

EMPOWERING TEACHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SEVERE TO PROFOUND  
DISABILITIES

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# **EMPOWERING TEACHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SEVERE TO PROFOUND DISABILITIES**

## **Background**

Despite policy commitment, there has been slow progress towards achieving quality education for learners with disabilities in South Africa, with one of the main obstacles being that there are very few training programmes preparing teachers to teach learners with severe to profound sensory or intellectual impairments (SPSII) (McKenzie, Kelly, & Shanda, 2018; Statistics South Africa, 2011). While there is an important place for full qualifications that focus on teaching learners with disabilities, the lack of teacher education can also be addressed through the development of short courses within a landscape of in-service and continuing professional development opportunities.

The Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion (TEDI) project - a partnership between the University of Cape Town and Christoffel-Blindenmission (CBM) and co-funded by the European Union and CBM – has developed short courses that aim to empower teachers to provide quality education for learners with SPSII through training that is focused on inclusivity, diversity and addressing learners' disability specific needs. These courses look at disability studies in education as well as teaching learners with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, learners with visual impairment (low vision and blind), and learners who are D/deaf or hard of hearing. This paper focuses on the evaluation of these courses, considering how they contributed to teacher empowerment.

Empowerment has been defined as a process whereby teachers begin to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems. A teacher who is empowered is one who is confident in their skills and knowledge and who is able to continually develop these skills.

Thus, instead of saying that they were not trained an empowered teacher says: “How can I find out?”. But how do teachers become empowered? Is it just a matter of telling them to take control? Surely not – it is a process that needs to be nurtured and supported.

Teachers need to be consulted and given the power to make decisions that affect their daily practice. They need to work out what inclusion would look like in their school and identify the school goals and policies that could support it. Research shows that when administrators follow such an approach, teacher morale increases and classroom instruction improves. This means that there should be opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles (Harpell & Andrews, 2010).

### **Research methods**

The study employed a qualitative research design, exploring the subjective experiences of those who participated in the TEDI short courses (Willig, 2008). Data was collected via evaluation surveys with 65 participants and eight focus group discussions with a total of 52 participants. These participants were educators working with learners with SPSII, including classroom teachers, principals, learning support advisors, social workers and carers.

The survey questions focused on the educators general experiences of the courses, while the focus group discussion explored how they felt the courses changed them as educators. Data was analysed deductively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Results**

Findings suggest that the TEDI short courses contributed to teacher empowerment through (i) open interactions and communication; (ii) the creation of supportive and collaborative networks; (iii) fostering empathy, and (iv) building confidence and a desire for advocacy.

Course participants seemed to appreciate the opportunity to openly interact and communicate with one another during the delivery of courses: *“I liked the conversation that was open, free and honest”* (VIP2<sup>1</sup>). Another educator said: *“I think we learnt a lot from one another. So, we go to that course with a vision of how can we get assistance maybe from the facilitators or something like that. But the most learning process was the teamwork”* (IDP20). These kinds of interactions allowed for support networks to form amongst educators: *“I feel like I am part of a network of people making a difference for inclusion”* (DSEP11). This in turn was empowering as they felt able to return to their schools and communicate with others what they had learnt: *“I will be able to go back and share the knowledge with my colleagues, and also be able to take the initiative to start the little that I can do to change my school”* (VIP1).

The TEDI courses also appeared to foster empathy in the educators through learning and hearing from people with disabilities. Some of the presenters on the courses had disabilities themselves and shared their personal experiences of schooling: *“When you hear their story and how they hated to be excluded and the challenges they had to go through, and the bottom line of all of it, is you just want to be accepted and to be treated as normal. I think that, to me, was a total eye-opener”* (DSEP18). These kinds of experiences seemed to facilitate a change in the educators in that they were able to better understand things from others’ perspectives: *“When I went back I looked at myself and children differently. If I can use an example: In the course I learned to ask and not to assume I know everything”* (VIP24). In addition, it built up confidence and a desire to be advocates for inclusive education: *“We are now the advocates for our district office - maybe we should take up that role”* (DSEP18). This educator said: *“At the conclusion of the course I felt really empowered and applied the theory received. Everything did not always work out as planned but I was a much more*

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<sup>1</sup> In order to ensure anonymity, we assigned codes to each of the educators.

*confident principal. My passion has simply increased 10-fold, and my belief strengthened in the application of inclusive education” (DSEP20).*

## **Recommendations**

Teacher education for children with disabilities should focus on creating platforms where teachers can openly and honestly communicate with one another, form collaborative and supportive networks, and hear from people with disabilities. In this way teachers become empowered to drive their own professional development as they realise that they are able to support each other and grow together with an empathetic understanding of what is required of them to support learners with severe to profound disabilities.

## **References**

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