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EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN TEACHING LEARNERS WITH DEAFBLINDNESS AT BAULENI SPECIAL SCHOOL IN LUSAKA, ZAMBIA

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Abstract:
The study explored the experiences of teachers in teaching and managing learners with deafblindness (DB) at Bauleni Special Needs School in Lusaka, Zambia. The study objectives were to: explore how deafblind education is being offered at Bauleni Special Needs School in Lusaka, establish challenges faced by teachers in teaching DB at Bauleni Special Needs School in Lusaka and explore the coping mechanism that teachers employ in managing experiences of teaching DB at Bauleni Special school. Interpretive paradigm and explanatory qualitative case study were employed to address the experiences of educators of learners with DB's questions of the study. The sample size comprised of 10 teachers, and homogeneous sampling was used to select them and was determined by the completeness of the data and the achievement of theoretical saturation. The interview guide was used to collect data teachers for learners of DB, and documentary analysis, which involves a critical look at the documents viewed as suitable for the study, was done, and data were triangulated and analysed thematically. The study revealed the use of intervenors, use of toys or objects, touch cues in tactile sign language, family involvement and through orientation and mobility as ways in which deafblind education is being offered. To sum up, in teaching learners with DB, there is a need for specialized training, adaptive strategies, and institutional support to effectively meet the unique educational and communication needs of these learners. Based on these findings, the study recommends capacity-building programmes on DB for teachers to have a more comprehensive understanding of DB to enhance communication and interpersonal interaction between teachers and learners with DB.

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Keywords: Bauleni, deafblindness, special needs school, specialist teacher

1. Introduction

Deafblindness is a condition where a person has both visual and hearing impairment. The term deafblindness describes a unique entity and not simply the addition of vision and hearing impairments (Deafblind International, 2019; Helen Keller National Centre, 2019). Individuals with deaf-blindness have very limited access to the world, usually only through their fingertips. World Federation of the Deafblind (WFDB) (2018) revealed that persons with deafblindness represent between 0.2% and 2% of the global population and are more likely to live in poverty and be unemployed, with lower educational outcomes than other persons with disabilities.

Initially, educational options were scarce, and individuals with both hearing and vision impairments were often excluded from formal education systems. Early programs focused mainly on sensory training and communication skills, influenced by the pioneering work of teachers like Helen Keller's instructor, Anne Sullivan, who demonstrated that with the right methods, learners with multiple disabilities could achieve remarkable things (Helen Keller National Centre, 2019). The development of individualized education plans and specialized teaching methods, such as tactile signing and hands-on learning (Vernard, 2019). The legislation and policies worldwide have significantly expanded access to quality education for deafblind learners, focusing on inclusivity and tailored educational support.

Despite the varying accounts of the evolution of deafblind education, the teaching of persons with deafblindness has since spread in most countries in Europe and the African continent. Each country faces its own challenges (Deafblind International (DbI), 2021). WFDB (2018) revealed that findings from the literature review raise concerns regarding the provision of education for children with deafblind. National Deaf-Blind Child Count (2020), data shows that although children who are deaf-blind are educated in a variety of settings, most are educated separately from students who do not have disabilities.

In Zambia, the provision of equal educational opportunities for all learners, and especially those with special educational needs, was operationalized through the drive for inclusive education (MOGE, 2016). Zambia has recognized deafblindness as a distinct disability, but there is still no statistics or information available about deafblindness in the national census or surveys (Kapapula and Simalalo, 2020). Muzata (2021) noted that the failure to establish the statistics of deaf-blindness in Zambia does not entail that deaf-blindness does not exist in the country.

There are few studies that have focused on education specific for learners with deafblindness in Zambia. The deaf-blindness as a subject has generally been under-reported, with a plethora of research studies focussing on the implementation of inclusive education in schools for learners with special education needs. In the quest to establish a democratic, free, just and non-discriminatory society, inclusive education and special

education in Zambia implementation guidelines (2016) have moved toward promoting the inclusion of learners with special educational needs into 'regular' schools. However, the placement of learners with deafblindness in schools needs to be examined carefully in order to understand the progress of education accessibility to deaf-blindness children in schools. In particular, there is a paucity of research focusing on the provision of education to children who are deaf-blindness. Based on this, a study needs to be carried out to understand the experiences of teachers in teaching deafblind learners at Bauleni Special Needs School in Lusaka, Zambia.

Muzata (2021:81) noted that the quality of teachers who should be able to teach learners with disabilities is important because teaching learners with a disability may be frustrating if such teachers are not trained to teach such learners. A study by Kapapula and Simalalo (2020) revealed that most teachers were incompetent in deaf-blind education and lacked the requisite skills to handle learners with deaf-blindness. Teaching resources and support services were also reported as inadequate. The study observed that much was needed to be done to make the lives of learners with deaf-blindness bearable in order to achieve success in the curriculum instruction given. There is, therefore, limited research-based evidence to validate the experiences of teachers in teaching deaf-blindness learners at Bauleni Special Needs School in Lusaka, Zambia. It is hoped that the findings will be significant because they would have the potential to generate interest and awareness among school administrators and teachers in schools where the deaf-blind are taught. The study would hopefully make a contribution to the curriculum developers and policymakers to understand the nature and progress made in the education for learners with deafblindness in Zambia since deafblind education is new in Zambia.

2. Theoretical Framework

The social model of disability was highly relevant to studying teachers' experiences in teaching deafblind learners at Bauleni Special Needs School, as it shifts the focus from the learners' impairments to the societal barriers they face in accessing quality education. This model emphasizes that disabilities arise not only from physical or sensory impairments but also from social, environmental, and attitudinal obstacles (Greg, 2017). Applying this framework allowed researchers to explore how teachers perceive and address these barriers, such as a lack of specialized resources, communication challenges, and inadequate institutional support that affect the inclusivity and effectiveness of their teaching. The social model thus frames the challenges these teachers face as systemic issues that can be addressed through improved educational policies, resources, and training rather than as limitations inherent to them.

3. Methods and Materials

The study operated within the interpretive paradigm, which emphasizes understanding the meaning that individuals (in this case, teachers) give to their experiences. The interpretive paradigm values the subjective experiences and insights of participants, making it appropriate for exploring the complexities of teaching learners with dual sensory impairments like deafblindness. A phenomenological study design was used for this study because it helps to understand complex social processes to capture essential aspects of a phenomenon from the perspective of study participants. With the use of the phenomenological research design, the researcher was able to conduct face to face interviews with participants on how deafblind education is being offered at Bauleni Special Needs School in Lusaka. An expert purposive sampling technique was used to select ten teachers of learners of deafblindness at Bauleni Special School Lusaka district. Bauleni Special School is located at Plot # 473A Leopards Hill Road, Lusaka, Zambia. Data was collected using an in-depth interview guide and was manually analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher organised the collected data into themes by transcribing from audio into text. The transcribed data was synthesized into common headings which were leading the data set, which were now called themes. The next stage was to organised the text under the created themes which have emerged from the data so that it can make sense. Through this procedure, data from all participants was organised under the themes the data represented, and this enabled the researcher to present data in the findings using the identified themes at analysis. In order to also show data authenticity, common responses were synthesized into verbatims to bring out the actual voices of the participants in the study. Through thematic analysis, data was presented to represent the actual findings of the study as collected from the different participants who took part in the study.

4. Results

The data was collected through the use of an in-depth interview guide. Regarding how deafblind education is done at Bauleni Special School, teachers understood ways of interaction by the use of intervenor, and all ten (10) teachers reported that there were rare and brief instances of how teachers interacted with their learners with DB**.** The findings revealed that teachers wished to have interpretive services which are unique for this population as well as some adaptive equipment. Six (6) out of ten (10) teachers expressed that learners with deaf-blindness use different communication methods and may be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional who is trained in tactile sign language. This sign language involves touching the hands of the client using a two-handed, manual alphabet, also known as finger spelling.

Other learners with deaf-blindness may use American Sign Language (ASL), or they may require small window interpreting (signing within a restricted range of vision). Some learners with deaf-blindness have some sight or hearing, and others have neither.

Learners with deaf-blindness will probably let you know how to communicate with them. Intervenor was identified as one-way teachers use in order to teach learners with deaf blindness. What teachers meant by tactile sign language was, for example, in tactile signing, the sender produces signs and the receiver (child) places his or her hand(s) on the sender's hand(s). If the sender is signing on the child's body, then the child is the receiver. If the communication partner is helping the child to sign coactively, then the child is producing the sign. This method does guarantee the achievement of the intended ways of interaction and teaching of deafblind leaners. Four (4) out of ten (10) teachers revealed believed that learners with deaf blindness had challenges with communication, for they require intensive one-on-one support, but that means the teacher should have one or two classroom assistants. Five (5) out of ten (10) teachers reported that they encountered an increased number of difficulties and greater stress in trying to communicate with learners with deafblind. Eight (8) out of ten (10) teachers indicated a lack of knowledge on how to interpersonally communicate with learners with d DB. The above sentiments were evidenced by teacher participant <**A'6**>, who observed that: *As a teacher of deafblind learners, I know that they have special needs that always require isolation from other learners and require segregated services, but to understand what exactly what they need is a big for me. I feel special interpreters are needed, for communication's sake.*

In support of the notion that there was a problem in communication with learners with DB, teacher participant <**A'5**> reported that: *I have observed that communication is a big problem to learners with* DB *which bring misunderstandings and defiance influencing my decisions and plans to be made concerning the education of the deafblind, often leading to inappropriate delivery of comprehensive services.*

Further, the use of toys or objects in the education of learners with DB teacher participants reported that. Seven (7) out of ten (10) reported that teachers should have the knowledge and skills to meet the unique educational needs of learners who are deafblind, including those with additional disabilities. Educational personnel should work collaboratively with professionals and other members of students' communities.

All teachers reported that educators should have knowledge and skills to develop learners and have the knowledge and skills in teaching literacy and numeracy to students who are deafblind. In support of the notion of the use of toys/objects in the education of DB teacher participant <**A'4**> had this to say that: *Teaching about a thing to a deafblind learner an object/toy must be used as an illustration. I use my hand-under-his/her hand, guide him/her to the object and put my hand on the object, letting the learner who is deafblind follow my movement, then gently move my hand away and let the learner who is deafblind take time to explore the object.*

Contributing to the same issue of toys and objects in the education of DB teacher participant <**A'7**> added that: *A deafblind learner will learn to use all the same information about the world around him/her but with the use of his/her tactile olfactory, kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses.*

Furthermore, the collaboration between the family and the teacher of the learner with DB education is crucial. Five (5) out of ten (10) teacher participants reported that there are better learning results for the stronger the relationship between parents and

teachers, the more likely it is for the learner to improve their performance. Two (2) out of ten (10) said that when teachers meet parents in person, send home useful materials, or talk to them on the phone about certain challenges of the learner are solved amicably. It was imperative to establish the role of family to embrace the education of a deafblind learner. Teacher participants were asked whether or not family play a role in the education of the deafblind child. The findings showed that all ten (10) teacher participants affirmed the importance of family involvement in the education of a deafblind learner. In support of these experiences, teacher-participant, <**A'7>** articulated that: "*Parents are the main actors in the child's education but, as a family: grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, brothers, also have an equally important role in improving education, especially the case of deafblind child character education for our younger siblings."*

The findings described Well-defined roles and tasks leading to the efficiency and well-being of a learner with DB. In support of this, teacher participants had this to say: "*Experts in education and psychology agree that the little ones need a structured environment and predictability in order to feel safe to explore and learn, to test their abilities and limits. This structured environment is provided by the school, on the one hand, through a clear schedule and sequence of activities, but it needs to be reinforced by the home environment, as well."*

Contributing to the same, teacher participant <**A'3**> observed that: "*Knowing that families' actions impact a learner with* DB*'s life to an extent. It is a great responsibility and can feel overwhelming. Families should not forget, though, that it is a shared responsibility and that shaping children* DB *into future accomplished adults is "teamwork"".*

Other teachers equally expressed concern over the family involvement in the education of deafblind learners, as was evidenced by observation of teacher participants who felt that: "*Teachers are not and must not be alone in this complex and, altogether, wonderful process - educating learners with deafblindness. Teachers should value family members as equal partners in educational planning for learners who are deafblind and should be knowledgeable about appropriate service."*

Also, seven (7) out of ten (10) reported that orientation is knowing the layout of your body, knowing where you are in space and time, knowing where you are going, and how to get there. All teachers reported that its main purpose is the help deafblind learner's mobility is the act of moving from place to place it may be active (e.g., scooting, crawling, walking) or passive (e.g., wheelchair, stroller, being carried). In support of the notion that orientation and mobility between orientation and mobilities specialities teachers of learners with deafblind was not definite, teacher participant <**A'4**> had this to say that: "*It is very important for learners with* DB *to have Orientation and Mobility Skills. For the instruction provides learners who are deaf-blind with a set of initial skills to use residual visual, auditory, and other sensory information to understand their environments."*

Contributing to the same issue of orientation and mobility of deafblind learners, teacher participant <**A'7**> added that: "*Orientation and mobility training helps deafblind learners to learn to navigate their environment. It teaches them to know where they are and create a plan to get where they want to go which changes the way an individual navigates their environment."*

For example, teacher participant <**A'1**> had this to say: "*As a teacher of deafblind learners, I use clear speech, speaking clearly is one of the most effective and common ways of communicating with deafblind learners who have some remaining vision and hearing and a tactile form of communication where words are spelt onto the deafblind person's hand using set positions and movements.*"

Contributing to the same, teacher participant <**A'4**> observed that: "*It is very difficult to teach orientation and mobility to learners with deafblindness for they experience far greater adverse consequences than people with hearing loss only or vision loss only. Among the greatest difficulties deaf-blind learners face are those related to communication and mobility; communication barriers in particular which leads to a profound sense of isolation and loneliness.*"

This is further supported in the verbal account cited by teacher participant **<A'2>,** who expressed concern about the fact that: "*Learners with deaf-blindness have an impact on the development of motor skills and the ability to move about freely and with purpose and challenges the individual to develop systems and skills for moving from place to place safely. The combined effects of a vision and a hearing loss make deaf-blindness a unique disability.*"

5. Discussion

In order to establish how deaf-blind education is offered at Bauleni Special School in Lusaka district, the first objective aimed at establishing ways in which individual teacher dealt with their learners with deafblindness. The study established that the use of an intervenor in tactile sign language in deafblind education is one way DB education is offered. These findings are in line with Manga and Masuku (2020), who also found that the educational team should consider the learner's characteristics, including vision, hearing, tactual skills, and motor skills, when selecting receptive and expressive forms. The study revealed that children with DB use tangible representations or symbols to communicate. Further, analyse of the study findings revealed that the touch cues are tactual hints about something that occurs in DB learners. The study findings by Morrison & Johnson (2020)'s study revealed that there is a demand for education for children with deafblindness that is accessible, targeted at the individual child, and at the same level as that of their regular peers. As a result, the phenomenon also observed that education practices in the field of deafblindness are at the emerging level, relying on professional literature with few intervention studies to inform practice.

The appearance of the learner with DB in a classroom caused extreme work for a teacher that was problematic to overcome. It can be compared to experiencing a tragedy and affecting the teaching. The research findings revealed particularly high levels of pressure at the moment of the first time in class teaching DB learners and the research results by Musyoka *et al.* (2016) showed the trend of education of DB apart from learners who do not have a disability.

The study established that teachers experienced overload in relation to teaching learners with DB. Based on the first research objective, the constraints and the increased policies on inclusive education, teachers did not have sufficient knowledge on the

condition of how best to teach learners with DB in schools. It was clear that some teachers had no adequate knowledge of DB and how well they could teach effectively. This situation forced teachers to experience nervousness in competence and worry about how best they can teach learners with DB. They did not know what best a DB can be taught or understand what the learner wants. It is for this reason that social model theory explains dysfunction in relation to normal functioning. It seeks change from society in order to accommodate people living with disabilities and the role they can play in life. The theory argues that treating disabled people according to this model makes them not dependent on certain (non-disabled) people and does not separate them from the rest of society.

Some teachers felt that information on the nature of their DB learners' condition and how to teach them could be shared or exposed to them through training. The study established that in as much as teachers of DB remained un-trained the teaching of DB learners will lag behind. The foundation of the social model can be a helpful tool for disabled people and their supporters to make positive changes in their lives and for non-disabled people to understand more about disability. Overall, the social model contributed enormously to disability dialogue and exposed the oppressive ideology of the past.

The results were in line with the study conducted by Okungu *et al.* (2020), who observed that despite the most successful efforts to remove societal obstacles from the environment, some traces, limitations and certain realities of a biologically informed disability, one would still remain. The study findings observed that the collaboration between the family and the teacher of the learner with DB education is crucial. The positive impact of family involvement in children's education on their development in key areas such as academic, social, emotional and even professional development is demonstrated. This is in line with the findings of Wolford (2016), who described the existing inner worlds of people with disabilities whose lives carry every aspect of human complexity: relationship, uncertainty, self-regard, loss and hope, making clear that the world of disability has human reach which extends way beyond the material and rational, beyond tangible barriers, to the recesses where these are mirrored in psychic life. It should be noted that the theory agrees that within the social model, an educational system is the centre of attraction and is blamed for pupils' academic failure based on environmental inadequacy, especially learners with deafblindness. It is noted by Chambers (2019) that treating disabled people according to this model makes them not dependent on certain (non-disabled) people and does not separate them from the rest of society. Hence, they strive to maintain the balance and straighten their relationships to support the entry, exit and development of DB learners in a functional way.

With regard to teachers' way of teaching DB learners, the study revealed that teachers use different communication methods which may be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional who is trained in tactile sign language. However, one of the ten (10) teacher respondents experienced relief focused and became more confident when communicating with DB learners. The respondents were pleased indeed when sign language is involved which is touching the hands of the client using a two-handed,

manual alphabet, also known as finger spelling. These results agreed with Chitiyo *et al.* (2018), who postulated that some teacher's emphasis on inclusive education for learners with disabilities recognizes the role of special schools and special units as suitable environments for the teaching and learning of learners with severe special needs in the area of hearing, visual, intellectual impairments, and other serious mobility challenges. It is evident from the study that some teachers experience shock in their teaching career with DB learners. Nevertheless, teachers are better prepared on how to teach DB learners with new challenges surrounding the methods of how best a teacher can teach DB learners. Uncertainty featured strongly as a challenge amongst the teacher participants with learners with DB.

6. Conclusion

Based on the three research questions that this chapter has presented that were arrived at through qualitative data suggested that teachers of DB learn. The findings for the first objective revealed that teachers had no knowledge of how best they can teach DB learners but use different communication methods and may be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional who is trained in tactile sign language. This sign language involves touching the hands of the client using a two-handed, manual alphabet, also known as finger spelling. Furthermore, teachers experience the diversity of learners who are deafblind and their unique educational needs. Educational teachers need specialized knowledge skills, and commitment to meet the educational and communication requirements of learners who are deafblind, as stipulated in their individualized education programs (IEPs). Additionally, the data revealed that teachers had an interest in teaching DB learners but had problems in terms of relationships with DB learners. In addition, teachers experienced confusion when teaching DB learners. The findings also revealed that teachers of learners with DB employed different strategies to teach DB learners. It is also evident from the study that although teachers held positive views about DB learners, they were discouraged by several challenges encountered in teaching learners with DB.

7. Recommendations

In view of the findings and conclusion above, the following recommendations were made:

1) Ministry of Education to help teachers to form 'teachers' to teachers' support groups' to share information and learn from each other ways to educate and communicate with their DB learners.
2) Ministry of Education to provide capacity-building programmes on DB and, in particular, communication and interpersonal interaction for teachers of learners with DB to share experiences and regularly be organized.

3) The schools should facilitate training for teachers' regular interaction with parents' and professionals to access support services to enable teachers to explore copying mechanisms in managing interpersonal interaction with their DB learners.

Consent for Participants

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the research.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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