

There is More Than Meets the Eye: Success Stories of a Visually Impaired Student and a Lecturer

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Abstract

Although Higher Education Institutions have come a long way in including students with disabilities, many students still experience exclusion or "otherness" among their abled peers. Currently, there is a gap in research where the focus is on the abilities and success stories of such individuals rather than their disabilities, the barriers they face, or the adjustments made to meet their needs. This research aims to share the success stories of a visually impaired student and his visually impaired lecturer at a South African University. Semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews were used as collection instruments where after the data was analyzed. The appreciation for friends outweighed the physical barriers. Through perseverance and hard work, the disabled student proved her teacher wrong by successfully entering university and completing her Ph.D. Both participants looked beyond their limitations and realized their capabilities.

Meskipun usaha untuk mewujudkan perguruan tinggi inklusif sudah dilakukan sejauh ini, tetapi banyak mahasiswa difabel yang masih merasakan 'keberbedaan' dirinya dari mahasiswa lain. Inklusi penyandang disabilitas harus mengarah pada peningkatan partisipasi dalam tatanan yang menghasilkan siswa, teman, atau guru terbaik. Saat ini, ada kesenjangan dalam penelitian yang fokusnya adalah pada kemampuan dan kisah sukses individu tersebut daripada disabilitas mereka, hambatan yang mereka hadapi, atau penyesuaian yang dilakukan untuk memenuhi kebutuhan mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk berbagi kisah sukses seorang mahasiswa tunanetra sekaligus dosen tunanetranya di Universitas Afrika Selatan. Melalui ketekunan dan kerja keras, para difabel dalam tulisan ini membuktikan apa yang dianggap tidak mungkin. Kedua subyek melampaui keterbatasan mereka dan menyadari kemampuan mereka.

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A. Introduction

According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), disability inclusion refers to "including people with disabilities in everyday activities and encouraging them to have roles similar to their peers who do not have a disability" (CDC, 2020, p. 1). Such inclusion should result in greater participation in society with various life roles, such as student, friend, or teacher, and maintaining healthy relationships while enjoying everyday activities. A recent study by Reeves, Harris, Phelan examined the exclusionary effects of inclusion in inclusive education settings. The findings of their study showed that "even if a school setting is labeled as inclusive, it does not necessarily mean that disabled children and parents feel included" (Reeves et al., 2020, p. 1). Even with an increasing body of literature on the inclusion of visually impaired students at tertiary institutions, most research points to the complexities of higher education disability issues or the adjustments made to meet these students' physical needs. In an attempt to make students feel more included, particular strides have been made concerning providing students with an opportunity to share their lived experiences concerning their visual impairments. However, the focus of such research mainly points to the feeling of being excluded, or "the only blind guy" or "otherness" among such students.

So far, little research has pinned down the abilities and success stories, rather than disability aspects, of visually impaired students at higher education institutions. Disability inclusion is only possible if we understand such students' relationships and how they engage in society. We have to make it more inclusive for students with disabilities, whether we listen to their living experiences and recognize that they are also human beings. We sometimes forget that a person with a disability experience' is a culmination of many aspects, not just how we see them in an isolated disabled environment. People with disabilities, like anyone else, have dreams and desires, talents and skills, sorrows and disappointment. Through the life stories of others, we can celebrate their abilities, joys, and successes with them because it allows us to see how it benefits us all as a collective united human race. The human spirit is one of ability, perseverance, and courage that no disability can steal away. One way to fuel this enthusiasm is to read success stories of people with disabilities, including students in higher education. Stories that uplift the spirits and speaks of victory after overcoming impossible odds. Where do they come from? What experiences have they had? What are they trying to share?

The aim of the study on which this article is based was to present the success stories of a visually impaired student and his visually impaired lecturer at a South African university. The study focuses on some challenges both participants faced as individuals with a visual impairment, their strategies to overcome these challenges, and collaborative aspects that have contributed to their successes.

This study contributes to knowledge regarding principles underpinning success stories of two people with disabilities in educational settings. The findings of this study could guide educators and policymakers regarding ways to support and share the success stories of students with visual impairments. The findings of this study could further motivate other students with visual impairments and other disabilities to set goals for themselves and follow their dreams.

B. Literature Review

The last two decades saw a growing international commitment to include disabled students in higher education. More and more learners with specific educational needs are entering mainstream higher education settings worldwide. An investigation into literature reveals that several attempts have been made in the higher education arena to include and assist students with visual impairments. For example, researchers started to document some of the barriers visually impaired students face in higher education (Bishop & Rhind, 2011; Lieberman et al., 2002; Vojtech, 2016). Other studies focus on efforts to support the learning of visually-impaired students (Eligi & Mwantimwa, 2017; Pino & Viladot, 2019; Quirke et al., 2018; Regal et al., 2018). In South Africa, a few studies focused on various support systems which are available to disabled students in higher education, such as Disability Units and lecturers. Such support resources provide sign language interpretation services, Braille facilities, infrastructure, equipment, and software to promote learning (FOTIM, 2011; Jaarsveldt & Ndeya-Ndereya, 2015; Matshedisho, 2010; Mokiwa & Phasha, 2012).

To provide visually-impaired students with better campus life, several studies investigated how assistive technologies can assist such students (Abner & Lahm, 2002; Kamaghe et al., 2020; Kelly, 2009; Kelly & Smith, 2011; Kose & Vasant, 2020; Silman et al., 2017). The inclusion of visually impaired students also sparked interest among researchers about staff and teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding the inclusion of such students (Herold & Dandolo, 2009; Pearson et al., 2019; Praisner, 2003; Ravenscroft et al., 2019).

Although particular strides have been made with regard to the inclusion of visually impaired students within mainstream education, as well as the implementation of support services and assistive technology to assist such students, researchers also started to investigate the "voice" and experience of visually impaired students at such institutions. As Haegele, Sato, Zhu, and Avery purport: "listening to the voices of individuals with disabilities can afford researchers and teachers with a better understanding of how they experience classes and help identify strategies to improve instruction" (Haegele et al., 2017, p. 175).

For example, Opie used a phenomenological study to allow students to voice their secondary schooling experiences in mainstream schools in Victoria (Opie, 2018). A common theme in the research analysis was a lack of instructor awareness of vision disability, suggesting that teachers of those students be trained in vision impairment to eradicate unintended exclusion patterns already experienced (Opie, 2018, p. 75). Furthermore, Metatla, Thieme, Brulé, Bennett, Serrano, and Jouffrais propose that sighted students should use the classroom as a safe space to learn more about disabilities (Metatla et al., 2018, p. 40). They argue that

when a particular educational experience centers on the lived experience of a subgroup like visually impaired students, inclusive education means ensuring they get to be the leaders of how visual impairment is shared with other students" (Metatla et al., 2018, p. 40).

In an attempt to better understand the experiences of visually impaired individuals in physical education, Haegele et al. explored the perspectives of visually impaired adults who attended residential schools. The interpretive phenomenological analysis of the study revealed two broadly defined interrelated themes - "being the only blind guy, to being one of the crowd" and "the bullies and the bullied" (Haegele et al., 2017, p. 135). Hansen, Wilton, and Newbold explored the experiences of immigrant women with visual impairment in Canada. One common theme that emanated from their research was that "there is always this feeling of otherness" for people with visual impairments (Hansen et al., 2017, p. 1121). Simui studied the lived experiences of visually impaired students at a

university in Zambia. The participants in the study expressed their felt "vulnerabilities and triumphs, resilience and frustration while pursuing their studies in an environment favoring and dominated by the sighted" (Simui, 2018, p. 1). The study's findings revealed that students with visual impairments' optimistic outlook were the most significant enabler of success at Sim University in Zambia. The research also showed that even where assistance from the sighted was unavailable, simply persistence, combined with courage and innovation in the face of injustice, was sufficient for these students to move up the academic ladder.

In South Africa, the study by Kasiram and Subrayen provides insights into the experiences of visually impaired students (Kasiram & Subrayen, 2013). The study found that the exclusion of participants from exposure to opportunities and development left them psychologically, socially, financially, and emotionally scarred. More recent research by King and Coetzee (2018) investigated the everyday life behavior of visually impaired students at Stellenbosch University and discovered that these students sought personal and academic information from friends, family members, and lecturers (King & Coetzee, 2018). The studies of Lourens and Lourens & Swart shed some light on the lived experiences of visually impaired students at South African universities (Lourens, 2015; Lourens & Swartz, 2016). The results of their studies also indicate that many of these students feel alienated and isolated, even in an "included" environment. A thorough look into literature demonstrates that "the voice of disabled students in higher education has been widely explored in the global North but relatively little is known about the experiences of their counterparts in the global South" (Palan, 2021, p. 202).

Certain strides have been made with regard to providing students with an opportunity to raise their voices and lived experiences with regard to their visual impairments. However, there is a gap in research where the focus is on the abilities and success stories of such individuals rather than their disabilities in higher educational settings. The majority of research so far shared the sorrows and disappointments of visually impaired students or pointed to the feeling of "otherness" among such students. However, visually impaired students also have dreams, desires, talents, and skills, just like anyone else. By reading stories that uplift the spirits and speaks of victory after overcoming impossible odds, we can celebrate such students' abilities, joys, and successes together. Hopefully, we make these students feel more included in society and contribute to the diverse culture of higher education institutions.

C. Methodology

1. Research design

A qualitative research design with an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was used to guide the study. This way, the researcher wanted to investigate and describe how individuals make sense of their experiences (Bevan, 2014, p. 136; Groenewald, 2004, p. 44; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). The purpose of the study was to describe the participants' perceptions thoroughly rather than to make more general statements prematurely (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

2. Participants

As the main concern of IPA is to appreciate each participant's experience fully, the researcher used purposeful sampling and included only two participants in the research study, which enabled a detailed case-by-case analysis. According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin, using two participants is acceptable if both are thorough research cases (Smith et al., 2009). According to Creswell, a phenomenological framework requires a fairly homogenous group of participants who understand and have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Both participants have a visual acuity of 20/70, are

partially sighted, read large print, and do not require any assistance while walking. Both participants have a laptop and smartphone and do not use other assistive technology.

Adam is a 20-year-old Language Practice and Media Studies student at the Central University of Technology, Free State, in South Africa. Adam grew up in poverty and lived with his mother in a township in the Free State province. His physical needs were met in boarding school as meals were prepared for them, and their clothes were washed and ironed. In 2019, he entered the university as a first-year student. Adam rented an apartment close to the university and learned how to cook and look after himself. Adam had a hereditary visual impairment and his disability was very noticeable.

The second participant in the study was the student's visually impaired lecturer, Martha. She and her twin sister were born prematurely at 28 weeks and, as a result, she suffered from retinopathy of prematurity (ROP). She is blind in one eye. Martha entered higher education as a first-year student in 1994 at the University of the Free State and stayed with her sister in a hostel on campus. The 44-year-old has been wearing a prosthesis on her blind eye since the age of 25. Her disability is no longer apparent. However, her disability was evident during her school years.

3. Data collection method

In-depth interviews were conducted individually with both participants in 2019. This data collection method was deemed most appropriate since the study's primary concern was "to elicit rich, detailed, and first-person accounts of both participants' experiences" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 10). All questions were open-ended and directed to both participants' experiences and feelings about their life worlds as visually impaired people. Both interviews were audio-recorded and evaluated separately so that the results would represent the deep layers of both participants' experiences in detail (Smith et al., 2009).

4. Data analysis

The researcher followed the IPA steps, as suggested by Groenewald (Groenewald, 2004). In seeking rigor, the alchemy of crystallization was found most appropriate for this study as it offers rigor through trustworthiness and credibility (Stewart et al., 2017, p. 8). Crystallization is a process of gaining depth in qualitative analysis "through the compilation not only of many details but also of different forms of representing, organizing, and analyzing those details" (Ellingson, 2008, p. 10). In this research, strong themes, supported by examples, provide a wide-angle view of the phenomenon's context, whilst each participant's stories illustrate individual experiences, emotions, and expressions. As a reflective process in the data analysis, the researcher builds a chain of evidence and documents the perspectives of crystallization as they emerge through various processes of logic (Patton, 2002).

This process included note-taking, member checks with participants after transcription of interviews, and prolonged engagement with both participants in the study. To establish the tenet of credibility in trustworthiness, synthesized member checking provided a rigorous approach as it facilitated the participants' engagement beyond existing member check procedures (Birt et al., 2016). After all interview data had been analyzed, the researcher shared the study's findings with both participants. The use of the original interview data alongside analyzed data enabled the voices of both participants to be present. It provided an in-depth approach to triangulate data sequentially from different points in time.

The research followed the tenets of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki on Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects. Both participants provided their written consent. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty Research and Innovation Committee (FRIC) of the university. As an ethical requirement of this research study, and to protect the

participants' identities and ensure confidentiality, their names were replaced by pseudonyms (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Roberts, 2015).

D. Findings and Discussion

This section focuses on the challenges and the strategies the participants used to overcome these challenges. The researcher also reports on collaborative aspects which have contributed to their successes.

1. Challenges

a. The importance of friendships

For Beauchamp-Pryor and Taylor & Palfreman-Kay, friendship has always been at the core of student experience (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Taylor & Palfreman-Kay, 2000). This aspect of friendship will further strengthen the self-conception of students with disabilities and affect their success in higher education (Hodges & Keller, 1999). Most students make friends and meet new people during their first year at university. Martha grew up with her twin sister and stated, "luckily, I had my twin sister to support me." From Martha's account, it seems that the twins were inseparable, and the bond between them was very strong. Martha knew that she had a sister who would carry her best interests at heart and be her "eyes". Martha mentioned that although she had grown up in a loving and caring community of family and friends, she was often teased about her eyes.

Adam, on the other hand, grew up without any friends. Adam stated that:

I'm not the only blind person at home. It's something I inherited from my mom. My mother never attended school and did not enjoy the past few years. She believes people would use us, so she forbade me to have friends at home around our township. In a way, it benefited me as it gave me some time to focus on my studies. I grew up with a friend, a TV, which developed my English skills. I made it to the university, and I'm making progress so far. Previously I had no friends. It's a good thing because I think it's a psychological thing. If you don't have friends, that's why individuals end up killing themselves. They have no people who can listen to them, who can advise them when they have problems (Adam, 29 April, 2019).

Adam noted that the only friend he had as a child was a TV. Adam's mother also had a visual impairment and did not live a happy life. Maybe to protect her son from going through what she went through as a child, she forbade Adam to have friends in the township where they lived. Making friends is a vital part of a child's upbringing and an essential part of their social and emotional environment.

From his account, Adam was not allowed to have friends as a child, and his only friend was a TV. As Adam grew older, he started to realize his need for friends. In childhood and adulthood, friendships provide an environment where children can develop social skills and improve their self-esteem (Hartup, 1989). It seems that Adam appreciates this new freedom to make friends as he enters higher education. Adam also learns that friends may be a source of emotional and instrumental support (Hartup & Stevens, 1999). From his account, Adam expresses his understanding of why people feel suicidal when they have no friends. Research shows that the number of close individuals one has is associated with psychological change and well-being (van Lier & Koot, 2010).

b. Assumptions about people with disabilities

In the literature, a common notion surrounding success and disability is that people with disabilities cannot achieve the same things as people without disabilities because of their disability (Low, 1996). Martha's response clearly illustrates this during the interview:

A former teacher of mine in grade 7 told me that because of my disability, I will never be able to go to university. I wanted to prove him wrong and show him that a disabled person can study like an average student... at a regular university (Marta, 1 May 2019).

The cruel remark made by Martha's teacher projects the message that she does not belong in higher education. She indicated that this comment stuck with her for years. One can thus understand why disabled people experience feelings of rejection and social alienation (Goode, 2007). Because disabled people face access barriers or have to find alternative ways to complete tasks, it can be argued that they often work harder than non-disabled people. As Adam purport:

Somehow just because I have a disability, I have to prove myself to fit it. I have to participate more in class. I have to show them how intelligent I am. Some people have not been around people with disabilities. So, they think disability has to do with mental issues... I have to prove that although I can't see, I can think like them, the only difference is the measure (Adam, 29 April, 2019).

Adam also gets annoyed when assumptions are made that, just because he lives with a visual impairment, he has a "mental disablement" too. To show his classmates that he is intelligent and fits in, Adam feels that he has to participate even more eagerly in class.

2. Strategies

a. Acknowledge their disabilities

As Adam grew older, he realized he needed friends. He said he started to make friends when he entered university and learned that friends may be a source of emotional and instrumental support. Adam indicated that he usually "takes the lead" and first introduces himself to other students.

In class, we have to communicate with each other. I'm usually the one who approaches them and introduces myself to other students. Then I tell them about my condition and I make sure that they understand, so they won't treat me differently. I've got friends now. They help me whenever I need help (Adam, 29 April, 2019).

From his account, it can be seen that Adam acknowledges his disability and takes the lead when he interacts with his non-disabled peers. Hodges and Keller argue that students with visual impairments see "taking the initiative" as the largest contributor to social participation (Hodges & Keller, 1999). With Adam taking the lead and sharing his experience with other students, he takes advantage of the classroom as a safe space to inform his fellow sighted classmates to learn more about his disability, and as a result, feel more included (Metatla et al., 2018).

b. Mentoring

When Adam attended his first media studies lecture with Martha at the university, she first approached him and introduced herself. Adam stated that:

Dr. Martha told me about her condition and she understands me a lot. She always wants me in the front row in the classroom, and she allows me to record while she's lecturing because she knows

I'm not fast. She uses slides; sometimes, she asks me to bring my laptop so that whenever she brings the slides over, then I have the slides on my laptop. It helps a lot (Adam, 29 April, 2019).

In her account, Martha stated that:

It's very nice for me to teach him because I can associate with him. Also, as a lecturer, you have to contribute to a student's development and sense of the self, and sense of belonging. I don't want that student to feel excluded the way I felt excluded sometimes. I can speak from experience and guide him not to fall into the same pitfalls as I did (Martha, 1 May 2019).

These accounts suggest that by mentoring Adam, Martha, who shared the same disability, understood what he was going through as it reminded her of her own experiences as a student. This finding demonstrates how important a teacher's understanding of vision impairment is (Opie, 2018). Both participants also reported that they developed a strong bond throughout the year.

c. Goal-setting

Goal-setting was acknowledged as being one of the most important things a person can do to achieve things in one's personal life. Both participants in this study realized the importance of goal-setting by furthering their studies at a university and obtaining a degree. Martha proved the Grade 7 teacher wrong by entering university and obtaining her degree through perseverance and hard work. Martha was also recently promoted to senior lecturer at the university.

3. Reflection

To pursue this self-determined life, both participants took a regular inventory of their accomplishments. By reflecting on some of her accomplishments, Martha was extra motivated to obtain not only a university degree but also a Ph.D.:

It wasn't just another milestone; it was a personal accomplishment. Going back to the day in grade 7 when my teacher told me you will never be able to go to university.... that was a personal accomplishment for me. Not only did I go to university, but I obtained my Ph.D. degree as well (Martha, 1 May 2019).

Adam knows he works hard and feels proud that he "made it to university" and "making good progress so far".

a. Seeking the positive

Apart from Adam's challenges, he acknowledged the many unique skills his visual impairment gave him. He mentioned aspects such as "being a confident Brailist and learning how to cook". Although Adam had no friends as a child, he sought the positive from his childhood experience and said it benefited him as the "TV developed (his) English language skills".

b. Principles for success

What stands out from Adam's interview is how happy he is to have friends – something he never experienced as a child. Martha did not allow anyone to stop her from reaching her goals. She believed in herself, knew exactly what she wanted to achieve in life, and realized that she had control of her own life. Although Adam and Martha differ more than 20 years in age, come from totally different backgrounds, and had different upbringings, they both looked beyond their limitations, realized their capabilities and took responsibility for their future and happiness.

From both interviews, it became clear that these two participants did not like being regarded as different or standing out. They both wanted to be integrated and included, even if it meant working harder than people without disabilities. Both participants acknowledged their disabilities. Martha took Adam under her wing as his mentor and encouraged him to become the best student. In doing so, Martha also contributed to her university by being the best teacher she could be by assisting Adam. They both reflected on their goals and what they have accomplished so far in life. Despite their throwbacks in life, they learned a lot from each other, their disabilities and sought the positive from their lived experiences.

E. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to present the success stories of a visually impaired student and his visually impaired lecturer at a South African university. The study reports on what was learned from in-depth interviews about the challenges that these two individuals have faced and the various strategies they have used to overcome those challenges within the context of a society in which the success stories of people who have low vision are still relatively rare.

We should not make the mistake of only using the success stories of disabled students to inspire others to succeed under unchanging and unjust circumstances. Instead, universities should continuously reflect on how their policies, practices, and structures empower or hinder students with disabilities from excelling at university. People with disabilities are resilient, and their ability to adapt is a natural consequence of their situation. For such people, it is second nature to develop skills such as persistence, problem-solving, and adaptivity, which are all key elements to innovation. Students with disabilities need to persevere despite overwhelming challenges, acquiring the needed courage to attain their personal goals and improve their lives. It is essential to implement policies that recognize the uniqueness of matters affecting the lives of students with disabilities. Students and staff with disabilities can be powerful advocates for change as they are the experts in this regard.

People with disabilities have the potential to be influential as they require determination and strength every day. The participants in this study have learned life lessons that non-disabled individuals rarely share. By sharing their heartache, dreams and desires, abilities and skills, as well as consistent persistence throughout life, their stories demonstrated that there is more to them than meets the eye

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