The Lived Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Institutions of Higher Learning: A Phenomenological Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore and provide an in-depth description of the lived experiences of students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. Three instruments were used to collect data: individual interviews, follow-up discussions and none-participant observations. The data which was elicited from conveniently sampled12 students with disabilities at an institution that had a niche in inclusive education was analyzed thematically. The study established that the self-esteem and self-image of students living with disabilities was very low because of what they experienced. The treatment they received from the university staff, the public and fellow students was hostile and disrespectful. Students with disabilities were given assistance as the last option in many situations. The unfriendly experiences have resulted in them internalizing negative perceptions of themselves as human beings and have no hope for a better future. The study recommended engagement and dialogue between the institution and the students to address concerns raised. The students with disabilities need constant support to assist them to manage stress and to cope with traumatic experiences they often face. The study recommended that to cater for disability the institution is to attend to disabling environmental barriers, hostile social attitudes and other exclusionary practices perpetuated.

Keywords: disability, stigma, discrimination, assistive devices, awareness, education

THE PROBLEM AND ITS CONTEXT

Introduction

Despite the rhetorical claims expressed by many higher education authorities that they are catering for inclusivity, very little is being done to address the concerns of students living with disabilities in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe (Podzo & Chipika, 2019). It is estimated that 1 billion people (about 15% of the world's population), live with disabilities, and one-fifth of them have significant impairments due to their conditions (World Report on Disability, 2011; WHO, 2011) where disability is divided into several categories such as visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical disability, learning disability, speech impediment, intellectual disability and others (UNESCO, 2013). Studies carried out in Asia also indicate that most countries were in their infant stages in catering for those people with disabilities as they were not providing required and appropriate facilities for students with disabilities (Sanmargaraja & Ta Wee, 2015). Contrary to international best practices, the debates and workshops for addressing inclusion issues are just but talk shows that lack a sense of commitment and recognition of human diversity.

Studies show that students who have disabilities are still marginalized (Narayanan, 2018). Similarly, Podzo and Chipika (2019:59) concur that, "discrimination against persons with disabilities has been long□term and widespread with a number of effects." Chinangure's (2019) study also found that students with disabilities are still being discriminated as the physical environment is not accessible in addition to lack of relevant assistive technology, negative attitudes of people towards disabilities. For instance, persons with visual impairment are excluded from mainstream social functions like rain-making ceremonies (Jenjekwa, Rutoro and Runyowa, 2013) while those with Albinism are shunned especially by black pregnant women who believe that they will also bear children with similar traits Chipika, 2021). Consistently, Chipika's (2021:285) qualitative study revealed that, given the different and limited understandings of inclusion in education by practitioners, "there is misalignment with its tenets including access, participation, acceptance and success of all learners".

Seen in this light, awareness and education on inclusion in Higher Education Institutions remains a challenge as these institutions are failing to meet the minimum norms and standards to promote provision of quality services such as assistive devices and basic funding to cater for the needs of students with disabilities. Even though the policy shows that it's the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Welfare to cater for needs of students with disabilities studies of the experiences of people with disabilities show that the upkeep of students with disabilities is affected by poor funding (Chinangure, 2019) and shortage of basic needs such as shelter and food (Tudorić-Ghemo, 2005:61). The limited support that the ministry offers has not done much to enable the students with disabilities to fully participate in both university and community life.

Back ground to the study

Access to university is a right for all people; however, access to higher education for people with disabilities is still a challenge. Towards end of the 20th Century, segregation of students with disabilities (SWDs) from mainstream education was debated greatly by the inclusive schools movement (Simons & Masschelein, 2005) culminating in the 1994 Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education in Spain with over 300 participants from 92 countries and 25 international organizations that signed and ratified the *Salamanca Statement* on inclusive education. Following the Salamanca Statement which acted as the global descriptor of inclusion in education, inclusive education has been widely accepted as a model for quality education (Maher 2009) and a means to a more just society (Ainscow., Booth., & Dyson, 2004).

To the contrary, the self-esteem and self-image of students living with disabilities is very low, not only because of what they experience but because of the nature of treatment they receive from the university staff, the public and fellow students. According to Chikiwa (2019), they are always treated with disrespect or given assistance as the last option in many situations. The unfriendly experiences have resulted in them internalizing negative perceptions of themselves as human beings and have no hope for a better future (Jamison 2008:17). Various studies have confirmed that students with disabilities have the potential to function normally if they are part of an inclusive and supportive community (Chinangure, 2019; Cockburn, 2004:46; Gracey, 2002:6; Panter-Brick, 2002:152; Tudorić-Ghemo, 2005:61). Inversely, the majority of students with disabilities in Higher Education Institutions expressed that they continue to experience a myriad of challenges that block their demonstration of their academic achievement and potential (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

According to De Vries (2009:24), students with disabilities feel insecure. As a result, they identify with and develop networks of friendship with people who have similar disabilities and lifestyles. As such, the insecurity of their lives and their daily struggle to survive makes them dependent on one another. Hence, they have to develop coping mechanisms to survive in both hostile and difficult environments. These

strategies are important in helping them to focus on their studies and share, on several occasions, very scarce resources made available to them (Chinangure, 2019). However, other studies have confirmed that having friends of a similar disability and life style was a challenge especially when they needed to participate in public functions of people with diverse abilities as they were not easily accepted and given the attention they deserved (Tudorić-Ghemo, 2005:61). In most cases instead of being treated normally the public would treat them as hopeless pathetic people who were always seeking for help (Kidd 2003:245–253).

A previous research (Chinangure, 2020) found that people with disabilities who were begging on the streets were a testimony for lack of diversity and failure by the education system to address the diverse needs of people with disabilities. Other studies also established that these people with disabilities had the potential to participate in mainstream economy if they had relevant skills to sustain their livelihoods (UNESCO, 2013).

Problem statement

The philosophy of inclusion in education is indivisible with quality education; hence meaningful and quality education can only be realized if the individuality of all learners are considered so that each and every learner is granted a chance meaningfully participate and achieve (Pinnock & Lewis, 2008). To this end, the background to the study has revealed that students with disabilities have the potential to function normally if they are part of an inclusive and supportive community (Chinangure, 2019; Cockburn, 2004; Gracey, 2002; Panter-Brick, 2002; Tudorić-Ghemo, 2005). The problem in institutions of higher learning is that, students with disabilities are confronted with environmental as well as personal challenges mostly related to survival and adjustment that have remained unaddressed. However, very little research was available that focused on lived experiences of people with disabilities in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, hence the essence of the current study.

Aim of the study

In accordance with this research question, the aim of this research was to explore and describe the lived experiences of students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

Significance of the study

The study is significant in three main areas of policy, practice and research. The study will serve to inform policy makers to make informed decisions based on study findings. in the same vein, the study will also guide the inclusive practices that should be adopted by professionals as they deal with learners with disabilities in institutions of higher learning. Future researchers will also have a wider data base for literature as this study will add to the available data base.

Study objectives

The study had two main objectives to accomplish as indicated below:
5.1 To establish challenges faced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning
5.2 To identify psycho-social problems faced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning

Theoretical Framework

The current study was influenced by the ideas from the humanist theories. One of the key proponents of the humanist theory, Maslow (1943), pointed out that social wellbeing can be achieved if human needs which are hierarchical were satisfied. He identified five categories of human needs which are psychological needs,

safety needs, possession and love needs, self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. The needs were arranged by rank order from the most basic to the least on the hierarchy. However, normal growth and social well-being would be achieved when lower level needs were met first before the higher level needs. Students with disability were among the most vulnerable members of the community (UNICEF, 2018). The majority of people with disability survived on begging because they did not easily get enough physiological needs such as food, clothes and shelter (Chikiwa, 2019). In light of the foregoing, Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains why most students with disabilities who failed to secure accommodation and food ended up dropping out of their studies. Safety needs such as protection and security were to be met if such students were to lead a normal life. Unfortunately, people with disabilities were vulnerable to abuse from the society that stigmatized them. The ego-destroying pressures that demeaned people with disabilities found its way into these institutions of higher learning resulting in trauma and loss of self-confidence and self-image. Maslow argues that the need for respect or reputation is most important for students as such any abuse negatively affects differently abled students. The students with disabilities desperately needed to be loved and to belong. Maslow further argues that if students with disabilities' safety needs are not met, psychosocial development is negatively affected resulting in poor academic performance. The need for belongingness and acceptance was also critical. As such failure to get support in these life fundamentals resulted in severe stigma and isolation practices that negatively affected their academic performances. The lived experiences of students with disabilities were therefore best understood within this framework.

RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

A thematic presentation was adopted, guided by the major objectives of this study:

Challenges faced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning

Several studies have been carried out on challenges faced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning and they established several findings. Generally, it surfaced that challenges faced included financial challenges, social stigma, accessibility, peer acceptance, language challenges, lack of clear policies on inclusive education and mechanisms that will remedy the challenges of students with disabilities in higher education institutions. According to Chiwandire and Vincent (2019), barriers which place SWDs at a substantial educational disadvantage compared to their non-disabled peers included bureaucratization of application processes, cuts in disability funding, means-test requirements, minimal scholarships for supporting part-time and distance learning for SWDs and inadequate financial support to meet the day-to-day costs that arise as a result of disability. Batanero., Rueda., and Cerero (2022) established infrastructural and Teaching-learning process challenges. Architectural or infrastructural barriers were the most common access barriers for students with disabilities as university facilities were mostly old buildings whose spaces are not adapted to the needs of students, hence affected their mobility. Similarly, on the teaching-learning process, the lack of preparation of teachers to use a methodology that promotes inclusion in the classroom according to the needs of their students stood out. Podzo, and Chipika (2019) established that, rigid curriculum a limited learners with disabilities to enjoy their education as a basic human right. Consistent with Batanero et. al (2022), Podzo and Chipika also established that, there was no suitable provision of services to address the queries of students with disabilities as well as the lack of funding for support programmes for students with disabilities.

The psycho-social problems faced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning

Laveena, Meena, and Govindaraju (2017) established that, learners with learning disability like any other person with disability encounter discrimination since they tended to alienate themselves from society as they felt unwanted and rejected. This culminated into majority of them viewing disability as a challenge

leading them to undergo a certain degree of negative feeling of their disability. Differently put, Kuriakose and Amaresha (2023) established existence of stress, anxiety, and lower self-esteem especially in those with learning disabilities. From another angle, student performance and retention of learnt concepts were major problems established, hence affected their self esteem (Antje & Alfons, 2023). To this end, the current study sought to ascertain these varied findings using a qualitative research approach.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach was most convenient for the present study since an interpretive approach to research relies on both the researcher and the human subject (participant) in the generation of data (Du Plooy-Ciliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014) guided by instruments such as those utilized in this study: interviews, discussions, observations and document analysis.

Research design

A qualitative case study design was chosen for this study to explore and describe how students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe made sense of their experiences as individuals and their shared meanings with other students who did not have any visible disabilities.

Population and sample

The population for this study consisted of 18 students with disabilities at one chosen institution that had a niche in inclusive education as manifested in its motto: 'building a legacy through inclusivity'. According to Burns and Grove (2018:355) a purposive sample is made up of those people likely to provide the muchneeded information to address a question. Thus, information-rich data was elicited from 12 purposively sampled students with disabilities, eight males and four female. The students who participated in the study were fully registered bona fide students of the chosen institution who had been in the institution for at least one semester.

Data collection

Student affairs administrative staff created a dossier for all the students with disabilities. The participants were invited to talk about their past experiences (Patterson & Hayne, 2009:124) and how the previous experiences where different from the current (Patterson & Hayne, 2009:124). The phenomenological face-to-face individual interviews were to be in-depth as described by Moolla (2012:60–61) to allow a deeper and thorough understanding of the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in institutions of higher learning. In addition to the dossier and in-depth interviews, follow up questions to further elaborate on key issues were given until data saturation was reached (Creswell 2013:125). Data saturation was reached when the interviews were no longer eliciting additional and new information (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010:146–147). To necessitate triangulation, the researchers collected field notes and observations during public functions as the students with disabilities were interacting with their peers without disabilities. Holloway and Wheeler (2010:117) argue that triangulation could be achieved through corroborating data collected through different instruments and methods.

Data treatment

All the collected data were coded and analyzed and developed into themes which were supported by direct

quotations from students with disabilities (Patton 2002:453; Creswell 2013:125, 209).

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Table 1 Challenges faced by students with disabilities

Student	Gender	Area of Specialization	Nature of Disability	Source of Funding	Challenges
1	Male	Honours in Business Management	visual impairment	social welfare and self	-stay in rented boarding houses in town7 km and 14km away from the university - owners of the properties are now expecting students to pay rentals in united states dollars.
2	Female	Honours in Business Management	visual impairment	social welfare and self	stay in rented boarding houses in town7 km and 14km away from the university
3	Female	Honours in Business Management	visual impairment	social welfare and self	stay in rented boarding houses in town7 km and 14km away from the university
4	Male	Honours in Special Needs Education	visual impairment	social welfare and self	stay in rented boarding houses in town7 km and 14km away from the university- trauma associated with homelessness for a girl child
5	Male	Honours in Special Needs Education	visual impairment	social welfare and self	stay in rented boarding houses in town7 km and 14km away from the university
6	Male	Honours in Special Needs Education	visual impairment	social welfare and self	stay in rented boarding houses in town7 km and 14km away from the university.
7	Male	Honours in Special Needs Education	visual impairment	social welfare and self	was asked to vacate the room she is lodging in two days' time and she has nowhere to go.
8	Male	Honours in Special Needs Education	physical disability	social welfare and self	stay in rented boarding houses in town7 km and 14km away from the university - no funds for rent
9	Female	Honours in Special Needs Education	visual impairment	social welfare and self	stay in rented boarding houses in town 7 km and 14km away from the university - risk of sexual and physical abuse from the street if she is not helped.
11	Male	Honours in Special Needs Education	albinism	social welfare and self	stay in rented boarding houses in town 7 km and 14km away from the university
12	Male	Honours in Bachelor of theology	albinism	social welfare and self	stay in rented boarding houses in town between 7 km and 14km away from the university

There were 4 female and 8 male students in the institution studied. All the students had visual impairment except for one who had physical disability and two with Albinism. All the participants were non- resident students. They all faced common challenges such as funding, transport, social and physical abuse, isolation, stigma and low morale. They had to travel between 7-14 km to the university during which serious challenges were experienced in the rainy season that was characterised by flooding, muddy and dicey surfaces as well as water logging.

Table 2 Psychosocial challenges affecting students with disabilities

Psychosocial challenges affecting students with disabilities	MEAN	SDV
We have been marginalized in all the activities of the university	5,86	0,302

Inaccessible facilities with windows opening outside	5,66	0,366
Students with physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities or other medical conditions requiring special care	5,17	0,363
The emotional responses to the challenges they face on a day to day basis	5.08	0,374
The various coping strategies against the challenges in and outside the institution.	4.91	0.359
Students with disabilities are autonomous	4,80	0,356
We are excluded from social functions such as educational trips	4,81	0,921
Areas that need to be improved in the institution include mobility and attitude	5,67	0,841
University does not have aides to assist	5,66	0,301
Assistive devices are not adequate	5,86	0,326

Research on provisions of facilities in Malaysia established that most basic facilities were inaccessible to people with disabilities (Sanmargaraja & Ta Wee, 2015). The physical structures made mobility very difficult for students with physical disabilities and also those who had visual impairment (Sanmargaraja & Ta Wee, 2015). Studies show that people with disabilities are continuingly ignored and subjected to material hardship and social injustice (Sanmargaraja & Ta Wee, 2015). There is a need to understand disability by attending to disabling environmental barriers, hostile social attitudes and material relations of power (Sanmargaraja & Ta Wee, 2015).

All the students with disabilities who were attending at the institution in the current case study were not local residents. They initially had to travel to this institution hoping to be accommodated within the institution. Un fortunately the host institution whose niche is inclusion did not offer accommodation to all its students by the time of the study. As a result the students had to find their own accommodation from the local township which was at least 7 km from the institution or in the local farming community that had farm houses with their own associated challenges to the occupants.

The institution did not offer transport to all its students, with or without disabilities. As a result students had to commute and find alternative transport to get to the institution for their lectures. The institution was located on a farm at least a kilometer of gravel road from the main tarred road. The students sometimes had to drop by the main road and then walk along this dust road which has a very low slab bridge to the institution. The institution was prone to main dangers such as muggings that were common in the farming community and surrounding areas. Apart from the danger of being attacked by robbers, there was likely danger of being swept away if the stream with a low bridge got flooded if it rained in the catchment area.

Except for two the rest of the students were not married. The need for sexual reproduction awareness and knowledge including supply of contraceptives was high. The students were facing threats from likely rapists and sexual harassment from fellow students and the intruders who were roaming around the area.

The students with disabilities were equally worried about lack of professional guards and at least a fence for security around the institution. The participants also bemoaned lack of professional orientation on arrival to the institution for the first time. Thus, there was likelihood that if not given enough orientation and mobility skills, the students would stray into the farms and be subjected to possible mugging, rape or any other form of abuse.

Findings from unstructured interviews

The unstructured interviews resulted in several themes that helped the researchers to conceptualize the needs of people living with disabilities. Below is a discussion of the themes which are supported by relevant excerpts from the views of students with disabilities who were interviewed.

Students with visual impairment were relying more on their residual senses to navigate and come to terms with reality in and around this institution. Mobility was enhanced through team movement as students with visual impairment preferred to move in company; two or three holding onto each other's arms or using their white canes or with a sighted friend. Key challenges were that they were sometimes verbally and physically assaulted by fellow sighted students besides being abandoned and rejected. Despite these exclusionary practices being perpetuated, students with visual disability remained resolute, largely autonomous and self-reliant as they were able to carry out daily survival skills and all house-hold chores such as cooking for themselves, wash and even carry our academic work independently. The subsequent excerpt supports this:

I can make my own money through begging when I am not at university and when I want any food I can cook for myself **(Participant 5)**

The students with disabilities faced stigmatization and discrimination from the university community. As a result, the students with disabilities were often seen alone or in their own peer group due to the fact that other students rarely socialized freely with them due to negative perception and attitudes towards disability as elaborated below:

At the university other students make funny of me because of my disability. I find myself failing to concentrate sometimes due to emotional problems **(Participant 7)**

Some students with disabilities who had inconsistent financial support performed badly culminating into some dropping out of school as alluded below:

Raising tuition fees and transport fares have always been a big problem because lack of financial support from social organizations **(Participant 12)**.

Some students with disabilities sought others of a similar disability in order to fulfill the need for social interaction and develop a sense of belongingness as highlighted in the following excerpt:

I have ended up falling into an intimate relationship with one of my similar condition as those who shun us see me as an outcast or beggar. They do not know that I am human too. Now, I have not gone back to begging because social welfares delays paying us our stipends to buy meals. I am currently receiving some grand from social welfare but it's not enough. I am suffering a lot. **(Participant 12)**.

However, some students with disabilities have gone back to begging as they face shortages of basic commodities. The excerpt below justifies this habit:

I am desperate; I can do anything that can help me generate money to survive **(Participant 12)**.

The students with disabilities were facing muggings and attacks from robbers on their way to campus as expressed below:

Our university is located far from the community we walk all the way and sometimes we get mugged **(Participant 12)**.

Most of the students with disabilities in this study experienced a deep sadness, a longing for physical safety, need for care; and also a sense of identity and personal worth. Many a time they were dehumanized and subjected to emotional and physical abuse by their ablebodied peers who even abandoned them when they needed help most. Some were abandoned when they were ill and in need of medical assistance. The females even pointed out that they were sometimes exploited for sexual favors. As a result they were traumatized by

the experiences. Emotionally they were suffering from fear, anxiety and negative self-stigma. Excerpts below bear testimony.

Some had this to say:

We are feeling very bad, too much verbal abuse, bullying and emotional abuse **(Participant 13)**.

They are treating me like you do not exist, a no body. Whenever you need help they these blind are a problem. The feeling of being a burden all the time to other students is worrying me **(Participant 10)**

Looking for some shelter all the time and transport is scary **(Participant 5)**

Some participants showed deep care and concern for the plight of other students with disabilities. They did not tolerate any form of abuse, vices which upset them when one of them was abused as demonstrated below:

I feel very bad and upset if any one of our colleagues is abused in any way **(Participant 12)**

Living through hardships sensitizes students with disabilities to want to help. It is a form of belongingness and family hood that bind us together as enshrined in the African philosophy of Ubuntu/Unhu whose emphasis is on identity, belonging and feeling for one another. One participant said:

You must help other students with disabilities. We are family together **(Participant 6)**

It was also noted that there was expression of wishing to die and escape from the difficult life by some students with visual impairment who would have failed to get help from social welfare as demonstrated in the excerpt below:

I had nobody to help me so I wanted to die and disappear from this harsh world **(Participant 13)**

The student showed assertive behaviour and sense of autonomy in their current situation. They were living in groups that made it possible for them to cook and do their own laundry. In extreme cases, they also used to hire people from their local residential community who came to assist them with house-hold chores when they had immense pressure from a lot of assignments due. This is expressed below:

We only stopped when the hired hands started stealing our food and money **(Participant 3)**

The students with disabilities complained that their right to dignity was not observed. Those with Albinism felt that it was the responsibility of their academic institution to provide sunscreens or lotions to protect their skins from the ultra-violet raises of the sun which they could not afford. This was an important human right that needed attention forthwith. One had this to share:

Our skins sometimes creak and other students with little awareness and knowledge of inclusion avoid us in group discussion forums **(Participant 8).**

Over and above, life experiences of students at the studied institution of higher learning leaves a lot to be desired. Students with visual impairments who participated in this study experienced some horrible incidents that eroded their human worthy and ultimately cost their educational performance. This calls for the need for vibrant and pragmatic intervention meant to improve quality of life of students with disabilities across all educational institutions in Zimbabwe. In pursuit for quality life, persons with disabilities are on

record utterance of their common aphorism that: 'Nothing for us without us'. Thus, there is urgent need to always plan and decide together with 'them'. That is the essence of advocacy and inclusivity.

DISCUSSION

The students with disabilities in this study experienced deep sadness, a longing for physical safety, care and also a sense of personal worth due to the tough conditions they faced at the institution under study. The failure by the institution to provide basic need was an attack on the fundamental human rights; a right to human dignity and respect. This was a cause of fear, anxiety, misery and survival despair that affected their concentration when it came to academic business. According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, security needs are critical in the development of the self. If not met, individuals' development towards a positive self-image, self-worth and self actualization is seriously affected.

The study established that the students with disabilities chose to part from a life style of begging into self-reliant lives where they became productive through producing goods and services. A study of people who were formerly beggars in Nigeria established that if given resources and skills people with disabilities could effectively participate in the development of their economy. The same observation that without any practical skills one may never be able to secure a decent profession in Zimbabwe, let alone manage to survive outside a context of abject poverty (Chikiwa, 2019; Chinangure & Chindanya, 2019). These students were able to unlock their potential to survive and service local communities with sanitizers during the global COVID 19 pandemic.

The students with disabilities are sometimes isolated and self-withdrawn. They often display a self- critical attitude symbolizing the feeling that they are different from fellow students. This finding was established by Patros and Shamoo (1989) who found the same attitude from students with disabilities when faced with criticism. The students openly pointed out that the institution did not consider their needs as equally important. They felt their needs were considered last after fellow students' needs were addressed. Thus, they were perceived as disabled first and human last (Chipika, 2021).

The same students felt that the institution was taking advantage of their disabilities and using their presence to gain attention from the public. Their relationship with the rest of the student body who were sighted was constrained because they felt these students exploited them for personal gains. They were always looking for mistakes and lapses in their treatment to confirm their negative self-worth. In line with this view, other studies established that students with disabilities were quick to criticize and find fault with others (Patros & Shamoo, 1989). In contrast, other studies established that needs of people with disabilities remained difficult to implement due to negative attitudes towards people with disabilities prevalent in Zimbabwe (Choruma, 2006; Mugoho & Siziba, 2014; Chimhenga, 2016). The negative attitudes were also prevalent across much of Africa as most people with disabilities still faced discrimination and received little support as seen in this institution. In some cases, there was no will to address the needs of the people with disabilities, unavailability of legal framework to protect their rights, allocation of enough funds in the budget and lack of user-friendly infrastructure and these were key impediments (Mathopa, 2007; Green & Engelbrecht, 2007; UNESCO, 1994; Nanty & Abosi, 2012:2).

The study also established that some of the students with disabilities were using their condition to manipulate the staff members and situations in their favor. They would attract sympathy where it was undue through temper outburst and use of anger tantrums. This finding is in tandem with the claim that some people with disabilities use their disabilities to gain attention and sympathy and their challenges often feature in their conversation (Patros & Shamoo, 1989). At the institution the practice was quite common where the students with disabilities jumped queues at the institutional cafeteria when dinning and shouted at

those serving them to be considered and be attended to first. This however was in contradiction to principles of equality and social justice as caterers should not be selective, discriminatory and prejudicial.

This study established that institutions of higher learning have no capacity to cater for the needs of persons with disabilities unless they work closely with organisations that provide financial and resource aid. The failure to cater for the needs of disabled people by institutions of higher learning especially in Zimbabwe may be attributed to three main factors, namely: system that is not inclusive; dysfunctional support systems for early detection and intervention (Kennedy & Fitzpatrick, 2011). The three areas needed to be further explored.

In previous studies such as Chinangure's (2020), results established that, students with disabilities went back to beg on the streets. This was a testimony for lack of diversity and failure by the education system to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Probably, higher education institutions need to be acquainted with the dictates of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) which requires educational institutions to celebrate diversity by way of making education equally accessible to all citizens of all member states with relevant support services. Zimbabwe is a signatory to this landmark macro policy adopted by members of the United Nations in Salamanca, Spain where approximately 300 delegates were in attendance representing 92 governments and 25 international organisations in pursuit and furtherance of Education for All (Majoko, 2013; Pantic & Florian, 2015). Since Zimbabwe adopted inclusion in 1994 in sync with the international fraternity, it has to seriously consider a paradigm shift in education fundamentals including policy and legislation governing provision of education in the education system across board. We therefore oblige the government to demonstrate political will first if at all inclusivity has to be a reality in Zimbabwe where all educational institutions would walk the talk.

The students with disabilities, master autonomy by identifying students with similar disabilities and they move as a team. They deliberately avoid abusive environments and peers to survive in socially supportive groups of students with similar disabilities. Those who use sign language are often seen on the streets selling items. They have developed a level of resilience to adapt to the challenges and have survival options that are less risky.

The unfriendly experiences and emotional verbal and non-verbal abuses lead to feelings of confusion, despair, helplessness and suicide ideation among students with disabilities. How ever studies by Ungar (2007) demonstrate that friendship ties helped the students to cope with psychosocial challenges and to develop some form of resilience.

The students with disabilities who participated in the current study reported several forms of abuse they encountered. They reported that at some point during their university life, not only did they confront abuse by peers without disabilities. They were threatened, attacked physically and abused, both verbally and sexually by landlords and the general public in their residential community. These students resultantly further expressed the need for belongingness and love from both their educational and residential communities. How ever the desire to be accepted and to fit in society was not easy because of stigma and stereotypes associated with disability. This is supported by Korevaar's (2009:76) study which established that persons with disabilities suffered psychologically resulting in emotional problems as a result of lack of social support from society.

In tandem with the findings of this study, Tsegaye (2008:21) also noted that most students with disabilities felt lonely and depressed from stress associated with suffering. As a result they ended up with low self-esteem and living in perpetual sadness. The students with disabilities need constant support to assist them to manage stress and to cope with traumatic experiences they often face. Studies also concur that catering for disabilities was a task beyond most institutions (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). As shown in one of the

studies, catering for students with disabilities without sponsorship is next to impossible since they need both financial and material support. The needs for students with disabilities include such things as wheelchairs, hydraulic buses, ramps, sign language interpreters, health care and working clinics. All these needs require careful planning as they demand large sums of money and support. This could explain possibly why most educational institutions actually trail behind the call for equality and social justice when it comes to addressing the challenges associated with disability.

The websites for the institution studied did not provide Braille and audio description services for the students with visual impairment and those with hearing impairment respectively to access the website by themselves. The available websites were not designed with students with visual and hearing impairments in mind, thus there was lack of universal design which could have catered for all users regardless of disability. Consequently, most students with disability are naturally excluded in most university activities.

Studies have also indicated that most students with disabilities fail to live independently with some failing to confidently explore their environments. They need personal assistants in the form of human guides for those with visual impairment while those in wheelchairs need an assistant to push them around. Participants in this study expected their university to hire guides for them to improve their mobility as they lacked professional orientation and university accommodation.

In this study, with regard to hearing impairment, most people including university staff and other students without this condition could hardly communicate in Sign Language. This situation contradicts the mission and purpose of the institution under study since inclusivity should be practiced by competent academic personnel in Braille and Sign Language across all faculties. This finding is in tandem with research on facilities provision in Malaysia which established that most facilities were inaccessible to people with disabilities (Sanmargaraja & Ta Wee, 2015). In the current study, physical infrastructure including buildings made mobility very difficult for students with physical disabilities as well as those with visual impairment. The ground is naturally wet perennially worse without pavements linking them. This makes usage of wheel chairs almost impossible. For those with visual impairment, all buildings lack louvered windows and sliding doors pausing a threat when students walk along corridors. All buildings in this institution are neither linked by continuous corridors nor pavements though some have ramps. No single structure has rails. People with disabilities are continuingly ignored and subjected to material hardship and injustice (Sanmargaraja & Ta Wee, 2015). There is therefore a need to understand disability by attending to disabling environmental barriers, hostile social attitudes and material relations of power (Sanmargaraja & Ta Wee, 2015).

To sum up, this study has indicated that most institutions lack basic requirement to support students with disabilities. There is also a need to work on attitudes of the public and improve the negative perception. The attitude problem can be improved through continuous sensitization and education through seminars, conferences and exhibitions. The issue of orientation and mobility was raised in the study. Enhancing mobility for students with disability is a very huge responsibility for all institutions including access to wheelchairs and walking aids. Studies have also shown that inclusion could be promoted if institutions focused more on inclusive practices (Chipika, 2021) that were disability friendly. The current study also established that students with disabilities faced stigmatization and discrimination from the university community. As a result, the students with disabilities are often seen alone or in their own peer group due to the fact that other student rarely socialize freely with them due to negative attitudes towards disability. This is similar studies reported that stigmatization and discrimination was experienced by vulnerable people who were in institutions (Korevaar, 2009:32). Lack of economic options made life difficult and risk for students with disabilities. Similar studies established that lack of economic options resulted in vulnerability to sexual and physical exploitation and HIV infection (Chinangure, 2019). The current study established that most

students with disabilities performed badly and some dropped out of school due to inconsistent financial support. However, studies have found some contradiction that some resilient students with disability have done well despite the fact that they faced challenges at some point. Life of living with a disability for life forces a person to seek others of a similar disability in order to fulfill the need for social interaction and develop a sense of belongingness. One advantage of friendships is social networking with other students in the institution in order to have access to resources and gain protection against the risks of physical assault.

CONCLUSIONS

It was concluded from the study that lack of resources and moral support, stigmatization and insecurity, physical and emotional abuse were major challenges faced by students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the key findings of this study, the following recommendations were made with specific reference to policy makers; researchers and practitioners.:

- Workshops with social workers and awareness campaigns led by the Ministry of Social Welfare and Development, in collaboration with the host ministry, may stimulate debate on some of the causes of negativity among the students with disabilities. At such forums, students with disabilities should be encouraged to integrate and verbalize their frustrations realistically through the correct channels so that they can be addressed.
- Orientation and Mobility skills training by university lecturers should be intensified so as to promote mobility among students with visual impairment. The ordinary students need exposure to awareness campaigns and workshops so as to gain knowledge on how to treat and manage fellow students with disabilities.
- Efforts by university administrators to acquire both Braille and Sign Language skills at institutional level goes a long way in promoting inclusion since these are pre-requisite qualifications for inclusive educators.
- Policy makers should have students with disabilities being prioritized in allocation of accommodation so as to minimize the risk of abuse in all its forms.
- Provision of relevant and appropriate assistive technology by both government and NGOs is a fundamental determinant of academic achievement of students with disabilities
- Implementation of the concept of Universal Design by university authorities where students with disabilities are part of the decision making process is critical.

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