormitories and dining halls. Such long distances hinder physically disabled students to reach and get different services on time. Due to the nature of their disabilities, physically disabled students spend much time walking compared to non disabled students when seeking different services at the institutions. No extra time or remedial classes were provided in the case that students with disabilities missed class or arrived late.

In a related study, McLeod (2014) points out that, students with disabilities experience personal limitations in school environments. This affects their psychological, social and academic spheres that are likely to affect academic performances. People with physical disabilities have experienced narrow chances to enjoy school environments or practices due to fewer priorities given by educational providers to issues that may support the disabled especially in developing countries in areas such as curriculums, teaching and learning materials, infrastructure, special programs such as sports and games, environmental issues and the general quality of education. In many sub-Saharan countries, being disabled at least doubles the chance of never attending school (UNESCO, 2010), and those who do start school are at increased risk of dropping out. This feature of the sub-Saharan education systems combined with lack of accessible infrastructure prevents a number of disabled students from entering higher education. One of the disabled student reported that he had bunked more than 10 tutorials and lectures during his study period since there were no “lifts” or Wheelchair ramps built in to assist him from ground floor to the other levels of the building where lectures and tutorials were held.

Work Related Learning

Work related learning is an important component in most professional degree programmes in Zimbabwe yet most students with disabilities faced challenges in this aspect of their learning. Employment is a fundamental human right and is important for every human being including persons with disabilities and particularly for women with disabilities. However, very few organizations in Zimbabwe have adopted the inclusion of persons with disabilities in their programs and projects. The main reason is that they

slow down progress, or their “conditions might be costly to the organization and in many ways due to segregation. In this scenario, disabled males are more likely to be employed than disabled females. Victoria (2010) states that, both men and women with disabilities are subject to discrimination, but women are at a further disadvantage due to discrimination based on gender and disability. A number of participants reported that they faced challenges in securing places for work related learning. They also reported that even if some organisations wanted to take them, some buildings could prevent them as they were not accessible.

Labelling

The depressing view that society has towards disability is the view that a disabled person is nothing but a burden to the society or to his family members. The participants reported that they were labelled and name called in communities they come from. Labelling and name calling were reported to be common not at the institutions of higher learning but from general members of the society. Most of the names given to persons with disabilities are derogatory in nature. These include *chirema* (physically disabled), *matsi* (hard of hearing), *mbeveve* (deaf and dumb) and many others. In most circumstances, persons with disabilities are described and identified by their disabilities. This was reported to exacerbate negative attitudes towards disability. Given the labels given to people with disabilities by the general society, the affected persons continue to suffer incessant discrimination in society.

Limited Facilities

During the study the researchers ascertained that the issue of shortage of Braille equipment and other important facilities was one of the major problems faced by students with disabilities. Participants with visual impairments reported that most institutions were not providing enough Braille material such as Perkins Braille machines, styluses, Braille text books, slates and modern assistive devices like Braille note takers and talking calculators. Due to these conundrums they encountered as students with disabilities, most of them relied on begging for small assistive devices such as writing frames and styluses from their former high schools. These findings are analogous to the findings by Mpofo and Shumba (2012) who noted that at Zimbabwe Open University students with visual impairments were facing brain-teasers in pursuing their education due to the shortage of materials such as writing frames, recorders, Perkins Braille machines and Braille books. As a result the performance of learners with visual disabilities was negatively affected. This is in line with the views of Omede (2015) who notes that in Nigeria provision of education to students with disabilities was proved to be difficult because most of the important assistive devices were imported from developed countries

such as Japan and United States of America which led to high cost of special education for the visual impaired persons.

Coping With Technology

The findings of the study show that most of the totally blind students were well versed with the operating of computer software especially to use internet and typing assignments. The information gathered reflected that they were few totally blind male students who were capable to use internet, type assignments on their own and even to write examinations using computers. In the same vein Chiparusha et al (2002) in their findings on challenges, opportunities and threats experienced by persons with disabilities in various institutions of Higher Learning in Zimbabwe discovered that most of the visual impaired students are computer illiterate due to ignorance to learn how to operate computers.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was on the challenges faced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher education in Zimbabwe. People with disabilities face numerous challenges in institutions of higher learning which include mobility problems, social exclusion, labelling, using modern technology and limited facilities. These problems have negative impact on students with disabilities. The outcomes of the research proved that the challenges faced by students with disabilities in Zimbabwe were precipitated by a plethora of causes which include ignorance by the administration, lack of awareness on how to deal with persons with disabilities, environmental changes and economic challenges experienced in the country.

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