



**CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING ON ACADEMIC
PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT
AT MUNALI BOY'S SECONDARY SCHOOL, ZAMBIA**

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Abstract:

This manuscript is about challenges of inclusive education on academic performance of students with visual impairment at Munali Boy's Secondary School. The objectives of the study were to find out the attitude of teachers and sighted students towards the inclusion of students with visual impairment into regular classes. It also sought to examine the academic performance of performance of students with visual impairment in inclusive settings. It further wanted to establish subjects in which students with visual impairment face difficulties. A descriptive survey design was adopted in which 42 participants were purposively selected. The study revealed that, although teachers and sighted students have a fair understanding of inclusive schooling, they give positive attention to students with visual impairment. It also revealed that students with visual impairment face academic challenges at Munali Boys' which include teachers' inability to use embossed teaching and learning aids during lesson, lack of individualised attention, mobility challenges, and their pace of teaching does not support the learning of students with visual impairment. The study established that although, inclusive education is fully accepted at Munali Boy's Secondary School, students with visual impairment are not included in mathematics and sciences related subjects.

Keywords: inclusive schooling, mainstream, visual impairment, orientation, mobility

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1. Introduction

Since the introduction of inclusive education in Zambia two decades ago, the Zambian government has undertaken a number of initiatives to ensure quality, equity and accessibility to education for students with disabilities (Educating Our Future, 1996). This move is in support of the inclusive education policy enshrined in the Salamanca Statement (1994) which promotes equal opportunities, non-discrimination, social justice, protection of basic human rights, and participation of students with disabilities in the mainstream education system (Educating Our Future, 1996). In addition, this has also been strengthened by the international protocols such as Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) and Sustainable Development Goals (2005) making inclusive education a fundamentally human right tying it to broader goals of developmental agenda. Crucially, Ainscow (2005) and Thomas, and Loxley (2007) stress that inclusion provide opportunities for equal participation of persons with disabilities (physical, social and/or emotional) whenever possible into general education but leaves open the possibility of personal choice and options for special assistance and facilities for those who need it. However, although research has established an increase in the number of students with disabilities accessing education, students with visual impairment face obstacles in accessing education in inclusive setting in the country. These obstacles also contribute to educational inequalities for all students (Florian, 2009). This study sought to explore perspectives of these barriers on students with disabilities who are attending Munali Boys' Secondary School. The current study aims to explore challenges of inclusive education on academic performance of students with visual impairment (SWVI).

2. Literature review

According to Sikanku (2018) the past two decades have witnessed a small number of studies that have emerged examining the challenges teachers face teaching students with visual impairment in an inclusive education setting. Research relating to educating SWVI in general education setting documents that educational needs of these students are not fully met due to lack of competent teachers to handle these students in inclusive settings. For instance, a study conducted in four countries (Tanzania, Nepal, Vietnam and Zambia) by Lewis and Little (2007) found that teachers who are not trained in braille face challenges when teaching SWVI in inclusive classroom. Similarly, a study on the challenges of teaching learners with visual impairment in Zambia conducted by Penda et al. (2015) found that among the factors attributed to poor performance among these learners are difficulties in teaching them. That study established that teachers experience challenges particularly when using the following teaching methods: question and answer; expository, group discussion; demonstration and inquiry methods. They concluded that challenges experienced by teachers in teaching SWVI largely contribute to poor academic performance and classroom participation (ibid). Some studies of visual perception have revealed that there are tendencies to pay attentional bias towards visual

modality when it comes to the general understanding of learners with visual impairment (Sham, 2000). Notwithstanding the importance of inclusive setting, SWVI are expected to muster and adapt to the same educational contents as their sighted peers. Despite their vision loss imposing restrictions on their ability to access the same curriculum, teachers shouldn't use this as a scapegoat for not teaching these students in a typical manner. Moreover, SWVI are expected to sit for the same National Examinations with sighted peers with which apparently has minimal adaptation or adjustments for them. However, the challenges encountered by this group of students negatively affect their performance in national examinations.

A study conducted by Mulenga (2007) clearly demonstrates that despite learners with visual impairment successfully completing secondary school and a significant proportion of them furthering their education in tertiary institutions, the majority are either unemployed or underemployed. However, if the education system can have a positive impact on SWVI, it is necessary that the curriculum is adapted to diversity needs of all learners. In particular, SWVI should be taught the necessary skills in order for them to obtain information in a highly stake content standardised curriculum. Johnsen (2001) proposes that teachers should modify and adapt their teaching components in order to meet the learning needs of students with special educational needs. In Kenya for instance, students with visual impairment are required to take the same examinations as the general population of students with regards to the cognitive areas, but they are provided with accommodation and adaptation regarding time. Waihenya (2000) indicates that students with visual impairments have 30 minutes extra time within which to complete national examinations. The challenges experienced by SWVI in inclusive setting are also similar in developed countries. The case in question is a study conducted in Spain with an aim of analysing the process of inclusion to SWVI by Simon et al (2010). Their study found that schools do not have appropriate teaching and learning resources to help students with visual impairment learn better in inclusive classrooms. That study revealed that teachers do not have enough knowledge on inclusion and how to teach learners with visual impairment in inclusive classrooms.

3. Problem statement

Despite increased advocacy of inclusive education and its importance to education provision, the extent to which learners with visual impairment benefit from this arrangement is very scanty. Although Munali Boy's Secondary School has adopted inclusive schooling in line with the government policy of educating all learners under one roof, it remains unclear how students with visual impairment are taught by teachers who lack specialised training in teaching these learners. There is also need ascertain how these challenges affect the academic performance of SWVI with respect to attitude of teachers and sighted students in inclusive classrooms.

3.1 Research objectives

- 1) To find out the attitude of teacher and sighted pupils towards the inclusion of students with visual impairment in regular classrooms.
- 2) To examine the academic performance of students with visual impairment in inclusive setting.
- 3) To establish in which subjects' students with visual impairment face difficulties and the cause.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design

Descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. This design involves collecting data in order to address research questions about people's views on issues. Qualitative research was preferred because it gives opportunities for atypical respondents to be heard. Creswell (2012) indicate that in qualitative research, *"the intent is not to be generalised to a particular population but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon"*, which is best achieved using purposeful sampling strategies. The phenomenological approach gave the researchers an opportunity to examine the particular experiences, opinions of SWVI in inclusive settings at Munali Boys Secondary school. The interviews were conducted with students with visual impairment, sighted students, and teachers. The school was chosen because it is a typical secondary school in Lusaka district that caters for students with visual impairments in general classroom.

4.2 Participants

In this study 42 participants were selected through purposive sampling. It involved 14 students with visual impairment; 16 sighted students; and 12 teachers. Cohen et al (2018, p.218) states that purposive sampling is used to access 'knowledgeable people' who have in depth knowledge about a particular issue. Although the school provides inclusive education at all grade levels, the study sample involved only students at senior levels (Grade 10-12). Therefore, in this study a random sampling strategy is unsuitable because the purpose of this research is not to generate a representative sample.

4.3 Data collection

Data were collected via face to face in-depth interview with 42 purposively selected participants. Interviews with students were conducted in the resource room, while interviews with the teachers took place in the career guidance office. The interview duration was between 40-45 minutes, but flexibility was provided as much as possible during the interview process. The questions that were asked included but not restricted to the following; attitude of teachers and sighted students on inclusive schooling? Challenges encounter by students with visual impairment during or after lessons? The language of instructions during the interview process was English.

4.4 Data analysis

All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, irrespective of how intelligible the transcript may have been, it was read back. The interviews recordings were then transcribed and coded to categorise key themes and identify patterns. Each theme was analysed to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's perceptions and opinions. Rigorous thematic can produce reliable and insightful findings for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights (Braun and Clarke (2006). Following transcription of the data, the researcher utilised qualitative thematic analysis to extract common themes, patterns and relations. During this process, interview transcripts were hand-coded to identify conceptual themes that were clear within both the research literature and within the data.

5. Results

The findings of the study are presented according to the research objectives: to find out the attitudes of teachers and sighted students towards inclusion of students with visual impairment in regular classrooms; examine the academic performance of students with visual impairment in inclusive setting; and establish subjects in which students with visual impairment face difficulties.

5.1 Attitude towards inclusion

The introduction of inclusive education at Munali Boys' presents mixed reactions from both teachers and students. Some teachers argue that at first it was hard for them to accept teaching students and with visual impairment and sighted students together. They are of the view that teaching SWVI requires one with specialised training in special education. On the other hand, sighted students support inclusive schooling and share all things together as learners regardless whether one has a disability or not. Students with visual impairment also seemed to be happy to be included in regular classrooms. According to most of them, they are engaged in all social and academic activities by both teachers and their sighted peers, as such they are comfortable learning together. This seems to suggest that inclusion of SWVI at Munali is supported by teachers and indeed all the students.

A student with visual impairment commented that:

"Our friends support us here are at school...they dictate notes and guide us between our dormitories and the classroom. Whenever we ask for help, they are readily available, we always feel supported."

Another one re-stated that:

"In fact, if you notice the physical barriers around the school surroundings, we hardly move independently... sometimes when we experience heavy downpours, the poor

drainages around here make it difficult for us come to class, we get stuck in our dorms [sic]. These friends do help us in many ways." (visually impaired student)

The above responses suggest that independent travel is a challenge for students with visual impairment at Munali Boys'. If indoor and outdoor movement becomes difficult for SWVI and their safety is not guaranteed they become psychologically or emotionally insecure. As much as these students rely on their sighted counterparts for movement, that should not deprive them of the freedom of movement especially if they want to visit places of convenient such as bathroom.

Some sighted students mentioned that learning together with students with visual impairment in the same classrooms has made them accept and treat students with visual impairment the same as other students.

"At first I used to show a lot of sympathy to my blind classmates, but I realised that sympathy alone was not enough...that is why I render support to them, my association with them [students with visual impairment] has taught me to read and write a bit of braille." (sighted student)

Another sighted student added:

"Whether blind or not we come to school to acquire knowledge so that we can secure our future...issue of physical appearance is not important here. Whether one sees or not we mix freely, and our teachers see us as students." (sighted student)

As responded by a sighted student, indeed there are common trends amongst people in the world to attach disability with pity or sympathy but persons with disability including those with visual impairment deserve more than that. It appears students at Munali have broken the disability barriers, no wonder they express understanding of each other. This means that the orthodox approach has made inclusion as a means for treating persons with disabilities as equals irrespective of ones' physical status. This balanced and health climate gives student a feeling of wellbeing and promoting of social skills.

"Here I have friends who are ready to help me... I am valued here more than home, even teachers are encouraging to me. They teach me, they want me to become a better person [sic]" (visually impaired student)

A sighted student mentioned that:

"My interaction with visually impaired classmates has even helped me to understand the challenges faced by my own uncle who has a disability. Have picked lessons from my

encounter with blind students is that we need to support them, this we can do if we get closer to them." (sighted student)

Another participant states that:

"Just as we learn together with our friends in the same classroom, we also share social and academic experiences as classmates. When I first came to this school, I had difficulties getting involved with them, but later I observed that these were open minded."(sighted student)

Apparently, most sighted students expressed positive comments about learning together in inclusive classrooms with visual impairment students. They seem to share cordial relationships and perceive them like any other student. It further goes to show that the principle of inclusion and its benefits outweighs segregated arrangements as learning under the same classroom settings demonstrates tolerance and acceptance of one another among students.

Similarly, the teachers talked to, expressed the same sentiments shared by students. They indicated that learners with visual impairment always behave so well and reports for classes much earlier. Although it was the first time for most of the teachers to teach students with visual impairment and they have no training in special education, it is a good experience for them to teach students with visual impairment in inclusive settings.

One teacher mentioned that:

"These learners are a conspicuous group in the school, but are not forceful... as a teacher, you need to engage them as well. Without a word of encouragement, them they tend to be passive in class."

Essentially, inclusion is about cultivating the positive relationship between teachers and students with disabilities which subsequently reflect the level of acceptance or rejection. It serves to suggest that less positive relationship between teachers and students with disabilities will have negative consequences on the social and emotion welfare of students. Most of the teachers interviewed, mentioned that the presence of SWVI in their classes has changed the negative perceptions against inclusive education. In addition, the long-standing myths about teaching students with visual impairment and barriers that limits the full participation of with disabilities in inclusive classroom setting is now being accepted by all educators.

5.2 Academic performance

True to the response made earlier by a teacher and indeed our observations, students with visual impairment were often punctual for lessons than their sighted peers. This was confirmed when sighted students helped by guiding SWVI into the classroom, when

themselves went to chat outside, until when they see their teachers approaching that is when they entered the classroom.

A visually impaired student mentioned that:

"It is difficult for me to go and stand outside and wait for the teacher there, I would rather the teacher finds me classroom...although at times teachers don't report to class, I avoid bumping into objects when I am rushing in inside the classroom, it's not safe. [sic]"

The above response suggests that SWVI are not never taught orientation and mobility. Where students are not oriented to the environment it is difficult for them to create mental geography about their location on the ground or they will always be over dependent on sighted guides to move about. Therefore, due mobility challenges experienced by learners with visual impairment at Munali, one may tend to justify their inability to move independently within the school campus.

While teachers prepare to teach, it seems they are not conscious about the presence of students with visual impairment in their classrooms. The lessons observed did not often capture the interest of students with visual impairment (totally blind) except for sighted students. Most SWVI were no paying attention during lesson presentations as teachers never utilised any teaching or learning aid to stimulate the interest in this category of students. While teachers can teach sighted learners without aids, and expect better positive response, it is difficult to teach SWVI without learning aids and expect good response from them. When one teacher was asked why she was not using teaching aids her response was that:

"It is my first time to teach blind students...I don't have knowledge of braille"

Another teacher argued that: *"braille is too hard for me; I need some time to learn braille.* "According to students with visual impairment, they encounter academic challenges because most teachers at Munali Boys' do not have interest in braille. Since students with visual impairment learn through touch, it is obvious that teachers take little interest in the way students with visual impairment understand concepts.

A student with visual impairment stressed that:

"Some teachers are too fast when teaching and we face problems to follow their pace of teaching...sometimes they are not audible enough especially when they are standing further away from us' [sic]"

In order to give appropriate feedback teachers must be aware that rather than the sense of sight, students with visual impairment (blind) interacts with the subject matter using other sense modalities (hear, touch, taste or feel). Therefore, unlike sighted students who can utilise their sense of sight to lip-read when the teacher is speaking, students with

visual impairment may get distorted audio sounds if the speaker is not speaking directly with them.

"We have been copying a lot of lesson notes without our teachers explaining them to us, we don't understand some meaning unless the teachers find time to explain" [sic]"
(visually impaired student)

Most students with visual impairment indicated that they usually copy notes free of errors when they are being dictated by a sighted student rather than the teachers because teachers are too fast when dictating.

The response from a non-specialist teacher is that:

"Managing a class that accommodates students with visual impairment needs specialised skills as students with visual impairment need specialised training... it is difficult to teach students with visual impairment due to their lack of sight, an important organ in learning" [sic]"

Teachers with lack of knowledge to teaching learners with visual impairment, should be aware that these students are capable of learning if they are supported. The purpose for which inclusive education was created is for teachers to adapt their teaching strategies to suit all their learners regardless whether one has a disability or not.

5.3 Challenging subjects

Students with visual impairment at Munali Boys' do not take all subjects that most sighted peers are taking. During classroom observations, we discovered that students with visual impairment never take natural sciences (biology, chemistry and physics) including mathematics, but takes some subject combinations of social science. Most students with visual impairment claim that they have no choice in subject selection as they are offered to them because of their status.

"teachers think we cannot understand other subjects because they involve doing experiments and calculations...but it is easy to learn the subjects we are taking."(visually impaired student)

However, another student said that:

"Unfortunately, some of us who are partially blind are discouraged to do mathematics and other subjects. They say these subjects are too difficult for us, so we don't do them [sic]"(visually impaired student)

Mathematics and sciences related subjects are very important areas of study globally and they increase ones' chances for university placement. Students who scores

high in science subjects, have wider career choices. In this case, students with visual impairment at Munali, have limited chance to proceed further in education.

When asked how they are taught in other subjects, students with visual impairment mentioned that teachers do not use embossed teaching aids either.

One student added that:

“There are no braille textbooks for in the school, it is difficult for us to study, instead we spend most of our time making notes with the help of our sighted friends who dictate for us. We cannot prepare well for examinations, when our sighted friends are studying, we are busy making notes to catch up with our them [sic]”

The principle behind inclusive education is to ensure that all students regardless of the social, emotional or physical status are granted the freedom to choose subjects they wish to take in the school. The implications to deter students with visual impairment from choosing subjects independently is a violation of their rights. As long as students with disabilities are given this opportunity, then the purpose for which inclusive education was founded is futile.

6. Discussion

A number of reasons were advanced by both teachers and pupils regarding attitude of teachers towards students with visual impairment. This study revealed that teachers face problems when teaching in SWVI due to lack of knowledge in braille and inability to adapt their lessons to accommodate these learners. These findings are consistent with those of (Ainscow, 2002) who found that teaching SWVI in inclusive classrooms is not as easy as teaching students with any other disabilities. His study revealed that due to the nature of this, the attitudes of teachers with no skills in braille leaves much to be desired. The current study did not clearly demonstrate teachers' positive attitude towards students SWVI who are included at Munali Boys. This was observed by lack of sourcing embossed teaching and learning aids to support the teaching and learning of SWVI. Our results seem to agree with a study by Fleneer (2006) which found that teachers' reactions towards students in inclusive classrooms are relatively difficult to tell. According to a conclusion in Morbeg's (2000) study, the attitude of school stakeholders will support the education of students with disabilities but if negative, will have strong impact on them.

However, the study revealed that both teachers and sighted students support inclusive schooling at Munali Boys'. Our findings are in agreement with Dillon's (2001) study, which found that inclusive education can benefit both teachers and students. In his study, Dillon (Ibid) concludes that teachers are embracing inclusive education because they need to learn how to effectively provide education to diverse kind of students in the same learning environment. Supporting inclusive education, a study conducted in Tanzania by Bangandaswa (2004) found that educating students with visual

impairment alongside their sighted peers enables teachers to create mutual relationships between teachers and students with visual impairment.

The classroom observations conducted showed that SWVI were always punctual for classes and were often the last to leave the classrooms suggesting that they were very much interested to learn. However, the study revealed that transcribing class exercises from ink print to braille was inconsistent as these students were not following lesson being taught correctly due to lack of prompt feedback from teachers. The challenges posed on students with visual impairment supports Arbeiter and Harley's (2002) findings that some of the problems facing the implementation of inclusive education include lack of awareness about the disability and low priority given to SWVI and lack of interest by non-specialist teachers in the mainstream. This also agrees with Kalabula (1991) who in his study *'The integration of the visually impairment learners into Zambian schools'* found that teachers had no training in dealing with the students with visual impairment. Kalabula's findings are also consistent with those of the findings of the research by Mandyata (2006) over the views of teachers on inclusive education. Mandyata found that the teachers' views are influenced by lack of training and resources to equip them in teaching learners with special education needs.

This study supports Ferguson's (2000) assertion that the idea of implementing inclusive education where students with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments who are enrolled in regular schools, calls for teachers to be retrained and equipped in special skills such as Braille and Orientation and Mobility.

With regards challenges in teaching students with visual impairment other subjects, this study found that they are not taught key subjects such as science related and mathematics. This finding agrees with Leaner (2005) who states that traditionally, Mathematics, Physics, Biology, Chemistry including Geography are generally regarded as difficulty subjects for students with visual impairment due to the abstract concepts they present.

7. Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study has revealed that teachers have a fair understanding of inclusive education. The reaction of teachers and sighted students to students with visual impairment, positively or negatively affects the promotion of inclusive education at Munali Boys' Secondary School. Lack of using embossed aids to facilitate teaching and learning of students with visual impairment is a demotivating factor to teaching and learning of students with visual impairment in the school. The findings of this study also demonstrated that teachers who support inclusive education feel it was a worthwhile shift to teaching students with visual impairment in regular classrooms as it enables all students to compete academically and promote self-esteem among students with visual impairment which leads to them to overcome several educational barriers.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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