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Provision of learning support to learners with visual impairment in Botswana:
a case study
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Abstract

Access to school continues to be problematic to most learners with disability, irrespective of the nations’
commitment to scale up efforts to support them at various levels of education. For learners with visual impairment
in Botswana, poor school performance continues to impede their chances to learn beyond grade 12 (Form 5). The
only option available to them after completion of Grade 12 is to join the Rehabilitation and Development Trust
centre for the Blind, a Dutch Reformed Church-based NGO, which admits them for either rehabilitation or for
training in secretarial, switchboard operation, agricultural business management-related courses. The institution
admits them regardless of their grades. In the light of the above, this paper will discuss the nature of learning support
provided to learners with visual impairment in Botswana. Such efforts will be critiqued on the basis of inclusive
educational policies and suggestions for strengthening such efforts and aligning them to the agenda of inclusive
education as described in the international agenda would be provided.

Research Methods: Data for this paper was obtained by means of qualitative research strategies, which included: 3
months long observations of classroom sessions and individual interviews with learners with visual impairments (8); 5
specialists’ teachers; Brailist, Teacher aide, 2 members of the management team, 3 ordinary teachers and resource
centre staff member, 3 staff members from Rehabilitation and Development Trust and 3 parents of learners with
visual impairments.

Findings: The data which was analysed for content is presented under the following four themes: (a) physical
adjustments; (b) curricular adjustments, (c) pedagogical practices and (d) community support.

Conclusions: The paper concludes that appropriate educational support strategies should be put in place at school
that learners with visual impairment if we are serious about seeing them accessing, participating and succeeding in
institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: Botswana; learners with visual impairment; learner support; provision

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Introduction

In line with international treaties, the country of Botswana is committed to have a system of quality education that is able to adapt to the changing needs of the country by 2016, as that is considered necessary for an educated, passionate and caring nation (Government of Botswana, 1997:5). On that note, basic education has become compulsory for all learners up to, at least, Grade 10 (Form 3). As a strategy to facilitate transition from junior to secondary schools, additional secondary schools have been built and the double shift system (sharing of premises by two schools) introduced in some high schools located in highly populated rural areas. A number of efforts have been put in place to improve learning support for students with disabilities. These include: (a) introduction of specialist-training facilities at the local university to equip teachers with the relevant skills for providing specialist services to students with disabilities in secondary schools; (b) teacher training curricular included courses in special education to ensure that all teacher training have some element of special education in pre-service. Furthermore, the government has taken full responsibility of such learners, with private sector and the non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) playing a limited role. At senior secondary school level, the government is currently responsible for over 90% of visually impaired learners in schools (Tsae, 2010:7). The Education Councils provide everything related to school for the learners with visual impairments if parents do not afford. They provide transportation facilities for learners to and from schools, buy them all school requirements and cater for their school fees (Kenosi, 2008). Following completion of Grade 12, learners with visual impairments are automatically admitted at a Rehabilitation centre (Monyatsi, 2009), mainly for rehabilitation purposes and for training in courses that include: secretarial, switchboard operation, agricultural and/or business management. It is only when they have spent 2 years in the rehabilitation centre that they can proceed to tertiary institutions.

Noticeably, many learners with visual impairment end up doing nothing after leaving Rehabilitation and Development Trust. According to the recent information which was accessed from the Department of Special Education in Botswana (2008), the number of visually impaired who managed to secure placement at institutions of higher learning remains unbearably low. In 2008, there were only 4 students with visual impairment at tertiary institutions, in 2007 the number was zero whilst, in the years 2006, 2005 and 2004 the number was only one, respectively. Authors attributed the situation to learners’ poor academic performance in Grade 12 (Dart & Seeletso, 2000; Dart, 2004; Sello, 2006; Chela, 2005); a problem which raises a concern with regard to the type of learning support for such learners.

In this paper we present the nature of learning support provided to learners with visual impairment at an inclusive school in Botswana. The efforts will be critiqued against the current policies on inclusive education, in order to provide suggestions for strengthening such efforts and aligning them to the agenda of inclusive education as described in the international agenda. The investigation will be approached from a human rights perspective. Embedded in the approach is a belief that all humans are equal and they are entitled to the rights afforded to every citizen. Any factor that prevents people with disability from obtaining any service/support to enable them to participate actively in the education system and to achieve to the best of their ability is a violation of their basic rights (Landmine Survivors’ Network, 2007).

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative signle case study. The design was chosen for its powerful learning modality built into the description of the meaning of the words used (Stake, 1994). It permits the researcher to describe phenomena detail, in context and holistically. We thus find it suitable for obtaining perspectives about learning support provision at the only school in Botswana which caters for learners who are totally blind. At the time of this study, the school had only seven specialist teachers and 29 learners with visual impairment. Following a medley of convenient and referral sampling strategies, we involved participants described in the table below.
Table 1.3 Description of participants

| Description of participants | Number of interviewees | Males | Females |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-------|---------|
| Specialists teachers       | 5                      | 5     | 0       |
| Learners with visual impairments | 8                  | 3     | 5       |
| Mainstream teachers        | 3                      | 2     | 1       |
| Former learners            | 4                      | 2     | 2       |
| SMT                        | 3                      | 2     | 1       |
| Resource centre staff      | 1                      | 1     | 0       |
| Library staff              | 1                      | 0     | 1       |
| Brailist                   | 1                      | 1     | 0       |
| Teacher Aide               | 1                      | 1     | 0       |
| Staff from the Rehabilitation centre | 2               | 1     | 1       |
| Parents                    | 3                      | 2     | 1       |
| Total                      | 32                     | 20    | 12      |

Data collection

Data was collected using documents, interviews and observation. The reason for using different methods was motivated by a desire to ensure rigour, relevance of the data and as a way of corroborating the data.

Observation

A total of 16 observation sessions, with each lasted for approximately 40-80 minutes were conducted over a period of 3 months at the research location. We observed how the school and its stakeholders support learners with visual impairments. The observations took place in different classrooms, laboratories, Special education department, Agricultural science garden and at the sports grounds during extra-curricular activities. To avoid being obtrusive, we were participant observers, meaning that, we actively participated in some activities at school. Such a role allowed us to not stand out as outsiders who would influence the outcomes. Data were recorded mostly in the form of field notes and it was sometimes video-recorded with participants’ permission.

Interviews

A total of 32 participants were interviewed individually in a face-to-face manner. Interviews facilitated probing of information that the participants presumably had but were not conscious of or had not considered important. We used the offices of the department of Special Education as venues for interviews with learners whilst adults were interviewed at their places of work. The interviews were conducted in both English and Setswana in an open-ended manner for approximately 20-40 minutes with each participant. They were tape-recorded for accuracy with participants’ permission.
Documents

The following documents were used, namely: Inclusive Education Draft Policy for Botswana, the Revised National Policy on Education, Vision 2016 document and Performance Based Reward System policy frameworks. We also consulted the school’s Special Education departmental policy, the school’s log book, learners’ portfolios, Special Education departmental minutes, teachers’ schemes and records of work, green books, class registers, marking keys for different subjects, learners’ manuscripts-both Braille copies and transcribed ones, learners’ notes and final results for former learners with visual impairments of the school.

Data analysis

Data was analysed for content, eliciting themes related to the learning support provision at the school. The process of coding and categorizing the content assisted in bringing meaning to the data collected.

Findings

The findings are mainly presented under the following four themes: (a) physical adjustment; (b) curricular adjustments; (c) pedagogical practices; and (d) community support.

Physical/environmental/adjustment

Sitting arrangements: In three of the four classes observed, learners with visual impairment sat in the front row closer to the teacher so as to maximize reception or utilize some of the residual sight whilst others sat towards the back of the class because of they are long sighted. Learners with albinism sat next to the wall as they need to be protected from any form of light because they are photophobic. It also emerged that from time to time, the school organises awareness sessions to sensitise non-disabled learners about appropriate sitting arrangements for learners with visual impairments. Learners with visual impairment are also informed of any classroom changes well in advance.

Class sizes: It emerged from the discussions with specialists teachers, that most of the classes which have learners with visual impairment have been reduced to 40. However, some teachers indicated that due to the government’s policy of double shift, the classes, which has learners with visual impairments school was allowed to admit up to 50 students.

Afternoon sessions: Although the school is inclusive, learners with visual impairments were allowed to spend the afternoon study sessions separately from the rest of their non-disabled counterparts. This was to ensure that they receive additional support which was not available in the regular class. Peers were able to dictate notes for them. They further indicated that teachers helped us even in the evenings and sometimes on weekends especially when it is examinations period.

Mobility Orientation: The learner received mobility orientation when they first arrived at school. This is done in groups and later with individual learner. It is conducted by Orientation and Mobility instructor. One learner puts it clearly as she says:

> He shows us the school, the nearby clinic, church and key places in the school like toilets, dining hall, base rooms and so forth. Even if our school is very big, he wants us to get to these places alone at least after a given period and a lot of us are able to move around.

However, the instructor lamented on the shortage of assistive devices such as the white canes among others which take a long time to be procured due to governmental procedures involved in purchasing items for the schools. He added that the skills have to be re-taught when learners come back from holidays. Also, he pointed out that that school community and the home environment tend to be over-protective to the totally blind learners, a problem which hinders them from practicing the skills learnt at school.
Curricular Adjustments

As a strategy to enable the visually impaired learner to access curriculum, the Department of Special Education in Botswana has put in place a wide variety of access technology which includes, among others, adapted computers, braille printers, CCTVs, zyfuse machines, photocopiers, scientific talking calculators and hand held magnifying glasses. According to the librarian, learners with visual impairments can access brailled books or recorded books from the library. The laboratory was well equipped with adapted computers and scanners among others. The school has received from the local mining company, the following equipment: closed circuit televisions, tape recorders, electric Perkins braillers, headphones and a camera. In addition, teachers make particular modifications and adaptations to the learning and teaching materials provided by the department of education. This was clear in the teacher’s words:

*There are so many ways we try to adapt the work for our learners including recording test items and responses from a learner, brailing and transcribing materials, using an amanuensis among others …*

This was confirmed by a brailist as he declares that:

*Sometimes I just blow and decongest the diagrams I receive. Although I must admit it is difficult to work with local subject teachers.*

It was evident from the excerpts above that modifications did not apply to science subjects such as Additional Mathematics and pure sciences. In consequence, there were no totally blind learners found in pure Sciences, Home Economics and Design and Technology. The only practical subjects that totally blind learners could register for included Art and Agriculture Science. For that reason, there was over-enrolment in Art.

Pedagogical practices

Pedagogical practices in the context of this study are special concessions made in the school to enhance learning support provision to learners with visual impairment. During examinations, the school allowed learners with visual impairment 25% of the paper’s time as extra time. Depending on the severity of the disability, learners were given rest breaks. The specialist teachers who are competent in Braille invigilate the learners with visual impairment to take care of Braille queries, provide learners with necessary assistive devices and to start the transcriptions as soon as learners complete assessment tasks. Seldom, mainstream teachers invigilate alongside specialist teachers.

With regards to the final examinations for form fives, Botswana Examinations Council sends the question papers to the United Kingdom for brailling. Unfortunately, due to poor communication between the Division of Special Education and the Botswana Examination Council, some questions tend to be asked in such ways that do not take into consideration of the learners’ abilities. This involves situations where learners with visual impairments are required to use materials that are not available at their school or are asked to draw diagrams that may be beyond their abilities.

Community support

There were reports about the general negligible parental and other stakeholders’ involvement in the education of the learners with visual impairment except where there was a serious case of illness of a learner or misconduct. However, some parents of learners with visual impairment interviewed were happy that the councils and schools were taking care of the children. Nonetheless, they indicated nothing on their contributions towards the education of their children. Most of the learners with visual impairment are from very poor families. They also come from distant places that make it very difficult for the poor parents of these learners to come to school. That is possibly the reason most learners indicated that their parents do not help them with things they learn at school and give them no support whatsoever.
Discussion

Providing learning support to learners with visual impairment requires adjustments, modifications and adaptations to the classroom, curricular and pedagogical practices. It also requires mobility orientation of the learner around the school premises and other areas, which are linked to the school. To accomplish such a responsibility requires the involvement of teachers, important stakeholders such as parents (families) and the entire community.

Seating arrangements is the first thing to consider because learners with visual impairment are generally sensitive to light. As noted by (Cox & Dykes, 2001), light might cause distraction, which could lead to reduced concentration and ultimately tamper with the school performance or grades. Therefore such arrangements should be done accordingly to ensure that distractions are minimized. Sensitizing learners sighted learners about the reasons for such arrangements could facilitate understanding and acceptance of such learners by their sighted counterparts. On the same note, mobility orientation affords learners with visual impairments opportunity to navigate within their environment with ease and thus facilitates acquisition of independence. Therefore providing mobility orientation early in the school year could ensure that learners with visual with impairment adapt to the school and its surroundings quickly. Availability of assistive technology and other curricular adjustments such as special concessions could further ensure that the learning materials are easily accessible on an equitable level as their non-disabled peers.

However, the finding that modifications did not apply to science-related subjects such as Mathematics and pure sciences reflects exclusionary practices. This poses restrictions with regards to the subjects and ultimately career to follow. This could also explain the reason they are said to perform poorly in grade 12 (Form five) and to struggle to meet university entrance. Also, this explains the reason most of them could not do anything following the two years spent at the Rehabilitation centre.

Whist it is clear that school is making strides in ensuring that learners with visual impairment providing learning support to learners with visual impairment, the finding about lack of parents involvement is concerning. Provision of learning support should be a collaborative effort with parents and other stakeholders in the community. Collaboration is based on the belief that education is a shared responsibility between all stakeholders (Friend & Cook, 2003). In particular, parents irrespective of their level of education are an integral part of the education of their children; they are their children’s primary teachers and they know their children better than any other adult. For that matter, parents are the source of experience and knowledge that may improve the quality of their children’s education.

The research findings suggest the schools’ attempts to make an ordinary school responsive to the educational needs of learners with visual impairment. This attempt is in line with Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), which requires schools to take into account of the learners’ characteristics and needs and to ensure that those with special needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within the child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting his needs (UNESCO, 1994). This is so because such practice affords them opportunities to learn alongside their non-disabled counterparts in the schools that are located in their neighborhoods whereby support could be received not only from ordinary teachers but also from a wide range of people in the community including own peers. More importantly, it is an attempt to ensure that they receive quality education.

Conclusion

Support for learners with visual impairment or any form of disability is crucial for achieving success and quality education for all learners irrespective of their differences. Support facilitates access to curriculum and improves learners’ confidence, skills of social interaction and independence. When support is delivered holistically, the impact could be far reaching.
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