Perceptions and Implications on Blindness at an Open Distance Learning Institution in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The purpose of the study was to project the academic community's perceptions of students with blindness with an aim of promoting access to Education for All. Framed by the theories of social construction and critical disability theory, this qualitative study uses the case study approach. Data were collected through life stories and telephonic interviews and analyzed through thematic analysis. The study revealed that the academic community is inappropriately prepared to deal with students with blindness; the community discriminates students with blindness from certain career paths and also has stereotypical overtures about students with blindness. The recommendations made include: more research on perceptions, attitudes and knowledge of the academics on issues of teaching the students with blindness; training and retraining on teaching students with blindness including the use of current and applicable technologies to facilitate learning; constant exposure and sensitization of the academic community on how to deal with students with blindness; creation of awareness on the implications of negative implications and regular student-centred research on how the students with blindness experience learning in an Open and Distance Learning setting.

INTRODUCTION

This study was approached with the belief that social perceptions play an important role in the development of a person and the role they play in the society. The people with blindness that live within supportive communities have better stories to tell about their experiences of living with a disability. Whereas the ones who live within non-supportive communities have unpleasant experiences which they have learnt to keep to themselves (Kasiram and Subrayen 2013). In an educational setting, the academic community has to realize that their perceptions of blindness lead to implications that would determine the students' learning experiences.

Open Distance Learning is an institution where the students have no or limited face-to-face contact with the academics; they only meet each other as students through technological tools like telephone, electronic mail, online discussion forums and other organized contact sessions (Van den Berg 2012; UNISA 2011). Therefore the ODL nature of the institution makes it next to impossible for the academics' percep-

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tions of students with blindness to be easily noticed and problematised. Social perceptions are formed through the way people without disabilities in educational communities interact with the students with disabilities (Yeo and Moore 2003). This brings about social stigma which in turn holds back the students with disabilities from having positive learning experiences. According to Grotevant (2000), peoples' identity and the way they are perceived is constructed through their past and present social interactions with the society. Since the people with blindness are not so much of an active part of the society they tend to be perceived in a biased way. Morris (1993: 103) substantiates this by saying that "disability provokes such negative feelings among non-disabled people". The negative feelings Morris talks about are not natural but stem from the myths and unjust ways the community members treat and react towards people with disabilities. In the case of South Africa, the negative feelings also stem from the exclusionary school system which separated the learners with disabilities from other learners (Howell 2005). Though this has changed and there are mainstream schools since the democratic dispensation, learners with blindness are still the most excluded and marginalized in higher education (Kasiram and Subrayen 2013).

Disability is defined in different ways; from the medical, the social and the human rights per-

spective. The medical model defines disability as the total or partial loss of body or mental functioning; total or partial loss of a part of the person's body; a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or that results in disturbed behavior (Gilson and Dymond 2011). This definition is not preferable in the 21st century because it devalues people with disabilities and promotes discrimination against them (Gilson and Dymond 2011). The social perspective defines disability basing on societal discrimination rather than body defects (Shakespeare 2006) whereas, the human rights perspectives looks at disability as a societal discrimination that should be addressed by both people with and without disabilities (Young and Quibell 2000). This study is grounded on the human rights based understanding of disability. The term 'students with blindness' is used in this study because it is a human rights based term used for those who are entirely blind. Though the term 'visual impairments' is sometimes used, the author regards it as inappropriate for this study because it encompasses different visual defects (Bolt 2005). The students that participated in this study insisted that they were not having visual impairment but their vision was fully lost. In compliance with the prescriptions of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006) of 'person before disability' the participants of this study are referred to as 'students with blindness'. Blindness in particular, is one of the mostly feared conditions (Hollier 2007). Hollier (2007) postulates that most people tend to be sympathetic to and pity the people with blindness. Fraser and Maguvhe (2008) point out the prejudices towards teaching student with blindness which they surmise leads to further isolation of the students. Swain et al. (1993) argue that the way people with disabilities are perceived brings about stigma which holds them back from getting what they desire. Adams and Browns (2006), and Pavri and Luftig (2000) caution academics that they should be watchful that discrimination of students with blindness could lead to very strong feelings of seclusion and lack of interest in learning.

The section below briefly reviews the studies that have been conducted on issues of higher education and students with blindness and visual impairment. Kasiram and Subrayen (2013)

conducted a study on the social exclusion of students with visual impairments at a tertiary institution in KwaZulu-Natal. The study revealed that the students with visual impairments' exclusion from access to opportunities left them psychologically, socially, financially and emotionally scarred. The study also revealed that there is abuse of power where people without disabilities take advantage of the students with visual impairments because of their disability. The study also highlighted the presence of exclusionary practices like academic exclusion; lack of acknowledgement of differences by sighted students, reflecting disrespect; violation of human rights at university including sexual exploitation and absence of reasonable accommodation. Steyl (2010) conducted a study on visually impaired physiotherapy students' perception of the support they received while studying at a tertiary institution in South Africa. The study revealed that tertiary institutions do not have proper skills and practical experience of teaching students with visual impairments. Another finding was that academics do not design the curriculum in a flexible way that will allow both the students with and without disabilities to access and engage with the learning material at their own terms. In another study conducted by Mpofu and Shumba (2012) on the challenges faced by visually-impaired students in Open and Distance Learning centres in Zimbabwe, it was established that the modes of learning delivery tended to exclude or disregard the learning needs of students with visual impairments and the learning centres did not have appropriate facilities for students with disabilities. Soderstrom and Ytterhus (2010) conducted a study on issues of identity and social construction brought by the use of ICT Assistive Technologies to students with visual impairment. They revealed that the partially sighted youngsters tend to switch between using and not using ICT- Assistive Technologies since they felt that it makes them look differently distinctive from their peers.

Dale (2010) conducted a narrative exploration on the experience of living with visual impairment and the effect it has on identity. The study revealed that society has negative attitudes towards people with visual impairments. The study also revealed that there is lack of proper support within the education and employment systems including the ones meant to cater for the visually impaired. Another study conducted

on students with disabilities, their instructors and staff members at a University in Hong Kong revealed that people had feeling of disgrace for having a disability (Gilson 2010). The results of the above reviewed studies reflect the negative perceptions that students with visual impairments face at institutions of higher learning. The present study focuses on academic community's perceptions and the implications of the perceptions in an Open and Distance Learning context.

Theoretical Framework

The integrative lens of social constructionism and critical disability theory were used as a frame to get to the depth of the study. Both these theories are relevant to frame this paper because they seek to promote the human-rights based view to disability which correlates with the notion of Education for All (UNESCO 2000). Goal 6 is succinctly states that all educational institutions should 'create safe, healthy, inclusive and equitably resourced educational environments conducive to excellence in learning, with clearly defined levels of achievement for all' (UNESCO 2000). Social constructionism was propounded by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the 1970s (Anastasiou and Kauffman 2011). The arguments presented by Social constructionism are that: the physical and psychological factors are the main cause of disability; the impact of society on the creation and perpetuation of disability should not be underestimated; the terms and categories used to classify people with disabilities lead to their further stigmatization; there is a need to refrain from projecting disability as a condition that needs curing and prevention; and there is a need to refrain from using patronizing approaches when dealing with people with disabilities (Anastasia and Kauffman 2011). In addition to the social construction theory, is the social rights model which identifies everyone as having disabilities (Shakespeare and Watson 2002; Healey et al. 2006). The social rights model plays an empowering role in the way students with disabilities are perceived by the society. This is done through the important and clear difference between impairment and disability. UPIAS (1976) states that impairment is lack of part or whole limb or deflective limb, organ or mechanism of the body including psychologi-

cal mechanisms and that disability is the restrictions brought about by the way society is organised which pays no attention to the physical or psychological impairments needs of individual members of society. The social rights model focuses on the societal attitudes and barriers that prevent the people with disabilities from participating full day-to-day life events. The model dictates that society be restructured to allow suitable space for people with disabilities. Restructuring the higher education system would require that the interaction between the students with blindness, the support services and the teaching and learning procedures gets reviewed (British Council of Disabled People 1981).

The Critical Disability Theory is based on Critical Theory. It is relevant to frame this article because it addresses issues of disability within society. The theory has been used to understand the lived experiences of people with disability. Devlin and Pothier (2006) suggest that disability is not about provision of medical and health care or being compassionate towards the people with disabilities. They further state that disability is about "politics and power (lessness), power over and power to". Critical disability theory was used to understand the lived experiences of people with disability. It was used to understand the perceptions of students with blindness. Both the social constructionism and critical disability theories provide a base for problematising how students with blindness are perceived. They promote the quest of the academic community reflecting on the implications of their perceptions on the students with blindness and other disabilities at large.

Research Problem

The aim of this study was to problematise the issues that arise in the process of providing educational for all to students with blindness in an Open and Distance Learning context. A specific focus was put on the how the students with blindness are perceived by the academic community at the University of South Africa (UNISA). There seems to be a dearth of research on the issues surrounding perceptions of students with blindness from the students' perspectives. Further, there is limited research that links the implications of perceptions to the goal of Education for All for in an Open and Distance Learning context.

Goals of the Study

The purpose of the study was to establish academic community's perceptions of students with blindness as viewed by students with blindness themselves. The overall aim was to show the link between perceptions and Education for All.

METHOD

Research Design

The study followed a qualitative research design which according to Savenye and Robinson (2004) allows the researcher and the research participants to craft their own truth through the genuine and rich expression of human activity. This design was used to explore the phenomena under study through the students' perspectives which Kasiram and Subrayen (2013) rightly term the 'insider perspectives'. This research was conducted through critical paradigm which is a proper lens for questioning issues of oppression and discrimination (Bohman 2010).

Sampling

The students were selected through purposive and snowball sampling of information rich and willing participants. Punch (2009) argues that snowball sampling comprises of a network of people who know people who have rich stories to tell about the research phenomena. Using the snowball sample, it was ensured that the participants came from different study levels and fields of study. The sample comprised of 3 females and 2 males who are all studying at UNISA. Dikeledi aged 46, has been blind since the age of 23 is pursuing a course in Human Resource Management. Zahara has been blind since birth, she is 27 years old and pursuing Honours in Policy Studies. Thoko aged 39, has been blind since childhood and is pursuing a course in Social Work. Tshepo is doing LLB and has been blind since childhood. He is 32 years old. Zane is 25 years and has been blind since birth. He is pursuing a Diploma in Public Relations.

Research Instruments

Data was collected through the use of life stories and telephonic interviews. Life stories were deemed an appropriate tool for collecting the students' views because they are natural and based on real life activity of dialogue. This method allows the researcher to be more empathetic and sensitive to the research participants (Cole and Knowles 2001). All the participants told their stories the way they wanted, the researcher ensured that they understood the research objective. Though telephonic interviews are not always favourable as a data collection tool because they lack of physical contact between the researcher and the participants (Irvine et al. 2010), this tool proved useful in the Open and Distance Learning scenario where students are geographically dispersed. Telephonic interviews were used to cross-check the information that the participants had given in their life stories.

Procedure

The first phase of data gathering involved collecting the electronic versions of the students life story, here the students typed and emailed the story to the researcher. The electronic life stories served as a basis for the researcher. The second phase involved the researcher going to meet the participants individually and digitally recording their narrations. The participants lived in different places within South Africa; for example Dikeledi lived some 300 kilometres away from the main campus which is situated in Pretoria, Zane lived 652 kilometres away from the main campus. After the stories were transcribed and trends identified, telephonic interviews were conducted with each participant to confirm if their views were accurately captured.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done through employing categorical-content approach, usually called content analysis. This method of data analysis was deemed appropriate for analysis because it allows for proper examination of narrative extracts. Categorical-content approach focuses on separate stories responding to one research problem (Lieblich et al. 1998). The researcher first used colour coding to identify the views that indicated how blindness and students with blindness were perceived. The researcher then looked at the different trends from different research participants and grouped them into common themes to be presented as findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted under the patronage of University of South Africa Research Directorate. An ethical clearance certificate was obtained authorizing the researcher to conduct this study. The rules prescribed in the Policy of Research Ethics such as right to informed consent, voluntary participation and to be free from harm were followed. Since the participants are blind the researcher provided the informed consent form to them in electronic format and in Braille. This allowed them to give the researcher permission to be part of the research study in a format they could comfortably access. Another ethical consideration that is very important is the protection of the participants' identity and dignity therefore to ensure anonymity the researcher has given the participants pseudonyms which do not give away the identity of the participants.

RESULTS

The findings of the study are presented under the themes that emerged.

Inadequate and Inappropriate Preparedness to Deal with Students with Blindness

The participants revealed that there was inadequate and inappropriate preparedness amongst the academic community to deal with students with blindness. Zahara narrated that a lecturer said:

I do not believe you wrote this…there is no blind person who can type…who typed this assignment for you?

Zahara mentioned that this made her generate negative emotions and wonder why her lecturer who is supposed to be encouraging her to learn treated her the way he/she did.

Thoko narrated that:

The first day I went to university for registration the security guards blocked me in the gate and they said that I am not supposed to be there. One said "This is not a place for people like you", that statement does not leave my memory. It keeps flashing and it hurts. They even asked me "How will you walk around the campus". Nowadays when I go to campus they [security guards] look[1] at me and I am sure they wonder how I manage to move around on my own.

Due to the way the students with blindness feel they are perceived, some of them indicated that they do not declare their blindness. Thoko confirmed this by saying:

When I registered for the course, I made sure that I do not inform any lecturer about my blindness so that they do not generate a negative attitude towards me as a blind person (laughing).

Discrimination from Certain Career Paths

Thoko mentioned that she felt very much discriminated against when she was told:

You should stop doing this course[2] because it is not for blind people and … students are expected to go and work in their different communities, you as a blind person will not be able to do that.

This statement implies that being blind means being unable to go to your desired destination. This notion disregards the fact that a student with blindness can make arrangements on how to get him/herself to the place where practicals are going to take place. The statement disempowers the student and makes them feel powerless and unable to control their destiny. It also illustrates the negative perception that most people have about people with disabilities' abilities.

Further, Thoko narrated that one lecturer told her:

How can you be a Social Worker when you cannot see the facial expressions of your clients? They do not consider that when you are blind you have other ways of sensing emotions.

This statement implies that the student with blindness will not be able to conduct a counseling session because of blindness. It disregards the fact that people with blindness compensate for their lack of vision through heightened visual perceptions (Bedny et al. 2009). These stories revealed exclusionary academic perceptions whereby Zane says that when he needed some help with his Public Relations assignment, he was asked:

…why don't you just operate the switchboard? That is what you people[3] do best.

Zahara also reported the same notion where she experienced the negative perception narrated below:

They said a blind person cannot do Maths and Science. When we reasoned with them that

the blind white learners were allowed in their school for the blind to do Maths and Science, they said we should remember that we are black. That was the most painful experience for me; we had to stop doing Biology. We had to insist to do Physiology which worked at last. We were only encouraged and allowed to do subjects like History, Biblical Studies and languages. We could not do Science and Commercial subjects, we were not allowed to because we are blind.

Stereotypical Overtures About Students with Blindness

Due to their learning material having to be converted to accessible formats they sometimes have to ask for extensions for their assignment due dates. Instead of people having proper understanding of why the students need reasonable accommodation like deadlines extension they instead regard the request as a way of asking for favours and expecting to be pitied and treated differently.

Dikeledi mentioned that:

When I ask for extension of the due date to submit my assignment, other lecturers are reluctant. One even said that we students with blindness use our blindness to get preferential treatment.

To highlight the perception of students with blindness as charity-deserving, Tshepo pointed out that:

…the other students thought we the students with blindness do not pay tuition fees.

This perception somehow affects the students with blindness because their value as paying students is not taken seriously. The fact some students with blindness have received bursaries or scholarships should be treated with seriousness as the reason behind this funding is to facilitate equitable access to education, empower and prepare the students to be self-sustaining.

DISCUSSION

It is clear from the results of the study that the challenges faced by students with blindness at other higher education institutions also exist at UNISA. The first theme on the inadequate and inappropriate preparedness to deal with students with blindness confirms Fraser and Magu-

vhe's (2008) finding that there is prevalent lack of skills to teach students with blindness. This could be caused by the educational practices whereby the children with disabilities went to special schools where they had specially trained teachers. This poses a challenge at tertiary education level because there are no special lecturers who are specially trained to teach university students with disabilities, those with blindness in particular. According to Moodley (2002), combating the academics' lack of skills to teach students with blindness requires them to adopt flexible curriculum approaches, adopt social rights model in education delivery, have positive attitude towards disabilities and undergo ongoing training on inclusive teaching approaches.

The study revealed that students with blindness were viewed as incapable and unwanted. Thokos' experience with the support staff where she was told that the university is not for people like her suggests that the way someone is addressed during conversation can make them feel discriminated. Shakespeare and Watson (2001: 548) assert that the most difficulties that people with disabilities encounter "do not arise primarily from their own bodies or minds but from the way society has treated them".

The second theme highlights the way the students with blindness are discriminated from certain career paths. Students with blindness were discriminated from pursuing Social Work because of their condition. Related findings were established by Kasiram and Subrayen (2013) who reported academic exclusionary practices where the students with visual impairments were excluded from group work. The students in Social work were told that they could not do field work which is a practical component of the course. This may be a sign of the absence of flexible curriculum which caters for diverse student populations. This scenario gives the students with blindness a negative learning experience and makes them fall under the 'dis-studentship' flag as explained by (Devlin and Pothier 2006). Devlin and Pothier (2006) argue that dis-studentship is the state of having the students register with the institution of learning but not giving them enough chance to fully participate in their personal growth. In the case of South Africa, most institutions of higher learning opened their doors for students with disabilities without taking enough time to train their academic, administrative and support staff on how to deal with

students with disabilities, blind in particular. Most of the students reported being advised to work on the switchboard because they are blind. This is inappropriate guidance based on lack of understanding that disability that does not mean inability. The medical and charity approach has always promoted people with blindness as having limited cognitive abilities therefore most of them were not given other employment opportunities besides being switchboard operators (Moodley 2002). It is inopportune that regardless of the UNISA policies promoting access to higher education for all including those with disabilities, there are some academics who think that the people with blindness should only be switchboard operators. Kasiram and Subrayen (2013) highlighted this disregard of students with blindness, relating an incident where the blindness was associated with being stupid. The promotion of education for all was also introduced while the old medical models based which operated during apartheid and continue to dominate during the new dispensation have not yet changed. The lack of appropriate skills on how to facilitate Open and Distance Learning and the negative perceptions about disability gives the students negative learning experiences.

The third theme highlights the stereotypical overtures about students with blindness which leads to some of them not declaring blindness (Moodley 2002). Those who declare their blindness only do so for administrative purposes, they do not inform the academic staff of their blindness such that they do not face discrimination they might have experienced before. Seale (2006) states that in United Kingdom, the discrimination legislation does not compel the students with disabilities to declare their disability status but the institution of learning have to anticipate the needs of such students. On the other hand, the United States legislation requires such students to inform the institution of learning of their disability so that the necessary modifications can be made. However, Seale argues that there is evidence-based information that students are reluctant and uncomfortable about declaring their disability because of fear of discrimination. Seale's (2006) finding concurs with the views expressed by some of the students with blindness in this study that they were perceived as opportunists who use their blindness to get favours and be treated differently from other students. This perception raises the need

to get the academic community to understand the meaning of reasonable accommodation and how it can be applied to promote learning for students with blindness. Kasiram and Subrayen (2013) postulates that reasonable accommodation should not be about adjusting policies only but implementation of the policies and providing the necessary support to enable the students to learn successfully. Oliver (1990, 1993, 1996) states that people with disabilities will not need to depend on other people if there can be a barrier-free society. A barrier-free society dictates that the society be free from structural and attitudinal barriers which block the people with disabilities from leading an independent life. In the case of students with blindness at the Open Distance Learning positive perceptions would make the students with blindness feel that the academic community is genuinely interested in teaching them. Moore (1972) argues that the reduction of transactional distance between the students and the academics leads to both pedagogical and social autonomous students.

CONCLUSION

The perceptions of blindness from the students' perspective illustrate that the academic community lacks proper understanding of blindness and how particularly students with blindness cope with being at an Open and Distance Learning institution. Instead of using their academic power to promote the transformational and inclusive agenda, they allow their perceptions to perpetuate exclusionary practices which contribute towards negative learning experiences for the students with blindness. This study demonstrated that the way the academic community perceives students with blindness at an Open Distance Learning institution in South Africa poses a challenge to the achievement of education for all goals. The negative perceptions that sighted academics have about the students with blindness symbolize use of power to oppress those who are powerless and different from the norm. This study found that there are inadequate and inappropriate preparedness to deal with students with blindness, discrimination from certain career paths and stereotypical overtures about students with blindness which all pose a challenge towards the realization of education for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:
There should be training and retraining of the academic community on issues of teaching students with blindness including the use of current and applicable technologies to facilitate open and distance learning. The academic community should be constantly exposed and sensitized on how those with blindness learn in an Open and Distance Learning context. The academic community should be made aware of the implications of their negative perceptions on the students with blindness' learning experiences. This study focused on the students with blindness, there is need to carry research that focuses on the academic community. The future studies should include the academics' perceptions, attitudes and knowledge on teaching students with blindness.

NOTES

1. Look –in the case of a person with blindness it does not mean that they have to physically see that you are looking at them but they can sense it when somebody is staring at them
2. Course – Social Work degree
3. You people- meaning students with blindness

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