

Learning needs of learners with hearing, visual and intellectual impairments in special schools in South Africa

Introduction

The Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion (TEDI) project is a collaboration between the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Christoffel-Blinden Mission (CBM), co-funded by the European Union. The project aims to strengthen learning and teaching for learners with severe to profound visual, hearing and intellectual impairment who attend special and full-service schools in South Africa.

Methods

As a first step to addressing this goal we conducted a qualitative descriptive study with 132 participants from special schools, full service schools and provincial and district offices.

Participant	Interviews
Provincial officials	2 (1 focus-group discussion (FGD) and 1 electronic response)- 6 participants
District officials	5 (2 FGDs and 3 individual interviews) – 13 participants
School management teams	8
Teachers	39
Learners: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• with severe intellectual disability,• who are D/deaf,• who are blind or have low vision	11 14 14
Parents	27
Total	132

Thematic analysis was used to analyse this data guided by the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Background

Historically in South Africa, learners with disabilities have been educated in special schools or excluded from education. South African policies rooted in a human rights approach stipulate that all learners with disabilities should have access to equal and quality education (United Nations, 2006; DoE, 2001; DBE, 2014). However despite this commitment, there are reports of approximately

500,000 learners being out of school in South Africa (Department of Education, 2001), many of whom have disabilities. There has been slow progress toward achieving quality education for learners with disabilities, with one of the main obstacles being that there are hardly any specialised academic teacher training programs preparing teachers to teach learners with severe to profound disabilities. In order to inform such training we asked the question in this study: What are the specialized educational needs of CWSPSII?

Findings

Through examining experiences across the different impairment types, we identified the following needs:

Social and psychological support

Learners felt the need to be understood and for teachers to know some of the difficulties they experience as a result of their impairments, such as accessing information or dealing with stigma. Importantly, they need to be seen holistically as young people who have impairments and need support to be able to participate fully in society.

The biggest problem with me ... with most teachers is the ability to have patience and to assist the learners accordingly and they cannot bring their personal issues to school. 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 (Learner who is blind)

Address additional barriers to learning

Learners within special schools are not a homogeneous group; they each have different support systems, different learning styles, and different family and social support systems.

If they come from areas where there is tremendous gang fighting or whatever those children come to school and they never really go out of this survival grid So their adrenaline levels are always very high. That affects how they learn.

Impairment-specific curriculum

Learners with SPSII have additional support needs that arise from their impairments. They require the curriculum to be adapted to their needs through additional programmes or modifications. Learning opportunities need to be enhanced to overcome the limitations that their impairments might place on learning from the environment or incidental learning.

It is difficult for me to understand maths. It is very difficult because of the teacher who doesn't know sign language.

Access to assistive technology (devices and training)

Learners need to be provided with appropriate devices and to know how to use them to access the curriculum effectively.

I am visually impaired and also they provide with laptops you can enlarge you can print or you can copy the textbook in a laptop, then the laptop is going to be easy for your to enlarge if there is no enough papers to print.

Appropriate language and media for learning and teaching

Learners stated unequivocally that they need to learn and be taught in an appropriate language. This applies most significantly to D/deaf learners who require SASL, but also to learners with severe to profound intellectual disabilities who need to be taught in their home language. The medium of Braille was stated as being critical for learners who are blind. This relates very closely to the need for appropriate LTSM, including adapted workbooks and assessment tools.

There are instances where the teacher forgets the structure of the sign language or maybe she doesn't know it well, they know that we help them. So maybe they don't know the structure, we aid them there, we help them. The teachers need to improve so they can help us improve our marks.

Conclusion

Within an inclusive education system where diversity is embraced and all learners are welcomed, there is a need to ensure that teachers, whether they are in special, full service or mainstream schools are equipped to meet the learning needs of children with severe to profound disabilities. While the form and type of teacher education may vary in terms of specialisation in different sites, there needs to be a commitment to quality education that meets the need of learners with disabilities as described above.